

## Deadly Subversion: The Real Beef about Advertising

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Early in the Reagan administration, the economist Robert Heilbroner, called advertising “. . . the deadliest subversive force in capitalism . . . [ for it] . . . debases language, drains thought, and undoes dignity.” Defenders of advertising insist that the indictment is seriously flawed. I will argue that the critics of advertising are largely on target, and the indictment is not nearly as flawed as the defenders complain. (Heilbroner 1981:37)

I will begin with some clarification: advertising is any public display designed to sell or promote a product, idea or person. This includes not just commercials or print ads, but also clothing, bumper stickers, billboards, and product placement in TV and movies. And when I talk about the effects of advertising, I am not referring only to the way it moves goods through the market, but with the ancillary messages that accompany the sales pitches.

The cost of these pitches now exceeds 230 billion dollars a year, and some estimate that the average person sees more than three thousand ads per day; the average school child will have seen more than a million ads by high school graduation. Some recent places ads have shown up: at the bottom of golf cups, even in elevators **“In some countries putting people in boxes and forcing them to watch your message would be illegal. God Bless America.”**<sup>1</sup> Advertising is appearing over men’s urinals: **“Put your used Bud here.”** **“Advertising is in your face, all over the place.”** (Kilbourne 1999)

The primary critics of advertising have not been philosophers. The largest group of critics have been economists such as John Kenneth Galbraith, Heilbroner and others. Contemporary critics include media experts Jean Kilbourne, Kalle Lasn, and president of the People-Centered Development Forum, David Korten. I am indebted to their analyses for my case against advertising. With an increased interest in business ethics we have begun to see philosophers entering the debate. Some philosophers who have made recent contributions include Tom Beauchamp, R. M. Hare, Ronald Dworkin and Richard Lippke.

There are several fundamental and widely accepted theoretical approaches to ethics, and ethical norms derived from them are violated by much advertising. Kant’s Categorical Imperative requires us to act only on maxims that are universalizable and to respect the intrinsic worth of persons. Utilitarianism requires us to act only on actions that promote the greatest good for the greatest number of people. This paper argues that much advertising is

morally objectionable on both Kantian and Utilitarian grounds. There are theoretical difficulties and controversies on how to balance the competing ethical grounds. However, when both ethical positions agree, the ethical case is exceptionally persuasive. Not all ads are deceptive, exploitive or produce harmful social effects. But enough are to be disquieting. Neither do I deny that advertising has a good side. What I want to show is that advertising is not the completely benign influence many people think it is.

A major point of the case against advertising is that advertising manipulates consumers. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith’s analysis of the dependence effect in *The Affluent Society*, shows that consumer wants are created by the same entity that supplies the wants. This is manipulation, because the wants are not original with the consumer; in fact the real wants and needs of the consumer are ignored, thus weakening the autonomy of the individual consumer. Furthermore, according to Galbraith, the manipulation of the consumer creates a propensity to consume (intensifies consumerism). (Galbraith 1957:155; Galbraith 1967:209-213)

This is an important claim according to Michael Phillips in his new book *Ethics and Manipulation*, for if Galbraith is correct, “capitalism loses much of its moral justification. That critique undermines consumer sovereignty, and consumer sovereignty seems crucial to capitalism’s (moral) legitimacy . . . . If consumers’ choices are not genuinely their own but are instead dictated by advertising, how can capitalism claim that it enables people to choose products and services that best serve their needs?” (Phillips 1997:11)

For this argument to succeed against advertising it will be necessary to show that ads are often manipulative. Though many of advertising’s defenders argue that advertising is primarily informative rather than manipulative, Tom Beauchamp’s definition of manipulation suggests otherwise. He argues that “manipulation is any deliberate attempt by a person P to elicit a response desired by P from another person Q by noncoercively altering the structure of actual choices available to Q or by non-persuasively altering Q’s perception of those choices.” (Beauchamp 1984:3-6) Ads would then be manipulative if they nonrationally change consumers’ desires or they associate products with the satisfactions of conscious or unconscious desires that they are unlikely to satisfy. So when **Scope describes itself as a love potion**, it is functioning as a manipulative ad. Given this definition, some defenders of advertising agree “that the majority of ads are predominately manipulative.” (Phillips 1997:14)

Phillips objects to Beauchamp’s definition of manipulation primarily because it would classify deceptive advertising as manipulative. He does not consider deception to interfere with the consumer’s rational autonomy. “Deception still treats consumers as rational actors. It ‘manipulates’ not by undermining the

capacity for reasoned evaluation of products and services, but simply by presenting false or misleading information about their nature.” (Phillips 1997:16) I believe Phillips is led to this position because he takes Galbraith’s arguments to be the only important attack on advertising, and Galbraith seems relatively unconcerned with deceptive advertising. But Phillips then proceeds to the philosophical case made by Kant, who certainly would find deceptive advertising in violation of both formulations of the Categorical Imperative, because it could not be willed as a universal law without contradiction, and because it treats the deceived as a mere means. Kant himself uses deception as a prime example of a maxim that cannot be universalized. Moreover deception, by providing false information, does indeed undermine the possibility of rational choice.

According to the second formulation, “coercion and deception are the most fundamental forms of wrongdoing to others—the roots of all evil. Coercion and deception violate the conditions of possible assent . . . lying treats someone’s *reason* as a tool. That is why Kant finds it so horrifying: it is a direct violation of autonomy.” (Korsgaard 1996:140-141)

We cannot say someone makes a fully autonomous choice between alternatives if information about one of the alternatives is false. Perhaps Phillips does not want to admit that there is a large component of deception operating in advertising.

But in any case, much advertising violates the moral rules which Phillips himself endorses. Advertisers deceive us in several major ways: one, is the effectiveness they claim for products: many products do not perform as advertised. (Cascade does not get your dishes spotless. **FORTUNE MAGAZINE will not really level the field or make your brain bigger.**)

Second, products are represented deceptively: the products you see in ads are not what you get. Campbell’s Chunky Soup has marbles instead of chunkier chicken in the ad pictures; **Did your last fast food hamburger look like this?**

The third kind of deception is creating imaginary needs; advertisers convince us that our well-being and happiness require their products. (You can’t smell like a man without your Aqua-Velva aftershave; you won’t have an accident with Michelin tires.) But contrary to advertisers’ claims, and fortunately for those of us on academic salaries, **You really can thank people adequately without buying them a Rolex.** Advertisers convince us that **furs and other luxuries are a necessity and that you are deprived if you do not own a Waterman pen.**

Advertising exploits consumers by manipulating and conditioning them to feel a need for goods and services. It does not just satisfy desires; it creates the desires in the first place. We did fine without designer jeans, designer eyeglasses, even designer cars. These desires are often so intensified that we

for the sake of their very happiness or self-esteem. This makes us buy whole bathrooms full of junk products that will make us sexier, prettier, cleaner, **surer**. We are kept in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction with what we have. Big Business does not exist to give consumers what they want, it exists to provide them with the wants big business wants to supply.

The consumer is the real product in advertising as this series of ads from *Advertising Age* attests. **“She’s looking to buy, is she looking at you?”** She represents the product *Advertising Age* is selling: customers for the advertisers. **Children are major targets** as this ad suggests because they influence spending habits. Nickelodeon, and other Media enterprises that cater to children, ruthlessly advertise these children as a captive audience for marketing. **This H and R Block ad explicitly depicts the kind of dehumanizing objectification** of consumers going on in ads: we are nothing more than objects to be delivered to advertisers. And here consumers are even more clearly seen as **target objects in this ad because “target is everything.”**

Defenders of advertising are fond of attacking Galbraith on this point. F.A. von Hayek thinks Galbraith’s criticism of wants production amounts to saying that any wants that are met by the process that creates those wants are not valuable wants. To this von Hacek observed, “To say that is to say that the whole cultural achievement of man is not important.” As von Hacek remarks, “Many of the most important of our wants are also produced by the process that supplies those wants; we teach young people to appreciate good literature by exposing them to good literature and then it is good literature that supplies the need created....” Von Hayek also argues that the production of wants is a very complex process. (von Hayek 1961:346) But Hayek and contemporary defenders miss the point in Galbraith’s original analysis. The wants created by advertising are selected neither for their intrinsic merit or for their contribution to the consumer’s well being. The wants created are those that serve the economic self-interest of the advertiser’s who create them. Furthermore, advertisers do not really need to create wants to manipulate: they are exceptionally good at exploiting real needs in false ways. They try to convince us that products will bring us closer to the real needs in our life. Eternity is a perfume, **Happiness is a perfume. Absolute Joy is Vodka.** All our complex needs can be easily satisfied with the purchase of a few products.

Exploitation by advertisers is especially ruthless when they depict women; advertising robs women of their dignity and it systematically trivializes their images. Women are either excessively obsessed with cleanliness, with rings around our collars or spots on our dishes; or women are often viewed as **objects**; sexy but mindless. We are either **sexpots** or **dishpots** with little in between. (Kilbourne 1970) But men, your day is coming. Good examples are this Snugg ad and

**this Calvin Klein ad which turn young men into much the kind of sex object women have been portrayed as over the last 50 years.**

The exploitation of black women is even worse. They are either rendered invisible by their absence or they are stereotyped as animals, savage beasts or sexual servants or all three. This ad is a good example of what I am talking about. **“Animale It speaks for itself.”**

The exploitation of women is particularly egregious in alcohol and tobacco ads. **“If your Date won’t listen, try a Velvet Hammer. “Put a little Cherry in your life.” “May all your Screwdrivers be Harvey Wallbangers.”** (Kilbourne, 1994) It is no surprise then that we have a problem with sexual assault and date rape. Many ads suggest that alcohol is the quickest way to get sex and they project this message by turning women into objects for use and consumption. **Consider this ad for champagne. If Mistletoe gets you a kiss, imagine what the Champagne will get you.”** Or this one for **Taittanger whose real message is, Instant Taittanger equals Instant Woman.** These ads clearly blur the line between alcohol and women: here the woman is **clearly in the Absolut bottle**, or here in the even more offensive **Ad for Original Red where the woman’s body replaces the bottle**; and you can be sure the placement of the logo is no accident.

Cigarette ads also exploit women by linking sex and cigarettes. The sexual imagery in these ads is quite deliberate. The **portrayal of women with their legs open is repeated** almost ad nauseam throughout cigarette ads. Sometimes, the come-on is even more explicit, as in this **Camel Ad: Pleasures to Burn**; or this **Lucky ad: Light my Fire** which is not referring just to her cigarette. Cigarette advertisers lose about three thousand clients a day — death and those who quit smoking. And they have increasingly targeted women (**It’s Kool to smoke**) and the entire **Virginia Slims ad campaign: It’s a Women Thing.**

They also target minorities and children. **Ads like this are why more children aged six recognize Joe Camel** than Mickey Mouse. (Kilbourne 1999:183) Moreover, Joe Camel or more precisely Joe Genital is the “most blatant phallic symbol in the history of advertising.” (Kilbourne 1999:208) Joe’s extraordinarily well-hung nose, coupled with icons of power like planes, motorcycles, etc. sends the message that smoking will make you a powerful man or even a powerful woman, although the message is more about male power than female power. And the irony is that while such ads offer the promise of male potency, cigarettes themselves may actually deplete male power in the form of increased rates of impotence, illness and even death. (Kilbourne 1999:209)

Manipulation, deception, and exploitation are forms of treatment we

maxims according to R.M. Hare. (Hare 1984:28) Moreover, they preclude informed consent and make the consumer a mere instrument of the advertiser. We cannot assume that individuals bring to advertising full autonomy with full critical thinking skills. “Much of what is sponsored by advertising is . . . hardly such as to encourage the development of autonomy. . . . It is often mindless, melodramatic and simplistic or worse, violent, sexist, racist or homophobic.” (Lippke 1995:106) Thus, on Kantian grounds, the manipulation, deception and exploitation in ads are morally blameworthy because they rob persons of full autonomy.

When we turn our attention to the Utilitarian effects of advertising, we can see many harmful consequences. First, advertising promotes the sale of often useless and dangerous products such as guns, tobacco and alcohol. All the media, not just the commercials, carry these messages. Advertisers pay dearly for product placement in movies and TV shows. Alcohol is responsible for more than 400,000 deaths a year and tobacco is responsible for more than 100,000 deaths. The World Bank estimates the use of tobacco results in a net global loss of \$200 billion a year in increased medical bills and lost productivity. (Kilbourne 1999:182)

Cigarettes and alcohol ads are selling dangerous fantasies: **Consider this progression “Weekends were made for Michelob, Put a little weekend in your week; The Night belongs to Michelob; Presumably put a little Michelob in your morning is next.** (Kilbourne 1994) Or this **Cuervo Ad** that suggests that turning an evening of drinking into an entire weekend is perfectly acceptable. The message is if you drink you get the girl of your dreams, become popular, athletic, and successful. But as Shakespeare reminds us, “Drink provokes the desire but it takes away the performance,” and for the millions of alcoholics the dream turns into a nightmare. Consider this **Adbuster’s parody of the Absolut ad campaign.** ([www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org)) Or this parody of the very real **outcome of campaigns like Absolut.**

Alcohol ads increasingly target women in their search for a higher market share and alcoholism is on the rise in women. This **Cointreau ad** is aimed at 19-21 year old women who are striking out in adulthood and may want to be Controversial.

Alcohol consumption is directly related to violence against women: over 50% of battered women report that their partners were drinking when the abuse first began. About 75% of acquaintance rape involves alcohol consumption on the part of either the victim or the assailant. And much of the advertising of alcohol trivializes this fact. (Kilbourne, 1979)

The defenders of advertising rarely include ads for alcohol and tobacco in their defenses. Billings, et al., (1997) state that the tobacco industry

because they "... would lengthen and complicate the book." (Phillips 1997:19) This is disingenuous at best, since tobacco ads account for over \$5 billion in advertising in the U.S. alone and are among most exploitative and manipulative advertisements. (Kilbourne 1999:182) It is certainly convenient to ignore cases where advertising defenders' arguments are weakest.

The economist John Kenneth Galbraith argued on Utilitarian grounds that advertising causes us to devote too many resources to the private sector. We practice reckless profligacy in the private arena and rigorous self-denial in the public arena. (Galbraith 1957:264) We refuse to pay higher taxes, and get a declining infrastructure. We have fancy new cars, with declining roads to drive them on, computers of every ilk, but declining accomplishments in public schools. This exacerbates the growing imbalance between the haves and the have-nots. His son, Jamie Galbraith, argues in his 1998 book, *Created Unequal*, that there is growing and dangerous economic inequality in this country. (Jamie Galbraith 1998) This is precisely the outcome his father predicted in 1957.

Advertising is also wasteful; it causes us to spend \$200 billion annually not to build products, but to move many useless, even harmful products, through the market. This causes consumers to replace products they already have with products that are even less satisfactory; it distracts much serious talent that could be used for more important social problems. Advertising raises the cost of many goods: toys and cereals cost more to advertise than to make. (Loudon and Bitta 1993:292)

Advertising leads to media censorship. Studies dating back to the 1930's provide evidence that the media's dependence on revenue from cigarette advertising has repeatedly led to suppression of discussions about the harms of smoking. (Warner 1988:201) Redbook magazine's recent "Top Ten Women's Health Issues" did not list smoking, because cigarette advertising is too valuable a source of revenue. (Kilbourne 1994) When we wonder why it took so long for us to recognize the dangers of smoking, we have to see the media as a part of the problem. Nor is this censorship limited to tobacco and alcohol advertisers. "In 1997, Chrysler, one of the five largest advertisers in the U.S., sent letters to one hundred newspapers and magazine editors demanding to review their publications for stories that could prove damaging or controversial." (Lasn 1999:35) Every single letter was signed in agreement and returned to Chrysler. Advertising promotes artificial standards of happiness and panders to real needs in false ways; it encourages us to meet our needs only through material consumption. **To Live For The Moments** takes on a new meaning here. **Tag Heuer** cannot guarantee inner strength. **Clinique** cannot really guarantee happiness. **A Diamond may be forever**, but the marriage it supposedly represents lasts fewer and fewer years today. All this buys real relationships; real love does not depend

on diamonds. **You do not have to give a man a diamond to love him well. Life's best moments do not come by FTD. We are constantly urged to see success and achievement in terms of material objects: watches, jewelry and even fancy homes.** And all this encourages us to see corporations and big business as our benevolent providers.

Advertising corrupts our language and thus degrades our ability to think clearly. As novelist Jonathan Dee writes, "The harm is not in the ad itself, the harm is in the exchange, in the collision of ad language, imagery, with other sorts of language that contend with it in the public arena: ... Heineken: 'Seek the Truth' or Winston: 'You have to appreciate authenticity in all its forms', or Kellogg's: 'Simple is good.' Words can be made to mean anything which is hard to distinguish from the claim that words mean nothing." (Jonathan Dee in Kilbourne 1999:74) The MasterCard slogan, "**There are some things money can't buy, for everything else there is MasterCard,**" purports to say some things are priceless, but its real message is that everything has a price—So charge it!

Much advertising overemphasizes the importance of appearance; it promotes artificial standards of beauty that are not realistically achievable; magazine cover photos typically require thousands of dollars of retouching, as in this photo of (**Michelle Pfeiffer**); beauty is **flawless** — but not real. There are **no wrinkles, no blemishes, no lines, in fact there are no pores!** We can all claim such beauty with this **tiny tube of Avon**. And American women buy this myth to the tune of billions of dollars a year.

The growth of bulimia and anorexia is also sometimes linked to the growth of advertising and its stress on slenderness. Eight million Americans suffer from eating disorders and the discrepancy between the real and the ideal has increased the diet industry's annual revenue to more than \$30 billion despite the inefficacy and dangerous nature of most diet products. (Kilbourne 1999:115) The cosmetic surgery industry is another lucrative effect of the overemphasis on attractiveness. Plastic surgeons are the fastest growing medical specialty in the U.S. The 1990 Miss Texas underwent breast implants, hair weaving, dental work and had her lower ribs removed in her successful quest to win the Miss U.S.A. title. (Kilbourne 1999:135)

There is a consistent picture of values in advertising: naked self-interest, rampant egoism and unbridled materialism. These values are being adopted by our culture. Advertisers identify the good life with material things: "Coke is the real thing!" We are told: "You are what you wear, what you drive, or what you own." Our sense of values gets turned upside down. At the same time, advertising creates rising expectations that generate excessive spending and debt. Twenty-seven percent of households that make more than \$100,000 say

they cannot buy everything they need. Thirty-nine percent of those in the \$50,000 to \$99,000 income range say the same thing. (Schor 1998:14-22) These values are at best philosophically questionable, and at worst may lead to an overemphasis on individuality that fragments society, in much the manner suggested nearly 50 years ago by elder Galbraith. The consumer society puts the search for our own pleasure at the center of our lives. We end up consuming everything in sight, including human lives. We do not acquire goods in order to live, we live in order to acquire goods. **So this American Excess parody seems particularly apt.** (www.subversive.com) The extreme focus on self-interest brings with it an overemphasis on individuality and a resulting loss of community values. The logical outcome of this focus may be a Hobbesian war of all against all. And this time the individuals are armed to the teeth in ways Hobbes never imagined.<sup>2</sup>

Defenders of advertising such as Michael J. Phillips do not believe the Utilitarian case goes against advertising. Phillips argues that a rule prohibiting manipulative advertising would not increase net utility. However, Phillips uses the concept of utility in a strictly economic sense, and then uses the results in a moral argument to show that manipulative advertising is not morally wrong.

Analyses like Phillips look at nothing but material consumption. Since contemplation of natural beauty does not increase the Gross Domestic Product, it is invisible to Phillips. His supposedly Utilitarian calculus excludes much of what makes for happiness or makes happiness possible.

Consequently Phillips fails to make a morally conclusive Utilitarian case for advertising. His cost benefit-analysis is much too limited and does not take a serious enough account of the negative effects described by Kilbourne, Lasn, and Korten who attempt to show that advertising has deadly implications beyond economics. The utility Phillips considers is almost entirely the economic well being of Western nations like the United States. But the costs of this consumption are appalling. "We are experiencing accelerating social and environmental disintegration in nearly every country of the world—as revealed by a rise in poverty, unemployment, inequality, violent crime, failing families and environmental degradation." (Korten 1996:11) We are exceeding the carrying capacity of the planet and dividing it between those who live in what Peter Singer calls "absolute affluence," which is the ability to provide for life's basic necessities and some luxuries, and those, the larger portion, who live in "absolute poverty," which is the inability to provide for life's basic necessities like decent housing, adequate sanitation, clean water and adequate food and medical care. (Singer 1981:273-279) This *Adbusters* **Beanie Babies** parody: "**You have 83 Beanie Babies and She has no where to sleep,**" makes the point far more effectively than anything I could say. (www.adbusters.org) We are practicing cowboy economics in a speech world, to use Kenneth Bolding's classic metaphor (Bolding 1968:2

14) We act as if there are limitless frontiers and resources while the planet is in reality a finely balanced system. Advertisers measure everything in terms of economic growth. Utilitarians know there is more.

The real beef about advertising is that it is a morally problematic and powerful force in contemporary society. It weakens human autonomy, undermines human dignity, subverts important values, and... it may even be deadly to the future of our planet as it promotes insatiable desires for the things corporations sell, and cultivates the political values that are aligned with the interests of global mega corporations. (Korten 1996:159)

And to the ad executives of the world, if these arguments give you a guilt complex, I offer fast acting relief for your troubled consciences in the spirit of Madison Avenue: **Ethics-Eze.** (www.adbusters.org)

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Portions in **Boldface** indicate copy from slides that accompanied presentation.

<sup>2</sup>Some defenders of advertising believe the extreme focus on self interest is exactly what is needed to save us from the deterministic, materialistic, anti-autonomous Kantian heritage. (Their characterization not mine.) And further they believe our salvation is to be found in the egoistic philosophy of Ayn Rand. But that is a topic for another day.

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