Praise for The Ethics of Influence

“In this era of intransigence and intolerance, The Ethics of Influence is a vitally needed book. It embraces what all of us—left, right, and center—mutually want: a balance between the goals of welfare, autonomy, dignity, and self-government. What’s more, it is a hoot to read. Roll Over Mill and Marx; tell Hayek and Gramsci the news.”

-George A. Akerlof
Nobel Laureate in Economics, 2001

“As more governments and businesses turn to ‘nudging,’ pioneer Sunstein turns his brilliant mind to building an ethical framework for these powerful approaches. New findings on public attitudes to nudges – showing surprisingly high levels of support even among traditionally skeptical Americans – are combined with Sunstein’s trademark clarity of thought to offer a timely framework that will be influential across the world.”

-David Halpern
CEO, Behavioural Insights Team, and author, Inside the Nudge Unit

“In a book full of convincing detail but free of dogmatism, Sunstein walks us through the case for and against nudges. Nudges are, in some circumstances, the best tool government has at its disposal – cheaper than financial incentives, more freedom-preserving than mandates, and more effective than information. Our government is sometimes ethically required to nudge us. Nonetheless, nudges raise legitimate ethical concerns, foremost among them that they can be manipulative. Sunstein ultimately makes a powerful argument for the widespread use of nudges by government, but without shortchanging the ethical arguments on both sides.”

-Anne Barnhill
Assistant Professor of Medical Ethics and Health Policy
University of Pennsylvania
“One need not agree with all of Cass Sunstein’s arguments about nudging to admire him for doing more than anyone to champion the importance of behavioral science for public policymaking. Owing to him, it is an increasingly recognized ethical imperative to measure government actions not only against societal values but also against evidence.”

-Ralph Hertwig
Director, Center for Adaptive Rationality, Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Germany

“Cass Sunstein knows more than anyone about nudging, and in this very insightful book he brings his acute reasoning to understanding the ethics behind choice architecture. Here he considers sources from Mill to Hayek to Ostrom, and argues that choice architecture is unavoidable and in many cases that it’s the right thing to do. Just as importantly, he talks about when nudging is wrong and when it is manipulative. All in all, it is an essential book for anyone interested in the ethics of behavioral intervention, either by governments or firms.”

-Eric J. Johnson
Norman Eig Professor of Business, Columbia University

“Behavioural regulation has spread to governments worldwide. This brilliant book tackles the many myths that have evolved around the use of behavioural economics in politics. Cass Sunstein explains in clear words how (and why) the core values of an Ethical State – welfare, autonomy, dignity, and self-government – are indeed best served by governments that carefully base their policies on an empirical foundation and use behavioural insights as additional effective policy tools.”

-Professor Lucia A. Reisch
Behavioural Economist, Copenhagen Business School

“We typically consider ourselves rational actors, whose dignity derives from our autonomy. In fact, our behavior is easily shaped by other actors and by external factors, often outside our awareness and control. When government intervenes to influence our behaviors, often to improve our lives, we recoil. But if government remains uninvolved while other interests are free to shape our world, how autonomous are we then? Sunstein confronts our naïveté with a penetrating discussion about how to balance government influence against personal dignity, manipulation against autonomy, and behavioral facts against political ideals. This book is an engrossing read.”

-Eldar Shafir
William Stuart Tod Professor of Psychology & Public Affairs, Princeton University, Co-author of Scarcity
In recent years, “nudge units,” or “behavioral insights teams,” have been created in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and other nations. All over the world, public officials are using the behavioral sciences to protect the environment, promote employment and economic growth, reduce poverty, and increase national security. In this book, Cass R. Sunstein, the eminent legal scholar and best-selling coauthor of Nudge, breaks new ground with a deep yet highly readable investigation into the ethical issues surrounding nudges, choice architecture, and mandates, addressing such issues as welfare, autonomy, self-government, dignity, manipulation, and the constraints and responsibilities of an ethical state. Complementing the ethical discussion, The Ethics of Influence: Government in the Age of Behavioral Science contains a wealth of new data on people’s attitudes toward a broad range of nudges, choice architecture, and mandates.

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THE ETHICS OF INFLUENCE

Government in the Age of Behavioral Science

CASS R. SUNSTEIN

Harvard University
For my students
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Acknowledgments

This book has been on my mind for many years, but it ultimately emerged from an essay on the ethics of choice architecture and nudging, delivered at a conference on that topic at Humboldt University in Berlin in January 2015. I am most grateful to participants in the conference for many valuable thoughts and suggestions. For obvious historical reasons, many Germans are keenly aware of the risks that can come from government influence (and manipulation); the discussion in Berlin was particularly valuable for that reason. For similar reasons, I am grateful to participants in a spirited colloquium at the Max Planck Institute in June 2015, and particularly to my hosts, Ralph Hertwig and Gerd Gigerenzer.

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