

3 Ethics of Persuasion



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Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Evaluate the ethicality of a persuasion appeal using the four criteria of a persuasion attempt.
- Define the different theoretical approaches to ethics.
- Discuss and apply the teleological approach to ethics.
- Discuss and apply the deontological approach to ethics.
- Understand the limitations and criticisms of teleological and deontological ethics.
- Explain how an ethical approach to persuasion can inform a belief system.
- Appraise real-world persuasion appeals using various ethical perspectives.

Maple syrup producers are upset that one brand is using the word *natural* to promote its syrup (CBSNews, 2010). See http://www.necn.com/news/new-england/_NECN__Log_Cabin_in_Sticky_Situation_Over__All_Natural_Syrup__NECN-251863581.html.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires that any product labeled as *natural* must only comprise plant-based ingredients (Hornbeck, 2010). All of the ingredients in the Log Cabin® table syrup are indeed plant-based (after the manufacturer removed caramel coloring and a couple of other ingredients), so the product can therefore be labeled natural (Curran, 2010). However, the maple syrup producers argue that *natural* implies purity, that the syrup in the bottle is *pure* maple syrup, which is more costly to produce. Due to FDA regulations, Log Cabin is prohibited from using the word *pure*, but they can use *natural*. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=cqxpX-t0oW8.

So, Pinnacle Foods, the manufacturer of Log Cabin, is abiding by the law in its product labeling, but are the labeling and packaging ethical? Is Pinnacle Foods responsible for consumers' confusion?

When is an act ethical? Is an attempt to persuade someone ever ethical? How do we assess what's ethical or not? What goes into our beliefs about right and wrong?

The relationship of ethics to persuasion has always been a complex issue that sparks controversy. Given the interplay of self-interests, subjective experiences, and a variety of possible outcomes, it's no wonder the two share a volatile relationship.

As you encounter a variety of approaches to persuasion, you should have tools for evaluating the extent to which an approach is ethical. In this chapter, we will consider two popular systems of ethics to set a foundation for analyzing the ethicality of different persuasion techniques. Some of the techniques you will learn in this book vary with regard to their ethicality, and even their legality. So, we must consider the ethics of persuasion attempts before we examine the persuasion theories and how they might be applied.

3.1 Evaluating Persuasion Ethics

Think back to the defining elements of persuasion in Chapter 1. A persuasion attempt involves 1) a conscious intent to persuade, 2) the communication of a message, 3) the message receiver's free will, and 4) an impact on the receiver's attitudes. Each element of a persuasion attempt can be evaluated in terms of its ethicality. The definition of persuasion provides a useful framework for analyzing the overall ethicality of a persuasion attempt.

So, let's think more about the ethics of persuasion as it relates to our definition of persuasion. When we think of ethics generally, and our ethics personally, it's easy to see it all in black and white terms. However, it often gets more complicated when we consider the multitude of competing interests, perspectives, and consequences that life presents us with. So, to better understand the complexity of the relationship between persuasion and ethics, let's break persuasion attempts into their component parts and look at how we can evaluate the ethical nature of each on its own terms.

Intent

First, we can examine the conscious intent of the persuader. For a persuasion attempt to be ethical, is it necessary for the persuader to have the right motive?

Let's say someone intends to persuade young adults to begin smoking tobacco. However, the persuasion attempt backfires and the persuader made the young adults less likely to smoke. Was this persuasion episode ethical? The intent was wrong, but the outcome was beneficial to the young adults. The question is this: Is the persuader's intent an important part of determining whether a persuasion attempt was ethical?

Let's flip the valence of the intent and outcome and see what happens. Media literacy is a movement to show children how the media, especially advertising media, can influence children's choices. By learning the primary techniques that advertisers use, children can become more skeptical of advertisements and, hopefully, less persuaded by advertisements that target them. Suppose a media literacy expert visits a high school with the intent to discourage children from consuming energy drinks. To help children become savvy consumers of the advertising appeals, the expert shows the advertising appeals that manufacturers use. Suppose, however, that after the presentation the children had a stronger desire to consume the energy drinks, which was the opposite effect of what the media literacy expert had intended. Was the persuasion attempt ethical? The persuader had good intentions, but the outcome was harmful to the children's health.

In other words, do motives matter? As you will see later in the chapter, the persuader's intent matters more under deontological ethics than under teleological ethics.

Message

Second, we can look at the message being delivered. We can evaluate the ethical nature of a persuasion attempt by examining the content of the message, whether it is a single message or an extended multipronged campaign. We can look at the source of the message and what that implies, the transparency of the communicator, and the characteristics of the message's content itself.

Most people would agree that persuasive messages should not include false information (i.e., lies), but information can be framed in a way that encourages the consumer to draw a conclusion that really has no merit. For example, some coffee roasters boast that their coffee is mountain grown. This is true, but it implies that their coffee is better than coffee that is not mountain grown. In fact, the coffee tree must be planted on a slope for drainage because the plant is susceptible to root rot. It also grows best at certain elevations, typically in a mountain range. So, virtually all coffee is mountain grown.

As you saw at the beginning of this chapter, many government bodies influence what can be included in a persuasive message. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC), for example, has guidelines on what constitutes deceptive advertising, and periodically companies are fined for making deceptive or unsubstantiated claims. As you know, though, what is legal might not necessarily be ethical.

Some messages, for example, include what is known as a fear appeal. Fear can be a powerful motivating force, and you will find persuasive messages that rely on a fear appeal. The ethicality of using a fear appeal comes under fire often, however. For example, some political action committees use fear appeals during an election season, warning of dire outcomes if a policy or candidate is not supported. But should public health officials use a fear appeal in encouraging women to check for breast cancer? Should fear be used to discourage minors from smoking tobacco? Is it ethical to use fear if the motives are well intentioned? Or if the desired outcome is noble? As you can begin to see, it can be difficult to separate the intent, the message, and the outcome when analyzing the ethicality of a persuasion attempt.

Free Will

Third, we can examine the involvement of the persuasion target's free will. When a person's free will is not fully honored, that person can feel resentful. Further, when a person's free will is not respected in a persuasion attempt, then you have an instance of coercion, and not persuasion. As we noted in Chapter 1, persuasion and coercion lie on a continuum in which persuasion fully involves a person's independent will, and coercion does not involve a person's free will at all. So, this element, the target's free will, is a key issue for evaluating the ethical nature of a persuasion attempt.

The exercise of free will also involves the use of power. Society tends to support the use of safeguards to protect vulnerable populations, such as children and the mentally disabled. Support for safeguards arises from the belief that these populations do not have the resources, or power, necessary to protect themselves. Children as consumers have been referred to as "soft-headed, non-discerning neophytes" that are bombarded with marketing images (Grimm, 2005, p. 107). Because vulnerable populations lack the power they need to maintain their autonomous will, persuasion attempts that target them are often considered to be unethical.

The exercise of a person's free will also involves an awareness that one is the target of a persuasion attempt. A persuasion attempt may not be ethical if the target is unaware of the attempt. If the target is unaware that she is the target of a persuasion attempt, she may be less able to defend against it. In Europe, for example, television programs that feature product placements must include a symbol at the end of the program and list the products that were incorporated into the program. This requirement is designed to make the viewer aware of the products that were included in the program for promotional purposes.

Beyond the respect for a person's free will is the larger issue of personhood. A person's will is an important component of one's personhood, and respect for persons, more broadly, is an important ethical criterion. Personhood encompasses a person's will, but it also includes that person's autonomy, identity, and power.

Outcome

Finally, we can evaluate the ethicality of a persuasion attempt by looking at the outcome on a target's attitudes and behavior. That is, does the persuasion attempt lead to a desirable outcome? For example, does a smoking cessation campaign get people to stop smoking? Does a civic engagement campaign get people to participate in an election or a town hall? Does an advertising campaign get children to consume more fatty or sugary foods?

Because of a respect for personhood, we can also expand this question of outcome to include the impact or influence on the target's well-being, fulfillment, happiness, and so on. An important question is the impact of the persuasion attempt on happiness, either the happiness of an individual, or the happiness and well-being of a larger group. In other words, the outcome of a persuasion attempt can include more than the impact on a person's specific attitudes and behavior; it can include the impact on the personhood and well-being of that individual or even of a larger social group. As far as individuals, some ad campaigns are designed to exploit a person's vulnerability or insecurity (PRNewswire, 2013). You can easily think of magazine covers that address people's insecurities regarding weight, aging, relationships, and so on. While they sell the magazine issue, they do so by heightening a person's insecurity. Other persuasion attempts can have detrimental outcomes for a group of people. For example, some advertisements rely on ethnic stereotypes (Taylor, Landreth, & Bang, 2005) and in so doing, the advertisements can reinforce stereotypical beliefs. Further, some persuasive efforts can lead to addictive behavior, whether to alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and so on, all of which can have detrimental effects, not just for an individual, but for that individual's family or community.

Persuasion in Focus: Food Choices and Free Will

The concept of free will involves assumptions about people being autonomous, rational, and not operating under social, mental, or physical constraints. How might these factors impact one's free will, though? To think through this, let's consider how we assign responsibility for the obesity epidemic. Americans tend to believe that individuals are responsible for their food intake and therefore should be held responsible for their weight gain (Levitsky & Pacanowski, 2011). However nutritionist David Levitsky and psychologist Carly Pacanowski have argued that absolute free will in relation to food consumption is a myth. They wrote,

Food choice is an illusion. We choose the food we eat based on our history of experiences with that food and all the environmental forces that impinge on us at that moment: what the food looks like, what others around us are eating, what we think others consider a normal portion to eat, the price of that food, the ease of obtaining food, the speed of obtaining the food, how much time we have to eat, and many other factors which have yet to be discovered. (Levitsky & Pacanowski, 2011, p. 137)

(continued)

Persuasion in Focus: Food Choices and Free Will (*continued*)

Since the 1980s, the average portion sizes in restaurants have grown along with the obesity rate. This has socialized people into thinking that larger portions are the “norm” and therefore rationally desirable. Levitsky and Pacanowski also pointed out that we have much more access to high-fat food, both in restaurants and in packaged snack foods. The researchers claim that our exposure to a wide variety of food advertisements, especially on television, primes us to want to eat and focuses our attention on unhealthy options, which is a mental constraint. Further, people usually are unaware that this is happening—yet another mental constraint. So, while we still have “free will” in this area, we are often constrained by the choices available (physical), lack of knowledge (rational), and norms about what is considered to be desirable food (social).

When we blame individuals for being obese, we assume absolute free will. However, instead of blaming individuals and their free will, the researchers suggested the best way to address the issue is through holding the food industry and the government responsible for obesity as well. They’d like to see restrictions on all food marketing, reduced portion sizes in restaurants and at home, and/or taxing sugary, high-fat foods. This would put limits on the “free will” of restaurant owners, consumers, and food companies.

—Cheri Ketchum, Ph.D.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. How do you define free will? How much free will do you feel you exercise, not only in your daily diet but also in life generally?
2. This issue cuts to the core of many societal debates, which pivot on how much influence our environment exerts on our thoughts and actions. With regard to diet, to what degree do you think it’s the responsibility of business and the government to make choices for individual citizens?
3. What ethical considerations are at play here? What would you consider the most ethical policy?

Reference

Levitsky, D., & Pacanowski, C. R. (2011). Review article: Free will and the obesity epidemic. *Public Health Nutrition*, 15(1), 126–141.

3.2 Theoretical Approaches to Ethics

The study of ethics typically relies on three classifications. **Metaethics** is the study of the field of ethics itself. This paragraph about ethics is an example of metaethics. **Normative ethics** focuses on systems of ethical reasoning that can be applied to a variety of situations. Normative ethics involves guidelines or principles that can guide a society’s behavior and social relationships. **Applied ethics** focuses on how to approach specific ethical quandaries, such as the appropriate role of medicine for a terminally ill person, or how to be an ecologically responsible consumer. Although persuasion is an applied field, we will focus on how normative ethics can guide ethical persuasion choices in a variety of situations.

There are several approaches to normative ethics, but we will focus on the two most common systems: teleological ethics and deontological ethics. The prefix “teleo” refers to ends, so **teleological ethics** is the study of the ends or outcomes of a person’s actions. The most common form of teleological ethics is utilitarian ethics, which we will discuss in a moment. The prefix “deon” refers to duty, so **deontological ethics** involves the study of a person’s duty or obligation.

Many other ethical systems could be considered, of course. Virtue ethics, for example, is one approach, but we will only deal with virtue ethics in passing in this chapter. Rather than focusing on how to engage in ethical behavior, virtue ethics emphasizes becoming an ethical person by cultivating a set of virtues such as honesty, generosity, thrift, and so on. You would benefit, both personally and professionally, from reading comprehensive and well-reasoned treatments of ethics, either on your own or as part of a formal course of study.

3.3 Teleological Ethics

Teleological ethical systems focus more on the end result of a person’s actions than on the actions themselves. A teleological approach to ethics, then, might be summarized broadly as “the ends justify the means.”



Bill Watterson/Universal Uclick

A key issue for teleological ethical reasoning is to make sure it doesn’t merely justify the use of power.

Utilitarian Ethics

Utilitarian ethics is the most widely known form of teleological ethical systems. **Utilitarianism**, as espoused by philosophers John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, holds that one should seek the greatest good for the greatest number of people. In other words, the ethical choice is the one that lets the greatest number of people experience the beneficial consequences of that choice.

In the utilitarian perspective, an action might hurt a few people, but if it benefits a greater number of people, then that action is ethical. For example, let's say your relatively wealthy friend Alberto was considering making a contribution to a hunger-relief program in Mozambique. He said he would donate \$1,000 if he knew that at least 90% of the contribution went directly to hunger relief. You know, however, that the organization needs to use 15% of the contribution for administrative expenses. You also know that the \$1,000 would feed two impoverished families for 1 year. In describing the program, you might exaggerate (i.e., lie about) the program's benefits and low administrative expenses in order to encourage your friend to make a contribution that would benefit those families. If you justify your action by saying, "It was for a good cause," then you engaged in utilitarian reasoning, which focuses on the outcome of your action.

For Mill, the goal of humanity is to experience happiness, which is the greatest good. So, ethical actions are those that lead to the greatest amount of happiness. "The ultimate end is the greatest balance of pleasure over pain," Mill wrote. "This being the end of human action, it is also the end of morality, which consists of those rules that will best further the end" (Mill,



Wang qi/ICHPL Imaginechina/Associated Press

To promote biodiversity and ecotourism, live butterflies were pinned to a model's dress during an event in Nanyang City, China (2014). The woman was advertised as a "living butterfly fairy," and was intended to encourage people's love of insects and the natural world. Is it okay to hurt butterflies if doing so will boost environmental protection?

1998, p. 37). That is, because human beings' ultimate goal is happiness, moral rules also must have as their ultimate goal to maximize happiness and minimize pain.

For utilitarians, "motives are morally irrelevant" (Mill, 1998, p. 38) because the consequences are what matter most. It is fine to do the right thing for the wrong motives, as long as the outcome is beneficial. It is also fine to do something that some people would frown upon, as long as the outcome helps more people than it hurts. Likewise, a persuader's good intentions do not matter if the outcome of the persuasion attempt hurts the people it was intended to benefit. The ethicality of a persuasion attempt is evaluated on the basis of the outcome, and not on the persuader's motive.

Examples of Utilitarian Reasoning in Persuasion

To encourage ethical behavior, some utilitarian approaches highlight the benefits to a person's self-interest. That is, an individual can benefit from "doing the right thing," and that person can also be hurt by acting unethically. For example, Cialdini (1999) noted that systematic dishonesty in a marketing organization leads to three types of costs:

1. Dishonesty leads to higher turnover and absenteeism among employees who value honesty, which leads to higher costs for the organization.
2. Employees who do not value honesty are more likely to remain with the organization, and having dishonest employees can lead to theft, kickbacks, and such, which leads to higher costs for the organization.
3. To combat this, organizations must spend money on sophisticated accounting and control systems, which leads to higher costs for the organization.

Therefore, systematic honest behavior is in the organization's self-interest. Cialdini's appeal to self-interest reflects a utilitarian ethical stance. That is, the costs of systematic dishonesty outweigh the benefits or short-term profits that might be derived from it. So, a utilitarian calculation should lead a marketing organization to promote honest behavior. This is a form of what is sometimes called "enlightened self-interest." That is, if people knew that ethical behavior was in their self-interest, they would engage in ethical behavior all the time. What it means in the short-term, though, is that honesty might lead to lower profits or lost sales, or even the firm's failure to meet payroll and pension obligations. It might even lead the business to fail, especially if competing firms are profiting from dishonest behavior, and then all the employees would be out of a job.

However, shouldn't an organization engage in honest behavior simply because it is the right thing to do? Moreover, if being honest is the most profitable approach to running a business, wouldn't every organization have learned by now to do conduct itself honestly? It isn't hard to find organizations that engage in dishonest conduct. For some, the reward of payoffs is so high that the risk of getting caught and paying a fine is just considered a cost of doing business.

In other cases, though, a firm might sincerely wish to engage in socially responsible behavior. Let's say a mining company wants to develop a potentially profitable silver vein that was discovered in a remote area of the Andes Mountains. Because of the potential payoff, the company is willing to risk several million dollars to mine the metal. If the mining operation turns out not to have been feasible, it will have lost millions of dollars in sunk costs, not to mention the benefits the money would have returned had it been invested elsewhere. The mining company officials feel that the local population should benefit from the mine, both economically and in other ways, such as improved health care and education. The local population has been virtually ignored by the government for generations and lacks access to even basic social services.

So, the company wishes to spend considerable sums to provide free medical care by building a medical center, staffing the hospital with highly trained professionals, to provide free education at a state-of-the-art school, and to build local housing that is comparable in quality to median houses in metropolitan areas. The company is also planning to invest several million dollars to make sure the mining operation has a negligible effect on the environment.

However, permits for the mining operation are being held up by a couple of high-ranking officials who wish to benefit personally from the wealthy international corporation. If the company does not pay bribes totaling several hundred thousand dollars, the residents of the mining area will not benefit from this new economic opportunity, as well as vastly improved health care and education for their families.

Is it ethical to bribe a few government officials so that the mining project can move forward and the well-being of several thousand people can be improved? If you agree that it's okay because many people will benefit, you are a utilitarian.

Limitations to the Utilitarian Approach

Utilitarianism's focus on outcomes leads to the doctrine of negative responsibility. As one scholar explained, "I am as responsible for the things I fail to prevent as I am for things I myself bring about" (Crisp, 1998, p. 29). For example, if you had the ability to persuade your roommate to make healthy eating choices or to drink responsibly, but you failed to do so, then you have acted unethically—because your inaction had led to unhealthy and thus "painful" ends for your roommate. In utilitarianism, there is no such thing as an "innocent" bystander.

As you can imagine, however, a subjective approach to utilitarian ethics can make it easy for someone to rationalize her behavior, when the behavior really is the result of personal convenience (Christians, Fackler, & Ferré, 2012). People can act selfishly, but they rationalize their behavior as being ethical. Have you ever told a "little white lie"? Perhaps you didn't tell your friend what you really thought about a new purse she had bought. You probably justified not being honest by saying you didn't want to hurt her feelings, when you really wanted to avoid a potentially unpleasant situation. Instead, you kept your mouth shut and let her walk around with a funny-looking purse. That is, much of our behavior is self-serving, but by resorting to utilitarian ethical justifications we can give our self-serving behavior a veneer of ethicality.

For example, Sarah, might take every opportunity to tell her roommate, Nora, how poor Nora's eating habits are. Sarah might explain repeatedly to Nora the healthful benefits of eating a vegetarian diet, not drinking alcohol or soda, and exercising five times a week. Even though Nora is tired of Sarah harping on her health habits, Sarah continues to do so. Sarah can justify her continued berating of Nora by saying that it is for Nora's own good.

But Sarah really might not be doing this at all for Nora's benefit. Deep down, Sarah might feel good about herself for taking time to "educate" Nora on healthy habits. Sarah may simply want to feel superior to Nora, or she may want to reinforce to herself her own diets and habits, or perhaps she doesn't like or respect Nora at all, and picking on Nora's diet is a way to make Nora feel bad about herself. Sarah could justify her actions by claiming she does it for Nora's health, but it might be that Sarah is really seeking to benefit her own sense of self-worth. That is, Sarah is seeking to boost her own self-esteem at Nora's expense, but she justifies it by telling herself that she is selflessly just trying to help Nora.

This qualification speaks to the limitations of the utilitarian approach. Utilitarianism has to assume that all actions are done for a just cause, even if they sometimes result in some harm along the way. But perhaps some actions are just plain wrong, at any time, at any place, regardless of the consequence. This is the thrust of deontological ethics.

3.4 Deontological Ethics

A deontological approach to ethics holds that a person's ethical obligations are universal. That is, ethics, like truth, do not vary from one society to another and apply equally to any situation.

Kantian Ethics

The most common form of deontological ethical reasoning was formulated by philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kantian ethics consists of **categorical imperatives**, or moral commands, that apply in an absolute sense in every situation. Instead of letting the potential consequences of your action guide your ethical decisions, you should act in a way that is universally consistent, regardless of the outcome. For Kant, only categorical imperatives express universal moral and ethical truths; that is, there is nothing higher that could change or limit the application of these ultimate truths. An example of a categorical imperative is “Do not lie. Period.” For contrast, the value of a **hypothetical imperative** depends on particular circumstances or goals (Johnson, 2009). An example of a hypothetical imperative is “Do not lie, if you want to keep your customers.” The merit of a hypothetical imperative is evaluated by the end or motive associated with it. That is, the end or motive is something greater that could override the application of this command.

Let's go back to the example of your wealthy friend who was considering making a contribution to a hunger-relief program. If you adhered to a deontological system of ethics, you would not lie about the program's administrative expenses because lying is always wrong. It is wrong even if it meant that two impoverished families went hungry for a year. The deontological system focuses on your action—in this case what you say, regardless of the action's consequences.

Kant's conception of categorical imperatives forms the basis for what we might better know as “Golden Rules”—for example, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” or “Never treat people as a means to an end.” These rules can be applied “unthinkingly” as a type of mental shortcut, or heuristic (see Chapter 6). In this latter iteration, we can start to see how this approach to ethical behavior would be problematic in the context of persuasive acts, as we will discuss later on.



Saul Loeb/Staff/AFP/Getty Images

Google's motto, “Don't be evil,” expresses a Kantian view that focuses on behavior. Critics, however, say that Google should also take a closer look at the consequences of its actions. Here, a “mime” with the “Google Track Team,” a group with the Consumer Watchdog Privacy Project confronting Google's privacy practices, walks alongside Eric Schmidt, chairman of Google.

Example of Kantian Ethics

Cedric is a salesperson at a cellphone store. He earns a commission on each phone he sells, and he also can earn a bonus if a customer purchases an extended warranty. A customer, Stan, is self-employed and needs a reliable phone for his business. He wants to purchase the XT-100 because it looks cool and has interchangeable, customizable cases. Cedric knows that the XT-100 has a higher repair rate than other models, and because he is looking out for his Stan's interests, he recommends the PQ-30, which is more reliable but lacks the customizable cases that Stan wants. Stan would purchase the PQ-30, except that it lacks customizable cases. So, Stan sticks with his choice of the XT-100.

Should Cedric tell Stan about the lower repair rate for PQ-30 and risk losing a sale altogether? Deontological ethicists would say that Cedric should follow the categorical imperative to tell the truth, even if he loses a sale and even if his boss might find out and fire him for losing a potential customer. Deontologists would say if Cedric were a customer, he would want a salesperson to be honest with him, so he should be honest with Stan.

The extra cost of an extended warranty would make the phone's cost much higher than the PQ-30, and Cedric is convinced that it is truly in Stan's best interests to have a reliable phone for a lower cost, especially since Stan depends on the phone for his income. Further, Cedric knows that the novelty of having interchangeable cases wears off after about a month, and Stan is likely to be dissatisfied with his phone in a couple of months. Even though they are quite popular, Cedric could lie to Stan and tell him that the cases are a passing fad that hardly anyone buys anymore. If Cedric did that, Stan probably would lose interest in the XT-100 and opt for the PQ-30, which is the more dependable phone that he truly needs for his business. A deontological ethicist would say that Cedric should not do that because lying is always unethical. A utilitarian ethicist would approve because Cedric's actions would benefit Stan.

The Question of Motive

Kant maintained that a person must also have a will that is good. Kant's notion of a **good will** is that of a pure motive, good intentions. Having a good will is the foundation for ethical action. Thus, this insistence on a good will bears directly on element #1 in the definition of persuasion, that is, the persuader's intent or motives.

Unlike utilitarian ethics, which intentionally overlooks a person's intentions, deontological ethics pays special attention to a person's motives. For Kant, doing the right thing, but for the wrong reason, is still wrong. Likewise, doing something that has a positive or beneficial outcome for people is still wrong if you do it for the wrong reason. So, if you intend to persuade someone, your desire to do so must arise from a pure motive. Otherwise, the persuasion attempt is unethical. If you persuade your friend to drive to the beach with you because you know she needs to relax, and also because it will make the trip less expensive for you, then the persuasion attempt is unethical.

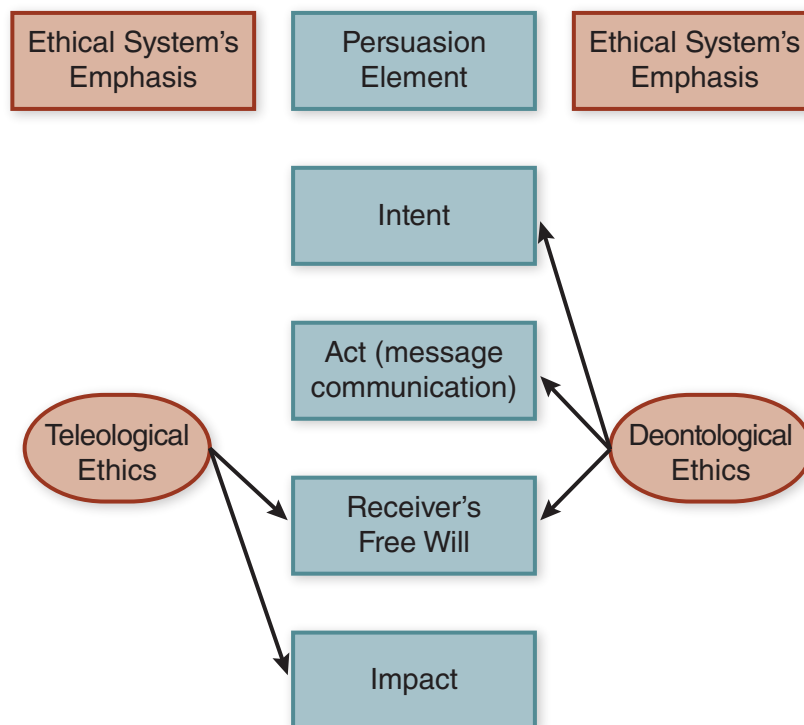
Going back to the cellphone sale example, let's say that Cedric does tell Stan about the repair record, and Stan still wants the XT-100. Should Cedric encourage Stan to purchase an extended warranty? Because Stan, of his own free will, wants the repair-prone XT-100, it would be in his interest to purchase an extended warranty so he wouldn't have to spend more money on likely repairs. Cedric would also benefit by receiving a bonus for selling the warranty, so Cedric is motivated both by his concern for Stan and also by his personal gain. "Since Stan decided

to get the phone anyway, it's in his interest to get the warranty," he thinks to himself. "Besides, I'll get a bonus, too." For a deontological ethicist, the attempt to sell an extended warranty is unethical because Cedric's motives aren't pure. For a utilitarian ethicist, the motives don't matter, as long as Stan benefits.

Think back to the example of Sarah trying to persuade Nora to live a healthier lifestyle. Let's assume for a moment that Sarah was sincerely trying to help Nora, but it might not be beneficial for Nora to hear this same message over and over. Sometimes intended persuasive messages can backfire and make a person even more resistant to the persuasive appeal, a phenomenon known as psychological reactance. In utilitarian ethics, Sarah's efforts would be unethical because they led to a negative outcome for Nora. Sarah's motives do not matter. The main thing that matters is the outcome and its effect on Nora. So, unintended consequences matter, even if a person was sincerely motivated. For deontological ethics, the outcome does not matter, as long as Sarah was operating from a pure motive (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1: Ethical systems and persuasion

Intent and act are more emphasized in deontological ethics, while teleological ethics is more focused on the outcome.



Example of Deontological Reasoning in Persuasion

Let's look at a real-life case of deontological ethical reasoning. In 2000, British Petroleum (BP) launched a campaign called "go green." This campaign introduced a new green and yellow logo and was intended to show the public that the company was concerned for the

environment. The company touted how it was spending money to promote the development of environmentally friendly sources of energy. While it was true that the company was investing in developing alternative sources of fuel, the way the information was communicated overlooked the company's considerable effort in developing fossil fuels as well.



Alastair Grant/Associated Press

A Greenpeace activist posts a sign at a BP gas station in London after the 2010 Gulf oil spill.

BP's marketing campaign, which sought to portray the company as being more environmentally friendly than it really was.

In 2008, however, BP received the “worst greenwashing award” from the environmental organization Greenpeace. Greenwashing is when a firm touts a narrow environmental benefit of its practices or products, while ignoring or covering up larger, more impactful, environmental harms. Greenpeace said that BP was being duplicitous for highlighting its commitment to alternative energy while spending 93% of its research and development budget on fossil fuels. In other words, the bulk of its development budget went toward fossil fuels, while most of its advertising highlighted the development of alternative fuels. This mismatch was the grounds for Greenpeace to criticize “the misleading nature of BP’s marketing claims of dedication toward alternative energy” (Walker, n.d.). Of course, matters only became worse after the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico 2 years later. In essence, Greenpeace criticized BP on deontological grounds for saying one thing while doing another.

Greenpeace's charge that BP misled the public was based on a deontological perspective. That is, BP was lying. Although Greenpeace often is concerned with the effect of companies' actions on the environment, this time Greenpeace was critical primarily of

3.5 Critiques of Teleological and Deontological Ethics

Although utilitarian ethics and Kantian ethics are quite common and are widely used, they have been criticized on a number of fronts. These critiques also can apply to teleological ethics and deontological ethics more generally.

Doing Versus Being

A critique from virtue ethics, which we mentioned briefly at the start of the chapter, is that both teleological and deontological ethical systems focus on doing rather than being (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). That is, because they are a form of normative ethics, they focus on ethical behavior more than on being an ethical person. For virtue ethicists, becoming a virtuous person will naturally result in ethical or virtuous behavior as this person develops daily habits in the practice of virtues. Most textbooks on ethics, however, focus either on normative systems

of guidelines, or on applied ethics, that is, how to apply rules to solve ethical quandaries. Although Kant maintained that ethical behavior has as its starting point a good will, the bulk of his writing focused on identifying categorical imperatives as rules that can be applied to generate ethical behavior. So, keep in mind that focusing on becoming an ethical person might be a worthwhile path toward behaving in an ethically consistent manner in persuasion. As we noted earlier, a more formal study of ethics will help you understand the strengths and weaknesses of a number of ethical approaches.

The Limitations of Reason

Both Mill and Kant developed their influential systems of ethics in the 18th century, and both systems focus on the rational autonomous individual. Both approaches to ethics rely on careful application of effortful thinking. However, this reliance on reason alone may not be warranted (Christians et al., 2012). People are not perfectly rational in their thought processes, and they do not possess perfect knowledge either, so any ethical system that relies solely on reason may be flawed.

For example, in utilitarian ethics, we must consider all of the consequences of an action so that we can weigh the benefits and choose the course of action that would result in the greatest good for the greatest number of people. If we are imperfectly rational, however, our ability to foresee all possible outcomes is also imperfect; in other words, we can't see all possible outcomes, and so relying on this model of ethics alone is, in itself, limiting. What is more, of the outcomes we can foresee, we might not be accurate in determining what the consequences might be, either in the short term or in the long term (Christians et al., 2012). In any case, reliance on reason alone in guiding our ethics is fundamentally flawed, and so, too, are all ethical models that rely solely on reason.

Let's put these into more specific examples. Jason, a physician, has a patient, Elena, who suffers from cardiovascular disease. Jason plans to prescribe Elena statins, which have been documented to reduce the risk for the disease. Jason considers two benefits to prescribing statins, namely that Elena's disease will improve and she likely will enjoy a longer life. Jason's colleague, Jill, can think of three benefits for prescribing statins for her patient, Masie. Not only will Masie's disease improve and she will live longer, but she will have an improved quality of life. Let's say that both Jason and Jill prescribed statins to both Elena and Masie, and their patients' cardiovascular disease improved. Is Jill more virtuous than Jason in choosing action A because she could think of more outcomes? Hardly. In utilitarian ethics, it is the outcome, and not the decision-making process, that matters most.

Now, let's say that aside from the benefits of prescribing statins, Jill also realizes that some heart disease patients who take statins will no longer stick to a healthy diet. In fact, patients on statins tend to increase their consumption of fatty foods (Sugiyama, Tsugawa, Tseng, Kobayashi, & Shapiro, 2014). Based on this consideration, Jill chooses not to prescribe statins, but instead stresses the importance of a healthy diet and exercise. Then, let's say that Jason overlooks the unintended detrimental consequence of prescribing statins. If he chooses to go ahead and prescribe statins for Elena, and she consumes even more fatty food than before and her cardiovascular disease worsens, was his choice ethical merely because he failed to consider a potentially harmful consequence even though the outcome was detrimental? When we think of ethics, we typically think of the conscious choices one makes—ethical or unethical choices—based on careful deliberation and the consideration of all the information available. Here, Jason's decision was based on less information than Jill's decision.

There is also an increasing body of evidence from contemporary research that highlights further the problems inherent in relying exclusively on the idea that reason alone dictates our ethical decision making.

Nonconscious Influences

Our ethical judgments can be influenced by factors that lie outside our conscious reasoning. Considerable evidence is emerging that our moral and ethical evaluations are not just the result of careful reasoned analysis, or even quick mental shortcuts. Instead, our judgments can also be influenced by our emotions and what we feel in our bodies.

For example, watching a movie clip or washing your hands should not influence your moral judgments if these judgments truly are the product of reasoning alone. However, as you saw in Chapter 1, people in one study watched a movie clip that made them feel disgust. Before going to another room to read and evaluate a series of moral dilemmas, half of the people were instructed to wash their hands with soap and water, and those who did so were less severe in their judgments of potentially immoral behavior (Schnall, Benton, & Harvey, 2008). Feeling disgust, not from the moral dilemmas themselves, but from an unrelated experience, led people to be more severe in their moral judgments, unless they washed their hands.



Fancy Collection/Fancy Collection/Superstock

Would your moral judgment of a person be more critical if you saw a messy desk?

In another study, experiencing a bitter taste made people's moral judgments more severe (Eskine, Kacinik, & Prinz, 2011). These effects do not have to be internal; contextual factors, such as a person's environment, can produce similar effects as well. Merely hearing unpleasant sounds (Seidel & Prinz, 2013) or sitting at a messy desk with scattered papers and food wrappers (Schnall et al., 2008) can increase the severity of moral judgments. In contrast, hearing upbeat, happy music in the background can reduce the severity of moral judgments (Ziv, Hoftman, & Geyer, 2011).

These types of results suggest that many of our ethical judgments are not the result of careful reasoning, as teleological and deontological ethics would call for. Instead, our judgments arise largely from "gut" impressions (figuratively and literally).

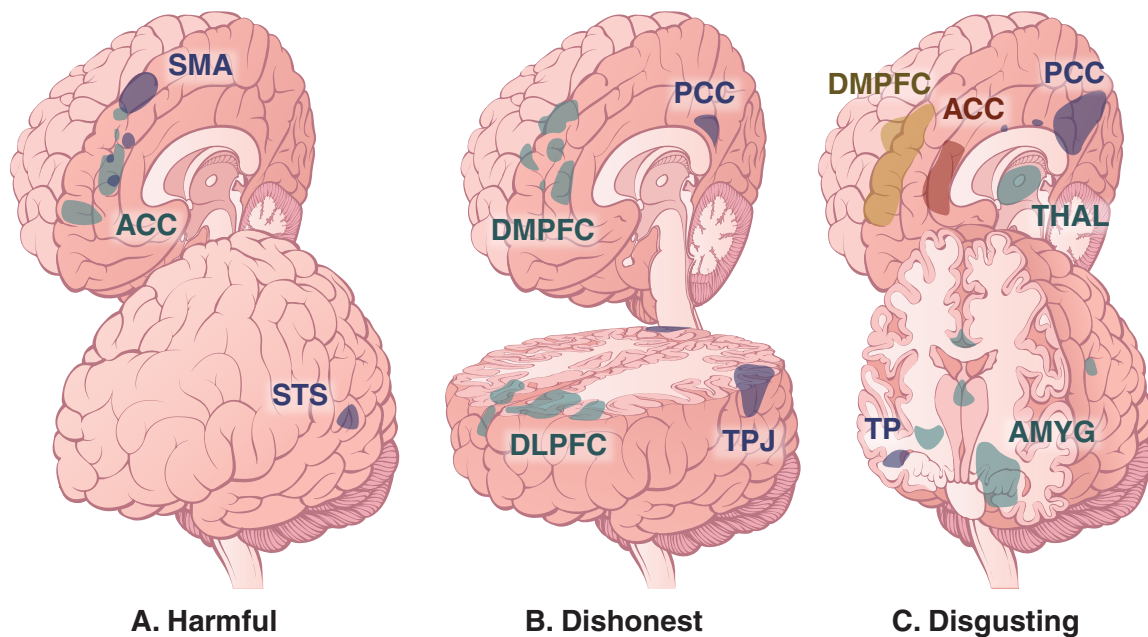
Multitasking Brain

Furthermore, evidence from fMRI data suggests that different parts of the brain “light up” depending on the type of ethical issue people are evaluating. One area of the brain is involved in judgments of harm, while another is used in evaluations of dishonesty (Parkinson et al., 2011) (see Figure 3.2). This is significant because it appears that our evaluations of ethicality are not the product of a single mental reasoning system. Therefore, we might need to reevaluate the usefulness of ethical approaches that rely primarily on a person’s ability to engage in effortful reasoning.

These critiques are not intended to make us dispense with ethical reasoning altogether. They are intended to keep us humble as we evaluate the ethical aspects of persuasion theories, keeping in mind that our judgment is influenced by our worldview beliefs, our snap judgments, and any number of contextual influences.

Figure 3.2: Different moral reactions activate different parts of the brain

A) The judgment of physically harmful scenarios was associated with increased activity in the dorsal ACC, SMA and STS. B) The judgment of dishonest transgressions caused increased activity in the DMPFC and TPJ, as well as the left DLPFC and PCC. C) The judgment of disgusting moral transgressions stimulated increased activity in the temporal poles and amygdalae, as well as in the DMPFC, ACC, and PCC.



Source: Parkinson, C., Sinnott-Armstrong, W., Koralus, P. E., Medelovici, A., McGeer, V., & Wheatley, T. (2011). Is morality unified? Evidence that distinct neural systems underlie moral judgments of harm, dishonesty, and disgust. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 23(10), 3162–3180. Copyright © 2011, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Reprinted with permission.

Persuasion in the Real World (of Distractions)

Practically speaking, people often do not have enough time to carefully consider the benefits and harm that might stem from their behavior. Life is full of daily distractions and hassles. We don't often have the opportunity to focus all of our attention and time on every decision we make. Consequently, utilitarian ethical reasoning might occur less often than people would like. A number of studies have explored this issue.

One experimental technique that researchers use to study mental processes is to manipulate cognitive load. Researchers ask people to engage in a supplemental mental task to see if this additional mental burden interferes with a person's performance on a different task. There are several ways to keep people mentally busy, such as trying to remember a long number, being ready to press a button every time they hear a tone, pressing a button every time the number 5 appears on the screen, and so on. This mental busyness is referred to as a cognitive load, and when people are under a cognitive load, they have difficulty using their deliberative thinking processes and must rely instead on snap judgments.

If utilitarian ethics involves a calculation to minimize costs and maximize benefits, then interfering with a person's ability to concentrate should hinder their ability to make a utilitarian-type judgment. An example of a utilitarian judgment is "It is acceptable to hurt one person if it will help several others." An example of a deontological judgment is "It is wrong to hurt a person." This second type of judgment does not involve weighing an action's pros and cons, and, therefore, it should not be affected as much by a cognitive load. That is, increasing a person's mental burden should interfere with that person's ability to choose an action that reflects utilitarian thinking, but it should not interfere with choosing an action that reflects a deontological judgment.

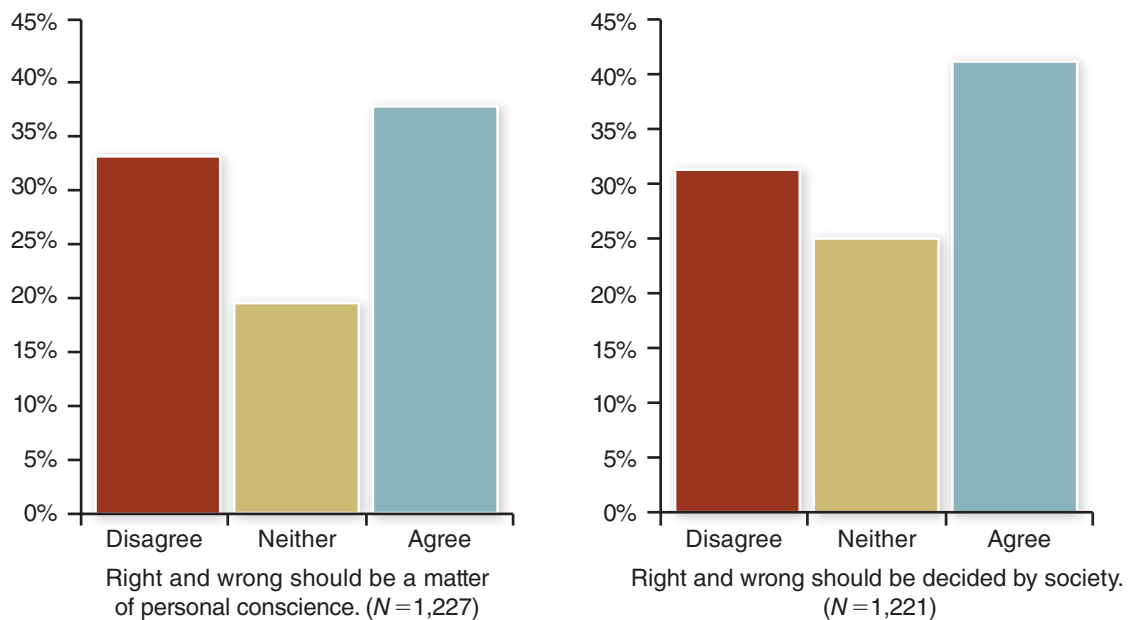
One study did find that increasing people's cognitive load impaired their ability to make utilitarian judgments, but it did not interfere with their ability to make deontological ones (Greene, Morelli, Lowenberg, Nystrom, & Cohen, 2008). A similar effect was found when people had very little time to deliberate, but only for dilemmas that were personally relevant and involved high levels of conflict (Suter & Hertwig, 2011). Further, judgments of harm or fairness tend not to be affected by a cognitive load, which suggests that these types of judgments tend to occur via quick low-effort thinking. Judgments in the areas of authority, loyalty, and purity tend to be affected by a cognitive load, which suggests that these types of judgments involve effortful deliberative thought (Bargh, Schwader, Hailey, Dyer, & Boothby, 2012). So, quick low-effort evaluations are likely to be deontological in nature, while deliberative evaluations are more likely to reflect utilitarian calculations.

3.6 Ethical Approaches in Contemporary Society

As you may have gathered by now, a teleological ethicist would encourage you to choose the system of ethics that best suits you for a given situation, whereas a deontologist would tell you that ethics is not a matter of personal choice because ethical rules apply to everyone universally. You now also understand that each ethical approach has its limits.

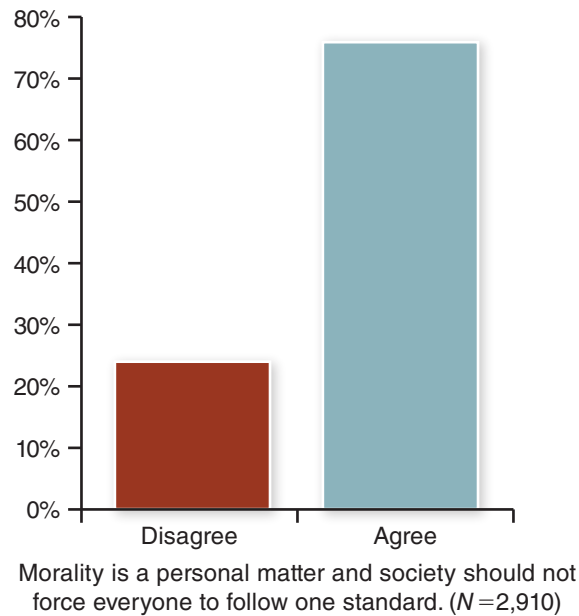
Each approach can also be found underlying many of our beliefs in society at large. Data from the General Social Survey (GSS) (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2007) suggest that both types of ethical reasoning are widespread in U.S. society. In a report spanning the years 1988–1991, people reported the extent to which they agreed with the following statement: “Right and wrong should be a matter of personal conscience.” Of the 1,227 people, 37% of respondents indicated some level of agreement, while 33% indicated their disagreement, with 21% saying they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. Respondents were also asked about the following statement: “Right and wrong should be decided by society.” Of the 1,221 people who responded, 32% disagreed, 25% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 43% agreed. (See Figure 3.3.)

Figure 3.3: Ethical reasoning in U.S. society (1988–1991)



Source: Based on General Social Survey (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2007).

In a 2006 report, respondents expressed the degree to which they agreed with the following statement (on a forced-choice scale): “Morality is a personal matter and society should not force everyone to follow one standard.” Of the 2,910 people who responded, 76% indicated some level of agreement with the statement, and 24% expressed their disagreement (see Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4: Ethical reasoning in U.S. society (2006)

Source: Based on General Social Survey (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2007).

These statements were not formal statements of teleological and deontological systems of ethics, but together they reflect common expressions of these systems in society. The responses suggest that people vary with regard to their ethical reasoning. Both teleological and deontological approaches to ethics are widespread in the United States, but they seem to be unrelated to traditional demographic variables (Rigney & Kearl, 1994).

These fundamental differences are also apparent in scholars' debates over whether morality is universal, which has implications for areas such as social and cultural influences on how children develop their moral reasoning. For example, Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller (1987) maintained that norms are merely the product of a particular society. As evidence that moral reasoning is culture bound, they described widespread cultural differences in moral practices. Turiel, Killen, and Helwig (1987) responded, however, that the moral imperatives remained the same across cultures, and variations in practices actually reflected differences in cause-effect beliefs on the best ways to implement these universal moral norms.

In other words, cultures around the world, Turiel et al. (1987) argued, share a common concern for fundamental values such as the welfare of others, justice, and trust. The difference in practices stems from specific cultural or societal beliefs about whether a specific action will result in benefit or harm, but all believe that harm should be avoided. For example, members of a capitalist society might believe that the best way to help its people is to limit government interference and promote a free-market economy. Members of a socialist society, in contrast, might believe that the best way to help its people is through more government intervention and limiting the reach of the free market. Both the devout capitalist and the devout socialist believe that inverting this balance will do harm to people. So, their policies are different, but their intended ends—to help their citizens—are far more aligned.

The point is that a person's ethical stance has implications for how that person perceives the ethicality of persuasion appeals. For example, the degree to which marketers endorse a teleological or deontological stance predicts their strategies for a number of marketing scenarios (Kleiser, Sivadas, Kellaris, & Dahlstrom, 2003). For example, a marketer who endorses a teleological stance is more likely than someone who endorses a deontological stance to approve of gift giving to keep a client happy. You should be aware of these systems and how they can influence your evaluation of the ethicality of a persuasion technique.

Let's turn now to some specific real-world examples of larger-scale persuasion attempts and evaluate the ethical questions involved in these attempts. We will do so by looking at the birth of and early practices of the public relations industry, which is likely familiar to all of us by now, given how saturated media and media messages have become in today's world, and how important these messages have become for social, political, and economic leveraging.

3.7 Practical Application: Public Relations and Ethical Considerations

Case Example 1: Edward Bernays and the NAACP

As a profession, the field of public relations has always been sensitive to ethical considerations. Edward Bernays is considered the founder of the profession of public relations. During World War I he worked for the government's Committee on Public Information (CPI), which was the U.S. government's first large-scale propaganda organization. The purpose of the CPI was to garner and maintain public support for U.S. involvement in World War I. Based on this experience, Bernays concluded that it is fine to use propaganda as long as it is used for ethical, not unethical, purposes (Christians et al., 2012). Bernays maintained that propaganda, or public relations, was an important component of a democratic society. This is because the purpose of propaganda was to influence public opinion, and a functioning democratic government represented public opinion. Decisions made in a democratic system reflected the multiple influences of any number of social groups and associations. However, reflecting his involvement with the CPI, Bernays also maintained that the government had an obligation to influence the public to support government policies. Therefore, public relations is amoral, he said, and the ethical value of public relations campaigns depends on the purposes for which public relations is used.

In 1920, Bernays and his wife and PR partner, Doris Fleishman, were hired to promote the national convention of the NAACP, whose primary goal was to secure equal treatment of African Americans. The meeting was scheduled for Atlanta, and amending notable speakers, Black and White civil rights leaders, were scheduled to participate. Bernays and Fleishman wanted to make sure that the meeting was covered on the front page of the Atlanta newspaper, *The Atlanta Constitution*. They encouraged the mayor of Atlanta to attend the convention, which would encourage more prominent coverage of the event (Christians et al., 2012). However, the issue of race relations was an important sensitive topic at the time in Atlanta and other areas across the U.S. South. Bernays and Fleishman also persuaded the state's governor to put the National Guard on alert (Tye, 1998). There was no known credible threat of violence surrounding the convention, but the governor's move made sure that the convention was covered not only in Atlanta, but also in newspapers across the country. The intent of promoting

the convention was laudable, as it supported a noble social goal, but the promotional efforts involved misrepresenting the potential for racial conflict in Atlanta surrounding the convention, which perhaps created a stigma nationwide toward the people of Atlanta and/or the state of Georgia generally.

Case Example 2: Edward Bernays and Lucky Strike Cigarettes

A few years later, Bernays was hired by the American Tobacco Company to increase tobacco sales among women, very few of whom smoked. Originally, the cigarette brand Lucky Strikes was associated with a desire for slimness. Bernays devised the campaign in which smoking a cigarette was associated with a desire for greater equality among the sexes. Bernays paid several fashion models to participate in the popular New York Easter Parade and to light up a Lucky Strike cigarette at a specific time (Christians et al., 2012). Before this happened, Bernays told press photographers that women activists would light cigarettes as a form of protest against the public disapproval of women smoking in public. Bernays called the cigarettes “torches of freedom” that symbolized women’s desire for equality (Tye, 1998). The press release that Bernays sent to the media seemed to come from the women. During the parade, press photographers took pictures of the models smoking the cigarettes, and photographs of the event appeared in newspapers across the country.

However, even though sales of cigarettes increased, women were not necessarily smoking the Lucky Strike cigarette. Bernays discovered that they disliked the packaging primarily because of the dark green color on the package. Because he could not change the packaging, Bernays promoted the color green as a new fashionable color (Christians et al., 2012). He promoted the color any way he could, including magazine articles, store displays, and so on. As the popularity of dark green rose, sales for Lucky Strikes increased among women.

Although Bernays promoted Lucky Strike cigarettes, he himself did not smoke (Christians et al., 2012). His wife, Doris Fleishman, smoked a pack of Parliament™ cigarettes every day, and Bernays did everything he could to try to get her to stop smoking. Bernays was aware of scientific evidence that links smoking to cancer, and he tried to discourage his family from smoking (Christians et al., 2012). So, it appears he was quite willing to promote the sales of cigarettes, even though he knew they were harmful.

For both clients, the NAACP and the American Tobacco Company, Bernays misrepresented the truth. For a teleological ethicist, the campaign for the NAACP would have been largely ethical because of the socially desirable outcome, but the campaign for Lucky Strike would have been somewhat unethical because of the harm to potential smokers. For a deontological ethicist, neither campaign would have been ethical because of the misrepresentation of the truth that was involved in the campaigns.

Case Example 3: Blogging About Walmart

In 2006, a couple known as Jim and Laura took a trip across America in a brand new RV, blogging about their trip as they stopped at Walmart stores across the country. The couple would spend the night parked in a Walmart parking lot, where Laura would post blog entries about their experience. She interviewed employees, from cashiers to managers, and told personal

stories of how much they loved working for Walmart and how the giant retailer had helped them improve their lives.

However, the stories were so positive and upbeat that some readers became suspicious. What Jim and Laura did not say on their blog was that the trip was paid for by an organization called Working Families for Walmart (Gogoi, 2006). That organization was formed in the previous year by Edelman, a large public relations firm that Walmart had hired. The retailer had been criticized by unions seeking to organize Walmart employees. Jim and Laura came up with the idea of spending the night at several Walmart stores and writing about the trip for a publication that is sent to RV enthusiasts. Before they did that, though, they contacted Working Families for Walmart. When the organization learned of Jim and Laura's plans, it offered to provide a new RV and pay for the gasoline. The organization also paid Laura a fee as a freelance writer. The organization also suggested a longer and much more elaborate trip than the couple had originally planned.

The problem for many observers is that at no point in their blog that Jim and Laura say that their trip was being funded by Working Families for Walmart, an organization that had been set up by Walmart's PR firm (Taylor, n.d.). Nor did they disclose that Laura was being paid for her blog entries. Laura's blog featured an advertisement for Working Families for Walmart, but the blog never mentioned their relationship with the organization.

When the public discovered that the blog and the entries were paid for by an organization set up by Walmart's PR agency, there was a widespread outcry. Most of the criticism centered on the fact that Laura did not mention that she was being paid for her blog posts, or that the trip itself was paid for by a public relations firm (Stroud & Pye, 2014). Critics said that Laura was being dishonest. The critics do not take issue with what Laura said in her blog entries, but rather they were critical of what was not said. While Laura spoke with many Walmart employees, and what the employees had to say was positive, some critics felt that Laura should have been honest about the source of the funding. So, they were not critical of the content of the stories, but they were critical of the possible motives or intent. It is not necessarily the case that having a selfish or personal motive makes a message more or less true. The truth of the content does not depend on the motive someone has for saying it. However, the credibility of the source, in this case Laura, was compromised because she did not reveal that there were other motives that could have influenced what she did and said.

Another issue that arose was that the head of the PR firm Edelman helps to craft the code of ethics for the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (Taylor, n.d.). Part of the association's code of ethics reads, "We believe in honesty and transparency at all times: Honesty of relationship, opinion, and identity, respecting the rules of the forum, rising above the minimum requirements in privacy and permission." The ethical problem was that the blogging campaign was not fully transparent. More specifically, the relationship between the bloggers and the organization was not transparent.

The question arises of what impact the obscured information might have had on the blog's readers, and on the public in general. Had the public known of Jim and Laura's relationship to Walmart, they might have been a little more critical of the blog content. They might have suspected that Jim and Laura only told the positive stories they encountered and refused to tell of any potentially negative stories that they might have encountered. However, because the public was not made aware of their relationship, their credibility might have been greater than it otherwise was.

From a deontological perspective, the behavior would have been unethical because the bloggers hid the truth. Doing so violated a categorical imperative, namely, "Do not lie." In this case, hiding the truth is similar to lying. From a utilitarian perspective, the behavior was unethical because it hurt the credibility of the blogging community (and public relations practitioners). The public might become more critical of bloggers in general because of this behavior. The primary concern was the consequence of a lack of transparency on free and open communication.

Each of these concerns relates to a different element of the definition of persuasion. Some of the ethical concerns arose from the couple's motives. If they were promoting Walmart primarily because they were paid to do so, then they were motivated by self-interest. If they truly wanted to influence the public's opinion about the retailer, they still could have blogged about their travel, as they had intended to do originally. The PR firm, Edelman, was motivated by financial gain, as Walmart was one of its clients, and it set up the organization Working Families for Walmart as a means of improving the retailer's public reputation amid criticism from labor unions. From a utilitarian perspective, the motives do not matter, but from a deontological perspective, the self-interested motives mean the campaign was unethical.

Some of the ethical concerns stemmed from the content of the message, namely, what was contained in the blog information and what was left out. Most observers did not object to the stories provided by the people that Jim and Laura interviewed, but it was possible that the couple omitted information that was critical of Walmart. In fact, the universally rosy picture that was painted was what caused some people to be suspicious. The fact that Edelman was not transparent in noting that it had set up the Walmart-funded organization that paid the bloggers was criticized as well. From a deontological perspective, not telling the truth fully is a form of deceit, which violates the categorical imperative of telling the truth.

The campaign might not have fully respected the public's free will, the third element of persuasion. The campaign gave the impression that Jim and Laura were merely private citizens who blogged about their experience camping in Walmart's parking lots. Hiding the couple's association with Walmart's PR firm might have been used to bypass the natural defenses that people use when they know they are evaluating persuasive messages. Had the public known that Jim and Laura were paid by Walmart's PR firm, they might have evaluated the stories differently. While the campaign was not coercive, it did not fully respect the public's free will, providing only feel-good stories that would appeal to the public's connection with average people.

Still other ethical concerns focused on the campaign's effects on the public, on bloggers, and even on PR professionals. This is where utilitarian ethics comes into play, while deontological ethics has little to say about the impact of the persuasion campaign. The harmful effects on the public, on the blogging community, and on the profession of public relations, means that the campaign was unethical. Any benefit that Jim and Laura, Edelman, and Walmart might have received was outweighed by the harm to these other communities. However, one might argue that the harmful effects were minimal. It is hard to say that people were truly hurt by the campaign, and Walmart employees might have benefited from the sharing the stories more than bloggers and PR professionals were hurt. To evaluate the ethicality of a campaign from a utilitarian perspective, you will need to be able to assess and balance the claims of harm against the claims of benefit.

Summary and Resources

Summary

- The definition of a persuasion attempt involves 1) a conscious intent to persuade, 2) the communication of a message, 3) the message receiver's free will, and 4) an impact on the receiver's attitudes. This definition also provides a useful framework for analyzing the ethicality of a persuasion attempt.
- A teleological approach to ethics involves a focus on the end result of a persuasion attempt; the most ethical persuasion behavior is the one that increases the well-being of the greatest number of people.
- A deontological approach focuses on the qualities of the behavior itself, regardless of the outcome; the most ethical behavior is the one that arises from good motives and does not violate universal moral laws.
- As you learn about a number of foundational theories of persuasion, you should be able to evaluate the ethicality of their application. The study of ethics can yield important insights into the practice of persuasion as a profession in a number of areas, including marketing communication, sales, political campaigns, health communication, product placement, and so on.
- Ethics can also help you on a personal level, as you evaluate the ways in which you seek to exert influence on other people.

Questions for Reflection and Application

1. When is it better, and when is it not better, to use deontological ethics or teleological ethics for analyzing the behavior in persuasion attempts by persuasion professionals? Why?
2. Is deontological ethics or teleological ethics better suited for analyzing the behavior in persuasion attempts by private individuals? Why?
3. Identify and describe a persuasion campaign that promotes either healthy behavior or environmental protection. Then, using the definition of persuasion, evaluate the campaign's ethicality from either a deontological or teleological perspective.
4. Identify and describe a persuasion campaign by a fast food restaurant chain. Then, using the definition of persuasion, evaluate the campaign's ethicality from either a deontological or teleological perspective.
5. Using the definition of persuasion, describe which elements are the most important considerations for evaluating the ethicality of a persuasion attempt in a free-market economy. Explain why.

Key Terms

applied ethics Focuses on how to approach specific ethical quandaries, such as the appropriate role of medicine for a terminally ill person or how to be an ecologically responsible consumer.

categorical imperative Moral commands that apply in an absolute sense in every situation.

deontological ethics The study of a person's duty or obligation.

good will Having pure motive and good intentions; Kant's foundation for ethical action.

hypothetical imperative An imperative that is evaluated by the end or motive associated with it; its value depends on particular circumstances or goals.

metaethics The study of the field of ethics itself.

normative ethics Focuses on systems of ethical reasoning that can be applied to a variety of situations.

teleological ethics The study of the ends or outcomes of a person's actions.

utilitarianism Form of teleological ethics that holds that one should seek the greatest good for the greatest number of people.