

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND REVERSE DISCRIMINATION

A Defense of Affirmative Action

Thomas Nagel

The term "affirmative action" has changed in meaning since it was first introduced. Originally it referred only to special efforts to ensure equal opportunity for members of groups that had been subject to discrimination. These efforts included public advertisement of positions to be filled, active recruitment of qualified applicants from the formerly excluded groups, and special training programs to help them meet the standards for admission or appointment. There was also close attention to procedures of appointment, and sometimes to the results, with a view to detecting continued discrimination, conscious or unconscious.

More recently the term has come to refer also to some degree of definite preference for members of these groups in determining access to positions from which they were formerly excluded. Such preference might be allowed to influence decisions only between candidates who are otherwise equally qualified, but usually it involves the selection of women or minority members over other candidates who are better qualified for the position.

Let me call the first sort of policy "weak affirmative action" and the second "strong affirmative action." It is important to distinguish them, because the distinction is sometimes blurred in practice. It is strong affirmative action—the policy of preference—that arouses controversy. Most people would agree that weak or precautionary affirmative action is a good thing, and worth its cost in time and energy.

But this does not imply that strong affirmative action is also justified.

I shall claim that in the present state of things it is justified, most clearly with respect to blacks. But I also believe that a defender of the practice must acknowledge that there are serious arguments against it, and that it is defensible only because the arguments for it have great weight. Moral opinion in this country is sharply divided over the issue because significant values are involved on both sides. My own view is that while strong affirmative action is intrinsically undesirable, it is a legitimate and perhaps indispensable method of pursuing a goal so important to the national welfare that it can be justified as a temporary, though not short-term, policy for both public and private institutions. In this respect it is like other policies that impose burdens on some for the public good.

THREE OBJECTIONS

I shall begin with the argument against. There are three objections to strong affirmative action: that it is inefficient; that it is unfair; and that it damages self-esteem.

The degree of inefficiency depends on how strong a role racial or sexual preference plays in the process of selection. Among candidates meeting the basic qualifications for a position, those better qualified will on the average

¹ Testimony before the Subcommittee on the Constitution of the Senate Judiciary Committee, June 18, 1981. Reprinted with permission of Professor Nagel.

8. F. A. von Hayek, "The Non Sequitur of the 'Dependence Effect'", *Southern Economic Journal* (1961); reprinted in Beauchamp and Bowie (eds.) op. cit., pp. 508-512.
9. Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of Person", *Journal of Philosophy* LXVIII (1971), 5-20.
10. Robert L. Arrington, "Practical Reason, Responsibility and the Psychopath", *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 9 (1979), 71-89.
11. Robert L. Arrington, "Forms and Limits of Control", delivered at the annual meeting of the Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology, Birmingham, Alabama, 1980.

Is Self-Identity Image Advertising Ethical?

John Douglas Bishop

For decades, criticisms of advertising have been legion. Advertising has been criticized both for its impact on society and for its impact on individuals. Criticisms have variously centred on aesthetic, economic, cultural, and other issues, but some have raised serious moral concerns. Sometimes critics have complained about specific ads or types of ads, sometimes about advertising in general. This paper confines its attention to one specific type of advertising (self-identity image ads), and to the moral issues arising out of the impact of image ads on individuals. The central moral issues raised by image ads are these: (a) whether they make false or misleading promises; (b) whether they promote false values; (c) whether they cause harm; and (d) whether they threaten the autonomy of the individual. . . .

Self-identity image ads (hereafter: image ads) create a symbolic image of an idealized person-type and invite the potential consumers of the product to identify themselves in some way with that image. The Marlboro Man is a good example of such an idealized image. Note that these ads do not try to create an image of the product; in fact, such ads often do not mention product features, price, or availability. They create an image of an idealized person-type who

is usually portrayed as a user of the product, though in some cases the connection between the ideal person and the product is vague. Images can be constructed and connected or transferred to the product in various ways. To see how these ads work, we need a basic way of analyzing this construction and transference. Versions of the techniques of analysis used by Williamson (1978) and Wernick (1991) will be sufficient for our purposes. The language of these techniques is best explained by examples. Two ads are described here; the following sections of this paper analyze these ads in terms of their direct effect on the viewer's beliefs, the presuppositions that underlie their explicit content, and their use of symbols. The ads were chosen because they are typical representatives of self-identity image ads.

EXAMPLE AD 1: THE "BEAUTIFUL" WOMAN¹

The top 80 percent of this ad is a photo of a woman; her face, head, left shoulder, arms, and hands are shown. She is wearing glittering glass jewelry on her neck and left forearm, and no clothes are shown. Her face is turned toward the camera, and she is looking directly at the

viewer of the ad. Her hair is combed back away from her face with not a single hair out of place. The edge of the bright red paint on her lips is similarly precise and neat. There is nothing pictured in the background, which is pure white. Most of the picture is her skin (face, shoulder, arms, and hands), which has absolutely no wrinkles, lines, freckles, scars, dents, dimples, or even pores; it is perfectly smooth and monotone except for some slight shading. Her face has no expression; it is relaxed and blank. In the lower right corner of the photo, superimposed on her upper arm, is a black and white jar, with black printing: "Teint Lumiere Creme Perfecting creme makeup SPF 8 CHANEL Paris New York." The bottom 20 percent of the ad is outside the photo; clear, large letters say "CHANEL." In smaller print it says: "Introducing new perfecting creme makeup. Lightweight, light-reflective formula minimizes imperfections for a flawless matte finish."

At a basic level, the interpretation of this ad is straightforward. We are meant to view this as a "beautiful" woman with "flawless" skin. Various techniques connect in the viewer's mind the "flawless" skin with the product. The product and the name CHANEL are superimposed on a large expanse of bare skin; the lines of the arms, cheeks, and jewelry all point to the Chanel jar; and the position of her head and arms makes it look as though she is leaning on the word "CHANEL." We are meant to associate the beauty and flawless skin with Chanel; whether the product causes the beauty, or is a symbol of it, or is associated with it in some other way, we will examine throughout the rest of this paper.

EXAMPLE AD 2: THE SEXY TEENAGERS²

This ad is a glossy heavy bond insert that opens to a 50 by 58 cm poster. Four young people (two male, two female), all white, healthy, and good looking, are shown separately on a purple carpet

with 1960s-style cheap wooden basement paneling in the background. The models are scantily clad in denim—one male has only underwear and an open vest on. One male and one female model have their legs spread open exposing genital bulging underwear. All four are in seductive poses, and look coyly directly at the viewer. The models appear to be between 14 and 18 years of age. Three of the four pictures have the CK logo and words "Calvin Klein Jeans" superimposed prominently. There is no other text.

Again at a basic level, this is easy to interpret. Calvin Klein wants to associate his logo, name, and product with healthy, good looking, white (?), sexy teenagers; he is creating an image that reeks of youthful sex and trying to connect this image with Calvin Klein in the target audience's mind.

Are these two ads ethical? Are they false or misleading? Do they manipulate people by creating desires for products people would otherwise not want? Do they threaten autonomy? To address these ethical issues, we need to look carefully at how these ads are intended to work and the impact they have on viewers. The following sections will consider whether image ads are false or misleading, have unethical pre-suppositions, or threaten autonomy.

FALSE PROMISES

One interpretation of the Chanel ad is that it promises to make the user as "beautiful" (or at least her skin as "flawless") as the woman in the ad. On this interpretation, the ad works by making the viewer believe that use of the product will make the user just like the model in some relevant aspect. Since all people have lines, wrinkles, and/or pores on their faces, this promise is obviously false. However, it is generally accepted that this is neither the intent nor the usual consumer interpretation of image ads (Arrington 1982, Waide 1987, Lippke 1988). Further, the fact that a product like Chanel skin cream needs repeat buyers means

that the ad-induced belief would have to continue after the product has been used. This view of consumer reactions posits a consumer with beliefs so resistant to evidence that there would be little or no possibility of consumer autonomy. The fact that some consumers such as small children (cf. Paine 1983) or people not used to modern advertising (as in the marketing of infant formula in Africa; cf. Post 1986) might be prone to this interpretation suggests moral restrictions on the target or placement of image ads, but does not affect the ethics of the image ad as a type. And the empirical possibility that some purchasers are in fact duped into false beliefs by image ads does not answer the ethical question of who is responsible for the duping; consumers may choose to participate actively in the image game, even if it involves self-deception. . . .

In general, image ads are not unethical because they are false or misleading. They do not make explicit product promises, and implied product promises are discounted by consumers, and are meant to be discounted. If the ads succeed in making the product a symbol of a particular image, then the image promises may be true or be self-fulfilling. It is an empirical question whether consumers discount the ads enough, but since most of the products that use image ads are low in price and depend on repeat purchases, this does not seem an important ethical issue.

PRESUPPOSITIONS

Ads are often criticized not for their stated or implied claims, but for the presuppositions that lie behind the explicit message of the ad. The Chanel ad, for example, presupposes that lines and wrinkles on a woman's face are "flaws" that destroy beauty. The ad assumes that such wrinkles are not to be seen as interesting and beautiful signs of maturity, experience, and lively features, which they might in a culture that respected aged women more.

The presuppositions of image ads can raise ethical concerns in several ways. First, since presuppositions are unstated, there may be concern that the viewer of image ads is receiving messages they are not aware of, and that therefore threaten their autonomy. Second, specific presuppositions of specific ads may be morally objectionable because they recommend false values. Third, there is concern about the cumulative effect of certain presuppositions common to many image ads. And finally, there are problems relating specifically to the gaze that is presupposed by many image ads. Since presuppositions in general may threaten autonomy, discussion of that issue will be postponed to section 3. We will here consider in turn: (1) the issue of specific presuppositions that may be unethical, (2) the cumulative effect of certain presuppositions, and (3) the issue of presupposed gaze.

Specific Presuppositions

Many ethical criticisms of the presuppositions of image ads object to specific presuppositions of certain ads or types of ads, but do not necessarily see a problem with other ads. Consider the following presuppositions assumed by the Chanel ad;

- (a) Beautiful women have wrinkle-free skin.
- (b) This is the kind of woman you should see as beautiful.
- (c) Women ought to pursue personal beauty with time and money.
- (d) Women will be and should be valued for their beauty.

Once spelled out like this, these assumptions are obviously suspect, and it is precisely specific presuppositions of this sort that feminist critics of advertising and others have analyzed so clearly (Wolf 1990).

Similarly, it is the specific presuppositions of the Calvin Klein ad that have provoked criticism (Brady 1995, Crain 1995, Garfield 1995,

Lippe 1995). The ad seems to assume that teenagers are sexy, ought to be seen as sexy, and ought to have sexiness as a significant part of their personal identity. Even people who see no ethical objections to teen sexual activity *per se* may feel that such ads lead teens to put too much emphasis on sex. . . .

By their very nature, image ads recommend for adoption as a self-image a particular person-type; inherent in this is the presupposition that a person should be valued for the characteristics of that person-type. The Chanel ad, for instance, suggests that women should be valued for their complexion; the Calvin Klein ad that teenagers should be valued for their sexiness. These value judgments are inevitable in image ads precisely because these ads are proposing the adoption of a particular self-image. And these value judgements apply both to how one should judge oneself, and to how people should judge others. Is it unethical to encourage valuing people based on their youth, thinness, complexion, beauty, sexiness, or hair—to list only some of the particular values that image ads are wont to advocate—or are these “false” values? . . .

THE CUMULATIVE EFFECT OF PRESUPPOSITIONS

Some of the objections to the presuppositions of image ads are not concerned with the presuppositions of specific ads, but rather complain about the proportion of certain kinds of presuppositions in image advertising in general. It is suggested that imbalance in advertising overall causes harm in ways that a single ad cannot. This harm may be the aggravation of false values already considered. For example, perhaps there is nothing morally wrong with the Chanel ad suggesting women should spend time and money to approximate the young, smooth-skinned beauty ideal; the prob-

lem is that too many cosmetic and fashion ads assume this, and too few assume women should spend their time and money studying, developing talents, or growing old with dignity. All fashion and cosmetic ads show the kind of “beauty” that drives sales; none show the beauty that drives sales; none show the beauty that comes from smiles, openness, cheerfulness, and liveliness. We have suggested there is nothing immoral with the presuppositions of the Tommy Hilfiger ad that young people should wear a certain style of casual clothes when having healthy outdoor fun with friends, but what is the cumulative effect of seeing thousands of ads that presuppose that having friends requires fashion, cosmetics, and special soaps, and never having it suggested that friendship depends on honesty, openness, or generosity? Is the imbalance in ads unethical? As these examples show, the cumulative effect of ads may place a “false” emphasis on values that are not inherently false. Claims of “false” emphasis are subjective in the same way that false values are, but a decent avoidance by one advertiser will not fix the cumulative problem of advertising in general. . . .

What should be done about the threat of image advertising to self-esteem? Collectively or separately image advertisers could establish and support women’s magazines that publish more realistic body images. Separately, companies like Chanel could create and advertise products using models with other body types, much as cosmetics companies now have products for various racial types. They would not have to use their own name or discontinue current ads since the issue is balancing images. Thirdly, companies should avoid using camera, photographic, and other techniques to create impossible body types as ideals. Given the severity of the harm of lost self-esteem, I conclude cosmetics companies have a moral responsibility to minimize the harm done to people’s self-esteem.

Gaze

Ads are carefully constructed so that the ways they are viewed by different sorts of people create particular impacts. The Chanel ad, for example, intends a certain impact on women—it presupposes a female viewer gaze. The Calvin Klein jeans ad, on the other hand, is intended to have an impact with either a male or female viewer gaze; it presupposes a young person, or a young person wannabe, gaze.

The viewer gaze determines the impact of an ad because it determines the reading of the ad. The Chanel ad entices the female gaze to a narcissistic reading; that is, it invites the female viewer to imagine herself as being the model, to read herself into the ad by identifying with the “beautiful” woman. This creates a second type of gaze. The ad is constructed to imply that the “beautiful” woman is looking at someone, and that that someone is looking at her. If the female viewer of the ad imaginatively becomes the woman in the ad, who is it that is now receiving her gaze and doing the viewing? This is the implied gaze (as opposed to the viewer gaze). Generally, women are assumed to want to be beautiful as a means of attracting the attention of men; therefore, the usual implied gaze of the Chanel ad is male. That is, the ad presupposes that it is a man who is looking at and sharing the gaze of the woman in the ad, even though it is assumed that the viewer of the ad is a woman. It can be asked whether the implied male gaze of ads of this sort is ethically objectionable. . . .

Self-identity image ads work only if the viewer identifies themselves with the image presented—the viewer has to read themselves into the ad as being, if only in fantasy, the person-type the model portrays; they have to imaginatively consider the image as potentially forming part of their self-identity. The ubiquity of image ads means that this process can be indulged in repeatedly. This constant reexam-

ination of one’s own self-identity is a form of narcissism; it was not common in most societies prior to the onset of modern advertising, but now forms part of the “culture of narcissism” (Lasch 1979). Whether this form of narcissism is unethical is hard to say. Its impact on human welfare cannot be guessed without making uncertain comparisons with alternative ways of spending one’s time. It may be entirely consistent with the cultivation of a virtuous character, though the concentration of advertising on the physical body and the portrayal of only limited roles probably does not encourage reflections on one’s own character. The self-identities offered by image ads are most often of isolated individuals (Dyer 1982, p. 110), but this is compatible with liberal notions of society, justice, and human rights. Narcissism and a narcissistic culture may be distasteful, but to view their encouragement as unethical would require precise arguments.

Implied gaze is more serious because it can contribute substantially to the undermining of self-esteem. The problem here is not the content of the implied gaze because in fact that is usually undetermined. Consider the Chanel ad; many viewers would assume that the implied gaze (which in this case is also shared gaze) is male and based on desire. But there is nothing in the ad to determine this; a viewer could assume an implied gaze that is female and based on envy, or (if the viewer gaze is lesbian) an implied gaze that is female and based on desire. Queer readings of fashion ads make clear that implied gaze (or, in this case, implied gays) is usually but not always undetermined (Woods 1995, Bishop 1997).

What can affect self-esteem is not the content but the very implication of implied gaze. Most image ads imply that we are being watched and judged by an Other at all times. This is not problematic because false; what is problematic is that image ads usually present impossible identity ideals, and therefore imply that we are constantly

being judged by impossible standards. This tends to undermine self-esteem. . . .

The ethical problems of undermining self-esteem are increased by the fact that this technique works best on people who belong to marginalized groups, especially women, adolescents, and minorities.

This undermining of self-esteem is further complicated by the fact that the impossible ideals presented in image ads are almost always based on the physical body, or in a few cases, particular social roles. This dramatically and unfairly undermines the self-esteem of anyone who fares poorly by those standards. In many cases this undermining is permanent, since there is often little one can do about one's body type (although, of course, one can make some effort to "stay in shape"). The implications that standards are physical also undermines the fact that it is morally more important to esteem people for their abilities, accomplishments, character, and virtues. This intentional undermining of self-esteem is the most serious ethical problem with image ads. Although this problem is greatly aggravated by the cumulative effect of many advertisers using impossible images and implied gaze, there would seem to be more than a collective responsibility in Brenkert's sense for avoiding this harm; each advertiser could individually avoid this technique and still market their products to the same target consumers. The problem is with a specific advertising technique, not with the product or consumer usage of it (as in Brenkert's example of malt liquors). Since the combination of implied gaze and impossible identity images causes harm, I conclude advertisers have an ethical responsibility for avoiding this technique. . . .

IMAGE ADS, ETHICS, AND AUTONOMY

If it is true that image ads tend to restrict human autonomy, there are grounds for concern about the ethics of this form of advertis-

ing. Autonomy is a complex concept; three aspects of human autonomy are particularly relevant to discussion of image ads. (1) Autonomy of choice (sometimes referred to as external autonomy): can a person in fact act on a desire that they have? (2) Autonomy of desire (or internal autonomy): is a person's having a desire, or their decision to act on it, autonomous? (3) Social autonomy: how does social context enhance or restrict either choice (external autonomy) or decisions about desires or actions (internal autonomy). We will consider these in turn.

Autonomy of Choice

In order to discuss whether a person's choice can be acted on autonomously, let us identify what choices people make with respect to image ads. . . .

Choice Regarding Exposure to Ads. Do people have any (apparently free) choice about whether to look at image ads? On the one hand, people leading ordinary lives cannot help seeing bill boards and transit ads; on the other hand, people can choose not to read fashion or other ad-dominated magazines, not to watch television or listen to commercial radio, not to open junk mail, and not to shop at fashion stores. Since outdoor advertising is only 6-7 percent of advertising budgets,³ most but not all image advertising can be avoided if a person wishes. But most people do not try to avoid image ads; they go out of their way to be exposed to them, they even pay money to buy fashion magazines that are densely packed with little else. People choose to be viewers of image ads. Most image ads are concentrated in fashion and special interest magazines that consumers pay money to look at. This willingness of consumers to actively seek and pay for image ads reduces the problem of passive exposure to the level of billboard bylaws; it is not rele-

vant to assessing the ethics of the technique itself. I do not know of any arguments against the autonomy of choosing to buy magazines or watch television in which it is image ads themselves that restrict autonomous choice. Since the choice to be exposed to the ad must be prior to any effect of the ad, arguments purporting to show that persuasive techniques in advertising undermine autonomy do not apply to choosing to be exposed to the ad. Let us conclude that the choice of seeing or avoiding most image ads is externally autonomous.

Choice Regarding the Creation of Symbols. The intention of image ads is to have the product and its logo become a symbol of a particular ideal person-type; can the viewer choose to accept or reject this symbolism? To answer this question, we need to consider how image ads create symbols. A sign is composed of a signifier (the physical object, sound, picture, etc.) and something signified (the meaning a person attaches to the signifier). If the connection between the signifier and the signified is an arbitrary cultural construction available only to people within a culture (or subculture), then we will say the sign is a symbol. For example, two small pieces of wood fixed across each other may be a signifier to a person familiar with Christianity; the signified is the large and elaborate meaning Christians attach to the crucifix. To a person unfamiliar with Christianity, the crossed pieces of wood may not be a signifier because no meaning is suggested. The crucifix is a sign for Christians, and a symbol since the connection between signified and signifier is culturally dependent. . . .

In the Chanel ad, the photo of the woman, her jewelry, lipstick, coiffure, arm position, head attitude, etc. are signifiers; the signified is an image of "elegant and beautiful" woman. This image is then transferred to the Chanel logo and the particular face cream product so that the logo and product come to be a symbol for elegant and beautiful woman. However,

the ad is more complicated than that because in our culture (or at least in the subculture that reads *Vogue* regularly) viewers come to the ad with the Chanel logo already functioning as a symbol of French elegance, sophistication, and creative Parisian fashion. This ad adds to the creation of a symbol that been created and refined in many ads, displays, and feature articles on Chanel and her fashions. . . .

Choice Regarding Accepting or Rejecting Self-images. If we choose to look at image ads and we do not actively resist symbol creation, the product logo will come to symbolize the image of an ideal person-type; can we choose to accept or reject this image as a role model for our self image? I want to argue that the very variety of possible self-images in image advertising gives people a choice as to which image to accept, and tends to make people more aware of this choice in selecting a personal image. Young people today are especially conscious that they can be whatever kind of person they want to be. If this is a kind of autonomy, that is morally valuable, then image advertising has great moral worth because it tends to make people aware of their autonomy, presents them with clearly defined options, and creates the symbolic language that allows them to express their choice. Indeed, Calvin Klein "Be" ads explicitly preach that the viewer can be what and whom they want to be—they preach free choice and hence one kind of autonomy in personal images. . . .

Choice Regarding Buying the Product. No one makes us buy image products, we are free to do so or not—we are autonomous in the political sense of that word. And most of us have economic autonomy in that we can afford many image products, and they are certainly readily available. Granted, as a professor I cannot afford to project the image that owning an S-class Mercedes would give, but since desiring such an image is based on the desire to have a higher

social status than other people, this is not morally relevant. The destitute in our society cannot afford image products at all, but destitution is not caused by image advertising, and what is morally wrong with destitution would not be fixed if there were no image ads. In fact, it is noticeable that the kinds of products sold through image ads are not the kinds that we need in any morally relevant sense of the word "need." Image ads sell beer, liquor, cigarettes, cosmetics, fashions, cars, vacations—these are sold by image advertising precisely because we have no real need for them. A person could easily choose a lifestyle that excludes all of these. . . .

Autonomy of Desire

Many of the issues surrounding internal autonomy have been discussed in the literature on persuasive advertising (Arrington 1982, Crisp 1987, Waide 1987, Lippke 1988), and that discussion need not be revisited in the context of image ads (which, of course, are a form of persuasive advertising). In particular, we can accept Arrington's arguments that persuasive ads do not "control behaviour, [or] produce compulsive behaviour" (p. 582). There is no empirical evidence to show that the purchasing of image products is compulsive in the way that kleptomania, alcoholism, drug addiction, or gambling can be compulsive. Only in a figurative sense can a person be a "slave to fashion." "Compulsive" shopping seems to be nothing more than weakness of the will, or, if it is more serious, there is nothing to show that it is caused by advertising. Two other issues in this debate are worth commenting on; what are people's second-order desires with respect to the images of image advertising? And do image ads have an impact on the viewer by appealing to unconscious desires?

Second-order Desires. Second-order desires are a way of approaching the question of whether persuasive advertising can "create

wants which are not rational or truly those of the consumer" (Arrington 1982, p. 582). It is assumed that irrational and unwanted desires threaten a person's autonomy unless the person can control them. It is argued that the origins of a desire are not relevant to a person's autonomy if they can reflectively assess that desire relative to their interests, aims, and life plans, and if such reflection can create second-order desires that control the motivational force of the original desire. This concept of autonomy as based on higher-order desires has been criticized (e.g., Lehrer 1977, pp. 94–103) first because it seems to lead to an infinite regress of desires, and second because it is a poor basis for autonomy unless it can be shown that the higher-order desires themselves are autonomous. Image advertising needs to be considered in the terms set by this debate.

An image ad creates an image of an ideal person-type and attaches the product as a symbol to the image. If the viewer desires to possess the product as a result of the ad, presumably they have a desire to own a symbol of that image; if they do not intend to use the symbol ironically, then they probably have a first-order desire to use the symbol to express the self-image to themselves or to others. The ordered-desires theory of autonomy claims that the viewer is autonomous in possessing a desire if they do not have a second-order desire not to have the first-order desire; in our case, if they do not desire not to desire the expression of that self-image. The question is not whether the viewer can reject the image—if they do, there are many other images to choose from—rather, the question is, do people desire the image, and at the same time desire not to desire the image? This situation may be the simple, though not always easy, task of having to resist temptation. It would threaten a person's autonomy if an image ad created an unwanted desire that could not be resisted and if the second-order desire was rationally grounded. Whether significant numbers of people tend

to be put in this situation by image ads is an empirical question; I know of no evidence that they are. Furthermore, if a person repeatedly loses their autonomy in this way, the rational thing to do is to avoid image ads, and we have already established that people have a large amount of choice in this, and that many people do the opposite—they actively seek image ads. This seems to imply a second-order desire to have the first-order desire. . . .

Unconscious Desires. It is frequently argued that if advertising can create unconscious desires then it threatens our internal autonomy. This leads us to ask to what extent image ads work in a way that is unconscious to the viewer. Consider the Calvin Klein ad. "Motivational research" would say that this ad tries to persuade by using the viewer's unconscious desire of sex to control the specifics of their conscious desire for clothes (cf. Arrington, pp. 574–575). First, I am completely puzzled by any suggestion that sexual desire is unconscious, especially among the teenage target audience of this ad. The sexual content of the Calvin Klein ad is explicit—very explicit—not subliminal. Furthermore, the Calvin Klein ad is not selling sex, nor promising to satisfy sexual desires; it is selling an image and promising (truthfully) to help satisfy the desire to project a sexy personal image to oneself and others. This desire is not unconscious, nor is the appeal to the desire unconscious. People play the fashion image game quite consciously; they are well aware of the possibility of choice in fashion selection, and aware of choice in using fashion to create and project a self-image. They are also aware of looking at fashion ads for precisely this purpose. As Levitt (1970) says, "everybody everywhere wants to modify, transform, embellish, enrich and reconstruct the world around him" (p. 336). Image ads assume that people also want to reconstruct themselves and their image; this is not an unconscious desire. . . .

Social Autonomy

The two concepts of autonomy discussed so far have been powerfully criticized for assuming that autonomy is a characteristic of isolated, independent individuals. Several philosophers, including Morwenna Griffiths whom we will rely on, have proposed an alternative concept of autonomy that recognizes that all people are embedded in social networks and dependent on other people; we will refer to this as "social autonomy."⁴

For Griffiths, the self is fragmented, always developing, and communally constructed because it is embedded in social relations with other people. The autonomous self, therefore, is not unified, static, or isolated; autonomy must be sought through an authentic "patchwork" (p. 191) of changing selves that participate in a web of fluid relationships with other people. Such relationships must avoid the traditional "master-slave" paradigm of controller and controlled; autonomy is not achieved through control or independence, but through mutual participation in creating the relationship with others. The self should not act on others, but interact with them. Autonomy is consistent with dependency. The web of the self's identity results from four attitudes toward others; wanting a relationship (love); not wanting one (resistance); being wanted (acceptance); and not being wanted (rejection). These apply to specific relations with identifiable others; they also apply to our relations with "invisible colleges"—that is, our identifying as a member of a large group, such as being a woman, being a writer, etc. (Griffiths 1995, pp. 86, 88, 90). Self-image is crucial to this continuous process of negotiating ever-changing relationships; the web of identity and the web of belonging are intertwined. . . .

Conclusions Regarding Autonomy

Image advertising does not generally restrict autonomy of choice, autonomy of desire, nor social

autonomy. One exception is that image ads can restrict autonomy of desire if they undermine self-esteem so severely that a person cannot undertake higher-order reflection on their own self-image and life plans. A second exception is the threat to social autonomy that results if image ads idealize domination and submission in personal relationships, or if they use exclusionary stereotypes of marginalized groups.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

People are not passively manipulated by image ads. They actively participate when viewing image advertising, and actively participate in the image game. They seek out image ads, choose to and even pay to look at them, choose to accept the symbols they create, and choose to project self-identities through those symbols. They willingly pay large premiums to buy products they do not in any real sense need. Image ads would not work if targeted viewers were not proactive; the viewer has to read themselves into the ad or it will have no effect. . . .

Finally, we should remember that image ads create symbols that people are willing to buy; therefore, they contribute to the economy by creating something of value. Some writers have argued that persuasive advertising must be a threat to rational autonomy because in a world of purely rational logicians the persuasion would not work.⁵ This is not true of image ads; even the most rational logicians could choose to buy a symbol to project an image.

And we should not forget that the image game is fun.

NOTES

1. The ad appears in *Vogue* magazine, 1993, November issue, p. 247.

2. The ad was widely distributed as an insert in newspapers in early 1995.
3. Furthermore, ad budgets are only about 25 percent of promotion budgets; so outdoor ads are about 1.5 percent of promotion budgets. Figures are for Canada, c. 1990, from Darmon and LaRoche.
4. Griffiths's theory of autonomy is presented in her book *Feminisms and the Self: The Web of Identity*. A critique of her theory is beyond the scope of this paper; we will simply use it to assess the ethics of image ads.
5. Arrington quotes Jules Henry on this, p. 592.

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Information Disclosure in Sales

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The issue of information disclosure is an important topic for a number of areas of applied ethics. Discussions in medical ethics often deal with the question of how much information should be given to a patient by health care professionals. A central topic of journalistic ethics is what kind of information the public has a right to know. In business ethics, discussions of information disclosure have dealt with areas such as disclosure of health and safety risks to employees, financial information to stockholders, and product safety information to consumers.¹

One area of business ethics which seems inadequately explored, but holds both theoretical and practical interest, is the question of exactly how much information a salesperson is obligated to give to a potential customer in selling a product. Unlike the field of health care in which roles such as physician or nurse are

paradigms of professions which carry with them clearly recognized responsibilities to serve the best interest of the patient, a salesperson is not generally thought to have such a professional responsibility to customers. In fact it is usually expected that the activity of sales will involve a primary pursuit of the interests of the seller. While there are legal obligations to disclose certain types of information, the question of what moral responsibilities a salesperson has is open to dispute.

An attempt to resolve the matter and specify a salesperson's moral responsibilities to disclose information raises two important theoretical questions: (1) To what extent can ethical argument help to define the moral responsibilities of a social role when these are only vaguely defined in a culture? and (2) How is empirical information about common practice relevant to making normative judgments?