

Suggestion, Ethics of

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Abstract

Suggestion refers to a form of non-coercive influence that shapes perception, judgment, or behavior without eliminating the possibility of alternative responses. This entry examines suggestion as a pervasive feature of human cognition and social interaction, rather than as an exceptional or pathological phenomenon. Drawing on philosophy, psychology, psychiatry, and ethics, it analyzes the conceptual boundaries between suggestion, persuasion, and manipulation, and explores their relevance to autonomy, responsibility, and informed consent. Attention is given to altered states of consciousness, clinical contexts, collective influence, and classical philosophical accounts. Ethical evaluation of suggestion is presented as context-dependent, focusing on how influence structures the field of available alternatives.

Online Synopsis

This chapter explores the ethical significance of suggestion as a non-coercive form of influence affecting decision-making, autonomy, and responsibility. It situates suggestion between rational persuasion and manipulation, examining its role in altered states of consciousness, clinical practice, collective behavior, and psychotherapy. By integrating philosophical and empirical perspectives, the chapter argues that ethical concerns arise not from irrationality as such, but from the subtle restriction of perceived alternatives. Suggestion is presented as a pervasive feature of human interaction requiring contextual ethical evaluation.

Glossary

Altered states of consciousness (ASCs) Temporary reorganizations of conscious experience affecting attention, perception, or self-awareness without necessarily implying pathology.

Akrasia Weakness of will, whereby an agent acts against their better judgment due to competing motivational influences.

Autonomy The capacity of agents to govern their actions through reflective endorsement rather than external control.

Hypnosis A social and cognitive process in which individuals respond to suggestions affecting perception, memory, or action.

Placebo effect Clinical improvement primarily driven by expectations and beliefs rather than specific physiological mechanisms.

Rationality The capacity for reflective evaluation of reasons, alternatives, and consequences in decision-making.

Suggestibility The disposition to accept and act upon suggestions from others or oneself.

Suggestion A form of influence through which a subject adopts beliefs or behaviors without explicit critical verification.

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Key Points

- Suggestion is a non-coercive form of influence that preserves formal choice while shaping perceived alternatives.
- Ethical concerns arise when suggestion limits critical reflection rather than when it induces error.
- Suggestion operates in ordinary cognition, altered states, and collective contexts.
- The boundary between persuasion and manipulation is context dependent.
- Ethical evaluation focuses on autonomy, responsibility, and informed consent.

Introduction

Suggestion can be understood as a form of non-coercive influence that directs an individual's behavior or experience while preserving the possibility of alternative responses. It may be direct or indirect, explicit or implicit, intentional or unintentional, but its defining feature is that it orients action or thought without eliminating choice. When external constraints remove the possibility of refusal, the phenomenon ceases to be suggestion and becomes coercion or automatism (Sunstein, 2016). This non-coercive character creates a paradox: suggestion does not compel a response, yet it can produce effects experienced as compelling, particularly when repeated or internalized, as in self-fulfilling prophecies or autosuggestion. Its effectiveness varies among individuals, depending on dispositions, expectations, or contextual factors. A central mechanism of suggestion is the subtle reduction of perceived alternatives. Suggestive contexts, including questions, may implicitly define acceptable options, orienting cognition without making the limitation explicit. Suggestion is closely linked to motivation, arising from the interaction between the subject's needs or inclinations and the situational context (Gheorghiu *et al.*, 1989).

From an ethical perspective, suggestions raise important questions regarding the boundary between persuasion and freedom, the origins of motivation, and how opportunities for action may be structured—or surreptitiously constrained—within human experience. Recognizing these dynamics supports a nuanced understanding of autonomy, responsibility, and consent.

The notion of suggestion is the nexus of numerous disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and psychiatry. It also encompasses a wide array of issues, particularly those pertaining to moral agency and responsibility. This unique position makes it particularly relevant in any discussion on topics related to applied ethics.

Conceptual Background and Definitions

The concept of suggestion was initially utilized within a philosophical framework by Gorgias (c. 483–375 BCE), a Greek sophist and rhetorician. Plato would later define the art Gorgias founded as psychagogia, the leading of souls through speech (Phaedrus 261a). The term carried a heavier history: before it named a technique of persuasion, psychagogia named the summoning of the dead. Rhetoric inherited its vocabulary from possession, a connection taken up in the following section. The contemporary conception of suggestion as the insinuation of a belief or impulse into the mind of the subject has its origins in the domains of psychology, medicine and philosophy, with its conceptual development occurring in the late 19th century. This development took place within the broader context of studies on hypnosis and interpersonal influence. Concomitant with the progressive empirical orientation of psychological research in the 20th century, interest in the theoretical conceptualization of suggestion diminished. Research has historically prioritized the examination of factors that promote suggestive responses, rather than focusing on the conceptualization of the phenomenon itself. The result was a situation in which suggestion was often described in negative terms, indicating what it is not, rather than through a shared positive definition.

Since the inception of research in this field, the term has presented considerable difficulties in terms of definition. Authors such as Bernheim, Janet, and McDougall endeavored to elucidate its meaning, while others, including Binet, underscored its inherently plural and non-unitary character, eschewing any effort to formulate a singular definition (Ellenberger, 1970). Despite the passage of time, a consensus on a universally accepted definition remains elusive. Classical interpretations are primarily referenced for their historical value or to underscore specific research traditions. Dictionaries pertaining to psychology, medicine, and philosophy reflect this uncertainty, presenting heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory definitions (Gheorghiu *et al.*, 1989).

The correlation between suggestion, hypnosis and persuasion is evident in contemporary socio-psychological and neuropsychological research. A significant number of studies in this field have shown that phenomena attributed to hypnosis and persuasion are closely related to the effects of direct or indirect suggestion. The propensity for psychological susceptibility to persuasion has been linked to personalities that are more open to suggestion (Zahedi *et al.*, 2024).

Religious and Spiritual Practices

In preliterate and oral societies, suggestive practices are embedded in communal life and serve multiple social functions (Lewis, 1971). These include healing rites, conflict mediation, rites of passage, and the reinforcement of communal identities.

Suggestive rituals are often associated with specific social roles (e.g., healers, shamans, spirit mediums), and may involve music, rhythmic movement, or psychoactive substances (entheogens) that facilitate altered experience. Suggestive and auto suggestive techniques were absolutely part of poetic art, and the features of oral poetry were inherently hypnotic. Medicine and religion (the identity between the two in preliterate societies has been widely discussed by many scholars) were other important fields where suggestive methods used to play an important role. Most of these situations (oral poetry, healing ceremonies, mystic rituals) are characterized by any form of possession. Possession is therefore the key concept for understanding suggestion in preliterate societies.

From an ethical perspective, suggestive practices in religious and spiritual contexts might raise some normative questions. First, whether participants engage in suggestive rituals with informed understanding of the processes and implications for their beliefs and agency. Also, the implications of suggestive practices for psychological and social well-being should be considered, particularly where individuals attribute distress to external forces or relinquish personal control in culturally sanctioned ways. Finally, it is paramount that cultural norms and belief systems do not prevent distinctions between sacred experiences and clinical phenomena (Celidwen *et al.*, 2023).

These considerations do not assume the truth or falsity of specific spiritual claims. Rather, they focus on the conditions under which influence occurs and on the ethical significance of suggestive practices within communities. Ethical analysis emphasizes two central principles: respect for people and the risk of manipulation. It also includes the protection of individual agency, even within culturally meaningful practices. While indigenous communities have the right to preserve their cultural traditions, they are simultaneously entitled to safeguards that uphold personal autonomy in a globally interconnected context.

Suggestion and Altered States of Consciousness

Contemporary neuroscience conceives consciousness as a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon. Two fundamental dimensions are distinguished: the level of consciousness, referring to alertness and arousal, and the contents of consciousness, encompassing perceptions, emotions, thoughts, and self-awareness (Hobson and Stickgold, 1995).

Many so-called *altered states of consciousness* (ASC) involve not a reduction of consciousness but a reorganization of its contents and functional structure. Consciousness is inherently variable, not only across different conditions—such as sleep, meditation, hypnosis, dissociation, or psychoactive experiences—but also over shorter temporal scales. Trance is part of everyday life, think, for instance, of automatic behaviors, “the common everyday trance” (Rossi, 1982, p. 22). Suggestibility and hypnotic susceptibility fluctuate systematically throughout the day, reflecting ultradian rhythms in wakefulness. Neurologically, such rhythms correspond to alternating patterns of hemispheric dominance and contribute to variations in the readiness to respond to external influence (Wolman and Ullman, 1986).

The ethical relevance of these dynamics is significant. Ordinary waking consciousness, commonly used as a baseline for assessing autonomy and decision-making capacity, is itself a pragmatic reference rather than an absolute norm. Its ethical significance derives from its association with relatively stable executive control, communicative competence, and social coordination, rather than from any intrinsic normative superiority.

Both longer-term altered states and short-term ultradian fluctuations can influence attention, judgment, and the ability to critically evaluate information, without eliminating agency altogether. Ethical evaluation therefore requires a context-sensitive approach, recognizing that susceptibility to influence is a natural, dynamic feature of human cognition. From this perspective, the term “altered” does not imply deficiency or pathology. Taking these insights into account allows for more nuanced assessments of responsibility, consent, and moral agency. It acknowledges that cognitive and emotional capacities are modulated by time and context.

Content, Form, and Modality of Suggestion

To adequately describe the variety of suggestive phenomena, it has been proposed that a distinction be made between the content, form, and modality of suggestion. Content refers to the suggestion's implications for experience and behavior, while form refers to the contexts in which the suggestion takes shape (e.g., analogy, imitation, involvement, situational pressure). Modality indicates the concrete means of transmission, whether direct or indirect, verbal or nonverbal. These distinctions are not rigid; rather, they offer a framework for comparing suggestion with other forms of influence (Gheorghiu *et al.*, 1989).

Content

In the realm of content analysis, it is imperative to draw a distinction between what has been termed “deceptive suggestion” and “imaginative suggestion” (Kirsch *et al.*, 2011). Most suggestions are distinguished by an element of deception, as their objective is to induce the subject to perceive the world in a manner that deviates from its actual or historical state. In such cases, the act of suggestion gives rise to significant ethical dilemmas, as the manipulation of perception has the potential to infringe upon the subject's autonomy and capacity for independent judgment. The crux of the issue does not lie in the efficacy of the response;

rather, it is the deliberate manipulation of facts by the individual who puts forth the suggestion. This deliberate act involves a direct involvement in the moral responsibility of the individual.

A paradigmatic example is placebos, which are substances devoid of active ingredients yet are presented as efficacious drugs. Furthermore, leading questions have the potential to disseminate false information regarding past events. In contrast, suggestions employed in hypnotherapy are frequently not deceptive. The objective of these discourses is not to instill the belief that the external world has undergone a transformation or has a different objective reality. In contrast, hypnotized subjects are instructed to engage in fantasies, which engender pleasant and relaxing subjective experiences that deviate from objective reality without any deliberate intent to deceive. From an ethical perspective, these cases underscore the capacity of suggestion to influence individual perception and experience without necessitating a violation of external truth. This shift in focus signifies a transition from the domain of lying to that of freedom and internal awareness.

Forms

Suggestions can also be distinguished by the context in which they are employed to influence the target: for example, through analogy, signals, model situations, involvement, or challenge.

Analogy can be defined as the phenomenon in which a suggestion arises from the perceived similarity between reality and its representation. Metaphors are often equated with factual circumstances or cognitions that serve as useful tools for exploring the former. The phenomenon of suggestion has been demonstrated in a variety of contexts, including déjà vu experiences and the formation of false generalizations resulting from the "halo effect."

Signals are defined as indications, instructions, and suggestions received in everyday life that direct attention and reduce consideration of alternatives, thereby facilitating substitution processes.

Participation in behavioral models has been demonstrated to induce imitation and conformity, often without the subject perceiving the external influence on their decision.

Active involvement in an experience has been demonstrated to promote suggestive adherence through emotions, cognitive associations, and moods. This involvement can, at times, result in a limitation of self-control. To achieve their goals, individuals often minimize the complexity of challenges by adopting protective, avoidance, relief, or compensation strategies. They use self-suggestion to encourage themselves to choose a particular alternative, procrastinate, or avoid certain decisions.

Modality

Classifying modalities of suggestion reveals that influence can be overt or covert, individual or collective, direct or mediated. It also shows that influence always affects the subject's alternatives, raising ethical questions about freedom of choice and moral responsibility.

The most well-known of these categories is the distinction between direct and indirect suggestion (Sidis, 1899). Direct suggestion is characterized by the clarity and immediacy of the influence exerted on the subject, while indirect suggestion acts in a mediated way, concealing the intention to influence. According to Erickson's teaching (Rossi, 1982), indirect suggestion is characterized as a permissive form of influence, while direct suggestion is defined as an authoritarian mode. However, this approach is not without its challenges, as direct influence can also be achieved in a permissive and non-authoritarian manner. Sidis (1899) is a seminal work in the field.

Other salient distinctions pertain to the provenance of the suggestion, delineating between autosuggestion, heterosuggestion, and collective suggestions. The collective dimension of suggestion has been the subject of extensive investigation chiefly by French scholars such as Gabriel Tarde and Gustave Le Bon who characterized crowd behavior as highly suggestible, emotionally influenced, and susceptible to a loss of individual critical thinking. Group dynamics, through mechanisms of identification and emotional contagion, amplify the predisposition to suggestion and can lead to phenomena such as collective hysteria, conformism, or fanaticism. In totalitarian regimes, suggestion is frequently employed as a mechanism of social control through propaganda, the reiteration of slogans, and the fabrication of common enemies, strategies that engender uniformity of thought (Canetti, 1960-1984).

Suggestion, Rationality, and Decision-Making

Suggestion has been associated with irrationality or emotional influence. Literature has frequently characterized suggestion as a phenomenon marked by the attenuation or elusion of the rational functions of thought and judgment. Non-rational is often equated with the irrational or interpreted as the simple prevalence of emotional factors over reasoning. However, this opposition risks being misleading. Many suggestive processes do not present themselves as openly irrational, nor as mere compulsive automatisms: they can coexist with plausible reasoning and with the subjective perception of having acted for good reasons. In such cases, rationality is not absent, but it does not play a decisive critical control role. Similarly, the absence of a response to suggestion cannot automatically be interpreted as evidence of full rationality or critical autonomy. In contexts of indirect or disguised influence, both adherence and non-adherence can occur without the agent recognizing the situation as suggestive.

A distinctive feature of suggestion can therefore be identified not so much in irrationality in the strict sense, but in the limitation of alternatives. A response is accepted as if it were the only available option, even when rational deliberation is impossible due to its compulsive nature, which leaves no room for alternative solutions.

In ethics, the distinction between rational and non-rational forms of influence is commonly used to frame discussions of autonomy, responsibility, and consent. In areas such as medicine, institutional communication, and public persuasion, ethical analysis often focuses on how suggestion operates in relation to agents' capacities for reasoning and decision-making, and on whether influence that does not proceed through explicit rational deliberation can nonetheless be accommodated within accepted ethical frameworks. Within this context, attention is directed not only to the presence of cognitive errors or false beliefs, but also to the structure of the decision-making process itself. Ethical discussions emphasize whether individuals retain the ability to subject their choices to critical reflection, including awareness of available alternatives and the possibility of revising preferences or intentions. Practices may therefore raise ethical concerns when they limit the scope of rational evaluation, for example by shaping the salience of options or by discouraging reflective scrutiny, rather than by directly inducing mistaken beliefs (Hilgard, 1977).

Finally, the presence of suggestive influence does not necessarily exclude the existence of rational elements. Indeed, plausible arguments and explicit reasoning can enhance the effectiveness of a suggestion. Consequently, it is not uncommon for individuals to interpret decisions guided by suggestive influence as rational decisions. The distinction between rational adherence and suggestive response cannot be clearly delineated based on the mere presence or absence of argumentative processes (Spangenberg, 1977).

Ethical Relevance of Suggestion

From an ethical perspective, suggestion may be problematic not because it induces strong irrational responses, but because it reduces the space for rational evaluation, rendering some options invisible or unviable. In this sense, suggestion is a borderline case for applied ethics, situated between rational persuasion and manipulation (Sunstein, 2016).

The term "suggestion" is derived from the Latin *subgerere*, which translates to "to place under" or "to insinuate", "to slip something under". In fact, it is precisely in the process of "slipping under" that one of the decisive characteristics of the suggestive effect is found. Whatever the elements supported by the categories of suggestion or whatever methods of manipulation are employed or arise spontaneously, the effects of suggestion always seem to correspond to a substitution or replacement. This phenomenon pertains to a process in which content does not impose itself as a constraint; rather, it gradually replaces the available alternatives until it is experienced as the only appropriate response to the situation. The treatment of similarities as identities, hypotheses as certainties, and allusions as established facts is a hallmark of the scholarly approach. The subject's response suggests a lack of consideration for other viable possibilities, despite these not being formally excluded (Shabo, 2008).

In this sense, suggestion should not be immediately understood as deception or error, nor should its outcome be necessarily considered false or harmful. The philosophically salient point pertains to the transformation of the field of alternatives, wherein the proposed response is accepted "as if" it were imposed by the situation itself. The phenomenon of suggestion is ethically problematic due to the *de facto*, but not *de jure*, suspension of the possibility of choice that characterizes it. This structural element gives rise to inquiries concerning freedom, responsibility, and the conditions of autonomous judgment.

In summary, the ethical evaluation of suggestion requires a contextual assessment of the conditions under which influence is exercised. Just because the subject did not make use of the possibilities of evasion available in principle in the situation of suggestion, it cannot be inferred that the substitution that occurs would not be useful to him or that the insinuated content must necessarily be false.

Suggestibility

Suggestibility is the predisposition to accept and act on the suggestions of others, playing a central role in human learning, social coordination, and adaptation. Laboratory and historical evidence, including Asch's conformity studies and cases of *mass suggestion*, demonstrate its effects at both individual and collective levels (Shabo, 2008). While suggestibility can facilitate cooperation and social learning, its deliberate use raises ethical concerns: influencing beliefs or behavior through suggestive means must be assessed in terms of individual autonomy, transparency, and opportunities for critical reflection, particularly when social or technological amplification magnifies its impact (Arqoub et al., 2019).

From an evolutionary perspective, suggestibility is observable in social mammals, particularly primates, where responsiveness to conspecifics' emotional and behavioral cues supports coordination and survival. In social species, sensitivity to others' expressions enables rapid alignment of behavior in response to shared threats. Suggestibility functions as a mechanism of social cohesion rather than a cognitive deficiency. High suggestibility should not be equated with gullibility, nor low suggestibility with greater rational autonomy; rather, it represents a variable disposition shaping responses to social information, expectations, and normative signals. Wrote B. Sidis "Suggestibility is the cement of the herd, the very soul of the primitive social group [...] Social life presupposes suggestion. No society without suggestibility. Man is a social animal, no doubt; but he is social because he is

suggestible. Suggestibility, however, requires disaggregation of consciousness; hence, society presupposes a cleavage of the mind" (Sidis, 1899, p. 320)

Social psychology systematically examined these dynamics in the mid-twentieth century. Conformity studies revealed that individuals often adjust perceptions and judgments to align with group expectations, even when these conflict with evidence. Such findings highlight the role of suggestibility in collective behavior and social coordination, rather than individual pathology. At the collective level, suggestibility may manifest as *mass psychogenic phenomena*, in which groups exhibit shared beliefs, behaviors, or symptoms without identifiable physical causes (Cialdini, 2021). These episodes often arise from interactions among social stress, expectation, and communicative amplification, demonstrating how suggestibility extends beyond direct interpersonal influence into broader cultural and media environments.

We are multi-channel senders and receivers. Facial expressions, prosodic elements of speech, vocal intonation, breathing, eye contact, and gestures (even micro gestures), subliminal messages of any kind, including pheromones, are all bound together in an ongoing feedback system of nonverbal communication. Contemporary digital media intensify these dynamics by amplifying emotionally salient content and reinforcing shared interpretations, frequently constraining opportunities for critical evaluation. While such processes can be used for socially beneficial purposes, they also raise ethical concerns regarding manipulation, misinformation, and erosion of reflective autonomy.

Ethical considerations are central in experimental contexts. Procedures that may induce false memories require debriefing to correct misinformation and mitigate lasting effects. Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and professional guidelines mandate informed consent, minimal deception, protections for vulnerable populations, and the right to withdraw, ensuring respect for autonomy, participant welfare, and scientific integrity (Sunstein, 2016).

From a broader ethical standpoint, the core issue is not whether suggestibility produces desirable outcomes, but under what conditions influencing belief and behavior through suggestive means is morally acceptable. Ethical assessment therefore emphasizes respect for individual agency, transparency of influence, and the availability of meaningful alternatives for reflection and dissent. The legitimacy of appealing to suggestibility—particularly at scale—must be evaluated with attention to pluralism, power asymmetries, and respect for persons, rather than solely on the intended benefits of the influence.

Classical Perspectives: Gorgias of Leontini

Many of the issues surrounding suggestibility were first addressed in the late fifth century BCE by the Greek philosopher Gorgias of Leontini, a figure historically less studied but of increasing contemporary interest. His speculation remains a paradigm for those theories that postulate that suggestion might play a major role in everyday life, notably in ethics (Rosenmeyer, 1955).

Gorgias's theory posited that human beings desire certainty yet exist in a state of perpetual uncertainty, characterized by an indistinct recollection of the past, an inability to fully comprehend the present, and an inability to predict the future. Consequently, they may be persuaded to construct illusions that may enable them to live.

Gorgias contended that the human mind is intrinsically passive. This passivity is characterized by two processes: receptiveness to sensory impressions and the openness to language. Persuasive language can only be effective if it successfully engages the target audience through a process of suggestion. Gorgias's theory may be reconstructed as resting on three factors: an external influence, which he termed "powerful speech"; internal dispositions, which he referred to as "opinion"; and the optimal timing, or "the opportune time", which he called "kairòs".

Powerful speech is not primarily rational or emotional (although it can be dressed in rational or emotional arguments), but functions through its formal and aesthetic qualities, akin to charm or musical effects. Furthermore, Gorgias believed that theatre, poetry and rhetoric all originate from this captivating power of language.

In a modern context, opinion is generally understood to refer to a personal perspective or viewpoint. In the view of Gorgias, it signifies the inherent uncertainty of the human condition that emerges when reason is unable to distinguish between different alternatives. Gorgias argued that this condition is nothing but the constitutive human situation.

The third element is the kairòs, the opportune and decisive moment for decision or action, the critical time. This concept is one of the most intriguing of the ancient Greek world. On this reading, Gorgias rejected the idea that eternity is the truth of time, and held time to be essentially discontinuous, characterized by right and wrong moments. Kairòs is the key to understanding the significance of timing in various fields, including politics, war, rhetoric, music and persuasion.

Finally, Gorgias's view is that suggestion is akin to a pharmaceutical agent (pharmakon). The Greeks attributed a dual sense to this word, both "medicine" and "poison". Gorgias himself makes the point: as different drugs drive off different humours from the body, some putting an end to disease and others to life, so different words act upon the soul (*Encomium of Helen* 14). When suggestion is used to create beneficial illusions, deception becomes a medication that is ethically legitimate and preferable to the truth. Gorgias termed this, in his remark on tragedy, a rightful deception.

Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* is an early systematic treatment of the conditions under which an agent may be exempted from blame, and his threefold framework—powerful speech, opinion, and opportune time—remains foundational for understanding suggestion, agency, and their ethical implications within social contexts, including casuistry, contextualist, and feminist approaches to ethics.

Domains of Application

Suggestion was traditionally confined to four main domains: hypnosis and hypnotherapy; clinical practice and placebo; information and informed consent; psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. The debate surrounding these domains continues, as researchers seek to determine whether they constitute distinct categories or merely interconnected manifestations of a singular phenomenon. In any case, the significance of these four domains, in conjunction with the fact that suggestion is central to each of them, renders it imperative to discuss the ethical implications of each domain in isolation.

Hypnosis and Hypnotherapy

The term "hypnosis" was coined by the Scottish surgeon James Braid in the 1840s. However, the practice of hypnosis can be traced back to ancient times, when it was utilized by Egyptian and Greek priests. Historically, shamans and sorcerers have employed trance techniques to enhance their clairvoyance and offer cures. It was Franz Anton Mesmer who, in the mid-1700s, pioneered a new era of research and applications in what we now term "clinical practice."

The interest in hypnosis reached its acme in France toward the end of the nineteenth century with a renowned controversy between the school of Nancy, led by Hippolyte Bernheim (1840–1919), and the school of Paris, led by Jean Martin Charcot (1825–1893). Bernheim asserted that hypnosis is a psychological phenomenon resulting from suggestion. He believed that suggestion can act as an idea that substitutes the direct sensory impulse in the reflex loop. He referred to this phenomenon as the ideomotor reflex. In contrast, Charcot believed that hypnosis represented a pathological state of the nervous system, manifesting in individuals afflicted with hysteria. Charcot's works had a significant impact on Pierre Janet (1859–1947), one of the most prominent scholars of his era. Janet's initial observation was that hypnosis can effectively treat certain mental disorders by restoring forgotten memories to the conscious mind. He also noted that dissociative symptoms can be effectively reproduced using hypnosis. Janet concluded that hypnosis and dissociation are both the result of the same element, a psychological state characterized by a deficiency in mental energy that hinders the integration of various mental activities. Hypnosis experienced a period of popularity until the early 20th century, after which its use in therapy gradually decreased. The utilization of the term in a clinical setting persisted solely amongst Janet and select American psychiatrists, including M. Prince and B. Sidis.

In the post-World War II era, the American scholar Milton H. Erickson emerged as a seminal figure in the field of hypnotherapy, significantly contributing to its theoretical and clinical development. He advocated what he termed as a "naturalistic approach" to hypnosis. This concept is predicated on the notion that hypnosis constitutes an extension of normal human experience, specifically the "common everyday trance." The influence of Erickson's approach transcends the conventional boundaries of hypnotherapy. From a technical perspective, the most notable aspect of Erickson's approach was his belief that trance induction was not a fundamental component of hypnosis. According to Erickson, it is possible to be under hypnosis even when awake, without entering a trance. Contemporary definitions of hypnosis (Kirsch *et al.*, 2011) emphasize the relational aspects of hypnosis, closely associating them with suggestion as originally conceived by B. Sidis. Hypnosis is defined as a social interaction in which one person responds to suggestions offered by another person, designated as the hypnotist, for experiences involving alterations in perception, memory, and voluntary action. Hypnosis is distinct from other suggestive phenomena primarily in the nature of the suggestions it employs (Braffman and Kirsch, 1999).

In the medical field, hypnosis has demonstrated efficacy in managing pain, alleviating gastrointestinal and respiratory dysfunction, and serving as an adjunctive treatment for various other disorders. Scientific literature has demonstrated the efficacy of hypnosis in providing analgesia, particularly in the treatment of headaches, cancer pain, musculoskeletal disorders, and labor pain. The phenomenon of pain reduction appears to be attributable not solely to the reduction of anxiety; however, the mechanisms of hypnotic pain control remain poorly understood.

Hypnosis is currently recognized as a therapeutic modality by the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the American Psychological Association, as well as by most medical and professional groups worldwide. The late 1980s witnessed the emergence of independent professional societies worldwide, uniting clinicians and researchers dedicated to the study of hypnosis or the practice of hypnotherapy in psychology, psychiatry, general and specialist medicine, and surgery. Nearly all these professional societies have formally adopted codes of ethics.

In 2018, the International Society for Hypnosis (ISH), an organization that unites 33 Constituent Societies worldwide, promulgated its Code of Ethics for the implementation of hypnosis for clinical, instructional, or experimental objectives. A significant number of professional associations of researchers and clinicians interested in hypnosis have generated Codes of Ethics, Conduct, and Best Practices on a global scale. A close examination of these documents reveals a striking similarity in their fundamental principles. Beyond the conventional professional principles inherent in all deontological codes (e.g., integrity, competence, confidentiality), all these codes explicitly prohibit researchers and clinicians from utilizing hypnosis for entertainment purposes. A review of the literature indicates the presence of several recurring themes in virtually all the examined codes. The following themes are addressed: 1) The safety of the method and the risks of malpractice must be considered; 2) The significance of upholding the patient's autonomy warrants careful consideration; 3) The utilization of hypnosis to either block or unblock a patient's memories is a subject of considerable interest.

Induction of hypnosis in healthy subjects is generally considered to be safe. In a clinical context, hypnosis presents the same ethical dilemmas that are observed in psychotherapy. The risk of patient exploitation, whether economic, sexual, or affective in nature, does not appear to exceed that observed in standard psychiatric practice. However, the utilization of hypnotic methods by

therapists who lack adequate training, even if they are physicians, has the potential to augment the risks of malpractice. It has been asserted that the utilization of hypnosis by a therapist who lacks the necessary expertise to address the specific condition in question is ill-advised.

In the context of patient autonomy, the extent to which hypnotizable individuals can be coerced into engaging in or expressing behaviors that contradict their values and beliefs remains a subject of considerable controversy. A substantial number of individuals regard hypnosis as a means of regulating behavior. However, extant research has not demonstrated that an individual is more likely to behave differently through hypnosis than by alternative methods. Indeed, the efficacy of hypnosis in the long-term treatment of smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, and obesity remains unproven. However, the suspension of critical judgment by the hypnotized patient necessitates that the therapist carefully examines the treatment goals and clearly articulate them in the therapeutic contract (Spangenberg, 1977).

The utilization of hypnosis for the purpose of blocking and unblocking memories is a contentious subject within the clinical context. Nevertheless, the implementation of this practice is not legally permissible in most countries. Utilizing hypnosis for the purpose of eliciting memories of traumatic events for legal purposes is ethically and morally unacceptable. It is incumbent upon medical professionals to decline such entreaties in the interest of their patients' well-being. Indeed, the occurrence of confabulation and false memories, which are not uncommon, not only undermines the integrity of the procedure but also has the potential to inflict harm on patients and their families (Sunstein, 2016).

Clinical Practice and Placebo

The present discussion is limited to the ethical implications of placebo use in ordinary clinical practice. The extensive ethical and methodological literature on placebo use in randomized clinical trials, including issues of deception, equipoise, and study design, is not addressed in this chapter.

The placebo effect is widely regarded as a paradigmatic example of suggestive phenomena in medicine. A placebo may be defined as any intervention that produces clinical improvement primarily through the patient's beliefs and expectations rather than through its specific physiological mechanisms. Although this discussion focuses on pharmacological placebos, similar effects may occur with physical, psychological, or dietary interventions. The substance used as a placebo need not be pharmacologically inert; rather, its therapeutic effect may be independent of its biochemical properties. In clinical practice, some treatments may function as placebos when their effectiveness exceeds what would be expected from their specific mechanisms alone. The related concept of the nocebo effect refers to the reduction or negation of therapeutic benefit due to negative expectations (Benedetti, 2014).

The doctor–patient relationship plays a central role in both placebo and nocebo effects. This relationship extends beyond individual interactions to include environmental and institutional factors, such as clinical settings and patterns of nonverbal communication. Empirical studies suggest that clinicians who effectively attune their verbal and nonverbal behavior to patients tend to achieve higher levels of satisfaction and trust.

The ethical evaluation of placebo use depends on context. When neither patient nor physician is aware of placebo mechanisms, no ethical issue arises. Ethical concerns emerge when a physician knowingly employs deception. Although rare in practice, situations may arise in which deceptive placebo use appears to offer benefit when alternative treatments pose significant risks. Such cases highlight enduring tensions between beneficence, honesty, and respect for autonomy.

Information and Informed Consent

Informed consent is a foundational concept in bioethics. Traditional accounts tend to construe information as declarative and unidirectional. Critics have argued, however, that consent depends not merely on information but on communication, which includes emotional, relational, and nonverbal dimensions.

Even subtle features of communication, such as tone of voice or body language, can influence patients' perceptions and decisions. Research indicates that clinicians' confidence in a treatment correlates with patients' willingness to consent, whereas expressed doubt is associated with higher rates of refusal. These findings underscore the ethical relevance of suggestion in clinical communication (Rotman, 2021).

Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis

Suggestion occupies an ambivalent and contested position within psychoanalytic theory and practice. From its inception, psychoanalysis developed in explicit contrast to hypnotic and suggestive methods, even while remaining historically and conceptually indebted to them.

Freud acknowledged that suggestion could be therapeutically effective, particularly in the alleviation of symptoms. Freud believed that suggestibility was an essential and fundamental aspect of human mental life. However, he consistently argued that psychoanalysis should renounce suggestive and deceptive techniques on ethical as well as theoretical grounds. For Freud, therapeutic change ought to result from the patient's discovery of unconscious truths through interpretation, rather than from suggestive influence exerted by the analyst. As he stated late in his career, the analytic relationship is grounded in a "love of truth" and therefore excludes forms of sham or deception (Freud, 1937).

An important internal challenge to this position emerged in the work of Sándor Ferenczi. Ferenczi interpreted hypnosis and suggestion as specific forms of transference, in which the analyst temporarily assumes a parental function. Together with Otto Rank, he argued that insight alone was often insufficient to produce lasting therapeutic change (Ferenczi and Rank, 1925). According to this view, recovery requires the emotional re-experiencing and repair of early relational deficits, including experiences that may be inaccessible to conscious memory. Suggestive and emotionally responsive techniques were therefore seen not as shortcuts or deceptions, but as potential agents of genuine psychic transformation.

This divergence marked the emergence of a fundamental tension within psychoanalysis: whether therapeutic efficacy depends primarily on the revelation of unconscious truth, as Freud maintained, or on emotionally corrective experiences that symbolically or affectively compensate for past deficiencies. Although Ferenczi's position was marginalized for many decades, it has been substantially re-evaluated in contemporary psychoanalysis, influencing later theorists and clinicians concerned with trauma, attachment, and relational dynamics (Haynal, 2001).

Jacques Lacan adopted a sharply critical stance toward suggestion, condemning not only its use in psychoanalysis but the very notion of psychotherapy understood as emotional and suggestive influence. Nevertheless, Lacan's theoretical framework exhibits notable structural affinities with classical theories of persuasion and suggestion. His conception of truth as an effect of speech rather than correspondence with reality, his emphasis on the evocative rather than communicative function of language, and his focus on temporality—particularly the *instant du regard*—closely parallel earlier accounts of suggestive influence. In this respect, Lacan may be seen as rearticulating, within a distinct theoretical idiom, some of the foundational insights of the general theory of suggestion, while simultaneously rejecting its clinical application (Cassin, 2019).

Contemporary psychoanalytic thought reflects this unresolved tension. Some analysts continue to privilege interpretation and truth-disclosure as the principal curative factors, while others emphasize emotional attunement, relational repair, and implicit forms of influence. From an ethical perspective, this debate bears directly on the legitimacy and limits of suggestion in psychotherapy, particularly regarding transparency, autonomy, and informed consent.

Nondynamic psychotherapies, particularly family and systemic approaches, frequently employ suggestive techniques, including paradoxical interventions and indirect influence. While such methods may be clinically effective, they raise ethical concerns when they compromise patient autonomy or informed consent. Contemporary debates continue to explore whether and how suggestive practices can be ethically integrated into psychotherapy.

Moreover, the employment of suggestive and deceptive methods has given rise to numerous issues pertaining to the matter of patient informed consent. The predominant consensus among scholars in the field is that the concept of patient consent pertains to the overall treatment plan rather than to specific therapeutic interventions. However, this practice contradicts contemporary ethical standards concerning informed consent. Informed consent is a concept that emphasizes the necessity of obtaining consent for each specific procedure. It also repudiates the legitimacy of consent that is granted in a generic manner.

Autonomy, Agency, and Personal Identity

A central ethical concern associated with all forms of suggestion concerns the potential infringement of individual autonomy using suggestive techniques. Suggestion operates by influencing thoughts, perceptions, or actions in ways that are not experienced by the subject as externally imposed, leading individuals to regard their subsequent behavior as freely chosen. If suggestion is regarded as a structural component of normal mental life, as many contemporary scholars maintain, it becomes possible to reinterpret desires, preferences, and intentions as post hoc rationalizations of actions shaped by prior influences. A paradigmatic illustration of this problem is provided by posthypnotic suggestions. In such cases, a subject may carry out an instruction given during hypnosis after awakening and subsequently offer a plausible, rational explanation for the behavior, without any awareness of its origin in suggestion. The explanations offered are indistinguishable from those typically used to justify ordinary actions. This phenomenon has led some theorists to suggest that many everyday activities may be performed under conditions analogous to posthypnotic states, shaped by networks of implicit and reciprocal influence. On this view, social life itself may depend on suggestibility, as proposed in early theories of crowd behavior and social cohesion. If such a hypothesis were taken to its extreme, it would call into question not only moral responsibility but also the very notion of agency.

From a more moderate perspective, the ethical problem does not consist in denying freedom altogether but in determining whether individuals retain the capacity to intervene reflectively in the interaction of competing influences. Human beings typically belong to multiple social groups—familial, professional, cultural, religious—each of which generates distinct and sometimes conflicting forms of suggestion. The ethical question, therefore, concerns whether agents can recognize and evaluate multiple and often conflictual social influences, or whether they merely enact the dominant suggestion without awareness of the underlying conflict.

Suggestion and related phenomena also raise questions about personal identity. In the context of suggestion, concerns about personal identity are most clearly illustrated by phenomena such as akrasia, self-deception, and dissociative disorders.

Akrasia (weakness of will) and self-deception occupy a prominent place in contemporary philosophical debates, particularly in postmodern critiques of the unified subject. Both phenomena challenge the assumption that moral agents are fully rational and transparent to themselves. Some theorists have proposed that suggestion may function as one pathway through which akrasia operates. On this view, suggestion represents a specific form of vulnerability of the will, in which an individual is unable to resist external or internal influences, including conflicting motivational states within the same person. Rather than being

anomalies, akrasia and self-deception may reflect ordinary features of human agency, in which deliberation and action are shaped by competing and partially opaque influences (Mordini, 2002).

Multiple personality disorder (now more commonly discussed under the broader category of dissociative identity disorders) is characterized by the emergence of distinct identity states, often differing in self-presentation, personal history, and behavioral patterns. Dissociative disorders are frequently interpreted as attempts to manage or integrate overwhelming experiences, particularly in individuals with high suggestibility. Although severe trauma is often cited as a precipitating factor, its presence is neither necessary nor always identifiable, and some accounts emphasize internal emotional processes rather than discrete external events. These disorders pose significant challenges to theories of personal identity by demonstrating the extent to which memory, self-representation, and agency can fragment.

A related and ethically complex condition is Ganser's syndrome, in which individuals initially simulate mental illness but gradually come to exhibit genuine dissociative symptoms. This progression blurs the boundary between deliberate deception and psychopathology, raising difficult legal and ethical questions concerning responsibility and diagnosis.

Conclusions

The view that suggestion is confined to a few, clear-cut, domains is considered today quite arguable. Forms of persuasion such as advertising, propaganda, and marketing may also be regarded as suggestive. Similarly, suggestive statements and nonverbal messages embedded in "neutral" questions should be regarded as suggestion. Suggestion does not necessarily require verbal communication. Much influence occurs through nonverbal channels. Also, unconscious suggestion, unintentional influence or spontaneous illusory perceptions should be treated as suggestive. A contemporary perspective extends the concept of suggestion to everyday and educational practices. Techniques used by parents to soothe children, strategies in schools, sports, or military training can be seen as forms of suggestion, often operating unconsciously for both agent and subject. From this standpoint, suggestion permeates most aspects of social life and learning. Moreover, suggestions are typically recursive: those influenced tend in turn unconsciously to influence the influencers. Consequently, each suggestion tends to create a *mise en abyme*, a self-reflexive technique in which a work of art, a theater representation, a movie sequence, a music piece, or similar contains a miniature version of itself, producing a recursive or story-within-a-story effect. It mirrors the larger work and often reflects on its own themes or creation, as exemplified in *Las Meninas*, Hamlet's "Mousetrap," or, more recently, *The Truman Show*.

Suggestion is a subtle yet significant force that influences numerous aspects of human life. If there is no consensus that it is a constitutive element of the mind in the sense of being a necessary structural component, it is evident that this mechanism plays a pivotal role in shaping beliefs, behavior, and interpersonal dynamics. To understand it, we need to take an integrated approach that combines cognitive science, social psychology, and the philosophy of mind. In an age dominated by information and communication, strengthening individuals' critical abilities represents a fundamental ethical challenge, notably in the field of applied ethics.

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