

UNITED WISDOM

The Golden Cage

Relationships and Shared Life

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Why overprotection—of a friend, a child, or a spouse—takes away the will, and why handing over control of one's own life proves to be not devotion but self-deception

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut · United Wisdom · Inner Transformation · Author series

> ***Archival translator's note.*** *This translation preserves the essay's strong judgments and its comparisons between laboratory research, psychological models, philosophy, and relationships. These are not a new clinical assessment. Dependence, disability, genuine danger, or receiving care does not establish hidden selfishness or consent to control. The archive's account of anxious attachment and its extrapolation from animal stress research to overprotection require separate verification. Terms such as "Victim," "Rescuer," and "bad faith" belong to the essay's frameworks and must not be used to blame people experiencing abuse or to withdraw necessary support.*
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> *"It is so convenient to be immature. If I have a book that thinks for me; a pastor whose conscience serves in place of mine; a physician who prescribes my diet, I need not trouble myself."*
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> *— Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" (1784), as quoted in the archive*

What This Article Is About

There is care that helps another person get to their feet, and care that puts them to bed forever. Outwardly they are indistinguishable: the same words, the same self-sacrifice, the same apparent love. The difference lies in the outcome. The first leads to the person eventually being able to manage without it. The second is arranged so that they never can.

This article is about the second kind. About overprotection directed toward a friend, a child, a wife or husband: care that, under the guise of love, takes away another person's will and fixes them in a comfortable yet inescapable position of victimhood, without the right to choose, make mistakes, or live their own life.

We examine it from both sides. From the cared-for person's side: how will is lost, learned helplessness develops, and the comfortable victim role becomes a prison. And from the caregiver's side, because overprotection has a hidden motive, and handing over—or taking away—control of someone's life is almost never pure devotion. More often it is self-deception: a bargain in which both parties gain something and both lose what matters most.

We draw on psychology—Seligman, Deci and Ryan, Karpman, Bowlby—and the philosophical tradition of will and freedom—Kant, Berlin, Sartre, Nietzsche—preserving differences between schools rather than smoothing them away. This is a self-contained text, but it echoes previous United Wisdom articles on the Stoic dichotomy of control and Nietzschean self-becoming.

I. Two Kinds of Care

The Latin *cura*, "care," lies behind "curator," the word for healing, *curare*, and the Roman fable of the goddess Care, who shapes a human from clay and will not release them until death. The ambiguity is already woven into the root: care can be what heals, and what holds.

Healthy care has a built-in expiration date. It strives toward its own disappearance: a good physician is glad when a patient no longer needs them; a good teacher when a pupil surpasses them. Overprotection works in reverse. It seeks to reproduce itself: it needs the need for it never to end. And so it quietly makes the other person less capable, because someone capable will one day leave.

This is not always malicious intent. More often it is a blind spot. But the result does not depend on intention, any more than a burn depends on whether someone burned you out of malice. We therefore need to speak here not about feelings but about a mechanism.

II. How Will Is Lost: Learned Helplessness

In 1967 at the University of Pennsylvania, Martin Seligman and Steven Maier carried out an experiment that became a classic. Dogs were divided into groups. Some could stop an electric shock by pressing a lever; others received the same shock, but their lever did not work—the shock was unavoidable. All were then placed in a box they could easily jump out of. Those that had previously had control jumped out at once. Those that had learned that nothing depended on them lay down and endured it, even when the way out was open (Overmier & Seligman, 1967).

The phenomenon was called learned helplessness. In their 1976 review, Seligman and Maier identified its three blows: motivational—the person stops even trying; cognitive—even when control becomes available, they cannot notice it; and emotional—dejection and anxiety (Maier & Seligman, 1976).

Overprotection reproduces the conditions of that doomed group, only gently and lovingly. The child—or adult in the cared-for role—receives their own "shocks": difficulties, conflicts, mistakes. But someone loving neutralizes them every time. The dependent person never accumulates experience of their own actions changing an outcome. It is as though the lever exists, but the hands pressing it are always someone else's.

Half a century later, in 2016, Maier and Seligman revised their own theory, and the correction makes it even more precise for our subject. Neuroscience showed that passivity is not learned; it is the brain's default state under uncontrollable stress. What is learned is the opposite: a sense of control. When the ventromedial prefrontal cortex registers that behavior affects an outcome, it inhibits the structures that trigger passivity (Maier & Seligman, 2016). "The original theory got it backwards," the authors acknowledged.

The conclusion for overprotection is merciless. The will to act is not a given that care preserves. It is a skill that grows only from experience of one's own influence on the world. To deprive someone of that experience "for their own good" is not to deprive them of comfort. It is to deprive them of the very organ of will.

III. What Nourishes Will: Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness

In self-determination theory (1985), Edward Deci and Richard Ryan described three needs without which psychological health is impossible: autonomy—the feeling of acting of one's own will; competence—the feeling of being able to cope; and relatedness—the feeling of closeness to others. Overprotection strikes at the first two under cover of the third: it offers relatedness at the cost of autonomy and competence (*Self-Determination Theory*).

As early as 1971, Deci showed how easily intrinsic motivation can be undermined. Students were paid a dollar for every puzzle solved; when the money was removed, they spent less time on the tasks than students who had never been paid. External control displaced inner interest: the person stopped feeling that they were doing it by choice (Deci, 1971). A controlling environment, even a benevolent one, treats autonomy in the same way. Constant prompts, constant backup, constant "let me do it" tell a person: your choice does not work here; someone else's does.

IV. A Drama for Three: Rescuer, Victim, Persecutor

In 1968, psychiatrist Stephen Karpman described the "drama triangle": three roles between which people move in unhealthy relationships—the Rescuer, "Let me help"; the Victim, "Poor me"; and the Persecutor, "It is all your fault" (Karpman, 1968). Overprotection is a frozen Rescuer chained to a frozen Victim.

Karpman pointed to a paradox: the Rescuer does not solve the problem, but preserves it. "Rescuing keeps the Victim dependent and deprives them of the right to fail and experience the consequences of their own choices"; further, "the Rescuer keeps the victim dependent by encouraging victimhood" (*Karpman drama triangle*). Here the central point emerges: the victim position is convenient. It removes responsibility, guarantees sympathy, and shifts every failure

onto circumstances or the Rescuer. It has only one price: giving up one's own life. That price is paid silently because the bill arrives later.

V. The Hidden Benefit: Why This Is Self-Deception, Not Devotion

Here we move to the caregiver's side and encounter the most uncomfortable question: whom does overprotection actually serve?

Psychoanalysis introduced the concept of secondary gain long ago: an advantage a person receives not from health but from weakness—care, sympathy, release from obligations, power over loved ones through their own helplessness (Fishbain et al., 1995). Freud wrote that at a certain point the ego begins behaving as though it has decided that the symptom has come to stay and sets about extracting the "greatest possible advantage" from it. This is the cared-for person's benefit.

But there is a mirror image: tertiary gain, described by Dansak in 1973, what the caregiver derives from another person's helplessness (Fishbain review, 1995). They derive a great deal: meaning for their own existence, a sense of being irreplaceable, control, justification of their own life through someone else's. In *Codependent No More* (1986), Melody Beattie called this enabling: "help" arranged so that the other person's problem persists because without it the helper would lose their role (*Codependency*).

This is why handing over—or taking away—control of someone's life so rarely amounts to pure devotion. Devotion serves the other person and is ready to disappear when they get to their feet. Overprotection serves itself and is arranged so that the other person never does. It speaks the language of sacrifice—"everything I do is for you"—but quietly seizes control, taking the steering wheel from a person and calling it love. This is self-deception in the exact sense: self-interest dressed as self-denial. As a rule, both parties deceive themselves: one gives up their will in exchange for security, the other accepts it in exchange for power. The bargain looks like love only because no one states its terms aloud.

VI. Support, Not a Cage: What Attachment Says

It would be a mistake to make all care suspect. John Bowlby, the founder of attachment theory, introduced the "secure base": a caring adult is needed precisely so a child can move away, explore the world, take risks, return for support, and leave again (Bowlby, 1988). A secure base is a springboard, not a cage.

Mary Ainsworth demonstrated the difference experimentally: with secure attachment, a child freely moves away and calmly returns; with anxious attachment, the child clings and does not settle (attachment theory). The paradox is that anxious attachment is produced not by the absence of care but by too much care at the wrong time: an adult who does not let the child

move away. The term “helicopter parent” itself came from a teenager’s complaint in Haim Ginott’s book (1969): “My mother hovers over me like a helicopter” (*Helicopter parent*).

The boundary between support and a cage runs through one question: does care allow someone to leave?

VII. Philosophy: The Convenience of Immaturity

What psychology calls learned helplessness, philosophy described two centuries before the experiments. In 1784, Kant defined immaturity, *Unmündigkeit*, as “the inability to use one’s understanding without another’s guidance,” and called it self-incurred, *selbstverschuldete*, when its cause is not a lack of intelligence but a lack of courage (Kant, 1784). His formula, “it is so convenient to be immature,” describes the victim position more precisely than any diagnosis: a book that thinks for me, a physician who decides for me, a guardian who lives for me. Kant took the motto for escape from Horace: *Sapere aude*, “have the courage to use your own understanding.”

In his 1958 lecture, Isaiah Berlin distinguished negative liberty, “freedom from” interference, and positive liberty, “freedom to,” the ability to govern oneself. He warned of the trap: positive liberty can easily deteriorate into paternalism when someone—a parent, guardian, or state—claims the right to know a person’s “true interests” better than the person themselves (*Two Concepts of Liberty*). Overprotection is paternalism in miniature: “I know what is best for you,” said so often that the person stops knowing it themselves.

Sartre took the thought to its limit. The human being, he said, is “condemned to be free”: even refusing to choose is a choice. He called flight from that freedom bad faith, *mauvaise foi*: self-deception in which a person hides behind a role as though they were a thing—“I simply cannot live without her,” “I am just obeying” (Sartre, existence and freedom). Both live in bad faith: the cared-for person denying their ability to choose, and the caregiver fleeing their own emptiness into someone else’s life. “I am responsible even for my very wish to escape responsibility,” Sartre wrote.

VIII. Echoes of Traditions: Be Your Own Light

The great traditions, disagreeing about everything else, unexpectedly converge on one point: maturity is the ability to stand on one’s own feet, and a true teacher prepares the pupil for parting, not dependence.

Before his death, the Buddha told Ananda: *Attadīpā viharatha*, “Be islands unto yourselves, refuges unto yourselves, seeking no other refuge” (*Maha-parinibbana Sutta*, DN 16). He compared his teaching to a raft: once across the river, you leave the raft on the bank rather

than carrying it on your head (*Alagaddupama Sutta*, MN 22). The teacher is a raft, not a lifelong burden.

The Stoics drew the same boundary differently. Epictetus opens the *Enchiridion* with the dichotomy of control: “Some things are in our power, and others are not.” The controlling caregiver violates it in both directions: taking on what is outside their power—another person’s life—and taking away from the other what should be within their power—their own choice. We discussed this dichotomy, *ta eph’ hēmin*, “what is up to us,” in more detail in the United Wisdom article on Stoicism.

In Christianity, the parable of the prodigal son gives an image of mature love: the father releases the son, allowing him freely to leave and squander his inheritance, and does not run to rescue him. He waits and welcomes the one who returns by himself, having “come to himself” (Luke 15:17; parable of the prodigal son). Freedom to leave is the condition of a genuine return.

Islam balances trust and effort. Asked whether to tie a camel or trust in God, the Prophet answered, “Tie your camel and trust in God” (Tirmidhi, 2517). Trust does not cancel action; care does not cancel the person’s own responsibility.

Nietzsche condensed this into a formula borrowed from Pindar: *Werde, der du bist*, “Become who you are” (Pindar, Second Pythian Ode). Overprotection directly betrays this task: it prevents a person from becoming themselves because it molds them to suit someone else. The United Wisdom article on Nietzsche discussed this formula and *ressentiment* as a will turned against itself.

IX. A Doll’s House and the Grand Inquisitor

Literature described overprotection earlier and more sharply than science. In Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879), Nora recognizes that she has been a doll all her life—first her father’s, then her husband’s. He calls her his “squirrel” and loves her most when she is helpless and “entirely dependent on him, like a child.” At the end she leaves, declaring that she can be neither a good wife nor a good mother “without first becoming a human being.” The slam of the door closing behind her became a symbol of escape from the golden cage.

Dostoevsky’s “Grand Inquisitor” (1880) exposed the other side: the temptation of the one who takes freedom away “out of love.” The Inquisitor argues that people are weak and happy to surrender freedom for bread, miracle, and authority, if only to escape the “great anxiety and terrible torment of free and personal decision.” He says he will benefit humanity by lifting the unbearable burden of choice. Here his self-deception reaches perfection: tyranny sincerely believing itself mercy. Overprotection works the same way: the more certain it is of its own love, the harder it becomes to recognize the seizure of control within it.

Key Quotation

“Be islands unto yourselves, refuges unto yourselves, seeking no other refuge.”

— The Buddha, Maha-parinibbana Sutta (DN 16), Access to Insight

Connections Between Traditions

• Kant, “self-incurred immaturity,” *Sapere aude* ↔ the Buddha, “be your own light,” DN 16: leaving guardianship as the personal courage to think and stand for oneself.

• The Stoic dichotomy of control, Epictetus ↔ the “tie your camel” hadith, Tirmidhi: care and trust do not cancel the person’s own responsibility and effort.

• The prodigal son, whose father lets him go ↔ Bowlby’s secure base: mature love permits departure and calmly awaits a return rather than holding someone back.

• Sartrean bad faith ↔ Karpman’s Victim role: refusing choice as a tempting but self-destructive position.

• Nietzsche’s “become who you are” ↔ Seligman’s learned helplessness: becoming oneself is impossible without experience of one’s own influence on the world.

• Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor ↔ Berlin’s positive liberty and paternalism: the temptation to remove freedom “for someone’s good” as an ancient form of self-deception.

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Tags

Overprotection, learned helplessness, will, freedom, autonomy, codependency, Karpman drama triangle, victim position, self-deception, self-determination, attachment, Kant, Berlin, Sartre, Nietzsche, Stoicism, Buddhism, Dostoevsky, Ibsen, United Wisdom.

About the Authors

Andrey Zarinsh (@andrey.zarinsh) and Maria Evilkut (@ilkutki) are the author duo behind United Wisdom. We bring together the precision of science and the depth of traditions to discuss inner transformation without esoteric simplifications: with names, dates, and verifiable sources.

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