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Perspectives on Ethics in Persuasion*

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The recent financial scandals at Enron, WorldCom, Arthur Andersen, and other large corporations in part involved unethical communication—the giving of false or misleading information to clients, stockholders, and prospective investors. According to a June 2002 poll by the *Chicago Tribune* (July 28, pp. 1, 14), 66 percent of respondents believed that the ethical standards of business executives have changed for the worse in the past several decades; only 4 percent felt the executives' ethical standards have changed for the better. Evidence abounds of public concern with the decline of ethical behavior, especially by persons in positions of significant public or private responsibility. "What Ever Happened to Ethics?" asked a cover story of *Time* (May 25, 1987). "A Nation of Liars?" inquired *U.S. News & World Report* (Feb. 23, 1987). According to *Time,* "Large sections of the nation's ethical roofing have been sagging badly, from the White House to churches, schools, industries, medical centers, law firms and stock brokerages."

Political commentators and private citizens debated the issue of "character" as it applied to ethics in the public and private lives of President Bill Clinton and other political leaders. Magazine articles explored the decline of an appropriate "sense of shame" as a norm in American culture (*Atlantic Monthly,* Feb. 1992, pp. 40–70; *Newsweek,* Feb. 6, 1995, pp. 21–25). A national survey of 3,600 college students at twenty-three colleges (*Washington Post National Weekly Edition,* Dec. 7–13, 1992, p. 36) revealed that one in six college students had lied on a résumé or job application or during a job interview; two out of five had lied to a boss, one out of three had lied to a customer during the past year; and one out of five had cheated on an exam. *Time*

*For a much more extensive exploration of the perspectives, standards, and issues discussed in this chapter and identification of relevant resource materials, see Johannesen (2002). My personal view of ethical persuasion is rooted in the political perspective of American representative democracy and in Martin Buber's conception of dialogue.

magazine devoted seven pages to the topic of "Lies, Lies, Lies" (Oct. 5, 1992). A 1998 national public opinion poll, reported in the *Washington Post National Weekly Edition* (Jan. 11, 1999, pp. 6–7), found that 71 percent of Americans interviewed felt that, in general, people today are not as honest and moral as they used to be.

Access InfoTrac College Edition, and enter the word "lying" in the search engine. Access the item "Lying on Top: Many Are Up in Arms About the Enron Scandal—But Our Political Leaders Are Just As Disgraceful As Their Corporate Counterparts," published in *Dollars & Sense* (March 2002). How do the examples and arguments raised in the article relate to ethical issues in persuasion?

Imagine that you are an audience member listening to a speaker—call him Mr. Bronson. His aim is to persuade you to contribute money to the cancer research program of a major medical research center. Suppose that, with one exception, all the evidence, reasoning, and motivational appeals he employs are valid and beyond ethical suspicion. However, at one point in his speech, Bronson consciously uses a set of false statistics to scare you into believing that, during your lifetime, there is a much greater probability of your getting some form of cancer than is actually the case.

To promote analysis of the ethics of this hypothetical persuasive situation, consider these issues. If you, or society at large, view Bronson's persuasive end, or goal, as worthwhile, does the worth of his end justify his use of false statistics as one means to achieve that end? Does the fact that he consciously chose to use false statistics make a difference in your evaluation? If he used the false statistics out of ignorance or a failure to check his sources, how might your ethical judgment be altered? Should he be condemned as an unethical person or an unethical speaker, or, in this instance, for use of a specific unethical technique?

Carefully consider the standards, and the reasons behind those standards, that you would employ to make your ethical judgment of Bronson. Are the standards purely pragmatic? (In other words, should he avoid the false statistics because he might get caught?) Are they societal in origin? (If he gets caught, his credibility as a representative would be weakened with this and future audiences, or his getting caught might weaken the credibility of other cancer society representatives.) Should he be ethically criticized for violating an implied agreement between you and him? (You might not expect a representative of a famous research institute to use questionable techniques, and so you would be especially vulnerable.) Finally, should his conscious use of false statistics be considered unethical because you are denied the accurate, relevant information you need to make an intelligent decision on an important public issue?

As receivers and senders of persuasion, we have the responsibility to uphold appropriate ethical standards for persuasion, to encourage freedom of inquiry and expression, and to promote public debate as crucial to democratic decision making. To achieve these goals, we must understand their complexity and recognize the difficulty of achieving them.

In this chapter, I do not intend to argue my own views regarding the merit of any one particular ethical perspective or set of criteria as the best one. Rather, my role here, as in the classroom, is to provide information, examples, and insights and to raise questions for discussion. The purpose is to stimulate you to make reasoned choices among ethical options in developing your own positions or judgments.

Ethical issues focus on value judgments concerning degrees of right and wrong, and goodness and badness, in human conduct. Persuasion, as one type of human behavior, always contains potential ethical issues, for several reasons:

- It involves one person, or a group of people, attempting to influence other people by altering their beliefs, attitudes, values, and actions.
- It involves conscious choices among ends sought and rhetorical means used to achieve the ends.
- It necessarily involves a potential judge—any or all of the receivers, the persuader, or an independent observer.

As a receiver and sender of persuasion, how you evaluate the ethics of a persuasive instance will differ depending on the ethical standards you are using. You may even choose to ignore ethical judgment entirely. Several justifications are often used to avoid direct analysis and resolution of ethical issues in persuasion:

- Everyone knows the appeal or tactic is unethical, so there is nothing to talk about.
- Only success matters, so ethics are irrelevant to persuasion.
- Ethical judgments are matters of individual personal opinion, so there are no final answers.

Nevertheless, potential ethical questions exist regardless of how they are answered. Whether you wish it or not, consumers of persuasion generally will judge your effort, formally or informally, in part by their relevant ethical criteria. If for none other than the pragmatic reason of enhancing chances of success, you would do well to consider the ethical standards held by your audience.

ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Persuaders' ethical responsibilities can stem from statuses or positions they have earned or have been granted, from commitments (promises, pledges, agreements) they have made, or from the consequences (effects) of their communication for others. Responsibility includes the elements of fulfilling duties and obligations, of being accountable to other individuals and groups, of being accountable as evaluated by agreed-upon standards, and of being accountable to one's own conscience. But an essential element of responsible communication, for both sender and receiver, is exercise of thoughtful and deliberate judgment. That is, the responsible communicator carefully analyzes claims, soundly assesses probable consequences, and conscientiously weighs relevant values. In a sense, a responsible communicator is "response-able." She or he exercises the ability to respond (is responsive) to the needs and communication of others in sensitive, thoughtful, fitting ways.*

Whether persuaders seem intentionally and knowingly to use particular content or techniques is a factor that most of us consider in judging communication ethicality. If a dubious communication behavior seems to stem more from an accident, a slip of the tongue, or even ignorance, we may be less harsh in our ethical assessment. For most of us, it is the *intentional* use of ethically questionable tactics that merits the harshest condemnation.

In contrast, it might be contended that, in argumentative and persuasive situations, communicators have an ethical obligation to double-check the soundness of their evidence and reasoning before they present it to others; sloppy preparation is no excuse for ethical lapses. A similar view might be advanced concerning elected or appointed government officials. If they use obscure or jargon-laden language that clouds the accurate and clear representation of ideas, even if it is not intended to deceive or hide, they are ethically irresponsible. Such officials, according to this view, should be obligated to communicate clearly and accurately with citizens in fulfillment of their governmental duties. As a related question, we can ask whether sincerity of intent releases persuaders from ethical responsibility concerning means and effects. Could we say that if Adolf Hitler's fellow Germans had judged him to be sincere they need not have assessed the ethics of his persuasion? In such cases, evaluations are probably best carried out by appraising sincerity and ethicality separately. For example, a persuader sincere in intent might use an unethical strategy.

What are the ethics of audience adaptation? Most persuaders seek to secure some kind of response from receivers. To what degree is it ethical for them to alter their ideas and proposals to adapt to the needs, capacities, desires, and expectations of

*This discussion of responsibility is based on Pennock (1960), Freund (1960), Niebuhr (1963), and Pincoffs (1975).

their audience? To secure acceptance, some persuaders adapt to an audience to the extent of so changing their own ideas that the ideas are no longer really theirs. These persuaders merely say what the audience wants to hear, regardless of their own convictions. At the same time, some measure of adaptation in language choice, supporting materials, organization, and message transmission for specific audiences is a crucial part of successful communication. No ironclad rule can be set down here. Persuaders must decide the ethical balance point between their idea in its pure form and that idea modified to achieve maximum impact with the audience.

THE ETHICS OF ENDS AND MEANS

In assessing the ethics of persuasion, does the end justify the means? Does the necessity of achieving a goal widely acknowledged as worthwhile justify the use of ethically questionable techniques? We must be aware that the persuasive means employed can have cumulative effects on receivers' thoughts and decision-making habits apart from and in addition to the specific end that the communicator seeks. No matter what purpose they serve, the arguments, appeals, structure, and language we choose do shape the audience's values, thinking habits, language patterns, and level of trust.

To say that the ends do not *always* justify the means is different from saying that the ends *never* justify means. The persuader's goal probably is best considered as one of a number of potentially relevant ethical criteria from which the most appropriate standards are selected. Under some circumstances, such as threats to physical survival, the goal of personal or national security may *temporarily* take precedence over other criteria. In general, however, we can best make mature ethical assessments by evaluating the ethics of persuasive techniques apart from the worth and morality of the persuader's specific goal. We can strive to judge the ethics of means and ends *separately.* In some cases, we may find ethical persuasive tactics employed to achieve an unethical goal; in other cases, unethical techniques may be used in the service of an entirely ethical goal.

Although discussed in the context of journalistic ethics, the six questions suggested by Warren Bovee (1991) can serve as useful probes to determine the degree of ethicality of almost any means–ends relationship in persuasion (see Figure 2.1). Here are the questions in paraphrased form:

1. Are the means truly unethical/morally evil or merely distasteful, unpopular, unwise, or ineffective?
2. Is the end truly good, or does it simply appear good to us because we desire it?
3. Is it probable that the ethically bad or suspect means actually will achieve the good end?
4. Is the same good achievable using other, more ethical means if we are willing to be creative, patient, determined, and skillful?
5. Is the good end clearly and overwhelmingly better than the probable bad effects of the means used to attain it? Bad means require justification whereas good means do not.
6. Will the use of unethical means to achieve a good end withstand public scrutiny? Could the use of unethical means be justified to those most affected by them or to those most capable of impartially judging them?

THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHICS

"A society without ethics is a society doomed to extinction," argued philosopher S. Jack Odell (in Merrill & Odell, 1983). According to Odell, the "basic concepts and theories of ethics provide the framework necessary for working out one's own moral or ethical code." Odell believes that "ethical principles are necessary preconditions for the existence of a social community. Without ethical principles it would be impossible for human beings to live in harmony and without fear, despair, hopelessness, anxiety, apprehension, and uncertainty" (p. 95).

FIGURE 2.1 How might Bovee's questions apply for evaluating the justifications here?

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A societal or personal system of ethics is not an automatic cure-all for individual or collective ills. What can ethical theory and systematic reflection on ethics contribute? One answer is suggested by philosopher Carl Wellman (1988):

> An ethical system does not solve all one's practical problems, but one cannot choose and act rationally without some explicit or implicit ethical system. An ethical theory does not tell a person what to do in any given situation, but neither is it completely silent; it tells one what to consider in making up one's mind what to do. The practical function of an ethical system is primarily to direct our attention to the relevant considerations, the reasons that determine the rightness or wrongness of any act. (p. 305)

ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF RECEIVERS

What are your ethical responsibilities as a receiver of or respondent to persuasion? An answer to this question stems in part from the image we hold of the persuasion process. Receivers bear little responsibility if audience members are viewed as passive and defenseless receptacles, as mindless blotters uncritically accepting ideas and arguments. In contrast,

persuasion can be seen as a transaction in which both persuaders and persuadees bear mutual responsibility to participate actively in the process. This image of persuadees as active participants suggests several responsibilities, perhaps best captured by two phrases: (1) reasoned skepticism and (2) appropriate feedback.

Reasoned skepticism includes a number of elements. It represents a balanced position between the undesirable extremes of being too open-minded or gullible, on the one hand, and being too closed-minded or dogmatic, on the other. You are not simply an unthinking blotter "soaking up" ideas and arguments. Rather, you exercise your capacities actively to search for meaning, to analyze and synthesize, and to judge soundness and worth. You do something to and with the information you receive: You process, interpret, and evaluate it. Also, you inform yourself about issues being discussed, and you tolerate, and even seek out, divergent and controversial viewpoints, the better to assess what is being presented.

As a receiver of persuasion, you must realize that accurate interpretation of a persuader's message may be hindered by attempts to impose your own ethical standards on the persuader. Your immediate, gut-level ethical judgments may cause you to distort the intended meaning. Only after reaching an understanding of the persuader's ideas can you reasonably evaluate the ethics of his or her persuasive strategies or purposes.

In this era of distrust of the truthfulness of public communication, reasoned skepticism also requires that you combat the automatic assumption that most public communication is untrustworthy. Just because a communication is of a certain type or comes from a certain source (for example, a government official, political candidate, news media figure, or advertiser), it must not automatically, without evaluation, be rejected as tainted or untruthful. Clearly, you must always exercise caution in acceptance and care in evaluation, as emphasized throughout this book. Using the best evidence available, you arrive at your best judgment. However, to condemn a message as untruthful or unethical solely because it stems from a suspect source is to exhibit decision-making behavior detrimental to our political, social, and economic system. Any rejection of a message must come after, not before, evaluation of it. As with a defendant in a courtroom, public communication must be presumed to be ethically innocent until it has been proved "guilty." However, when techniques of persuasion do weaken or undermine the confidence and trust necessary for intelligent public decision making, they can be condemned as unethical.

As an active participant in the persuasion process, you need to provide appropriate feedback to persuaders. Your response, in most situations, should be an honest and accurate reflection of your true comprehension, beliefs, feelings, or judgment. Otherwise, persuaders are denied the relevant and accurate information they need to make decisions. Your response might be verbal or nonverbal, oral or written, immediate or delayed. A response of understanding, puzzlement, agreement, or disagreement could be reflected through your facial expressions, gestures, posture, inquiries, and statements during question-and-answer periods and through letters to editors or advertisers. In some cases, because of your expertise on a subject, you may even have an obligation to respond and provide feedback while other receivers remain silent. You need to decide whether the degree and type of your feedback are appropriate for the subject, audience, and occasion of the persuasion. For instance, to interrupt with questions, or even to heckle, might be appropriate in a few situations but irresponsible in many others.

Disagreement and conflict sometimes occur in intimate and informal interpersonal settings. In such situations, when at least one participant may be emotionally vulnerable, individual personalities often affect each other in direct and powerful ways. When you as a receiver in such a situation decide to respond by expressing strong disagreement, you should avoid "unfair" tactics of verbal conflict because they are irresponsible (Ross & Ross, 1982). For example, avoid monopolizing the talk with the intent of preventing others from expressing their position. Avoid entrapment, in which you lure someone into saying something that you intend to use later to embarrass or hurt him or her. Avoid verbally "hitting below the belt" by taking unfair

advantage of the other person's psychological vulnerability. Avoid stockpiling or accumulating numerous grievances so that you can overwhelm others by dumping the complaints on them all at once. Finally, avoid dragging in numerous irrelevant or trivial issues and arguments in order to gain an advantage.

SOME ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

We will briefly explain six major ethical perspectives as potential viewpoints for analyzing ethical issues in persuasion. As categories, these perspectives are not exhaustive, mutually exclusive, or given in any order of precedence.

As a receiver of persuasion, you can use one or a combination of such perspectives to evaluate the ethicality of a persuader's use of language (such as metaphors, ambiguity) or of evidence and reasoning. You can also use them to assess the ethics of psychological techniques (such as appeals to needs and values) or the appeal to widely held cultural images and myths. The persuasive tactics of campaigns and social movements can also—indeed must—be subjected to ethical scrutiny.

Religious Perspectives

Religious perspectives on communication ethics are rooted in the basic assumptions of a religion about the relation of the divine/eternal to humans and the world, and vice versa. In light of such assumptions, various world religions emphasize values, guidelines, and rules that can be employed as standards for evaluating the ethics of persuasion. Religious perspectives are reflected in the moral guidelines and the "thou shalt nots" embodied in the ideology and sacred literature of various religions. For instance, the Bible warns against lying, slander, and bearing false witness. Taoist religion stresses empathy and insight, rather than reason and logic, as roads to truth and right living. Citing facts and demonstrating logical conclusions are minimized in Taoism in favor of feeling and intuition. These and other religiously derived criteria can be used to assess the ethics of persuasion.

To illustrate the relation between religion and ethical persuasion, consider the following case. On two weekends in January 1987, evangelist Oral Roberts recounted on his nationally syndicated television program an encounter he had had with God the previous year. God told Roberts that he would not be allowed to live beyond March 1987 unless he raised $8 million to fund sixty-nine scholarships for medical students at Oral Roberts University, to enable them to serve in medical clinics overseas. In an emotion-laden plea to his viewers, Roberts asked, "Will you help me extend my life?" Roberts' chief spokesperson, Jan Dargatz, defended Roberts' motives to reporters but conceded that his "methods have hit the fan." Dargatz said that Roberts sincerely believed, "from the very core of his being," that the fund drive was a "do-or-die effort." The Reverend John Wolf, senior minister of Tulsa's All Souls Unitarian Church, condemned the appeal as "emotional blackmail" and an "act of desperation" (Buursma, 1987). Another news report revealed that in 1986 Roberts had made a similar appeal. Roberts told a Dallas audience that his "life is on the line" and that God "would take me this year" if he did not raise necessary funds to finance "holy missionary teams." "Because if I don't do it," Roberts said, "I'm going to be gone before the year is out. I'll be with the Father. I know it as much as I'm standing here." Roberts failed to raise the necessary money (*Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 26, 1987).

To assess the ethicality of Roberts' appeals, you might bring to bear an ethic for Christian evangelism developed by Emory Griffin (1976). For example, to what degree could Roberts' persuasion be condemned as that of a "rhetorical rapist" who uses psychological coercion to force a commitment? Intense emotional appeals, such as to guilt, effectively remove the element of conscious choice. Or was Roberts' persuasion more that of a "rhetorical seducer" who uses deception, flattery, or irrelevant appeals to success, money, duty, patriotism, popularity, or comfort to entice an audience? What other ethical standards rooted in Christian doctrine

or scripture might be used to evaluate Roberts' appeals, and how might those standards be applied?

Human Nature Perspectives

Human nature perspectives probe the essence of human nature by asking what makes us fundamentally human. They identify unique characteristics of human nature that distinguish us from so-called lower forms of life. Such characteristics can then be used as standards for judging the ethics of persuasion. Among some of the suggested characteristics are the capacity to reason, to create and use symbols, to achieve mutual appreciative understanding, and to make value judgments. The underlying assumption is that uniquely human attributes should be promoted to enable fulfillment of maximum individual potential. A determination could be made of the degree to which a persuader's appeals and techniques either foster or undermine the development of a fundamental human characteristic. A technique that dehumanizes, that makes a person less than human, would be unethical. Whatever the political, religious, or cultural context, a person would be assumed to possess certain uniquely human attributes worthy of promotion through communication.

In 1990 in Florida, a U.S. district court judge declared obscene the album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* by the rap group 2 Live Crew. But in a local trial in Florida that same year, three members of the group were acquitted of obscenity charges for performing the songs. These incidents are part of a larger controversy concerning lyrics that explicitly refer to the sexual and physical abuse and debasement of women and that attack ethnic groups. For example, lyrics on the *Nasty* album vividly describe the bursting of vaginal walls, forcing women to have anal or oral sex or to lick feces, and such acts as urination, incest, and group sex. Similarly sexually violent lyrics can be found in songs by such individuals and groups as Judas Priest, Great White, Ice-T, and Guns n' Roses. And bigotry against immigrants, homosexuals, and African Americans surfaces in the Guns n' Roses song, "One in a Million."

Regardless of whether such lyrics are judged obscene or whether they are protected by the freedom-of-speech clause of the First Amendment, many would say that they should be condemned as unethical (Johannesen, 1997). Such lyrics treat women not as persons but as objects or body parts to be manipulated for the selfish satisfaction of males. Thus, they dehumanize, depersonalize, and trivialize women and celebrate violence against them, and they reinforce inaccurate and unfair stereotypes of women, homosexuals, and ethnic groups. How do you believe a human nature perspective on communication ethics might be used to assess such lyrics?

Political Perspectives

The implicit or explicit values and procedures accepted as crucial to the health and growth of a particular political system are the focus of political perspectives. Once these essential values are identified for that political system, they can be used to evaluate the ethics of persuasive means and ends within that system. The assumption is that public communication should foster achievement of these basic political values; persuasive techniques that retard, subvert, or circumvent the values would be condemned as unethical. Different political systems usually embody differing values leading to differing ethical judgments. Within the context of U.S. representative democracy, for example, various analysts pinpoint values and procedures they deem fundamental to the healthy functioning of our political system and, thus, values that can guide ethical scrutiny of persuasion therein. Such values and procedures include enhancement of citizens' capacity to reach rational decisions, access to channels of public communication and to relevant and accurate information on public issues, maximization of freedom of choice, toleration of dissent, honesty in presenting motivations and consequences, and thoroughness and accuracy in presenting evidence and alternatives.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the issue of "hate speech" on college and university campuses illustrated the tension between the right of freedom of speech and the ethically responsible exercise of

that right. On one campus, eight Asian American students were harassed for almost an hour by a group of football players, who called them "Oriental faggots." On another campus, white fraternity members harassed a black student by chanting, "coon," "nigger," and "porch monkey." On yet another campus, a white male freshman was charged under the school's speech code with racial harassment for calling five black female students "water buffaloes."

In response to hate speech incidents, many colleges and universities have instituted speech codes to punish hateful and offensive public messages. Among the forms of expression punishable at various schools are these:

- The use of derogatory names, inappropriately directed laughter, inconsiderate jokes, and conspicuous exclusion of another person from conversation
- Language that stigmatizes or victimizes individuals or that creates an intimidating or offensive environment
- Face-to-face use of epithets, obscenities, and other forms of expression that by accepted community standards degrade, victimize, stigmatize, or pejoratively depict persons based on their personal, intellectual, or cultural diversity
- Extreme or outrageous acts or communications intended to harass, intimidate, or humiliate others on the basis of race, color, or national origin, thus causing them severe emotional distress

To see the variety and intensity of hate speech Web sites on the Internet, go to www.stormfront.org. Read some of the hate literature of this organization, and then click on various links to Web sites of other hate groups and read some of their literature. What ethical issues are raised by the language used and actions urged by these groups?

Whether hate speech is protected by the First Amendment and whether campus speech codes are constitutional, specific instances of hate speech should be evaluated for their degree of ethicality (Johannesen, 1997). Hate speech can be assessed according to various ethical perspectives (such as human nature), but how might values and procedures central to a U.S. democratic political perspective be used to judge hate speech?

Access InfoTrac College Edition, and enter the words "hate speech" in the search engine. Access the item "Hate Speech and Constitutional Protection," published in the *Journal of Social Issues,* 58 (2002). Consider how the arguments concerning the First Amendment and the Fourteenth Amendment relate to ethical judgments about hate speech.

Situational Perspectives

To make ethical judgments from a situational perspective, it's necessary to focus *regularly and primarily* on the elements of the specific persuasive situation at hand. Virtually all perspectives (those mentioned here and others) make some allowances, on occasion, for the modified application of ethical criteria in special circumstances. However, an extreme situational perspective routinely makes judgments only in light of *each different context*. Criteria from broad political, human nature, religious, or other perspectives are minimized, and absolute and universal standards are avoided (see Figure 2.2). Among the concrete contextual factors relevant to making a purely situational ethical evaluation are these:

- The role or function of the persuader for receivers
- Expectations held by receivers concerning such matters as appropriateness and reasonableness
- The degree of receivers' awareness of the persuader's techniques
- Goals and values held by receivers
- The degree of urgency for implementing the persuader's proposal
- Ethical standards for communication held by receivers

From an extreme situational perspective, for instance, it might be argued that an acknowledged leader in a time of clear crisis has a responsibility to

FIGURE 2.2 How might situational ethics apply here?

(© 1987 by Jim Berry, NEA, Inc.)

rally support and thus could employ so-called emotional appeals that circumvent human processes of rational, reflective decision making. Or a persuader might ethically use techniques such as innuendo, guilt by association, and unfounded name-calling as long as the receivers both recognize and approve of those methods.

Legal Perspectives

From a legal perspective, illegal communication behavior also is unethical, but that which is not specifically illegal is viewed as ethical. In other words, legality and ethicality are synonymous. Such an approach certainly has the advantage of enabling simple ethical decisions: We need only measure communication techniques against current laws and regulations to determine whether a technique is ethical. We might, for example, turn for ethical guidance to the regulations governing advertising set forth by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) or the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Or we might use Supreme Court or state legislative criteria defining obscenity, pornography, libel, or slander to judge whether a particular message is unethical on those grounds.

However, many people are uneasy with this legalistic approach to communication ethics. They contend that obviously there are some things that are legal but are ethically dubious. And some social protesters for civil rights and against the Vietnam War during the 1960s and 1970s admitted that their actions were illegal but contended that they were justifiable on ethical and moral grounds. Persons holding such views reject any conception of ethicality and legality as synonymous, view ethicality as much broader than legality, and argue that not everything that is unethical should be made illegal.

To what degree, then, can or should we enforce ethical standards for communication through laws or regulations? What degrees of soundness might there be in two old but seemingly contrary sayings: "You can't legislate morality" and "There ought to be a law"? In the United States today, very few ethical standards for communication are codified in laws or regulations. As indicated previously, FCC or FTC regulations on the content of advertising, and laws and court decisions on obscenity and libel, represent the governmental approach. But such examples are rare compared with the large number of laws and court decisions specifying the boundaries of freedom of speech and press in our society. Rather, our society applies ethical standards for communication through the more indirect avenues of group consensus, social pressure, persuasion, and formal-but-voluntary codes of ethics.

Controversies surrounding computer communication on the Internet and Web illustrate not only the tension between freedom and responsibility but also pressures for legalistic approaches to ethics and

the creation of formal codes of ethics. Should you be free to say or depict anything you want, without restriction, on the Internet or Web or in email? The freedom–responsibility tension is underscored by Frank Connolly, a professor of computer science at American University: "With the Internet, we are in the situation where there are no controls, no cybercops, no speed limits. The other side of these freedoms is that individuals have to exercise responsibility for their actions" (*Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, Oct. 30–Nov. 5, 1995, p. 36). But there are pressures for controls and for formal rules of responsibility. In February 1996, Congress passed the Communications Decency Act to punish the publishing of "indecent" or "patently offensive" material on the Internet—material that could be available to children as well as adults. But in June 1997, the U.S. Supreme Court declared the Communications Decency Act unconstitutional, as violating the freedom-of-speech clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution.

University officials have debated whether to apply existing campus speech codes that prohibit hate speech and harassment to the Internet and email activities of students or whether to formulate special codes of computer communication ethics to guide student use. Virginia Tech University, for example, instituted a student code that prohibited conduct, in words or actions, that "demeans, intimidates, threatens, or otherwise interferes with another person's rightful action or comfort," both online and elsewhere on campus. The dean of students at Virginia Tech said the university's position was that, "if you use our server, then you have some responsibility because you associate the name of the institution with what you say." (See, for example, *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, Oct. 30–Nov. 5, 1995, p. 36; Nov. 6–12, 1995, p. 27; *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 24, 1995, p. 30.) What is your view on how ethical responsibility for computer communication on the Internet should be promoted? On your campus, what official policies (set how and by whom?) govern ethically responsible communication on the Internet and Web? How adequately and appropriately do these policies speak to specific issues of communication ethics? Do these policies actually seem to address matters of legality more than of ethicality?

Dialogical Perspectives

Dialogical perspectives emerge from current scholarship on the nature of communication as dialogue rather than as monologue.* From such perspectives, the attitudes toward each other among participants in a communication situation are an index of the ethical level of that communication. Some attitudes are held to be more fully human, humane, and facilitative of personal self-fulfillment than are others.

Communication as dialogue is characterized by such attitudes as honesty, concern for the welfare and improvement of others, trust, genuineness, open-mindedness, equality, mutual respect, empathy, humility, directness, lack of pretense, nonmanipulative intent, sincerity, encouragement of free expression, and acceptance of others as individuals with intrinsic worth regardless of differences over beliefs or behaviors.

Communication as monologue, in contrast, is marked by such qualities as deception, superiority, exploitation, dogmatism, domination, insincerity, pretense, personal self-display, self-aggrandizement, judgmentalism that stifles free expression, coercion, possessiveness, condescension, self-defensiveness, and the view of others as objects to be manipulated. In the case of persuasion, then, the techniques and presentation of the persuader would be scrutinized to determine the degree to which they reveal an ethical dialogical attitude or an unethical monological attitude toward receivers.

How might ethical standards rooted in a dialogical perspective be applied to political campaign persuasion? Consider the face-to-face, question-and-answer citizen forums held by Bill Clinton with voters during the 1992 and 1996 presidential campaigns. For any particular forum, you could as-

*For a more general analysis of communication as dialogue, see Johannesen (1971, 2000) and Stewart and Zediker (2000).

sess the degree to which the communication of participants reflected and promoted dialogical rather than monological attitudes. How might a dialogical ethical perspective apply to intimate interpersonal communication situations such as between friends, family members, lovers, and spouses? Earlier in the section on responsibilities of receivers, some unfair tactics of verbal conflict in interpersonal communication were summarized. How would you assess those tactics from a dialogical perspective?

With knowledge of the preceding ethical perspectives (religious, human nature, political, situational, legal, dialogical), we can confront a variety of difficult issues relevant to ethical problems in persuasion. As receivers constantly bombarded with verbal and nonverbal persuasive messages, we continually face resolution of one or another of these fundamental issues.

ETHICS, PROPAGANDA, AND THE DEMAGOGUE

Is propaganda unethical? The answer to this question partly depends on how the term is defined. As emphasized in a later chapter, numerous, often widely divergent, definitions abound. Originally, the term *propaganda* was associated with the efforts of the Roman Catholic church to persuade people to accept the church's doctrine. Such efforts were institutionalized in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV when he created the Sacred Congregation for Propagating the Faith. The word *propaganda* soon came to designate not only institutions seeking to propagate a doctrine but also the doctrine itself and the communication techniques employed.

Today, one cluster of definitions represents a neutral position with regard to the ethical nature of propaganda. A definition combining the key elements of such neutral views might be: Propaganda is a campaign of mass persuasion, an organized, continuous effort to persuade a mass audience, primarily using the mass media (see Kecskemeti, 1973; Qualter, 1962). Propaganda would thus include advertising and public relations efforts, national political election campaigns, the persuasive campaigns of some social reform movements, and the organized efforts of national governments to win friends abroad, maintain morale at home, and undermine opponents' morale in both "hot" and "cold" wars. Such a view stresses communication channels and audiences and categorizes propaganda as one species of persuasion. Just as persuasion can be sound or unsound, ethical or unethical, so, too, can propaganda.

Another cluster of definitions takes a negative stance toward the ethical nature of propaganda. Definitions in this cluster probably typify the view held by the average American. A definition combining the key elements of such negative views might be: Propaganda is the intentional use of suggestion, irrelevant emotional appeals, and pseudoproof to circumvent rational decision-making processes (see Chase, 1956; Werkmeister, 1957). In this view, the emphasis is on communication techniques, and propaganda as inherently unethical.*

Are traditional propaganda devices always seen as unethical? This book's accompanying Web site discusses the traditional list: name-calling, glittering generality, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking, and bandwagon. Such a list, however, does not constitute a surefire guide for exposing unethical persuasion. The ethics of at least some of these techniques depends on how they are used in a given context. For example, the plain-folks technique stresses humble origins and modest backgrounds shared by the communicator and audience. The persuader emphasizes to the audience, although usually not in these words, that "we're all just plain folks." In his whistle-stop speeches to predominantly rural, Republican audiences during the 1948 presidential campaign, Democrat Harry Truman typically used the plain-folks appeal in introductions to his speeches to establish common ground and rapport; he did not rely on it for proof in the main body of his speeches. If a politician relied primarily on the plain-folks appeal as pseudoproof in justifying the policy he or she advocated, such usage

*For a philosophical and ethical analysis of propaganda, see Cunningham (2002, pp. 97–178).

might be condemned as unethical. Further, Truman was the kind of person who could legitimately capitalize on his actual plain-folks background. A politician from a more privileged and patrician background, such as Ted Kennedy, could be condemned for using an unethical technique if he were to appeal to farmers and factory workers by saying, "you and I are just plain folks."

Access InfoTrac College Edition, and enter the word "propaganda" in the search engine. Access the item "Propaganda: Remember the Kuwaiti Babies?" published by United Press International (Feb. 26, 2002). What ethical judgments, and why, would you make about some of the examples of propaganda described?

Today, the label "demagogue" is frequently used to render a negative ethical judgment of a communicator. Too often, however, the label is only vaguely defined—the criteria used to evaluate someone as a demagogue are unspecified. In ancient Greece, a demagogue was simply a leader or orator who championed the cause of the common people.

Consider the following five characteristics collectively as possible appropriate guides for determining to what degree a persuader merits the label "demagogue":*

1. A demagogue wields popular or mass leadership over a number of people.
2. A demagogue exerts primary influence through the medium of the spoken word—through public speaking—whether directly to an audience or by means of radio or television.
3. A demagogue relies heavily on propaganda defined in the negative sense of intentional use of suggestion, irrelevant emotional appeals, and pseudoproof to circumvent rational decision-making processes.
4. A demagogue capitalizes on the availability of a major contemporary social issue or problem.
5. A demagogue is hypocritical; the social cause serves as a front or persuasive leverage point, but the actual primary motive is selfish interest and personal gain.

Several cautions are in order in applying these guidelines. A persuader may reflect each of these characteristics to a greater or lesser degree and only in certain instances. A persuader also might fulfill several of these criteria (such as characteristics 1, 2, and 4) and yet not be called a demagogue; characteristics 3 and 5 seem to be central to a conception of a demagogue.

Access InfoTrac College Edition, and enter the word "demagogue" in the search engine. Access the article "The Sincere Demagogue," about former Democratic presidential candidate Bill Bradley. Note that it is published in a politically conservative journal and is about a politically liberal candidate. Given the information and judgments in the article, use the criteria for determining a demagogue described in this section, and develop your own argument (citing evidence in the article or a lack thereof) to explain why you think Bradley is or is not a demagogue.

ETHICAL STANDARDS FOR POLITICAL PERSUASION

Directly or indirectly, we are daily exposed to political persuasion in varied forms. For example, the president appeals on national television for public support of a military campaign. A senator argues in Congress against ratification of a treaty. A government bureaucrat announces a new regulation and presents reasons to justify it. A federal official con-

*The basic formulation from which these guidelines have been adapted was first suggested to me by Professor William Conboy of the University of Kansas. These five characteristics generally are compatible with the standard scholarly attempts to define a demagogue; see, for instance, Reinhard Luthin (1959) and Barnet Baskerville (1967).

tends that information requested by a citizen action group cannot be revealed for national security reasons. A national, state, or local politician campaigns for election. A citizen protests a proposed property tax rate increase at a city council meeting. What ethical criteria should we apply to judge the many kinds of political persuasion? We will consider several potential sets of criteria in the hope that among them you will find ones useful in your own life.

Traditional American textbook discussions of the ethics of persuasion, rhetoric, and argument often include lists of standards for evaluating the ethicality of an instance of persuasion. Such criteria often are rooted, implicitly if not explicitly, in what we previously described as a political perspective for judging the ethics of persuasion. The criteria usually stem from a commitment to values and procedures deemed essential to the health and growth of our system of representative democracy. Obviously, other cultures and other political systems may embrace basic values that lead to quite different ethical standards for persuasion.

What follows is a synthesis and adaptation of a number of traditional lists of ethical criteria for persuasion.* Within the context of our own society, the following criteria are not necessarily the only or best ones possible; they are suggested as general guidelines rather than inflexible rules, and they may stimulate discussion on the complexity of judging the ethics of persuasion. Consider, for example, under what circumstances there might be justifiable exceptions to some of these criteria. Also bear in mind that one difficulty in applying these criteria in concrete situations stems from differing standards and meanings people may have for such key terms as *distort*, *falsify*, *rational*, *reasonable*, *conceal*, *misrepresent*, *irrelevant*, and *deceive.*

1. Do not use false, fabricated, misrepresented, distorted, or irrelevant evidence to support arguments or claims.
2. Do not intentionally use specious, unsupported, or illogical reasoning.
3. Do not represent yourself as informed or as an "expert" on a subject when you are not.
4. Do not use irrelevant appeals to divert attention or scrutiny from the issue at hand. Among the appeals that commonly serve such a purpose are smear attacks on an opponent's character, appeals to hatred and bigotry, innuendo, and god or devil terms that cause intense but unreflective positive or negative reactions.
5. Do not ask your audience to link your idea or proposal to emotion-laden values, motives, or goals to which it actually is not related.
6. Do not deceive your audience by concealing your real purpose or self-interest, the group you represent, or your position as an advocate of a viewpoint.
7. Do not distort, hide, or misrepresent the number, scope, intensity, or undesirable features of consequences or effects.
8. Do not use emotional appeals that lack a supporting basis of evidence or reasoning or that would not be accepted if the audience had time and opportunity to examine the subject themselves.
9. Do not oversimplify complex, gradation-laden situations into simplistic two-valued, either/or, polar views or choices.
10. Do not pretend certainty where tentativeness and degrees of probability would be more accurate.
11. Do not advocate something in which you do not believe yourself.

During the 1980s, political analysts in the mass media often criticized President Ronald Reagan for misstating and misusing examples, statistics, and illustrative stories. They charged that he did this not just on rare occasions but with routine frequency in his news conferences, informal comments, and even speeches (Green & MacColl, 1987; Johannesen, 1985). The glaring misuse of facts and anecdotes in

*For example, see the following sources: Buehler and Linkugel (1975), Oliver (1957), Minnick (1968), Ewbank and Auer (1951), Thompson (1975), Bradley (1988), Nilsen (1974), and Wallace (1955).

ethically suspect ways continues in the national political discourse. For example, syndicated columnist Joseph Spear took to task former House Speaker Newt Gingrich for this habit ("Third-Wave Newt Comes Unglued," [De Kalb, IL] *Daily Chronicle,* March 17, 1995, p. 4). Spear observed:

> We know that Newt doesn't care that his facts are often not factual. He spoke about a ten-year-old student in St. Louis who was suspended for asking God's blessings on his cafeteria meals. It was not true. He told how the FDA refused to approve an innovative heart pump. It was not true. He rattled on and on about a federal shelter in Denver that was outperformed by a private facility down the street. It was not true.

Spear's judgment was that "Newt is a prattler, a careless accuser, an irresponsible teller of tales." An editorial in the *Washington Post National Weekly Edition* (March 13–19, 1995, p. 27) contended that trying "to get the story straight, whether you're in our business or Speaker Gingrich's, is not a luxury, but a responsibility." To assess the ethicality of such misstatements in current political discourse, you are encouraged to apply our previous discussions concerning intention, sincerity, responsibility, the political perspective, and suggested standards for political persuasion.

ETHICAL STANDARDS FOR COMMERCIAL ADVERTISING

Consumers, academics, and advertisers themselves clearly do not agree on any one set of ethical standards as appropriate for assessing commercial advertising. Here we will simply survey some of the widely varied criteria that have been suggested. Among them you may find guidelines that will aid your own assessments.

Several writers on the ethics of advertising suggest the applicability of perspectives rooted in the essence of human nature. Philosopher Thomas Garrett (1961) argued that a person becomes more truly human in proportion as his or her behavior becomes more conscious and reflective. Because of the human capacity for reasoning and because of the equally distinctive fact of human dependence on other people for the development of their potential, Garrett suggested several ethical obligations. As humans, we are obliged, among other things, to behave rationally ourselves, to help others behave rationally, and to provide truthful information. Suggestive advertising, in Garrett's view, is that which seeks to bypass human powers of reason or to some degree render them inoperative. Such advertising is unethical, not only because it uses emotional appeal, Garrett believed, but also because it demeans a fundamental human attribute and makes people less than human.

Advertising scholar Theodore Levitt (1974) used a human nature position to defend advertising techniques often viewed by others as ethically suspect. While admitting that the line between distortion and falsehood is difficult to establish, he argued that "embellishment and distortion are among advertising's legitimate and socially desirable purposes; . . . illegitimacy in advertising consists only of falsification with larcenous intent" (p. 279). Levitt grounded his defense in a "pervasive, . . . universal, characteristic of human nature—the human audience demands symbolic interpretation of everything it sees and knows. If it doesn't get it, it will return a verdict of 'no interest'" (p. 284). Because Levitt saw humans essentially as symbolizers, as converters of raw sensory experience through symbolic interpretation to satisfy needs, he could justify "legitimate" embellishment and distortion:

> Many of the so-called distortions of advertising, product design, and packaging may be viewed as a paradigm of the many responses that man makes to the conditions of survival in the environment. Without distortion, embellishment, and elaboration, life would be drab, dull, anguished, and at its existential worst. (p. 285)

Sometimes advertisers adopt what we previously called legal perspectives, in which ethicality is equated with legality. However, advertising executive Harold Williams (1974) observed:

> What is legal and what is ethical are not synonymous, and neither are what is legal and what is honest. We tend to resort to legality often as our guideline. This is in effect what happens often when we turn to the lawyers for confirmation that a course of action is an appropriate one.
>
> We must recognize that we are getting a legal opinion, but not necessarily an ethical or moral one. The public, the public advocates, and many of the legislative and administrative authorities recognize it even if we do not. (pp. 285–288)

Typically, commercial advertising has been viewed as persuasion that argues a case or demonstrates a claim concerning the actual nature or merits of a product. Many of the traditional ethical standards for truthfulness and rationality have been applied to such attempts at arguing the quality of a product. For instance, are the evidence and the reasoning supporting the claim clear, accurate, relevant, and sufficient in quantity? Are the emotional and motivational appeals directly relevant to the product? The techniques that will be discussed in Chapter 14 as "weasel words" and as "deceptive claims" might be judged unethical according to this standard of truthfulness.

The American Association of Advertising Agencies' code of ethics was revised in 1990. As you read the following standards, consider their level of adequacy, the degree to which they are relevant and appropriate today, and the extent to which they are being followed by advertisers. Association members agree to avoid intentionally producing advertising that contains the following:

- False or misleading statements or exaggerations, visual or verbal
- Testimonials that do not reflect the real choices of the individuals involved
- Price claims that are misleading
- Claims that are insufficiently supported or that distort the true meaning or practicable application of statements made by professional or scientific authority
- Statements, suggestions, or pictures offensive to public decency or to minority segments of the population

What if ethical standards of truthfulness and rationality are irrelevant to most commercial advertising? What if the primary purpose of most ads is not to prove a claim? Then the ethical standards we apply may stem from whatever alternative view of the nature and purpose of advertising we do hold. Some advertisements function primarily to capture and sustain consumer attention, to announce a product, or to create consumer awareness of the name of a product. What ethical criteria are most appropriate for such attention-getting ads?

Finally, consider advertiser Tony Schwartz's (1974) resonance theory of electronic media persuasion, which is discussed in detail in the chapter on modern media and persuasion. Schwartz argued that, because our conceptions of truth, honesty, and clarity are products of our print-oriented culture, they are appropriate in judging the content of printed messages. In contrast, he contended, the "question of truth is largely irrelevant when dealing with electronic media content" (p. 19). In assessing the ethics of advertising by means of electronic media, Schwartz said, the FTC should focus not on truth and clarity of content but on the effects of the advertisement on receivers. He lamented, however, that "we have no generally agreed-upon social values and/or rules that can be readily applied in judging whether the effects of electronic communication are beneficial, acceptable, or harmful" (p. 22). Schwartz summarized his argument by concluding that

> truth is a print ethic, not a standard for ethical behavior in electronic communication. In addition, the influence of electronic media on print advertising (particularly the substitution of photographic techniques for copy to achieve an

> effect) raises the question of whether truth is any longer an issue for magazine or newspaper ads. (p. 22)

What ethical evaluation of effects and consequences would you make of an advertisement for Fetish perfume in *Seventeen* magazine, a magazine whose readers include several million young teenage girls? The ad shows an attractive female teenager looking seductively directly at the readers. The written portion of the ad says, "Apply generously to your neck so he can smell the scent as you shake your head 'no.'" Consider that this ad exists in a larger cultural context in which acquaintance rape is a societal problem, women and girls are clearly urged to say "No!" to unwanted sexual advances, and men and boys too often still believe that "no" really means "yes."

THE ETHICS OF INTENTIONAL AMBIGUITY AND VAGUENESS

"Language that is of doubtful or uncertain meaning" might be a typical definition of ambiguous language. *Ambiguous* language is open to two or more legitimate interpretations. *Vague* language lacks definiteness, explicitness, or preciseness of meaning. Clear communication of intended meaning usually is one major aim of the ethical communicator, whether that person seeks to enhance receivers' understanding or to influence beliefs, attitudes, or actions. Textbooks on oral and written communication typically warn against ambiguity and vagueness; often, they take the position that intentional ambiguity is an unethical communication tactic. For example, later in this book, ambiguity is discussed as a functional device of style, as a stylistic technique that is often successful while ethically questionable.

Most people agree that intentional ambiguity is unethical in situations in which accurate instruction or transmission of precise information is the acknowledged purpose. Even in most so-called persuasive communication situations, intentional ambiguity is ethically suspect. However, in some situations, communicators may believe that the intentional creation of ambiguity or vagueness is necessary, accepted, expected as normal, and even ethically justified. Such might be the case, for example, in religious discourse, in some advertising, in some legal discourse, in labor–management bargaining, in political campaigning, or in international diplomatic negotiations.

We can itemize a number of specific purposes for which communicators might believe that intentional ambiguity is ethically justified: (1) to heighten receiver attention through puzzlement, (2) to allow flexibility in interpretation of legal concepts, (3) to allow for precise understanding and agreement on the primary issue by using ambiguity on secondary issues, (4) to promote maximum receiver psychological participation in the communication transaction by letting receivers create their own relevant meanings, and (5) to promote maximum latitude for revision of a position in later dealings with opponents or with constituents by avoiding being locked into a single absolute stance.

In political communication, whether from campaigners or government officials, several circumstances might justify intentional ambiguity. First, a president or presidential candidate often communicates to multiple audiences through a single message via a mass medium such as television or radio. Different parts of the message may appeal to specific audiences, and intentional ambiguity in some message elements avoids offending any of the audiences. Second, as political scientist Lewis Froman (1966) observed, a candidate "cannot take stands on specific issues because he doesn't know what the specific choices will be until he is faced with the necessity for concrete decision. Also, specific commitments would be too binding in a political process that depends upon negotiation and compromise" (p. 9). Third, groups of voters increasingly make decisions about whether to support or oppose a candidate on the basis of that candidate's stand on a single issue of paramount importance to those groups. The candidate's position on a variety of other public issues is often ignored or dismissed. "Single-issue politics" is the phrase frequently used to characterize this trend. A candidate may be intentionally ambiguous on one emotion-packed

issue in order to get a fair hearing for his or her stands on many other issues.

In his *Law Dictionary for Non-Lawyers,* Daniel Oran (1975) warned against use of vague language but also noted:

> Some legal words have a "built-in" vagueness. They are used when the writer or speaker does not want to be pinned down. For example, when a law talks about "reasonable speed" or "due care," it is deliberately imprecise about the meaning of the words because it wants the amount of speed allowed or care required to be decided situation by situation, rather than by an exact formula. (pp. 330–331)

In some advertising, intentional ambiguity seems to be understood as such by consumers and even accepted by them. Consider the possible ethical implications of the Noxzema shaving cream commercial that famously urged (accompanied by a beautiful woman watching a man shave in rhythm to strip-tease music), "Take it off. Take it all off." Or recall the sexy woman in the aftershave commercial who says, "All my men wear English Leather, or they wear nothing at all."

THE ETHICS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Nonverbal factors play an important role in the persuasion process. In a magazine advertisement, for example, the use of certain colors, pictures, layout patterns, and typefaces influences how the words in the advertisement are received. A later chapter provides examples of "nonverbal bias" in photo selection, camera angle and movement, and editing in news presentation. In *The Importance of Lying,* Arnold Ludwig (1965) underscored the ethical implications of some dimensions of nonverbal communication:

> Lies are not only found in verbal statements. When a person nods affirmatively in response to something he does not believe or when he feigns attention to a conversation he finds boring, he is equally guilty of lying. . . . A false shrug of the shoulders, the seductive batting of eyelashes, an eyewink, or a smile may all be employed as nonverbal forms of deception. (p. 5)

Silence, too, may carry ethical implications. If to be responsible in fulfilling our role or position requires that we speak out on a subject, to remain silent may be judged unethical. But if the only way that we can successfully persuade others on a subject is to employ unethical communication techniques or appeals, the ethical course probably will be to remain silent.

Another example of potentially unethical nonverbal communication via photographs occurred in the political arena. In *Harper's* magazine, Earl Shorris (1977) condemned as unethical the nonverbal tactics of the *New York Times* in opposing Bella Abzug as a candidate for mayor of New York City:

> The *Times,* having announced its preference for almost anyone but Mrs. Abzug in the mayoral election, published a vicious photograph of her taken the night of her winning the endorsement of the New Democratic Coalition. In the photograph, printed on page 1, Mrs. Abzug sits alone on a stage under the New Democratic Coalition banner. There are three empty chairs to her right and five empty chairs to her left. In this forlorn scene the camera literally looks up Mrs. Abzug's dress to show the heavy calves and thighs of an overweight woman in her middle years.
>
> While the editorial judgment may be right, in that Bella Abzug is probably not the best choice or even a good choice for mayor of New York, the photograph is an example of journalism at its lowest. (p. 106)

Similarly, television coverage of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center yielded many vivid images that were burned into our memories. An Associated Press photographer produced one especially emotional image—of a man plunging headfirst down the side of the still-standing North Tower. Although no captions identified the man, the photographer's telephoto lens was powerful

enough that, in versions enhanced for clarity, the man's face was recognizable to persons who knew him. With regard to ethics, this photo generated criticism of the media that used the photo and praise for the media not using it. On what ethical grounds might you condemn the use of the photo? On what ethical grounds might you justify its use? Consider the likely emotional trauma for persons who knew the man. Did the ends of selling papers or crystalizing the personal dimension of the attack justify using it as a means that intensified the grief and violated the privacy of family members and friends? How does the photo feed into the public's seemingly unlimited appetite for glimpses into the intimate details of the grief of others—a process that some scholars refer to as the "pornography of grief"?*

To further explore ethical standards for nonverbal communication, you are urged to read several sources that are especially rich in extended case studies. The entire issue of the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 2* (Spring/Summer 1987) is devoted to ethics in photojournalism. Some contributors suggest concrete ethical guidelines (pp. 34, 71–73); others discuss photos as claims and the nonobjectivity of photos (pp. 50, 52). A photo as a reflection of the photographer's formed ethical character is probed (p. 9). Two books by Paul Martin Lester—*Photojournalism: An Ethical Approach* (1991) and *Visual Communication* (2003)—are rich sources on the topic. Also thought-provoking is Thomas H. Wheeler's, *Phototruth or Photofiction? Ethics and Media Imagery in the Digital Age* (2002).

THE ETHICS OF MORAL EXCLUSION

Moral exclusion, according to Susan Opotow (1990), "occurs when individuals or groups are perceived as outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply. Those who are morally excluded are perceived as nonentities, expendable, or undeserving; consequently, harming them appears acceptable, appropriate, or just." Persons morally excluded are denied their rights, dignity, and autonomy. Opotow isolates for analysis and discussion over two dozen symptoms or manifestations of moral exclusion. For our purposes, a noteworthy fact is that many of them directly involve communication. Although all of the symptoms she presents are significant for a full understanding of the mind-set of individuals engaged in moral exclusion, the following are ones that clearly involve persuasion:

- Showing the superiority of oneself or one's group by making unflattering comparisons to other individuals or groups
- Denigrating and disparaging others by characterizing them as lower life forms (vermin) or as inferior beings (barbarians, aliens)
- Denying that others possess humanity, dignity, or sensitivity, or have a right to compassion
- Redefining as an increasingly larger category that of "legitimate" victims
- Placing the blame for any harm on the victim
- Justifying harmful acts by claiming that the morally condemnable acts committed by "the enemy" are significantly worse
- Misrepresenting cruelty and harm by masking, sanitizing, and conferring respectability on them through the use of neutral, positive, technical, or euphemistic terms to describe them
- Justifying harmful behavior by claiming that it is widely accepted (everyone is doing it) or that it was isolated and uncharacteristic (it happened just this once)

An example may clarify how language choices function to achieve moral exclusion. The category of "vermin" (mentioned in the second item in the list) includes parasitic insects, such as fleas, lice, mosquitoes, bedbugs, and ticks, that can infest

*For one insightful discussion, see Jane B. Singer, "The Unforgiving Truth in the Unforgivable Photo," (2002). A superb general analysis of ethical issues in media treatment of victims of tragedy is Cooper (2002).

human bodies. In Nazi Germany, Adolf Hitler's speeches and writings often referred to Jews as a type of parasite infesting the pure Aryan race (non-Jewish Caucasians or people of Nordic heritage) or as a type of disease attacking the German national body. The depiction of Jews as parasites or a disease served to place them outside the moral boundary where ethical standards apply to human treatment of other humans. Jews were classified or categorized as nonhumans. As parasites, they had to be exterminated; as a cancerous disease, they had to be cut out of the national body.

Now consider a more recent example. The headline "An Eskimo Encounters Civilization—and Mankind" appeared in the Tempo section of the *Chicago Tribune* (May 29, 2000). Can you identify two ways in which the words in the headline reflect a process of moral exclusion? How do these words place people outside the categories where human ethics normally apply? Hate speech, as discussed earlier in this chapter, and racist/sexist language, examined in the next section, also illustrate the process of moral exclusion.

THE ETHICS OF RACIST/SEXIST LANGUAGE

In *The Language of Oppression*, communication scholar Haig Bosmajian (1983) demonstrated how names, labels, definitions, and stereotypes traditionally have been used to degrade, dehumanize, and suppress Jews, blacks, Native Americans, and women. His goal was to expose the "decadence in our language, the inhumane uses of language" that have been used "to justify the unjustifiable, to make palatable the unpalatable, to make reasonable the unreasonable, to make decent the indecent." Bosmajian reminded us: "Our identities, who and what we are, how others see us, are greatly affected by the names we are called and the words with which we are labeled. The names, labels, and phrases employed to 'identify' a people may in the end determine their survival" (pp. 5, 9).

"Every language reflects the prejudices of the society in which it evolved. Since English, through most of its history, evolved in a white, Anglo-Saxon, patriarchal society, no one should be surprised that its vocabulary and grammar frequently reflect attitudes that exclude or demean minorities and women" (Miller & Swift, 1981, pp. 2–3). Such is the fundamental position of Casey Miller and Kate Swift, authors of *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*. Conventional English usage, they argued, "often obscures the actions, the contributions, and sometimes the very presence of women" (p. 8). Because such language usage is misleading and inaccurate, it has ethical implications. "In this respect, continuing to use English in ways that have become misleading is no different from misusing data, whether the misuse is inadvertent or planned" (p. 8).

To what degree is the use of racist/sexist language unethical, and by what standards? At the least, racist/sexist terms place people in artificial and irrelevant categories. At worst, such terms intentionally demean and put down other people by embodying unfair negative value judgments concerning traits, capacities, and accomplishments. What are the ethical implications, for instance, of calling a Jewish person a "kike," a black person a "nigger" or "boy," an Italian person a "wop," an Asian person a "gook" or "slant-eye," or a thirty-year-old woman a "girl" or "chick"? Here is one possible answer:

> In the war in Southeast Asia, our military fostered a linguistic environment in which the Vietnamese people were called such names as slope, dink, slant, gook, and zip; those names made it much easier to despise, to fear, to kill them. When we call women in our own society by the names of gash, slut, dyke, bitch, or girl, we—men and women alike—have put ourselves in a position to demean and abuse them. (Bailey, 1984, pp. 42–43)

From a political perspective, we might value access to the relevant and accurate information needed to make reasonable decisions on public issues. Racist/sexist language, however, by reinforcing stereotypes, conveys inaccurate depictions of people, fails to take serious account of them, or even makes them invisible for purposes of such decisions. Such language denies us access to necessary

accurate information and thus is ethically suspect. From a human nature perspective, such language is ethically suspect because it dehumanizes individuals and groups by undermining and circumventing their uniquely human capacity for rational thought or for using symbols. From a dialogical perspective, racist/sexist language is ethically suspect because it reflects a superior, exploitative, inhumane attitude toward others, thus denying equal opportunity for self-fulfillment for some people.

SOME FEMINIST VIEWS ON PERSUASION

Feminism is not a concept with a single, universally accepted definition. For our purposes, elements of definitions provided by Barbara Bate (1992) and by Julia Wood (1994) are helpful. Feminism holds that both women and men are complete and important human beings and that societal barriers (typically constructed through language processes) have prevented women from being perceived and treated as of equal worth to men. Feminism involves a commitment to equality and respect for life. Feminism rejects oppression and domination as undesirable values and accepts that difference need not be equated with inferiority or undesirability.

"My indictment of our discipline of rhetoric springs from my belief that any intent to persuade is an act of violence." Thus, Sally Miller Gearhart (1979) opened her attack on rhetoric as persuasion as reflecting a masculine-oriented, "conquest/conversion mentality." According to traditional views of rhetoric, "it is a proper and even a necessary function to attempt to change others." The conquest/conversion model for persuasion is subtle and insidious, said Gearhart, "because it gives the illusion of integrity. . . . In the conversion model we work very hard not simply to conquer but to give every assurance that our conquest of the victim is really giving her what she wants." Gearhart contended that the rational discourse of traditional rhetoric actually is a "subtle form of Might Makes Right." Teachers of rhetoric, she argued, "have been training a competent breed of weapons specialists who are skilled in emotional maneuvers, experts in intellectual logistics."

Working from feminist assumptions, Gearhart offered a particular version of "communication" as a more desirable and ethical alternative. This view of communication involves "deliberate creation or co-creation of an atmosphere in which people and things, if and only if they have the internal basis for change, may change themselves; it can be a milieu in which those who are ready to be persuaded persuade themselves, may choose to hear or choose to learn." Participants in this kind of interaction (1) try to develop an atmosphere in which change for all participants can take place, (2) recognize that participants may differ in their knowledge of the subject matter and in basic beliefs, (3) look beyond these differences to attempt to create a sense of equal power for all, (4) are committed to working hard to achieve communication, and (5) are willing at a fundamental level to "yield [their] position entirely to the other(s)." This view of communication, Gearhart suggested, moves away from a male-dominated model that assumes that all power is in the speaker/conqueror. Instead, the "womanization of rhetoric" focuses on improving the atmosphere, on listening and receiving, and on developing a "collective rather than a competitive mode."

Although they accept much of Gearhart's critique of a speaker-centered rhetoric of conquest, conversion, domination, and control, Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin (1995) believe that such persuasion should remain one among several rhetorics available to humans for selection in varying contexts. They do not want to characterize such a view of rhetoric as inaccurate or misguided. But as one alternative, Foss and Griffin develop an "invitational rhetoric" rooted in the feminist assumptions that (1) relationships of equality are usually more desirable than ones of domination and elitism, (2) every human being has value because she or he is unique and is an integral part of the pattern of the universe, and (3) individuals have a right to self-determination concerning the conditions of their lives (they are expert about their lives).

Invitational rhetoric, say Foss and Griffin, invites "the audience to enter the rhetor's world and to see it as the rhetor does." The invitational rhetor

"does not judge or denigrate others' perspectives but is open to and tries to appreciate and validate those perspectives, even if they differ dramatically from the rhetor's own." The goal is to establish a "nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, nonadversarial framework" for the interaction and to develop a "relationship of equality, respect, and appreciation" with the audience. Invitational rhetors make no assumption that their "experiences or perspectives are superior to those of audience members and refuse to impose their perspectives on them." Although change is not the intent of invitational rhetoric, it might be a result. Change can occur in the "audience or rhetor or both as a result of new understandings and insights gained in the exchange of ideas."

In the process of invitational rhetoric, Foss and Griffin contend, the rhetor offers perspectives without advocating their support or seeking their acceptance. These individual perspectives are expressed "as carefully, completely, and passionately as possible" to invite their full consideration. In offering perspectives, "rhetors tell what they currently know or understand; they present their vision of the world and how it works for them." They also "communicate a willingness to call into question the beliefs they consider most inviolate and to relax a grip on these beliefs." Further, they strive to create the conditions of safety, value, and freedom in interactions with audience members. Safety involves "the creation of a feeling of security and freedom from danger for the audience," so that participants do not "fear rebuttal of or retribution for their most fundamental beliefs." Value involves acknowledging the intrinsic worth of audience members as human beings. In interaction, attitudes that are "distancing, depersonalizing, or paternalistic" are avoided, and "listeners do not interrupt, confront, or insert anything of their own as others tell of their experiences." Freedom involves the power to choose or decide, with no restrictions placed on the interaction. Thus, participants may introduce for consideration any and all matters; "no subject matter is off limits, and all presuppositions can be challenged." Finally, in invitational rhetoric, the "rhetor's ideas are not privileged over those of the audience."

In concluding their explication of an invitational rhetoric, Foss and Griffin suggest that this rhetoric requires "a new scheme of ethics to fit interactional goals other than inducement of others to adherence to the rhetor's own beliefs." What might be some appropriate ethical guidelines for an invitational rhetoric? What ethical standards seem already to be implied by the dimensions or constituents of such a rhetoric?

From her stance as a feminist teacher and scholar of communication, Lana Rakow (1994) spoke to an audience of students and teachers of communication at The Ohio State University. She employed the norms of "trust, mutuality, justice, and reciprocity" as touchstones for communication relationships. As part of a wide-ranging address on the mission of the field of communication study, Rakow contended that we must develop a communication ethic to guide "relations between individuals, between cultures, between organizations, between countries." She asked, "What kind of 'ground-rules' would work across multiple contexts to achieve relationships that are healthy and egalitarian and respectful?" She suggested these:

- Inclusiveness means openness to multiple perspectives on truth, an encouragement of them, and a willingness to listen. Persons are not dehumanized because of their gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, country, or culture.
- Participation means ensuring that all persons must have the "means and ability . . . to be heard, to speak, to have voice, to have their opinions count in public decision making." All persons "have a right to participate in naming the world, to be part of the discussion in naming and speaking our truths."
- Reciprocity means that participants are considered equal partners in a communication transaction. There should be a "reciprocity of speaking and listening, of knowing and being known as you wish to be known."

In what respects, and why, do you agree or disagree with the positions advocated by these feminist scholars? What contributions do their

viewpoints make to our better understanding of the process of persuasion as it functions and as it ought to function?

ETHICAL STANDARDS IN CYBERSPACE

What ethical standards should apply to communication in cyberspace—in the realm of the Internet, the Web, listservs, newsgroups, and chat rooms? We can get guidance and suggestions from several sources. Some of the "Ten Commandments of Computer Ethics" formulated by the Computer Ethics Institute are particularly relevant. For example, "thou shalt not: Use a computer to harm other people; interfere with other people's computer work; snoop around in other people's computer files; use a computer to steal; use a computer to bear false witness against others; [or] plagiarize another person's intellectual output" (reprinted in Ermann, 1997, pp. 313–314).

In *Communicating Online: A Guide to the Internet*, John Courtright and Elizabeth Perse (1998) define acting ethically as simply "doing the right thing, even when no one is looking" and as "behaving properly, even when there is no chance of being caught" (p. 16). Concerning communication via email, they propose that we ask ourselves, "Would I be embarrassed or ashamed if I read my own words in tomorrow's newspaper?" It's important to never, intentionally or unintentionally, harass someone with email, or to send "flames" or messages that contain strong language and are meant to provoke or criticize. "Just like any other form of communication, don't email in anger. Give yourself a chance to cool down before you send your message" (p. 33). Whenever you use the ideas of another person from an Internet source, give that person credit by using a proper citation (p. 64). With email, listservs, and newsgroups, avoid "shouting," or routinely typing in all capitals, which generally is considered inappropriate if not rude. Also avoid "trolling," or posting messages designed simply to agitate a group to "bite back" with an extreme response (p. 82).

A more philosophically grounded source is James Porter's *Rhetorical Ethics and Internetworked Writing* (1998). Porter adapts traditional sources such as Aristotle and Kenneth Burke but also draws heavily on postmodernist, critical theorist, and feminist sources such as Foucault, Lyotard, Benhabib, and Irigaray. In focusing on how ethical rules are created and changed, Porter condemns static, decontextualized, universal rules. He also explores how competing ethical principles can be reconciled in concrete contexts. He provides no absolute and specific answers to issues of persuasive ethics but does offer provocative questions and guiding principles for exploring what ethical judgments might be reasonable in a given case. Porter's critical rhetorical ethics examines how individuals' communication is situated in and influenced by a web of class, economic, racial/ethnic, and gender relationships and limitations. Porter thus gives special priority to the concerns of marginalized, oppressed, or silenced persons. As ethical guidelines to structure both our stance toward the audience and our choice of persuasive techniques, Porter offers the following: (1) Respect the audience and audience differences, (2) care for the audience and for concrete others, (3) do not harm or oppress the audience, (4) consult dialogically with diverse sources, (5) focus on contextualized elements and the situated moment, and (6) recognize the complexity and ambiguity of most ethical judgment (pp. 151–162).

What kind of a code of Internet ethics might you propose as appropriate, clear, and workable?*

ETHICS AND PERSONAL CHARACTER

Ethical persuasion is not simply a series of careful and reflective decisions, instance by instance, to persuade in ethically responsible ways. Deliberate

*A number of excellent books focus on standards and issues for ethics in cyberspace. You are urged to examine, for example, Robert Baird et al., *Cyberethics* (2000); Cees J. Hamelink, *The Ethics of Cyberspace* (2000); Deborah G. Johnson, *Computer Ethics* (2000); and Duncan Langford, ed., *Internet Ethics* (2000).

application of ethical rules is sometimes impossible. Pressure for a decision can be so great or a deadline so near that there is insufficient time for careful deliberation. We might be unsure what ethical criteria are relevant or how they apply. The situation might seem so unusual that applicable criteria do not readily come to mind. In such times of crisis or uncertainty, our decisions concerning ethical persuasion stem less from deliberation than from our formed "character." Further, our ethical character influences what terms we use to describe a situation and whether we believe the situation contains ethical implications (Hauerwas, 1977; Klaidman & Beauchamp, 1987; Lebacqz, 1985).

Consider the nature of moral character as described by ethicists Richard DeGeorge and Karen Lebacqz. As human beings develop, according to DeGeorge (1999), they adopt patterns of actions and dispositions to act in certain ways.

> These dispositions, when viewed collectively, are sometimes called *character.* The character of a person is the sum of his or her virtues and vices. A person who habitually tends to act as he morally should has a good character. If he resists strong temptation, he has a strong character. If he habitually acts immorally, he has a morally bad character. If despite good intentions he frequently succumbs to temptation, he has a weak character. Because character is formed by conscious actions, in general people are morally responsible for their characters as well as for their individual actions. (p.123)

Lebacqz (1985) observes:

> . . . when we act, we not only do something, we also shape our own character. Our choices about what to do are also choices about whom to be. A single lie does not necessarily make us a liar; but a series of lies may. And so each choice about what to do is also a choice about whom to be—or, more accurately, whom to become. (p. 83)

In Judeo-Christian or Western cultures, good moral character is usually associated with habitual embodiment of such virtues as courage, temperance, wisdom, justice, fairness, generosity, gentleness, patience, truthfulness, and trustworthiness. Other cultures may praise additional or different virtues that they believe constitute good ethical character. Instilled in us as habitual dispositions to act, these virtues guide the ethics of our communication behavior when careful or clear deliberation is not possible.

In what ways does the issue of ethical character apply to the 1992 and 1996 presidential campaigns of Bill Clinton and to his communication during his presidency? Consider the arguments in some of the national press commentary. During the 1992 campaign, political columnist Paul Greenberg (1992) wrote:

> The character issues just won't go away no matter how many times Bill Clinton assures us, word of honor, that his is fine. His stock response to questions about his character or absence of same is to say that nobody's perfect, admit he's not, and therefore imply that he's no better or worse than anybody else." (p. 25)

Economist and syndicated columnist Robert J. Samuelson (1994, 1995) was especially critical of Clinton's communication as it reflected his character. Samuelson argued that Clinton routinely exaggerates, fibs, and misstates on both foreign and domestic policy. In 1996, a *U.S. News & World Report* survey (Borger & Kulman, 1996) concluded, "Yet character remains the president's Achilles heel. The poll found that while 70 percent of voters describe [Republican party nominee Bob] Dole as moral, only 41 percent describe Clinton that way." Although respondents in the poll could not identify concrete "best aspects" of Clinton's character, they included "deceptive, cheater, and indecisive" among the "worst aspects" of his character (p. 36).

The period from 1997 to 1999 found Clinton's character to be a primary focus of media scrutiny because of his sexual improprieties with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, because of independent counsel Kenneth Starr's investigation into alleged Clinton and Clinton administration misdeeds, because the House of Representatives voted two articles of impeachment (indictment) against the president, and because the Senate acquitted Clinton on the two charges of perjury to a

grand jury and of obstruction of justice. Public opinion polls during the period reflected a paradox: Clinton's job performance approval ratings ranged between 60 and 70 percent, but significant numbers of citizens doubted his personal ethical character and trustworthiness. For example, a CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup Poll released in mid-January 1999 (*Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, Jan. 25, 1999, p. 12) found that 69 percent of those surveyed approved of Clinton's job performance as president, and 81 percent said his presidency had been a success. In contrast, only 25 percent said he was honest and trustworthy, and only 20 percent said he provided good moral leadership. In the summer, fall, and winter of 1998–1999, Clinton gave four speeches of apology (August 16, September 11, December 11, February 12) in which he admitted engaging in sexual improprieties and lying about it and in which he progressively expressed regret, remorse, sorrow, and shame. You are urged to analyze the arguments and appeals in these four speeches to judge their degree of ethicality (see the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*).

Columnist Robert Samuelson (1998) continued to condemn Clinton for "routine and unending deceptions"—not only about personal behavior but also about public policy: "What inhibits most people from routine lies is a sense of shame. Clinton seems to lack this" (p. 17). Other political analysts contended that the issue of personal ethical character should be of crucial importance in selecting future presidents. John Kass (1998) concluded, "Character is the only thing that matters. And we're responsible for forgetting" (p. 3). And Joan Beck (1998) urged, "And next time we should pay more attention to character issues, to understand that character can't be divided into public and private sectors, and that the presidency can, indeed, be weakened by such discussions as whether oral sex counts as adultery" (p. 19). In what ways, and why, do you agree or disagree with the judgments of the various critics cited in these sections on Clinton's ethical character?

Columnist Stephen Chapman (1987) suggests three reasons that media scrutiny of the character issue is so intense for presidential candidates. First, voters are imposing increasingly higher ethical standards. Second, "personal integrity is one of the few matters that lend themselves to firsthand judgments by the voters. Most voters may feel unable to judge whether a politician is right about the defense appropriations bill. But they are able to consider evidence about a politician's ethics and reach a verdict, since they make similar evaluations about people every day." Third, voters "tend to vote for general themes, trusting candidates to apply them in specific cases. A politician who creates doubt about his personal honesty doesn't merely sow fear that he will steal from the petty cash. He creates doubt that his concrete policies will match his applause lines" (p. 3).

To aid in assessing the ethical character of any person in a position of responsibility or any person who seeks a position of trust, we can modify guidelines suggested by journalists. We can ask, Is it probable that the recent or current ethically suspect communication behavior will continue? Does it seem to be habitual? Even if a particular incident seems minor in itself, does it fit into some pattern of shortcomings? If the person does something inconsistent with his or her public image, is it a mere miscue or an indication of hypocrisy (Alter, 1987; Dobel, 1999; Johannesen, 1991)?

Access InfoTrac College Edition, and enter the word "ethics" in the search engine. Access the item "Do As I Say, Not As I Did," published in *Time* (July 22, 2002). What ethical judgments could you make concerning the described comments and actions by President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney?

IMPROVING ETHICAL JUDGMENT

One purpose of this book is to make you a more discerning receiver and consumer of communication by encouraging ethical judgments of communication that are specifically focused and carefully considered. In making judgments of the ethics of your own communication and the communication to

which you are exposed, your aim should be specific rather than vague assessments, and carefully considered rather than reflexive, "gut-level" reactions.

The following framework of questions is offered as a means of making more systematic and firmly grounded judgments of communication ethics.* At the same time, we should bear in mind philosopher Stephen Toulmin's (1950) observation that "moral reasoning is so complex, and has to cover such a variety of types of situations, that no one logical test . . . can be expected to meet every case" (p. 148). In underscoring the complexity of making ethical judgments, in *The Virtuous Journalist*, Klaidman and Beauchamp (1987) reject the "false premise that the world is a tidy place of truth and falsity, right and wrong, without the ragged edges of uncertainty and risk." Rather, they argue, "Making moral judgments and handling moral dilemmas require the balancing of often ill-defined competing claims, usually in untidy circumstances" (p. 20). How might you apply this framework of questions? (Also see Figure 2.3.)

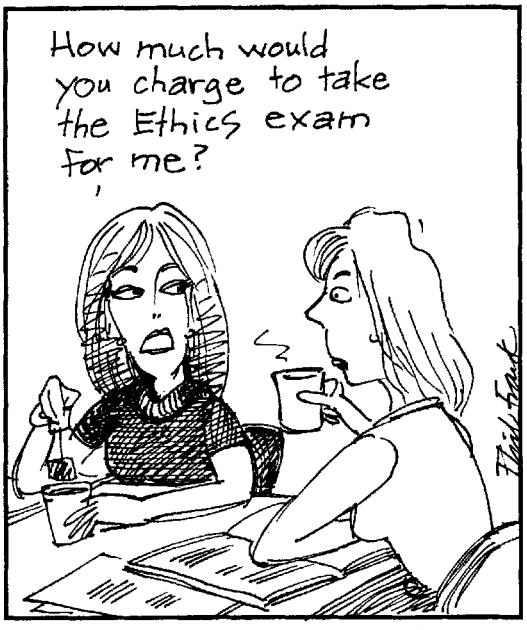

FIGURE 2.3 How might the guidelines for ethical judgment help to evaluate this situation?

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1. Can I specify exactly what ethical criteria, standards, or perspectives are being applied by me or others? What is the concrete grounding of the ethical judgment?
2. Can I justify the reasonableness and relevancy of these standards for this particular case? Why are these the most appropriate ethical criteria among the potential ones? Why do these take priority (at least temporarily) over other relevant ones?
3. Can I indicate clearly in what respects the communication being evaluated succeeds or fails in measuring up to the standards? What judgment is justified in this case about the degree of ethicality? Is the most appropriate judgment a specifically targeted and narrowly focused one rather than a broad, generalized, and encompassing one?
4. In this case, to whom is ethical responsibility owed—to which individuals, groups, organizations, or professions? In what ways and to what extent? Which responsibilities take precedence over others? What is the communicator's responsibility to her- or himself and to society at large?
5. How do I feel about myself after this ethical choice? Can I continue to "live with myself" in good conscience? Would I want my parents or mate or best friend to know of this choice?
6. Can the ethicality of this communication be justified as a coherent reflection of the communicator's personal character? To what degree is the choice ethically "out of character"?
7. If called upon in public to justify the ethics of my communication, how adequately could I do so? What generally accepted reasons or rationale could I appropriately offer?

*For some of these questions, I have freely adapted the discussions of Goodwin (1987, pp. 14–15), Christians, Rotzoll, and Fackler (1991, pp. 21–23), and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969, pp. 25, 483).

8. Are there precedents or similar previous cases to which I can turn for ethical guidance? Are there significant aspects of this instance that set it apart from all others?
9. How thoroughly have alternatives been explored before settling on this particular choice? Might this choice be less ethical than some of the workable but hastily rejected or ignored alternatives? If the only avenue to successful achievement of the communicator's goal requires use of unethical communication techniques, is there a realistic choice (at least temporarily) of refraining from communication—of not communicating at all?

REVIEW AND CONCLUSION

The process of persuasion demands that you make choices about the methods and content you will use in influencing receivers to accept the alternative you advocate. These choices involve issues of desirability and of personal and societal good. What ethical standards will you use in making or judging these choices among techniques, contents, and purposes? What should be the ethical responsibility of a persuader in contemporary society?

Obviously, answers to these questions have not been clearly or universally established. However, we must face these questions squarely. In this chapter, we explored some perspectives, issues, and examples useful in evaluating the ethics of persuasion. Our interest in the nature and effectiveness of persuasive techniques must not overshadow our concern for the ethical use of such techniques. We must examine not only how to but also whether to use persuasive techniques. The issue of whether to is both one of audience adaptation and one of ethics. We need to formulate meaningful ethical guidelines, not inflexible rules, for our own persuasive behavior and for use in evaluating the persuasion to which we are exposed.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. What standards do you believe are most appropriate for judging the ethics of political persuasion?
2. What ethical standards do you think should be used to evaluate advertising?
3. When might intentional use of ambiguity be ethically justified?
4. To what degree is the use of racist/sexist language unethical? Why?
5. Do the ethical standards commonly applied to verbal persuasion apply equally appropriately to nonverbal elements in persuasion? Should there be a special ethic for nonverbal persuasion?
6. What should be the role of personal character in ethical persuasion?
7. What ethical standards do you believe should guide communication on the Internet?
8. How does hate speech illustrate the process of moral exclusion?

For online activities, go to the Web site for this book at http://communication.wadsworth.com/larson.