



PART 3

Read the text below and answer questions 27–40.

NUDGE THEORY: INFLUENCING CHOICE FOR THE BETTER

A

Nudge theory refers to policy and design approaches that modify the context in which people choose, so that individuals are steered toward outcomes judged beneficial without having options removed or large penalties imposed. Its best-known justification is “libertarian paternalism”: the claim that it is possible to guide behaviour while still preserving freedom of choice. In practice, nudges work by adjusting the choice architecture surrounding decisions—how options are ordered, framed, timed, or set as defaults—so that the easiest path often aligns with a desirable behaviour. A classic example is automatic enrolment in a pension plan while allowing participants to opt out, a design that changes what happens if a person does nothing.

B

The intellectual roots of nudging lie in behavioural economics and cognitive psychology, particularly research on heuristics and biases. People often rely on mental shortcuts when they lack time, information, or attention. They are influenced by what seems normal, by how a question is framed, and by immediate rewards that feel vivid compared with distant costs. Small changes in “cognitive friction” can therefore produce large shifts in behaviour: a form that is shorter, a reminder that arrives at the right time, or a default that reduces the need to decide can alter outcomes without changing anyone’s preferences in a deep sense. Supporters view this as an opportunity to design environments that respect human limitations rather than assuming perfect rationality.

C

Proponents argue that nudges are justified when they help people act on intentions they already hold but fail to implement. Many individuals endorse long-term goals—saving for retirement, taking prescribed medication, or reducing energy use—yet procrastinate or forget. Automatic enrolment, well-timed prompts, and simplified processes can reduce the gap between intention and action. In this interpretation, nudges do not impose new values; they correct predictable errors produced by inattention, delay, or confusion. Furthermore, nudging can be cheaper than large-scale enforcement and can avoid the political resistance that often accompanies bans or taxes, especially when the targeted behaviour is widespread and culturally normalised.

D

Critics, however, argue that the moral status of nudging depends on who decides what



counts as “better” and who gains from the behavioural shift. Even when choices remain formally open, the structure of a decision can steer people in ways they do not notice, raising concerns about manipulation. If the choice environment is built to exploit biases rather than to support informed agency, citizens may be guided without meaningful consent. The worry becomes sharper when nudges serve institutional interests—reducing costs, increasing compliance, or expanding data collection—while being presented as benevolent assistance. From this perspective, the ethics of nudging cannot be separated from power: those who control the environment can influence behaviour while appearing merely to “present options.”

E

These concerns make transparency a central issue. Some scholars argue that nudges should be openly disclosed, easy to understand, and simple to resist, so that individuals retain genuine agency. Yet others respond that disclosure can weaken effectiveness, particularly when a nudge relies on subtle changes in friction or attention. If a prompt works partly because it reduces the chance that people postpone a task, announcing the technique may prompt reactance or deliberate refusal. Consequently, debate often distinguishes between “easy-to-see” nudges, such as warning labels or simplified comparisons, and “hidden” nudges, such as default settings embedded in complex digital menus. The underlying question is whether influence is acceptable when it operates below the level of conscious reflection, even if the outcome is socially desirable.

F

A further limitation concerns context. Nudges may be least effective when structural barriers dominate behaviour. Reminders to attend medical appointments, for example, may have limited impact if transport is unreliable, clinics have long waiting times, or patients cannot take time off work. In such cases, changing the decision context does not remove the underlying constraint. Critics argue that nudging can become a substitute for deeper reform, offering a low-cost appearance of action while leaving systemic problems untouched. Conversely, defenders reply that nudges are not meant to solve poverty or infrastructure failures; they are tools for specific behavioural bottlenecks. The dispute is therefore partly about policy priorities: whether nudging is used to complement substantial reforms or to distract from them.

G

Evaluation is another challenge, especially in passage-of-time effects and replication. Some nudges produce measurable short-term gains that fade as people adapt or as novelty wears off. Others work well in one setting but not in another, raising concerns about generalisability. Because small design changes can yield large outcomes,



researchers increasingly emphasise field trials, transparent reporting, and cost-effectiveness comparisons with alternatives such as regulation, taxation, or direct service provision. Without careful evaluation, a nudge may be adopted because it sounds elegant rather than because it produces durable benefits. Moreover, even effective nudges can have unintended effects if they shift behaviour in one domain while creating new burdens elsewhere.

H

Digital technology has expanded nudging into highly adaptive environments. Online platforms can run rapid experiments on interface design and tailor prompts to individual users, creating “hyper-personalised” influence at scale. In principle, such tools can support beneficial aims, such as encouraging medication adherence, reducing energy consumption through timely feedback, or helping people avoid late fees. Yet the same capacity enables commercial exploitation through dark patterns—designs that steer users into subscriptions, continued payments, or data sharing through confusing menus and asymmetric effort. In these systems, the boundary between legitimate guidance and manipulative design becomes harder to police, because influence can be customised, continuous, and difficult for users to detect.

I

A balanced view treats nudging as neither a miracle cure nor an inherent ethical failure. Nudges are most defensible when they pursue clear public goals, are subject to oversight, and are combined with broader measures when risks are severe or inequalities are entrenched. In other words, nudges can complement regulation and investment, but rarely substitute for them. When used carefully, they can make it easier for people to act on their own intentions, especially in everyday decisions where small frictions accumulate into large societal outcomes. The central ethical test is not whether a nudge influences behaviour—it always does—but whether the influence is accountable, proportionate, and aligned with legitimate social purposes.

Questions 27–33

Choose the correct heading for each paragraph.

List of Headings

- i** Ethical objections: manipulation, consent, and who benefits
- ii** The behavioural economics reasons small design changes can have large effects
- iii** When nudges fail because structural constraints dominate
- iv** The challenge of measuring impact over time and across settings
- v** Why transparency and the ability to resist nudges are debated



- vi Nudges as tools to help people act on intentions they already have
- vii How nudging steers choices without removing options
- viii Digital personalisation and the risk of manipulative design
- ix Why nudges are preferable to stronger policy tools

27 Paragraph A

28 Paragraph B

29 Paragraph C

30 Paragraph D

31 Paragraph E

32 Paragraph F

33 Paragraph G

Questions 34–36

Complete the summary below. Choose **ONE WORD ONLY** from the text for each answer.

How nudges guide behaviour and why they are contested

Nudges influence behaviour without removing options or imposing large **34** They can help people act on long-term goals they support but may otherwise **35** or forget. However, openly revealing a subtle technique can sometimes provoke **36** or deliberate refusal.

Questions 37–40

Select the correct answer.

37 What is the main point made in Paragraph **E** about disclosure?

- A** Disclosure is essential because nudges are effective only when they are openly explained.
- B** Disclosure can weaken a nudge when effectiveness depends on subtle changes in friction or attention.
- C** Disclosure ensures nudges cannot be used to serve institutional goals.
- D** Disclosure removes the need to distinguish between “easy-to-see” and “hidden” nudges.

38 Why can nudges be ineffective in some contexts, according to Paragraph **F**?



- A** Nudges fail mainly because people do not rely on heuristics under time pressure.
- B** Nudges are least effective when they are used for health or savings behaviours.
- C** Nudges work only when they are supported by penalties or financial incentives.
- D** Nudges may be outweighed by structural barriers such as transport problems or long waiting times.

39 What new risk is linked to digital nudging in Paragraph **H**?

- A** Commercial “dark patterns” may steer users into subscriptions or data sharing.
- B** Digital nudges cannot be tested at scale, so evidence is always inconclusive.
- C** Personalisation reduces the ability to target prompts to individual users.
- D** Digital environments make oversight unnecessary because outcomes are easily measured.

40 What is the writer’s overall view of nudging in Paragraph **I**?

- A** Nudges should replace regulation because they are cheaper and less intrusive.
- B** Nudges are ethically acceptable only when they are hidden so people cannot resist them.
- C** Nudges can be useful when guided by public goals, subject to oversight, and combined with broader measures.
- D** Nudges mainly distract policymakers from effective solutions and rarely work in practice.

Answer Key

27. vii

28. ii

29. vi

30. i

31. v

32. iii

33. iv

34. penalties

35. procrastinate

36. reactance



37. B

38. D

39. A

40. C