Branding and liberal autonomy
Terlaak, E.

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Introduction

In all contemporary industrialized countries a large cluster of organizations is dedicated to influencing how people feel, think and ultimately act in relation to branded products. But most industrialized countries are also liberal states and as such – on a common understanding – committed to protecting autonomy. If there is indeed such a commitment, then it seems relevant to ask whether it implies that the liberal state has the obligation to protect its citizens from branding. In this thesis I contribute to answering this question in two ways. I both outline the structure that such an argument must have for it to be convincing, and – on the basis of this design – make a case for thinking that branding undermines liberal autonomy.

Outlining the structure of my argument – my first contribution – is the task of chapter 1. In this chapter, I first lay out the case for thinking that liberal legitimacy implies a commitment to autonomy and then explore what an assessment of branding with regard to this standard should look like. The guiding idea of my design is to isolate a core of minimal thresholds of liberal autonomy and to render these empirical with the help of psychology. If the psychological processes by which branding influences consumers are known, then it can be established with regard to a branded message whether it violates any one threshold of autonomy. My second contribution consists in building an argument on the basis of this design. The first stage of this argument, set out in chapter 2, is to spell out – in sufficient empirical detail – what the minimal core among theories of autonomy consists in. Only in some instances, such as in my discussion of authentic mental state formation, do I have to add minimal principles of my own that follow from a commitment to central intuitions about autonomy. Admittedly, my account is more contentious in these places, but since I present a differentiated set of minimal standards, my assessment need not be contingent on the plausibility of these principles (and this will indeed turn out not to be the case).

Since I will argue that autonomy violation is relevant to the liberal state only if it is sufficiently structural, I need a theory about structural features of branding. Unfortunately, such a theory does not yet exist. What I will therefore do in chapter 3 is to apply to branding the epidemiological approach to culture. Obviously, I cannot hope to develop a comprehensive theory of branding of my own in the current context. Hence, I focus on a limited number of key features of branding that can be readily identified on such an approach, and that are also a priori relevant to the normative assessment of branding.

Chapter 4 then turns to consumer research in order to establish whether the use of techniques for which the previous chapter postulated structural pressures are effective in enhancing sales. Although there is no research that speaks to this issue directly, a suggestive case is made for thinking that autonomy violating techniques are effective under the conditions specified in chapter 3. In chapter 5 I go on to ask whether my conclusion with regard to autonomy violation in branding ought to be extended to traditional religions and political
communication. If that were the case, then the framework for my analysis would contradict very strong intuitions. Because I am committed to political justification on the basis of some form of reflective equilibrium, this would count as an argument against the framework. However, I claim that traditional religions and political communication are different from branding in that they do not violate all of the relevant minimal conditions of liberal autonomy. Thus, my argument in chapter 5 is that branding is special in structurally violating liberal autonomy and that this gives the liberal state a *pro tanto* reason to protect citizens against branding.

I do not claim to offer a knockdown argument for state intervention against branding. That would be presumptuous given that my argument covers a lot of ground, much of which is either hotly contested or largely unexplored in philosophy and consumer research. My claim is therefore rather that I render plausible the possibility that autonomy is structurally violated in branding to such an extent that it should urgently become the object of more intense philosophical and psychological scrutiny.