

The Good, The Bad, & The Unethical: The Ethics of Propaganda

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Abstract

Propaganda has been solidified in history, becoming more widely used in the early to late 1900s. Whether you recognize it or not, there are certain images and characters from past and present propaganda campaigns that have been embedded in your brain. From Rosie the Riveter to Uncle Sam, propaganda has become a part of popular culture. Now in the present era, propaganda is all around us. It is in our schools encouraging us to recycle our water bottles; it is on TV urging us to vote for a certain candidate; it is pumped out by the government reminding you to register to vote. The question is not whether this is effective or not, but whether propaganda in itself is ethical. Looking at Kant's moral thesis, the use of propaganda is unethical. According to Kant's Second Formulation of the Categorical Imperative, an agent should never be used merely as a means to an end and should be treated as an end in herself. Propaganda is defined as a persuasive technique employed by a government or other agency where said government or agency puts out partial truths or lies in order to manipulate the public to act or think in a certain way and to produce an outcome which is in favor, directly or indirectly, of the government or agency. But how do different types of propaganda persuade moral agents, and which propaganda campaigns, if any, are considered more acceptable? This paper looks at multiple case studies of propaganda such as Nazi propaganda during World War II and American propaganda used during the Cold War, and weighs in on which of these, if any, are morally acceptable.

Keywords: Immanuel Kant, Propaganda, Ethics

1. Introduction

Propaganda has been solidified in history, becoming more widely used in the early to late 1900s. Whether you recognize it or not, there are certain images and characters from past and present propaganda campaigns that have been embedded in your brain. From Rosie the Riveter to Uncle Sam, propaganda has become a part of popular culture. Now in the present era, propaganda is all around us. It is in our schools encouraging us to recycle our water bottles; it is on TV urging us to vote for a certain candidate; it is pumped out by the government reminding you to register to vote. The question is not whether this is *effective* or not, but whether propaganda in itself is *ethical*. Looking at Kant's moral thesis, the use of propaganda is unethical because it is autonomy undermining or non-promoting. According to Kant's Second Formulation of the Categorical Imperative, an agent should never be used merely as a means to an end and should be treated as an end in herself.

Let us accept the following stipulations in order to define propaganda for the purpose of the following argument. Propaganda is a persuasive technique employed by a government, person, or other agency where said government, person or other agency puts out partial truths or lies designed to detour a person's autonomy and to produce an outcome which is in favor, directly or indirectly, of the government or agency or the goals of that government, person, or other agency. Furthermore, I have determined that there are two types of propaganda; hard-core and soft-core. Hard-core

propaganda is when a government, person, or other agency publishes false information based on partial or non-existent truths. Soft-core propaganda is when a government, person, or other agency publishes truths while using manipulation techniques (i.e. ethos, logos, pathos) and/or partial lies.

2. Case Studies in Propaganda (and their ethics)

Let us now consider this. Agent X in Town Q is seeking revenge against Firefighter Z (for reasons that are irrelevant). Agent X later hears that Firefighter Z is leading a training exercise which involves setting fire to an abandoned building and then observing newer firefighters techniques in putting out the fire. Agent X tails the firefighters to the training site and snaps pictures of Firefighter Z first setting fire to the building with a match and then standing back with a smile as he watches the new firefighters putting out the fire. Agent X sends these pictures to the local newspaper anonymously without any words or captions. The local newspaper, always on the hunt for a good story, then publishes these pictures with the headline “Firefighter Z commits arson to local building!” The residents of Town Q (who all read the local newspaper) are outraged at the headline, claiming that Firefighter Z is not fit in any way to be employed. Rallies and protests are held by the residents of Town Q, demanding the removal of Firefighter Z. The fire chief has no choice other than to dismiss Firefighter Z, for the Town Q Council has threatened to cut funding for the fire station unless Firefighter Z no longer works at the fire station. Agent X’s goal has been achieved and Firefighter Z is (unfairly) out of work.

This example is hard-core propaganda at work, since he has created a blatant lie. For nefarious purposes, Agent X has abused the power of the press in order to promote his own agenda and affect the way that the citizens of Town Q viewed Firefighter Z. By doing this, Agent X has taken advantage of the town’s citizens as well as Firefighter Z, who believe that they are acting autonomously but are in fact being manipulated all along. This example can quite easily translate to the real world and is in fact based off of a case where crowd psychology scholar Gustav Le Bon manipulated his community to act in his favor. Both examples, the made-up one and the real-world one, are prime examples of when producers of propaganda employ propaganda in order to get the population to commit an action they may not otherwise choose which is clearly abusive of a person’s autonomy and, therefore, goes against Kant’s Second Formulation of The Categorical Imperative.

In an ideal world, one would like to believe that the general populace consists of autonomous, critical-thinking agents. However, when faced with propaganda made to seem like fact, they can be persuaded into anything. Propaganda may even brainwash agents to commit or support a cause that they would not have chosen to do otherwise. A prime example of this is the Nazi invasion of Poland, and, eventually, the extermination of six million Jews and other minorities that the Nazi Party felt was a danger to the world. To persuade a Germany that was hesitant to go to war again, SS men dressed in Polish uniforms and staged a fake battle between Poland and Germany on the Polish border. The “battle” was later published in German newspapers and was circulated as news on German radio as a reason for the invasion of Poland. Once the war was underway, the Germans published news articles on how they were relocating the Jews and giving them jobs and setting up soup kitchens for them. German authorities also told the public that the Jewish ghettos were set up for the public’s own good because the Jews allegedly spread diseases. Obviously, this was all a façade and mere “justifications” for the mistreatment and death of millions of innocents. However, because of all of the propaganda, the German public went along quietly, unknowingly (for the most part) supporting the Holocaust and Hitler’s viciously unjust war campaigns.

Germany was not the only country during a war to employ propaganda to create sentiments among its people which would make the public fearful of an “enemy”. The United States was also a culprit. Please see image 2.1 below.



Image 2.1 Source: www.freerepublic.com ⁸

This image was used during the Cold War when Joe McCarthy had successfully created a witch hunt for Soviet spies in the US and made the public paranoid that their neighbor may secretly be a Commie. Featuring a burning American flag, there are soldiers in the foreground, made to resemble those of the Soviet army tackling Americans to the ground. The words “Is this tomorrow” are scrawled across the yellowed sky with a caption underneath claiming that what the viewer is looking at is “America under communism!” This ad plays on the emotions of its American viewers in several ways. One, the American flag is burning which is meant to inspire patriotic feelings amongst its viewers. Two, the fact that it depicts Soviet-looking soldiers attacking Americans calls upon fear but also puts the idea in the public’s head that their enemy is the USSR. Three, the poster uses a lot of warm colors (the background, the fire, etc.). This may have been due to the fact that they were trying associate this poster with the Red Scare as the color red was associated with Communism (think the Red Scare).

There are other parties still that will partially object to the idea that propaganda is not always as intense as the kind that was employed by Nazi Germany and that there are plenty of softer, kinder propaganda campaigns such as the campaign to recycle or the posters telling you to register to vote. This is where they idea of hard-core propaganda versus soft-core propaganda comes in to play. Please refer to image 2.2.



Image 2.2. Source: randystaplesdds.com ⁷

Let us examine this advertisement in a way similar to how we critiqued the anti-Communist Cold War poster. First, a little background on The Real Cost campaign. It is a program funded by the US Government aimed at teens and young adults that tells them of the effects and dangers of smoking tobacco. The first thing you probably noticed is the yellowed smile with the words over the top “You get all your smokes for free. Or do you?” implying that this is the smile of a smoker and this will happen to the viewer if they smoke. In the bottom left corner it says “Smoking cigarettes can cause yellow teeth, bad breath, and gum disease.” This seems like it would be the most important fact but it is positioned on the poster almost as if it is an after-thought. While getting bad breath and gum disease from smoking is factually true, this ad in particular plays on what marketing experts over at The Real Cost deems a fear of most young adults; losing their beauty. The yellowed-smile reduces its target audience, teens, to nothing more than a group of people concerned with only their looks instead of the fact that they may develop heart disease or lung cancer from smoking cigarettes. So, not only is The Real Cost unethical in its attempt to undermine the autonomy of their targeted demographic by using propaganda techniques which are meant to cause fear, but they also believe that they have found a trait that most members of this age group possess and have decided that a fear of being deemed ugly by society, not the potential serious health risks caused by smoking, is enough to produce a desirable outcome for The Real Cost campaigners.

A true form of manipulation of the truth is abstinence-only education, another campaign targeted at young people. For the purpose of this argument, abstinence-only education is defined as sex education that states that abstaining from sex until marriage is the only way to prevent sexually-transmitted infections and pregnancy and does not provide other methods of having “safe sex” which would include birth control and condoms. The National Abstinence Education Association (NAEA) is a huge proponent of the push for abstinence-only sex education in public schools. They are a big user of soft-core propaganda, often manipulating or publishing slanted statistics that clash with statistics published by more reputable sources such as the Pew Research Center ^{4,6}. Besides false statistics, abstinence-only education often employs fear-mongering and over-exaggerated facts to make their case for no sex until marriage. More likely than not, abstinence-only sex education stems from more conservative Christian groups, particularly in the South, who are trying to push their own agenda among young students in an effort to get them (the students) to commit to practices which fit their (the conservative group’s) values instead of offering both sides of the issue and treating their impressionable audience as autonomous members of society, a classic case of soft-core propaganda.



Image 2.3. Source: italladdsup.umn.edu ⁹

The first several soft-core, as well as hard-core, campaigns we have looked at were either created or endorsed by the government. Image 2.3 is a poster that was used during the University of Minnesota’s 2012 campaign called “It All Adds Up” to encourage recycling and more environment-friendly habits across campus. Something that seems so benign or so obviously beneficial to the public may be overlooked as a real propaganda campaign but let us analyze the poster. As mentioned before, this recycling campaign was launched in 2012 which was a presidential election year where incumbent President Obama was running against Republican front-runner Mitt Romney. The poster plays off

of President Obama's popular campaign slogan "Yes, We Can," so the poster is not only to the viewer's sense of good but also perhaps their political leanings as well considering that a majority of college students, the campaign's target audience, do tend to vote Democrat. The poster is also done in patriotic colors, featuring a red hand crushing a blue can with the font in blue and red against a white background, subliminally saying that by recycling you are doing good by your country. For the second time, the real facts are written in fine print saying "Only 41% of all campus waste is currently recycled, mostly due to recyclables being thrown in the trash. The EPA estimates that 75% of solid waste is recyclable." While these facts are true, the poster is designed so that the viewer only notices them after they observe the patriotic hand grasping a recyclable can, manipulating the viewer's feelings in the ways that were mentioned previously.

Many would argue that soft-core propaganda is much more ethical than hard-core propaganda, especially in the cases given here. But let us critically compare the propaganda produced by the American government that would quintessentially produce the suspicion that arose during the Cold War and McCarthyism to the current propaganda campaign called *The Real Cost*, which was mentioned earlier. Both campaigns play on its audiences fears which are prevalent to that particular time period but some people may say that McCarthyism contributed to an air of distrust in the American public which was not justified and ultimately just made the US into an even more paranoid place *The Real Cost* campaign, on the other hand, tells the American youth that if they use tobacco products then they will get cancer young and die ugly, something which has been validated by science. They are different, right? One is obviously a "better" form of propaganda because it is, in theory, serving a better purpose than the other (the "better" propaganda campaign is, in this case, *The Real Cost*). However, in the eyes of Kant, neither campaign is better because in both cases the American government is using the public merely as a means to an ends, whether to prevent the spread of communism or the use of tobacco. Again, we are not dealing with outcomes in this argument but the means.

Some parties may object that if agents are critical thinkers they should have the ability to discern what the morally right thing to do in a given situation is but one cannot underestimate the many different techniques of propaganda, which is a science that many people devote hours upon hours to studying. You need only look at how those employed in the advertising industry study people like rats in a cage, seeing which techniques will affect people in what way and to what degree. The fact that there is an industry devoted to figuring out what will cause the unsuspecting agent to be stripped of their critical-thinking abilities so that they can be used as a means to an ends in the name of capitalism is incredibly disturbing, yet this is exactly what propagandists do. So to say that a moral agent always possesses the ability to figure out what is the morally correct thing is truly naïve.

There are more ways than one in which a producer of propaganda can virtually strip agents of their autonomy, and one of those ways is through censorship. Again, we turn to the propaganda produced by the Nazi party during World War II as a case study. In order to make it seem as if the Nazis were in the right, Germany's government censored Allied and Soviet forces that denounced German war crimes. By not providing these sources of information, actually quite similar to the abstinence-only education case just discussed, citizens were much more likely to believe that the Nazi party was in the right and that the opposing forces were unjust in their attacks. Of course, the German government is not the only government in history to use censorship to deprive its citizens of so-called "full truths." We need only look at the Chinese government censoring Facebook (after all, look at how social media contributed to the Arab Spring), the North Korean government's claims that its leaders are more-or-less demigods, or even the United States' use of propaganda to demonize the Japanese during World War II, and more recently their using nuclear weapons as an excuse to invade Iraq.

3. Propaganda: How It Differs From Persuasion

Critics may argue that by looking at some of the soft-core examples given in this paper that the case could be made that other forms of persuasion such as philosophical papers would be considered propaganda. However, it is important to note that while propaganda of any sort seeks to undermine a person's autonomy on a pre-rational level, essays seek to enlighten the reader on a rational level by engaging their thinking-selves rather than playing on their fears and biases. Thus, an essay would be considered an argument and not propaganda. Additionally, many forms of persuasion would be considered on the same level as an argument because of its engaging with viewers on a higher-level of thinking.

Advertisements may also be confused with propaganda; however, propaganda is usually produced by a source that is trusted on some level (i.e. the government, government agencies, schools, etc.) while many consumers are aware when an advertisement is such. The same could be said for political campaign ads. Those ads even go so far as to make a statement at the end to say who paid for the ad.

4. Conclusion

Not only is the practice of propaganda unethical according to Kant's Second Formulation of the Categorical Imperative, it is often demeaning and belittling as well, sometimes reducing its targeted population to nothing more than a means to accomplish a goal rather than seeing the population in question as a whole autonomous being. While it can be argued that soft-core propaganda is "better" or more ethical than hard-core propaganda because the examples given here are used to the potential betterment of a community, soft-core campaigns still play on people's emotions and their pre-rational selves by employing the use of partial-truths or facts that are phrased in a slanted way. These soft-core campaigns aim to make you feel better about yourself for recycling, bad about yourself and your looks because you smoke, or that staying abstinent-until-marriage is the only way to prevent pregnancy and sexually-transmitted infections.

Hard-core propaganda campaigns are just as ethically bad as soft-core. These hard-core campaigns manipulate their targeted audience by instilling fear and suspicion and sometimes even causing countries to go to war, killing hundreds of thousands of people on both sides. While the outcomes of hard-core propaganda may be more serious or more deadly, this does not put soft-core propaganda in the clear as it still manipulates people who should be fully-autonomous, free to make their own decisions without being unknowingly coerced into thinking or acting a certain way. Presenting people with straight-forward facts that do not have any sort of slant or objective to them is always the best way to go if you hope to remain ethical within the eyes of Kant and deontology.

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