

HUMAN NATURE: BETWEEN PERSUASION AND MANIPULATION

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Abstract: Each word is an attempt to influence other persons, as Alex Mucchielli said. Communication, by using words, is a characteristic of human beings, and it plays an important role in everyday life. Communication can be seen as an attempt to share information through a process of symbolic interaction between human beings. It is an essential life process through which humans create, transmit and utilize information by words. Putting words in act, we can express feelings, we can share opinions and we can obtain whatever we want, finally. It is essential to take into account certain ethical rules whenever we start a communication process. As the main purpose of communication is to convince people, this goal can be achieved only by using persuasion and/or manipulation. The last century is a sort of witness as regards the use of words in order to persuade people to adhere to certain ideological precepts and to determine them to act in a certain desirable way by the initiators of the communication process. Practically, there is a fine line between persuasion and manipulation; and in this situation, it is hard for ordinary people to distinguish between them. Manipulation appears like a persuasive process and it hides its true aims. This is the only way by which it can operate and for that it is considered immoral and invasive in the mind and soul of people. Human beings are now in the position to look for a way to protect themselves against such an invasive act and to find a way to distinguish between correct and false information. What can we do? In this study we analyze persuasion and manipulation from an ethical point of view and we search for paths to protect ourselves from the manipulative techniques.

Keywords: persuasion, manipulation, ethics, communication, ethical responsibility

INTRODUCTION

It is in our human nature to speak, to communicate our thoughts, ideas or wishes. In order to do that, we appeal to words and gestures. Communication can be seen as a process of interaction between

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individuals, a process which is mediated by words, gestures, signs or pictures. Through persuasion and manipulation, as specific forms of human communication, people seek to influence, to change attitudes and beliefs, and to mobilize the others to action in a way or another. Communication, seen as an action, has always a specific purpose, and more specifically, it produces effects among individuals or groups. These effects that result from the communication process can be under the sign of good or evil, depending on the intentions of the initiator of this action.

In this study, we aim to analyze the concepts of persuasion and manipulation from an ethical perspective. Important at this level are the definitions of these concepts and the similarities and differences that they entail. The last part deals with persuasion and manipulation from an ethical perspective, and here are highlighted the ethical responsibilities of the sender and the receiver.

HOMO COMMUNICANS

Humans speak and this fact is essential for us in the everyday life. Martin Heidegger noted that: “We speak when we are awake and we speak in our dreams. We are always speaking, even when we do not utter a single word aloud, but merely listen or read, and even when we are not particularly listening or speaking but are attending to some work or taking a rest. We are continually speaking in one way or another. We speak because speaking is natural to us”¹. We cannot conceive our lives without it. As we can easily see, communication is an important feature of humans and the “recourse to language is inscribed in the general framework of human action”². As Heidegger pointed out, “Man is said to have language by nature. It is held that humans, in distinction from plant and animal, are the living being capable of speech. This statement does not mean only that, along with other faculties, humans also possess the faculty of speech. It means to say that only speech enables man to be the living being he is as man. It is as the one who speaks that man is – man”³.

¹ Martin Heidegger (2001). *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper Perennial Classics, p.187.

² Michel Meyer, Marlene L. Cushman (1982). ”Argumentation in the Light of a Theory of Questioning”. *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 15:2, p.81.

³ Martin Heidegger, *op. cit.*, p.187.

As Philippe Breton said, “human beings are full of beliefs and detain the wish to persuade”⁴, and in order to achieve this goal, they appeal to words. The social, cultural, religious or political life could not exist without it. Words play a crucial role in these aspects of human life since without language man wouldn’t have created different forms of social organization. Through language, man not only communicates, but he can exercise an influence upon his interlocutors. Communication, whether verbal or nonverbal, cannot be deprived of a certain finality. Thus, words can be used to express a fact, to inform and ultimately, to persuade. Therefore, words include “three elements in which to persuade can play the most important part”⁵. This fact is also observed by Alex Mucchielli, who holds that “every word is an attempt to influence others”⁶. In conclusion, to convince means to act upon a person through words⁷.

Communication can also be perceived as an intervention which has the goal to change the information and the feelings of the others, and therefore, this intervention implies an action on their system of representations. According to Philippe Breton, this fact is possible because “once involved in the process of communication, we naturally tend too much to convince the others, we think we hold the absolute truth and we are certain that people must adhere to our opinions”⁸.

The influence which is exerted through the communication process is accomplished in varying degrees, starting with the shaping of the information held by the interlocutors, and continuing with their mobilization, if the situation requires. So, we can say that communication is intended to generate effects, namely it aims to determine the receiver to believe, to think, to accept a situation or act in a certain way⁹.

⁴ Philippe Breton (2006). *La parole manipulée*. Romanian translation: *Manipularea cuvântului*. Iași: Institutul European Publishing House, p.28.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Alex Mucchielli (2002). *L’art d’influencer*. Romanian translation: *Arta de a influența. Analiza tehnicilor de manipulare*. Iași: Polirom Publishing House, p.11.

⁷ Philippe Breton (2009). *Convaincre sans manipuler - Apprendre à argumenter*. Romanian translation: *Convinge fără să manipulezi. Să învățăm să argumentăm*. Iași: Institutul European Publishing House, p.22.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p.23.

⁹ Alex Mucchielli (2005). *Psychologie de la communication*. Romanian translation: *Arta de a comunica. Metode, forme și psihologia situațiilor de comunicare*. Iași: Polirom Publishing House, p.82.

Humans cannot influence other individuals only through word because it does not have the power to change itself perceptions, attitudes and beliefs. The influence is in fact performed by using words, by creating a world of cognitive objects for the one who will be influenced¹⁰. The communicator will build this world of objects in order to obtain a reaction among receivers, by reinterpreting old values and beliefs.

PERSUASION VS CONVICTION

Persuasion and manipulation are two distinct forms of communication and people can choose between them. Understanding persuasion better, can help us “make better choices and is essential to live in our ever-changing world where having to choose among alternatives, trivial and essential, is a constant”¹¹. Persuasion is a ubiquitous part of our lives¹². We use it every day and we can certainly be either a persuader or a persuadee. “Persuasive devices hang on our belts or are stored in pockets, purses, and backpacks such as cell phones that are equipped with cameras, texting options, the means to listen to and/or view persuasion on the Internet, and so on, or are available to us via mass media, the Internet and other interactive devices”¹³, as Charles U. Larson pointed out. Persuasion is present everywhere and it changes our lives and our minds.

It is obviously that every communicator has a definite goal and he can share it or not, with the audience. So, we can talk about persuasion whenever his real purposes are revealed to those who receive the message. In turn, if the purpose is concealed from people, it is clear that we deal with a manipulative action. This is the significant difference between persuasion and manipulation. These two processes of communication intend to produce changes at the cognitive level, and to determine some sort of action, depending on the context in which they are released. Persuasion and manipulation are involved where there is a resistance to a particular issue of the receivers. Manipulation techniques tend to paralyze reflection, and to a mental level, they can

¹⁰ Alex Mucchielli (2002), *op. cit.*, p.192.

¹¹ Charles U. Larson (2010). *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility*. Boston: Wadsworth, p.1.

¹² Richard M. Perloff (2010). *The Dynamics of Persuasion. Communication and Attitudes in the 21st Century*. New York: Routledge, p.37.

¹³ Charles U. Larson, *op. cit.*, p.1.

be a form of deprivation of liberty¹⁴. In contrast, persuasion is built on the individual's freedom of thought and free will.

Persuasion is the act of determining someone to think or to act in a certain way, and the result of this action¹⁵. It can be defined as “the process of co-creation by sources and receivers of a state of identification through the use of verbal and/or visual symbols”¹⁶. *To persuade* may be seen as the synonym of the verb *to convince*, but there are some authors who believe that there is a difference between *to convince* and *to persuade*. This distinction first appears at Immanuel Kant, who considers that:

Taking something to be true is an occurrence in our understanding that may rest on objective grounds, but that also requires subjective causes in the mind of him who judges. If it is valid for everyone merely as long as he has reason, then its ground is objectively sufficient, and in that case taking something to be true is called *conviction*. If it has its ground only in the particular constitution of the subject, then it is called *persuasion*¹⁷.

Conviction is more about the rational side of the communication process. We convince ourselves on some matters through objective principles, through our own ideas. Even if the influence is exerted by someone else, it is not a conviction until the information provided are not assumed by the receiver, as it would come from objective principles. Conviction can be seen as “the result of a rational, even logical enterprise, a constraining one because it comes from displaying some indubitable evidence”¹⁸.

In the case of persuasion, the rational and objective dimensions are exceeded. The subjective elements are present too. In other words, the persuader will also use some subjective factors, such as the reputation of the speaker, his charisma, his voice tone, gestures and so on. Broadly speaking, “persuasion uses either logical or emotional means or a combination of both of them instead of force to accomplish

¹⁴ Philippe Breton (2009), *op. cit.*, p.33.

¹⁵ Septimiu Chelcea (2006). *Opinia publică. Strategii de persuasiune și manipulare / Public Opinion. Strategies of Persuasion and Manipulation*. Bucharest: Economic Publishing House, p.123.

¹⁶ Charles U. Larson, *op. cit.*, p.22.

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant (1998). *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.684-685.

¹⁸ Aurel M. Cazacu (2007). *Teoria argumentării / The Theory of Argumentation*. Bucharest: Romania Press Publishing House, p.85.

desired ends”¹⁹. Thus, Constantin Sălăvăștru states that “we are convinced only through ourselves, but we have always been persuaded by others!”²⁰

We often talk about persuasion at the passive voice: *we are persuaded*. It is, however, important to stress out that persuasion, as a result, it is not an effect produced automatically by a cause and more exactly, it is not the consequence of the act of persuasion. The persuadee’s participation is fundamental in achieving the desired result of the persuasive agent. Persuasion cannot occur if the persuadee is not free, if he does not have a free will. This means that there is a high degree of consent in the process of influencing others. The reasons given by the persuasive agent must be accepted by the audience.²¹ From a certain perspective, one can argue that “All persuasion involves self-persuasion”²², simply because we cannot be persuaded if we do not effectively participate in the process.

MANIPULATION – A FORM OF COMMUNICATION

Words can also be placed in the service of less honest purposes; it can be used “sometimes for lies, to mask realities, for persuading others for dishonest purposes, for the manipulation of the masses”²³. The subject of manipulation is getting more and more attention from people because it plays an important role in many areas of our life, such as advertising or politics²⁴.

Manipulation cannot be considered only an automatic effect of the communication system; it is only a possible use of this process by persons interested in it²⁵. Communication can become a manipulative process only when the communicator intends to influence its audience

¹⁹ Charles U. Larson, *op. cit.*, p.2.

²⁰ Constantin Sălăvăștru (2010). *Mic tratat de oratorie / Short Treatise of Oratory*. Iași: “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University Publishing House, p.22.

²¹ Ana Laura Nettel, Georges Roque (2012). “Persuasive Argumentation Versus Manipulation”. *Argumentation*, 26: 1, p. 60.

²² Charles U. Larson, *op. cit.*, p.301.

²³ Tatiana Slama-Cazacu (2000). *Stratageme comunicative și manipularea / Communicational Stratagems and the Manipulation*. Iași: Polirom Publishing House, p.50.

²⁴ Louis de Saussure, Peter Schulz (eds.) (2005). *Manipulation and Ideologies in the Twentieth Century. Discourse, Language, Mind*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, p.169.

²⁵ Irina Stănciugelu (2009). *Măștile comunicării: de la etică la manipulare și înapoi / The Masks of Communication: From Ethics to Manipulation and Backward*. Bucharest: Tritonic Publishing House, p.172.

through other means than the rational ones, seeking for another goal than the one declared. As Richard M. Perloff pointed out, “manipulation is a persuasion technique that occurs when a communicator disguises his or her true persuasive goals, hoping to mislead the recipient by delivering an overt message that belies its true intent”²⁶.

Whenever the speaker is not well-intentioned, in one way or another, we can affirm that he manipulates the receiver. The speaker might intend to make some changes in the receiver’s mind “without respecting the tacit contract in which participants of a dialogue are presumably engaged, thus without providing the hearer with all the necessary and relevant information: it is therefore a case of covert intentionality”²⁷.

As we can clearly see, the distinctive feature of manipulation is dissimulation; whenever this process is used, the manipulative intention remains always hidden from the receiver²⁸. Another characteristic of manipulation is that the sender intervenes when there is a resistance or opposition from the receiver, regarding some problems or situations. If the individual is not convinced of some aspect, in that case there is a need for the intervention of an agent of communication or sender. If the sender cannot influence the receiver through rational means, then he might appeal to manipulation in order to accomplish his goal. As Philippe Breton said, we do not try, when we manipulate, to make an argumentation, in other words, in order to change an opinion, we actually try to impose another one²⁹.

Both manipulation and persuasion seek to influence, but this fact is not specific only to these two types of activities, when the purpose of speech is to influence the receiver³⁰. Along with the goal of influencing people, manipulation and persuasion try to obtain an effect, to determine some sort of action among them. In the case of persuasion, by contrast with manipulation, the persuader declares his purposes in an honest way and those purposes can coincide with the ones of the persuadees. People have the chance to distinguish between valid reasoning and fallacies, and are free to consider a purpose as good or bad. Furthermore, people are given the opportunity to check if

²⁶ Richard M. Perloff, *op. cit.*, p.24.

²⁷ Louis de Saussure, Peter Schulz (eds.), *op. cit.*, p.1.

²⁸ Ana Laura Nettel, Georges Roque, *op. cit.*, p.57.

²⁹ Philippe Breton (2006), *op. cit.*, p.25.

³⁰ Ana Laura Nettel, Georges Roque, *op. cit.*, p.58.

the persuader's purposes resonate with their own, having also the freedom to assume that goal or to reject it.

The difference between manipulation and persuasion lies precisely in the fact that persuasion involves the acceptance and consensus of the receiver, and in the case of manipulation, the exercise of free will is blocked³¹. The manipulator's message is built from the start in order to deceive, to mislead and to determine people believe in something that does not exist in reality. The individual is fueled with appearances and has the illusion that he is involved in a process of persuasion, and that he has the freedom to think and to choose among the existing options; to manipulate means nothing else but to build an image of the reality that has only the appearance of being so³². Manipulation materializes through an action that is both violent and constraining to individuals. In this sense, it is dishonorable and it discredits the one who uses such resources, whatever the cause that may be defended³³.

Therefore, the common feature of manipulation and persuasion is that both try to influence the individual. But what distinguishes them is the intention with which they perform the process of communication. If the sender has other purposes than those stated, and his intention is negative, then we are dealing with an act of manipulation. On the other hand, if the intention is positive or neutral, and the real goals are the one stated by the sender, we are talking about persuasion.

Intentionality can be seen as a concrete commitment to a particular problem, and it precedes a decision that can be taken in order to solve a problem. The intent to communicate, an element liable of ethical appraisal, represents the decision to solve, in one way or another, an issue raised by a social situation of communication³⁴. It is clear that the sender is the only one who knows exactly which are his real intentions. He is able to distinguish between the types of intentionality and he can choose between persuasion and manipulation, in order to reach his goals. Thus, persuasion becomes manipulation when the intention is malevolent and when the influences that determine the changes in the minds of individuals do not come from rational arguments³⁵. We can speak about at least two major types of manipulation techniques, namely those who use emotions, feelings and

³¹ *Ibidem*, p.59.

³² Philippe Breton (2006), *op. cit.*, p.18.

³³ *Ibidem*, p.22.

³⁴ Alex Mucchielli (2002), *op. cit.*, p.168.

³⁵ Irina Stănciugelu, *op. cit.*, p.194.

the one using false reasoning. In both cases we deal with dissimulation, mental violence or the deprivation of liberty of thought³⁶.

PERSUASION AND MANIPULATION: AN ETHICAL APPROACH

Persuasion and manipulation, as forms of human behavior, raise some moral and ethical dilemmas, because “all that is human poses, sooner or later, one way or another, a moral issue”³⁷. An ethical analysis of the two phenomena that are inherent in the process of communication is necessary and useful, in order to understand them better and to avoid possible errors.

If persuasion is seen by the public as correct or good, for most individuals manipulation is the exact opposite. In this case, we can ask ourselves: why should we analyze these two phenomena from an ethical view, since things seem to be so clear? But persuasion is not always what it seems and we cannot say that it is inherently ethical; this would be an extreme assertion³⁸.

An ethical approach on manipulation and its effects on individuals are important if we want to understand why we should avoid these aspects in the process of communication. And as Charles U. Larson considers, “persuasion can make the world a better place just as persuaders throughout history used it to make society a better place, but the phenomenon doesn’t end there—there is a darker side. Persuasion can be used for much good and much evil”³⁹. Thus, “experiencing not merely the knowledge of good, but also that of evil within its consequences, man reaches to understand the real value of good, and he is able to completely be aware of the necessity to choosing and following it, in order to accomplishing it”⁴⁰.

If persuasion is put in a positive light, manipulation is regarded with distrust by people and has some negative connotations. It is often associated with lying, craftiness or deceit. Both processes of communication aim to influence and to produce changes in the mind or behavior of individuals targeted by it. Basically, manipulation and

³⁶ Philippe Breton (2009), *op. cit.*, pp.33-34.

³⁷ Vladimir Jankélévitch (1989/1997). *Le Paradoxe de la morale*. Romanian translation: *Paradoxul moralei*. Cluj-Napoca: Echinox Publishing House, p.8.

³⁸ Richard M. Perloff, *op. cit.*, p.35.

³⁹ Charles U. Larson, *op. cit.*, p.1.

⁴⁰ Carmen Cozma (1997). *Elemente de etică și deontologie / Elements of Ethics and Deontology*. Iași: “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University Publishing House, p.79.

persuasion are two psychological processes that have common characteristics, but they are different if we see them from an ethical point of view⁴¹.

When we deal with a persuasive process, the sender presents his goals to the audience and he must bring strong arguments in its favor, along with the best means to achieve those goals. Individuals are free to weigh the proposed alternatives, to deliberate on it, and finally, to choose to act or not in the desired way by the persuader. These goals can be either positive or negative, and they can be in the interest of the receiver or not. When the interests of the communicator are negative, this means that it may produce some unpleasant consequences to a number of individuals or it may act in their detriment, then we have a clear case of manipulation.

When someone resorts to manipulation, the goal is known only by the manipulator and it is different from the one declared to the audience. In this way, manipulation is considered to be deceiving and immoral, and it is rejected by people because no rational human being wants to be fooled, lied to or used as some sort of puppet. For this reason, manipulation poses in persuasion and tries to leave the impression of a fair process of communication.

Even if the goals of the manipulator could be perfectly justifiable, the simple presence of some constraints on individuals not only allows us to differentiate manipulation from persuasion, but also to identify another reprehensible element of manipulation, the blockage of individual's freedom of will⁴².

Persuasion and manipulation are not processes that can occur accidentally during communication. These processes are deliberate actions, and their initiator is aware of the chosen method in order to achieve his goals. As receivers and senders of a fair process of communication, "we have the responsibility to uphold appropriate ethical standards for persuasion, to encourage freedom of inquiry and expression, and to promote public debate as crucial to democratic decision making"⁴³.

For the process of persuasion to take place in an honest and responsible way, both involved parties must have equal opportunity to persuade and to have access to the means of communication. At the

⁴¹ Septimiu Chelcea, *op. cit.*, p.227.

⁴² Ana Laura Nettel, Georges Roque, *op. cit.*, p.59.

⁴³ Richard L. Johannesen. "Perspectives on Ethics in Persuasion" In Charles U. Larson, *op. cit.*, Ch.2, p.43.

same time, it is required that both agents of communication must reveal their true purposes from the beginning. But the sincerity of intent does not absolve the persuasive agent of the ethical responsibility for the means employed and for the resulting consequences, “since a persuader sincere in intent might use an unethical strategy”⁴⁴.

Even if the goals are not presented directly, receptors might at least infer the sender’s intentions. For this process of communication to be ethically correct, it is necessary to have some critical receptors that can be able to test the information and arguments of the sender. They should inform themselves from several sources and to draw a conclusion only after they are properly informed about the issues that are being discussed⁴⁵. In general, persuaders assume that their audience has the proper means to obtain information and that they can distinguish between reliable sources and the discredited ones.

Both the persuader and the persuadee have some ethical responsibilities in the process of communication. The ethical responsibilities of the persuader “can stem from statuses or positions they have earned or have been granted, from commitments (promises, pledges, agreements) they have made, or from the consequences (effects) of their communication for others”⁴⁶. The persuader must be responsible in front of the people he wants to influence, and in front of his own conscience. The communicator should consider all the options that he has, in order to assess the possible consequences and to balance all the important values that humanity holds. He has the moral obligation to check upon the veracity of information and the validity of the arguments that he wishes to use in the process of communication. The persuasive agent must be judged by the consequences of his actions, by his intentions, by the morality of his message and by the context in which the persuasion takes place⁴⁷.

The receptors have their own responsibilities in the process of communication. They are usually perceived as the ones who bear little responsibility “as passive and defenseless receptacles, as mindless blotters uncritically accepting ideas and arguments”⁴⁸. In reality, persuasion requires an active involvement from the persuader and

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p.44.

⁴⁵ Charles U. Larson, *op. cit.*, p.24.

⁴⁶ Richard L. Johannesen, *op. cit.*, p.44.

⁴⁷ Richard M. Perloff, *op. cit.*, p.39.

⁴⁸ Richard L. Johannesen, *op. cit.*, p.46.

persuadee, both of them having responsibilities in order to have a correct communication.

In order to fulfill his ethical responsibilities, he must have the freedom of thought, of speech and a free will. If man had not been free to make his own decisions, he would have been compelled to act depending on the external pressure and wouldn't have had the liberty of choice. The freedom of speech is essential in forming opinions and in providing a feedback to those who started the process of communication. But this kind of freedom leaves on our shoulders the weight of the decision⁴⁹. And this way, receivers become responsible for the choices that they make. People have a moral and ethical duty not to deliberately harm the others and to be honest about the claims they make, and about their goals. In order to reach their goals, they must use the right means.

CONCLUSIONS

It is in our human nature to communicate and we could not live otherwise. People have the freedom of speech and they can be honest and tell the truth or they can lie, also they can reveal their true intentions or not, as well as they can choose to persuade or to manipulate the audience. It is a matter of choice.

By persuasion and manipulation, people seek to influence individuals, and to determine them to behave in a certain desired way. According to Richard M. Perloff, "the persuasion has moral components. Individuals choose to morally engage in beneficent or reprehensible actions. Persuasion does matter as some belonging to the core of humans' life"⁵⁰.

In conclusion, persuasion can be an ethically correct process, as far as the persuasive agent's intent is positive and whether the stated goals are not contrary to the ethical principles. Manipulation is a pathological form of persuasion and it unwittingly enters into the minds of individuals, and determines them to act against their will. As we can clearly see, manipulation always falls under the moral and ethical sanctions.

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⁴⁹ Philippe Breton (2009), *op. cit.*, p.21.

⁵⁰ Richard M. Perloff, *op. cit.*, p.11.

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