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# Conclusion

My main argument in this thesis has been that the liberal state ought to either ban branding that undermines liberal autonomy or create practical opportunities that allow citizens to properly consent to it (depending on one's take on the type of consent that liberal autonomy demands). In these concluding remarks I want to explore the political relevance of this argument. In doing so, I am going to assume that in order to be politically relevant an argument must be both convincing and able to motivate agents to advance it in the political domain.

In order to assess the robustness of the overall argument it is convenient to break it down into three claims. The first claim is that the minimal theory of autonomy that I have developed is a non-perfectionist account that legitimizes the liberal state. I take it that the argument for thinking that autonomy is the most plausible basis for liberal legitimacy is sound, provided that it is possible to develop a non-perfectionist theory of autonomy. With regard to the theory that I have developed for this purpose, the self-control component is certainly less controversial than the part about authenticity. Fortunately, these components of autonomy imply very similar minimal empirical standards – if my account is correct – so that very little hangs on the validity of my conception of authenticity. I am furthermore fairly confident about the intuitive plausibility of my practical thresholds of liberal autonomy (with respect to both self-control and authenticity), given the outcome of the test that consisted in applying them to the fields of religion and politics.

The second claim is that branding violates this minimal conception of autonomy at least some of the time. If intentions or conflicts (or both) are indeed not recognized in associative processing or automatic goal activation, then there is – I think it is fair to say – solid evidence from consumer psychology for thinking that branding violates liberal autonomy at least sometimes. Finally, the third claim is that branding undermines minimal autonomy for structural reasons, and this claim is certainly more contentious. To begin with, the naturalistic account of culture that forms the backdrop of my analysis is very controversial and has not yet been corroborated extensively. Moreover, my postulation of higher-order social motivations is contested both theoretically and empirically. It has furthermore been tested only incidentally in the context of consumer psychology and not at all in the context of the socio-historical reality of branding. The same holds for my claim that the conflict that such claims generate would make associative processing more effective from the perspective of brand managers. In short, my claims about the structural nature of autonomy violation in branding rely on a host of assumptions and ought to be put to the test, for the purpose of which I have developed a number of hypotheses. Absent empirical corroboration along these lines, it is not sufficiently clear how widespread autonomy violation in branding is and which type of state intervention would be a proportional response.

This brings me to another reason for skepticism about the political relevance of my argument. It can be objected that even if all the claims that I have made in the course of my

argument would be empirically corroborated, my argument would still not have any practical implications because there is no political support for the issue. That is, people simply do not seem to care much about covert influence in branding, especially not if it gives them a reduction on, say, the price of entertainment on television. They presumably know at some level that they get this reduction (on the price of a television cable contract) because advertisements are effective in inducing viewers to buy products. And given that so little actual product information appears in commercials, they presumably also know at some level that such influence is unlikely to take place via deliberative processing. Thus, people seem to willingly sell some of their autonomy to a cable television provider in exchange for a price cut. If there is indeed so little concern for autonomy violation, then it is unlikely that philosophical arguments to this effect will have much of a practical impact.

If we want to assess the force of this argument, then we must know what causes the lack of concern about preserving autonomy. In this regard, one of the most plausible explanations may be what the psychologist Robert Levine has called 'the illusion of invulnerability'.[1] As part of this illusion, most people (at least in the West) not only think that they are less prone than average to diseases and earthquakes, but also that they are less prone than average to manipulation. For example, Levine and colleagues found that whichever feature of magazine advertisements was changed (e.g. product, style or content), subjects were adamant in claiming that they were not influenced by it. However, subjects readily agreed that *others* might be influenced by the advertisements.[2] If there is indeed such an illusion of invulnerability, then it will indeed be very hard for people to be concerned about violations of their autonomy. Even if they accept an argument to this effect intellectually, they may not worry too much about this because of a deeply held conviction that *they* are invulnerable.

If the illusion of invulnerability is indeed what blocks the emergence of a concern for autonomy violation, then I think that there is reason for optimism. For under the influence of research in neuroscience, notions of conscious control are now under serious pressure.[3] With regard to persuasion for example, researchers recently managed to predict the effectiveness of persuasive messages in terms of triggering behavior up to a week in the future more accurately on the basis of measuring brain activity than on the basis of self-report measures. That is, when they asked participants one week after exposure to a number of persuasive messages how much sunscreen they had used, the reported behavior was explained significantly more accurately on the basis of earlier measurements of activity in the medial prefrontal cortex (upon seeing the persuasive messages) than by what subjects themselves had predicted (after exposure to these messages).[4] As doubts about conscious control – that are fueled by this experiment and many similar ones – are trickling down in society, people may be expected to become more open to the possibility that they are being influenced, and hence to become more interested in protecting their autonomy.