

Ethics and Advertising

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Introduction

Human beings are world creators. One of the worlds that human beings have created is the world of money, commodities, trade, exchange. To me, it's a world full of beauty and ugliness in equal proportions, messy, flashy, exotic, scary. No-one who has made their home in this world would see this the way an outsider -- and being a philosopher makes me by definition an outsider -- can see this.

I regard the business arena -- the world of buyers and sellers, bosses and workers, producers and consumers, the world of *money* -- as nothing less than an ontological category, a way of Being. It is not accidental to who we are. It defines the way we relate to each other and to the world around us. But it is not the only way of Being. There are other ways, and the most fundamental of these is ethics.

Ethics, as understood here, is defined by the I-thou relationship:

When I engage another person in moral dialogue, there are not two parallel processes of practical deliberation going on, his and mine, but only one. (Contrast this with the case of a 'dialogue' between politicians or traders, where each is privately deliberating how to gain the upper hand.) In opening myself up and addressing the other as a thou I am already committed to the practical consequences of agreement, of doing the action which, by the combined light of his valuational perspective and mine is seen as the thing to be done.

Geoffrey Klempner 'The Ethics of Dialogue' (1998) [1]

As a professional metaphysician, I am fascinated by the idea that human beings can belong to more than one world, or move between worlds. Anthropologists who 'go native' in order to study their subjects more closely have an inkling of what I am talking about. We live in the marketplace and also outside it. We can play the various roles assigned to us in the game, or we can stand outside our economic personae and observe ourselves from an ethical point of view. The only difference between us and the anthropologist is that, most of the time, we don't realize that we are doing this.

In my recent article, 'The Business Arena', I put forward three propositions, as a 'prolegomenon to a philosophy for business':

Business and commerce take place in a frame, an arena defined by unwritten rules.

Within the business arena, *normal* ethics is suspended.

The aim of a philosophy for business is to understand the rules that define the business arena, in other words, to grasp from an ethical perspective *how business is possible*.

Geoffrey Klempner 'The Business Arena' (2004) [2]

To claim that in the business world 'normal ethics is suspended' is not to deny the validity of rules of conduct, such as fairness and honesty. Without these universal rules, these values, the game could not be played. However, these obligations fall far short of the demands of ethics, as I have defined it here.

Advertising: for good or evil?

But how fair is the business game, really? On the face of it, producers and consumers have a very different view. The marketplace is not a level playing field, and the chief culprit is advertising.

Here are three charges levelled against advertisers:

They sell us dreams, entice us into confusing dreams with reality.

They pander to our desires for things that are bad for us.

They manipulate us into wanting things we don't really need.

All this can be summed up in the popular sentiment that advertisers cynically use a world of fantasy and illusion in an attempt to control us.

Most people who express this sentiment, however, would add that *the attempt doesn't succeed*. We see through the ruse. (Or, at least, it is always other people who seem to have the wool pulled over their eyes, never ourselves.) That's a claim to take with a big pinch of salt.

In recent times advertising has become increasingly regulated by codes of practice. These codes may be adequate to curb the worst excesses of advertising. It is much harder nowadays for advertisements to get away with telling outright lies. But they still fall far short of answering these three indictments.

That suggests the following question: suppose that you were an advertiser who wanted to be truly *ethical* and not just *legal*. What would you have to do? Let's look at each of the indictments in turn.

Selling dreams

Let me start with a personal example. What initially attracted me to philosophy was the life of Socrates. In the same way that few, if any Christians could live the way Christ lived, so few if any philosophy students are capable of emulating the life of Socrates. I knew this. *I was sold the dream of philosophy*. And I am glad for that. I don't feel I was cheated. Plato, the greatest of all salesmen for philosophy, seduced me -- along with countless thousands of students before and since -- with his brilliant dialogues depicting the life of his mentor.

Gilbert Ryle in his book *Plato's Progress* (1966) [3] argues that the dialogues were performed live. You can see audiences of Plato's dialogue *Phaedo* sobbing, or swooning as Socrates calmly drinks the hemlock, with words of reassurance for his gathered friends, facing death with courage and dignity.

The dream is not extraneous to the product. It is part of the complete package. The treasure that is the collected works of Plato has added to the value of philosophy, not just through novel arguments or its addition to the storehouse of human knowledge but through the sheer seductive power of Plato's storytelling. Living and breathing the atmosphere of the dialogues we become more, we become better, we are enhanced.

But is that also true out there in the commercial marketplace, where humans barter their love of material goods, succumb to the dreams that advertisers sell? It is very tempting to say no. It is so easy to take the moralistic high ground. Yet, as I want to argue, that would be a serious error.

Anyone who is serious about deconstructing the dream world of advertising should start by considering the meaning of *fashion* and *style*, not as illusions that human beings fall helplessly victim to, but as part of the scaffolding of human culture. A world without fashion or style would be obnoxious, alien, brutal -- in the true sense of being fit only for brutes.

Think of the clothes one wears as a kind of advertising. To say that the appearance that clothes create is a mere illusion is to class a well cut or well designed suit with cod pieces and false breasts.

A philosopher might object that my example of the 'dream of philosophy' is not fair. Philosophy is an ideal. Advertisers try to sell us material *things*. The two could not be more different. I totally disagree.

Philosophers, so quick to analyse, look at an object as a mere bearer of physical properties, or as a tool with a function, or, possibly, one of those rare objects that attains the status of a 'work of art', a bearer of sheer disinterested aesthetic value. None of these ways of analysing an object explain *why we love things*. All parents know how children lust for toys. We grow up. We put away childish things. We do not lose that lust, we merely look for different things to attach ourselves to, to project our emotions onto. This is normal, not pathological behaviour.

Object-love is one of the most profound facts about our *human* relation to the world. That is something Freud saw.

These are passing observations (as Wittgenstein would say) concerning the 'natural history of mankind'. It ought to be seen as surprising, worthy of note, in the same way as we ought to be surprised at the capacity of the human imagination to be captured by storytelling, by fiction. Maybe Martians are not so lucky. Pity them.

In the commercial world, there are plenty of examples of manufacturers who believe passionately in their product. Apple Macintosh is the best example I can think of. Macs are good, not only because they function well, but because they are beautiful, stylish, designed with loving attention to detail (most of the time, anyway -- there have been occasional, humorous exceptions when in the face of competition cost-cutting was allowed to take precedence over quality).

I am happy to buy into a dream I can believe in. But not one that has been cynically created with the sole aim of making me spend my money.

So is this true? -- 'As an advertiser, it's OK to sell a dream if you believe in it too.' When a consumer buys an Apple Mac, the value of the product is not just its beauty and functionality, but the love that has been lavished on it. The image that the advertisers have created is not only true, but also enhances the pleasure of using the product.

But we're on risky ground here. Consider the religious cults who send their followers on the streets seeking converts. They believe in the dream that they are selling too. Even if the dream selling is not done cynically, it all-too easily becomes an attempt to brainwash, to control.

A campaign which Apple ran a couple of years ago featured 'real people' explaining why they switched to Macs and recounting the misery of badly designed, unreliable PCs. The campaign backfired because PC users found it offensive, while Mac users resented being patronised. They were rudely awakened from the dream.

Pandering

We tell a child, 'You'll feel sick if you eat that second chocolate bar.' Yet advertisers are only too willing to sell us as many chocolate bars as we can eat -- or, whatever our particular vice may be.

In today's climate, as a would-be ethical advertiser, there's no way you could accept a cigarette advertising account. With the current problem of binge drinking in the UK amongst young people, one would have to be very careful in accepting a drinks account. I have yet to see a drinks advert whose message was, 'Enjoy our beer -- but don't get drunk!'

Advertisements can set out with the laudable aim of educating people. 'Eat our cereal because it's low in fat and high in fibre'. This is good advice, offered, however, not in a spirit of social conscience but as part of the sales pitch. If consumers were less sensitive to such appeals to improve their health and life style, then advertisers would not waste time and money making them.

Ever-resourceful advertisers have even found ways to openly admit that their product is bad for you. A recent advert for meat pies portrays impressively overweight men -- a construction worker, a welder, a tyre fitter, a fireman -- as everyday 'heroes'. A potentially damaging admission is turned round into something positive with the clever use of humour. A *real man* likes his beer and pies.

This illustrates the important point that advertisements can be very *knowing* -- showing an awareness of the ethical issues which marketing that particular product raises, while at the same time deftly deflecting criticism. We are not offended because we get the point, we smile at the irony -- and we buy the product.

Manipulating

Suppose you are a deodorant manufacturer who has conceived the idea of an ethical advertising campaign. It goes without saying that the deodorant has got to work effectively, as claimed. It should not contain chemicals which are bad for your health (when the product is used according to instructions). This is more or less where we are now, in relation to current rules on advertising.

But what does it mean for a deodorant to be effective? On a hot day, you will be more confident in the company of other people, because they will not be able to detect your body odour. Critics of deodorant advertising have pointed out, however, that although it is true that the deodorant has the power to prevent odour, and this is a ground for extra confidence, the reason why it is a ground for confidence is at least partly due to a belief or attitude which has itself been inculcated by advertising.

'Body odour' is one of the classic phrases invented by advertisers, embodying the concept that any natural human smell is, or ought to be regarded as offensive. It is hard to question a belief when it has become part of language itself. If you have B.O. that is something bad, by definition. B.O. is unpleasant and offensive, because being offensive is part of its concept. But that begs the question whether all bodily odours are unpleasant, or only some.

So let's take our imaginary scenario from here:

The ethical deodorant marketing team take the brave decision to question this assumption. The design and advertising of the product will be based around the idea that there are pleasant as well as unpleasant bodily odours. The chemists are asked to come up with a product which gets rid of the unpleasant odours while not masking the pleasant ones. After extensive research and testing, the product is launched.

The campaign is a great success. The concept captures the public imagination, better than anyone had dared hope.

However, a new trend emerges from the on-going market research. A significant proportion of the people questioned express a willingness to try a product which enhances their 'naturally pleasant' bodily smell. The chemists identify a complex blend of chemicals, some of which are capable of synthesis in a laboratory. The ethical marketing team now face a difficult dilemma.

How can it be wrong to market the chemically enhanced product, if this was what people want? The argument for not doing so is that it was the success of the first campaign that created the demand for an added 'natural bodily smell', where none had existed before. This is the very thing that the ethical advertising team had sought to avoid! Against competitors who show no such scruples, however, the ethical advertisers face a losing battle in the marketplace.

Conclusion

I raised the question whether it is possible to be an *ethical* advertiser -- in the true sense of 'ethical', and not merely in the minimalist, legal sense of respecting the rules that govern play in the business arena, such as honesty and fairness.

I have argued that reflection on what ethics demands makes the hurdles impossibly high. The stark truth is that manufacturers and advertisers are as much controlled by the fickle consumer as in control. Rules can be set down concerning what is factually truthful, decent and fair. It is not the advertiser's job to make people better than they are, or want better things than they want. That is the work for politicians and preachers, or, possibly, philosophers.

A defence of advertising against unjustified demands is bound to be less spectacular than an attack. However, don't forget the point of all this. My aim is to defend ethics against pressures that would weaken or dilute its requirements in order to fit in with a so-called 'business ethic'. Ultimately, we are all members of the moral world, whatever games we choose to play, whatever other worlds we may inhabit. No-one escapes ethics.

References

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