Advertising and the Social Conditions of Autonomy

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In *The New Industrial State*, John Kenneth Galbraith charged that advertising creates desires rather than responds to them.¹ His thesis raised in stark terms the issue of who is controlling whom in the marketplace. Yet, Galbraith did not provide a rigorous analysis of autonomy, and his remarks about the effects of advertising on individuals were often more suggestive than carefully worked out.

The claim that advertising is inimical to the autonomy of individuals has been taken up and discussed by philosophers, economists, and social theorists. Typically, these discussions provide first, an analysis of autonomy, and second, some empirical conjecture about whether or not advertising can be said to subvert it. The focus of most of these discussions has been on whether or not advertising can be justly accused of manipulating individuals into wanting and therefore purchasing specific products or services. Less attention has been paid to what I believe is another major theme in Galbraith's writings--that mass-advertising induces in individuals beliefs, wants, and attitudes conducive to the economic and political interests of corporations in advanced capitalist societies like the United States. Galbraith's concern seems to be not only that advertising is hostile to individual autonomy, but that it is an aspect of the ability of corporations to dominate the lives of other members of society.

What the effects of mass-advertising are on individuals is, it must be admitted, ultimately an empirical question. In spite of this, I will try to show how we might reasonably conclude that advertising undermines autonomy, especially under the social conditions that exist in advanced capitalist countries like the United States.² Recent discussions of advertising have not only failed to consider one crucial way in which advertising might subvert autonomy; they have also ignored important
aspects of the broader social context of advertising. Specifically, they have paid scant attention to the ways in which other social conditions also undermine autonomy. My analysis will emphasize the complex interplay between and amongst the various social conditions that affect the autonomy of individuals.

In addition to providing an analysis of autonomy, I will show how autonomy requires social conditions for its development and continued viability. I will show how the content and methods of persuasive mass-advertising are likely to suppress the development of the abilities, attitudes and knowledge constitutive of dispositional autonomy. Yet, my view is that its full impact on autonomy should be considered in light of the ways in which political and economic institutions distribute the other social conditions of autonomy.

My primary focus will be on persuasive as opposed to informational advertising. Though the distinction is not a sharp one, I take the latter to involve information about the features, price, and availability of a product or service. Persuasive advertising, in contrast, often contains very little direct informational content about a product or service. Whereas the former presupposes some interest on the part of individuals in the product or service, the latter seeks to cultivate an interest. This typically involves tying the product or service to the satisfaction of individuals’ other, sometimes subconscious desires. It seems fair to say that current informational advertising is woefully deficient. The information that is presented is often incomplete or misleading, or both. As a result, even informational ads are deceptive or manipulative at times. To that extent, they undercut the abilities of persons to make informed choices and may be destructive to the intellectual honesty that is one of the constituents of dispositional autonomy. Also, in the context of massive persuasive advertising, informational advertising is likely to reinforce the content of its persuasive counterpart. Nonetheless, the two can be roughly distinguished and my remarks will be predominantly directed against persuasive advertising.

Implicit in my analysis will be the claim that one criterion for judging social orders is the extent to which they provide all of their members with the social conditions of autonomy. I will not attempt to argue for this claim here, though it is by no means an uncontroversial
I note only that my claim is a relatively modest one—that this is one criterion for judging social orders. Critics of my approach may point out that many individuals seem to lack a strong desire for the sort of autonomous life I elucidate. We should not, however, be misled by this appearance. Many persons will assent to the principle that, ceteris paribus, the choices of individuals ought to be respected. Yet, as Lawrence Haworth shows, it makes little sense to urge such respect where peoples' choices do not reflect an autonomous way of living. This suggests there may be sound reasons to hold that autonomy is a central value. Its value may be obscured for many people by, among other things, persuasive mass-advertising.

One reason that we value autonomy is relevant to Galbraith's thesis that advertising is an aspect of the dominance of large corporations over the lives of individuals in advanced capitalist societies. Persons who are nonautonomous seem much more likely to be dominated by others. Such domination need not be consciously intended or effected by the more powerful. They may simply act in ways that they perceive to be in their own interests. Nonautonomous individuals may respond by passively assimilating the interests of the more powerful. I suspect that something like this is true when it comes to corporations, advertising, and its effects on individuals. Though I cannot hope to fully support Galbraith's thesis here, I will touch on it in numerous places throughout my discussion.

Recent discussions of advertising and autonomy are inadequate because they fail to isolate the crucial way in which the content of advertising might be subversive to autonomy. Roger Crisp, a critic of advertising, develops and tries to support the claim that ads are manipulative in an objectionable fashion. He argues that advertising "links, by suggestion, the product with my unconscious desires for [for instance] power and sex." Crisp claims that persuasive advertising leaves persons unaware of their real reasons for purchasing a product, and so precludes their making rational purchasing decisions. Crisp then argues that "many of us have a strong second-order desire not to be manipulated by others without our knowledge, and for no good reason." If persons become
aware of how persuasive advertising affects them, by locking onto their unconscious desires, they will likely repudiate the desires induced by advertising. Such repudiated desires will not be regarded by individuals as theirs. Hence, Crisp believes he has shown how advertising is subversive to autonomy.

Crisp's approach seems to attribute both too much and too little power to advertising. Too much, because there is reason to doubt that most adults are manipulated by particular ads in the way Crisp describes. Perhaps children are so manipulated at times, and this is cause for concern. Most adults, though, seem quite able to resist what I will call the "implicit content" of ads. The explicit content of ads is the message to "buy X," along with information about where it may be purchased, its features, and how much it costs. Most individuals learn at an early age that many ads are out to persuade them, even manipulate them. They become wary of ads and this explains why they often resist their explicit consent quite easily. Even if persons do have the second-order desire Crisp attributes to them, it is not the explicit content of ads that manipulates them without their knowledge. The challenge is to develop an account of how advertising can have power over individuals who very often realize ads are designed to manipulate them.

This brings us to the way in which Crisp's account attributes too little power to advertising. In addition to encouraging persons to buy Brand X, many ads have what I will term an "implicit content" that consists of messages about, broadly speaking, the consumer lifestyle. This lifestyle consists of a set of beliefs, attitudes, norms, expectations, and aspirations that I will, in due course, attempt to summarize. While individuals may be aware that they are being sold particular products, the crucial issue is the extent to which they are aware of being "sold" this implicit content. As Samuel Gorovitz remarks, "it is an error to focus too narrowly on the cognitive content of advertising by looking at the truth of its claims and the validity of its inferences."

Instead, we should consider how the images and emotional content of ads affect our beliefs, aspirations, expectations, and attitudes. Crisp does not really consider where some of the unconscious desires ads supposedly lock onto might originate.
In an important defense of advertising, Robert Arrington argues that it rarely, if ever, subverts the autonomy of individuals. He maintains that a desire is autonomous so long as it is endorsed by an individual on reflection. In other words, the (first-order) desire is autonomous if the person has a second-order desire to have and satisfy it. Advertising, he contends, rarely leads persons to have first-order desires for products that they subsequently repudiate. Perhaps, as we saw earlier, this is because many individuals resist the explicit content of even the most manipulative ads.

Arrington also argues that ads do not violate autonomy by inducing persons to make irrational choices based on faulty or inadequate information. The only information needed for a rational choice, on his view, is information relevant to the satisfaction of individuals' particular desires. He claims that ads often provide the information relevant to the satisfaction of such desires.

Even if we accept his arguments as stated, Arrington's defense of advertising is seriously incomplete. He ignores the very real possibility that it violates autonomy not by manipulating persons' desires and choices with respect to particular products, but by suppressing their capacities to make rational choices about the implicit content of ads. If advertising induces uncritical acceptance of the consumer lifestyle as a whole, then Arrington's vindication of it with respect to the formation of particular desires or the making of particular choices within that lifestyle is hardly comforting. Arrington consistently ignores the possibility that the beliefs, attitudes, and desires particular ads cater to may themselves be influenced by ads in ways that ought to trouble anyone who values human autonomy.

II

As a first step in building my case, I offer an account of autonomy that draws on recent work on the concept. Robert Young notes that a person has "dispositional autonomy" to the extent that the person's life is "ordered according to a plan or conception which fully expresses [that person's] own will." In a similar vein, Gerald Dworkin suggests that autonomy is a "global" concept: "It is a feature that evaluates a whole way of living one's life and can only be assessed over extended
periods of a person's life . . . " Autonomy is a matter of degree, an achievement that depends in part on the capacities and virtues of individuals, and in part, as we shall see, on the existence of certain social conditions.

Dworkin's analysis employs the well-known distinction between first and second-order desires and abilities. He summarizes his account as follows:

Putting the various pieces together, autonomy is conceived of as a second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences, desires, wishes, and so forth and the capacity to accept or attempt to change these in light of higher-order preferences and values.

Similarly, Lawrence Haworth interprets autonomy in terms of the notion of "critical competence." Autonomous persons are competent in the sense of being active and generally successful in giving effect to their intentions. They are critical in that they deliberate not only about means to their ends, but about the ends themselves, including those of central significance in their lives. While not engaged in continuous ratiocination, they are nonetheless disposed to critically examine their beliefs, desires, attitudes, and motivations. They subject claims they are confronted with and norms others urge on them to rational scrutiny.

Importantly for our purposes, autonomous individuals should be understood as ones who scrutinize the political, social, and economic institutions under which they live. These institutions, and the patterns of habit and expectation they establish, shape the possibilities individuals can envision and determine the areas in which they can exercise their autonomy. Autonomous individuals want to shape their own lives. Hence, of necessity they will be interested in the social forces and institutions that significantly affect their lives, especially since these forces and institutions are often humanly alterable.

Autonomy is not a capacity that develops in isolation from the social conditions that surround individuals. It requires individuals to have certain abilities, motivations, and knowledge (or at least awareness) of alternative belief-systems and lifestyles. It also requires
venues in which they can reasonably expect to display these abilities and act on these motivations. Obviously, individuals must not be subjected to things like coercion, deception, brainwashing, and harassment. Being shielded from these is a necessary social condition of the development and exercise of autonomy. Yet, there are other social conditions that while perhaps not, strictly speaking, necessary ones, are such that they foster and support autonomy in vital ways. Societies differ in the extent to which they provide these conditions for all individuals, and thus in the extent to which they enable autonomy.

III

What is the importance of noting the numerous social conditions of autonomy in the context of an analysis of persuasive mass-advertising? Very simply that advertising, as a possible threat to autonomy, does not exist in a social vacuum. We cannot assume that individuals encounter mass-advertising with already finely-honed skills of critical competence. The extent to which they do so is a function of the distribution of other social conditions of autonomy. The absence of social conditions of autonomy in one area will often reinforce or exacerbate the effects of their absence in other areas. Thus, in any attempt to gauge how much of a threat to autonomy persuasive mass-advertising represents, we must consider these and other background social conditions of autonomy.

In advanced capitalist countries like the United States, many individuals spend significant portions of their working lives in conditions destructive to autonomy. As Adina Schwartz and others have argued, hierarchical, authoritarian management structures, typical in such industrialized countries, thwart the autonomy of workers in obvious ways. Very few have meaningful input into the decisions affecting their working lives. The tasks they perform are determined by management, as are the methods used in carrying them out. Work technology is decided by management, as are productivity quotas, discipline procedures, and criteria for evaluation. Workers are not allowed or expected to exercise even the minimal autonomy of determining the ends they will pursue or the means used to pursue
them. This is one way in which the institutions of advanced capitalism enable corporations to impose their interests on individuals.

Often connected with the character of work is unequal access to quality education. While certain ways of organizing work may simply deny individuals avenues along which to exercise their autonomy, lack of education or poor quality education undermines it in more basic ways. Reduced educational and cultural experiences often result in restricted intellectual abilities and dispositions. The kinds of rational skills needed for autonomy and the motivation to employ them seem to be the products of a liberal education in the classic sense. Individuals who lack ready access to such education are likely to have an impoverished awareness of different ways of conceiving of their lives and their social relations. This makes them ideal candidates for the tutelage in the consumer lifestyle effected by mass-advertising.

Much of that which is sponsored by advertising on TV, radio, and in magazines is hardly such as to encourage the development of autonomy. Program content on commercial networks is often mindless, melodramatic, simplistic in its approach to the problems of human life--or worse, violent, sexist, or subtly racist. Even commercial network news programs seem to emphasize entertainment. Dramatic visual images, "sound bites," and fifteen second summaries of events are the rule. Commercial sponsorship of the media opens the way for the exercise of subtle control over program content. But the more likely effect of that sponsorship is an emphasis on gaining and holding an audience. That which cannot do so does not get sponsored. Yet, I think we should be wary of those who claim that what the public does not choose to consume in the way of mass media reflects its autonomous choices. Other factors, such as lack of education, mindless work, and the impact of advertising may figure in such choices. In any case, what ads are wrapped around must be factored into any analysis of their likely effects.

We should also pay attention to the ways in which institutions distribute political power, and therefore the abilities of individuals to act on and realize their interests. In this regard, the existence of formally democratic political structures is often misleading. Notoriously, access to political power depends on wealth or economic power in various ways. Here again, the political and economic
institutions of advanced capitalism facilitate the dominance of corporations and their constituents.

IV

I come, at last, to the central argument of my paper. My strategy in what follows will be to amass considerations that make a plausible case for the claim that persuasive mass-advertising is detrimental to autonomy. If there is a case to be made, it is not one that can be made by showing how advertising falls into categories that are traditionally viewed as hostile to autonomy—coercion, deception, manipulation, and brainwashing. While advertising is sometimes deceptive and often manipulative, and in some ways akin to brainwashing, its overall character is not easily assimilable to any of these. I am inclined to think that the way to conceptualize its character is in terms of the notion of suppression. Advertising suppresses autonomy by discouraging the emergence of its constitutive skills, knowledge, attitudes, and motivations.

One general feature of mass-advertising is simply its pervasiveness. Individuals are inundated with ads, no matter where they go or what activities they engage in. David Braybrooke refers to the "aggregative and cumulative effects" of ads.\(^\text{19}\) The quantity of ads and their near inescapability are such that even the most diligent will be hard-pressed to avoid absorbing some of their implicit content. Many television shows and magazines feature or cater to the consumer lifestyle and this reinforces the implicit content.

The pervasiveness of ads is often coupled with an absence of views that challenge or reject their implicit content. In assessing the likely impact of mass-advertising, we must pay attention to societal measures to counter its effects. For instance, in the United States, there are few if any public service announcements urging individuals to be wary of ads, exposing the tactics of manipulation and seduction ads employ. Also, it is unlikely that such announcements would ever be repeated often enough, or have anything like the appeal of ads which promise persons sex, power, prestige, etc., if only they will buy the associated products. It seems clear that our society's educational and religious institutions, which might serve to counter ads, are ill-equipped to raise
and deal with complex issues such as the nature of the good life. These are issues which ads greatly oversimplify and offer a virtual unanimity of opinion about. In many cases, attempts to educate children (and adults) about ads are sporadic and unsophisticated. To the extent that this is so, it is unlikely that such education will be forceful enough to effectively counter the advertising barrage.

Stanley Benn writes that one of the unique features of rational suasion is that it invites response and criticism.\textsuperscript{20} It presupposes the possibility of a dialogue between or amongst the parties involved. Yet, we might wonder how far most individuals are from having a meaningful dialogue in their lives with advertising. What competing conceptions of the good life has advertising vanquished in an open, rational dialogue? If individuals lack appealing and coherent alternatives to what ads tell them about how to live, they cannot make critical, rational choices about such matters.

It is bad enough that advertising has the character of a loud, persistent bully. What is worse is that it often is not directed only at adults who might be capable of responding critically. The concern about the effects of advertising on the vulnerable, especially children, is not simply that many ads are so manipulative that they trick the vulnerable into wanting things they do not need or which are not good for them. It is also that the implicit content of ads gets absorbed by children, and habits are set up that carry forward into their adult lives. The ways in which they habitually perceive their lives and the social world, the alternatives they see as open to them, and the standards they use to judge themselves and others, are all shaped by advertising, perhaps without their ever being aware of it.\textsuperscript{21}

I now turn to an analysis of the implicit content of persuasive mass-advertising. This content is a function of both the methods of conveying messages in ads and the messages conveyed. What follows are some of the key facets of this implicit content. I do not claim that my analysis is exhaustive, only that it is thorough enough to support my contention that the character of advertising is such as to suppress autonomy.

I begin with that facet of the content and methods of ads that Jules Henry refers to as the encouragement of "woolly mindedness."\textsuperscript{22} Ads subtly encourage the propensity to accept emotional appeals,
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oversimplification, superficiality, and shoddy standards of proof for claims. Evidence and arguments of the most ridiculous sorts are offered in support of advertising claims. Information about products is presented selectively (i.e. bad or questionable features are ignored), the virtues of products are exaggerated, and deception and misinformation are commonplace. The meanings of words are routinely twisted so that they are either deceptive or wholly lost (e.g. consider the use of words like 'sale' or 'new and improved'). Also, ads encourage the belief that important information about our lives must be entertainingly purveyed and such that it can be passively absorbed.

All of these are what we might term "meta-messages." They are messages about how to deal with messages, or more precisely, about how to approach claims made by others. They are messages that tell individuals, among other things, that they cannot believe or trust what others say, that anything (or nothing!) can be proved, that evidence contrary to one's claims may be ignored, and that words can mean whatever anyone wants them to mean. They tell persons that success in communication is a matter of persuading others no matter how it is done. Such attitudes about thought and communication starkly oppose the habits and attitudes constitutive of critical competence: clarity, rigor, precision, patience, honesty, effort, etc. Henry remarks that advertising would never succeed in a world filled with logicians.23 Though we may not want such a world, we should be aware of how advertising promotes sophistry and attitudes supportive of it.

Complementing the meta-messages is the pervasive emphasis on ease and gratification. As Henry points out, austerity and self-restraint are anathema to advertisers.24 Mass production requires the existence of ready and willing consumers. Lifestyles contrary to consumption are either absent from ads (and from TV shows) or are ridiculed in them. Predominant messages in ads are "take it easy," "relax and enjoy yourself," and most especially "buy it now!" In moderation, there may be nothing objectionable about such messages. However, where not balanced by other messages, and so not made liable to critical examination, they encourage attitudes subversive to autonomy. In order to formulate, assess, and carry out life-plans of their own choosing, individuals must possess self-control and seriousness of
purpose. They must also have the capacity to resist temptations or momentary distractions.

More insidious, though, is a further implied message--that persons ought to let advertisers show them how to live the good life. What could be more inviting than a life that demands so little beyond ease and gratification (especially to children, who are less attuned to the values of self-control and delayed gratification)? Freedom is divorced from self-direction and equated with passivity and consumption. Control over one's life becomes simply the ability to satisfy one's consumer desires. Alternative conceptions of freedom are drowned out. Opposing lifestyles are saddled with a burden of justification. Those who resist the easy gratifications of the consumer marketplace are likely to be perceived as square, eccentric, boring, or life-denying. The scorn of others thus becomes a barrier to the critical examination of life.

While one of the main messages of advertising is to accept a lifestyle of ease and gratification, individuals who buy into that lifestyle cannot be allowed to relax if that means not buying products. Fear and insecurity are the motifs of advertising. There are always new products and services to be sold and individuals must be convinced that they will not experience true or complete gratification until they buy this or that product. As John Waide remarks, advertising cultivates and thrives on "sneer group pressure."25 Other persons are portrayed as constantly ready to judge negatively those who have not tried the newest product that promises to make their lives more appealing in some fashion. Advertising is fundamentally divisive in this regard. It encourages the view that social relationships are competitive, that persons are out to "top" one another rather than help and support one another. The internalization of this competitive model is likely to deprive individuals of the care and counsel of others, two things that vitally contribute to the sustained critical examination of their lives. Individuals need others to provide them feedback about their conduct and projects, as well as to present them with alternative beliefs, outlooks, and commitments.26

Numerous writers have commented on the confusion about values ads promote. Many ads tell individuals that if they will only buy X, they will acquire friendship, self-esteem, sex appeal, power, etc. Collectively, these ads tell individuals that they will be able to satisfy
some of their most important desires (ones Waide refers to as being for "non-market goods") through the purchase and use of consumer products. Where they have bought these products and still not found the relevant satisfactions, advertising has a ready answer: buy more or better products!

It is doubtful that there are areas of peoples' lives where clear thinking is of more importance. It is equally doubtful that consumer products can make a significant contribution to the satisfaction of the desires for such non-market goods. More to the point, at best ads can only distract individuals from clear thinking about such things as why they lack self-esteem, or why they feel powerless, or why their friendships or marriages are unsatisfactory. At worst, they can fill individuals' minds with pseudo-truths or pseudo-values bearing on issues of central significance in their lives. Numerous examples come to mind: how women are encouraged by ads to conceive of their self-worth in terms of unrealistic standards of physical beauty; how having fun is portrayed in ads for beer, wine, and alcohol; ideas about nutrition courtesy of the junk food industry; how racial disharmony, homosexuality, and poverty are missing from the social world of ads; and so on.

Finally, in light of my earlier claim that autonomous individuals will be disposed to critically scrutinize the institutions they live under, it is important to point out how the portrayal of consumption as the good life serves a political function. This portrayal provides individuals with standards and expectations against which to judge not only their own lives, but the institutions that shape and mold their lives. Consumption is presented as the reward for "making it," and as a way of ameliorating, if not curing, boredom, powerlessness, lack of self-esteem, etc. Political and economic institutions then come to be measured by the extent to which they provide individuals access to consumer goods. Of course, there is no guarantee that, judged against this criterion, a society's political and economic institutions will fare well. In this way, even mass-advertising may provide individuals with a basis for criticizing their institutions.

However, the basis is a very limited one. Individuals may only be concerned with whether they might get more or less consumer goods if institutions were organized differently (or run by members of a
different political party). Other, competing criteria against which to judge institutions are likely to have a hard time getting a hearing in societies dominated by mass-advertising. In this way, advertising serves as a force that legitimizes the political and economic status quo. It deadens individuals to a more extensive critical scrutiny of the institutions they live under. The ways in which their political and economic institutions distribute the social conditions of autonomy, and therefore allow the economic interests of corporations to dominate their lives, are rarely considered or seriously discussed.

One of the supposed virtues of advanced capitalist societies where mass-advertising is ubiquitous is that they afford individuals a wide range of choices. Within the ambit of the consumer lifestyle, that may be so. But, what about some of the more basic choices individuals have about how to live their lives or about how to organize their political and economic affairs? Are these choices many individuals in such societies realize they have, let alone can conceive of an array of alternatives about? My contention is that many in such societies are in no position to make critically competent choices about these more basic issues and that advertising significantly contributes to their inability to do so.

V

It is not enough for defenders of advertising to respond to the preceding analysis by pointing out that some individuals seem to resist absorbing much of its implicit content. No doubt this is true. It is also true that many interactions of a more mundane sort between and amongst individuals fall short of being fully autonomous ones. The use of emotional appeals is widespread, as are other forms of manipulation. There are many insecure or servile individuals who are influenced by others in ways that likely fail the tests of critical competence. Few would suggest that societies be judged harshly for allowing such interactions to go on. Yet, it might be argued, why should we think societies ought to treat persuasive mass-advertising any differently? Why not, instead, think it reasonable to let individuals watch out for themselves in the face of mass-advertising? After all, some seem to.
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This is a formidable objection, but it fails to take account of the differences between individuals’ encounters with advertising and their encounters with other individuals. The latter typically have three features that the former lack. First, encounters with other individuals are often either voluntarily sought out or at least voluntarily maintained. Yet, advertising is not easily avoided. It begins to work its influence on individuals when they are young and it never lets up. It is omni-present. Second, even where individual encounters with other individuals are not fully voluntary (e.g. familial or work relationships), they typically serve some important value or function in individuals’ lives. This is less obviously true with respect to persuasive mass-advertising. Third, encounters with other individuals, if found unsatisfactory, can be altered by the participants. Individuals can ask, or insist, that others not deceive or manipulate them. Sometimes this works. With advertising, individuals can, at best, try to shut it out or be wary of it. It is not an agent whose “conduct” can be altered by direct appeals.

Also, the fact that some individuals manage to resist the effects of persuasive mass-advertising might be explained by their having greater access to the other social conditions of autonomy (e.g. education). Surely that does not show that a society need do nothing about an institution in its midst that arguably plays a very significant role in suppressing the autonomy of what is perhaps a very large majority of its members. As Tom Beauchamp notes, a source of influence need not be completely controlling in order to be an object of concern.28

Defenders of advertising might at this point argue that the actions of corporations are protected by the moral right of free speech. Joseph Desjardins and John McCall maintain, however, that we should distinguish commercial speech from moral, religious, and political speech. They argue that some types of speech are more valuable to human life than others. Moral, religious, and political speech “contribute to the pursuit of meaning and value in human existence,” while commercial speech “in offering an item for sale appears a rather mundane concern.”29 The latter only encourages persons to deliberate about various and competing consumer choices.
Desjardins and McCall are mostly concerned about providing a rationale for governmental efforts to regulate deceptive commercial speech. Their argument relies on a conception of human autonomy similar to my own. Still, it seems to me that there exists a simpler and more straightforward justification for attempts to regulate deceptive commercial speech, one that appeals to the notion of the sorts of voluntary informed exchanges which are supposed to be the backbone of free enterprise economic systems. Deceptive commercial speech vitiates the informedness of such exchanges and it is often possible to prove ads deceptive.

Additionally, Desjardins and McCall fail to distinguish between the explicit and implicit content of persuasive mass-advertising. The latter, as we have seen, is rich in moral and political content. Thus, by their argument, if we should reject restrictions on political, religious, and moral speech, we should equally reject the curtailment of persuasive mass-advertising. Nevertheless, I think that most of the traditional arguments for free speech will not serve defenders of persuasive advertising. Frederick Schauer develops and assesses several of these arguments. I will concentrate on three central ones.

First, there is what Schauer calls the "argument from truth." This argument alleges that there is a causal link between freedom of speech and the discovery of truth. Schauer suggests we modify this argument to emphasize the elimination of error so as to avoid the complications that attend the notion of "objective truth." The modified argument suggests that allowing the expression of contrary views is the only rational way of recognizing human fallibility, thus making possible the rejection or modification of erroneous views. It holds that we can increase the level of rational confidence in our views by comparing them to other views and seeing whether ours survive all currently available attacks. The suppression of speech, as John Stuart Mill noted, is inconsistent with a recognition of human fallibility.

A second argument is what Schauer refers to as the "argument from democracy." It is an argument that presupposes the acceptance of democratic principles for the organization of the state. It then consists of two parts:
(1) in order for the people as sovereign electorate to vote intelligently, all relevant information must be available to them; and

(2) as political leaders are to serve their citizens' wishes, the latter must be able to communicate their wishes on all matters to the government.

In short, since democracy implies that government is the servant of the people, the people must retain the right to reject and criticize their government. Yet, this requires no prior restrictions by the government on information available to the citizens.

A third argument has been developed by Thomas Scanlon, and is referred to by Schauer as the "argument from autonomy." This argument claims that the province of thought and decision-making is morally beyond the reach of the state's powers. The state is alleged to have no ultimate authority to decide matters of religious, moral, political, or scientific doctrine. Autonomous persons cannot accept, without independent consideration, the judgment of others as to what they should believe or do, especially on these matters. Thus, it is held that individuals must be free from governmental intrusion into the process of choice.

It is important to note, in general, that all three of these arguments presuppose that it is government suppression of speech that threatens individual thought-processes and choices. Historically, this may have been true, but the development of persuasive mass-advertising poses a different sort of threat. Schauer repeatedly claims that the province of individual thought and decision-making is inherently (as a causal matter) beyond the control of the state. He claims that the area of individual conscience is "under the exclusive control of the individual" because of the "internal" nature of thought. While this may only underestimate the power of the state to influence thoughts and feelings, it surely ignores the possibility that persuasive mass-advertising significantly influences these in the ways detailed earlier.

With regard to the argument from truth, it is not fair to portray advertising as simply offering "truths" for consideration that compete
against other beliefs in the marketplace of ideas. Whatever "truths" it offers (and I suspect they are small ones) threaten to drown out all other claims, or to render them tedious or irrelevant by comparison. Worse, as we have seen, its implicit content encourages beliefs and attitudes about thought and decision-making that are hostile to those necessary to sort through claims and weed out the false or misleading ones.

Similar remarks hold for the argument from democracy. Especially relevant here is the political content of persuasive mass-advertising, with its emphasis on consumption-as-the-good-life as the standard against which to measure political and economic systems. More insidious than its insistence on this essentially status quo-preserving standard is its implicit denial of the value of political debate and activity. Consumption is where individuals are told they will find satisfaction, and a host of pseudo-issues about such a life are offered as the central focus for individuals' care and concern.

Finally, if advertising is inimical to autonomy in the ways I have claimed throughout this paper, it is obvious that the argument from autonomy cannot be invoked on its behalf. Those who defend persuasive mass-advertising on the basis of its contribution to individual choice would seem to have an extremely limited notion of the range of choices that individuals have about their lives.

Virginia Held makes the important point that in societies like the United States, it is no longer adequate to construe the right to free expression simply as a right not to be interfered with:

But in a contemporary context this leaves those with economic resources free to express themselves through the media: they can buy time on TV or own a station, they can buy up or start a newspaper, and so on. At the same time, those without economic resources can barely be heard.35

Held's concern is with a society's taking steps to enable its members to freely express themselves. Though she does not directly address the issue of persuasive mass-advertising, it is likely that she would view the nearly unchecked power of corporations to express their interests through the media with alarm.
What to do about persuasive mass-advertising is, I think, a daunting problem. Throughout my analysis, I have insisted that we consider the effects of advertising in conjunction with the effects of other social conditions that might impact on autonomy. The question we must ask ourselves, then, is what changes in our political and economic institutions are necessary in order to provide all persons with the social conditions of autonomy. Since advanced capitalist countries like the United States are now plagued in various ways by the dominance of corporate interests, we might hope that enhancing the social conditions of autonomy for all persons will result in the cultivation, expression, and realization of more varied (and autonomous) interests.

While some will think that the only way to accomplish this result is to abandon capitalism altogether, I want to consider changes that are somewhat more modest. First, in order to modify the organization of work so as to provide a venue for the realization of worker autonomy, we might adopt the sorts of worker participation mechanisms institutionalized in countries like West Germany and Sweden. These mechanisms guarantee workers participation in the economic decisions that vitally affect their lives. Second, we would need to guarantee to all individuals the level and quality of education necessary for them to develop the skills, dispositions, and knowledge constitutive of dispositional autonomy. Third, we would need to take steps to lessen if not eliminate the influence of wealth and economic power over the decisions of democratically elected political officials. This might include such things as the development of a public financing scheme for all political campaigns and the institutionalization of mechanisms to guarantee the independence of government officials from those they regulate or purchase products and services from. Fourth, steps must be taken to divorce the media from their almost exclusive reliance on commercial financial support and to provide individuals with increased access to the means of expression. Virginia Held offers a number of valuable proposals about how to effect these ends. These include having more public financing of the media and having commercial sponsors buy nonspecific time on the airwaves. Both measures would reduce the pressure to produce programming that is successful
according to narrow commercial criteria. The hope is that this will lead to greater experimentation in the media, and thus to the creation of a more diverse cultural life.

Obviously, the preceding changes would need to be considered at greater length. But, let me instead turn to advertising and its role in the suppression of autonomy. As an aspect of the dominance of corporate interests in advanced capitalist societies, it is important to neither over-estimate nor under-estimate its significance. On the one hand, without complementary changes of the sort just discussed, attempts to regulate or restrict advertising seem likely to have only minimal impact on the development and maintenance of autonomy. At most, such regulation or restriction would eliminate one barrier to autonomy. On the other hand, it may be argued that the salutary effects of such complementary changes will be undermined if no steps are taken to regulate or restrict persuasive mass-advertising. Workers might remain imbued with the mentality promulgated in ads and so unwittingly express views conducive to corporate interests. Attempts to cultivate a more educated populace would still be opposed by the barrage of ads with its implicit content.

Unfortunately, it is hard to come up with a feasible approach to the regulation or restriction of advertising. Since the thrust of my argument has been against persuasive advertising, it might be suggested that we attempt to legislate a distinction between it and informational advertising. The idea would then be to restrict if not eliminate the former while permitting the latter. Perhaps simply providing information about the price, character, and availability of products and services poses little threat to autonomy and may even facilitate it.

One serious problem with this approach will be that of defining "persuasive." For instance, if individuals are shown using and enjoying a product, will that have to be considered an attempt at persuasion? Or, if a product is displayed in a pictorially pleasing manner, will that be considered persuasive? Also, assuming this difficulty can be overcome in a reasonable manner, won't the amount of regulation required necessitate the creation of a massive bureaucracy? It should be noted that corporations confronted with restrictions on persuasive advertising are likely to respond creatively in attempts to circumvent the rules.
An alternative approach would be to try to restrict the overall quantity of advertising without regard to a distinction between informational and persuasive types. It might be feasible to restrict the number of ads on TV to a certain number per hour, but can we do something similar with magazines, radio, and newspapers? Even if we had the will to do so, at least two serious problems remain:

1. a mere reduction in the quantity of ads (persuasive and otherwise) may not greatly lessen their impact in terms of selling the consumer lifestyle--especially in the absence of steps to counter this implicit content;

2. the difficulties in formulating and enforcing such restrictions would be formidable.

On the latter point, think about the enormous number of venues for advertising (currently existing as well as those that might soon be available) that we would have to regulate.

It is not easy to avoid drawing a pessimistic conclusion from the preceding remarks. Perhaps those more inventive than I can come up with proposals to restrict persuasive advertising that evade these problems and others like them. What cannot be evaded is the political reality that any proposed restrictions will be steadfastly, and I suspect effectively, resisted by corporations and advertisers. On this score, the only hope may lie with the sorts of institutional changes sketched earlier. It is possible that a better educated populace with more democratic control over its corporations can take the necessary steps to curtail the suppression of autonomy effected by current mass-advertising.

Notes


2. I will limit my claims to countries with schemes of political and economic organization like those in the United States. Obviously, my claims would have to be weakened or modified if they were to be made applicable to countries with significantly different institutions.


5. Tom Beauchamp distinguishes between the responses of individuals to advertising and the intentions of those who create the advertising. My remarks in what follows concern the responses of individuals. I do not wish to suggest that corporations consciously intend all of the effects I delineate. See Beauchamp, "Manipulative Advertising," p. 7.


8. Ibid., p. 414.


13. Young distinguishes between internal constraints on autonomy (e.g. lack of self-control) and external constraints (e.g. lack of liberty). See his *Personal Autonomy*, p. 35.


17. Of course, the lack of avenues for the exercise of autonomy will often result in atrophy of the abilities and motivations that are its constituents.

18. For more on advertising and program content, s Virginia Held, "Advertising and Program Content," *Business and Professional Ethics Journal* 3 (Spring/Summer 1984): 61-76. See also the accompanying commentaries by Clifford Christians and Norman Bowie.


23. Ibid., p. 48.

24. Ibid., p. 75.


26. Also, if most persons can be induced to fear the judgment of others and adopt the consumer lifestyle, the result will be a remarkably homogenous collection of otherwise isolated individuals. Advertising superficially promotes individuality by telling persons they can only truly
find themselves with this or that product. Of course, it tells every individual the same thing. Ethnic or individual diversity is worn away.


30. Also, Burton Leiser argues that the United States Supreme Court has seen fit to extend constitutional protection to commercial speech. See 1-2 "Professional Advertising: Price Fixing and Professional Dignity versus the Public's Right to a Free Market," Business and Professional Ethics Journal 3 (Spring/Summer 1984): 93-107.

31. Frederick Schauer, Free Speech: A Philosophical Inquiry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Schauer notes problems with each of these arguments that I will ignore here.
32. Ibid., pp. 24-25.
34. Schauer, Freedom of Speech, p. 68. See also p. 53.

37. See her "Advertising and Program Content," pp. 66-74. Also, see Rights and Goods, Chapter 12.