

## On Leaving Well Enough Alone

We try to get people to feel better all the time. We aim to cheer each other up, calm each other down, and give each other pleasant surprises. Such deeds cannot be objectionable in general; they are a ubiquitous feature of good friendships, marriages, and familial relations generally. However, there is an interesting kind of case where we aim to make someone feel better in a way that *does* seem intuitively misguided and objectionable – or even flat-out wrong. To name rather than pinpoint the problem, we call such behavior *manipulative*.<sup>1</sup> Such cases are interesting not only because they highlight certain moral constraints on interpersonal relationships; they are also interesting because they constitute a type of manipulation that does *not* aim to subvert the manipulated parties' interests, as with many other manipulative acts. Nor is the aim of the exercise to benefit the manipulator. As such, this type of manipulation – call it paternalistic manipulation – may shed light on what is wrong with manipulation *per se*, independently of its harming or taking advantage of the person who has been manipulated. For, in these cases, the very point is to do somebody good, and the deed may be competently and successfully executed. And yet it can still seem wrong or at least ill-advised to behave in such a, well, manipulative way.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Manipulative' and 'manipulation' have a fair claim to being thick ethical terms, like 'kind' and 'kindness;' the term 'benign manipulation' at least has an odd ring to it. So I will use the terms in what follows as at least *pro tanto* pejorative, although little hangs on this point of usage. However, if I am right, it may not be possible to give a very satisfying *analysis* of manipulation (as opposed to what I will aim to achieve by the end, which is a loose preliminary characterization). For, predicating the term 'manipulative' of actions may pick out those attempts to somehow influence or control people that (again, somehow) *go too far*, and therefore strike us as ethically problematic. When it comes to filling in the details, I will be arguing that manipulative actions are not straightforwardly reducible to actions involving other specific moral perfidies that have to do with illicitly trying to influence people, by, e.g., deception and trickery, and in illicit directions. So, for example, manipulative behavior is to be distinguished from Machiavellian behavior (which I take to involve dark and ulterior motives), and it is also distinct from behavior that is malign (which I take to attempt to undermine the interests of the manipulated party). These various categorizations do often overlap. But, in the end, I will suggest that manipulative actions are best thought of manifesting an interpersonal *attitude* that is morally wrongheaded (roughly, seeing others as mere playthings), and illicitly tries to get the target of the attempted manipulation to feel, think, or behave in relatively specific ways, as per the manipulator's intentions.

<sup>2</sup> To clarify: I do not intend 'manipulative behavior' to be a success term. (That distinction will be reserved for the transitive verb form, as in "Bob manipulated Jane," which I will use less frequently.) So, in what follows, the execution of manipulative actions, or behaving manipulatively towards someone, is not meant to imply that the target has indeed been manipulated – just that that was the aim of the exercise. My way of using the term does imply, however, that manipulative

What kinds of cases do I have in mind here? Recall the – in my view rather saccharine – French film *Amélie*. To spoil the plot: *Amélie*, a sweet but socially awkward young woman, decides to make it her life's mission to make people happy in a variety of secretive ways. She orchestrates an unlikely love affair, and convinces a widow that her husband, who abandoned her, had wanted to reconcile prior to his accidental death. She devotes her life to improving others' lot (with the exception of a bullying greengrocer, who she nearly drives insane; in this case, his nervous employee is the beneficiary). Eventually she learns the error of her ways, but the normative upshot is ambiguous. The real problem with her manipulative behavior, it is suggested, has to do with her avoiding her own romantic problems at the expense of trying to solve other people's.

I am not so sure. *Amélie's* behavior, I have to say, strikes me as creepy rather than cute – and creepy at a moral level, rather than creepily *sad* insofar as she is neglecting her own love life. There are lots of terms which help to capture this intuitive reaction. *Amélie* is a meddler, a busybody, or – somewhat more affectionately – a Yenta. She should mind her own business, I believe; she should leave well enough alone. Now admittedly, there is nothing particularly *sinister* in her actions. Her behavior, it might thus be contended, is not so much wrong as silly. Depending on where you set the bar for wrongness, this might be correct. But her actions are at least misguided, I will assume from here on out. And it is also quite clear, I think, that those people who *Amélie* manipulated would have had a fair *complaint* against her, had they been apprised of her designs. These are the intuitions which I will be trying to explain in the first part of this paper.

For, on the face of it, explaining these intuitions is not altogether easy. *Amélie's* intentions were good, and – at a superficial level anyway – so were the results, for the most part at least. But, as I will shortly argue, this may in fact not be true. For, there is reason to doubt that somebody can be benefitted by even pleasurable and agreeable eventualities, unless they were willing to have them happen (either *simpliciter*, or in this covert manner). Thus, there is an argument to the effect that one simply cannot benefit someone by supplying them with an unwanted good, and similarly that aiming to benefit someone against their will is not even coherent. At best, the person's well-being will remain constant; at worst, their interests will be seriously damaged by the unwelcome intervention, for reasons to be explored later. (Was the intervention welcome or not in the

---

behavior has to be intentional, which I take to be a fairly innocuous assumption (especially if one thinks, as I do, that intentional behavior does not have to be entirely deliberate or self-transparent).

various cases in *Amélie*? We do not really know: hence the moral ambiguity. But, in any case, Amélie's behavior was certainly *presumptuous*; see *n.* 4) As I will argue, this tidy explanation of our intuitions about Amélie's actions seems to do better than its various possible rivals in identifying where and how she goes wrong – even if no harm came of it, and the actions lacked other wrong-making features characteristic of manipulation. The point is that nothing good *can* come of unwanted interventions, so there would be no normative trade-offs, no genuine potential benefits to be weighed against the potential costs. This is in turn some evidence in favor of views of well-being which deliver this nice result. They explain why even paternalistic manipulation is almost always a bad idea, morally speaking, all else being equal. (Towards the end I will examine cases where things are *not* equal, socially, and we subsequently regard manipulation in a more ambivalent way; but I anticipate.)

### Desire and its Discontents

To start off with, it will be helpful to draw a distinction between theories of well-being that award intrinsic significance to the agent's desires, versus those that don't. Call the former theories *desire-granting* theories of well-being, and the latter *desire-denying* theories. Desire-granting theories include traditional desire-based or subjective views of well-being, according to which what is good for you simply *is* having your desires fulfilled – possibly when the desires meet some further condition, such as being well-informed. But desire-granting theories of well-being also include so-called hybrid theories. According to these views, wanting something is a necessary but not sufficient condition on its being good for you to get it. (More on such views in a moment.)

It is important to note that 'desire' should be read here in a sense that is broad in one way, and narrow in another. What we have in mind are those events that the agent is *willing to have happen*, which thus extends well beyond gaining goods that she would find appealing or expect to enjoy in the narrower hedonic sense. (I might be perfectly willing to go through something boring or discomfoting on behalf of someone I love, for example. It should presumably not then be held to be an event that automatically detracts from the goodness of my life, even from my own 'insider's' perspective.) However, by the same token, we probably want to rule out mere appetites, which the agent is not willing to indulge, as desires in the sense we have in mind. (Thus, we might appeal to the Aristotelian distinction between *appetite* and *volition* to spell out the intended contrast.) Your salivating at a bowl of walnuts probably ought not be held to make it good for you to dig in, if you are not willing to, for whatever reason (e.g., you are allergic, or are saving the snack to share with impending guests).

The point here is not that the ‘desire’ would not survive critical scrutiny; it is that it is not a desire at all, in the intended volitional sense. As we will see shortly, this distinction will matter for our purposes; it makes ready room for cases in which one *really does not want* some admittedly pleasurable event, even if the thought of it is still bound to arouse one’s appetites. This is also the surest way to establish a substantive contrast between desire-granting and desire-denying theories of well-being.

What *about* desire-denying theories of well-being? These theories encompass hedonic theories, along with ‘objective list’ theories which add further goods and ills to the hedonist’s brief list (i.e., pleasure is good for you; pain is bad). The important point is that these objective goods and ills are supposed to depend at most causally, rather than directly and more deeply, on one’s desires. For example, it might be that one would take pleasure in (e.g.) reading this book only because one has long wanted to read it. But the pleasure that results is supposed to be good for you independently of its psychological aetiology. Reading the book would equally be good for you, and in just the same way, if the pleasure of reading it owed to its being finely-written, moving, or amusing. Fulfilling the desire is supposed to make no difference in itself to its being in your interests. Similarly – and this is particularly important here – having a desire *thwarted* or *ignored* is supposed to make no difference in itself either. What matters is the hedonic sensation that often comes from realizing that one’s desires have been thwarted or ignored, regardless of how or why this sensation occurs. The problem could thus be ameliorated by preventing the sensation, say by preventing the realization. So, on desire-denying views of well-being, what you don’t know can’t hurt you, unless knowledge is billed as intrinsically beneficial and ignorance as harmful.

To see how the distinction between desire-granting and desire-denying theories of well-being matters here, let’s return to our opening cases of manipulation. I’ll ask you to imagine that you are one of Amélie’s would-be dupes. Let us suppose that you are single, for example, and unwilling to have a love affair at present. It might induce pleasure or even ecstasy; and let us suppose, a tad implausibly, that the affair would be entirely untrammelled by pain, let alone real suffering. Still, you *just don’t want* to have a love affair at the moment. Perhaps you are still ‘getting over’ someone else, or perhaps you have a big project to complete that demands your full attention. No matter how great it will be, you are not in the ‘right place’ (as we say) to be swept off your feet. Or perhaps you are just flat-out not open to romance at the moment – or in general, it not being ‘your thing.’ True, you might not regret it if you *did* fall in love, but this is often true in life. (Nature has a way of making some alternatives, especially

those involving love, seem excellent once you are in the thick of things.) Love has a tendency to change your priorities. But you are not open at present to having your priorities up and change on you.

On desire-granting theories of well-being, falling in love would *not* be in your best interests at present, even if it would indeed be pure, untrammled bliss. Thus, desire-granting theories of well-being have a ready explanation of why it seems wrong or at least misguided for would-be busybodies to engineer a love affair for you at present. It wouldn't actually be good for you, is the thought, even if it *would* be wholly and highly pleasant. So, at best, the effects will be neutral; at worst, e.g., if the results are in any way bad for you, the net effects will be negative.<sup>3</sup> So, if we can establish that the results often *will* be bad for you in some way, it follows very naturally that Amélie and her ilk should leave well enough alone. Nothing good can come of their unwanted interference on desire-granting views.<sup>4</sup> Whereas desire-denying theories of well-being would need to be supplemented (with an independent account of what is wrong with even harmless and well-intentioned manipulation, say) in order to show where Amélie and her ilk err.

Now, it must be admitted, simple desire-based theories of well-being suffer from serious problems. Surely wanting something – e.g. to be miserable, which does not seem at all impossible – is not enough to make it in your interests to have the desired outcome occur. (It is a pretty stupid desire, after all.) However, not all desire-granting theories are susceptible to such difficulties. On the view I favor, for example, desires are necessary to *render* potentially valuable outcomes valuable for *you*. So potential goods – like love, knowledge, and most

---

<sup>3</sup> What if your desires change as a result of the unsolicited pleasure of love? Still, in that case, the manipulator would have succeeded in *changing* what is in your interests, not in granting the 'original' you something that you had an interest in at the time. Is this ever justifiable? I suspect that it can be, but only when your interests have shriveled to a nub, e.g., in depression. Then giving you 'a new lease on life' may be worth overriding your present interests to achieve; but these are special cases, and do not seem intuitively to generalize beyond emergency interventions, which I will not consider here. But that is why, for the record, I hold that paternalistic manipulation is only *almost* always a bad idea. I want to leave room for cases in which such behavior is a justifiable last resort.

<sup>4</sup> On these views, good results for the person intervened with can only result if the intervention *is* wanted. Given that some interventions have to be covert, this would lead naturally to the principle that one ought not to stage such interventions unless one can presume, to some sufficient degree, that the person in question would welcome the intervention in theory. (One might imagine them welcoming the intervention on behalf of the self who, by necessity, cannot be apprised of the plan.) This addendum makes room for staging surprise birthday parties and the like. But, given that Amélie seemingly had no such grounds for the presumption in the cases in which she intervened (the people in question being relative strangers to her), this makes her meddling behavior presumptuous at best.

notably pleasure – are in your interests to have only if you are actually willing to embrace them. Think of it like this: there is a smörgåsbord of prospective objective goods in life which we are empowered to pick and choose from. (Similarly, there are potential ills which we may embrace if we are willing, which are then not in our interests to *avoid*.) For obvious reasons, I call this view about the normative significance of desire the *veto power view*.<sup>5</sup>

The veto power view is also nicely equipped to explain why manipulation can be objectionable even if the good bestowed on you is something which you are actively seeking. For, we can be unwilling to have a good bestowed on us *in a manipulative way*. Suppose you are looking for love. Still, you want it to happen naturally or at least on your own terms; you don't want to be set up with friends-of-friends who they conveniently arrange for you to be seated next to at their strategically-timed dinner party. This might be because you find it patronizing, or because it's awkward, or simply because you want them to butt out. In any case, the veto power view is well-positioned to explain why such manipulation is objectionable too. Even if the outcome would be not only nice but welcome, independently of the way it is brought about, you don't want it to happen in this way. And you have the right to say no. As such, your well-meaning friends would do well to abandon their matchmaking efforts, and simply mind their own business. It is literally true that they cannot help you if you do not want to be 'helped,' on this view.

So, to summarize the results of this section: according to desire-granting theories of well-being, such as the veto power view I favor, paternalistically manipulating people into feeling good against their will is a kind of incoherent project. One really cannot benefit someone unless they not only want this benefit, but are willing to be benefitted in this very manner. In the next section, I examine what sorts of theoretical supplements a desire-denying theorist might endorse in order to emulate this result. I will argue that all of the obvious contenders suffer from serious problems; they prove too much, or too little, or threaten to collapse into a desire-granting view. As such, desire-granting views of well-being such as the veto power view are, *ceteris paribus*, to be preferred. They are best-equipped to explain why manipulation is almost always a bad idea. It is almost always a bad idea because it is, at best, unhelpful. And, as we will see

---

<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, I argue that this view of desire provides a plausible way of filling in Bernard Williams' thesis of *reasons internalism*, to the effect that desire is a necessary condition on reasons for action. But I do not need to put the point in terms of practical reasons here, and thus will stick to discussing well-being. For the record, as I use the terms, one has a *self-interested* reason to bring about outcome X only if X would enhance one's well-being. Moreover, if X would enhance one's well-being, then one has a self-interested reason to bring it about, if one can.

later, it also seems to manifest a distorted and disrespectful way of relating to other people, which subsequently often wrongs them. Because it is harmless at best and often wrong into the bargain, we should generally leave well enough alone (absent dire circumstances perhaps, which I will not consider; see *n.* 3). I think this is very much the right result, and desire-granting theories of well-being enable us to get there. As such, we have good reason to endorse them, all else being equal.

### Manipulation: Where's the Harm?

Desire-denying theorists might make a start on explaining what is problematic about manipulation by positing a certain value in 'autonomy' – a many-splendored, but (it must be said) multiply ambiguous beast in ethics. This is the tack taken by Derek Parfit, a particularly resolute desire-denialist, when he suggests that helping someone act on their desires might be morally good because it promotes or respects their autonomy, even if their desires are out of whack and irrelevant to their interests anyhow. He suggests, in the course of diagnosing the illicit appeal of subjectivist (i.e., desire-granting) theories of well-being, that:

...when we could fulfill *other people's* desires, or help these people to achieve their aims, these facts may give us *non-derivative* reasons to act in these ways. When other people have some desire or aim that they have no reason to have, these people may have no reason to try to fulfill this desire or achieve this aim. But *we* may have such reasons. In helping other people to fulfill or achieve their desires or aims, we respect these people's autonomy, and avoid paternalism. Other people's desires, aims, or choices are often, in this respect, like votes, which should be given just as much weight even when the voters have no reason to vote as they do. Many people accept desire-based or choice-based theories because they are democrats, liberals or libertarians, who believe that we should not tell other people what they ought to want, or choose, to do. (*On What Matters*, Vol. I, 2011, p. 66)

There is a question, however, about how likely it is that we should facilitate other people's choices if their choices do not, in themselves, make any difference to (let alone determine) their interests. (Should we respect people's personal desires because interpersonal autonomy is valuable? Or is interpersonal autonomy valuable because people's personal desires matter?) As Parfit points out, it is certainly not *impossible* that the former should be true, even in the absence of personal desires having any normative significance at all; but we at

least want a convincing story about how this would be the case. And, as it stands, the story is not very convincing. A person's self-interested desires are in the relevant sense precisely unlike votes, it being a constituency of one. And the idea of helping someone execute their desires out of respect for their wishes doesn't even seem called for, intuitively, unless they're no longer in a position to act on their own behalf and I am committed to acting as their proxy (personally or legally). Otherwise, if someone has some really terrible plan, then I generally respect their autonomy by letting them get on with it, perhaps having aired my concerns beforehand. I'm generally not required to *help* them, unless there are instrumental reasons to do so (e.g., they'll never pipe down otherwise, or they have to learn their lesson eventually, and I may as well help speed up the process).

However, Parfit's proposal can be modified in a way that renders it more plausible. Perhaps there is a general prohibition against *interfering* with someone's execution of their desires, even if their desires make no difference to what is in their interests (or their successfully executing their will would positively detract from their well-being). Perhaps we are morally required to leave people alone, even if interfering with their desires would often be capable of genuinely advancing their interests.

The trouble with such a suggestion is that it is not clear how it preserves the *complaint* that the manipulated party might naturally be thought to have against their manipulator. It seems that, although the manipulator has done something wrong on this story, the manipulated person has not *been* wronged in the sense that would make her the appropriate complainant. In legal parlance, her damages are only nominal, and she would have no *standing* to bring the extant complaint on such a view. But, intuitively, she does seem to.

To bring this intuition out, consider the following analogy. Suppose that Frank gives a gift to Jane – a really lovely gift, say a pair of sapphire earrings, which she likes very much. Let us suppose too that, in the course of doing so, Frank has acted wrongly. Perhaps the earrings were not his to give away – he stole them, for example. Or perhaps, although the earrings *were* his to bestow, he owed them to someone else – his wife Barbara, for instance, who has a prior claim on such attentions. Or, alternatively, Frank was just not in an appropriate position to give Jane, a new Platonic acquaintance, such a personal and expensive gift. In any of these cases, Jane might feel exasperated, or protest about Frank's lack of scruples or his rather 'off' behavior. She would be well-advised to avoid Frank's company and his attentions in the future, most likely. But, assuming she is not particularly upset or affronted by the incident, *Jane* is not the victim here. The victim is the person who Frank stole from, or Frank's wife



Barbara, or perhaps nobody in particular at all (if Frank has offended against a code of appropriate social behavior, say).<sup>6</sup> Jane might protest on behalf of any of these parties; but she herself has not been wronged by Frank's wrong behavior.

The point of the analogy is that, in such cases, we have a genuine beneficiary of an action that is, for independent reasons, wrong. Any complaint that the beneficiary (i.e., Jane) would have against the perpetrator (Frank) would then be dependent on further facts about her justifiable expectations – say, that their relationship will proceed within the bounds of morality, marriage, or the law. Now, according to the suggestion modified from Parfit, paternalistic manipulation would be much like this. That is, the manipulated party could be a genuine beneficiary of the manipulative action, even if the act of manipulation is – for independent reasons – almost inevitably wrong. So Amélie's dupes may have no real complaint against her; indeed, *nobody* may have such a complaint, it being rather that she violates a general moral constraint in acting as she does. In which case, we can even imagine manipulation coming under the purview of the doctrine of dirty hands. That is, sometimes one is allowed (some of us think) to violate general moral constraints in order to help specific people who would otherwise be subject to bad fates. Sometimes one ought to ignore general moral constraints – e.g., a prohibition against lying – and get one's hands dirty, not so much for the greater good, as for the good of specific people whose well-being is morally more important than preserving one's own moral purity in the end. This is the doctrine of dirty hands, in a nutshell, in what I take to be its most plausible incarnation.

In my view, the way of thinking about manipulation sketched in the above paragraph seems seriously off-kilter. Amélie's dupes *would* seemingly have a valid complaint against her, and her moral mistake was surely made with respect to the manipulated parties themselves. These intuitions are underscored by the reflection that even paternalistic manipulation does not seem remotely ripe for an application of the doctrine of dirty hands. One has transgressed against the manipulated person, not against some abstract moral code, it seems to me. Cases of paternalistic manipulation therefore do not appear analogous to cases in which someone receives a genuine benefit which they nevertheless generally ought not to have received for independent moral reasons. In the case of paternalistic

---

<sup>6</sup> It would be different if Frank didn't know Jane at all, or knew her just barely, in which case the gift could read as creepy 'stalker' behavior. But we are supposing here that Jane is pleased by the gift, and her feelings of discomfit follow only upon learning that Frank did something wrong in giving the gift to her. In this case, Jane is not so much the victim as the beneficiary of an action that is, for independent reasons, wrong.

manipulation, the ‘gift’ seems inherently *besmirched* by the fact that it was unwanted and often given under what amount to false pretenses. Something intrinsic to the transaction between the manipulator and the manipulated party has been blighted, we feel.

This brings us to another suggestion about what is wrong with (even paternalistic) manipulation. Perhaps it will be argued by the desire-denialist that manipulation is wrong not *per se*, but rather because it violates another generally valid moral prohibition – a prohibition against *deception*, say, which people owe it to each other almost never to engage in. In the next section I will examine this suggestion, and conclude that it is wanting. However, these reflections will turn out to shed light on what is often positively wrong with manipulation – our having so far only seen that it is arguably *never beneficial*, at least by the lights of desire-granting theories of well-being like the veto power view.

### Transparency: What’s the Good?

A further suggestion on behalf of the desire-denialist is that what is wrong with manipulation is that it involves or entails other generally morally objectionable features. Manipulation is not bad in itself, then, but bad because of its further, inevitable (or almost inevitable) moral properties. For example, manipulation is bad because it involves or entails *deception*.

There are two problems with this suggestion. Firstly, it is far from clear that manipulation always involves or entails deception; secondly, it is far from clear that what manipulation *does* arguably always involve or entail, namely a certain kind of ‘trickery’ or *non-transparency* in social relations is always, or even almost always, wrong. (Perhaps the same can be said of deception itself; but I do not need to rely on this more controversial point here.)

To see this, I want you to consider a case of manipulation which is all too familiar in the current American political climate. Nowadays, women who wish to have an abortion, are required in some states to view ultrasounds and hear descriptions of the fetus’ physical characteristics, prior to the requested termination procedure. The thought, presumably, is that listening to the heartbeat and envisaging more vividly the fetus’ small fingernails (for some reason always a favorite image among ideologues) will deter the woman from going through with the abortion. There is a paucity of evidence that this tactic actually works; but no matter, for my purposes.

Like many a pro-choice feminist, these sorts of tactics on the part of anti-abortion activists and legislators tend to make my blood boil.

They strike me as deeply *emotionally* manipulative. Still, it surely could not be argued that what is wrong with requiring a woman to have a medically unnecessary ultrasound prior to a termination is that it is deceptive. One is simply showing the woman an image of the fetus which inhabits her own body. One is simply making the physical realities clearer, it could be argued. And certainly the image is not, in itself, in any way deceptive.

So it cannot be, I take it, that what is wrong with manipulation is deceptiveness *per se*. While many acts of manipulation involve deception, other paradigm cases do not.<sup>7</sup>

Now, admittedly, there is something in the *vicinity* of deception which does seem to be involved here: namely, what we often call *scare tactics*. The point is surely to appeal to a woman's guilt and emotional vulnerability in a way that seems out of bounds on the part of the state in particular, and arguably anybody at all (if one takes the view, as I do, that it is ultimately the woman's choice). One is giving the person in question information not in order to improve her ability to make her choice, but to alter a choice that has already been made, and in a specific direction. This kind of strategic intervention to alter someone's behavior is characteristic of manipulation, and characteristic of why manipulation is often thought objectionable.

So, we might now think of issuing a general moral prohibition against attempting to interfere with someone's choices, or redirect their deliberations, in any non-rational way. Appealing solely to someone's emotions, appetites, and feelings would then, in particular, be obviously verboten.

But the trouble now is that interpersonal relations are in danger of being reconfigured in a radical, and radically implausible, manner. For the simple truth is that we appeal solely to other people's emotions, appetites, and feelings *all the time*, using a variety of techniques, in ways that do not seem even remotely inappropriate. Life would not be very much fun if we refrained from engaging each other in any way, except as one rational will deliberating with another. Consider

---

<sup>7</sup> Something similar might be said of the idea that manipulation is objectionable insofar as the resulting manipulative scenario itself involves *coercion*, I believe. I do not think the ultrasound policy would be any less manipulative, although it might be less objectionable in other ways, if there was an opt-out clause or a nearby center which offered terminations *sans* ultrasounds. But it would be less coercive. We should also consider the cases in *Amélie*, which do not seem coercive either. When the two people she 'sets up' are nudged together, they have ample opportunity to opt out, after all. The only sense in which they are coerced has to do with how they are treated by *Amélie*, insofar as she ignores or overrides their desires in her attempts at social engineering. But, as we will see in the next section, this goes towards my point.

wholesome seduction: the husband who lights candles, or the wife who dons a favorite silky *négligée*. These attempts to arouse and engage the appetites of the other are not exactly rational persuasion (one hopes), but they are well within the bounds of morality (again, one hopes). Consider too the attempt to make another person laugh, to cheer someone up, or to soothe somebody's feelings. These kinds of emotional engagement are often not only innocent but morally laudable, and they need not be manipulative in the least (especially if one is thinking, as I am, of 'manipulative' as an at least *pro tanto* pejorative term). So we had better not be too hasty in ruling out forms of interpersonal non-rational engagement as morally acceptable. That would be a sure way to leach out much of the color from human interaction.

One might now think of retreating to the more modest claim that *scare tactics* in particular are morally objectionable – perhaps it is only all right to try to induce emotional changes in people which are of a pleasant kind. But this does not seem right either. Consider the whole horror movie industry. The aim of purveyors of horror movies is precisely to induce fear and sometimes disgust, using every variety of scare tactic in the book (e.g., cutaway shots, other camera tricks, suspenseful music, and of course the startling plot itself).<sup>8</sup> But 'manipulating' the viewer in this way, if it can fairly be called that, seems perfectly morally benign.<sup>9</sup> Why? Presumably it is at least partly because the viewer has *signed up* to be scared out of their wits – indeed has paid good money for the privilege, oftentimes. (Sometimes their fright might ultimately be thrilling; but other people, one suspects, are simply gluttons for punishment.) So we are back to thinking about manipulation in terms of its tendency to circumvent desire – or not, in the case of horror movies, which are therefore not manipulative in the morally problematic sense we have in mind. The naturalness of this return to the issue of desire here is, I think, rather suggestive.

### Manipulativeness as an Interpersonal Vice

Let's review. So far in this paper we have seen examples of manipulation which are neither selfish nor exploitative, nor involve ulterior motives. Nor is manipulation invariably deceptive, nor

---

<sup>8</sup> My thanks for these points and the example of horror movies to Christopher Robichaud.

<sup>9</sup> Is the issue also that it is an *industry* rather than an individual doing the frightening work? I do not think that this makes much of a difference. Consider the 'spooks' in a carnival's haunted house, which interestingly enough is one of the day jobs performed by Amélie's love interest, Nino. His profession seems perfectly respectable to me. And I do not think it would make much difference if he was a self-employed spook, either.

coercive, nor malign. Although these do not exhaust the range of possibilities, it may be beginning to seem unlikely that we will be able to locate the problem with manipulation in some quality of the actions themselves, as opposed to the underlying attitude to other people which they seem to manifest. For one thing that might be seen to unify the various examples of manipulation considered above is that the manipulator has failed to understand or respect the proper *boundaries* between people, or to adhere to the proper limitations on intervention which attend their social position. The manipulator may be morally unscrupulous or merely obtuse. Either way, they have failed to recognize the fact that, in many areas of life, it is up to individuals to make their own decisions – or, at any rate, the issue in question is no business of *theirs*.

This point can be easily reconciled with the point that emotional engagement between people often allows or positively requires us to attempt to change and arouse each other's emotions, appetites, and feelings. For, in the foregoing examples, there is an assumed *openness* on the part of the moved party to being moved in this way, by the particular person who is responsible for wringing the changes, who is in turn presumed to be sensitive to and attuned to the ongoing openness of their partner to being so moved. The relationship between them is thus collaborative, and the image of an *exchange* is more apt than that of a one-sided or covert operation. The contrast here recalls Strawson's famous distinction between the interpersonal versus the objective stance we can take to other people; one feels that the manipulators' mistake is to relentlessly take the objective stance to others, thereby attempting to 'manage' them, when they are perfectly capable not only of autonomous decision-making but collective collaboration (although perhaps they would not *desire* to collaborate with the manipulator herself). This is a point the Kantian might make, but it would be a mistake to treat it as the exclusive province of committed Kantians. And the point is less about treating people as ends in themselves (a deep but deeply puzzling idea), and more about treating other people as simply separate from oneself and having a mind (and life) of their own – a considerably less demanding moral mandate.

How do these ideas fit with the earlier point about the advantage to be gained by advocating a desire-granting theory of well-being here? The connection consists in the fact that seeing people as separate from oneself is really only a metaphor in the end; spelling it out must involve specifying the characteristics which undergird this separateness and which a recognition of others' separateness will involve treating as sacrosanct. A plausible contender for the role, I believe, identifies people's *desires* or *will* as that which must be taken seriously – not necessarily as a source of reasons for *her*, but at least

as a source of absolute constraints on what it is acceptable to do *to* her as an outside party. Now, admittedly, we could posit such a desire-based constraint as a brute fact which governs interpersonal relations.<sup>10</sup> (Parfit does not call it a brute fact; but he could.) But this would involve our saying that the proper attitude to take to other people involves a kind of useful fiction, to the effect that their desires matter. And why is this fiction useful? Because of the brute fact that people's desires have to be respected, even when they are not worthy of respect *qua* determinant of their good. This is just not satisfying. A more satisfying alternative, it seems to me, is to trace the basis of the proper interpersonal attitude to ways in which the verboten practice of overriding someone's will is bound to often compromise her interests, and almost never advances them. A person's desires then matter in interpersonal relations because they make a difference to what will be good and bad for, and acceptable to, her. The moral basis for this sort of respect thus turns out to be quite straightforward and unmysterious.

The veto power view of well-being allows us to take this line, without falling prey to some of the implausible results that afflict other desire-granting views. We recognize that someone's desires, while not themselves empowered to *generate* her interests, nevertheless set the limits on her interests, and thus what can be beneficial to her. And, when she is nevertheless interfered with, it is plausible to suppose that she will often be derailed from doing what she correctly judged to be in her best interests – not to mention hurt, frightened, or angered in discovering the (by hypothesis) pointless intervention. She will then often justly feel compromised and patronized, even when the manipulator's efforts were entirely well-meant. In other words, attempted manipulation is often if not inevitably harmful, for a variety of reasons.

On the other hand, if a person's choices made no essential difference to what is in her interests, then there would be merely practical and epistemic barriers to helping someone by thrusting them up the hedonic ladder even when they don't want to be 'helped' in this way. Admittedly, boosting someone's hedonic quotient is rarely a straightforward task, absent supernatural abilities. And, in reality, there is always the risk that your projected cost/benefit analysis will turn out to be wrong. For example, the beneficiary might be more disturbed by the accidental revelation that you'd been 'messing with their head' than pleased by what was done. But, while the do-gooding

---

<sup>10</sup> We might also say it is a fundamental *right* that people have to have their desires respected. Even if one takes rights-talk as more than a convenient political fiction, it is not clear to me that this is satisfactory either. Rights are a quasi-legal concept. And we are not accustomed to thinking that party A has standing to bring a claim against party B unless her interests have been damaged in some way.

approach might make for bad *policy*, on this view there would be nothing inherently wrong with the do-gooder's attitude to other people. But it seems clear that there is. So such cases push us to acknowledge the inherent moral importance of desire – i.e., what the target of the invention is willing to have happen and thus consents to – even where the aim in intervening is actually to improve their lives. This makes moral room for cases in which we are *quite* willing to be 'messed with,' because there is sufficient trust or playfulness or love written into the relationship. So the view I favor also avoids the peril of depicting people as not so much autonomous as isolated, morally immune from interference admittedly, but equally ill-equipped to let others in (as we say). On the veto power view, letting other people in is simple: just say yes.

I therefore want to tender the following suggestion: manipulateness may be best envisaged as a moral *vice* that afflicts interpersonal relations, and does so insofar as the manipulator fails to take into account the degree to which other people's desires matter, normatively speaking.<sup>11</sup> Although Amélie and her spiritual brethren might mean well, insofar as they intervene paternalistically to engineer improvements in other people's lives, it is in the end not clear that this can be done without the person's (at least tacit) consent. So, insofar as they try to manipulate others into living better and happier lives, they will do them no good and will often positively harm them. Manipulators thus misunderstand the nature of interpersonal relations, by overlooking the complexities of dealing with other human beings. People, after all, can take critical attitudes to their own treatment, and subsequently protest being boosted up the hedonic scale in covert, conniving, and devious ways. Given the normative significance of such protests, it is plausible to think that – given the grave risks and dubious rewards of even paternalistic manipulation – the appropriate moral counsel is to leave well enough

---

<sup>11</sup> This characterization of the vice that is at the heart of manipulative behavior thus makes room for instances of manipulation that do not attempt to override or violate someone's desires, but ignore or minimize them in more indirect and subtle ways. So I am in the end not committed to thinking that attempting to circumvent someone's desires is a necessary (let alone sufficient) condition on manipulative behavior. However, it will be the paradigm case. More on these issues in the next section.

I should also note for the record that, in calling manipulateness a 'vice,' I do not mean to commit myself to a virtue-theoretic 'approach' to manipulation any more than a Kantian one. My hope is that the suggestion here – to the effect that what *underlies* manipulative behavior is a certain distorted attitude to other people and their desires – can remain agnostic about what *makes* manipulative behavior wrong. The idea is just that, insofar as there is any *unity* to manipulative behavior, it has to with its issuing from the morally distorted interpersonal outlook described above. But that is compatible with manipulative behavior being wrong for a variety of reasons, as I tend to suspect.

alone. On the view I have sketched, then, how we should treat people turns out to be satisfyingly connected to how they themselves can be affected for better or worse by being so treated. The desire-denialist cannot take advantage of this connection; they must show how desires matter interpersonally without falling into the (by their lights) trap of saying that desires matter *personally*. And, as we have seen, it is not clear that this can be done in a way that is both satisfactory and explanatory to boot. So desire-granting theorists have a considerable edge here.

### Manipulation, Thy Name is...

If what I suggested in the previous section is along the right lines, then manipulateness can be envisaged as a kind of failure of moral vision – a failure to take people, and their plans and desires, seriously. Instead of seeing people as inviolable in certain respects (and, what's more, as fundamentally unruly), one sees them as slotting neatly into one's own schemes (and as subject to one's control). This attitude is compatible, as we saw in Amélie's case, with those schemes being quite benign, indeed designed to benefit the manipulated parties. Nevertheless, Amélie appears to have little sense that people simply aren't fitting subjects for (or, rather, objects in) one's machinations.

To summarize the foregoing ideas in slogan form, manipulative people have a tendency to see others as their playthings – apt to be played with, tampered with, repositioned, and generally controlled. What does this imply about manipulative behavior itself? It cannot be that *any* action that issues from this wrongheaded interpersonal attitude counts as manipulative behavior; for this attitude also seems to result in actions which are disrespectful in other ways, by (e.g.) objectifying, toying with, belittling, overlooking, and even destroying people, as befitting the occasion. Ranking one's ex-lovers in terms of their appearance or sexual prowess certainly manifests the attitude that these people were one's playthings (at least with the hubris of hindsight); but it is not in the least manipulative. Here then, I suggest, is a plausible further condition on manipulative behavior: manipulative behavior involves wrongly trying to get people to think, feel, or behave in certain fairly specific ways, partly as the result of one's sense that they are essentially one's playthings.<sup>12</sup> Why 'wrongly'?

---

<sup>12</sup> It may be complained that the underlying interpersonal attitude is being described too metaphorically. Elsewhere, I defend the position that the way we see the world morally is a philosophically interesting mental state, distinct from moral beliefs, and often crucial in guiding our behavior. (For example, we might see a person *as* Black, as a woman, as beautiful, and as fit for use and abuse.) I cannot hope to defend that controversial position here about moral perception, the perceptual application of social-cum-moral concepts, and patterns of salience. For now, I just note that a metaphorical description may suit an attitude that is, on one level of description, metaphorical indeed – insofar as it involves seeing object X *as*



The idea is that the term ‘manipulative’ applies when the behavior *goes too far*, or crosses the line into positively immoral territory. Why the specificity condition? This inclusion is designed to enable us to rule out cases in which the agent is merely ‘messing with’ other people, and is not trying to induce very specific results. Consider the following nice example of Joel Rudinow’s (in his “Manipulation,” *Ethics*, Vol. 88, No. 4: Jul., 1978, 338–347). If I misdirect people who want to get to Pinsk, and thereby get them to go to Minsk, then it does not automatically follow that I have manipulated them. We will need to know more about my motives and what I envisaged would happen, I believe; if I was not trying to get them to go to any specific location, we are less likely to say that my actions were manipulative.<sup>13</sup> If I had specific *designs*, and wanted them to end up in Minsk in particular, then I hazard we are more likely to. The metaphor of manipulation bears reflecting on here, as Rudinow reminds us (although his reflections tend in a different direction). As the behavior of the manipulator comes to resemble more closely that of someone plotting to coordinate the actions of characters in a play, then they get progressively closer to the underlying metaphorical image and the paradigm case of a sort of social puppeteer. We see then why Amélie counts as a master manipulator. She is absorbed in her own elaborate schemes for other people, designing their environments, and orchestrating their actions and interactions like an expert film director. It does not much matter that the play was meant to be a romance, not a tragedy – insofar as one has non-utilitarian intuitions, anyway.<sup>14</sup>

---

P. And I hope you will allow me the idea that we can have such ‘seeing as’ attitudes, even if you would wish to show that they reduce to more familiar propositional attitudes (e.g., belief and desire) in the end. For my purposes here, the possibility of that reduction can remain on the table. It may still be illuminating or at least acceptable to describe the interpersonal attitude in question in the non-reductive language of ‘seeing as,’ as I do here.

<sup>13</sup> The same is true, I think, of treating people *exploitatively* or *instrumentally*, i.e., using them. While such behavior is often manipulative, we have less of a tendency to label it so when the instrumental behavior treats the used parties’ thoughts, actions, and feelings as largely incidental. For example, one can make a friend, and then decide to use their popularity to improve one’s own reputation. One may then have used them, without manipulating them in the process. Manipulation would only come in if one tried to get them, say, to ‘talk up’ one’s positive attributes in public, or if one had originally forged the friendship with that ignoble goal in mind.

<sup>14</sup> Moreover, one sees the dark side of her manipulative nature clearly, when she works to ‘gaslight’ Collignon, the greengrocer, driving him increasingly mad by tampering with his apartment (e.g., changing his speed dial, swapping his slippers for a smaller pair, unscrewing door handles, salting his liquor, causing his lamp to explode when he turns it on by putting a pin in the cord). Admittedly, Collignon is a creep and a bully himself. But this is surely no justification for treating him so poorly.

One implication of the foregoing characterization of manipulation is that we cannot call an action manipulative unless it was performed by a manipulative person (or a person who is temporarily in a manipulative frame of mind). This, I think, is no strike against the view, as long as it is admitted that an action can *seem* manipulative, or resemble a manipulative action, even when it isn't. And note that this aspect of the view helps make sense of a ubiquitous phenomenon. When accused of being manipulative, what is the first thing we tend to say? Something like: "But I swear I'm not a manipulative *person*." Sadly the rejoinder is often the product of self-deception, though. For who amongst us does not have our manipulative or at least solipsistic moments, when people do not seem nearly as real to us as they should? (To borrow a phrase of Iris Murdoch's, quashing the 'fat, relentless ego' is generally an ongoing piece of moral *work*.) So I do not think the view I've sketched here is objectionable on the grounds that it makes manipulative behavior too rare; for most of us can be a bit manipulative from time to time, at least. The vice manifestly comes in degrees.

One nice feature of this account of manipulation is that it explains why manipulative behavior rarely comes to the party alone; it stems from an interpersonal attitude that will make manipulators liable to engage in all manner of iniquities, including deception, sexual objectification, 'mind games,' inducing pandemonium, and even the sheer destruction of other people's lives. What the manipulator will do will depend on both the darkness of her plans, and also the degree to which she retains certain moral or interpersonal reservations – about people who have not 'crossed' her, say. (So all this is not to suggest that the manipulator will stop at nothing; just that the underlying attitude she possesses is manifestly dangerous.) The account I favor also explains why deception, though not a necessary feature of manipulative actions, is a favorite technique of manipulators nonetheless. When she tries to get others to feel, think, or act differently, one of the most powerful tools at the manipulators' disposal is to lie or otherwise deceive her target. And, being disposed to see people in the way she does – as a pawn in a game of her own devising – it is unlikely that she will feel much compunction about doing so.

I want to close by considering a further reason for subscribing to an account of manipulation that emphasizes the bad interpersonal attitude from which the behavior stems. For such an account is particularly well-positioned to deal with the fact that, under certain social conditions, we are somewhat more forgiving of manipulative behavior than we otherwise would be.

What sorts of social conditions do I have in mind here? For the most obvious example, consider the perceived historical plight of many women, who were often liable to be seen as playthings by the majority of their contemporaries (including other women). Women were envisaged as dolls and explicitly infantilized in many times and places, and were also often routinely seen in terms of their functioning – e.g., their ability to produce and rear children, and of course their sexual potentialities. This is all to paint in very broad brushstrokes, of course; the historical realities are infinitely subtler, although there is a good deal more than a grain of truth here too. But, simply in light of our *perception* of we might loosely term ‘the female predicament,’ it is perhaps unsurprising that we seem to be somewhat more forgiving of manipulative behavior in women. Consider an Emma Woodhouse, a Scarlett O’Hara, a Nora Helmer, a Portia; not to mention Cady Heron from *Mean Girls* and Amanda Clarke/Emily Thorne of *Revenge*. In women, manipulateness is sometimes even referred to as ‘feminine wiles,’ bitchiness, feistiness, or (curiously) ‘spunk.’<sup>15</sup> The repackaging underwrites ambivalence – as perhaps it sometimes should. Why should those destined to be viewed and treated as playthings refrain from viewing and treating other people similarly? The question is not meant to be easy to answer.

As a little piece of evidence in favor of my fledgling hypothesis about our more complex moral attitudes to female manipulators, let me remind you of a marvelously vampy scene in the American film version of the 18<sup>th</sup> century French novel, *Dangerous Liaisons*. In the scene in question, Marquise Isabelle de Merteuil (played by a perfectly cast, glacial Glenn Close), really lets loose when her male counterpart Valmont asks how she came to be a master manipulator.

Valmont: I often wonder how you managed to invent yourself.

Isabelle: I had no choice, did I? I’m a woman. Women are obliged to be far more skillful than men. You can ruin our reputation and our life with a few well-chosen words. So, of course, I had to invent not only myself, but ways of escape no one has ever thought of before. And I’ve succeeded because I’ve always known I was born to dominate your sex and avenge my own.

---

<sup>15</sup> Of course, there is a sexist way as well as a non-sexist way of proceeding from this observation. There is a popular and still prevalent perception that women are more manipulative or, similarly, ‘bitchy’ than men. Needless to say, I hope, I find such a view highly unlikely, especially insofar as it purports to pick out a ‘natural’ or essential property of women. It is more plausible to suppose that women are socialized to be more manipulative, but I do not claim this either – just that manipulateness seems to be somewhat more forgivable in female literary figures. Male master manipulators – e.g., Iago, Humbert Humbert, Napoleon – tend to be downright evil. Of course, there are really despicable female manipulators too: enter Lady Macbeth and Miss Havisham. But it is quite hard to think of a male manipulator to whom we are at all sympathetic.

Valmont: Yes, but what I ask was, how?

Isabelle: When I came out into society I was fifteen. I already knew that the role I was condemned to: namely, to keep quiet and do what I was told. It gave me the perfect opportunity to listen and observe. Not to what people told me, which naturally was of no interest, but to whatever it was they were trying to hide. I practiced detachment. I learnt how to look cheerful while under the table I stuck a fork into the back of my hand. I became a virtuoso of deceit. It wasn't pleasure I was after, it was knowledge. I consulted the strictest moralists to learn how to appear. Philosophers, to find out what to think. And novelists, to see what I could get away with.

And in the end I distilled everything to one wonderfully simple principle: win or die.

Valmont: So, you're infallible, are you?

Isabelle: If I want a man, I have him. If he wants to tell, he finds that he can't. That's the whole story.<sup>16</sup>

A smile plays upon Valmont's lips. He is the more likeable, but also the more contemptible, of the pair. His view of other people seems to be in no way the product of being viewed that way himself. He is merely a psychopath – although a sentimental one, what's worse.

At any rate, these musings about the interplay between power and manipulation take us into moral and political territory well beyond my turf here. But I would suggest, in closing, that it may be no accident that the updated version of the scene in *Cruel Intentions* is so utterly insipid. Nowadays, it is just not plausible to think that women are viewed as playthings by the majority of those who they interact with – except perhaps in one sense, namely sexually, for pretty young women like Sarah Michelle Gellar's character Kathryn (the updated version of Isabelle). Still, one does not feel much inclined to look past her merciless, manipulative machinations, notwithstanding the following little outburst to Sebastien, Valmont's counterpart:

It's all right for guys to fuck everyone. But when I do it, I get dumped for twits like Cecile. God forbid I exude confidence and enjoy sex. Do you think I relish acting like Mary Sunshine so I can be considered a lady? I'm the Marcia-fucking-Brady of the Upper East Side – and sometimes, I want to kill myself. There's your psychoanalysis, Dr. Freud.

And with these inspired words, I rest my case. Manipulative behavior may not be unforgivable in all contexts, but it is nevertheless deeply inhumane. It is subsequently pretty hard to look past in people who are treated humanely themselves. And, even when manipulative

---

<sup>16</sup> The original scene in the novel by Choderlos de Laclos is more complex, and well worth comparing. It contains the wonderful line about Isabelle's deceased husband: "And he never thought me more like a child than when I was most flagrantly deceiving him." (Penguin, 2009, p. 183)

behavior is well-meant and harmless, manipulateness remains a real vice. Or so I've argued.