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Mass Moralizing

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Publicity adds up to a kind of philosophical system. It explains everything in its own terms. It interprets the world.

(JOHN BERGER, 1972, p. 149)

The noble lie

The discipline of philosophy has been slow to acknowledge and slower to examine how mass media discourse practices shape the ways we think about and practice morality. Mass marketing operates primarily in an existential register. Its messages no longer focus primarily upon product qualities or benefits, but, at least since the rise of branding, offer instead meaning systems designed to present group and individual identity as consumer choice. Even when its content is not overtly moralistic, such a dynamic is ineluctably moral. The question of who we are and who we want or ought to be is the central concern and territory of ethics. Many media practices, including advertising, have always been at least subtly moralistic in tone and content, co-opting and employing traditional moral ideas and values. In this chapter, however, I will argue that what one might call the ontological dynamics of mass media advertising present our relations to advertising as a
profound and in some ways new moral question embedded in the very fabric of its practice.

At the heart of this argument is the claim that we are fundamentally and even primarily narrative beings. Most of our cognitive activities, those activities aimed at understanding ourselves and our world, are exercised in creating a coherent narrative that makes sense of experience. We are first and finally storytellers, telling stories of ourselves to ourselves and to others into a world we fashion as story. And it is the nature of marketing as story that both demands and will benefit from philosophical analysis. Jhally (2000) has said:

The right question would [be to] ask about the cultural role of advertising, not its marketing role. Culture is the place and space where a society tells stories about itself, where values are articulated and expressed, where notions of good and evil, of morality and immorality, are defined. In our culture it is the stories of advertising that dominate the spaces that mediate this function. If human beings are essentially a storytelling species, then to study advertising is to examine the central storytelling mechanisms of our society. The correct question to ask from this perspective, is not whether particular ads sell the products they are hawking, but what are the consistent stories that advertising spins as a whole about what is important in the world, about how to behave, about what is good or bad. Indeed, it is to ask what values does advertising consistently push.

This chapter explores, philosophically, that is, through analysis of the particular world structures that marketing discourse practices construct, just the question Jhally poses: What is the relation of current dominant modes of narrativity in advertising to moral narrative and moral heuristics?

To deal with this question, I must first argue that all ethics take the form of Plato’s “noble lie.” The rhetorical strategy behind any articulation of ethical guidelines is to posit a human subject which is capable of entering into the description of human nature or world structure that it offers with the idea that such a person will then act in ways that are better for him/her and better for all. We may be skeptical of some or all ethical formulations because they foreground some particular possible relations or behaviors on the basis of one or another view of human beings which we may not agree with. But that skepticism is not really to the point. Each ethical theory describes how one acts once one accepts a description of what generally matters and how the world is, not whether that description has ever been the case historically or theoretically. This is to say that an ethical system will always posit a human subject which is capable of entering into it, and that the posited human
subject does not pre-exist the frame but arises with the ethical framework which has described it into existence. Each theorist frames interactions and elements of human nature corresponding to the demands his/her ethics makes of the people it describes.¹

In precisely this way, advertising offers ethical narratives that explicitly state what matters and describe how the world is, and then place us, or at least strongly invite us to place ourselves, into that description. When they do so, they do not invite us to place some pre-existing self into their narratives. They create identities by means of their narratives which we may adopt. When we do so, we find ourselves in worlds that compete, overtly or subtly, with each other and with the world we take to be our actual world. To the extent that we inhabit those worlds, we do so in terms that organize our obligations and possibilities in different ways, and each of those ways constitutes a moral possibility for being in the world. Each advertisement frames interactions and elements of human nature corresponding to the demands of selling us its product. We may be skeptical of those demands, and even of the world the ad constructs, but that skepticism is beside the point. The very presentation of the possible world of the ad, and the possible selves we are positioned as free to choose creates an ethical framework that is necessarily critical of all alternate frameworks.

The primary impact of advertising discourse I want to examine is the way in which that practice presents us with possible selves and worlds, and so morality, as a commodity, something we can “shop” for and acquire, choosing between one “system of values” or another, adopting them as ways of establishing and maintaining “identities.” Morality as a set of obligations or duties we experience flows directly out of the metaphysics of the worlds we inhabit. Such worlds are narratively constructed. It is decidedly not the case that we find ourselves in a world with these or those elements, with this or that set of relations, and then freely choose between competing moral systems of values. Once we construct a world, by telling ourselves stories about what is and how it is, we have already constructed the moral system operative in that world.

Ethics, then, both in the sense of the process of living our lives, but also in the process of philosophical theorizing, is and has always been a narrative process. Ethics requires and inhabits stories. We tell stories, not just about human subjects and the sort of thing being human is through stories about what being a friend or being courageous means, but also about the way things are, the way the world is, such that this or that character or action is right or good. That is why, for Socrates, some story must be told, true or not, which provides the ground for specific obligations and relations which form the foundation of those values. We do not know how to posit such valuations
without a narrative frame within which they achieve the character we assign to them and that provides the criteria for that valuation. They achieve that character, moreover, not as a result of their congruence or isomorphism with some rule or immutable category, but within and through the narrative elements as they are coherently related by a given story.

**Selling selves through storytelling**

In our world, mass marketing is the dominant source and medium of narrative and argument. It achieves this status if for no other reason than its saturation levels. As Louise Story (2007) said, there is very little space that isn’t occupied by marketing. There was perhaps a time when marketing was a kind of hawking of products, not unlike a mass mediated version of the snake-oil salesman, or the carnival barker, whose clear job it was to arrest attention and induce consumption of whatever ware was for sale. In such cases, the public distinguished the activity of the hawker from the normal activity of their lives. Such activity was a break from the norm, an entertainment, perhaps, but a novelty at least. Now, not only is it difficult to find any space that isn’t carnival space, as it were, that isn’t crowded with mass media barkers, but, if we take into account the way marketing has integrated into most other mass media, such messages are the stuff of daily life, the primary interpreters and narrators of experience for many of us.

Marketing is clearly about selling things by telling particular stories, both concerning the products about which it is ostensibly informing us, and, more importantly, about the way the world and we in it really are or can be. Because its discourses are the primary discourses we encounter, its particular form of argument is the argument form with which we are most familiar. Outside of law courts, or a few other very specialized and formal practices of arguing in our culture, no other practice is as fully engaged in “argument” in the classic sense of that term: a discourse that aims to produce conviction or provide persuasive conclusions by means of linked evidence in the form of grounds for belief and authoritative backing. Marketing arguments purport to tell us if not the “truth,” at least what we might, or even should, believe.

Moreover, it has risen to dominant status by colonizing other narrative forms taking them up as its own. This adoption and adaptation has allowed marketing to fold itself “seamlessly” into entertainment media. All media is, after all, packaged. The images are often the same, the graphics and soundtracks, the “sets.” All are broadcast through the same physical boxes, which, of course, no matter how large and immersive or small and handy, are
still boxes. What we watch on any screen, we watch knowing that what we view is something distant, something elsewhere, happening to others. There is very little content or form difference to distinguish marketing from other forms of mass media storytelling. The real distinction is the truth conventions of each. This difference is largely a propaganda difference. But it is a difference that matters in terms of our reception.

Into these dominant “truth”-telling narratives, which have always exhibited a moral impulse, we have recently transferred a great deal of moral authority. We live in an age of carefully tailored images and exquisitely focused messages broadcast to audiences of staggering proportions at unimaginable frequencies and saturation levels, all saying largely the same few things structured according to a limited dynamic. The “truth” of that dynamic echoes something we seem to always have believed about ourselves: that the truth of who and what we are is grounded in “freedom.” Morality is intrinsically a matter of choice. The “truth” of mass marketing is that we are both “free” to choose who we are or will be, and that the options are limited to a select and narrow set of pre-packaged alternatives.

## Tribes

These new narratives are precisely ethical by virtue of being about identity and identity choices. Marketing, and so now almost all mass media, offers pre-packaged identities as consumable products, but it does more than this in the process: it tribalizes (Godin, 2008). Constructing group identities allows mass marketing to negotiate the tension inherent in presenting a message that purports to be about each individual consumer to mass anonymous audiences. In other words, not only does Dr. Pepper invite us to be a Pepper too, the brand’s advertisements suggest quite strongly that we, of course, really want to be a Pepper too, and imply that not to choose to be a Pepper too is at least odd, perhaps wrong. Such marketing presupposes and constructs a new tribal identity in the process of applying the age-old marketing formula: buy our product and become the special person you always wanted to be and knew you deserved to be. As silly as it may seem on the surface, the invitation to tribal affiliation is almost always genuine.

We may scoff at being Peppers, but there are many, many more tribes to choose from. We have been invited to be Malboro men, or Virginia Slims women. We are told constantly that we simply are either PC people or Mac people. In my time, one was either Ford or Chevy, Coke or Pepsi, Levis or
Wrangler. Inner city youth have carved themselves into groups through identification with particular brands of shoes and other brands of clothing. It is not always a binary choice. Saturn heavily marketed its brand as something more and other than a choice in what car to buy, but rather as a community we may join, complete with nostalgic values and a better way of life. Harley-Davidson would like us to believe that there are no real alternatives to their motorcycle/lifestyle brand; and Starbucks would like us to believe that they offer more than coffee, that they offer a “third place” that is not home and not work, and where we can ourselves be something new and other (Klein, 2000, pp. 15–26). Indeed, a significant part of brand marketing works as an at least implicit, and often quite explicit, invitation to join a tribe, if not a cult (Atkin, 2004). These tribal identities offer themselves as largely shallow but still more or less coherent sets of social, political, and moral values, that is, as ideologies. Of course, these are the largely shallow but still roughly coherent ideologies of our culture. Being a Pepper is not really being anything new or different. Still, these tribes claim to cut across biological and social realities of all sorts, across historical and physical dynamics. They offer belonging as choice, rather than genealogy, as free and freeing, while simultaneously binding and grounding. The choice is always presented as double: not just who to be as an individual, but with whom and to what larger community we may belong. Being a Pepper matters much more because we can be a Pepper too.

Obviously, what kind of person to be simply is the central ethical question, and what we owe each other, both in and out of our “communities,” is a central moral question. Marketing restructures both questions. The decision of who to be is at the same time the decision of what to belong to or whom to belong with, and both are framed as consumer decisions, not social or political, much less historical, decisions. Marketing relies upon the fiction that we are completely free to make such moral/ethical consumer choices. Therefore, in a strange conceptual twist, systems of values and responsibilities, codes of behavior and duty, may be shopped, not as the corollary of market choices—if we want to be a Pepper then we necessarily join all Peppers in a community and take on the duties of that community, however minimal or nebulous—but as the point—we want to be a Pepper because a Pepper is articulated as a set of values and relations to others and the world that we desire or desire to perfect.

The self purchased, the self acquired through market decisions is not one who consumes and feels pleasure through brands, but is constituted as consuming, as identified with and through brands. Such a self is a Pepper, not something else who happens to like Dr. Pepper. That is the primary significance of Dr. Pepper’s slogan. It does not invite us to purchase cans of corn syrup and feel pleasure in drinking them, or even in attaching ourselves to
their brand. It does not invite us to take on new loyalties. It invites us to be that brand. That is the point of brands. They are not understood by marketers to be lifestyle symbols or commodity loyalties. They are understood to be pre-packaged meaning systems we can choose not so much to inhabit as to become (Atkin, 2004).

In marketing, a person’s qualities are almost never presented as uniquely their own, recognized as such, detached from how others view them, and not grounded in anyone’s desire to emulate them. In marketing, a person’s qualities are presented as potential, grounded in a social dynamic, requiring a social system of validation. Experience is deferred and projected (Berger, 1972, p. 132). One of the most interesting aspects of marketing dynamics is the way in which each mass market message needs to say to each individual viewer that the message speaks to him/ her, individually, while, of course, simultaneously speaking to millions of people, hoping each feels the same, as if they were unique and uniquely addressed. Necessarily, then, everything that happens in these worlds happens to someone else somewhere else, even if we are to imagine that someone as us. We are invited to and can merely observe, envy, judge. Part of that judgment is implicitly, at least, moral, in that we are constantly presented with the possibility of moral failure if we fail to actualize the person that advertising promises we can become. The exemplars in advertising are avatars, exhibiting moral possibilities that require the correct (consumer) actions of the auditor to realize.

**Tele-being**

This aspect of tribal marketing, the commoditization of value systems, is enhanced by an important structure in television generally. “Televising,” in the sense of the mechanical reproduction of “what happens,” transforms what transpires into what is transmitted. What happens in the world of our activity, our lives as lived, is not really consumable, at least in fungible terms. This world is a world of engagement and interaction, not products. But filming that world, editing and packaging that world, changes the ontological status of that world. From a world in which, as Heidegger (1962) would put it, we are already-alongside as ready-to-hand (equipment) together-with involved in some project, we are transformed into objects, present-at-hand, now able to be examined, questioned, appropriated, bought. The world shifts from a world-we-are-in into a world-over-against-at-a-distance. Less clumsily (with all due apologies to Heidegger), the world of our activity, familiar and intimate, the context as it were of our being and doing, becomes an image world, the world of seeing and being seen, a little strange and distant no matter
how familiar. It becomes spectacle (Debord, 2000). This transformation is not, or not much, an epistemological transformation, not a matter of seeing the world differently. It is an ontological transformation, a different way of being the world and being in it. One is a world in which our behavior is the substance of what happens, the other a world in which our behavior is the content of a completely other happening.

This ontological shift is not new, of course, and not created by mass media. It has always been around as long as inquiry has been around. To take some part of the world with which we are engaged in activity toward some goal and begin to ask after its nature is to perform the same ontological shift. Television, however, as perhaps the most reproductive of the various mechanical reproductions of reality, has naturalized and normalized this shift in interesting and influential ways. This matters a great deal for a number of reasons. Different ontological status entails different commitments and different potentialities.

Both worlds are not habitable in the same ways with the same purposes. To eat or to vote, for instance, and to view eating or voting broadcast as part and parcel of some advertisement for a restaurant or an election, have almost nothing in common as activities. Rather, both of these activities present completely different dynamics, goals, consequences, and meanings. Further, the element of mechanical reproduction confuses these ontological distinctions. The broadcast of voting or eating, for instance, is the broadcasting of some people actually voting or eating. It is the representation of the substance of some activity as the content of another, the one we are actually engaged with at the moment, the viewing of the news or the commercial.

It is only in the past decades that images of life in action have achieved a fidelity to lived experience such that they can begin to effectively blur the ontological boundary just adduced. Only the most recent generation has grown up fully in an image world where life and image are so fully conjoined and integrated, so mutually referential and reflective. Before this generation, there was an apparent distinction between the world as lived and the world as represented. There was life and there was image and the two were not only clearly separate, but one was dominant and occupied the vast portion of our experience, while the other was occasional, perhaps novel, and largely recreational. This relation has been turned on its head.

Parallel to this phenomenon, there was a time, perhaps, when the interpretation of the world offered by marketing and the perceived condition of the world was clearly distinct for most auditors, even starkly so, as on those occasions when the world presented in marketing found itself juxtaposed against the world presented by journalism in the morning paper or during the commercial breaks of the news program, or, in the case of those...
classes whose conditions do not include consumer power, those occasions when marketing images spread into their decidedly different circumstances and environments. But for many people, those who enjoyed a sufficient level of socio-economic privilege, the perceived conditions of the world came to resemble quite closely those they encountered in marketing, and when other less familiar worlds impinged, they did so mostly in images, offering a glimpse of a distant world brought close but still removed. As such, the “actual” but distant world was encountered in exactly the same way as the marketing world, as a series of narrative images; and we were at least implicitly and structurally invited to encounter them in the same way, so that the image of the “actual” world, of the tragic event, was subsumed under the same dynamic as the marketing image, that is as representation.

The line between “real” and image was further blurred when marketing began using images of the non-commercial world, of revolution or famine, of conflict or social crisis, in its own campaigns, as material for its own world constructions. Marketing is always looking to inhabit new representational territory, and so is always looking to transform elements of radically non-commercial ways of life into stock elements in its own constructions. It is aided in the process by the phenomenon I am here calling attention to the way that so many non-commercial ways of life have been “captured” as media images. The point I want to make is that the technological advances of mechanical reproduction coupled with the swing of mass media journalism toward entertainment and marketing motifs has perhaps eradicated this boundary between the actual and the image. The images we receive from journalism of an “actual” world of crisis and conflict, pain and need, are both in substance and in style, both in technical detail and narrative framing, no different from those images we encounter in marketing.

There may have been a time when encountering, in some magazine or newspaper, an image of starving children in Ethiopia while viewing on the facing page or under the fold some advertisement for perfume or a luxury automobile might have caused some cognitive dissonance, might have generated some at least momentary recognition that the world is not wholly market, that not all events or choices confronting us are consumer choices and opportunities. I deeply suspect that this is less and less the case. We have seen too many images of both sorts, and there has been too much crossover.

Witness the Benetton campaign ads (Figures 1.1–3) where images of war or racial conflict (or harmony) or death and illness are presented, without commentary, as commercial images harnessed to the purpose of exciting consumer interest in their brand.3
In Benetton’s press information (2011) about their campaign, they say:

The photos of the AIDS patient, the soldier and the Albanian emigrants [not shown] were not taken for the ad campaign but were actual agency photos, in typical reportage style, used for conveying the news. These were photos that portrayed the “real” world, fell within the conventions of information, and introduced a new and intriguing question about the fate of advertising: can marketing and the enormous power of advertising budgets be used to establish a dialogue with consumers that focuses on something other than a company’s products? Where was it written that advertising could only portray the absence of conflict and pain?

And even if some images of world conflict do not include in their frame the familiar consumer symbols and signs, these are not necessary for the interpretive conflation to occur. Since marketing no longer intends its symbols and signs to gesture toward particular consumer products but rather to evoke emotional and moral identities, to call up formulaic narratives of possible lives, then the image and narrative of the “actual” world we encounter, even without those symbols and signs, may be viewed as instances of those established and pre-packaged formulas.

Such a tendency is perhaps a natural development of normal human heuristics, magnified by the increased general familiarity with a limited set of
near-universal motifs that truly mass (global) marketing technology has propagated. But the categories are vastly more general now, and the authority for forming them has shifted from personal experience and local authorities to mass media.

**The all-seeing eye**

Of course, as marketing infiltrates every possible space to break through the clutter, as it develops new techniques explicitly designed to eschew the external markings of marketing, to appear to be journalism or advocacy or public discourse or simply the “real” world, then the fact that it is the same medium, the same vehicle of image and narrative as is used by all other forms of discourse just mentioned, magnifies the conflation of its messages. For all practical purposes, the same voice constantly speaks to us. Telling us about the world no longer occurs in clearly distinct categories with clearly distinct functions and mediators, such that we can recognize the authority and motivation of the “truth tellers” as different one from the other, teacher from reporter from salesman. I am not talking about the way in which one form of “truth telling” can be seen to be “like” another. I am talking about the very real way in which none of the “territory” of any one of these forms of “truth telling” has remained intact and discrete. There is no “content” or “process” of education that hasn’t been appropriated by the other forms, and vice versa. All these forms of world talk, of world presentation and representation, have both intentionally and unconsciously borrowed from each other, if only as a result of the perhaps innocent impulse to innovate, to use the latest technique/technology, to borrow and adopt the most appealing narrative frames.

As Boorstin (1992) foresaw, the *pseudo-event*, a “happening” that has been created exclusively for the purpose of being reported or seen, has supplanted the event. Things do not seem to us to be events unless they bear the marks of having been processed to be seen. In this way, and as Bourdieu (1999, pp. 6–7) has made clear, journalistic narratives have lost their dynamic aspect. They do not unfold. We do not see cause and effect, just effect, for which a cause must be manufactured and reported or, increasingly, merely puzzled over. We do not learn of the world in ways that show us the development of the “events” we view. So the “events” have no real event dynamics. It is odd, but the immediacy of media has made media images the narrative equivalent of still-frame photographs, capturing no more than a moment in time, an artificially truncated and objectified representation of life, not life itself, however endlessly replayed.
The illusion of video representation is that we are seeing the world unfold. This aspect has been reinforced by the essentially “eventless” nature of marketing, which, as Berger (1992, p. 153) suggests, exists always in the future (and subjunctive) tense. Events do not unfold in marketing, no matter how a particular marketing narrative is structured to look like an event. Instead, they only promise an unfolding for the consumer upon the condition of their participation in the market. And it is always the same promises. The marketing world, for all its sometimes jittery (multiple frames per minute) presentation, is static. The same goals beckon, the same procedures apply, the same mechanisms obtain. The only variable is the material element: this car rather than that, or rather than a particular airline or even clothing item, offers the same promise of freedom or luxury.

But it is perhaps the ubiquity of the representations, the degree to which we are flooded with our being in the world as content of mechanically representing the world as happening that has contributed most to the blurring of the boundaries between these two worlds. The world we inhabit as agents has been remapped as the world we observe as spectacle. We are, famously, hyper-aware of ourselves as objects and image, televisualizable if not always or presently or even ever actually televised. We have come to think of our world of activity as a model or instance of the spectacle rather than the other way around. I do not want to belabor this point, as many others have articulated this phenomenon with great care and insight. I simply wish to call attention to the way in which this conflation, this transformation, in which this reproduction subsumes the production, allows for our world of activity to be seen by us as consumable after all, as product, as marketable good.

**Tele-morality**

This conflation colludes with the dominant motifs of marketing in which values and ideals are transformed, packaged, and repackaged, into consumable goods. Morality, a dynamic aspect of our lives as lived, is thus transformed into market options, consumer choices. The moral agency we necessarily enact in our lived lives becomes the moral narratives and clichés of those lives reflected back at us as spectacle which then, because they echo across all spectacle, all forms of representation, including marketing, represent themselves to us as moralized products and consumer choice. Reporters and anchors, talk show hosts and commercial announcers are all now moral guides, guardians of middle-class and middle-of-the-road morality (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 46). They are constantly telling us what we should think, how we should act, and how the world should work.
As in all marketing, these narrative moral/ethical products are presented as something we lack, but can gain, merely by participating in the marketplace and making smart consumer choices. Just as with the promise of a sparkling clean kitchen or a more exciting and appealing self, morally inflected worlds are offered to us not as a necessary and deeply contingent aspect of living our lives, but, through the representation of values and moral sentiments as the point of almost all products we can actually buy, as the thing we are indeed buying when we buy products like soft drinks or cars. Morality is represented as something just out of our current reach but attainable by joining the right tribe by means of buying the right stuff.

One of the more interesting aspects, or oppositional tensions, within marketing is the need to simultaneously create dissatisfaction in the auditor with his/her life and lifestyle, while also validating, even valorizing the pop culture lifestyle in general (Berger, 1972, p. 142). The goal is not to make the consumer dissatisfied with the world, just his/her place in it. This has interesting connections to moral heuristics, since, in large part, it offers a similar dynamic. Moral rules serve to perpetuate and consolidate a moral order. Moral deliberation as popularly understood—the individual application of general rules to one’s own behavior—usually results in the failure to fully realize this order. Marketers play off this dynamic of our failure to realize a more perfect moral universe by suggesting that what we are failing to live up to is our culture’s and our personal full possibilities, to be as sexy and successful and happy, not as we might, but as we ought to be. Our failure to realize our more perfect potential in the material universe is a moral failure.

All of this is further complicated by the fact that marketing genres participate in a very limited range of motifs. Most marketing narratives are collapsible into each other. They all present consumer choice as an identity choice mapped along an attenuated spectrum of human being. However, since the identity packages we are offered are thoroughly moralized packages, our moral choices are located along the same attenuated spectrum of human being. Jhally has called our attention to how marketing, since the 1920s, has explicitly sought to link products to the real social desires of people:

No wonder then that advertising is so attractive to us, so powerful, so seductive. What it offers us are images of the real sources of human happiness—family life, romance and love, sexuality and pleasure, friendship, and sociability, leisure and relaxation, independence and control of life. That is why advertising is so powerful, that is what is real about it.

(2000, p. 6)
The truth of an ad is not measured in the potential of a product to fulfill the promise of the ad, nor in the relation of the world of the ad to our lived lives, not, at least, in terms of material culture (the truth of the extravagantly beautiful burger in a McDonald’s ad is never a correspondence with the burger we buy and get). The truth of an ad is measured in the relation of the ad’s narrative world to the narrative worlds of our fantasies. The truth of an ad is the truth of our desires. Advertising executive Jerry Goodis puts it this way: “Advertising doesn’t mirror how people are acting but how they are dreaming” (cited in Nelson, 1983, p. 10). Berger insists that:

The gap between what publicity [marketing] actually offers and the future it promises, corresponds with the gap between what the spectator-buyer feels himself to be and what he would like to be. The two gaps become one; and instead of the single gap being bridged by action or lived experience, it is filled with glamorous day-dreams.

(1972, p. 148)

When an ad shows a family eating dinner together at McDonald’s, all smiles and excitement (see Figure 1.4), it is clearly claiming that eating at McDonald’s with one’s child is a way of giving to the child, perhaps repaying the child for neglect, a way to foster warm family relationships. We do not measure this claim against the “real” world; we measure it against our desires for this to be true, for it to be possible. The marketing argument is that believing enough in the possibility that having a cheap burger in a McDonald’s playland will constitute good parenting, wanting enough for that to be so, can make it so. No amount of believing can make the cheap hamburger a nutritious meal; so McDonald’s shies away from claims of that sort. It makes carefully calculated claims that can be measured not against some testable quantity of the material world, but only against our psyches.

We are offered the opportunity to belong to implicitly or explicitly moral tribes through the consumer process of assuming personal identities, of becoming who we want to be. As is the case in all marketing, in explicit mass media moralizing we are repeatedly positioned as needing to pick certain pre-packaged moral issues to inhabit and fight for in order to gain moral character at all, because, until we pick those issues, we lack it.

Many people have recognized that, as Berger (1972, pp. 149, 152) puts it, consumer choice has supplemented political or social choice, the act of consumption substituting for the democratic act. I want to argue that consumer choice, with its always implicit, and often explicit, register of personal identity formation, has come to stand for moral choice. The ethical question of who one desires to be, what sort of person one will actualize,
is sublimated by the consumer question that carries the exact same significance. Whatever else it is, marketing is a moral system. It valuates the world, and interprets it in morally charged terms. It constructs, borrows, fashions, and refashions interconnected and relational systems of moral symbols, values, and entities.

I do not want to argue that one system of moral values (more to be desired or better in some moral or extra-moral sense) is being replaced by another and consumerist system of values (of a worse or more shallow sort). I want to argue that our historical and cultural systems of values are being (re)configured as consumerist. I think current and dominant mass media discourse practices invite us to inhabit our old familiar world, the world of our familiar cultural narrative frames, attenuated significantly, adopted and adapted, but still recognizable as our values and our meaning systems. The radical change is that it invites us to do so in ways that make of those values and meaning systems commodities, market goods, to be purchased as a way of becoming who we are, as opposed to allowing them to remain non-commercial ways of living and being which, through actualization in our activity, shape who we are in the living (rather than in the consuming).

Is this change for the better? For the worse? I do not know how to answer that question without invoking some, perhaps impossible, rubric that stands apart from the very system I am analyzing. But I do, obviously, think we are participating in dynamics that are changing the way we think and act in the world, and being aware of that change, of those dynamics, is important, if only
to keep open the possibility of direct and effective agency on our part. It is fair to ask, and important to be able to ask, whether we want a world in which everything, even the questions of who to be and to whom we owe obligation or duty, is product, and in which every choice, even moral/ethical choice, is market choice. As I have argued, the choice I believe we do have is a choice between narratives. Once we inhabit a narrative, and the metaphysics that narrative invokes and constructs, we have our moral system. Therefore it is incumbent upon us to critique all narratives, including and perhaps especially the narratives offered by marketing. I believe the only way to do so, and the way straightforwardly available to us, is by critically inhabiting, that is, explicitly relating and interrogating the various narratives available to us.

Notes

1 I owe some of the formulation of the ideas of this paragraph to Chris Elford, an exceptional student in my History of Western Philosophy: Ancient class at Southwestern University in the fall of 2007.

2 I am not arguing that such a distinction is actual, just that we have in the past, I would argue, experienced these events or activities as distinctly different in a way that is harder and harder to maintain.

3 Images used in this chapter are protected by the Fair Use Clause of the Copyright Act of 1976, which protects the unlicensed reproduction of media for the purposes of criticism, commentary, and education.

4 As Holmes (1859) feared and as Berger (1972) eloquently argues.


References


**Discussion questions**

1. How does the marketing you consume present you with the opportunity to join a tribe? What values are presented as associated with or embodied by those tribes? Are there responsibilities or obligations and privileges to belonging to tribes?

2. How does the marketing you consume frame the possibilities of personal identity? What kinds of freedom are offered or promised? In what ways does marketing present your choices as limited?

3. How is identity packaged by marketing? What are the kinds of identity models offered? Do those faithfully or richly reflect the choices you find in living your life?

4. How much do marketing narratives rely upon existing cultural narratives, or the community of marketing narratives? How do they alter or inflect those narratives?

5. As you consume marketing, try to identify both the explicit moral values presented, and the implicit moral choices offered. How do those relate to traditional moral concepts? In what ways is traditional morality re-fashioned by the arguments of the ads?

6. How do the questions of morality—questions of what sort of person to be and how to live with others—change when they are put in the service of selling things?