

The background of the cover features a light yellow-to-white gradient with several stylized, dark green leaf motifs scattered across it. These motifs are simple line drawings of leaves on short stems, appearing in various orientations.

THOUGHT MANIPULATION

**The Use and Abuse of
Psychological Trickery**

SAPIR HANDELMAN

 ***Greenwood***
PUBLISHING GROUP

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Psychological Trickery

Sapir Handelman

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Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Thought manipulation : the use and abuse of psychological trickery / Sapir Handelman.
p. cm. —

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-313-35532-5 (hard copy : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-313-35533-2
(ebook : alk. paper)

1. Control (Psychology). 2. Mental suggestion. 3. Behavior modification. I. Title.
BF611.H35 2009


153.8'5—dc22 2009009899

13 12 11 10 9 1 2 3 4 5

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130 Cremona Drive, P.O. Box 1911
Santa Barbara, California 93116-1911

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Manufactured in the United States of America

In memory of my parents, Miriam and Joseph, and for my beloved wife, Yael.

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Introduction

THE CHALLENGE OF MANIPULATION

Manipulation is a wide-ranging phenomenon, present in almost every dimension of our social life. It is a puzzling motivating action geared towards interference in the decision-making process of another person, usually without his approval. This kind of intrusion is done indirectly by employing morally questionable tricks, such as temptation, distraction, and misdirection.

The trickery quality associated with manipulation enables the phenomenon to appear in almost infinite variations and under many different guises, from a powerful weapon in the service of indecent propaganda¹ to altruistic measures in psychotherapy and even education.² Indeed, social scientists have pointed out that an effective change in human decision-making and behavior cannot be achieved without employing a certain degree of manipulation.³

Manipulation is not exactly persuasion, not precisely coercion, and not merely similar to deception. This elusive phenomenon is located somewhere in the gray area between those motivating actions, and this gray place presents essential difficulties in characterizing manipulation and measuring its impact.

The skilled manipulator adopts strategies in a way that will obscure normative and legal judgment of his actions. His sophisticated and illusive methods of influence challenge the wisdom of leading proponents of the open society. The challenge appears in almost any dimension one can imagine, from politics to advertising to education and even to the most intimate relationships. For example, where is the

limit between sexual harassment and legitimate courtship? How can decent and indecent propaganda be distinguished? Where exactly is the boundary between fair and unfair influence upon consumers? How can people's attention be attracted to innovative ideas when they aren't inclined to pay attention? How can the social reformer, the genius, and the pioneer challenge the conventional wisdom and open new vistas? What is the most effective way to open a public debate on sensitive, important issues that almost everyone in society regards as taboo?

This book proposes that the phenomenon of manipulation be used as a constructive tool. It introduces manipulative strategies in order to present difficulties that relate to one basic and fundamental question: How can an individual's autonomy, independence, and freedom of choice be guaranteed and decision-making be improved according to his or her preferences, priorities, and best interests?

LIMITING THE DISCUSSION TO THE "TWILIGHT ZONE"

The kinds of manipulation discussed in this book are geared toward influencing the decision-making of a person, but without physically limiting his options. Thus, the type of manipulation studied in this book will pertain to mental influence as opposed to physical coercion.⁴ This distinction points to a fundamental difficulty in any discussion on the ethical and political aspects of manipulation: How can we protect the individual from destructive manipulation that cannot be quantified or clearly identified? Is the target of manipulation, who seems to act against his own best interests, acting out of a free choice, or is the adroit manipulator controlling him by preying on his weaknesses? Where is the boundary between irresistible weaknesses and free choice?

Our inability to read minds and thoughts obstructs us from finding satisfactory answers to just such tricky questions. Therefore, instead of tackling these problems head on, we shall turn to the bigger picture, which is the debate over the decent social order. The basic idea is that a stable, decent society can benefit its members while reducing the impact of damaging influences, such as offensive manipulation. However, is such a vision practically possible and, if so, how?

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The chief purpose of this book is to present challenging and arousing questions regarding individual freedom of choice via the analysis of manipulative strategies. The manipulations are analyzed through the eyes of a rational motivator, and questions, problems, and dilemmas are then constructed from possible outcomes of the actual dynamic interactions likely to create unexpected results.

The book is composed of three parts. The first part, which consists of the first four chapters, presents the concept of manipulation and explains the challenges the phenomenon presents to proponents of the open society. The second part, chapters 5 through 8, specifically introduces manipulations that are designed to limit our freedom of choice. The third part, chapters 9 through 11, discusses manipulations that are geared toward helping us discover new options, possibilities, and horizons.

Part One offers a general introduction to the phenomenon of manipulation and the problems it encompasses. It discusses the characteristics of manipulation, the ethics of manipulation, and the terminology of manipulation. The intention is to prepare the groundwork for the book as a whole.

Our point of departure is a rational human being who is determined to manipulate. This point of view helps to better understand the fundamental nature of manipulation and its uniqueness in comparison to other motivating actions, such as coercion, persuasion, and deception. However, social life does not provide laboratory conditions in human design. The next parts, which include many practical examples, examine actual manipulative interaction in the field.

The focus of Part Two, “limiting manipulations,” aims to narrow the target’s perception of available options. Usually the intention is to steer him toward one specific goal, without using coercive means. This part explores the problem of limiting manipulations in three dimensions: advertising, politics, and leadership.

The chapter on advertising focuses on “irrational” methods of influence employed by professional advertisers and the challenges raised thereby to proponents of capitalism, a society conducted and organized as a free market system.⁵ The discussion of manipulative strategies and their effectiveness clarifies central issues at the very core of the capitalist view, such as the use of knowledge in society, the problem of censorship in advertisements, and the meaning of competition

in the global social context. The upshot of this chapter is a demonstration of how an ideal free market is able to spontaneously reduce the impact of damaging influences. Still, the question remains: how is such an ideal approached?

The chapter on politics compares two manipulative strategies that appeared in two different election campaigns. This comparison—which emphasizes major differences with regard to parameters such as influence on voters, potential to shift voting, and legislation implications—indicates that rules intended to ensure fair elections can yield embarrassing, and even absurd, results. The inevitable conclusion is that even the most sophisticated, best-intended rules are only man-made and, thus, can fail. How can we improve the rules intended to direct a straight, effective, and beneficial political process?

The chapter on leadership focuses on a desperate situation of destructive social conflict. It presents a drastic political move that led to a turning point in one of the most entrenched conflicts in the world: the Arab-Israeli conflict. The chapter intends to demonstrate a basic rule in the art of political influence: not all forms of subversive manipulation are wrong. How can tolerable and intolerable manipulation be distinguished? How can manipulation be judged as ethical or unethical? What are the ethical limits of political manipulation?

Manipulations that are designed to expand people's perception are the topic of Part Three of this book. "Expanding manipulations" aim to open the target's mind to discover new horizons without directly intervening in his final decision. They are built to give a liberal response to painful situations of rigidity and inflexibility.

The manipulator, who wants to reveal other options to a target, believes that the target is possessed by a biased conviction that he refuses to examine critically. The manipulator in this case tries to cast doubts in the target's mind about the value of the target's conviction. In this way, the manipulator hopes to aid the target in improving his decision-making process. However, many bothersome questions and problems emerge from this scenario. Is this kind of liberation, liberation by manipulation, really possible? Is it possible to ensure that the liberal manipulator does not become an oppressive manipulator who actually maneuvers the target to agree to his opinion? Is it always advantageous to cast doubts on someone's convictions if he might not have other tools to cope with reality?

To better understand these issues, I examine psychological therapy as a laboratory for the study of central issues concerning the individual's freedom of choice, autonomy, and independence. The discussion

connects the laboratory conditions of the psychological treatment and the ethical-political discussion in the field. The laboratory conditions of psychotherapy can help explore many difficulties in understanding manipulative interactions. For example, it helps demonstrate that it is not always clear who is actually directing the manipulative interface. A skilled manipulator might possibly be a victim of his own manipulation.

In conclusion, this book offers a preliminary study on a fascinating, pervading social phenomenon. By examining manipulation, it is possible to illuminate gray areas of human relations. This book will, hopefully, pave the way for further ethical and political discussions concerning how to develop the foundations of a good society.

NOTES

1. Adorno, T. W. (1951), "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda" in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. Ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt. (New York: Urizen, 1978), 118–137.

2. A manipulative approach to cope with human problems and misery can be found in Watzlawick, P., J. H. Weakland, and R. Fisch, (1974), *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company). The authors, who are professional therapists, offer manipulative strategies to deal with stubborn psychological problems.

3. Kelman, H. C. (1965), "Manipulation of Human Behavior: An Ethical Dilemma for the Social Scientist," *Journal of Social Issues* 21, no. 2: 33. Kelman, who agrees that an "effective behavior change inevitably involves some degree of manipulation," presents and analyzes a dilemma for the social scientist: "The two horns of the dilemma, then, are represented by the view that any manipulation of human behavior inherently violates a fundamental value, but that there exists no formula for so structuring an effective change situation that such manipulation is totally absent."

4. The classical distinction between liberty (physical options available for a person) and autonomy (the individual's ability to choose among the available options) indicates that, principally, manipulation invades the autonomy of an individual without limiting his or her liberty. In other words, manipulation influences mainly the mental sphere (autonomy) and not the physical one (liberty). For a further discussion on the distinction between liberty and autonomy, see Dworkin, G. (1997), *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 14.

5. I focus mainly on Friedman, R. & M. (1979), *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich); Hayek, F. A.

(1944), *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press); Hayek, F. A. (1945), "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *American Economic Review* xxxv, No. 4: 519–530; Hayek, F. A. (1960), *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press); Hayek, F. A. [1973] (1993a), *Rules and Order*, Volume 1 of *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul); Hayek, F. A. [1979] (1993b), *The Political Order of a Free People*, Volume 3 of *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).

CHAPTER 1

The Manipulation Phenomenon: An Overview

INTRODUCTION

Manipulation is an interesting motivating action. It is not exactly coercion, not precisely persuasion, and not entirely similar to deception. It is a widespread phenomenon that occurs in almost all walks of life: politics, art, education, and even interpersonal relations. Yet, the professional literature that attempts to cope with the challenge of systematically characterizing and analyzing the very essence of the phenomenon remains insufficient.

Very little academic work has been done to explore, investigate, and explain the fundamental nature of manipulation and its uniqueness relative to other motivating actions. Most of the work that attempts to face this challenge assembles and summarizes the phenomenon into one conclusive definition. I would like to open my own discussion of manipulation by presenting three definitions that have helped me greatly in understanding the important aspects of manipulation, especially in exploring the uniqueness of the phenomenon and the secrets behind its powerful influence.

Joel Rudinow, in a discussion about the unique characteristics of manipulation, observes that “most people . . . would distinguish manipulation from persuasion, on one hand, and from coercion, on the other.”¹ He emphasizes the sophistication of the phenomenon and proposes the following complicated definition: “*A* attempts to manipulate *S* if *A* attempts the complex motivation of *S*’s behavior by means of deception or by playing on a supposed weakness of *S*.”² Robert Goodin, who is interested in the ethical aspects of

manipulatory politics, regards manipulative behavior as an exercise of power.³ He emphasizes the trickery-based features of manipulation and proposes a friendlier definition than Rodinow's: "One person manipulates another when he deceptively influences him, causing the other to act contrary to his putative will."⁴ Michael J. Phillips, who explores the ethical aspects of manipulation in advertising, emphasizes the irrational motifs inherent in the phenomenon. He clearly understands that manipulation is neither persuasion nor deception and proposes the following sophisticated definition to manipulative advertising: "... we might first describe it as advertising involving efforts to nonpersuasively alter consumers' perceptions of products by means other than deception."⁵

Each of these thinkers emphasizes different important aspects and elements of manipulation, including sophistication (Rudinow), trickery (Goodin), and irrational motifs (Phillips). These differences help to concretize the impossibility of assembling and summarizing the very essence of manipulation in one clear and conclusive definition. There will always be important examples of manipulations (or, more precisely, what we intuitively categorize as manipulative behavior) that contradict each definition or, at least, are not included under the umbrella of that definition.⁶

In this book, which focuses on manipulation in a very broad sense, I intend to use a different methodology. Like Rudinow, Goodin, and Phillips, I will propose my own definition of manipulation. Unlike these thinkers, however, my proposal is much more humble and not as ambitious. I will offer a broad and general definition only as a point of departure and as an introduction to my main analysis. The main focus will turn to a sketch of the landscape of manipulation through a systematic analysis of the unique characteristics of the phenomenon and the necessary conditions for it to occur (an overview that definition alone cannot provide).⁷

I will begin by asking the questions: What does a rational human being, who wishes to be manipulative, have to do? Which effect does he desire to create? What motivates him to employ manipulative tricks? Taking up these questions is intended to facilitate our preliminary discussion. Exploring the issue from this point of view is helpful in forming a better understanding of the unique characteristics of manipulation and allows us to avoid struggling with trickery questions that cannot be satisfactorily answered. (For example, how could we identify manipulative interaction?) I will simply try to examine a manipulative interface as it is designed in the laboratory of a rational manipulator.

Of course, to remain exclusively in the laboratory of a rational manipulator seems to evade the very challenge of coming to grips with manipulative behavior. The reason is that almost every rational plan of manipulative strategy sooner or later must contend with dynamic interaction that is likely to yield unexpected results. The next chapters, which include many real-life examples, are conducted on the theoretical-practical axis. I begin with a rational motivator planning his moves; different possible outcomes of his strategy are the very stuff of actual political problems, ethical dilemmas, and intellectual challenges.

In conclusion, this introductory chapter is designed to sketch the landscape of our discussion, provoke critical thinking, and prepare the ground for understanding the challenges that the manipulation phenomenon presents to passionate advocates of liberty, autonomy, and the open society.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

This chapter intends to feature the unique characteristics of manipulation in an analytical form and present typical characteristics of a manipulative interaction.⁸ For this purpose, I found it useful and efficient to employ certain basic assumptions that are usable in economic analysis. This kind of move is consistent with the methodology known as Economic Imperialism.⁹

Our basic assumptions, which are based on simple common sense, are intended to facilitate our discussion. As our journey progresses, I will need to deviate from basic assumptions and even cast doubts upon their validity. The following chapters include many practical examples. As sophisticated and logical as our assumptions may sound, reality has its own rules of conduct. Real-life situations are not necessarily conducted according to our basic assumptions, to say the very least. This is especially true of manipulative interactions that contain elements that we tend to understand as irrational.

This book describes manipulative situations as a type of interaction that occurs between human beings. The analysis focuses on agents that hold “standard” human characteristics: conscience, preferences, will, and so on. The discussion is limited to conscious behavior (as much as possible).

As already stated, the book explores the unique characteristics of manipulation and presents the ethical challenges that the phenomenon