Manipulation and Freedom of the Will in the Real World

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‘Manipulation cases’ – designed to test intuitions about moral responsibility – have dominated recent discussions of free will. To what extent are you morally responsible for your act if you have been brainwashed, or if your beliefs and desires were ‘fixed’ by your upbringing, or if your environment has been manipulated by advertisers or supermarket managers?

The kinds of cases normally discussed are far-fetched ‘thought experiments’, and the responses they elicit from philosophers are therefore rather unreliable. This project, which involved two second-year Philosophy students (Diana Bruce and Joseph Holloway), Prof. Helen Beebee, and a PhD student (Ben Matheson) involved the two undergraduate research scholars identifying, gathering and summarising information regarding real-world cases of manipulation – for example first-hand accounts of people who have been involved in religious cults, and examination of the kinds of psychological manipulation typically used by popular illusionists and advertisers.

The intention was for that information to feed into a co-authored article for a popular philosophy magazine about the differences between real-life manipulation cases and those far-fetched ones dreamed up by philosophers. In fact, the project ended up taking a rather different course: Diana and Joe developed their own positive philosophical view, based on thinking about the real-life cases, and wrote a paper together, which they have presented at two undergraduate conferences (at Warwick and Liverpool) and will be submitting to an undergraduate philosophy journal. But Helen Beebee also used their central idea -- that moral responsibility comes in degrees -- as the centrepiece of a reply paper she presented at a conference on free will at New York University. She plans to write up the paper -- crediting Diana and Joe as co-authors -- in due course.

Diana said: *"The scholarship was a great opportunity, and I am very grateful that I was able to do it. I gained both independent research skills and skills on working closely with another student to produce a co-authored piece. The work was stimulating and interesting, so much so that it has fed into my 3rd year Philosophical Project. Overall it was a great experience, which has led to further opportunities as our paper has been accepted at two Undergraduate Conferences."*

Joe Holloway said: *"The experience was of huge importance to my academic development. I felt like a genuine academic and got to grapple with important philosophical issues. My research skills were finely honed by the scholarship, and under the expert guidance I have helped to write an article that is both current and useful. This is a fantastic help-start to an academic career, and the scholarship makes clear what such a life entails. This has only reinforced my ambition in this respect. I would still recommend the scheme to all that could apply, even if you are not necessarily intending to take academia any further then your degree. My writing style and my research method have significantly improved, enabling me to write a far better dissertation."*

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