

LECTUUR EN REPLIEK

ERASMUS: SOMETIMES A SPIN DOCTOR IS RIGHT

WHY HAVING ONE'S RATIONALITY OPENLY EXPLOITED MIGHT BE CONSIDERED MANIPULATION

by Bart KAMPHORST and Annemarie KALIS (Utrecht)

This paper responds to a specific distinction that Daniel Dennett makes in his Praemium Erasmianum Essay *Erasmus: Sometimes a Spin Doctor is Right* (2012).¹ In this essay, Dennett, recipient of the Erasmus Prize 2012, sets out to once again do battle in defense of a notion of free will 'that is worth defending'.

While his essay will no doubt give rise to new impulses in the tug of war between incompatibilists and compatibilists, we do not wish to debate the validity of his general argument in favor of free will here. Rather, we would like to focus on a more specific aspect of Dennett's essay, namely his discussion of the distinction between manipulation and non-manipulative influence. We will first discuss Dennett's use of the distinction, then argue why his view is at best only part of the story.

On pages 23 to 25, Dennett distinguishes between 'mere influence' and manipulation, or in his words, between "the ordinary world and a world full of lurking

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D.C. DENNETT, *Erasmus: Sometimes a Spin Doctor is Right* (Praemium Erasmianum Essays, 10), Praemium Erasmianum Foundation, Amsterdam, 2012.

secret agents (or puppeteers)” (p. 24). He illustrates the distinction by discussing four cases, in which the level of manipulation is built up gradually.

The first case concerns a doctor telling a patient to eat Bran Blobs cereal, because “it is the best way to lower [...] cholesterol” (p. 24). The patient ends up buying Bran Blobs. Dennett acknowledges that in this case the patient has been influenced by the doctor and that the doctor’s advice *caused* the patient to buy Bran Blobs (p. 24). However, because the doctor “openly exploits” the patient’s rationality by providing him with reasons, Dennett tells us that this is not a case of manipulation. The rationale for this is that the reasons the doctor gives the patient are ones that the patient can choose to endorse. What Dennett seems to miss, however, is that in this scenario there are many factors that weigh in on the patient’s decision to buy Bran Blobs, that is, that influence which reasons one is prone to endorse. To name just a few: the patient will be influenced by the authority of the doctor (her white lab coat, her stern voice, etc.; see Milgram’s findings on the status of authority figures²), and by the doctor making salient certain social norms concerning healthy lifestyle choices.

Also, the doctor may be receiving a fee from Bran Blobs Co. every time she persuades one of her patients to eat Bran Blobs for breakfast. One might still be getting solid advice (to eat a healthy breakfast to lower cholesterol levels), but that doesn’t mean that every influencing factor is an appeal to the patient’s rationality.

This brings us to a related point, namely that it seems peculiar that Dennett uses the phrase “openly exploiting rationality” to indicate harmless influence. The online Merriam Webster dictionary gives two meanings for the word ‘exploit’: 1) to make productive use of, and 2) to make use of meanly or unfairly for one’s own advantage. Whereas we may suppose that Dennett is concerned with the first meaning of the term, often the second meaning may apply as well: Bran Blobs Co. wants to utilize the person’s rationality to increase sales!

It is easy to dismiss these seemingly minor factors. Ultimately, Dennett will say, it is the agent who makes the decision: “[...] you can easily enough refute [the doctor’s] claim decisively — if you are not overwhelmed by the authority of her white lab coat and fancy apparatus [...]” (p. 28). Indeed, one may well be aware of possible manipulations and possess certain coping skills for dealing with manipulative situations.³ However, our point is that, despite any coping skills that one might have, the lab coat and fancy apparatus will have some effect that might be considered manipulative (even if it leaves our free will intact). It is exactly ‘the other stuff’ that gives the agent a certain disposition to act in one way and not another. So, with regard to the distinction between manipulation and influence, the patient might have been manipulated by his

² S. MILGRAM, *Obedience to Authority*, New York, Harper & Row, 1974. See also: M. MERRITT, J. M. DORIS and G. HARMAN, ‘Character’, in: J.M. DORIS and the Moral Psychology Research Group (Eds.), *The Moral Psychology Handbook*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2010, pp. 354-400.

³ M. FRIESTAD and P. WRIGHT, ‘The Persuasion Knowledge Model. How People Cope with Persuasion Attempts’, *Journal of Consumer Research* 21/1994, pp. 1-31.

doctor into making the endorsement, even if he rationally endorses the reason for buying (and eating) Bran Blobs.

To press the issue, consider the second case. Here, a person in the supermarket picks up a box of Bran Blobs, reads the nutritional information, decides to trust the information (which happens to be justified as the information provided by Bran Blobs is correct) and buys a box. Again, Dennett analyses this case as one of mere influence, because the person uses his rationality to make his choice. Surely Bran Blobs Co. anticipated this! They will have employed research teams to study the behavior of sample customer groups who fall into the category of people ‘who like to know everything about a product’. Even the design — the placement of the words, the fonts — will be designed to trigger the ‘this is trustworthy’ response.

Imagine a person who, after his initial exploration, eats Bran Blobs for breakfast for the rest of his life, rejecting a different, much healthier product, Corn Cobs, which just happened to present its nutritional value in a poorer way. How could we consider the person’s choice for Bran Blobs to be based on rational processes?

Let us move on to the final two cases. In case 3, the person in the supermarket buys a box of Bran Blobs “with a fetching picture of Cameron Diaz on it” (p. 24). Here the company is clearly and only appealing to non-rational processes to try and make people buy their product. But what if the buyer is perfectly aware of what is going on? Such a buyer might think of his buying Bran Blobs as “rewarding the company for its good taste in women” (p. 25). In case 4, there is no such awareness: a secret ‘microchip transponder’ is hidden in the box of Bran Blobs, tweaking the person’s *nucleus accumbens*, which causes him to buy the box of cereal. The chief difference between cases 3 and 4, according to Dennett, is “that in case 4 [the buyer has] no idea that an attempt to manipulate [him] is occurring” (p. 25). This indicates that there is a second criterion — besides being presented with reasons — for manipulation, namely that influence is only manipulative if the person is unaware that the purpose of the influence may not coincide with his own goals and desires. That is why Dennett says of the third case that it is generally not manipulative, but that “it might be seriously manipulative [if it were] directed against some truly naïve and sheltered person” (p. 25).

What can be distilled from Dennett’s cases is that in his view influence is not manipulative whenever one’s rationality is involved in the decision-making process, either through open exploitation, or through disarming an attempt at manipulation. However, as indicated, these criteria do not capture the fact that one can be influenced in seeing certain reasons and not others.

Secondly, it is questionable if having knowledge of the goings-on really safeguards against manipulation. Take the person in case 3, who knows “how companies use sex appeal to sell things” (p. 25). How certain is it that this type of knowledge can be integrated into our selves in such a way that we are no longer susceptible to the effects of this type of influence? It seems quite plausible that there exist mechanisms that one can know about without being able to circumvent their effects (cognitive equivalents to the Müller-Lyer illusion, as it were). Even if one doesn’t fall for a known trick directly, but instead stops and considers the attempt at manipulation taking place, it

is likely that the picture of Cameron Diaz will have triggered a certain disposition towards buying the Bran Blobs. The fact that one can rationalize it — thinking of it as rewarding the company for its good taste in women — does not make this less so.

Of course, the importance of getting the details of this distinction right may not be centrally relevant for Dennett. In the end, what is at stake in his essay is showing that we are not merely puppets controlled by the environment, but that our agency is real and that it matters. But precisely in defending such a position Dennett should show how his notion of agency and freedom fares against everyday attempts to steer our choices in certain directions. A current and pressing example of this can be found in the field of persuasive technology. Persuasive systems do just what Dennett dismisses as unlikely: they try to identify factors that influence decision making on a subconscious level and aim to exploit those factors to promote desirable behavior.⁴ One question that seems relevant in drawing the line between mere influence and manipulation is whether those kinds of techniques are endorsed by the agent or not.⁵ The point that we would like to get across here is that in order to make a clear distinction between mere influence and manipulation, an appeal to rationality is not sufficient.⁶

KEYWORDS: manipulation, influence, exploitation, rationality.

SUMMARY

This paper responds to Daniel Dennett's 2012 Praemium Erasmianum Essay *Erasmus: Sometimes a Spin Doctor is Right* in which he makes a distinction between manipulation and non-manipulative influence. Dennett argues that influence on an individual's decision-making process is not manipulative so long as that individual's rationality is involved.

In this work we show that Dennett's account of this distinction is, at best, incomplete. He fails to consider the many factors that implicitly weigh on a person's rational decision-making process. That is, there are a number of manipulable factors that will always have some bearing on one's rationality, ultimately influencing what reasons the individual ends up endorsing. We conclude that in order to make a clear distinction between 'mere influence' and manipulation, an appeal to rationality alone is not sufficient.

⁴ See R.L. JOHANNESSEN, 'Perspectives on Ethics in Persuasion', in: C. LARSON (Ed.), *Persuasion, Reception and Responsibility*, Boston (MA), Wadsworth, 2006, pp. 28-53; S. BAKER and D.L. MARTINSON, 'The TARES Test. Five Principles for Ethical Persuasion', *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 16/2001, pp. 148-175; A. SPAHN, 'And Lead Us (Not) into Persuasion...? Persuasive Technology and the Ethics of Communication', *Science and Engineering Ethics* 18/2012, pp. 633-650.

⁵ Cf. Spahn's first guideline for ethical persuasion that states that 'persuasion should be based on prior (real or counterfactual) consent' (A. SPAHN, 'And Lead Us (Not) into Persuasion...?', p. 643).

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COMMENTARY ON KAMPHORST AND KALIS

by Daniel DENNETT (Medford)⁷

In my essay, I argue that a condition for free will is absence of manipulation by another agent (the puppeteer, in effect) and point out that causation of one's decision by events in the environment does not in itself constitute manipulation. Kamphorst and Kalis see a shortcoming in my attempt to demonstrate this. The technologies of manipulation are getting ever better, and mere awareness of this fact does not show that we can always appreciate the risks of underestimating the degree of manipulation of our most 'rational' choices.

They are right that I should have stressed this point. There is an arms race of techniques of persuasion — an arms race as old as human interaction. Anybody who falls seriously behind in their defenses is likely to be manipulated, and to that extent will not be a genuinely free and autonomous agent. Part of moral responsibility, I claim, is taking responsibility for protecting yourself from the guiles of propagandists, rhetoricians and con men. Most children can count on getting quite specific training and warnings about this in their youth, so that by the time they are of age, they are well enough equipped — and poised to update their equipment as novelties are introduced — to be held, and to hold themselves, responsible. Whether we excuse them from responsibility in cases where they are seriously misled is a matter of negotiation. There is no foolproof defense against covert manipulation, but that does not diminish the requirement; it just obliges us to recognize that we are always in jeopardy of being less autonomous than we feel at the time. Still, we need not be paranoid about this; we can wisely apportion our vigilance, taking extra precautions when deciding about matters of ultimate concern, while nonchalantly making the minor decisions — like which cereal to buy — with minimal attention to security. The law is well-equipped with standard language about how vigilant the normal responsible individual is expected to be, and makes special cases out of those who should be held to higher standards. Strict liability laws for pharmacists, for instance, mean that they do *not* get to plead ignorance that other folks can use as an excusing or partially exculpating condition. If you don't want to be held to this higher standard, don't make pharmacy your life's work.

⁷ Daniel C. Dennett (1942) is University Professor and Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy, and Co-Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University. His most recent books are *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking* (Norton, 2013) and, with Linda LaScola, *Caught in the Pulpit. Leaving Belief Behind* (Congruity, 2013).

