

The Social Obligations of the Cued Self in the Age of Advertising

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0. Extended Abstract

The information age presents us with a gambit: present information transparency to level the asymmetries of information, “democratizing” the opportunities for people to act according to more informed, autonomous decisions; or to control and manipulate our inherent human vulnerabilities to further skew power towards increasing asymmetrical positive feedback loops benefitting the few. This paper examines contrasting notions of the self vis-à-vis (un)consciously curated environments as humans increasingly live in advertising-saturated environments.¹

Advertising per se can influence actors towards virtuous action (e.g., neighborhood watch anti-crime campaigns) or towards behaving according to the wills of private interests (e.g., a Christian pathos-infused anti-abortion billboard).² While certainly no advertising will ever be neutral, and one can always question the good or the interests behind such efforts to influence, we can differentiate between public versus private advertising, those without a product to sell intending to sway a population towards profiting a certain business, subculture, or belief system versus those aimed to help a population for their own sake (such as a public service announcement about proper nutrition). Society is never monolith, but should advertising really be the battlefield through which discourse is achieved?

Evolutionarily, we are maladapted to deal with advertising.³ Until the last century or so, information was power, and the natural environment tended not to deceive us.^{4,5} More recently, our desires and emotions have been hijacked through public relations, propaganda, and advertising.⁶ Mass media has enabled the conformity of opinion unlike that previously imagined, and in the last decade, the internet has moved from primarily a portal of knowledge and understanding to a dizzying maze of corporate interests and click bait one must navigate in order to actually get or do the thing one turned to it to do in the first place. The moneylenders have captured the akashic records.

The monetization of human consciousness raises interesting epistemological and ethical questions.⁷ What we make of the effects of advertising, and more importantly, the decisions we collectively make regarding how we wish to curate our mental environment, are fundamental to our present condition. These determinations rest, in turn on our view of human nature.

The recent work of situationist philosophy emphasizes that the bulk of our actions are cued, rather than based on an unshakable non-socially-contingent self.^{8,9} Unlike the myth of the autonomous individual, almost ignoring the distractions society presents, increasingly social psychology and philosophy is acknowledging the inextricably relational composition of the self.¹⁰

Debates currently rage in philosophy between virtue ethics and situationism. Situationism, most provocatively formulated by Kwame Anthony Appiah, states that instead of some inner essence of character determining our behavior in the world, that for the most part, various external stimuli and pressures impinge on us, significantly altering the course of our actions.¹¹ The same person in

different situations, can perform drastically different behaviors, based on the challenges and opportunities they come into the situation with, and are presented with. In one famous experiment, seminarians on their way to an important meeting were observed whether or not they gave money or help to someone in need. Those seminarians running late to the meeting in the experiment almost systematically did not lend help, while those who were early helped the planted subject to a much higher degree.¹² This experiment by design suggests that the same population engages in widely divergent socially-cohesive behaviors depending on the situation they are in—in this case, whether they were late or not to an important meeting.

Pragmatism has since its origins denied the notions of an autochthonous self, instead avering that the self is always socially constituted through and through. G.H. Mead, for example, appraises the communicatively rationalized society as forming the bulwark of how we understand ourselves. Mead writes, “we are what we are, through our relationship with others.”¹³ If this interdependency is so strong that it has led Alasdair MacIntyre to write his book *Dependent Rational Animals* to characterize both humans and nonhumans as ontologically social,¹⁴ then what does it mean when a primary mode of interacting with our environment through advertising becomes instrumental rather than communicative?

By returning to the original Aristotelean meaning of character qua habitus,¹⁵ situationism and virtue ethics are much more compatible than otherwise judged. Our habitus, however, emerges from a specific spatiotemporal milieu,¹⁶ a habituation to a particular habitat.¹⁷ Take Aristotle’s phronimos out of Athens in the 4th century B.C.E., and that same person may be very maladapted indeed to the strictures of the modern world. Attentive habituation is not a universal quality, but one keenly geared towards the history of situations and stimuli encountered. Thus, reinscribing virtue ethics in the constraints of context highlights the molding of individual to environment and vice-versa.¹⁸

What this suggests, is that advertising robs of knowing and developing certain parts of ourselves, through its calculated intention to use us qua consumers to achieve the ends of some anonymous other profiting entity. Rethinking the ethics of advertising in a world with increasingly ubiquitous modes of manipulating us through automatic means—algorithms, Big Data, predictive purchases, one-click-buy, etc.—benefits from understanding our vulnerable and porous selves, dismantling the claims that we can fortify ourselves against systematically exploitative elements in our environment.

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