You're Too Smart to Be Manipulated By This Paper

Anne Barnhill

(Draft for presentation at the Bowling Green Applied Ethics Workshop)

[This draft is LONG. If you're short on time, skip pp.9-11 and pp.19-28.]

I. Introduction

What is manipulation? More specifically, what is the manipulation of people? We speak of manipulating things other than people – for example, we might claim that the Chinese government manipulates its currency, keeping it artificially weak so that Chinese products are relatively cheaper, or we might claim that a violinist expertly manipulates her violin. But let's focus here on the manipulation of people, not other things.

The question "what is manipulation?" presented itself to me when I tried to write a paper comparing the ethics of manipulation in personal relationships with the ethics of manipulation in clinical relationships. When I canvassed the literature, I noticed that manipulation isn't always defined in work on the ethics of manipulation. Rather, there's just an implied definition of manipulation – often, but not always, something along the lines of *manipulation is non-rational persuasion*.[1] Some philosophers *have* offered precise analyses of manipulation, but I find most of them to be either under-inclusive or over-inclusive. In this paper, I endeavor to give an account of manipulation that captures the range of cases we consider manipulation and that properly excludes those cases that we don't consider manipulation.

Here's how I proceed. First, I present cases of manipulation and non-manipulation. Second, I go through a number of accounts of manipulation, rejecting all of them except Robert Noggle's: Manipulative action is the attempt to get someone's belief, emotion, or desire to fall short of the ideals that *in the view of the influencer* govern the target's beliefs, desires and emotions.

Third, I painstakingly modify Noggle's account. Noggle's account is promising but has several problems. The primary problem is that it's overly broad: contra Noggle, not all instances of making someone fall short of ideals for beliefs, desires and emotions are instances of manipulation. In particular, appealing to someone's self-interest and making her act in an excessively self-interested way, and thereby making her fall short of various ideals, is not necessarily manipulative.

Is manipulation, then, influence that makes someone fall short of ideals in ways that aren't in her self-interest? Unfortunately, the relationship between self-interest and manipulation is not quite that simple. I conclude:

> Manipulation is intentionally directly influencing someone's beliefs, desires, or emotions such that she falls short of (the manipulator's) ideals for belief, desire, or emotion in ways typically not in her self-interest or *ways that are likely not to be in her self-interest in the present context.*

In the last section, I suggest that we translate this account into more intuitive terms:

> Manipulation is intentionally making someone succumb to a weakness or a contextual weakness, or altering the situation to create a contextual weakness and then making her succumb to it. (where a weakness is a character trait or psychological disposition that makes someone likely to fall short of ideals in a way typically not in her self interest)

II. Cases of Manipulation and Non-manipulation

Some of the following cases are, to my mind, instances of manipulation or attempted manipulation (for brevity, I will label cases of attempted manipulation as "manipulation"). Other cases are, to my mind, not instances of manipulation, despite their similarity to the cases of manipulation.

Many of the cases in this paper will be variations on the first case below, George W. Bush (Cowboy). To be fair, I should emphasize that all the George W. Bush cases are fictional cases. However, this first case is loosely based on fact-- or at least, loosely based on purported fact. The journalist Jane Mayer wrote an amazing book on the Bush Administration's war on terror, *The Dark Side*. One passage reads:

> After losing the battle to uphold the Geneva Conventions, [Secretary of State Colin] Powell concluded that Bush was not stupid but was easily manipulated. A confidant said that Powell thought it was easy to play on Bush's wish to be seen as doing the tough thing and making the 'hard' choice. 'He has these cowboy characteristics, and when you know where to rub him, you can really get him to do some dumb things. You have to play on those swaggering bits of his self-image. Cheney knew exactly how to push all his buttons,' Powell confided to a friend.

This passage from Mayer's *The Dark Side* is what inspired these first cases.

Cases:

George W. Bush (Cowboy)
President George W. Bush is unsure about some of Vice President Dick Cheney proposed policies—approving the torture of prisoners at Guantanamo, wiretapping phones without court approval, and invading Iraq. Cheney plays on Bush's "cowboy self-image" in a flattering way, saying things like: "You're the kind of man who makes the tough decisions that other people—who are too concerned about being popular—aren't courageous enough to make." Bush is insecure and needs to identify with being a tough guy. Bush is motivated by Cheney's words to make decisions he sees as "tough" decisions—approving torture and illegal wiretapping, and invading Iraq.
Manipulation

George W. Bush (Reelection)
President George W. Bush is unsure about some of Vice President Dick Cheney proposed policies—approving the torture of prisoners at Guantanamo, wiretapping phones without court approval, and invading Iraq. Political advisor Karl Rove wants Bush to approve these policies, because he believes that making decisions that appear to be "tough" decisions will increase Bush's popularity and ensure his re-election. Rove tells Bush, "If you make decisions that appear to be 'tough' decisions, this will increase your popularity and ensure your re-election," because Rove believes that Bush wants to be re-elected and will therefore be motivated to make decisions he sees as "tough" decisions. Because Bush wants to be re-elected, he is motivated by Rove's words to make decisions he sees as "tough" decisions (e.g. approving torture and illegal wiretapping, and invading Iraq).
Not manipulation

Medicine: A patient is being stubborn and won't take his heart medicine—even though it will greatly reduce his chances of a repeat heart attack. A nurse gets him to take his medicine by saying flirtatiously, "You're not going to make me beg, are you?" He smiles and takes his medicine.
Manipulation

Date: You get someone to go out on a date with you by asking in a cute, flirtatious manner.

> *Not manipulation*. You could fill in the details so that this is a case of manipulation – but my point here is just that asking someone out on a date in a cute, flirtatious needn't be manipulation.

The next two examples feature kinds of manipulation identified by Bob Goodin.

The first is an example of overloading people with information so that "they will be

desperate for a scheme for integrating and making sense of it," and then giving them an

interpretive framework that serves your purposes.[2]

Information Overload: A member of Congress gives a speech on the floor of the Congress about an appropriations bill. The speech refers to government programs that most citizens have never heard of, using acronyms that no one outside government knows, and it's all very complicated. Then she pulls out an alarming chart – a single line, in red, pointing down and says, "In summation, if we let this appropriations bill pass, the economy tanks."
Manipulation

Another of Goodin's examples is making a nice-sounding argument or claim that

has hidden presuppositions or hidden implications:

War Department: "Americans renaming the old War Department the 'Department of Defense'. Of course, defense presupposes a threat—one can only defend *against* something. The implicit assertion is that someone is threatening the nation, but by being implicit, this assertion escapes the questioning it deserves."[3]
Manipulation

Goodin's point is that when people go along with the renaming of the War

Department, they also go along with the presupposition that someone is threatening the

nation -- yet they need not explicitly consider this presupposition or even be fully aware

that they've presupposed it.

Guilt Trip: Janice has booked a vacation trip to Brazil. Janice's father Mike doesn't want her to go because he thinks that she should save her money. Over the course of a weekend together, Mike repeatedly says things like, "If you go off to that dangerous, outlaw country, your mother and I will be sick with fear. Absolutely sick!" This makes Janice feel very guilty and as a result, she cancels the trip.
Manipulation

Guilt Talk: Janice has embezzled money from the company she works for. Janice's father Mike finds out. Over the course of a weekend together, Mike repeatedly says things like, "What you did was wrong." and "You should return the money." This makes Janice feel very guilty and a result, she returns the money.
Not manipulation

Cookies (House): Your house is on the market. Before an open house, you bake cookies so that the house will smell like cookies—knowing that this will make prospective buyers more inclined to make an offer on the house.
Manipulation

Cookies (Bakery): You work in a bakery. Whenever a batch of cookies comes out of the oven, you place them in an open front window—knowing that the smell of cookies will make passersby more inclined to come into your bakery and buy cookies.
Not manipulation

Movies:
Critic Richard Brody writes: "On the evidence of 'Antichrist,' von Trier is one of the best advertising men of our time—he uses religion to sell sex and sex to sell religion—and his handling of his themes is as cheaply manipulative and overdetermined as a TV commercial."[4] The movie director being discussed here is Lars Von Trier, the writer-director behind "Dancing in the Dark" and "Breaking the Waves." I personally don't find his movies manipulative; they're really sad and disturbing, but not manipulative. The point I'd like to make here: there's often disagreement about whether films are manipulative.

Camping Trip: your partner wants to go on a family camping trip, but you don't. While you're discussing it, your partner calls out to your children, "Hey kids! Who wants to go on a camping trip?" The children cheer. Rather than disappoint your children, you agree to go on the camping trip.

Manipulation

Manipulation comes in many varieties. Some instances of manipulation target emotions (e.g. Guilt Trip). But manipulation doesn't always target emotions: Information Overload and War Department are examples of manipulation that prevent thorough, rational deliberation, but don't target emotion.

Manipulation is often contrary to the target's best interests (e.g. Cookies-House). But manipulation can be in the target's best interests (e.g. Medicine).

Manipulation sometimes aims to change a specific decision someone's made, or aims to change behavior immediately—for example Guilt Trip, or Medicine. But manipulation doesn't always aim to change the target's behavior—for example, Movies.[5]

Manipulation is sometimes intricate – it plays on the details of someone's personality: for example, in George W. Bush (Cowboy), Dick Cheney has a manipulative strategy that's fine-tuned to Bush. But manipulation isn't always intricate – sometimes it's blunt, and it doesn't play on the details of an individual's personality, but takes advantage of widely-shared psychological dispositions – for example, Cookies (House).

III. Manipulating people vs. manipulating situations

Several theorists of manipulation —Ruth Faden and Tom Beauchamp, Marcia Baron, Alan Ware[6]— draw a distinction between manipulation that targets the person and influences the person directly, on the one hand, and manipulation that changes the situation or changes the options available to the person, on the other hand. They contrast *manipulating the person directly*, and *manipulating the person by changing the situation*. I think this isn't quite the right distinction. The distinction I prefer is:

> Manipulation of a person: making someone have a non-ideal response, either by influencing her directly (e.g. Guilt Trip) or by changing the situation in a way that will cause her to have a non-ideal response (Cookies-House).

> And

> Manipulation of a situation: Manipulation that changes the situation so that the ideal response is the desired response (e.g. Camping Trip).

I'm going to focus on the first kind of manipulation, manipulation of a person. I don't have a unified account that captures both kinds of manipulation. So put aside the case Camping Trip, which is example of manipulation of a situation, and don't think about it again.

My task here is to come up with an analysis of manipulation of a person that accommodates the above cases of manipulation (aside from Camping Trip), and that explains why, in pairs of similar cases, one is manipulation but the other isn't manipulation. Ideally, this account of manipulation will also ring true, and capture what seems manipulative about these cases of manipulation.

IV. Overview of analyses of manipulation that don't work

Some theorists analyze manipulation as covert influence of some sort.[7] The analysis of manipulation as covert influence captures what seems like a key feature of some cases of manipulation: the manipulated person doesn't realize that she's been influenced by another, or doesn't realize the way in which she's being influenced.

Rather than covert influence, some theorists understand manipulation as non-rational influence of some sort. Ruth Faden and Tom Beauchamp offer this account of (psychological) manipulation: A person is influenced by causing changes in mental processes other than those involved in understanding. According to Claudia Mills, what's distinctive about manipulation is that it purports to be legitimate persuasion that offers good reasons, but in fact bad reasons are offered.[8]

According to other theorists, what's distinctive about manipulation as a form of influence isn't that the influence is covert or non-rational, but the nature of the influence's effect: manipulation is influence that renders people less rational or less deliberatively ideal. According to Thomas Hill, what's distinctive about manipulation is that it causes people to make decisions in ways that rational people wouldn't want to make decisions.[9] Robert Noggle defines manipulative action as action that intends to make someone fall short of ideals for belief, desire, or emotion.[10] I think that Noggle's account of manipulation is almost right, as I'll explain below.

Felicia Ackerman, in "The Concept of Manipulativeness," goes through several analyses of manipulation, gives counter-examples to all of them, and then suggests that it's not really possible to give an analysis of manipulation. She wonders if manipulation is a combinatorily vague concept. By "combinatorily vague concept" she means there are

"a variety of conditions, all of which have something to do with the application of the term, yet are not able to make any sharp discriminations between those combinations which are, and those which are not, sufficient and/or necessary for application."

In the following sections, I consider these accounts of manipulation in more detail.

VI. Manipulation as influence that doesn't increase understanding

Ruth Faden and Tom Beauchamp offer this account of psychological manipulation (which is one category of manipulation, according to them):

> Psychological manipulation: A person is influenced by causing changes in mental processes other than those involved in understanding.

This definition of manipulation is too broad. It counts as manipulation cases that aren't manipulation -- for example Date. Flirting influences someone by causing changes in mental processes other than those involved in understanding, but flirting isn't manipulative in all cases.

Other, similar definitions of manipulation are too narrow. For example, Claudia Mills writes that "manipulation is changing another's beliefs and desires by offering her bad reasons disguised as good reasons, or faulty arguments disguised as sound arguments." This definition doesn't accommodate Cookies (House), which is manipulation but isn't an instance of offering someone bad reasons disguised as good reasons.

VII. Manipulation as deceptive influence or covert influence

Robert Goodin observes that manipulation carries "especially strong connotations of something sneaky" and that manipulation characteristically happens unbeknownst to its victim. Goodin defines manipulation as "deceptively influencing someone, causing him to act against his putative will."[11] Alan Ware also defines manipulation as a kind of covert influence: to manipulate someone is to structure his environment with the intention of changing his choice, and to succeed in doing so, without his knowledge or understanding of what you're doing.[12]

The analysis of manipulation as covert influence captures what seems like a key feature of some cases of manipulation, which is that the manipulated person doesn't realize that she's been influenced by another, or doesn't realize the way in which she's being influenced. For example, in Information Overload, people don't realize that they've been led to accept a certain interpretive framework. And in George W. Bush (Cowboy), Bush doesn't realize how Cheney has pulled his strings.

But this account of manipulation is too narrow. Manipulation isn't always deceptive, or covert. For example, Guilt Trip is a case of manipulation, yet there needn't be deception or covertness involved. Janice might be lucidly aware that she's being manipulated by her father, and how she's being manipulated. Examples like this are not uncommon; we're often lucidly aware that we're being manipulated into having a response, such as feeling guilt or pity or embarrassment, even as we have this response and act on it.

I think that deceptiveness or covertness is a favorite technique of manipulators – manipulation is more likely to succeed if it's target doesn't realize what's happening. But manipulation needn't be covert. Covertness isn't what's definitive of manipulation.

VIII. Manipulation as a combinatorily vague concept

Felicia Ackerman, in a paper "The Concept of Manipulativeness," goes through several analyses of manipulation, gives counter-examples to all of them, and then suggests that it's not really possible to give an analysis of manipulation. She wonders if manipulation is a combinatorily vague concept. By "combinatorily vague concept" she means there are "a variety of conditions, all of which have something to do with the application of the term, yet are not able to make any sharp discriminations between those combinations which are, and those which are not, sufficient and/or necessary for application."[13]

Ackerman identifies a number of conditions that, in certain combinations, constitute manipulation – but she cautions that we can't know which combinations of conditions constitute manipulation. Those conditions are: Influence; Shrewdness; Deviousness; Indirect means; Artfulness; Aim is to benefit the manipulator; Subtlety; Inhibition of rational deliberation; Falsification or omission of information; Play on nonrational impulses; Deceptiveness; Ulterior motives; Getting someone to do something differently from what he is already doing; Unethicalness; Inhibition of action, belief, emotion, etc that the manipulatee finds natural or appropriate (or is otherwise inclined to engage in); Pressure/making it awkward for the manipulatee to say no.

I must admit that this is a tempting account of manipulation. I might yet decide this is the right account of manipulation. When you raise seventeen counter-examples to my account of manipulation, I intend to respond that manipulation is a combinatorily vague concept! But for the time being, I think that I have found an account of manipulation – a modification of the account offered by Robert Noggle.

IX. Manipulation as influence that makes people fall short of ideals

Robert Noggle, in a paper "Manipulative Actions: A Conceptual and Moral Analysis," writes:

> The term "manipulation" suggests that the victim is treated as though she were some sort of object or machine. It's as though the manipulator controls his victim by "adjusting her psychological levers." There are three main "levers" that a manipulator can "operate." They are belief, desire, and emotion. This suggests that there are three main ways of manipulating someone, that is, three distinct ways that a manipulator can lead his victim astray. The paths from which the victim can be led astray are paths toward certain ideals. These are the ideals to which we strive to get our beliefs, desires, and emotions to conform. It is this striving that the manipulator attempts to thwart. To put the point a bit less metaphorically, there are certain norms or ideals that govern beliefs, desires, and emotions. I am suggesting that manipulative action is the attempt to get someone's beliefs, desires, or emotions to violate these norms, to fall short of these ideals. (p.44)

Noggle's view is that there are certain norms or ideals that govern beliefs, desires, and emotions; manipulative action is the attempt to get someone's belief, emotion, or desire to fall short of the ideals that govern beliefs, desires and emotions. More specifically, according to Noggle:

> (1) Manipulative action is the attempt to get someone's belief, emotion, or desire to fall short of the ideals that *in the view of the influencer* govern the target's beliefs, desires and emotions.

Noggle uses the metaphor of "adjusting psychological levers." Manipulative action is adjusting those psychological levers away from what the manipulator thinks are the ideal settings for the target.[14] Noggle gives some examples of ideals that govern beliefs, desires and emotions: the ideal of attending to all and only true and relevant beliefs; the ideal that desires conform to one's beliefs about what there is most reason to do; the ideal that emotion make salient what is most important or most relevant to the situation at hand.

Noggle emphasizes that manipulation *is not* non-rational persuasion. The category of manipulation is really orthogonal to the category of non-rational persuasion. Whether influence is manipulation doesn't depend on whether the influence is itself "rational persuasion" or "non-rational persuasion." Rather, whether influence is manipulation depends on whether the influence is intended to make the person more or less ideal. This allows us to distinguish between manipulation and what Noggle calls "non-rational counseling". He writes:

> Suppose you remind me of starving children in Rwanda, and describe their plight in vivid detail in order to get me to feel sad enough to assign (what you take to be) the morally proper relevance to their suffering. Surely you have not manipulated me, though you may have engaged in non-rational moral persuasion. Similarly, if one person tries to direct another person's attention to relevant beliefs, the first person is not manipulating the second; rather, she is offering a sort of counsel by pointing out what she thinks is pertinent information. Or if a psychologist uses conditioning to instill desires that conform to the patient's beliefs about what there is reason to do, then she is engaged in therapy rather than manipulation. These examples show that trying to move someone toward that person's ideal conditions is not in itself manipulative, even when it takes place by "non-rational" means. Rather it is what we might call "non-rational counselling."   (p. 49)

X. Modifications of Noggle's account

Noggle's account is substantially correct, but needs a few modifications.

Noggle gives us an account of *manipulative action* as action that attempts to make someone fall short of ideals for belief, desire and emotion. Noggle gives us an account of attempted manipulation, essentially. I think it's clearer to talk about manipulation than attempted manipulation. Manipulation is a success term: to manipulate someone isn't just to attempt to affect her, but to succeed in doing so.

So let's slightly modify Noggle's account into an account of manipulation as opposed to manipulative action:

(2) Manipulation is intentionally making someone's beliefs, desires, or emotions fall short of the ideals that in the view of the influencer govern the target's beliefs, desires and emotions.

For brevity, let's shorten (2) to:

(3) Manipulation is intentionally making someone fall short of (the manipulator's) ideals for belief, desire, or emotion.

The main virtue of Noggle's account is that it's broad – it encompasses the range of cases of manipulation, as opposed to other accounts of manipulation that pick out too narrow a class of action. However, as it stands, Noggle's account of manipulation is too broad -- it identifies too broad a class of action as manipulation.

Consider, for example:

Ecstasy: Mike wants to convince his daughter Janice not to go on a trip to Brazil. He covertly gives her ecstasy, which makes her much more agreeable to his point of view. Janice agrees not to go on the trip, and cancels her ticket.

In Ecstasy, Mike intentionally makes Janice fall short of ideals for emotion, motivation and deliberation, yet it doesn't seem like a case of manipulation. Drugging someone isn't a manipulative form of influence; manipulation affects belief, desire and emotion more directly or immediately. Manipulation directly targets psychological processes.

I suggest we narrow Noggle's account:

(4) Manipulation is intentionally *directly influencing* someone's beliefs, desires, or emotions such that she falls short of (the manipulator's) ideals for belief, desire, or emotion.[15]

Admittedly, the notion of "*directly influencing* someone's beliefs, desires, or emotions" is imprecise. I need to spell it out so as to exclude influence such as drugging someone, but to include cases like baking cookies in order to make prospective buyers like a house. I invite your suggestions about how to sharpen up the notion of "directly influencing."

The account of manipulation in (4) is still too broad: it includes lying and intimidation. Lying is directly influencing someone's beliefs such that her beliefs fall short of ideals; but to my mind, simply lying to someone isn't manipulation. Noggle disagrees; he thinks that lying is a form of manipulation. But I think we should modify this definition to exclude lying.

We also need to exclude intimidation from our definition of manipulation. Consider this example:

> **Fire Sale:** You're at a clearance sale at a store. You and a stranger grab a beautiful coat off the $10 rack at exactly the same moment. The stranger stares at you angrily and says, "Let it go, or you'll be sorry!" You don't think he'll hurt you if you hold onto the coat, but nonetheless you're intimidated and you let go.

In this case, you're intimidated into giving in. It's not rational to give in; you aren't being threatened. You also aren't motivated by generosity to let go. You're just intimated. The stranger has intentionally directly influenced your desires or emotions such that they fall short of ideals, yet the stranger's behavior doesn't seem to me like an example of manipulation.

Intimidation seems to be a distinct kind of influence from manipulation. This has been remarked upon by others: as Bob Goodin puts it, manipulation is a way of undermining resistance, not a way of overcoming resistance. Manipulation undermines resistance by changing the will – but not by simply overpowering the will.

I have no clever way to modify our account of manipulation to exclude lying and intimidation, so let's just add an exclusion:

(5) Manipulation is intentionally directly influencing someone's beliefs, desires, or emotions such that she falls short of (the manipulator's) ideals for belief, desire, or emotion —but not by lying, and not by simply overpowering her will.

You might find this objectionably ad hoc -- I'm just tacking on exclusions. It'd be more satisfying to identify a core concept of manipulation that doesn't include lying and intimidation. I don't see how to do that; suggestions are welcome.[16] However, I think we shouldn't be surprised if there's a core concept of manipulation that does include lying and intimidation, but we don't consider all actions that fit the core concept to be manipulation. Certain distinctive, common kinds of behavior have been carved out from the core concept and they get their own concepts and terms – e.g. lying and intimidation. It's more precise and concise to have distinct concepts for these distinctive, common kinds of behavior, so that's how the conceptual landscape has developed.

XI. The account accommodates most cases of manipulation

The account of manipulation given in (5) accommodates *almost* all of our cases – and explains why the cases of manipulation are manipulation, whereas the cases of non-manipulation are not manipulation.

In Guilt Trip, Mike makes Janice fall short of ideals for emotion and motivation. Mike's actual objection to Janice's trip is that it's too expensive – but he makes her feel guilty about making her parents worry about her safety. For this to be a case of manipulation, it must be the case that Mike is making Janice fall short of the ideals Mike thinks apply to Janice. So suppose this to be true: Mike causes Janice to feel excessive, unwarranted guilt – what he takes to be excessive, unwarranted guilt. In Guilt Talk, by contrast, Mike causes Janice to feel guilty, but this is appropriate guilt, to his mind. Thus our account of manipulation explains why Guilt Trip is manipulation, but Guilt Talk isn't. Causing what you take to be an appropriate kind and degree of emotion isn't manipulative. But causing what you take to be an inappropriate kind or degree of emotion is manipulative.

We can also explain why Cookies (House) is manipulation, but Cookies (Bakery) isn't. In Cookies (House), the prospective buyers are caused to fall short of ideals for emotion and desire. Being motivated to purchase a house because it smells good on the day you visit it is non-ideal motivation. However, being motivated to buy cookies by the enticing smell of cookies isn't falling short of an ideal – it's an acceptable motivation for buying cookies. (Or at least, barring a special circumstance, it's an acceptable motivation for buying cookies.)

Lastly, consider Movies. Our account of manipulation also allows us to make sense of why there's often dispute over whether a sad movie is manipulative; the disagreement is over whether the movie makes people fall short of emotional ideals or not. The person who thinks the movie is manipulative thinks that viewers are caused to have non-ideal emotional reactions: viewers are made to feel excessively sad about the events depicted in the movie – sad music, or staged expressions of emotion, make them feel excessively sad. On the other hand, the person who thinks the movie isn't manipulative thinks that viewers aren't caused to have non-ideal emotional reactions: viewers feel the right amount of sadness about the sad events depicted in the movie; or perhaps they feel excessively sad about the events depicted in the movie, but that's the ideal reaction to have to a sad movie.[17]

XII. Manipulation and self-interested motivation

[This section is a good one to skip, if you're short on time.]

Our working definition of manipulation explains most of the above cases. But not George W. Bush (Reelection), which is not a case of manipulation, though it is a case of making someone fall short of ideals for desire and emotion. Rove appeals to and stokes Bush's self-interest, which is excessive self-interest: invading a country because it's in your self-interest is excessively self-interested. In being so excessively self-interested, Bush falls short of ideals for emotion: he feels an inappropriate level of self-interest. He also falls short of other ideals for emotion: he doesn't feel an appropriate level of guilt, or compassion, or other emotions that might rein in his self-interest. (Let's stipulate that Karl Rove recognizes these ideals for emotion.)

In George W. Bush (Reelection), Rove causes Bush to fall short of the ideals that Rove thinks apply to Bush. Yet it doesn't seem to me like a case of manipulation; rather, it's a case of persuading someone by providing information and advice.

Notice that George W. Bush (Reelection) is the mirror image of Guilt Trip. In Guilt Trip, Janice's father causes her to feel excessive guilt, and this dampens her self-interested motivation. In Bush's case, he feels too little guilt, and has an excessive amount of self-interested motivation. In both cases, someone is caused to fall short of ideals for guilt and self-interest. But in Guilt Trip, it's manipulation, and in George W. Bush (Reelection), it's not. Why?

A tempting explanation is that: George W. Bush (Relection) isn't manipulation because Bush is made to act in his best interests; Bush isn't influenced in some way that diverts him from acting in his best interests. So perhaps:

(6) Manipulation is intentionally directly influencing someone's beliefs, desires, or emotions such that she falls short of (the manipulator's) ideals for belief, desire, or emotion, *and such that she doesn't act in her best interests*.

The idea is—to return to Robert Noggle's metaphor—that adjusting someone's psychological settings away from the ideal settings is manipulation, but only if this adjustment away from the ideal is not in her best interests.

But this can't be right, because manipulation sometimes *is* in someone's best interests. For example the patient in Medicine is manipulated into taking his medicine, which (let's stipulate) is in his best interests.

Perhaps self-interest plays a slightly different role in manipulation:

(7) Manipulation is intentionally directly influencing someone's beliefs, desires, or emotions such that she falls short of (the manipulator's) ideals for belief, desire,

or emotion - except that increasing her self-interested motivation isn't manipulation.

The idea here is that manipulation is adjusting someone's psychological settings away from the ideal settings, except that turning up the self-interest dial isn't manipulation, even if turning up the self-interest dial moves the person away from ideal. This would explain why George W. Bush (Reelection) isn't manipulation but Medicine is manipulation. In George W. Bush (Reelection), Rove turns up the self-interest dial (which isn't manipulative), but in Medicine, the nurse's flirtation doesn't turn up the patient's self-interest dial, even though she acts in his best interest.

I think (7) is pretty close to the correct account of manipulation, but not quite. Consider another case:

> **George W. Bush (Competitive Malice)**
> President George W. Bush is unsure about some of Vice President Dick Cheney proposed policies—approving the torture of prisoners at Guantanamo, wiretapping phones without court approval, and invading Iraq. Political advisor Karl Rove wants Bush to approve these policies, because he believes that making decisions that appear to be "tough" decisions will increase Bush's popularity and ensure his re-election. Rove tells Bush as much. Rove believes that it's in Bush's best interests to be re-elected, but is worried that Bush isn't sufficiently motivated. Rove knows that, as a graduate of Yale University, Bush feels an intense competitive malice towards graduates of Princeton University. In order to motivate Bush to do what it takes to win re-election, Rove reminds Bush that his likely opponent is a graduate of Princeton University.

In this case, Bush is falling short of various ideals. In feeling intense competitive malice, Bush is falling short of emotional ideals. In making a decision to invade a country on the basis of competitive malice towards one individual, Bush is falling short of ideals for motivation and for deliberation. (Let's stipulate that Rove recognizes these ideals.)

Is it manipulative to appeal to Bush's intense competitive malice, and use it to motivate him to do what it takes to win the election? I'm of two minds about this case. When I imagine the intense competitive malice as a settled part of Bush's personality – as something that's under his control, and that doesn't prevent him from pursuing his other goals and acting on his settled decisions– then it doesn't seem manipulative for Rove to appeal to it to motivate Bush. But when I imagine the intense competitive malice as a hot emotion—an emotion that's not fully under Bush's control—then it seems manipulative for Rove to motivate Bush by appealing to his intense competitive malice. What explains this? I suggest:

(8) Manipulation is intentionally directly influencing someone's beliefs, desires, or emotions such that she falls short of (the manipulator's) ideals for belief, desire, or emotion in *ways typically not in her self-interest.*

In other words: Manipulation is adjusting someone's psychological settings away from the ideal settings – except that if you're adjusting her settings in ways that typically promote her self-interest, then you're not manipulating her. But if you're adjusting her settings away from the ideal settings in ways that typically aren't in her self-interest, then you are manipulating her.

This account of manipulation explains why George W. Bush (Reelection) isn't a case of manipulation: in stoking Bush's excessive self-interest, Rove is making Bush fall short of ideals, but in a way that's likely to be in Bush's self-interest. In George W. Bush (Competitive Malice), whether or not Rove manipulates Bush depends upon the kind of malice he stokes. If Rove appeals to a cold, competitive malice that's under Bush's control, then it doesn't seem like manipulation – and that's because feeling controlled, competitive malice, and making decisions on the basis of it, is likely to be in

Bush's self-interest. However, if Rove stokes a hot competitive malice that's not tightly controlled, then it seems like manipulation – and that's because feeling intense malice that not tightly controlled is likely to make one act out-of-control, which isn't typically in one's self interest.

But we need one last modification to the account. Consider this case:

George W. Bush (Turncoat Rove)
Karl Rove is a turncoat: he's secretly working for Bush's opponent in the reelection campaign. Rove knows that when Bush is motivated by competitive malice during a debate, it will be clear to voters that he's so motivated, and they will stop supporting him. Rove knows that, as a graduate of Yale University, Bush feels an intense competitive malice towards graduates of Princeton University. Rove reminds Bush that his likely opponent is a graduate of Princeton University, in order to make Bush manifest his intense competitive malice and thereby help Bush's opponent win the election.

When Rove motivates Bush by appealing to cold competitive malice, this seems manipulative – even though motivating someone by appealing to intense competitive malice is typically in his self-interest. Why is it manipulative to appeal to Bush's competitive malice in this case, but not in George W. Bush (Competitive Malice)? My intuition is that it's manipulative in this case to appeal to competitive malice because being motivated by competitive malice is not likely to be in Bush's interest in this case. Thus our account needs one last modification:

(9) Manipulation is intentionally directly influencing someone's beliefs, desires, or emotions such that she falls short of (the manipulator's) ideals for belief, desire, or emotion in ways typically not in her self-interest or *ways that are likely not to be in her self-interest in the present context.*

Certain ways of intentionally making people fall short of ideals—certain ways of turning her psychological settings away from the ideal—are manipulative, but other ways aren't manipulative. Moving someone's settings away from the ideal in ways in ways

22

that typically *aren't* in her self-interest, or aren't in her self-interest in the present context,

is manipulation. But moving someone's settings away from the ideal in ways that

typically *are* in her self-interest, and are in her self-interest in the present context, isn't

manipulation.

XIII. Manipulation as weakness-targeting influence?

[This section is a good one to skip, if you're short on time.]

I think that (9) is the correct account of manipulation. However, it is a

cumbersome account and it doesn't capture our pre-theoretical notion of manipulation.

Let's try to find a more intuitively appealing account of manipulation.

Joel Rudinow suggests that manipulation is influence that plays on a supposed

weakness of the manipulated person.[18] Rudinow offers this case:

> **Jones.** Jones complains of being the object of regular manipulative attempts by
> his wife. He describes a typical instance of this. He is making ready to leave the
> house for his weekly poker game, of which he is very fond. It has been an
> uncommonly busy period for Jones; he has not spent one evening in the past two
> weeks at home with his wife. His wife now appears, clad in a see-through nightie,
> poses seductively, begins nibbling at his ear lobe and playing with the buttons on
> his shirt. Jones protests that he does not want to be tempted just now—he will
> end up missing his poker game. Furthermore, Jones suggests that his wife is
> really not at all interested in sex. Though he has arrived home late at night for the
> past two weeks, the couple's sexual frequency has been higher than at any other
> time in the couple's history. He accuses her of attempting to manipulate him so
> that he will remain at home with her for the evening. His wife admits to this
> immediately, adding that she knows as well as Jones how frequently they have
> had sex of late and that he knows as well as she does that she knows this as well
> as he does.[19]

Rudinow thinks this seems like a case of manipulation, and I agree. When the

wife gets her husband to stay home by seducing him, she's targeting his desire for sex—a

paradigm case of a bodily desire that's considered a weakness. (Whether the bodily

desire for sex should be considered a weakness is a separate question; what's relevant here is that we do, pretheoretically, consider it a weakness.) So the wife's method of changing her husband's motives is to target a characteristic that we pretheoretically consider a weakness.

Many other paradigm instances of manipulation involve playing on character traits or psychological dispositions that we consider weaknesses. For example: guilt trips target characteristics considered to be weaknesses—the propensity to feel excessive guilt, neurotic character, low self-esteem, or just tender-heartedness. To give another example: manipulative flattery targets vanity, gullibility, perhaps insecurity– all personality traits that are considered weaknesses. "Playing on weaknesses" seems to captures something about our pretheoretical notion of manipulation.

Let's recast our account of manipulation, from (9), in terms of targeting weaknesses:

> (10) Manipulation is intentionally making someone succumb to a weakness or a contextual weakness, or altering the situation to create a contextual weakness and then making her succumb to it.

Let's define a *contextual weakness* as a character trait or psychological disposition that typically isn't a weakness, but in the present context is a weakness. For example, consider the case in which turncoat Rove appeals to Bush's cold competitive malice, with the intention of turning voters against Bush. Cold competitive malice isn't a weakness – cold competitive malice is really more of a strength. However, cold competitive malice is a liability for Bush in those circumstances, because it will hurt him.

Cold competitive malice is a contextual weakness. So when turncoat Rove appeals to Bush's cold competitive malice and gets him to act on it, Rove is playing on a contextual weakness of Bush's.

An example of manipulating someone by creating a contextual weakness is Information Overload, the case in which people are overloaded with information so that they will be desperate for a scheme for integrating and making sense of it, and then given an interpretive framework that serves your purposes. The psychological disposition being targeted – the disposition to efficiently make sense of information, to put it into an interpretive framework efficiently – is one that might be perfectly rational, and might typically serve one well. But in this context it's turned into a weakness: when you're overloaded with information, and given an interpretive framework that is biased, the disposition to latch onto an interpretive framework is a weakness. The manipulator creates a context in which this habit of mind is a weakness.

Formulation (10) is meant as an account of our pretheoretical notion of manipulation. So the notion of "weakness" in (10) is a pretheoretical notion of psychological weakness. Perhaps our pretheoretical notion of psychological weakness is something like:

> Weakness: a character trait or psychological disposition that makes someone likely to fall short of ideals in a way typically not in her self interest.

Weaknesses include character traits or psychological dispositions that make someone susceptible to control by others (for example, gullibility, which makes us too readily believe what others tell us), and character traits that make us likely to have

weakness of will (for example, sexual appetites). I think this is a plausible analysis of our

pretheoretical notion of psychological weakness.

Low and behold, when you plug this notion of weakness into (10), you get:

(11) Manipulation is intentionally making someone succumb to weaknesses (fall short of ideals in ways typically not in her self interest), or succumb to contextual weaknesses (fall short of ideals in ways likely not in her self interest in the context), or altering the situation to create a contextual weakness and then making her succumb to it (fall short of ideals in ways likely not in her self interest in the context).

(11) more or less boils down to:

(12) Manipulation is influence that intentionally targets character traits or psychological dispositions to make someone fall short of ideals in ways typically not in her self interest, or ways that are likely not in her best interest in the context.

Lo and behold, (12) is just a hair's breath away from (9):

(9) Manipulation is intentionally directly influencing someone's beliefs, desires, or emotions such that she falls short of (the manipulator's) ideals for belief, desire, or emotion in ways typically not in her self-interest or *ways that are likely not to be in her self-interest in the present context.*

So: our pretheoretical notion of manipulation is something like (10). (9) is a more

precise account of manipulation, and is more or less equivalent to (10).

---

[1] I'm thinking here of Barbara Herman, Christine Korsgaard, Onora O'Neill, Tamar Schapiro (she analyzes the wrong in the lying promise to be that it's manipulative, but she doesn't define manipulation). Another example is Miller et al (KIE, 2008, pp.239-240), who claim, without

defining manipulation, that "Deception may manipulate individuals to volunteer when they would not have chosen to do so had they been informed accurately about the nature of the research, including its use of deception."

[2] Bob Goodin, Manipulatory Politics, p. 59.

[3] Bob Goodin, Manipulatory Politics, p. 100.

[4] Richard Brody. http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/movies/2009/10/crossed-out.html

[5] For example, an aspect of Goodin's account of manipulation is that it changes the target's will. Similarly, Joel Rudinow says that manipulation changes behavior.

[6] Faden and Beauchamp identify three types of manipulative influence, including the manipulation of options, in which options in the environment are modified by increasing or decreasing available options, or by offering rewards or threatening punishments. Another of Faden and Beauchamp's three types of manipulative influence is person manipulation, in which the person is influenced by causing changes in mental processes other than those involved in understanding. Marcia Baron identifies multiple types of manipulation, including applying pressure and manipulation of the situation so as to artificially limit the other person's options. According to Alan Ware, manipulation is covert persuasion, and one of the methods of manipulation is restricting options or restructuring options.

[7] Robert Goodin, *Manipulatory Politics* (Yale University Press, 1980), p. 9, p. 19. Alan Ware, "The Concept of Manipulation: Its Relation to Democracy and Power," *British Journal of Political Science*, vol.11, 1981. See also Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, *Power and Poverty* (Oxford University Press, 1970).

[8] Claudia Mills, "Politics and Manipulation," Social Theory and Practice, vol 21, 1995, 97-112; especially p.100.

[9] Thomas Hill, "Autonomy and Benevolent Lies," p.251.

[10] Robert Noggle, "Manipulative Actions: A Conceptual and Moral Analysis." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1995): 57-69.

[11] Goodin, *Manipulatory Politics*, p. 9, p. 19.

[12] Ware, "The Concept of Manipulation."

[13] Ackerman's notion of "combinatorily vague concent" is from Alston, 1967.

[14] Noggle writes: "What makes a form of influence manipulative is the intent of the person acting, in particular the direction in which she intends to move the other person's psychological levers." (51) "Even if the influencer has a culpably false view of what is our ideal, the influence is not a manipulative action so long as it is sincere, that is, in accordance with what the influencer takes to be true, relevant, and appropriate. " (51) "Often children (and some adults as well) have an inflated sense of their own importance; they genuinely believe that their pains and projects are (or ought to be) more significance than those of other people, not only to themselves but to others as well. Such cases are somewhat intricate morally. On my view such an agent does not in fact act manipulatively." (51)

[15] The beliefs, desire or emotions that are directly influenced needn't be the ones that fall short of ideals. Manipulation *can* intentionally influence a belief, desire, emotion without directly targeting that belief, desire, or emotion. E.g. Distracting people with soaring rhetoric – you're making someone fall short of ideals for belief not by targeting those beliefs, but by influencing her emotions.

[16] We could exclude both lying and bullying from manipulation by claiming, as Joel Rudinow does, that manipulation is the *complex motivation* of behavior. Rudinow distinguishes influencing behavior from motivating behavior ("a motivation is a belief which at the time of deliberating or acting is part of an acceptable explanation for the agent's behavior"), and distinguishes simple motivation of behavior (motivate in ways consonant with person's goals – e.g. lying) from complex motivation of behavior – motivate behavior in a way which one presumes will alter the person's goal (or complex of goals). We might say: lying is the simple motivation of behavior that doesn't change the person's goals. Similarly: being irrationally bullied/intimidated into doing x rather than y is an instance of behavior being influenced, not motivated: the fact that you were irrationally bullied into doing x rather than y isn't an acceptable explanation for doing x, so being irrationally bullied isn't an instance of motivation. So bullying doesn't count as manipulation.

[17] Similarly, there's often disagreement over whether inspirational speeches are manipulative. For example, during the last American Presidential campaign, there was disagreement among my friends about whether Barack Obama's "Yes We Can" speeches were manipulative or not. I thought his speeches were sometimes manipulative. The manipulative speeches had inspiring rhetoric, but they were hollow: they didn't have content that warranted feeling hope, optimism, and belief in Barack Obama. These speeches caused people to have non-ideal emotional and deliberative responses: people really ought to have been more focused on the issues, and more thoughtful about the candidates. Many of my friends thought the speeches weren't manipulative. Most of my friends disagreed that Obama's speeches caused people to feel unwarranted hope and optimism—they thought it was appropriate to be so hopeful and optimistic. Some agreed that Obama's inspiring rhetoric made people feel unwarranted hope and optimism—but they saw nothing wrong with that. Feeling unwarranted hope and optimism wasn't falling short of an emotional ideal.

[18] More accurately, Rudinow claims: A attempts to manipulate S iff A attempts the complex motivation of S's behavior by means of deception *or* by playing on a supposed weakness of S.

[19] Joel Rudinow, "Manipulation" *Ethics*. July, 1978, p. 341.