

[An elbow to the ribs](#) [1]

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[The Economist reports on ?Nudging?](#) [3], the idea that governments can non-coercively steer people towards making the right decisions for themselves. In other words, make things like pensions opt-out instead of opt-in, so that lazy people end up with pensions, instead of without them.

The overall impression the article gives is how shallow Nudging is as an idea. One example:

A study into the teaching of technical drawing in French schools found that if the subject was called ?geometry? boys did better, but if it was called ?drawing? girls did equally well or better. Teachers are now being trained to use the appropriate term.

Well, if you say so. I suppose this might be true, but it could just be another of those ?correlation equals causation? fallacies that bedevil the social sciences. Statistically, all manner of associations may appear in data surveys, but they don?t necessarily mean that one thing causes the other.

As the article puts it, Nudging is based on the ideas behind behavioural economics: the idea that ?all sorts of psychological or neurological biases cause people to make choices that seem contrary to their best interests?.

But what is in anybody?s ?best interests?? I am fairly risk-tolerant, so I cycle into work on rainy days and ?binge drink? (that is, I have three pints) at least once a week. I hate athletics and can?t understand why anybody would want to spend their money on Olympics tickets instead of going to the pub.

Are these things not in my ?best interests?? It?s a silly question. Every action contains a risk/reward calculation whose outcome will differ from person to person. What a person?s own best interests are is entirely subjective ? even seemingly sensible things like pensions and health insurance have real costs. It?s no more in my interest to nudge me in one direction than to nudge me in another.

Nevertheless, Nudging seems to have captured the imaginations of the Cameroons, who see it as an exciting new way of making stupid people do what?s best for them without really forcing them to do it. It shouldn?t be a surprise. Nudge policy is shallow, gimmicky and desperately trendy. It?s tailor-made for the government.

Most seriously, there is the problem that, even if you can steer people into doing the ?right? things, it?s difficult to know what?s actually right for different people:

Not every policy works as planned: Mr Oullier wants the European Union to test the anti-smoking warnings it puts on cigarette packets, for instance, after research found that those who say they are most shocked by the more graphic images were also those who most craved a smoke after seeing them.

With safety warnings like that, who needs advertising?

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