SOME CONTRARIAN REFLECTIONS ON ADVERTISING

Tibor R. Machan

Among business ethics teachers, as reflected in their books and papers, advertising is deemed anything but honorable.[1] Quite the opposite. This is mainly because so many business ethicists are convinced that altruism is the proper ethics for people to practice and, of course, advertising is far from altruistic. The following will be a presentation of a position that finds advertising ethical but also rejects altruism as the proper ethics by which human beings should live.

The Benefits of Advertising

Advertising benefits both producers and consumers. It makes possible though does not guarantee mutually beneficial trades that might not have taken place otherwise.

What do advertisers accomplish for themselves when they successfully pitch a product? They will have found a way to make a living. Consider the maligned telemarketer, calling people up in the middle of dinner with a proposal to switch telephone service. Should one hang up on such a person? No. Partly because after a bit of thought, one can simply say, "No, I've got a service I'm perfectly satisfied with. Thank you, bye-bye." (One need not growl, instead, "Get off my phone, you a******!") Even if one is not willing to attend to a seller's message, one could at least extend some courtesy because one can appreciate what they are trying to do: earn a living. That is a bond between seller and potential buyer. After all, everyone is trying to earn a living. If one pitches one's latest book at a cocktail party or philosophy conference, one does not want to get bopped

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on the nose by someone perfectly happy with the latest Stephen King novel who doesn't want to hear about anything else.

In this age of broadcasting, advertisements are often presented to many millions more than are in the market for the sort of product or service being promoted. As one views a television or listens to a radio program, an ad interrupts and this tends to annoy us (our annoyance is, incidentally, yet more evidence against the notion that advertisers can simply reconstitute our preferences at will). Most viewers, during most commercials, would rather continue attending to the program; the ads thwart this goal.

Once in a while, of course, an ad aimed squarely at one's own needs and wants comes up, and then the benefits of advertising for human beings qua consumer begin to be clear. So perhaps one can be tolerant of ads that miss the mark. (And are there no mute buttons?) In other contexts, when ads are more narrowly cast, they are not so annoying. Indeed, sometimes readers of specialized magazines will flip through looking only at the ads.

Advertising also benefits us in cases where we never buy any of the products being advertised. Thanks to TV ads, we don't have to pay for network television – and the cost of cable television is less than it might be. Without ads, we would not enjoy access to so much free information in newspapers, magazines and on the internet. Internet access itself is now available at no charge, as long as you're willing to put up with some pop-up ads. Advertising is thus one modern method for spreading the benefits of new products and services from the few to the many.

Advertising and Prudence

Once both parties have done their level best to find out what will be prudent for them to do, but not before, they may properly unite in trade.

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Not everyone is always prudent, it's true. Some people just see ads and without further ado yield to the desire to get what is being offered; they buy on impulse. Impulse buying most closely resembles the phenomenon that the late John Kenneth Galbraith and others thought and still think advertising engenders all the time. But people who buy on impulse don't have to buy; they merely have chosen to do so carelessly. (And even then, the impulse buyer's imprudent purchases are confined to the realm of his already chosen values and interests – clothing, lottery tickets, food, or books.)

Just as having the capacity to reason does not mean that one will always reason, so having the capacity to be prudent does not mean that one will always be prudent. Participants in the market can fail to be alert, fail to pay attention to their own responsibility in a trade. They may place all the responsibility in the hands of the other party to a trade and then, afterwards, when they are eating the losses, blame that other party, not themselves. But they are complicit in so far as they neglected to pay sufficient attention to what was going down.

What's a Good Ad?

The primary responsibility of an ad is to call attention to a product in such an effective way that people will have difficulty overlooking it.

Why is it morally okay to try to capture people's attention this way? Because it's important for us to prosper. That means it's important for us to promote the services or wares that we have to offer for sale. If human life is a value, advertising is a value. It is a positive good.

Contrary to how it is often depicted, advertising is not selfish in any cruel, nasty, or brutal sense of the word; rather, it is self-responsible. People in business must make this effort to take care of themselves, to do justice to the prospect of succeeding and prospering in their lives.

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Everybody benefits thereby–the customers, the people who own and run the business, and the employees whom businesses are able to hire when the advertising does its work.

Of course, an altruist will object because '"Altruism" [is] assuming a duty to relieve the distress and promote the happiness of our fellows. . . .Altruism is to . . . maintain quite simply that a man may and should discount altogether his own pleasure or happiness as such when he is deciding what course of action to pursue.'[2] However, is this a sound ethics by which human beings should live? Without entering the topic in full, a brief remark by the poet W. H. Auden suggests a negative answer: 'We are here on earth to do good for others. What the others are here for, I don't know.'

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Notes

[1] See, for example, Mark J. Lovas, 'Creating a Cultural Niche for the A-Social?: Or, Speculation about How Cultural Factors Might Defeat Altruism,' *Think*, Spring/Summer 2008, pp. 59–66.

[2] W. G. Maclagan, 'Self and Others: A Defense of Altruism,' *Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1954), pp. 109–110.

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