

This paper defends a *relational* analysis of the wrong of wrongful manipulation.

The Relational View: *A wrongfully manipulates B when A, in their interactions with B, influences B's practical reasoning in a way that is inconsistent with A and B relating in an egalitarian manner.*¹

A relational view focuses on how someone *stands in relation to* the person who treats them in a certain way. Intuitively, manipulation is *essentially* relational, so it is surprising that standard views focus on *the person being manipulated*: whether their reasoning abilities are affected, whether their autonomy is violated, whether their rights are infringed. On these views, how the manipulated stands in relation to the manipulator is not normatively basic.² On a relational view the fundamental problem in manipulation is *a problem in the relationship*. §I describes the phenomenon. §II introduces the Relational View. §III addresses the objection that relational facts are not the source of the wrong of wrongful manipulation. §IV concludes.

SI: The Phenomenon

Manipulation is often understood as influence on someone's reasoning that is neither rational persuasion nor coercion (Noggle 2022). If I try to convince you to *phi* via convincing you that your reasons speak in favor of *phi*-ing, I have not manipulated you. Nor have I manipulated you if I make you *phi* through threat of violence. But if I influence your reasoning by taking advantage of rational limitations or emotional cues, in a sense *bypassing* rational influence on your reasoning, then I have manipulated you.

What basically distinguishes manipulation as a concept seems to be two elements: *First*, unlike coercion, manipulation does not change someone's *actual reasons*, either by giving new reasons or changing how reasons weigh against each other. Rather, it changes how someone relates to their actual; how those reasons play in their reasoning. *Second*, unlike rational persuasion, manipulation seems to *bypass* someone's reasoning capabilities, or change how someone relates to their reasons "not in full view" of their own reasoning.

Other features of manipulation are controversial and veer into conceptual disagreement. For example, does manipulation require ill-intent on the part of the manipulator? Perhaps one can manipulate with the intent to advance the good of the manipulated — it can be *paternalistic* (cf. Dworkin 2020, Bengtson and Midtgaard 2023). And is manipulation *always* or even *pro tanto* wrong? Answering this might seem to depend on a fuller account of manipulation, but at least *prima facie* there seem cases where manipulation is not wrong. For example, grocery store layout nonrationally affects shopper choices in a

¹ I follow relational egalitarians in focusing on equality in the context of relationships between people and structures, rather than in the context of distributions (cf. Anderson 1999, Axelson and Bidadanure 2019).

² See Noggle (2020), Gorin (2014), and Gibert (2023, 1, fn1). Of course, there is a sense in which manipulation is conceptually a relational matter. This can be seen in the fact that it paradigmatically requires a manipulator who has intentions directed toward the manipulated. If some stimuli (pictures, smells, etc) are set up by someone to affect my emotional state, this might be manipulation. But if the stimuli are *coincidentally* there, then nobody has manipulated me even if the effect on my reasoning capabilities is the same. While extant accounts do focus on such *relational* cases as paradigms, I claim they have not *located* the wrong of manipulation in its relational nature and have tended to analyze the wrong in such a way that *in principle*, one could be manipulated by a coincidence of nonagential factors. Thanks for Juliana Bidadanure for this point.

way that is plausibly manipulative. But the grocer cannot have *no layout whatsoever*: so the question has to be what the acceptable ways to nonrationally affect shopper choices are. Whatever the final verdict is, it seems unwise to *define* manipulation so that it's always wrong.

I will not here assume or develop any fuller analysis of what manipulation is. In a given case, I will suggest, instead of appealing to a full theory of manipulation, we can instead ask whether the interactions are consistent with relating in an egalitarian manner,³ and this avoids taking a stand on matters raised in the previous paragraph.⁴

SII: The Relational View

The relational view says that wrongful manipulation is wrong because it is inconsistent with egalitarian relationships.

The Relational View: *A wrongfully manipulates B* when A, in their interactions with B, influences B's practical reasoning – though not by providing additional reasons – in a way that is inconsistent with A and B relating in an egalitarian manner.⁵

Consider a specific case and the relational view's analysis. I will take a case from Gibert (2023): "India's partner, Sebastian, wants her to come on a trip this weekend with a group of his friends. There are at least three different ways he might get her to come" (5):⁶

- (1) *Coercion*: India values her reputation among her friends. Sebastian knows this and threatens to spread a rumor about her if she doesn't come on the trip.
- (2) *Manipulation*: India's reasons as a whole don't count in favor of her going on the trip; she should stay home and finish her work. But India has an unwarranted insecurity about being a workaholic. Sebastian knows this and mentions the insecurity to India. India is not in one of her better moments, and caves to insecurity.
- (3) *Persuasion*: India's reasons as a whole count in favor of going on the trip, and Sebastian makes these reasons more salient to her.⁷

What does the Relational View say about these cases? In *Coercion*, Sebastian does not influence how India thinks about her existing reasons. Rather, he changes India's choice situation by giving her an additional reason to go: to avoid the rumor. So the Relational View says *Coercion* is not a case of wrongful manipulation (but rather wrongful *coercion*).

In *Manipulation*, the Relational View says that Sebastian wrongly manipulates India because he influences India's practical reasoning in a way that inconsistent with Sebastian and India relating in an egalitarian manner. Whence the inconsistency? Sebastian

³ To do this, we need a good theory of what relating in an egalitarian manner is. Why think this is easier than having a theory of manipulation? I don't think it's easier, but I think we need a good theory of relating in an egalitarian manner *anyways*. Thanks to Isabel Herburger for this point.

⁴ Gibert (2023) distinguishes between reductive and nonreductive views; on her taxonomy, mine is reductive.

⁵ Wording in the first half from Gibert (2023).

⁶ I follow Gibert with slight modifications. E.g., in Gibert's formulation, Sebastian mocks India. I think a gentler approach has the same effect, and we don't need to add the moral valence of mockery.

⁷ We might worry about the boundaries between these cases, especially between *coercion* and *manipulation*. But on my account, adjudicating the boundaries is not necessary for evaluating if a wrong has occurred. Suppose we say that what Sebastian has done here is merely raise the cost of one of India's decision, and that this cost-raising is graded and we don't really want to call all cases of it *coercive*. We might say that *regardless of the account*, the wrong is located in a rights violation (Gibert) or in a failure to relate as equals (me). The normative question, then, is not whether to count the action as coercion or manipulation, but in adjudicating the presence of the wrong in the relevant account.

differentially influences how facts about India's insecurities bear on her practical reasoning. India cannot talk herself out of the insecurity, so if the insecurity were to arise naturally, she would not be able to control how it bears on her practical reasoning. Sebastian, on the other hand, can toggle the insecurity by bringing it to India's attention, thereby influencing how it bears on her practical reasoning. So Sebastian exercises *power over* India's practical reasoning in a way that India cannot. And exercising this power over India's practical reasoning is inconsistent with India and Sebastian relating in an egalitarian manner.

In *Persuasion*, Sebastian does not differentially influence how facts about India bear on her practical reasoning. He brings reasons relevant to India to her attention, but he does not have additional power over how India considers these reasons. India retains agency over how she reasons about her options and reasons. Sebastian's emphasis on certain reasons does not give him more influence over the relevance of those reasons than India has. So in this interaction Sebastian and India do not relate in an inegalitarian manner, and the Relational View says this is not wrongful manipulation.

Compare Gibert's (2023) view:⁸

The Reductive View: Manipulation is wrong if, only if, and because it influences the target's practical reasoning—though not by providing additional reasons—in a way that infringes one or more of their other rights—specifically, their rights against interference.

On the Reductive View, Sebastian wrongfully manipulates India in *Manipulation* because India has a right against noninterference in her practical reasoning, and Sebastian violates this right by mentioning her insecurities. Why prefer the Relational View? Consider:

- (4) *Omission*: as in *Manipulation*, India's reasons as a whole don't count in favor of her going on the trip (she should stay home and finish her work) and India has an unwarranted insecurity about being a workaholic. But now, India is *currently thinking* about the insecurity and leaning toward not going. Normally Sebastian would try to convince India that her insecurity is unwarranted. But this time he decides not to.⁹

The Reductive View must say that Sebastian does not manipulate India in *Omission*, since he does not infringe her rights against interference, even though his omitting to convince India that her insecurity is unwarranted influences her reasoning. But I think Sebastian's behavior here is wrongful in basically the same way as in *Manipulation*. The Relational View can capture this thought because it can give the same story in both cases: Sebastian can influence how India's insecurity bears on her practical reasoning. He exercises differential *power over* India's practical reasoning, inconsistent with them relating in an egalitarian manner.

§III: Is the Relationship Really the Problem?

Why locate the wrong of wrongful manipulation in *the relationship*, rather than in rights violations or ways in which one's reasoning is affected, which abstract from relationships?

The case below illustrates this objection:

⁸ Given more room I would compare more rival accounts. But I am basically in agreement with Gibert's methodology, so find her account the most pertinent to compare.

⁹ If one is uncomfortable with omissions, we can suppose that India asks Sebastian "I am a workaholic, right?" and he is noncommittal where he would normally emphatically deny it. But although it's delicate, in principle we should be able to be just as responsible for our omissions as for our actions (Sartorio 2016, 46-50).

- (5) *Symmetric Manipulation*: A and B are partners. A manipulates B with ill-intent to her own ends in a way that is bad for B. But B also does the same to A, so that in the relationship as a whole, the extent of manipulation “cancels out” and so A and B relate in an egalitarian manner.¹⁰

Symmetric Manipulation appears to have the following features: (1) A and B relate in an egalitarian manner. (2) A’s manipulation of B and B’s manipulation of A nonetheless seem both wrongful. If (1) and (2) are both true in *Symmetric Manipulation*, then wrongful manipulation is compatible with egalitarian relating, and then a relational account of wrongful manipulation fails.

I think we should deny (1). A and B’s relationship involves two inegalitarian relations that do not cancel out. Call this a *symmetrically inegalitarian* relationship. Let me say more. Sometimes, unequal relations cancel out: if one person does all the laundry and the other all the dishes, the relationship is unequal with respect to laundry and unequal with respect to dishes in the other direction; but with respect to overall responsibility for household labor the relationship can remain egalitarian. In other cases, it’s less clear that unequal relations cancel out: If I exercise power over you in some domain and you exercise power over me in another domain, it’s unclear that these cancel out and make our relationship egalitarian. Why do they not cancel? Bidanure (2023) argues that

the injunction to treat others as equals, with respect to their basic equality, requires more than treating them the same as they treat you. ...We must also treat others in a way that shows respect for their basic dignity as persons (167).

The parties in *Symmetric Manipulation* don’t do this. Even if they *view* each other as equals and treat each other in the same way as they are treated by the other, A’s treatment of B and B’s treatment of A are both *unfitting* in the context of an egalitarian relationship. If in each case of A manipulating B, she exploits her differential influence over B’s reasoning, she in this very case relates to B in a manner incompatible with an egalitarian relationship or a certain sort of basic equality. That B will later do it back to her does not cancel it out: two inegalitarian relations do not make an egalitarian one.

Another worry about the Relational View is that it overpredicts wrongful manipulation. Consider non-rational influence in parent-child relationships. Arguably, a parent-child relation is paradigmatically inegalitarian in that parents are justified in exercising power over their children and influencing their reasoning in paternalistic ways. There is often simply no reasoning with a child to get them to do what is best for them. But it seems the Relational View would predict that quotidian parenting techniques like distracting or tricking one’s children would come out as wrongfully manipulative. Is this a problem?

I think the Relational View can say that while a parent and a child may not be able to relate as *cognitive* equals, they can relate as *normative* equals – largely based on how the parent treats the child. While recognizing that the child can’t properly implement their own

¹⁰ This objection is similar in structure to one that Lippert-Rasmussen (2023) raises against Bidanure (2021): that agents who stand in symmetric relations of domination to each other do not seem to be relating in an inegalitarian way, and thus the complaint against domination is not a relational egalitarian one. I basically follow Bidanure’s response to Lippert-Rasmussen.

good, the parent can at the same time reject the thought that this inability, this cognitive lack of development, makes the child a normative inferior: the child can remain an equal in a moral sense. And so the parent can exercise nonrational influence on the child while relating to the child in an egalitarian manner. The Relational View also predicts, correctly I think, that as the child's cognitive capacities grow, the room for the parent to exercise nonrational influence on the child while still relating to them as a moral equal shrinks accordingly. Because the child's capacities grow in a context where parents often retain much power over them, it might in the end make sense to say that some bad parenting of older children is also wrongful manipulation.

SIV: Nonrational Influence in Egalitarian Relationships

The Relational View can explain why, in certain contexts, manipulation is not wrongful because it occurs as part of an egalitarian relationship. Consider Gibert's account of a friend studying to become a therapist (2023, 27):

She deliberately repeats things you say and validates your feelings ("I'm hearing that it really upsets you when. . .", "It makes a lot of sense that you feel. . ."); she asks questions you know are designed for cognitive behavioral therapy ... and she uses body language to signal concern – for example, tilting her head, frowning her brow, and maintaining eye contact. All of this reveals to you that, rather than listening and responding in an authentic way, she is calculating how best to respond so that you will feel better and come to better conclusions. You feel manipulated in an objectionable way. Moreover, discovering that her techniques are effective – that they actually improve how you reason about your life – would not change how you feel.

Gibert argues that "[t]his kind of calculated behavior can be wrongfully manipulative in a friendship and can be cause for legitimate complaint. You may be warranted in saying, 'Stop treating me like one of your clients; I am your friend!' and it may be apt for her to apologize."

How does the Reductive View explain this wrong? Is it that by treating you in a therapeutic way, she violates your rights against noninterference, while she would not in interacting with you as a friend? In Gibert's own characterization of the situation the complaint is not "you're manipulating me!" – rather, it's "you're my friend, not my therapist!" But what it is to interact *as a friend* is underspecified. Suppose your friend's tilted head and furrowed brow and validating questions were all *authentic* expressions of how she relates to her friends, genuine and natural expressions of care. We might even suppose she doesn't know that these behaviors tend to improve how people reason about their life. Nonetheless, they have the same effect on you. So interacting as a friend is not less manipulative than interacting as a therapist on the Reductive View, nor any view that locates the wrong purely in nonrelational facts about how someone's reasoning is altered.

The Relational View asks what interactions could be compatible with egalitarian relating between you and your friend. In the therapist friend example, it seems important that because your friend understands how these techniques work better than you, she has differential access to and thus influence on how the conversational dynamics unfold to influence your reasoning. She has differential power over your reasoning within the conversation, and this may be inequalitarian. In the case where she does the same things authentically, and perhaps doesn't know they are effective, she seems to lack this differential

power. My intuition here aligns with the verdict of the Relational View: she does not wrongfully manipulate you.¹¹

On the Relational View, nonrational influence can be acceptable or even *good* when its influence on one's reasoning is part of an egalitarian relationship, like a friendship or romantic relationship.¹² This is a good upshot, because I think the difficulty of characterizing manipulation arises from the fact that we are *almost always* negotiating the non-rational influence we have on others' reasoning in the context of interpersonal relationships. When interacting with an upset friend, for example, there seems to be no *neutral* way to proceed that doesn't influence their reasoning in a way standard accounts would consider manipulative (though perhaps not wrongfully so). Consider Sebastian and India again:

- (6) *Nonrational Influence*: As in *Omission*, India's reasons as a whole don't count in favor of her going on the trip (she should stay home and finish her work), India has an unwarranted insecurity about being a workaholic, and India is *currently thinking* about the insecurity and leaning toward not going. India is talking to Sebastian about the decision and asking for his advice. Sebastian tries to reason India out of the insecurity but realizes it's hopeless. So he instead tries to *distract* India from the insecurity, making more salient the other reasons India has, emphasizing the importance of the work she has to finish this time in particular, mentioning that there will be other chances to take a trip.

Does Sebastian wrongfully manipulate India? I'm not sure, but I want to say it depends on how we fill out further facts about their relationship. Consider the question *what should Sebastian do?* Should he let India make her own decision? This is what the Reductive View would recommend. But as I suggested above in discussing *Omission*, it's not clear that an omission is any less wrongful – India could have a complaint in *Omission*: “you wanted me to come, so you let me be driven by my insecurities, even though you could have stopped it!”

Here is a tentative thought for evaluating *Nonrational Influence*: if Sebastian and India have an egalitarian relationship, there is *something* that Sebastian could do such that, were the situation subsequently revealed in full detail to both of them, Sebastian and India would both deem it compatible with their relating in an egalitarian manner. In particular, there is *something* Sebastian could do such that India would in hindsight, understanding Sebastian's motivations and the situation fully, not think that Sebastian was taking advantage of differential influence on her reasoning abilities. And I can imagine a case in which what Sebastian does in *Nonrational Influence* is just this thing.

How exactly this *something* would be determined is beyond our present scope. But I suspect we should appeal to *shared plans* (where these plans can be indeterminate) (Bratman 2014) or *shared understandings* of the nature of the relationship. If a shared understanding or

¹¹ Matters get tricky if we think about the possibility of people being *subconsciously* manipulative, using manipulative techniques without realizing that they are doing so. For instance, is your therapist plan subconsciously interacting with you in a certain way because at some level she knows of its effectiveness? Still, I think the Relational View can handle it: certain behaviors can be incompatible with egalitarian relating even if they are not done fully consciously.

¹² It may also explain why it could be *really hard* for there to be good nonrational influence in relationship types that inherently have deep inequalitarian relations.

plan is developed in an egalitarian context, then specific instances of nonrational influence can be egalitarian because they conform to the shared plan or shared understanding.¹³

A basic thought of this paper is that the relevant normative question around manipulation is not *how do I avoid non-rationally influencing my friend*, but *how do I best non-rationally influence them?* The Relational View says: interact with your friend in a way compatible with your mutual understanding of the relationship as an egalitarian friendship.

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¹³ Cf. White (2022) and Gibert (2023, pp37-38). My view puts more weight on if a relationship can be *egalitarian*.