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**Autonomy and Advertising**

Timothy Aylsworth

Florida International University

**Synonyms**: Freedom, Independence, Marketing, Manipulation

**Introduction**

Autonomy is an agent’s capacity to govern herself; it is the ability to make choices based on one’s own beliefs and desires. Several ethical theories assign moral significance to this capacity for self-government; they claim that we have a moral obligation to respect people’s autonomy. According to such views, it would be morally wrong to undermine someone’s autonomy by means of coercion, deception, or manipulation.

This commitment to the moral importance of autonomy has led to some concerns about advertising. According to one popular objection, persuasive advertising is morally problematic because it has the potential to undermine the audience’s autonomy (Crisp 1987). Others have argued that advertising does not violate the audience’s autonomy and it might even enhance people’s ability to set and pursue their ends (Arrington 1982).

At the heart of the issue, there are debates about autonomy and manipulation. The disagreement involves a dispute about what kinds of external influence should count as manipulation. In addition to informing people about the existence of products, services, and ideas, advertising also attempts to persuade the audience, to instill desires in them. But not all persuasion is morally problematic (since rational persuasion is typically seen as permissible), so the moral question about advertising is ultimately a question about the nature of autonomy and manipulation.

**Autonomy, Manipulation, and Alien Desires**

Autonomy is generally defined, as it was above, in terms of self-government. Understood in this way, there is a helpful analogy with the idea of the state (Thomson 2018). A sovereign state is one that is self-governing; its policies and laws are not controlled or excessively influenced by another nation. When extended to individuals, this might make it sound like actions or desires are autonomous only if they are not the product of external influence. This would set the bar too high, however. People are constantly subjected to a wide variety of external influences, so we must draw a distinction between influences that undermine autonomy and those that do not. This is what theories of autonomy and manipulation aim to do.

Our desires are influenced by a wide array of external forces: friends, family, culture, history, etc. Nevertheless, many of these desires are still our own, and we are autonomous when we act on them. But there are other cases where it is very clear that a person is acting on desires that are not her own. These are sometimes called “alien” desires. Two of the most commonly discussed examples are brainwashing and addiction. An agent fails to act autonomously when she acts on a desire that was the product of brainwashing. Similarly, an unwilling addict lacks autonomy when giving in to a powerful addiction in spite of efforts to resist it (Frankfurt 1971).

Theories of autonomy try to explain what is distinctive about acting on alien desires, and they use this analysis to contrast such actions and desires with autonomous ones. Although several different theories have been proposed, many of them agree that actions are autonomous only if the agent’s mental states are, in some sense, coherent (Buss and Westlund 2018). The autonomy of an action depends crucially on whether or not the agent condones or approves of her motivation to perform the act.

One popular version of this account, following Harry Frankfurt’s influential work, makes a distinction between first-order desires and second-order desires. First-order desires refer to desires in the ordinary sense: Smith wants to eat a piece of chocolate cake; Jones wants to go for a walk; etc. Second-order desires refer to desires about our first-order desires. Smith does not want to have the desire to eat cake because his doctor told him to limit his sugar consumption. Thus, Smith’s second-order desire is inconsistent with his first-order desire (Frankfurt 1971).

Some theories emphasize the agent’s reflective judgments about which actions are best, and others look at the consistency between the agent’s action and her long-term plans (Buss and Westlund 2018). There are also theories that involve scrutinizing the process through which the desire was formed. According to one approach, a desire is autonomous if the agent did not resist the formation of that desire (or would not have resisted it) when she rationally reflects on the process through which the desire was developed (Christman 1991). This theory allows us to see why desires that result from brainwashing are not autonomous. If a cult member has been successfully brainwashed, then she might have a first-order desire to move to the cult’s compound, and she might even approve of this desire through second-order reflection. Perhaps she wants to have this desire. But if she were to rationally reflect on the ways that the cult leader manipulated her into having this desire, she would reject this process and come to see it as an alien desire.

Other approaches stress the importance of engaging the agent’s rational faculties. On views of this kind, alien desires result from manipulation precisely because of the ways that manipulation circumvents or undermines the agent’s rational decision-making process (Wood 2014). Some of these “rationalist” accounts also emphasize the importance of a certain kind of internal coherence. According to one view, alien desires involve “quasi-beliefs” that are inconsistent with the agent’s other beliefs (Noggle 1995). Quasi-beliefs function like ordinary beliefs in many ways (they can be part of our motivation to act, for instance), but they are importantly different insofar as they were not formed by ordinary cognitive processes and they are not noticeable upon introspection. For instance, Ricardo might see an advertisement for Coca-Cola and form a quasi-belief about how drinking it will enhance his sex appeal. But this belief would not hold up to scrutiny if he were to rationally reflect on it; this belief is inconsistent with other things Ricardo believes. If this quasi-belief motivates him to drink a Coca-Cola, then he has acted on an alien desire.

Finally, it is important to draw a distinction between autonomous *actions* and autonomous *persons*. For the most part, all of the theories mentioned above are tools for evaluating whether or not a particular action or desire is autonomous. Discussions about autonomy and advertising tend to approach the debate on those terms: they look at desires and actions that were influenced by advertising. But there are others who have argued that an evaluation of advertising requires us to think about autonomy in a deeper sense (Lippke 1989, Sneddon 2001). According to these views, we should look not only at individual actions; we should ask whether or not people have the capacity to evaluate and revise and their deepest commitments and their conception of the good life. Autonomous persons are those who are capable of evaluating and pursuing different ways of life in accordance with their freely chosen conception of the good.

**Persuasive Advertising and the Autonomy Objection**

Critics of advertising have raised a variety of objections. Some of these criticisms are made on utilitarian grounds: they argue that advertising is harmful to society in some way. For instance, children might come to desire unhealthy candy or fast food as a result of advertising, and this could lead to adverse health outcomes (Gustafson 2021). Even more broadly, targeting children or other vulnerable groups through advertising is a practice that is commonly criticized. It is also generally agreed that false or deceptive advertising is morally objectionable. Other critics focus on the way that it might contribute to racism or sexism, and some have criticized how advertising affects our perception of our own bodies (Gustafson 2021; Borgerson and Schroeder 2021).

The autonomy objection focuses on a different aspect of advertising, and it is one that is central to the practice of persuasive advertising. Unlike utilitarian critiques, which focus on the harmful *effects* of advertising, the autonomy objection takes issue with the *techniques* employed by advertising. Perhaps the clearest example to draw upon is the commonly cited (although almost certainly apocryphal) story about moviegoers who purchased soda and popcorn after seeing a subliminal advertisement before the film. Many people find this objectionable because they believe that the audience was manipulated. In a similar vein, critics argue that advertising should be condemned because it is manipulative in some way or another. This criticism is often countered by those who argue that advertising does not work by means of manipulation and thus does not violate our autonomy.

The *locus classicus* of this debate is an exchange between Robert Arrington and Roger Crisp (Arrington 1982 and Crisp 1987). Both authors make use of the distinction between first-order and second-order desires. Arrington argued that the first-order desires that result from advertising are perfectly consistent with our higher-order desires. An advertisement might make someone want Coca-Cola, but the agent also wants to have this desire. He argues that most of us accept the desires that advertising produces and that the best evidence of this claim is the fact that we return to purchase these products repeatedly “without remorse or regret” (Arrington 1982).

Crisp and other critics respond by claiming that this analysis is overly simplistic. Crisp points out how most people have a second-order desire that their first-order desires not be products of manipulation. So there is at least one second-order desire that is inconsistent with the desires that advertising produces. He also argues that advertising often works by making appeals to our unconscious desires. If this is true, then advertising would make it impossible for people to reflect rationally on their reasons for wanting a particular product. Unconscious desires are not available to us upon introspection. Desires of this kind are predicated on quasi-beliefs that are inconsistent with rational agency. For these reasons, critics argue that advertising violates our autonomy because it fails to engage with our rational faculties; it circumvents them or subverts them (Crisp 1987, Wood 2014).

Proponents of advertising argue that this gives far too much credit to advertising. Most people are aware of the fact that they are seeing an advertisement, and they are able to make rational judgements about the desires that are influenced by advertising (Arrington 1982). This defense might not work across the board, however. It is common to make exceptions for children and for those who are especially vulnerable to manipulation. It might also be the case that requiring advertising to engage with the audience’s rational faculties overemphasizes the importance of advertising’s techniques. It might be more important to ask whether or not the agent would accept the desire if she were to rationally reflect on the process that produced it (Aylsworth 2022).

Others argue that advertising is morally objectionable, not because it produces alien desires but because it makes it difficult (or even impossible) for us to be autonomous people. According to this approach, looking only at the consistency between first-order and second-order desires sets the bar too low. We might approve of our first-order desires precisely because advertising has convinced us to uncritically accept a consumerist lifestyle (Lippke 1989). Critics of this kind argue that advertising undermines our autonomy not by making us want particular products; it wrongs us by making us the kind of people who want to have materialistic first-order desires. Advertising narrows our conception of the good and weakens our capacity to freely choose different ways of life (Sneddon 2001). They argue that advertising does this by “undermining our openness to other ways of living and by impoverishing our conceptual horizons in such a way that we cannot see beyond the limited confines of consumerism” (Aylsworth 2022).

**Conclusion**

In short, the autonomy objection to advertising claims that advertising is morally wrong because it violates our autonomy. Critics argue that it does this by manipulating the audience and producing alien desires. On some versions of this objection, the main issue is the way that advertising fails to engage our rational faculties. It subverts or circumvents them (Crisp 1987; Wood 2014). Others argue that advertising undermines our autonomy by luring us into an uncritical acceptance of a consumerist lifestyle (Lippke 1989, Sneddon 2001). Proponents of advertising have responded to these objections by claiming that it does not really manipulate the audience (Arrington 1982). They argue that people are not so easy to manipulate, and they do not think that advertising undermines our ability to rationally reflect on our desires. It is difficult to reach a consensus on this issue because there are so many competing conceptions of autonomy and manipulation. In order to reach a conclusion about advertising and autonomy, we must wrestle with some of the deepest and most difficult questions concerning the nature of rational agency.

**Cross References**

Borgerson and Schroeder 2021. “Advertising and the Commodification of Identity through Skin”

Gustafson 2021. “Advertising Ethics”

Thomson 2018. “Autonomy and Informed Consent”

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