

Manipulation

New technologies are offering companies, politicians, and others unprecedented opportunity to manipulate us. Sometimes we are given the illusion of power – of freedom – through choice, yet the game is rigged, pushing us in specific directions that lead to less wealth, worse health, and weaker democracy. In *Manipulation*, nudge theory pioneer and New York Times bestselling author, Cass Sunstein, offers a new definition of manipulation for the digital age; explains why manipulation is wrong; and shows what we can do about it. He reveals how manipulation compromises freedom and personal agency, while threatening to reduce our wellbeing. He explains the difference between manipulation and unobjectionable forms of influence, including “nudges.” And he lifts the lid on manipulation by artificial intelligence, algorithms, and generative AI, as well as threats posed by deepfakes, social media, and “dark patterns,” which can trick people into giving up time and money. Drawing on decades of groundbreaking research in behavioral science, this landmark book outlines steps we can take to counteract manipulation in our daily lives and offers guidance to protect consumers, investors, and workers.

Cass R. Sunstein is the Robert Walmsley University Professor at Harvard. The most cited law professor in the world, he is the founder and director of the Program on Behavioral Economics and Public Policy at Harvard Law School. In 2018, he received the Holberg Prize from the government of Norway, sometimes described as the equivalent of the Nobel Prize for law and the humanities. During the Obama Administration, he served as Administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. He is author of hundreds of articles and dozens of books, including several *New York Times* bestsellers.

Manipulation

What It Is, Why It's Bad, What To Do
About It

Cass R. Sunstein



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To Sendhil Mullainathan

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PREFACE

You need this book.

You might believe that you understand people, but your knowledge barely scratches the surface. True mastery lies in the art of manipulation, a practice as old as humanity itself.

This book is your guide into that forbidden realm, where the rules are rewritten and the stakes are life itself. It will reveal the techniques, the psychology, and the strategies used by the world's most influential figures.

You will learn not just to recognize manipulation but to wield it with precision.

As you turn these pages, let the power of this knowledge sink in. Imagine how your life could change with the ability to influence anyone, anywhere, at any time.

This is more than a book; it is a key to unlocking potential you never knew existed. But be warned – this journey will transform you. Once you embrace these secrets, there is no turning back.

Are you ready to wield the power that has shaped empires and commanded legions? The choice is yours, but remember: with great power comes great responsibility. Welcome to the world of manipulation.

A confession: I didn't write the italicized paragraphs. I asked ChatGPT to write a manipulative start to a book on manipulation, and there we are.¹ I kind of hate those paragraphs, but they're not bad. They promise to disclose secrets. They're an attempted

¹ OpenAI, Response to this set of prompts, ChatGPT (June, 2024), <https://chatgpt.com/> (enter query into "Message ChatGPT" box). "Write a manipulative start to a book on manipulation"; "Make it nonfiction"; "Make it more manipulative."

seduction. They play on the reader's emotions. ("This is more than a book; it is a key to unlocking potential you never knew existed.")

Here is a better-known passage.² You know it, don't you?

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden;

but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'"

But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

The serpent was a manipulator. He was a seducer. He knew a lot about human psychology. He knew how to play on the emotions of his targets: "your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God." (Was he an expert on optimistic bias? On behavioral science? Obviously.) Actually ChatGPT used some of the same techniques as the serpent. It offered to disclose hidden secrets, and to open readers' eyes.

We live in an era in which manipulation is pervasive, especially online. A central purpose of manipulation is to attract attention. If a social media company can grab your attention, it might be able to charge advertisers. If an advertiser can grab your attention, it might be able to get your money. Politicians want your money and

² Genesis 3:1–7.

your vote, and they might be able to manipulate you into doing what they want.

But the ability to manipulate people goes well beyond grabbing attention. Manipulators, often aided by (or consisting of) artificial intelligence, can play on your desires, your hopes, your fears, and your weaknesses. If they know a few things about you, they might know a lot of things about you. They might be able to convince you to think what they want you to think. They might be able to convince you to act as they want you to act. They want your money, and they want your time.

Manipulation is a serious threat to well-functioning markets, which depend on informed choices. Manipulation is also a serious threat to democracy. Perhaps above all, it compromises freedom. It is a threat to our capacity to exercise agency.

There is a great deal of work on coercion and almost as much on lying and deception. Comparatively speaking, manipulation is a neglected topic. One reason may be that the term is hard to define. Another may be its pervasiveness and inevitability. If you turn on a television or go online, you will probably find an effort at manipulation. If one of your family members does not try to manipulate you within the next month, you have an unusual family. Because a clear definition is hard to come by, and because some forms of manipulation are inevitable or innocuous, the topic is unusually challenging. I will be trying to overcome the challenges here. While arguing against manipulation (mostly), I will also be pointing to tools of influence that might well be thought to be both manipulative and bad, but that are in fact neither. We should oppose many forms of manipulation, but we should also know what manipulation is not.

This book comes in three parts. Part I explores theoretical questions: What manipulation is, what is wrong with it, and what might be done about it. It devotes a great deal of attention to autonomy, dignity, and social welfare. It connects coercion, lying, deception, and manipulation (the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse?), and urges that they raise overlapping questions about freedom. As we shall see, manipulation is a protean concept; it has several faces. We can offer definitions that capture some of what manipulation is, but no definition captures all of what manipulation is. (I am going to fuss a lot over definitional matters; some readers

might want to skim Chapter 1 and get to Chapter 2 more quickly.) As we shall see, manipulation is (often) wrong because it invades people's autonomy and offends their dignity. We shall also see that manipulation is (often) wrong because it decreases people's welfare – that is, it makes their lives worse. Much of my own focus is on the effects of manipulation in taking people's time or money.

Part II turns to applications. First, it investigates deepfakes and manipulated media. Deepfakes are a pervasive form of manipulation and they can cause serious harm. Second, Part II explores sludge, often used to manipulate people – as, for example, through the imposition of frictions that make it hard for people to exit from a bad situation. The problem of sludge outruns the problem of manipulation, but sludge is a powerful way of manipulating consumers, investors, patients, students, and others. Third, Part II discusses *goods that people buy but wish did not exist*. People can be maneuvered into situations in which they purchase goods whose existence they dislike or even deplore. As we shall see, this problem raises a set of new questions about manipulation in the current era.

Part III explores the future, or at least some aspects of it. It devotes two chapters to ways of influencing people, or nudging them, that do not involve manipulation. I spend a good deal of space on that issue because the topic of nudging has been central to the work of many governments and private institutions, because it is a keen interest of my own, because there is a lot of confusion out there, and because it is important to get clear on the ethical issues, including the line between nudging and manipulation. Some people think that nudges are manipulative. They can be, but they need not be; I explore that issue in detail. Part III also investigates uses of artificial intelligence. My account here is optimistic. I emphasize the potential of artificial intelligence to help people to counteract an absence of information or behavioral biases. Still, I note that artificial intelligence can produce new and especially harmful forms of manipulation.

As we shall see, manipulation is often (not always) a kind of trickery; it treats people as tools or fools, and as objects rather than subjects. If we keep that point in mind, we will have a good sense of what manipulation is, and why it is wrong. As we shall see, it is wrong for many of the same reasons that coercion is wrong. It is not worse than coercion, but it is bad in a different way. It is more insidious. Manipulators do not treat people with respect. They make

it harder for people to make reasoned choices about how to live their lives.

Coercion, lies, deception, and manipulation have a great deal in common: They take things from people without their consent. Manipulation can be a form of theft.

With these points in mind, I shall be proposing a new right, suitable for the current era: A right not to be manipulated. We are going to spend a fair bit of time defining the scope of that right, and some of the discussion will get a bit fussy. Specification of the right is not a simple matter. There should be a *moral* right not to be manipulated. There should be a *legal* right too, but it needs to be defined and limited to the egregious cases, in which real harm is imposed. It is much harder to define a right not to be manipulated than to define a right not to be deceived (and I will have something to say about that as well).

As we shall see, the United States quietly recognized something like a right not to be manipulated on August 12, 2024: “Americans should not be subject to confusing, manipulative, or deceptive practices online.”³ Consider that a Declaration of Independence.

I am acutely aware that I will be swimming against a strong tide. In markets and in politics, individuals and institutions have unprecedented abilities to manipulate people. They also have a strong incentive to do so. Consider social media, which wants your attention, and which can figure out how to lead you down rabbit holes (involving conspiracies, or sports, or motor vehicles, or sex). Some of the most serious threats will undoubtedly seem pretty primitive, and pretty tame, in the near future. New technology, including artificial intelligence (AI), will produce unimaginably effective ways to manipulate people, though science fiction helps trigger the imagination, as we will see.

When I served in the federal government, I was shocked at the sheer number of lies and falsehoods that received public

³ See Biden-Harris Administration Launches New Effort to Crack Down on Everyday Headaches and Hassles That Waste Americans’ Time and Money (Aug. 12, 2024), www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/08/12/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-launches-new-effort-to-crack-down-on-everyday-headaches-and-hassles-that-waste-americans-time-and-money/.

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attention. It occurred to me: “Whatever might be thought will be said.” With respect to technology, it is only a slight exaggeration to say: “Whatever can be used will be used.” (The fact that it is an exaggeration is important; consider nuclear weapons.) Genies are rarely put back in their bottles.

Still: Consumers, investors, workers, and citizens of the world, unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains.