

# Modulated feelings: the Pleasurable-Ends-Model of manipulation

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*Abstract:* Manipulation is a significant feature in human interaction and its study is of growing importance in areas such as marketing, politics, and policy. Questions concerning the nature of manipulation have become important in recent debates in ethics and political philosophy, referred to in terms such as “nudging” and “choice architecture”. But what precisely is manipulation? How does it operate? Without conceptual analysis, ethics cannot perform any critical evaluation of manipulation.

We discuss and reject some recent definitions of manipulation before proposing a new analysis and suggesting a more precise use of the term “manipulation”. Manipulation should be seen as a form of power where the manipulator makes it more likely that the manipulated chooses some end (action, belief etc.) but where the manipulated remains ultimately free to choose or not to choose this end. Manipulation works by actively changing the emotional attraction of certain ends or their realisation. This transformation of emotional bonds makes some options more appealing (or unappealing) to the manipulated, and thus more or less likely to be chosen. We call this the “Pleasurable-Ends-Model”.

We argue for the suggested model against the background of Aristotelian action theory. This theory states that human beings act either for some end which they consider good, or useful, or pleasurable. Consequently, agents can be made to act by influencing them in three fundamentally different ways: giving reasons may affect actions done for the good, economic bargaining influences actions done for utility, and manipulation affects the pleasurable ends. From this starting point, we further develop the Pleasurable-Ends-Model and elucidate its power.

*Keywords:* influence; manipulation; persuasion; power.

## 1. *Introduction: the many faces of one phenomenon*

Manipulation is a broad form of influence on human behavior and specifically on human decision-making.<sup>1</sup> It is ubiquitous. Politicians, and others

<sup>1</sup> There is another meaning of “manipulation” which is not the topic of this paper: namely “manual operation”. “Manipulation” was, until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a neutral technical term, meaning “to handle something (eg a machine) prudently so that it works in the way that is intended by the manipulator”. This usage is still today the norm in behaviorism. See Dahme: 1980: 726f.

in public life, develop politics and policies intended to direct our actions in manipulative ways.<sup>2</sup> Election campaigns like the recent US-American presidential election are increasingly based on manipulative means like emotional stimulations and strategic uses of television and social media, for example by inoculating one's political base against information from other sources by stirring up distrust for certain media. The same can be found in economical settings: In shopping malls marketing specialists aim to create a relaxed atmosphere, which will improve our mood for lingering and buying. And Manipulation has always been a constitutive element in interpersonal relations. Literature presents many examples. Fanny Dashwood in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* is an expert in manipulating her husband. (Rather than giving arguments, she plays with his emotions to make him believe that his father never wanted him to give any money to his stepmother or half-sisters.) The *locus classicus* is Shakespeare's *Othello*, where Iago is the true master of the art of manipulation. Iago stimulates Roderigo's basic desire to be loved, but also his jealousy and aggression, to get him to do exactly what he wants.<sup>3</sup> Let us look at a modern day example from politics: In 1990, just before the First Gulf War, the American people were mostly dismissive regarding the option of a military intervention in Iraq. But a well orchestrated political manipulation helped shifting the public mood towards a more sympathetic stance. *Citizens for a Free Kuwait* made a video go viral that heavily counted on the compassion of the people. In this video of an informal congressional hearing, a sobbing young woman, almost still a girl, with the name Nayirah, told the world about Iraqi soldiers pillaging the al-Addhan hospital in Kuwait, taking with them even the incubators – regardless of the inevitable death of the babies that were thrown onto the cold floor, left behind there to die. Two years later, and after the military intervention had taken place, it was revealed that Nayirah really was the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador in the U.S., Saud Nasir as-Sabah, and the whole video a PR-stunt by the PR Agency *Hill & Knowlton*. She had never worked in the hospital and the entire story was fictitious (but surely not unimaginary). But the video worked and helped to

<sup>2</sup> The definitions of “politics” and “policies” are many. “Policies” are often understood as the basic principles or political goals, which are put into practice in a society by means of “politics” (processes, methods). The distinction, however, is usually not that clear: “policy” is also used more generally to include the principles, goals, *and* the chosen means of their implication. Sunstein and Thaler, for example, identify “public policy” (2008: 14) with “designing user-friendly environments” (12): the processes and methods (user-friendly environment) by which goals are achieved. In what follows, we will accept this wider use of “policy”, which *includes* the means of realization of political goals. It is, for example, a “policy” to attempt to reduce speeding by laying speed bumps.

<sup>3</sup> Iago exploits Rodrigo's love-induced blindness and succeeds in making Rodrigo behave exactly as planned.

change the public view on an US-American intervention. Nayirah and Hill & Knowlton obviously lied to the public (a clear case of “fake news”) but what we are interested in is how the film targeted emotions. *That influence* is the centrally manipulative act, not the deception. Of course, in this case as so often manipulation is closely related to deception; the lies are used for the manipulation. But we can still distinguish the two aspects; we are not focusing on the deception but on the manipulative aspect of influencing people (be it based upon a lie or on something else).

It is not surprising that our general understanding of manipulation is negative. Understood as a means of influencing others for one’s own selfish ends, it is, in Western culture, generally condemned. Manipulation is mostly identified with deceit, negative incitement, and harm. However, it does not have to be seen straight-forwardly negative. “Nudge-apologists”, for example, regard manipulative techniques as positive methods in guiding human behaviour toward benign ends (though they do not use the *term* “manipulation” and prefer other expressions, such as “nudge”, “communication”, “information” and “choice architecture”; Thaler and Sunstein 2008; C. Heath and D. Heath 2010).

Given these very different ways of understanding and evaluating manipulation, it seems worthwhile to seek a basic understanding of what manipulation is – without any positive or negative connotations. That is the aim of this paper. We wish to propose a particular understanding and explanation of manipulation, by analyzing its underlying mechanisms and by looking at the phenomenon from the perspective of action theory. To make this aim clear, let us get back to the *Citizens for a Free Kuwait*-video for a second. Independently from the deception (lies), we find an example of manipulation in the setting, the performance and especially the thereby intended targeting at people’s emotions in order to affect their actions.

To anticipate our central point, we will argue that *Manipulation is a form of power where the manipulator makes the manipulated choose some end (an action, belief etc.) but where the manipulated remains, at least in a minimal sense, free to choose or not to choose this end. Our suggestion for its mechanism is that this power works by actively changing the emotional attraction of certain ends or their realization. This makes some options more (or even extremely, whereas others not at all) appealing to the manipulated, and thus more likely to be chosen.*

The structure of this paper develops this account in several steps. We first show that manipulation is a form of power which works with, rather than against, the freedom of the manipulated (Section 2). Then we look at, and reject, some specific common critiques (Section 3). It results that manipulation is neither necessarily under-hand (3.1), nor always serves negative ends (3.2). We then turn to critiques according to which manipulation essentially

limits the free and rational agency of the manipulated (3.3). Manipulation can, indeed, proceed by such a circumscription of rational agency, but this itself is not, we argue, its central mechanism. In Section 4 we fill the explanatory gap by showing that manipulation operates by raising or diminishing the emotional attraction of some desired end (and thus of some line of action). Using the Aristotle-Aquinas model of action theory, manipulation can be seen as one of three distinct ways in which an agent is guided toward a particular choice. Focussing on acts that are tied back to pleasure, we will call our suggestion the “Pleasurable-Ends-Model” of manipulation (4.1). We then argue for the merits of this account (4.2), and that from this account some conclusions follow (Section 5) – most importantly that this model might be a useful tool for future analyses of manipulation in such disciplines like Ethics, Political Theory, “Policy” and so forth.

## 2. *Manipulation as a specific form of influence* – *first part of the account*

Our goal is to find a precise descriptive account of manipulation which can serve as a conceptual tool for analysis, in various disciplines. Our proposed understanding should be generally compatible with common usage (“ordinary language”) but not strictly so: not all cases of “manipulation”, as commonly understood, will fall under our account.

In most general terms, we propose that one person “manipulates” another person (or himself/herself) if and only if

(i) *the manipulator makes someone do, desire, or believe something the manipulator wants the manipulated to do, desire, or believe*

and also

(ii) *the manipulator achieves this without using force and without threat of forceful consequence in the case of the non-compliance of the manipulated; such that, even when being manipulated, the manipulated could have acted otherwise.<sup>4</sup>*

The first condition identifies manipulation as a form of power, the second distinguishes it from coercion. However, as it stands, this account is incomplete. There are other non-coercive forms of power that are not identical with

<sup>4</sup> This surely is no comprehensive understanding of “freedom”. All we want to say is that freedom of choice is not undermined completely by what we call “manipulation”. We do not intend to say, that this is all that “freedom” may contain.

manipulation (e.g. persuasion). Condition (ii) is not yet sufficient.<sup>5</sup> Some suggestions of how to complete the account are discussed in the next sections: namely that manipulation is unique in operating in an under-hand manner (III.a), that it serves negative ends (III.b), or that it bypasses rationality (III.c). We discuss and reject these criteria before introducing our proposed clarification.

### 3. *What manipulation is not: three suggestions under scrutiny*

#### 3.1. Is manipulation necessarily under-hand?

Roderigo in Shakespeare's *Othello* is unaware that he is being manipulated, as were the viewers of the video with Nayirah. They didn't know the whole thing was a lie and they didn't anticipate that a sophisticated manipulation was taking place. In many cases manipulation doesn't come to mind immediately and thus happens under an awareness-threshold of the manipulated. In this sense van Dijk calls manipulation an "opaque instrument of power" (van Dijk 1998: S. 275; but "under-hand" is a better English expression for what he means) employed by those who control discourses and opinion-making. It is a power, he continues, "of which recipients are not barely aware, or of which they cannot easily control the consequences" (*ibid.*)<sup>6</sup>.

In contrast to this, perhaps widely held, view some contemporary authors would call some influences "manipulation" even where the manipulated is fully aware of being manipulated. Anne Barnhill gives an example: "We can be lucidly aware that we're being manipulated into feeling guilt, even as we feel guilt and act on it" (Barnhill 2014: 59). The self-consciousness of the manipulated, in such cases, is no escape from the manipulation. Thus being aware of manipulation does not necessarily break its spell. We might clearly see that a person is trying to manipulate us; we might see through the guise; we might even *not* want it to affect us; and yet we may not be able to escape from those paths of thought or action which our manipulator has intended for us. Joel Rudinow presents cases of erotic manipulation in this regard. Jones' wife poses semi-naked and seductive before Jones' weekly poker-evening with his friends to prevent him from going to the poker-game. Rudinow claims that in this case

<sup>5</sup> In Aristotle's nomenclature, condition (i) could be called the *genus proximum* (manipulation as a form of influence on human actions), but in order to differentiate Manipulation from other forms of influence we still need a precise *differentia specifica*.

<sup>6</sup> Without further specification, his account of manipulation is certainly over-inclusive – almost anything that is intentionally hidden, such as lying or cheating, can be called an "opaque instrument of power". It does not help that van Dijk explicitly criticizes the general lack of definition: "although frequently used, the notion of manipulation has, to my knowledge, never been made explicit in a theory" (van Dijk 1998: 340).

“it is apparent that [the wife] does not intend to deceive [...] about an interest”, it is “intuitively apparent that his wife is attempting to manipulate Jones” (Rudinow 1978: 342). Still, as a consequence, Jones cannot resist the temptation to stay at home with his wife. More examples of transparent acts of (self-) manipulation are to be found in the growing market of books and films on self-perfection. We can be taught manipulative means which, it is claimed, help overcoming our undesirable characteristics. We can, for example, be taught the use of mental mechanisms in order to relieve stress by regulating our negative feelings with positive mental images.<sup>7</sup> Such methods are expected to be efficacious despite the fact that the agent knows very well that they are manipulative mechanisms (at least in terms of our understanding of manipulation).<sup>8</sup>

### 3.2. Does manipulation necessarily serve negative ends?

In ordinary language “manipulation” is associated with the negative goals of manipulators. We speak of “manipulation” if we disapprove of some such influence on what we do. Paradigmatic for these critical approaches is the discussion of manipulation by neo-Marxist philosophers from the Frankfurt School. These authors argue that modern societies manipulate the exploited working-classes to prevent them from protesting against the unjust consequences of capitalism. Herbert Marcuse, for example, claims that manipulation aims at “reconciling the individual with the life-form that is enforced upon him by society” (Marcuse 1969: 31). Similarly, Ronald K. Green and Edward J. Pawlak mention (but do not discuss further) a negative account of manipulation in their analysis of organisations in the 1980s. They understand manipulation in terms of the power-structure which is imposed upon weaker persons by the more skilled (Green and Pawlak 1983: 37). They write:

Influence has been defined as manipulation when one who has a higher level of skill in persuasion uses it to further his own interests vis-à-vis a person less skilled in persuasion. In summary, manipulation is the conscious control of another’s behavior, without his knowledge or consent, by the control of communications or activities that have meaning to the other person in order to achieve one’s own objectives (35ff).

For these authors, manipulation is an abusive (and occasionally deceptive) influence by which manipulators achieve their personal (and selfish) aims. Thus manipulation is regarded as a morally questionable procedure.

<sup>7</sup> For example see Dobelli (2005).

<sup>8</sup> We speak of “(self)manipulation” since the very same mechanisms are at work that can be used to influence others. An appropriate account of manipulation should therefore consider both cases: that in which the manipulated is aware of the influence, and that in which s/he is not aware of it. Under-handedness should *not* be included in its characterisation.

No doubt, there are many cases where manipulation involves immoral or selfish behaviour. The *same* mechanism of influence, however, can be used to move people to bad deeds (such as serving the selfish and maybe even harmful ends of a manipulator) or to *good* deeds. A works or school canteen may present unhealthy fast food attractively in a manipulative manner, in order to simply sell more products and make more money, or it may present healthy food in the very same manipulative manner, so that customers choose it and improve their eating behavior. The latter seems laudable. It is an example where the same psychological mechanism serves in one case a good and in another case a bad end; manipulation would not seem to necessarily be bad. In that sense many authors agree that manipulation is neither necessarily under-hand nor serving negative ends.

Things may, though, be more complicated than they seem. The manipulation of a person, even to the performance of good deeds, may be (inherently) bad. Let us now turn to some authors who have argued along these lines.

### 3.3. Does manipulation necessarily vitiate the rationality of an agent?

Many authors struggle with the impact of manipulation upon the rational goals and upon the autonomy of the manipulated.<sup>9</sup> Robert Noggle argued in 1996 that manipulative actions are attempts to get another person's beliefs, emotions, or desires to fall short of the ideals that in the view of the influencer govern the manipulated's beliefs, desires, and emotions (Noggle 1996: 43ff). Manipulation is an act where the manipulator controls someone by adjusting his or her "psychological levers" (44). Noggle singles out three ways to lead "someone astray from certain paths toward certain ideals" (44): deception is an attempt to operate beliefs, conditioning and changing situational factors are attempts to operate desires, and the implementation of guilt (or other impulses) is an attempt to operate the manipulated's emotions (44-47). It is important for us to note that Noggle sees manipulation always as harming the manipulated: the manipulator vitiates the manipulated's moral agency by exploiting his emotions and thus flies under the "rational radar". According to Noggle, manipulation may even degrade an agent to the level of an object – a view which is still very popular (52-53).<sup>10</sup>

There are some problems with this understanding. First, Noggle's definition seems over-inclusive because, as Anne Barnhill has pointed out, physical

<sup>9</sup> Puzynina writes: "Manipulation is an attempt to affect the target in such a way that his behaviour/action is an instrument of attaining the goals of the manipulator, who acts without using force but in such a way that the target does not know the goal of the manipulators actions" (Puzynina 1992. Quote from Galasinski 2000: 54).

<sup>10</sup> See also Wood 2014: 17-50.

(or physiological) influencers (such as drugs) would *also* count as manipulators.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, Noggle's notion of ideals is ambiguous. What kind of ideals does he mean? Those the manipulated happens to have, or those, which he *should* have? This distinction is crucial. The manipulator might cause someone to act according to the good ideals which he *should* have. But why should we think of this as degrading the manipulated? We could, after all, argue that in some cases the manipulator has made the manipulated into a better moral agent. The ideals a person is manipulated to espouse might, in fact, be very good for that person (this hypothesis is mostly associated with what is called "paternalism").

Barnhill makes a similar criticism when she modifies Noggle's notion of ideals:

Manipulation is directly influencing someone's beliefs, desires, or emotions such that she falls short of ideals for belief, desire or emotion in ways typically not in her self-interest or likely not in her self-interest in the present context (Barnhill 2014: 52).<sup>12</sup>

She accepts that manipulation induces a "typically" non-ideal response (through the use of psychological levers and not through rationally argument), but does not go so far as to state that such a response is necessarily to the disadvantage of the manipulated. For Barnhill, objective ideals are important possibilities; manipulation *can* lead to good beliefs, desires, or emotions.

But possibly manipulation harms the *rational agency*<sup>13</sup> of the manipulated?<sup>14</sup> Marcia Baron has argued that "manipulativeness" is a form of arrogance because of the control the one seeks to exercise over the choices of the other (and over the choices they make even when they do have other acceptable alternatives). The mechanisms which constitute manipulation can vary widely, according to Baron. (She enumerates three: deception, pressure to acquiesce, and exploitation of emotional need or weaknesses of character.) But let us examine

<sup>11</sup> See also the critique of Noggle's account by Wood (Noggle 1996: 44f).

<sup>12</sup> She introduces the concept of "directly influencing" to exclude influences exerted over long periods of time or influences which act only some time after their exertion (such as drugging with substances whose affects kick in at a later time). The concept, however, also excludes manipulative acts which are not isolated events, but release their impact over time (such as advertisements, which work slowly into our unconscious). That is why we will add "directly or indirectly" to our definition in section 4.

<sup>13</sup> Rationality is understood as the ability of agents to be able to recognize, develop, and correct reasons that will lead to an action or attitude. Rationality is fundamentally committed to the principles of logic and is therefore fundamentally different from belief. It is also to be understood as being on the opposite end of a justification-spectrum to emotion (see e.g. Gigerenzer 2014: 1380 or Id. 2008: 20).

<sup>14</sup> This might also allow us to draw a contrast between manipulation and, for example, child-rearing. When the other does not yet *have* rational self-determination it cannot be bypassed. Consequently, when we act paternalistically towards children we do not necessarily manipulate them.



the thesis that manipulation bypasses or subverts the rational capacities of the manipulated, a suggestion that is also made by John Martin Fischer (Fischer 2004: 145).<sup>15</sup> Is this a harm to rational agency?

Allen Wood is concerned about some such effect on the manipulated, being strongly inspired by Kant's emphasis on autonomy as a prerequisite of the ethical. For Wood, manipulation is always bad because it "demeans and undermines the manipulee by violating his rational capacities to choose for himself how to live" (Wood 2014: 36ff). Although he acknowledges that manipulation does not deprive agents of their freedom fully, he holds that it significantly limits their self-determination: manipulation "refers to a way of interfering with or usurping someone's free agency that does not limit or destroy free choice but, rather influences it in certain ways that promote the outcome sought by the manipulator" (30). The influence on free choice is complex: If we see nudging someone in a certain direction, thus making the rational decision for another direction more difficult, as interfering with free choice, it would be too strong to say, that manipulation does not at all interfere with free choice. However, we think that manipulation is taking place, when there is a possibility for an agent to still choose what to do, otherwise it would be more like coercion. To be sure, we would have to say more about what constitutes "free choice" (one way to look at it, is to say, that having more than one choice and being able to choose between these constitutes "free choice") and look at individual cases in order to make out the gravity of a certain manipulation. It can hardly be decided in a clear cut manner, because life and therefore the decisions humans make in it are messy and happening more in something like a continuum where a manipulation might be problematic because it is a strong influence even if not a form of coercion.

Moti Gorin's critical definition of manipulation is rather similar to Woods. For Gorin "manipulation is a process of interpersonal influence that deliberately fails to track reasons" (Gorin 2014: 97). Failing to "track reasons" presupposes an ideal of action or behavior which is governed by appropriate reasons (96). This is a position also close to Kant's notion of autonomy in practical reason. Gorin consequently sees an "ideal type of personal influence" in rational persuasion: "the motivations of the influencer are grounded in the reasons she believes really do support the behavior she seeks to bring about, the means of influence (e.g. sound argument) reliably "aim at" or "linkup with" these reasons, and the mental states of the person being influenced also refer to the reasons that support the behavior." A good influence, according to Gorin, is grounded on reasons and moves the addressee by virtue of those reasons. Ma-

<sup>15</sup> See also Cave 2007: 138; Blumenthal-Barby 2014: 121-134; Greenspan 2003: 164; Mills 1995: 100.

nipulation, by contrast, disconnects this link by making the addressee act for reasons other than the right ones – or for no reason at all. Given his ideal of reason-based action, Gorin regards any manipulation as a form of harm to the manipulated and thus as problematic: “influencing reasons-responsive agents via such processes displays a lack of respect for them as agents and this is *pro tanto* wrong” (*ivi*: 96f).

These accounts of manipulation include two separate theses, a descriptive and a normative one:

1. A constitutive mechanism of manipulation is that it aims at bypassing reason as a source of action. The manipulated ultimately acts not on the basis of good reasons (but because someone has been “[...] playing upon [his] emotions, emotional needs or weaknesses of character”, as Baron suggests).
2. Such bypassing is regarded as harmful to the manipulated and thus wrong, because ideally actions should be based upon right reasoning.<sup>16</sup> This line of argument is, of course, of Kantian origin.<sup>17</sup>

This first (descriptive) thesis seems an adequate account of a manipulation.<sup>18</sup> But the second (normative) thesis is not convincing. An attempt to bypass reason is not by itself “harmful” because we are free to ignore it. Not *every* manipulative influence on our rational agency, aiming to vitiate our reason, is so powerful that it makes it impossible to act rationally. To be sure, if the manipulated’s responses are triggered in the right way he might find some option or action attractive *for no good reason* because pre-rational impulses have been activated. But that does not by itself degrade him to the level of an object: he can still decide rationally

<sup>16</sup> This does not mean that *every* action is based on reason – e.g. cycling.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Buss challenges this view when she says, that it is not *per se* wrong to bypass or subvert rational capacities – in fact, it is just a normal thing that happens all the time and is often neither harmful nor lacking respect with regard to an agent’s autonomy. It is not even clear if being straightforward (as the opposite of manipulation might be called) isn’t morally problematic in itself. The reasons why manipulation is morally significant are threefold to her: „There are, in particular, three reasons worth noting: manipulating/deceiving someone often prevents her from governing herself with an *accurate understanding* of her situation, [...] often prevents her from relating to the manipulator/deceiver as an *equal*, [...] is often incompatible with promoting, or even preserving, her *welfare*.“ (Buss 2005: 226f.)

<sup>18</sup> The case when only some reasons are given (and others left out) is not manipulation according to our understanding but rather deception - which can, but doesn’t necessarily have to be part of an act of manipulation. Even though the selection of information may aim at modifying the attractiveness of an end, it does so in a way that is not necessarily targeting the emotions of an agent *in the first place* (but maybe in the second). By selecting facts in a certain way, the recipients of that argument are tricked into thinking (concluding) in a certain way, namely that they should do X. By itself, this is not manipulation. But it is an example for how messy it gets, when we talk about decision-making and possible influences on other people.

not to follow these impulses. Otherwise he would be *forced* to act in a particular way, and that is not manipulation, but a kind of coercion.

Let us return to the central point. Is there a threat to (free) agency in *every* act of manipulation? The answer is no, because *free agency might remain robust*. The harm done to freedom might be merely superficial: the piped music in the shopping mall might tempt me to buy more but puts no real limitation on free agency. And, more fundamentally, it is part of the account of manipulation that the manipulated could have acted otherwise. That seems to be admitted by Wood when he writes that it “does not limit or destroy free choice”. But then, what harm might it actually do to people?

There is a further objection to this “it-limits-freedom” critique: not all limitations of freedom are *per se* bad. Such limitations can be morally required in, for example, cases of paternalistic intervention: to protect other people (roads have speed limits) for example. To call every curtailment of freedom *immoral* is not philosophically justified.

#### 4. *The Pleasurable-Ends-Model of manipulation* – *second part of the definition*

##### 4.1. Why people act – and what makes them act.

Even if manipulation cannot be analyzed trivially as a vitiation of human freedom, the above approaches do point in an important direction. The manipulated is made to choose something freely but does so, mainly *not* because of reasons which he receives from the manipulator. This is how manipulation differs from, for example, (rational) persuasion, where reasons are presented to the manipulated for doing something. Manipulation is indeed a bypassing of reason, but we still have to know how the manipulated is made to do what he does. To focus upon the mechanisms of manipulation we must ask more generally: Why do people act in certain ways at all? Why do they choose (freely) one action rather than another?<sup>19</sup>

If we take the basic form of an action to be “I do X for purpose E”,<sup>20</sup> we can state that someone acts if he *sees something good in his or her choice*. An action

<sup>19</sup> It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss whether we are really free or whether human freedom is but a grand illusion. Following Beyleveld, we can simply take it as a “phenomenological necessity”: “We can’t categorically know that we are PPAs [prospective purposive agents]. However, the phenomenology of our [...] agency makes it, in practice, impossible to assume that we are not” (1991: 118).

<sup>20</sup> See Gewirth 1981: 49.

(in contrast to mere behavior) is a realization of a pro-attitude towards an end voluntarily selected as being better than alternative ends. This understanding of action was expounded by Aristotle and later elaborated by Thomas Aquinas and most recently by authors such as Alain Gewirth, Elisabeth Anscombe, and Candace Vogler.

How does a chosen purpose lead to an action? Aristotle's Latin commentators have reconstructed this process as a "practical syllogism":<sup>21</sup> the major premise is a chosen end, the minor is a concrete situation in which that end can be realized by a certain action, and the conclusion is a proposition about this action (or is an action itself, as Aristotle on occasion claims). For example: "I want something sweet" (Major), "There is some chocolate in my cupboard" (Minor), "Taking the chocolate from my cupboard will satisfy my need" (Conclusion). The choice-worthy end (something sweet that I desire) is the normative starting point of the practical deliberation; it explains why the conclusion is action-related in the relevant sense. If the action does not conflict with other ends that I have (e.g. losing weight) and if there are no limiting conditions (e.g. I do not suffer from a fatigue syndrome rendering me incapable of opening the cupboard), then the deliberation will make me sufficiently motivated to perform the action: I go to the cupboard, open it, and take a piece of chocolate.

What are choice-worthy ends for our actions? While Aristotle largely discusses substantial notions of the "good" or moral norms, we can give a very general account of choice-worthy ends. People realize all sorts of ends through intentional actions, both good and bad, both objective and highly subjective, some of which they choose merely because they like them. For a better understanding it is helpful to turn to Aquinas' more general application of the practical syllogism. He distinguishes three different types of Majors. (He actually speaks about different "appetites" which people have - goods or ends they strive for.) We have ends we desire *for their own sake* (such as truth), or ends we have because they are *useful* (such as healthy food), or ends we desire because they are *pleasant* (such as chocolate).<sup>22</sup>

1. The first type of end, something chosen for its own sake, has been the focus of most discussions in ethical reflection. In her powerful defense of

<sup>21</sup> The *locus classicus* for Aristotle's account is *De motu animalium* 7, 701a7-36 where the syllogism is meant to explain animal motion. In other contexts (e.g. *NE* III.5), the syllogism seems to explain human deliberation in the sense above. (It is rather doubtful whether in can do both in the same way. For a detailed analysis of the different readings of Aristotele's practical syllogism see: Klaus Corcilius 2008a: 101-132).

<sup>22</sup> See *Summa Theologiae* I/II q. 5 and 6. Obviously not all of the examples above are by the Angelic Doctor (who could not know about the great pleasures of chocolate).

Thomas' theory of action, Vogler calls them "ultimate" ends which are "fitting" to the agent's life: "What can be said in support of attaining her ultimate end will involve the overarching practical direction of her life [...]. In that sense what stops the movement of appetite in what is wanted for its own sake is what fits the agent more generally, given the sort of practical being she is and works to be. Such pursuits are good in the sense fitting" (Vogler 2009: 32).

2. Useful ends are all those things which serve, in direct or indirect ways, other ends we have (healthy food makes us healthy).
3. Pleasant ends are desired simply because of the pleasure they provide.

These three types of ends are, of course, in many cases mixed one with another: even healthy food can be pleasant. Often, too, the agent is not fully aware of his (unacknowledged) ends: I help someone spontaneously because (subconsciously) I do not want a fellow human being to suffer. But Thomas' distinction allows us to make intentional actions more transparent.

Let us take his theory of action as a starting point for furthering our analysis. We will follow a slightly unusual path. Rather than asking why someone acts in a certain way we will ask (indirectly) *how someone can influence someone else to act in a certain way*. Based upon the Aristotle-Aquinas model, there are two possibilities: influence is possible either *via* the Major or *via* the Minor part of the syllogism. We can modify the Major, by, for example, presenting to someone a new choice-worthy end (of any of the three types) or by combining or adding a new end to an already existing end (I have shown you how good passion fruit tastes and now you want to buy some of them). Or we can change the Minor, by, for example, creating such a context that one of his choice-worthy ends becomes more easily realized than it would be otherwise.<sup>23</sup> On this basis we can sketch a typology of influences:

1. We can present to someone a new end as being *choice-worthy for its own sake*. This can be done by giving reasons as to why something is good; we try to *persuade* someone. For example: I convince you that primates are ends-in-themselves (as Kant would express it) and therefore have fundamental rights. If I succeed, you will have a new Major. If we use Vogler's more general understanding of the first type of end as "fitting", I might also give you reasons as to why someone like you (with an overall concern for the environment) should act with a concerns for

<sup>23</sup> We could also influence someone's action by distorting his entire repertoire of practical reasoning by, for example, deception (which leads him to wrong conclusions) or by inducing some weakness of the will (through, for example, drunkenness).

primates (this being a choice-worthy end for you). The influencer can also change the context (the Minor). I can inform you that drinking coffee is ultimately contributing to the deforestation of the rainforest and thus depriving primates of their natural habitat. If you already accept that we should protect primates as a choice-worthy end for its own sake, you might now draw a new conclusion, namely to drink less coffee.

2. We can present some new ends as *useful* because it helps to achieve an end one has already chosen. You do want chocolate? I tell you where it is, namely in the cupboard. This will make you adopt the new (useful) subordinate end of opening the cupboard. Influence on a Major of usefulness will often happen in economic contexts. A seller offers a product at a certain price and we have to decide whether or not to buy it at this price (whether the useful end is sufficiently choice-worthy to act accordingly). The “goodness-value” we attach to a utility-end will depend on the price; how much something costs (in comparison to others things, and to what we can afford) determines how useful it is to us. We can therefore influence others by offering a certain price, by bargaining, or even by bribery. Penalties, fees, and economic incentives are further examples of this.

3. We can also introduce a new *pleasure* or make some existing end more appealing. I might introduce you to truffles and, all of a sudden, you have a new longing and you act accordingly. We might add pleasure to what is useful: we might add sugar to the porridge and thereby make the children eat it happily. The shop-owner who wants people to enter the shop decorates it attractively and makes it easy to access from the street. It is then simply more pleasant to go into the shop than it would be otherwise. And in all these cases we suggest to speak of “manipulation”.

If these be the mechanisms of manipulation, we can add a third condition to our proposed account. Someone *manipulates* another person (or himself) if the first two conditions are fulfilled and if

(iii) *the manipulator actively changes the emotional attraction of some end for the manipulated in such a way that he is emotionally more (or less) inclined to act upon that end than before the manipulation.*

This condition is specific to manipulation and helps us distinguish it from other forms of influence.<sup>24</sup> Manipulation does not work through the presenta-

<sup>24</sup> And if we take criterion (ii) and (iii) *together*, we finally have the *differentia specifica* of manipulation that we were looking for.

tion of reasons, but primarily through changing the emotional attraction of some end. Let us call this account the “Pleasurable-Ends-Model of Manipulation”.

It will be noted, of course, that this is an ideal model because in real life reason and emotions are not so sharply distinguished. Most reasoning is accompanied by some emotion; and probably most, if not all, emotions have some implicit reasoning at their heart.<sup>25</sup> That is why we can also colour a reason emotionally so that its effect on the addressee is strengthened. (In this case we can speak of a *manipulative dimension* of persuasion).

Our third condition has a forebear in Marcuse’s observation that manipulation operates by transforming “the social and political needs [...] into individual, libidinal needs” (Marcuse 1969: 13). But manipulation goes beyond “social and political needs” and its mechanism does much more than merely playing upon libidinal needs. The Freudian picture is too simplistic. Baron comes closest to our Pleasurable-Ends-Model when she regards “pressure to acquiescence” and more generally “playing upon emotions, emotional needs or weaknesses of character” as manipulative means. They are indeed central mechanisms of manipulation and the Pleasurable-Ends-Model explains how.<sup>26</sup> We can give a more precise meaning to Baron’s rather vague remark about “playing upon emotions”: manipulation makes a particular end more or less emotionally attractive.

#### 4.2. The examples revisited

Let us turn back to the examples above. Does the Pleasurable-Ends-Model of manipulation help us to understand what is going on?

Quite generally, policies introduced to make people act in certain ways can be seen as making some actions emotionally more or less pleasing. And the relaxed atmosphere of the shopping mall manipulates us by making the shopping event more pleasant so that consumers either adopt a new end (it is pleasurable to go there) or find an existing end (shopping in the mall) emotionally more attractive.

Jane Austen’s Fanny Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* skillfully manipulates her husband by generally making it emotionally unattractive for him to hold an opinion, which differs from hers. Even if it *appears* that she persuades him by argument, the *real* influence happens on an emotional level. On the one hand, her personality is such that it is fairly unpleasant to disagree with her: her husband is well advised not to gainsay her if he wants to live in peace.

<sup>25</sup> For the literature on reason in emotion see for example de Sousa (1998).

<sup>26</sup> Barons “pressure to acquiescence”, for example, makes the manipulated feel uncomfortable if he is not in agreement with some general consensus; an action or belief not in accord with the consensus becomes less pleasurable - to hold his view (or reason) becomes for him emotionally coloured.

On the other hand, she adds an emotional burden to any generous thought her husband might harbour: When she states for example, “what brother on earth would do half as much for his sisters, even if really his sisters! And as it is – only half blood!” Fanny does not argue that responsibility towards half-sisters is less than to full sisters; she moves him emotionally away from them instead (“only half blood!”). Her husband at last reaches the point where he finds helping his family financially is emotionally very unattractive and concludes: “it is certainly an unpleasant thing... to have those kinds of yearly drains on one’s income” (Austen 1944: 9). At this point Fanny’s victory is complete. Her husband happily accepts her “reasoning” (which is no reasoning) that his father did not want him to give them money in the first place. She has influenced him not by asserting good arguments but by adding an emotional burden to some (good) arguments and making some weak ones more pleasurable to accept. This is an act of manipulation.

In Shakespeare’s *Othello* Iago exploits Rodrigo’s love-caused blindness and puts him in a context where his emotional objective comes seemingly in reach. Roderigo must now assume that his love has a chance of being requited and Desdemona seems to give encouraging signs. Rodrigo thus he becomes completely loyal to Iago. Placed by Iago in this new situation, Rodrigo represses all other concerns and ends he might have under the one all-powerful love-end. Thus Iago, the skillful manipulator, makes Rodrigo to behave exactly as planned.

When *Hill & Knowlton* made Nayirah appear talking about the cruelty of Iraqi soldiers and dead babies whilst weeping, the audience was emotionally pushed by the video to legitimize a military intervention. The fact that soldiers pillage hospitals during wars is maybe nothing new, but the effect Nayirah and her tears had on the audience opened up a new dimension of being emotionally affected.

## 5. *Conclusion: the strengths of the Pleasurable-Ends-Model*

Taking pleasantness (or emotional attraction) of an end as the core of the manipulative mechanism, we can now explain specific characteristics of manipulation.

### 5.1.

The model shows why manipulation does not deprive the manipulated of his freedom to choose (see condition 2 above). To make an end pleasant might render the decision against it highly unpleasant, demanding, or even painful; but



the manipulated is not forced in his decision either way. In order to be effective, manipulation must either be very powerful (strong erotic attraction might have an irresistible effect even if the manipulated knows that he is being manipulated) or unexpected, so that the manipulated cannot easily guard himself against it. There are situations where the manipulated has no strong reasons for or against a certain action and even slight emotional influence can push him one way or the other. In all these cases, however, the manipulated is ultimately free to resist. That explains why manipulation is so important in election campaigns: it acts on people and they still consider themselves to be free voters. If people were *forced* to do something then the influence would count as coercion (of which rape is an example) and no longer manipulation (of which seduction is an example).

### 5.2.

This suggested mechanism can explain the particular importance of our human dispositions to manipulation. There are, for example, many evolutionary-given instincts in *homo sapiens*, “automatic behaviour patterns”, which can be “triggered by a single feature of the relevant information in the situation” (Cialdini 1993: 16). These patterns are known to exist in many animal species. They enable them to react efficiently and quickly in standard situations. They seem also to be powerful in *homo sapiens*, where they lead to (often unconscious) shortcut-reactions. Most of these patterns become active when stimulated by emotions (understood as motivating brain states with biological functions) that are aroused in a situation. It is in the evolutionary interest of human beings to feel in a certain way in certain situations and to act accordingly (Tooby and Cosmides 1990: 375-424). These inborn responses afford many manipulative possibilities. A visceral or emotional appeal can be attached even to things as boring as car tires (e.g. the *Pirelli* calendar) and thus help to sell a product.<sup>27</sup>

### 5.3.

Our explanatory thesis makes it plausible that manipulation can be achieved by using very particular weaknesses or individual responses in groups of people or in an individual. It is, for example, possible to influence an electorate of people who feel forgotten or threatened by playing on fear and nationalism or hope (“Yes we can!”, or “Make America great again”). And the better you know an individual the more subtly you can manipulate him or her, because you are familiar with his or her *particular* emotional responses. Rudinow, although he does not say anything in detail about the mechanism, rightly observes that

<sup>27</sup> See for example: Berlyne (1960); Eskine, Kaciniak and Prinz (2012).

“weakness” plays a crucial role. The Pleasurable-Ends-Model explains why. Let us understand someone’s weakness for something to be a special fondness or desire for it: he finds it hard to resist some particular thing when it is offered. Though manipulation is not restricted to cases of weakness (it can work *wherever* emotions can determine our action) a weakness is particularly useful for manipulative purposes because it is an area where we tend to be guided strongly by emotions and where the manipulator can act on specific individuals. If someone presents something as an attractive end for our self-indulgent desire then we find it hard to resist.

#### 5.4.

Our analysis of manipulation shows why it normally bypasses reasoning, at least to a certain extent. When someone is manipulated, the good of his act *for him* is it being pleasurable (or the pleasurable dimension it has added to another good). Thus he acts ultimately because it pleases him to do so (or not). The action is not primarily based upon any rational evaluation of the end (even if reasons come into the decision making process). That explains Thomas Hill’s observation:

“Manipulation, broadly conceived, can perhaps be understood as intentionally causing or encouraging people to make the decisions one wants them to make by actively promoting their making the decisions in ways that rational persons would not want to make their decisions” (Hill 1984: 251).

A rational person bases his choice of action on reason and it would be odd of him to act exclusively upon emotions. But it is not *per se* wrong. He can happily eat chocolate simply because he likes it – as Oscar Wilde has Lord Henry famously remark: “I adore simple pleasures. They are the last refuge of the complex” (Wilde 2011: ch. 2)

#### 5.5.

The Pleasurable-Ends-Model makes it clear why manipulation does not have to imply deception. There are many ways in which we can change the emotional attraction of ends without using deception. In some cases, certainly, deception can help – but mainly by blurring the origin of a new emotional attraction of an end. (If the manipulated realizes that the attraction has been consciously added to make him act in a certain way, he might be more critical about the situation or some pleasing end.) Deception, moreover, is not specific to manipulation. It can be part of other types of influence: we can persuade someone with deceitful arguments or we can falsely present something to him as a useful end.

The Pleasurable-Ends-Model accords manipulation a precise place on the map of behaviour-affecting influences. It explains fundamental mechanisms and can therefore be a starting point for a more advanced ethical analysis of manipulation, a phenomenon so pervasive in politics, marketing, and elsewhere.

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