Journal of Marketing Behavior, 2015, 1: 245–260

Manipulated as a Way of Life

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ABSTRACT

Being manipulated is an integral part of the human condition. It is unavoidable and happening all around us; yet, it has not penetrated our naive view of the autonomy in our decisions. We resist government involvement even in domains where interventions can do a lot of good. Yet, a misplaced respect for people's autonomy among well-intentioned players leaves us at the mercy of those less well-intentioned. Beyond regulating egregious and harmful manipulations, we need to be more willing to manipulate for the good. A skepticism about people's deliberative, autonomous, dignified decision-making is actually the more respectful and considerate approach. It takes people's limitations seriously, and proposes ways to help them do the best they can. Aided by standard checks and balances, we need to devise ways for manipulation to proceed in constructive ways.

What makes research in the behavioral sciences so interesting is that it can change our views of ourselves, what we expect of one another, and the society we aim to create. This is consequential because the policies we devise depend on what we think people can and cannot do, what we expect to be easy for them to achieve and what might be difficult, where they need serious help and where they should be left to their own devises.

Our attitude towards manipulation, is intertwined with our understanding of what it takes to shape people's behavior. And that is an empirical matter, which needs to be updated in accord with behavioral research. In this brief commentary, inspired by Sunstein's 2015 deeply penetrating piece, I want to argue two main points: (1) that manipulation, understood correctly, is an inherent and unavoidable part of the human condition, and (2) that a misplaced respect for people's autonomy among well-intentioned players, leaves us at the

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ISSN 2326-568X; DOI 10.1561/107.00000015

mercy of those less well-intentioned. The conclusion, with several provisos, will be that beyond regulating the most egregious and harmful manipulations, we need to be more willing to manipulate for the good.

Human Quirks and Limitations

When you show people some of the findings from the behavioral sciences, it is instructive to watch their reactions. Take, for example, linguistic errors and confusions. Garden path sentences are grammatically correct sentences that, because of the automatic ways we parse sentences as we read them, typically lead readers to parse them incorrectly. (*The horse raced past the barn fell*[1]; or, *The complex houses married and single soldiers and their families.*) Spoonerisms are verbal production errors in which a speaker accidentally transposes the initial sounds or letters of two or more words. (For example, *Our queer old dean,* or *The Lord is a shoving leopard to his flock.*) And ambiguities are frequent, both in informal speech and in the press. (*Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim.* Or, *Complaints About NBA Referees Growing Ugly.*)

These production and comprehension errors are an integral part of our sophisticated linguistic apparatus. Our language capacity relies on quick and effective processing, contextual cues, and shortcuts; it works remarkably well, but sometimes yields errors and misunderstandings. When you present all this to people, they find it charming. Our linguistic processing system, a rather impressive apparatus, sometimes goes awry.

And then there are visual illusions — plenty of them, and impossible to overcome. People find it hard to believe that the tabletops in Figure 1 are the exact same shape, or that the cars in Figure 2 are the exact same size. Our visual system, because it is so reliant on contextual cues of depth and perspective, is misled by the cues in these pictures. When you show these to people, they're impressed. Our visual system, a truly remarkable capacity, can be systematically misled.

Change blindness is another impressive perceptual phenomenon, where a clear change in a visual stimulus occurs, which the observer fails to notice. This poor ability to detect changes reflects fundamental limitations of human attention. It is a heavily researched topic, with practical implications for eyewitness testimony and driving, among other domains (Chabris and Simons 2011; Simons 2000)).

And then there is memory. Memory problems, of course, are notorious and frequent. (Who can remember them all?!). Every kind of memory (short term, long term, declarative, episodic) has its respective and predictable pitfalls.

[1] To be read as: "The horse—(that was) raced past the barn—fell."

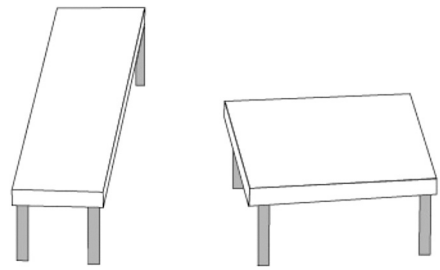

Figure 1: Two tabletops of exact same shape.

Figure 2: Three cars of exact same size.

Even flashbulb memories, once considered the apex of precise and vivid recall, are now known to be systematically distorted (Neisser and Harsch 2006).

Our navigational capacity is highly problematic (Klatzky *et al.* 1999; Stankiewicz *et al.* 2006), as anyone who drove before the advent of GPS will recall (or perhaps has forgotten). Manchester (2009), in his book on the middle ages, describes how "If war took a man even a short distance from a nameless hamlet, the chances of his returning to it were slight; he could not identify it, and finding his way back alone was virtually impossible." (This, incidentally, is a problem a honeybee, with a brain the size of a head of a pin, would never encounter.)

When people are exposed to these systematic mistakes and limitations they are interested, often amused, occasionally alarmed, but rarely offended. Our linguistic processor sometimes does strange things. Our perceptual system

has its predictable quirks. Our navigational abilities are fairly weak. Our attentional, and memory storage and retrieval systems have their obvious limitations. The human skeleton, perhaps because evolution was too quick, remains poorly adapted to bipedalism, leading to frequent lower back and knee problems (which turn out to be a leading cause of lost working days; Stearns and Koella 2007). This is all rather sensible, unavoidable, and hardly contentious.

But all that changes when we talk about decision-making. When we think about visual illusions, back pain, forgetting things, or getting lost in the forest, those are our visual system, our vertebrae, limited memory capacity, and faulty compasses exhibiting their unavoidable limitations. But when it is errors in decision-making, that is "us!" And it is no longer funny! When you show people errors or inconsistencies in their choices, it is THEM you're insulting, their independence, their capability, their superior insight into what they need and think and want.

It would appear patently absurd, for example, to insist that our eyes can see as well as could be, and that nothing could improve our vision. And yet it is standard, and highly celebrated, for Mill (1859), Hayek (2014), Friedman (1990), and other influential thinkers, to insist that the decisions we make are just as they ought to be, and should not be touched, and that nobody and nothing can reliably make them better.

Consider, for example, Milton Friedman's memorable quote, "Nobody spends somebody else's money as carefully as he spends his own." Or Mill (1859), as quoted by Sunstein, "ordinary man or woman has means of knowledge immeasurably surpassing those that can be possessed by any one else." Those claims, given what we know today, are just absurd. Of course, a person might be more *worried* about her money than anybody else. And she may know more than anybody else about what she had for breakfast, or what movie she saw last week. But when it comes to having insight into our decisions, knowing what will bring the greatest gain, or safety, or wellbeing; what we care about most and how much weight we assign to various aspects of a choice, when it comes to those things, we often have rather faulty insight. Given an expert with the right incentives, experience, and training, it is clear that most people would greatly benefit from this expert spending their money, whether on education, or health, or retirement savings, or at the local supermarket for that matter. Of course, having somebody with the right incentives and experience is no trivial matter but it is a different sort of problem, and it is a problem we will never advance on if we fail to recognize it in the first place.

All this is relevant to concerns about manipulation — when our decision-making powers are circumvented in ways we might not recognize and do not appreciate. In his inimitable style, Sunstein manages to cover many aspects of the manipulation conundrum. He considers not only the behavioral issues and their regulatory implications, but the philosophical, political, and legal

issues as well. This commentary has a more modest aim: it focuses on the behavioral facts and their fundamental implications, without worrying too much (not because it is not important, but because I don't know how) about what all this might mean for the law, or for democracy generally.

Behavior and Manipulation

The behavioral facts are clear. We are inherently, and profoundly, creatures of context. From color and form perception, to emotions, well-being, reasoning, choice, and judgment, our experiences are heavily shaped by contextual nuances of which we are often unaware. In some instances, like the visual illusions above, it is nearly impossible for us to ignore contextual cues, even when we try. In other cases, we might be able to transcend some contextual information if we "put our mind to it," or rather, if we try to avoid having our mind use it, but it remains something we typically and naturally do most of the time.

Figure 3 captures an autobiographical experience from my days as a graduate student, when I would walk from home to the office and back along the streets of Cambridge, Massachusetts (Shafir 2007). One day, at a lecture on "local optima," I realized that for 3 years I had been taking one route every day on the way to school, but a different route going home. There was no deep reason for this — no inclines, no views to enjoy, nor dark or crowded places. As I approached an irregularly shaped parking garage, I would take what felt like the most efficient detour. As portrayed in Figure 3, the structure of that garage led me to take one route on the way to school (a left felt like moving forward; a right felt like going backwards), and an alternate route on the way back home. Not surprisingly, my old Cambridge map shows one route was longer than the other: since my sole purpose was to cover the distance efficiently, I had taken the "wrong" route half the time.

My choice of a route was made "in context," as I proceeded down the street. I could have consulted a map when I first moved to Cambridge, determined the route to take, and proceeded always to take it. But even then, there'd be other deviations, a tree, a bench, parked cars that I might circumvent in inconsistent ways. And besides, I'm not going to consult a map every time I take a walk.

Consider now the well-known framing example below (Tversky and Kahneman, 1986). When presented with the first ($300) frame, the majority of people prefer the sure gain; but when presented with the second ($500) frame, the majority prefers a chance to lose more or nothing over the sure loss. Like my route to school, people face two paths to the same outcome: $400 for sure, or an equal chance at $300 or $500. But contextual detail — facing a choice between gains versus losses, like approaching the garage from north or south–shapes their preference.

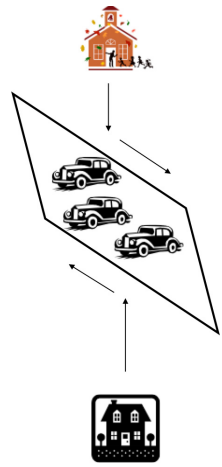

Figure 3: A route to and from work.

Assume yourself $300 richer than you are today.
Choose between:
$100* and ($200, 0.50)
Assume yourself $500 richer than you are today.
Choose between:
−$100 and (−$200, 0.50)*

Here, too, it is not practical to decide ahead of time which option you will choose, frame-independent, for every choice problem you will ever encounter. In fact, it is worse: at least with my garage example there was a "right" answer, a shortest route. But in the typical choice problem, as in the one above, there is no right choice, and what feels right, what proves more appealing, will be influenced by the cues we encounter and what they bring to mind.

The cues around us have an influence on almost everything we do, and many of those cues function at a level that is not detectible or controllable, nor typically available to introspection, let alone to rational, consensual, dignified deliberation. The following section summarizes just a few relevant facts, culled from a sea of such findings.

Influences on Decision-making

People interviewed on rainy days tend to receive lower ratings than people interviewed on sunny days (Schwarz and Clore 1983). This bias extends to

admission interviews at large medical schools, where the difference in scores due to rainy versus sunny days was equivalent to about a 10% lower total mark on the Medical College Admission Test (Redelmeier and Baxter 2009).

People who are touched on the shoulder by a waitress tip higher than those who are not touched (Crusco and Wetzel 1984; Schwarz 1990; Schwarz and Clore 1983). Waitresses' physical characteristics also correlate with tips Lynn (2009), and those who write "Thank you" on the back of checks, or who mimic their customers by literally repeating their order, receive significantly larger tips (Rind and Bordia 1995; Van Baaren *et al.* 2004, 2003).

Male participants who encounter a woman on a fear-arousing suspension footbridge misattribute their arousal (from the bridge) to the woman, find her more attractive, and are more likely to follow up with a phone call, compared to others who meet the woman before the bridge (Dutton and Aron 1974). More generally, misattributed physical sensations, such as isometric flexion ("approach behavior") or extension ("avoidance behavior") of the upper arm can trigger the processing of positive or negative affective reactions, respectively (Neumann and Strack 2000).

The impulse to reciprocate leads us to repay when we perceive others have benefitted us. Many studies have documented the power of free samples and token gifts to shape transactions in the marketplace. Taken further, this generates a reciprocation of concessions, wherein a requester who first asks for an extreme favor (which is refused) then asks for a smaller favor. This produces more compliance with the smaller favor than when the requester asks for the smaller favor from the start (Cialdini 2006; Cialdini *et al.* 1975).

Even hypothetical questions, as long as they appear relevant, can influence people's subsequent decisions (Fitzsimons and Shiv 2001). For example, simply asking consumers whether they intended to purchase an automobile or a personal computer significantly increased their subsequent purchase rate (Morwitz *et al.* 1993). Follow-up interviews suggest that the effects of hypothetical questions on choice occur beyond awareness and are quite difficult to counteract.

This also applies to separate versus comparative evaluations, which can trigger different considerations and alter choice. In a study of responses to environmental issues, Kahneman and Ritov (1994) presented people with statements of problems, along with suggested forms of intervention, such as:

- *Problem*: Skin cancer from sun exposure is common among farm workers.
  Intervention: Support free medical checkups for threatened groups.

- *Problem*: Several Australian mammal species are nearly wiped out by hunters.
  Intervention: Contribute to a fund to provide safe breeding areas for these species.

One group was asked which of the two interventions they would rather support; a second group was presented with one problem at a time and asked to determine the largest amount they would be willing to pay for the intervention. When asked to evaluate each intervention separately, respondents, moved by the hunted animals' plight, were willing to pay more for the Australian mammals than skin cancer checkups. But when faced with a direct comparison between the options, most favored the program for humans over that for animals.

Just as options need to be framed, programs need to be implemented. And here, again, seemingly inconsequential changes can make a difference. High school seniors eligible to receive thousands of dollars in college financial aid (FAFSA), and informed of the full details of their financial eligibility, were nearly 25% more likely to enroll in college if, in addition to the information, they also received assistance filling out the application forms (which they were capable of filling on their own). (Bettinger *et al.* 2012).

In monetary transactions, including ones of high value, customers are willing to spend a lot more when offered to use a credit card rather than cash. The effect can be large (up to 100%), and cannot be fully attributed to liquidity constraints (Prelec and Simester 2001). When toll facilities adopt electronic toll collection, where cars are automatically debited as they drive through and drivers no longer use cash, toll rates are 20–40% higher than they would have been without electronic toll collection (Finkelstein 2009).

Clients of a money-lender in South Africa were sent letters offering short-term loans (averaging a third of borrowers' gross monthly income) at randomly determined interest rates. Not surprisingly, those offered higher rates were less likely to take up a loan than those with access to lower rates. In addition, thou, various features of the offer letter that had no economic implications had a large impact on take-up. The picture of a smiling woman randomly placed in the corner of the loan offer letter had the same positive effect on take-up among male clients as dropping the monthly interest by 4.5 percentage points (Bertrand *et al.* 2005). Similarly, showing one example of a possible loan (easy to read) rather than four (harder to parse) examples had the same positive effect on take-up of a loan as dropping the monthly interest by more than 2 percentage points. (In a similar vein, Huberman *et al.* 2004) found that employees' overall participation in 401(k) plans drops as the number of fund options proposed by their employer increases.)

Reminiscent of innocent borrowers, judicial rulings are similarly swayed by extraneous variables that should have no bearing on legal decisions, and of which the judges themselves are unaware. One study segmented judges' deliberations according to their two daily food breaks and found that the percentage of favorable rulings dropped gradually from around 65% to nearly

zero within each decision session and returned abruptly to 65% after each break (Danziger *et al.* 2011).

The above list is a fairly arbitrary sample (no doubt subject to the writer's own biases) of a large collection of studies showing the many ways in which people's decisions are influenced by all sorts of contextual nuance. These have been observed among novices and among experts, in situations where someone manipulates intentionally, in cases where nobody is aware of the manipulation, and sometimes where the manipulating factors are altered absent any human involvement. The evidence is glaring, but it doesn't seem to have fully penetrated our conception of the autonomy in our decisions.

Manipulation and Dignity

Our preferences are malleable and shaped constantly, everywhere, and often in ways we are unaware. Like linguistic processing errors, and visual illusions, our decisions are inherently prone to contextual nuance of all sorts, big and small, detectable and undetectable, intentional and unintentional, novel and familiar. All this, if we consider the evidence, ought to drastically change our views of the autonomy, the independence, the manipulation-free nature of everyday decision making.

To make things even more complicated, people have multiple identities — mother, sister, athlete, CEO — and their attitudes and preferences fluctuate as a function of whichever identity is rendered salient. Identity-salience has been shown to affect behaviors ranging from resistance to persuasion (Kelley 1955), and reactions to advertisements (Forehand *et al.* 2002), to choice and the rating of consumer products (LeBoeuf *et al.* 2010; Reed 2004). There is an inherent instability to our attitudes and preferences that is inconsistent with simple views of autonomy. A working parent may be more willing to commit to a weekend conference away from home when their professional identity is salient, say, at the office, than when their parent identity dominates, while at home. Whose autonomy should then be respected — the working parent's or the one who's cozy at home with the children?

The behavioral evidence calls into question the philosophical positions, both deontological and utilitarian, highlighted by Sunstein. One problem with manipulation, Sunstein writes, is that it "fails to respect people's autonomy and is an affront to their dignity." I think Sunstein is right about that, but only because we have a misplaced sense of autonomy and dignity. If the impact of contextual cues in visual illusions does not offend our dignity (and it shouldn't!), then neither should the impact of contextual cues on our decisions.

In this regard, John Stuart Mill's Harm Principle — people know what is in their best interests and should have a (manipulation-free) opportunity to

make that decision — is not entirely applicable to people as we know them. Given what we know — the decision frames, the touches, the weather, the lunchbreaks — what would a manipulation-free opportunity look like? The objection to manipulation — that it "infringes upon the autonomy of the victim by subverting and insulting their decision-making powers (Wilkinson 2013) — is based on a naive view of the "victim" and her powers. This is not to say we cannot make decisions — only that our decisions may always be manipulated, by someone or something. And if that is the case, why not explore more effective manipulation contexts with more desirable outcomes?

The strongly felt deontological objections to manipulation, Sunstein explains, "reflect a sense that people are not being treated respectfully. Their own capacities — to assess, to weigh, to judge — are not being given appropriate deference." The problem is that if our capacities **were** given the appropriate deference, we'd stop demanding so much respect. In fact, our capacities to assess, to weigh, to judge, while in many ways impressive, are inherently malleable and manipulable. Manipulation in all its shades is an integral part of our lives. Why not make the best of it?

In that regard, there are several distinctions Sunstein makes that I do not find convincing. In particular, those concerning the role of intentionality, avoidability, and the mild and benign nature of some manipulations.

According to Sunstein, "nature can, in a sense, manipulate people ... but it seems useful to limit the category to intentional efforts; in ordinary language, intentionality appears to be a defining characteristic of the concept of manipulation." On legalistic grounds, an attempt to define intentionality this way might prove useful, but more generally I don't see a principled way to separate the various gradations of manipulation we encounter everyday. Some preferences are manipulated intentionally, some without anybody's knowledge, and some are not manipulated by people at all. Of course, when the weather does it, it would be silly to blame it. But the test's outcome will have been manipulated nonetheless. Knowing what we know, would we consider it manipulative to schedule interviews on a rainy day? Or to hold a court hearing right after the judge's lunch?

Sunstein writes, "Life cannot be navigated without default rules, and so long as the official is not hiding or suppressing anything, the choice of one or another should not be characterized as manipulative. Note that people do reject default rules that they genuinely dislike, so long as opt-out is easy — an empirical point in favor of the conclusion that such rules should not be counted as manipulative."

The fact that people can — often, if not always — reject things they genuinely dislike is not enough to render manipulation any less manipulative, especially because often the person does not know what part of the experience is up for rejection, and because the part the person dislikes is not always what is most manipulative. I may dislike carrying cash and prefer credit cards, but

it is the latter that is causing me to pay twice as much. I may dislike going inside for an interview on a sunny day, but that is when my chances to get into medical school are greater. I may, on the other hand, not dislike at all being asked whether I have considered a new car recently, but then find myself the proud owner of a new car I did not need. And it is precisely the warm and respectful and highly likeable treatment at check-cashers and payday loan providers, which is so welcome and appreciated, that is costing the poor so dearly and gets them to opt for products that make tomorrow more difficult.

The fact that defaults are unavoidable is not different from the fact that one needs to pay in *some* form, every decision problem needs to be "framed" somehow, waitstaff need to interact with diners, judges have to have lunch, and there is always going to be weather. Sunstein suggests that influences on our preferences that cannot be avoided ought not be considered manipulation. I would say: manipulation of our preferences simply cannot be avoided.

I agree with Sunstein's highlighting of the importance, and the difference, between degrees: between manipulation, misrepresentation, deceit, and lying. There is certainly a difference between outright lying and milder efforts to frame an alternative in an appealing or unappealing light. But I am less convinced of Sunstein's conclusion that "it is important to see that mild forms might well be acceptable and benign." Some mild forms, of course, might. But the problem is that we are not at all guaranteed a direct relationship between how mild or aggressive a manipulation might be, and whether or not it might prove benign. Getting no help filling out a form, being interviewed on a rainy day, having your case heard just before lunch, are all mild. But failing to go to college, getting rejected from medical school, and receiving a guilty verdict are by no means benign outcomes.

The lack of a simple relationship between mild and benign certainly holds in the financial domain, as Sunstein suggests in his endorsement of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. Teaser rates, ballooning mortgages, and short-term predatory interest rates are typically fully and explicitly outlined. Rather than lies, they are typically framed in appealing ways, not easy to understand, and offered in moments of need, where they bring ruin and misery.

Manipulation as Policy

If manipulation is so common, what can we do about it? I agree with Sunstein that more egregious, deceitful, and harmful instances ought to be regulated to the extent allowable by law. But I want to propose another, additional direction. Once we accept the fact that manipulation is everywhere and unavoidable, that it is an integral part of our lives, we need to go with it. We need to stop being offended by what are simple facts about the human experience, and we need to do what we can to bring about the best possible

outcomes. Perhaps the least desirable — and worrisomely close to current — situation is for well intentioned actors — governments, individuals, organizations — to "respect people's deliberation and autonomy and dignity," while those who are less respectful go around selling those same people dangerous products, impossible dreams, and inferior living conditions.

Take, for example, the current state of advertising and education around nutrition in the United States. Estimates are that each year kids see more than 10,000 food ads on TV alone, almost all of them for soft drinks, fast foods, and sugared cereals. (This is data from before the major advent of the internet, which has given rise to other insidious trends, such as "advergaming," where games invite children to interact with various fast food and candy products (Olfman 2005, Chapter 5)).

Not surprisingly, the marketing of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods and beverages is linked to obesity. (See Institute of Medicine Reports.) A 2004 review of over 40 studies on the relationship between TV viewing and obesity in children found that advertising and marketing to children were the primary mechanisms through which obesity was related to media use (Olfman 2005, Chapter 6).

Being overweight or obese leads to other health problems, including adult onset diabetes. If trends continue, one out of every three children born after 2000 will develop diabetes in their lifetime. The onset of diabetes before age 15 is correlated with a two-decade decrease in life expectancy. Over 100 million Americans are overweight or obese, and obesity is now second only to smoking as a major cause of preventable death in America.

There is compelling evidence that television advertising influences children's food and beverage preferences, requests, and consumption habits. One study found that a majority of Australian children age 9–10 believed that Ronald McDonald knew best what children should eat (Olfman 2005). Another study found that the number of hours of TV watched by 3–8 year olds is correlated with their caloric intake and their requests — and subsequent parent purchases — for foods they see on TV.

All of this is a handsome victory for those who do not worry much about respecting people's deliberation and autonomy and dignity. The same year that the US government spent $2 million on its main nutrition-education program, McDonald's spent 1.4 billion on direct advertising, and $500 million on their We Love to See You Smile campaign alone. The advertising budget for soft drinks in 1998 was $115.5 million, and for popular candy bars it was $10–$50 million. Compare that with the CDC's $15 million yearly budget for oral health initiatives, the National Cancer Institute's $1 million budget for its 5 A Day campaign or the $1.5 million for the National Cholesterol Education Campaign of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (Brownell and Horgen 2004, pp. 101–123). With Coca Cola and McDonald's festively and spectacularly sponsoring the Olympic games, what is a child to deduce?

One possible approach is to try to limit all sorts of advertising. Greece bans toy ads until 10 p.m., Belgium prohibits commercials five minutes before, during, and after children's programming, and Norway and Sweden ban advertising directly to children under 12 (Brownell and Horgen 2004, pp. 101–123). In the current US environment this does not appear as a forthcoming agenda. But as we come to better understand the unavoidable power of manipulation, such an approach could get a lot more traction. After all, subliminal advertising is illegal, simply because it is easy to recognize the difficulty of resisting messages one is not aware of. But so many other manipulative interventions are beyond our control, including advertising processed at the periphery of attention and outside conscious awareness. As people come to appreciate all this, we might develop a more "European" tolerance for a variety of controls and regulations.

But the truth is that manipulation remains too dominant and ubiquitous a force for some regulatory interventions to prove sufficiently effective. Rather than try to limit the expression, neither egregious nor criminal, of advertisers, we need those positioned to help on issues of health, safety, well being — government officials, experts, non-profits — to do their own manipulating. And like the manipulations so effectively implemented by the other side, these well-intentioned attempts to influence — to manipulate — need to be conducted with similar disregard for people's supposed deliberative prowess, their imagined autonomy, and their misplaced dignity. (Instead of mature statistics, show scary or heart-wrenching pictures; instead of sophisticated explanations, steer people in the right directions, and so on. Here there is much to learn from the advertising industry.)

Similar analyses apply to the financial services industry, as Sunstein alludes to towards the end of his fine piece. Unfair, deceptive, even abusive products and services are offered profusely, especially to low-income folks who can least afford them. Allowing predatory actors to take advantage of low-income people while the authorities and the well-intentioned assume autonomous and dignified decision-making on their part seems irresponsible, if not immoral. (Sunstein seems to agree with this last claim in contexts, such as smoking, where advertisers make egregious or blatantly misleading claims, and where citizens' judgment, like that of smokers driven by addiction, seems impaired).

Now, do we really want government to spend more on manipulating people? In one sense, of course not! Nor do we want government to spend money on health problems, environmental protection, or policing. It would be wonderful if these were not real issues and we could just build parks and help the poor instead. But as long as these are real issues, we need to address them heads on. And manipulation is a real issue. It is as much a part of the human condition as stereotypes and aging and car accidents. It would be unhelpful to declare car accidents an offense to human dignity and ignore them.

Indeed, the decision to manipulate for the good could prove costly. Not only politically and socially, at least until people come around to realizing that there

is no other way, but also financially. To counteract McDonald's billions, one would need to spend comparable amounts. This raises interesting cost–benefit analyses that are beyond the purview of this comment. Once the "forces-for-good" credibly threaten to respond, fast food advertisers could either escalate, or choose to back down. One could also impose a tax on advertisements for unhealthy products to support messages and nudges that help people opt for healthier goods. (Similar to the use of tobacco settlement money to support antismoking campaigns). Furthermore, the cost of advertising and nudging campaigns will, to a greater or lesser extent, be covered by the obtained gains — better eating habits will improve people's health and lower society's healthcare related costs. (For some relevant recent examples, see Halpern 2015).

Of course, the idea intentionally to manipulate people has an uncomfortable "Orwellian" flavor to it. This is certainly a valid and appropriately alarming concern. The problem is that those who have no respect for their citizens, their clients, their voters, will continue to engage in such manipulative tactics. And they may do so with only greater vengeance since they'll be functioning unopposed by those who have greater respect. Evil governments have always manipulated their people, and continually have access to more sophisticated means. (Goebbels, the Third Reich's behaviorally sophisticated Minister of Propaganda is a chilling example). Unencumbered by concerns about human autonomy and dignity, governments, corporations, and individuals have on occasion manipulated people in ways that are hard to fathom, and very often in ways that are more benign, but still not helpful. So what choice do we have? Change the ways the human mind processes information, or accept the facts and act accordingly, with an aim towards doing good.

As always, the direction proposed here — to accept the fact that people are constantly manipulated and use it to help them — can be taken too far. After all, who decides what and who to manipulate, in what direction, to what extent, and at what cost? But this is true about most things we do, and once taken seriously will need to be implemented judiciously, with the same standard constraints, checks and balances we aim to impose on every policy domain. The point is that manipulation is unavoidable and happening all around us. And the current situation, in which those who worry about our safety and well being aim to avoid manipulation while those who don't much care use it against us, does not a healthy state of things make.

Some readers will find the view presented here, the skepticism about people's deliberative, autonomous, dignified decision-making, and the willingness no longer to assume it, somehow disrespectful of people. I would argue on the contrary: that this is the more respectful and considerate approach. It takes people's limitations seriously, and proposes ways to help them do the best they can. People will always be manipulated — let us devise ways for such manipulation to proceed in constructive ways. Suppose you think that your vision, which is in fact myopic, is near perfect. I could try to persuade you

that you are wrong and give you glasses, or I could compliment you, provide no visual aids, and let you walk off a cliff. Staying safe and wearing glasses seems healthier, wiser, and a lot more dignified.

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