

# Abstract: Autonomy, Manipulation, and Respect (for Mortals)

THOMAS ATCHISON

*Department of Practical Philosophy and Ethics  
Metropolitan State University  
700 East Seventh St.  
St. Paul, MN, 55106  
USA  
Thomas.Atchison@metrostate.edu*

ABSTRACT: Manipulative communication (communication that “pushes people’s buttons,” works at an unconscious level, and bypasses critical thinking) is often regarded as unethical because it fails to respect rational autonomy. But, if we take seriously the extent to which people are only very imperfectly rational, we may need to rethink this norm and the associated conception of autonomy.

KEYWORDS: autonomy, manipulation, respect, science communication

## 1. EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Many, perhaps most, perhaps nearly all people thinking seriously about the ethics of science communication have adopted a very high-minded set of norms. To pick just one example, Dan Kahan (2012) of the Cultural Cognition Project at Yale has posted “Ethical Guidelines for Science Communication Informed by Cultural Cognition Research.” They are:

- (1) No Lying
- (2) No Manipulation
- (3) Use communication strategies and procedures only to promote engagement with information—not to induce conclusions.
- (4) Use strategies and procedures to promote engagement only when you have good reason to believe that engagement fits the aims and interests of information recipients. (That is, if people want to believe “unscientific” things because it helps them feel connected to their communities or the like, leave them alone.) (Kahan, 2012)

I want to complicate this discussion by thinking more carefully about manipulation.

We want a definition of manipulation that does not build in moral condemnation. I suggest: *Manipulation = actions intended to produce (cognitive, behavioral, emotional) effects by triggering non-rational emotional/cognitive reactions.*

Drawing on Buss (2005), I argue that:

- Manipulation doesn’t necessarily compromise autonomy. It doesn’t remove our ability to be self-governing. Even when manipulated we are still deciding for ourselves as much as we ever are. Choice and decision always operate on a set of beliefs and attitudes influenced by non-rational factors. The fact that some of those factors may be chosen by others who are trying to influence our beliefs or behavior does not fundamentally change the situation.

- Manipulation is not always wrong. Sometimes we can rationally endorse our own manipulation, at least after the fact. When my friends arrange a surprise party and get me to show up without disclosing the reason, I have been manipulated, but not wronged. If my wife cooks up chores for me to do, not because she wants them done but because she wants to get me to exercise without triggering my resistance to that endeavor, I have been manipulated, but not wronged. Buss argues that many personal relationships begin with seduction, as people show themselves to each other in their best light, etc., and are none the worse for that fact.
- When manipulation is wrong it is because it prevents accurate understanding, precludes relationships based on equality, and/or because it undermines welfare. These faults are not always present, and, when they are, they come in degrees and need to be balanced against other values.
- Given the extremely limited rationality of actual human beings, science communicators (like teachers, friends, lovers, and people in a variety of other roles) may need to be somewhat manipulative to be successful. For one thing, an emotional response to danger/surprise/novelty is what triggers rational deliberation. Most of the time we are operating on habitual, “auto-pilot” thinking. (This is explicitly argued by Marcus, Neuman, and Mackuen (2000) and seems to me to be implicit in Kahneman (2011).) Even when we want to engage people as rational deliberators, the first requirement of successful communication is to get their attention and set them to thinking. (In Kahneman’s terms this is the move from the “fast” System One to the “slow” System Two.) Moreover, given people’s cultural loyalties, our highly “polluted” information environment, and the urgency of some science-related problems, it may be necessary to “short-circuit” some degree of ideally deliberative processes to get timely action. Given the degree to which people are already not rationally deliberating, this may be a reasonable trade-off of accuracy (of belief) and equality (of relationships) for well-being.

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