

The Ethics and Politics of Nudging

Francesco Guala (University of Milan)

A 'nudge' is a policy intervention that manipulates the environment in which citizens make decisions, in such a way as to preserve the full range of options that citizens already have, that is, without reducing their freedom of choice. Classic justifications of nudge policies move from welfaristic premises: nudges are acceptable because they benefit the individuals who are nudged. A tacit assumption behind this strategy is that we can identify the true preferences of decision-makers. This assumption however is often unwarranted, and as a consequence nudge policies must be justified in a different way. A possible strategy is to abandon welfarism and endorse genuine paternalism. Another one is to argue that the biases of decision that choice architects attempt to eliminate create externalities. For example, in the case of intertemporal discounting, the costs of preference reversals are not always paid by the discounters, because they are transferred onto other individuals. But if this is the case, then nudges are best justified from a political rather than welfaristic standpoint.