



Brands beyond good and evil?*

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Either / or?

Most debates about ethics or the lack thereof are framed around two opposing schools of thought. On the one hand, liberal philosophy advocates values of freedom, the private and the individual; on the other hand there is a more loosely connected set of ideas that advocate society, the common good and justice (Rorty, 1989). The liberal tradition, with its emphasis on free markets leading to all other freedoms including democracy and personal freedom, dominates the debate in mainstream economics and business literature. The brand plays an important role in the defence of free market principles: brands create accountability, loyalty and value. The more critical tradition sees brands as part of the problem, not the solution. Brands are the lubricants of free markets in which the consumption mentality comes to colonize all other forms of life. Brands are the avant-garde of the capitalist quest for world domination, spearheading the invasion of culture and privacy (or what's left thereof).

When people talk about brands and ethics, they normally join one or the other camp. Their ideas miss each other, like ships passing in the night. Both can draw on a set of well-rehearsed arguments that support their perspective whilst subverting the other's point of view. It is an undecidable question, it seems: for what is at stake when the Tibetan independence struggle features prominently in Benetton's communication, or when the Ghetto turns into the cultural resource and reference for lifestyle brands? Is the economy becoming human, finally? Or

* Some of the arguments put forward in this essay have their origin in my book *Brand Society* (Kornberger, 2010).

do brands colonize and exploit the last human refuge – culture, meaning, and identity?

I will argue that these are the wrong questions to ask. Ethics can be neither an exact guide nor a superior judge in regards to what is wrong or right, and what one ought to do, as Wittgenstein (1929/1972) put it in his *Lecture on Ethics*:

Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.

Ethics, Wittgenstein argued, is not a science that can prescribe what is right or wrong. Only ‘facts’ can be right or wrong, but what ‘is’ will never tell what ‘ought to be’. Ethics are not matters of fact, because they cannot be deduced from science; nonetheless Wittgenstein argued that we are in dire need of ethics. It is because of this tension between the impossibility to deduct ethics scientifically and the necessity to base one’s action on it that makes ethics a ‘tendency in the human mind’ that Wittgenstein respected so deeply.

Brands, lifestyles and ethics

How can we theorize the relation between ethics and brands if it evades the practices and procedures of scientific analysis? Perhaps one strategy to escape the conundrum would be to move from a concern with the ethicality of brands towards an investigation of the conditions under which a brand is equipped with ethical potentiality. In other words, rather than investigating some kind of ‘ethical substance’ we suggest asking under which conditions something (a brand) becomes the condition and medium for an ethical practice. This resembles a Nietzschean move: rather than asking: ‘what is ethics?’, he asked under which circumstances the dominant values have become powerful in the first place. Similarly, we can read brands as problematizations in which things collide, forming a space in which ethics are *at stake*: this space is neither ethical nor unethical *per se*, but provides the conditions for an ethical practice (see Clegg et al., 2007). And it is this space which an analysis of the ethicality of brands may want to investigate.

The concept that delineates this space is that of lifestyle. Edward Bernays, godfather of Public Relations, argued that every form of propaganda, including selling products, must, in order to be effective, manipulate the context in which decisions are made. Rather than trying to influence the decision directly, the manipulation of its framing is a more powerful way of influencing outcomes. For

instance, Bernays argued that a piano will not be sold through praising its qualities, but through demonstrating that a proper household should have a music room. Bernays advised staging events and ceremonies in which influential people anchor the idea of a music room as a symbol of culture and progress. People will then start buying pianos because their idea of what makes a proper home and a decent life has been changed. The actual purchase of the piano 'will come to him [the home owner] as his own idea', Bernays concluded (1928/2005: 78). What he took seriously was the notion of 'custom' in 'customer': first and foremost customs had to be changed so that products could appear as desirable. 'To make customers is the new problem', Bernays declared (1928/2005: 85), and the method of producing them was through changing their customs.

Implicitly, Bernays framed public relations as form of governing life: his strategy was to influence cultural values and manipulate symbolic meanings in order to sell products. Nowhere is this more evident than in his talk from 1950, entitled 'How American Business Can Sell the American Way of Life to the American People'. He argues that the American Way of Life is too focused on producing and consuming products: cars, breakfast cereals, washing machines and so on. For Bernays, business has to go deeper than satisfying material needs; it has to understand, shape and satisfy the social and cultural values of people. The business of business is neither producing nor selling goods; it is to lead communities through the 'engineering of consent', 'by persuasion and suggestion to insure that the community will reach its highest goals in health, housing, education, safety, public welfare, and other fields. What helps the community helps business' (1952: 345).

For business, the only way to interact with what Bernays called the community was to expand its boundaries and start thinking in terms of culture, meaning, values and eventually life itself. Brands have fulfilled exactly this role. They have brought about a new way of living life: the ubiquitous, pervasive yet little analysed notion of lifestyle encapsulates brands' power to quite literally stylise life. Brands, we shall see, provide the raw material that we use to build our individual lifestyles. Lifestyles form the context in which individual decisions are made. Through structuring lifestyles, brands frame those decisions. The power of brands is insinuated in the notion of lifestyle: through lifestyle, brands start to manage, control and 'style' life itself. The juncture where the individual relates to objects and uses this relationship to make sense of and give meaning to life, – this juncture is the birthplace of lifestyle. It marks the moment when life was given form and styled through the consumption of brands.

Ethically speaking, this marks a decisive moment: In the past, social structure and status were established through one's position in the production of things:

you are what you produce. Traditionally, class, religion, gender and other social stratification mechanisms co-determined life patterns. In contrast, lifestyle-identity is based on what you consume and how you appropriate brands. Identity becomes a function of brands, appearances and playfulness as opposed to pedigree, substance and tradition. Implicitly, patterns of class, race, religion, gender and so on represented barriers for marketing. Rather than developing products to fit into lives that were based on these more traditional patterns, lifestyle became the powerful context from which individual needs would emerge in the first place. Lifestyle melted all social categories into air and promoted consumption practices as building blocks for individual identity. Brands set out to be the alphabet of that new-found language. Lifestyles are based on people's consumption patterns. They cut across older sociological concepts such as class or status. Lifestyle defines people by what they consume; and this increasingly covers every aspect of life, including leisure, health, politics, work, education and so on. Lifestyle is our grammar, brands our alphabet: Club Med would tell us how to spend our holidays, IKEA how to live, McDonald's what it means to have a family meal, and Nike how to turn hobbies into high-performance activities. Brands are about a form of life, a way of living: brands express the quest for the self-actualization and lifestyle reveals the 'truth' of the individual. Consequently, brands start to govern life itself. And it is from this vantage point that we can start investigating the relation between ethics and brands.

Trojan horses

The analysis of ethics and brands does not follow the clear lines of good and evil: rather than forming an iron (golden?) cage brands have the tendency to subvert and undermine their own rationale. As argued, the possibility of ethics is framed through lifestyle. Paradoxically, lifestyle is a power that individualizes while it has totalizing effects at the same time. The sociologist Simmel (1911-12/2000) has identified the paradox – or tragedy, as he put it – of style at the heart of culture. According to Simmel, culture has an objective and a subjective element. The objective element is the style of a particular school of painting or music. It is what artists share and what makes them part of a larger movement. The subjective part represents the individual's expression, her ability and willingness to create something new. This 'something' is unique and individual as we relate it to a particular creator and her oeuvre. It is in the clash of the objective and the subjective where Simmel sees the tragedy of culture unfolding: the objective structure annihilates the individual, forcing conventions upon her, while the individual attempts to break free from conventions. While one force pushes the individual towards pure expressionisms, the other force deprives individual imagination of its oxygen through empty formalism. The problem is resolved

through what Simmel calls style. Style prescribes clear conventions and objective structures; at the same time, it allows the individual to satisfy his need for distinction and difference. Style allows an individual to identify with a certain group or movement and be part of an objectified culture. While it connects with others, style simultaneously allows one to differentiate oneself from others. Style elevates and equalizes; it creates envy and approval. Lifestyle resolves the old metaphysical conflict between individual and society by combining the two: like fashion, style homogenizes as it forms patterns that the individual has to accept as given. At the same time, style (and fashion) allow us to be who we are as they offer a repertoire for self-expression. According to Simmel, style paradoxically performs both functions: it makes us increasingly the same while simultaneously allowing us to be ever more different. The aesthetization of life in a brand-driven society follows this path. Brands are ready-made props and scripts for individual identity: In a Goffmanian sense, people perform their selves – and brands are the stage equipment that allows them to accomplish that tricky act of feeling different, unique and individual through following conventions. Brands promise freedom and unique personal expression whilst simultaneously creating trends and fashions that homogenize the individual and strip it of its possibilities for expressing itself. Think of all those people who express their freedom, their uniqueness, even their resistance through buying Skater-brands or (if wealthier) a Harley Davidson (see also Smith, this volume). No doubt, brands link our *id* to the ad, offering space for identification, representation and differentiation whilst creating sameness.

Where does this leave us? For Deleuze (1990), the idea that corporations have souls is ‘the most terrifying news in the world’. On the other hand, for the first part of the 20th century, the concept of organizations as soulless machines and faceless bureaucracies was equally terrifying. With the notion of brands, capitalism reintroduces qualities into the market exchange (Lury, 2004). Brands supplement the cold logic of transaction with their chatty logic of interaction. Brands re-enchant the world, after capitalism has done its best to dis-enchant it. Brands substitute the cold bars of the iron cage with seductive images that form the invisible walls around our lifestyles. Brands represent a space in which attempts to challenge the order of things will be absorbed and digested by the system. The revolution is being televised, on HBO and YouTube, financed by ads for brands that have made revolution their business and change their status quo. As Holt (2002: 88) argued, ‘since the market feeds off the constant production of difference, the most creative, unorthodox, singularizing consumer sovereignty practices are the most productive for the system’. Lifestyle thrives on the exploitation of difference, which produces new brands and lifestyles. At no point does the search for difference threaten the market system itself, because consumer resistance ‘is actually a form of market-sanctioned cultural

experimentation through which the market rejuvenates itself' (Holt, 2002: 89). In this sense, brands are, as Askegaard (2006) put it eloquently, hegemonic engines of diversity: compliance and homogeneity would equal system failure. Brands explore and exploit difference: be it hip, cool or hop, brands absorb what's different and integrate it into their machinery. This relentless quest for difference turns brands into potential Trojan Horses. Therein lies brands' ethical potential and political power; they are neither ethical nor unethical *per se*, but provide the space in which struggle for ethics take place.

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