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Who's Messing with Your Mind?

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“She just ran game on you.” “You got played!” “He plays mind games.” “You were brainwashed!” What’s the meaning of these statements? They all express the realization that you’ve been a victim of manipulation.

I remember the first time I heard the term “manipulation.” I was a pre-teen and one of my adult mentors was warning me about a close friend of mine who they believed was a manipulator. They felt she had played them and was playing me too.

“Manipulation” was a big word for me at the time and although I didn’t know what it meant, I knew it meant something bad. As I grew older, I thought I’d finally understood the meaning of the term. I was experiencing life, horrible people, and retained something from my psychology 101 course. I had also read my share of Dale Carnegie and Robert Greene books. But all of my previous experiences could not compare to the crash course in manipulation I received while watching Season Two of *Orange Is the New Black*.

I’m not a psychologist. I’m a philosopher interested in moral psychology. While psychologists analyze behavior, I am interested in the nature and moral status of

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attitudes, dispositions, and emotions such as compassion, anger, forgiveness, and manipulation. But it's one thing to sit in an armchair and philosophize about these ideas and it's another thing altogether to see an idea embodied in a character. Yvonne "Vee" Parker is that character.

Vee makes her *Orange Is the New Black* debut in Season Two ("Looks Blue, Tastes Red") in the backstory of Tasha "Taystee" Jefferson's life. As a child, Taystee is a ward of the state who desires to get adopted. Vee is a drug dealer in Taystee's community who tries to recruit her as a child and throughout her teenage years. Taystee refuses her offer until foster care life begins to get the best of her.

With tears running down her face, Taystee begs Vee to take her in. She then shows Vee her skill with numbers when a desperate customer who defaulted on his payments comes in to re-up on drugs. Vee is persuaded and decides to take her into her home. Vee also employs Taystee in her drug business. In the flashback scenes, it appears as if Vee is giving Taystee everything she has been yearning for: stability, support, home-cooked meals, and a family.

While watching, I started to feel happy for Taystee and also confused. I didn't know what Vee's intentions were. Was she sincere and loving or was she taking care of Taystee for all the wrong reasons? It's not until Vee begins to do time at Litchfield Penitentiary that I see that she is a master manipulator who repeatedly 'runs game' on everyone.

What Is Manipulation?

You are a pedophile without the sex. I bet the real playas laugh in your face.

—POUSSEY ("Take a Break from Your Values")

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Philosophers are divided on what manipulation is. This isn't because manipulation is hard to define; it's because manipulation has so many features and these features do not always fit all cases of manipulation. One definition is that manipulation is covert influence over another. The person who's being manipulated doesn't know what's actually happening. To manipulate, you must keep your true intentions hidden. Vee's victims are completely oblivious in the moment to what she is up to and are usually enraged when they find out. Her actions fit this definition.

Other philosophers define manipulation as non-rational influence of some sort. Instead of laying out a logical argument where she says that Pousey needs to be shut off from the group because she turns down opportunities to make money, Vee instead convinces Taystee through homophobia, to stay away from Pousey. She persuades Taystee through non-rational influence. In this way, Vee is the sophist of her day. The sophists were Socrates's nemeses in Ancient Greece. While Socrates argued by and for rational persuasion, the sophists used emotions, rhetorical tricks, and manipulation to persuade their audience. Vee neglects rational influence and opts for persuasion of a psychological kind instead.

Some definitions of manipulation tend to focus on the effect of the non-rational influence. Manipulation then can be described as behavior that makes the listener make decisions in ways that rational people wouldn't want to make decisions. When Mendoza realizes they are smoking cigarettes that are from 1983, she screams out, "that bitch!" because she knows that if she had only known they were that old, she would not had made the cake-cigarette deal with Vee. The effect of Vee's non-rational influence is that it causes

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Mendoza to make decisions she would not normally rationally make, but while under the influence of manipulation in this case, she does. As you can see, Vee's actions satisfy this definition of manipulation as well.

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Manipulation also has several features. In order for manipulation to take place, Colin McGinn argues in his book *MindFucking: A Critique of Mental Manipulation*, that trust, deception, emotion, false belief, and vulnerability must be present. The manipulator gets the listener to trust them and deceives them in the process by implanting false beliefs. For McGinn, the most important of these features are emotions. Manipulation aims to make you think something that is not true but also to *feel* a certain way. Manipulation produces false belief but it also produces emotional disturbance. The manipulator has to play on your emotions in order to create the false belief.

This takes skill. In the instances of Vee's manipulation trek, she uses emotions brilliantly. She plays into Taystee's fear of being perceived as gay, Poussey's desire to be loved, Mendoza's sympathy, and Crazy Eyes's desire to be seen, valued, and accepted. Vee uses these emotions as a starting point in order to create the false belief that it's best for Taystee to stay away from Poussey, Poussey to stay away from Taystee, Mendoza to request that her girls join custodial, and Crazy Eyes to be loyal to Vee.

To use emotions effectively, the manipulator must be a psychologist who is a student of human weakness and vulnerability. Anne Barnhill has given an account of manipulation in terms of targeting weaknesses. For Barnhill, manipulation is intentionally making some-

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one or altering a situation to make someone succumb to a weakness or a contextual weakness. Vee is an evil Dr. Phil, scoping out the details of people's personalities and histories to discover their weakness and then using that weakness against them. She sits in the meeting where Nicky testifies to the fact that although she's been clean for two years, heroin is her best friend and she misses the way it makes her feel. Days later, Vee sends her a bag of heroin through a dealer with the message, "First one's free, let me know if you want more." Here Vee alters a situation to get Nicky to succumb to her weakness so that Vee can profit.

In the same episode, Vee also mysteriously sees the weakness of Black Cindy. After Cindy comes up short and then challenges her, Vee visits her bunk with a psychological analysis. Vee 'reads' Cindy by telling her that Cindy is all about jokes, she has given up on herself, and is a loser. In this episode we see the backstory to Cindy's life. On the outside she was always joking, didn't take life too seriously, didn't have the means to take care of her daughter or the courage to let her daughter know she was her mom. This tormented her. The audience sees Cindy's life but Vee doesn't. However, Vee is still able to know Cindy's weakness. Through this conversation, Vee makes Cindy succumb to her weakness of wanting to prove herself. It will lead Cindy to come back to Vee to deal drugs.

Some philosophers even argue that because the manipulator trades on the vulnerabilities of the victim, the victim is complicit in their own victimization. This is in no way blaming the victim but it is to suggest that the manipulator is only successful because they exploit only what's already present in the victim. If the victim were not gullible, the manipulator couldn't appeal to their gullible tendency. If the victim were not sympathetic,

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the manipulator couldn't appeal to their sympathetic tendency. There are people that Vee does not manipulate and it makes us wonder that perhaps it's because of their emotional strengths or their lack of *visible* vulnerabilities that keep them safe from her snares.

Although McGinn highlights the importance of emotions in manipulation, Robert Noggle believes that there are three main ways that you can manipulate someone and they are through belief, desire, and emotion. He gives no significance to one over the other. He calls these 'levelers' and the person you are manipulating, a machine. For Noggle, manipulation takes place by leading someone away from the ideal version of his or her belief, desire, and emotion.

For example, an ideal desire could be to stay out of trouble and out of the dramas of prison life. Anne Barnhill modifies Noggle's definition by suggesting that the manipulator must be aware that there is a steering away of the listener from their ideal place. When Vee manipulates Mendoza by suggesting that she gives up the bathroom in return for Taystee and Watson joining the custodial crew, it is Red who has to make Mendoza aware of what she has really done and how Vee has 'played' her. The custodial crew will be responsible for the drug trade in the prison. Vee led Mendoza away from her ideal desire of not contributing to trouble and Vee was very much aware that it was far away from Mendoza's ideal desire.

Although the manipulator implants false beliefs, this is not to say that manipulators do not *express* the truth. The manipulator doesn't always speak something false. Manipulators can be misleading without speaking falsely. As Jason Stanley has pointed out, you can state a truth and rely on the listener's false belief to communicate your goals. When Vee tells Poussesey that Taystee

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will never love her the way she wants, Vee is not speaking falsely. Taystee communicated something similar to Poussey earlier. However, Vee is misleading Poussey into accepting the false belief that Taystee does not care about her and is not really her friend.

Manipulation is also tricky (no pun intended). It can include emotions, but not always. It can be contrary to the victim's interests, but can be in their best interests. It can aim at changing someone's behavior or changing a decision. It can play on someone's personality but also widely shared dispositions. Vee uses cake in "A Whole 'Nother Hole" to reconcile with Taystee and to get the others to warm up to her. Even for her to get the cake, she uses old cigarettes to seduce Mendoza into giving her the food. Although she has not manipulated them through their emotions or weaknesses this time, she knows the psychological power that baked goods and a good cigarette has to unite troops and also make deals.

As we can see, manipulation can take many different forms. Vee's manipulative actions seem to cover all of them-proving that she is not only a skillful psychologist, but a multi-talented one as well.

What's Wrong with Manipulation?

She is a truth teller. Don't you dare speak ill of her!

—CRAZY EYES ("We Have Manners. We're Polite")

There must be something morally problematic with manipulation that will make Vee's manipulative actions unethical. Under what conditions can we say that manipulation is bad?

Before we try to get at what's bad about Vee's actions and character (that's the easy part), let's try to imagine Vee's manipulation as a good thing. What would make

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her manipulative actions good? Aristotle might argue that to be a manipulator you must know how to bring about conduct at the right time, for the right reason, and to accomplish the right ends. It appears as if Vee has this skill down perfectly. She gets her girls in custodial at the right time (she “bargained” at a perfect time to make it happen), for the right reason (to obtain advantages), and for the right ends (nicotine relaxation for inmates).

This is skillful maneuvering. This would qualify her actions as virtuous, right? Let’s not go too far. Skillful acts do not equate to ethical acts. Serial killers and Wall Street criminals can use skillful methods and perfect application of those methods in their criminal activities but that is not enough to then evaluate their actions as ethical.

In addition, Vee’s case is not like a friend who manipulates their drunken friend to turn over their keys or their sick friend to finally visit the doctor. In these cases, a friend can be accused of manipulation, particularly if they use non-rational or covert influence, but we would not judge their actions to be unethical. The reason is because although they too are using strategic application of Aristotle’s advice, they are aiming for a good result on behalf of the listener, and their manipulative actions are coupled with concern, compassion and sympathy. Vee is only thinking of herself. We can say that Vee has a skill to do manipulative actions in a skillful way, but this skill should not be interpreted as virtuous or ethical. Her actions will have to be more than skillful to be considered morally good.

Vee’s manipulative actions toward her fellow inmates are morally problematic because her manipulation threatens her listener’s autonomy, she employs certain vices, and bad consequences arise as a result.

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Most criticisms of manipulation focus on its threat to the autonomy of the listener. When someone manipulates you, you're kept in the dark and as a result you're less free in your decision-making. But threats to autonomy involve more than this. When Vee manipulates, she imposes her will on her listeners in ways that they would not endorse if they knew what was going on. Melvin Rogers has argued that when we manipulate, we dominate the listener by substituting our judgment and will for the listener's own, and secure their co-operation to our advantage. He argues that this violates what Rogers calls the *identifiability condition* because the listener no longer recognizes himself or herself in the belief they now hold.

Vee also blocks and burdens her listeners' options. Instead of giving Taystee a choice in helping her with a new jail hustle, Vee manipulates her by holding what she did for her as a child, over her head. Taystee feels like she has no other options because of this demand and obligation for loyalty. Although Taystee is aware of what has taken place, her autonomy is still threatened. Vee is imposing her will over Taystee in ways that Taystee would not endorse otherwise. She thus becomes Vee's slave, lacking full autonomy. Persons ought not to be used in this way. In a Kantian sense, the glory of our being is in our rationality. To have that under the submission of another is to deny us our personhood and that is what Vee does when she manipulates.

Manipulation also employs many vices and these vices make Vee's actions bad. According to J.S. Blumenthal-Barby, to manipulate you must employ dishonesty, predatoriness, disrespect, and laziness. Vee is dishonest when she tells Red that the war between them is over. Vee is a predator by not only exploiting the weaknesses

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of her fellow inmates but by making Taystee feel indebted to her. She tells her “You owe me.”

Vee disrespects her fellow inmates by not seeing them as persons but rather as pawns and objects that can be used for her own purposes. Look at how she non-verbally instructs Crazy Eyes to beat up Poussey in the bathroom. Vee is also lazy. She does not try to convince anyone through rational arguments but takes the easy way out through psychological persuasion.

In addition, Vee’s manipulative actions do not aim for the good. Okay, they aim for *her own* good, but they do not aim for the good of those who are the targets of her manipulation. It’s her dealers who possess the illegal contraband not her, increasing the risk that it’s they who will get caught. When the correctional officers do a sweep of the prison, Janae is caught and taken to the SHU, not Vee.

Her victims usually suffer bad consequences. When Vee assaults Red, she convinces Crazy Eyes that it was Crazy Eyes that did it for her. Vee wanted Crazy Eyes to take the rap, knowing that the consequence for the assault would be an attempted murder charge and movement to maximum security. Niccolò Machiavelli, the sixteenth-century Italian political theorist, wrote that “Although the act condemns the doer, the end may justify him.” Vee is Machiavellian in this way. Vee thinks that immoral means justify her aim for survival and glory.

Protect Yourself

Don’t feel bad if you don’t see it yet. . . . I just hope y’all wise up before it’s too late.

—TAYSTEE (“We Have Manners. We’re Polite”)

I think I’ve discovered ways for manipulators like Vee to be stopped in their tracks, ways that don’t include

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shanking them or doing a literal 'drive by' in a van. What you are about to read is not a Sun Tzu "Art of War" discourse. This is not to downplay philosophy, but we are no experts of war. However, I think philosophy can give us some insights into how to guard ourselves against manipulators.

You don't have to be an expert in manipulation either. You just have to learn a few critical thinking skills and tips from philosophers like Socrates and Immanuel Kant and soon you'll be able to protect yourself from the Veeps of the world.

The first thing we can do is to improve our critical thinking skills. This involves being able to recognize and evaluate arguments. The only arguments we ought to accept are those resulting in conclusions backed by true premises that are appropriately related to one another. We should guard against being seduced by appeals to our emotions, popularity, tradition, irrelevant information, and more. This will take psychological strength because humans have psychological needs and manipulation feeds off of this. But if former drug addict, Nicky, can give over to Red the free bag of heroin that was given to her, we can refuse the psychological drugs manipulators peddle to us.

Immanuel Kant argues that emotions should have no room in ethical reasoning. For Kant, emotions come and go, so we ought not to depend on them to make decisions. Emotions can cloud our judgments because they can force us to give excessive credulity in judgment. They also can make us less prone to revise our judgments in light of reflection. I'm not arguing that emotions have no cognitive features or any room in persuasion or ethics, rather I'm suggesting that being convinced through emotions alone and not by true and strong propositions will make us susceptible to manipulators.

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Socrates agrees. For him, rhetoricians like his Gorgias (in Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*), use emotional appeals, particularly flattery, to convince the masses. Because of this, Socrates claims that those who listen to Gorgias are witnessing an *experience* but not an *art*. Reasoning is not what Gorgias does. Those who give into a modern day Gorgias are not reasoning either. Because manipulation plays on the emotions in order to implant false beliefs, we should be careful to make sure that it's rationality and not emotion that leads us to accept the conclusions of arguments. If not, we will be suckered every time.

Lastly, Socrates says in *The Apology* that the unexamined life is not worth living. Careful examination should be a part of our internal lives and our engagement with others. This is not to say that we ought to be skeptics each time someone attempts to persuade us of something but it does suggest that we ought to hold others to high standards when it comes to convincing us of anything. We should not believe everything we hear but ought to inspect everything for its truth and give ourselves time to do so. Unscrupulous operators will continue to play us if we fail to stop and think, truth-check, and evaluate the motive behind people's attempts to persuade.