

The ethical problem with models like Fogg's isn't whatever nefarious deed you can accomplish with the knowledge that a person needs to want to do a task, be able to do it and be reminded in order for the task to happen. It's the grift inherent in selling this kind of knowledge.

THE ETHICAL PROBLEM IS WE ARE BEING OFFERED MONEY FOR NOTHING.

Selinger and Whyte* seem to be doing a really good job of showing how problematic the emperors wardrobe is, which does not strike me as a productive endeavor.

When I control + F "replication" in Selinger and Whyte I find nothing. Search "reproducibility"; nothing. "Verification"; nothing. They do have a paragraph which gets at what I see to be the core issue:

"Even if those who advocate nudges respond to the criticisms just described, there is still a long way to go before we ever arrive at a point where choice architects can have a reliable method for offering nudges. Nudges can be offered by policy professionals or simply anyone in the position to improve the greater good, such as teachers and parents. Yet Thaler and Sunstein do not provide anything like a formula, technique, or method for creating and implementing successful nudges that could be used reliably by any of these potential choice architects."

I want to pull this out in order to make it clear that I read and understood it--I still think it's an insufficient comment on the issue. The entire **appeal** of nudging as a policy instrument is you're not really "doing" anything. Material distribution isn't changing, design of how people interact with policy isn't changing. You're *explicitly and deliberately* choosing a touchpoint which you will change in some second order way. Selinger and Whyte note "Citizens thus should be aware that an initiative is not guaranteed to be a genuine nudge simply because some refer to it in this way"*** without following up that the easiest way to recognize a genuine nudge is a lightness in the pocketbook after the purveyor of the nudge walks away.

Now, you say. Adam. You're being harsh. These are changes being made to gigantic systems or changes pushed out to millions or billions of people. They have to be tiny in order to not disrupt the system and why not use what we know about psychology to design adjustments rather than some more draconian (and often purely hypothetical, posed for the purpose of comparison) alternative.

To that I say, what do we know about psychology's understanding of human response to second order changes? What do we know about psychology's understanding of another closely related [money for nothing scheme](#)? What I know is that psychology has trouble replicating findings in this area. That's a primary concern, because it **hazards the general applicability** of these nominally generally applicable theories. Without the generality offered by the fact that we all have brains each of these nudges falls back on **DOMAIN KNOWLEDGE** and situated understanding. On page 925 there's a quote from Thaler & Sunstein about small changes made to lake shore drive. If that decision originated from a non-specialist "choice architect" and percolated into a transportation department rather than the other way around I'm a monkey's uncle.

"Hausman and Welch are struck by the example of the Ambient Orb," apart from being an excellent sentence opener, is a good example of the problem. The paragraph kicked off by that sentence ends thusly "Thaler and Sunstein claim the orb to be so persuasive that "in a period of weeks, users of the Orb reduced their use of energy, in peak periods, by 40 percent" (2008, 196)."

We then spend paragraphs asking whether or not this was a nudge instead of saying YE GODS! 40% IN A MANNER OF WEEKS. WE HAVE SOLVED THE ENERGY CRISIS, LADS! Let that sink in. If you

could put this pushy colored orb in a house and reduce energy in peak periods by 40% someone would be able to replicate that. Someone SHOULD (be able to) replicate that and I wouldn't care what we called the intercession the color makes in my practice.

And yet....call me cynical...but I don't believe that 40% number holds up.*** Regardless of whatever you call the orb. How long did that study continue to run? Was it like a lot of design studies where they put these hokey prototypes into play for a limited period of time and didn't net out the shock of the new? What happens in the second summer where you have a minder orb? Do you relocate it to a closet? Unplug it? I don't really want to test these variations because, AGAIN, I think the reported success is not replicable. I know the world is big and we are just small monkeys. There are lots of results we might not believe but which nevertheless are well replicated.**** We can be baffled by the world and in return our recourse should be to come together and make sense of it. One thing which must unfortunately happen in that process is we toss out mystifiers and grifters. In contrast to strategic arms reduction, the right response is not "[trust, but verify](#),"***** it is "who benefits?"

Unless and until that answer is clear, hold on to your wallet.

* I understand they are reacting to Thaler and Sunstein and so forth. Distinctions between their work and Fogg's are hard for me to make out.

** They follow this up with a concern for the slice of the polis who will support policies iff they are nudges, which is a pretty narrow political constituency, IMO.

*** Separately from that the geoenginerring we are doing to ensure the sweep and success of earth's sixth great extinction is a global political and institutional project. You didn't turn on the air conditioning because you're a bad human. You turned on the air conditioning because we have collectively put the scattershot burden of climate adaptation on individuals, lensed by generations of racist housing policies.

****Bell's theorem and the experiments around it (see Arthur Fine's [The Shaky Game](#) for a MASTERFUL***** and close look at EPR, quantum mechanics and the idea of scientific realism) are baffling and incomprehensible. It's possible to not believe whole portions of quantum mechanics. Many talented physicists did ([Night Thoughts of a Classical Physicist](#) is a pretty good novel about that, set in WWI Germany)!

***** I'm not kidding. If quantum mechanics or the history of science or the idea of how science sees itself (ANY OF THOSE THREE) are your jam, this book is for you.

***** An enduring shame that this Russian proverb is now wantonly associated with a famous American grifter instead.