

# Philosophy Meets the Social Sciences: The Nature of Humanity in the Public Arena

Lee Wilkins  
*University of Missouri*

Clifford Christians  
*University of Illinois*

□ *Using a base of philosophical anthropology, this article suggests that an ethical analysis of persuasion must include not just the logic human response, but culture and experience as well. The authors propose potential maxims for ethical behavior in advertising and public relations and applies them to two case studies, political advertising and the Bridgestone/Firestone controversy.*

Communications scholars have generally approached persuasion through epistemology and communications theory.

In the first case, establishing the actual effects of the persuasion process has proved to be impossible. Uncertainties remain over the variables that directly influence behavior, and the explicit degree of influence of advertising and public relations stimuli is unknown. Since the beginnings of the culture of consumption in the 1920s, advertising's critics, and the majority of its practitioners, have alleged its "ability to influence us directly to buy particular products or brands" and "to shape the consumption agenda; however, because of the complex environment in which advertising operates, there is often no clear-cut proof of either the presence or absence of these effects on the thinking and/or behavior of individuals" (Rotzoll, 2001, pp. 128, 151). Even with the more sophisticated methodologies today, controversies will continue if epistemology is our framework for understanding the responsibility of public relations practitioners.

In terms of mainstream communications theory, information and propaganda (news and persuasion) are considered two qualitatively different domains. Historically the purpose of the news media has been to discover truth, to present factual evidence on which the public can base its decisions. Information in the news is considered vital to informed public opin-

ion. The press' function is enlightenment through neutral, value-free knowledge. *Persuasion*, on the other hand, is a conscious attempt to control the popular mind. The defining feature is manipulation; audiences are to be mobilized. Therefore, public relations and advertising are not essentially informational but subsets of propaganda.

However, if one considers both information and propaganda part of the larger world of symbol formation, then insisting on an explicit distinction between the two is untenable. As communication theory takes an interpretive turn, all forms of communication are seen as value laden. For Stuart Hall, all communication is ideological, that is, loaded with the ideas and presuppositions of communicators and the patterns of belief that hold societies together. If communication on every level is persuasive, then working on the ethics of news and the ethics of public relations as two genres is based on a false premise.

---

*If communication on every level  
is persuasive, then working on  
the ethics of news and the ethics  
of public relations as two genres  
is based on a false premise.*

---

It is our contention that the limitations of these two standard approaches have kept persuasion ethics from maturing as a field. We propose another alternative for coming to grips with public relations and ethics. We replace epistemology and communications theory with philosophical anthropology. This enterprise we understand "broadly as the philosophical examination of human nature ..." (Schacht, 1990, p. 157). It examines "what characteristics (if any) are both common and unique to human beings as such", or, in other words, "what the necessary and sufficient conditions of being a human being are" (Schacht, 1990, p. 157; cf. Ricoeur, 1967; Rasmussen, 1971). However, philosophical anthropology is not narrowly and strictly limited to those questions, nor does it presuppose there is "a human essence of some sort" (Schacht, 1990, p. 158). We propose to start over intellectually with persuasion ethics by grounding it in philosophical reflection on the nature of our humanness.<sup>1</sup>

### **Rational Being**

In classical theory, the moral reasoning process begins with the individual, specifically the autonomous moral actor who is considered culpable for choices made.

This view of human nature centers on the uniqueness of the rational faculties in the human species and places extraordinary emphasis on the human actor's capacity for rational thought. "Since Parmenides, Greek philosophy assumed the identity of being and reason" (Niebuhr, 1941/1964, p. 6). *Nous*, the capacity for thought and reason, is a universal and immortal principle. Plato and Aristotle shared a common rationalism as identifying our essential humanness, and a common dualism of mind and body. "In the thought of Aristotle only the active *nous*, precisely the mind which is not involved in the soul is immortal; and for Plato the immutability of ideas is regarded as proof of the immortality of the spirit (*nous*)" (Niebuhr, 1941/1964, p.7).

The Greeks first established rationalist ethics. Once we acquire confidence in reason, we dare "to disobey divine or traditional regulations" (Landman, 1974, p. 110) and instead follow what our inner voice dictates. Philosophical ethics in this tradition is "based on the common principle" that we ought to "do the good which stands the test of reason" (Landmann, 1974, p. 110).

Descartes, the father of philosophy in modernity, portrayed human subjects as "interiorized mental substances" (Schrag, 1997, p. 4). Human bodies are subject to inspection and the laws of mechanics, but human minds are private, metaphysical, and abiding (Schrag, 1997, pp. 11–13).<sup>2</sup> The essence of the self is *res cogitans*, a thinking substance. *Cogito ergo sum*, genuine knowledge is testable and objectively true. It is as cognitively clean as mathematics, built in linear fashion from a neutral, noncontingent starting point.

Humankind is rational being. "What was called thought in the eighteenth century was no longer the Platonic contemplation of ideas to which a realm of essences organized by form was revealed" (Landmann, 1974, p. 120). Rather thought was understood as analytic calculating "that dissolves the world into a mechanical contraption made of quantitative particles and thus makes it technically masterable" (Landmann, 1974, p. 120).

Descartes described this method of reasoning in *His Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (1964):

Reduce complex and obscure propositions step by step to simpler ones, and then try to advance by the same gradual process from the ... very simplest to the knowledge of all the rest.... We should not examine what follows, but refrain from a useless task (pp. 163, 172).

Descartes contended, in effect, that we can demonstrate the truth only of what we can measure. The realm of spirit was beyond such measurement, a matter of faith and intuition, not truth. The physical became the only legitimate domain of knowledge. Science gained a stronghold on truth and

narrow calculation was accepted as the ideology by which modernity ought to live.

"The entire eighteenth century fell under the spell of Cartesian rationalism" and its dominance "is bound up with the successful development of the science of mathematics" (Levi, 1959, p. 34). Descartes expressed his delight "at the certitude" of mathematics (1637/1938, p. 7), and the "guiding spirit" of his entire work was to erect a philosophy of nature and a picture of the human person "on a mathematical foundation" (Levi, 1959, p. 34). The scientific successes of the 17th century in astronomy and physics became the structural model for philosophy. The cosmos was seen to mirror in its mathematical and quantitative character the explicitly rational character of human thought (Levi, 1959, pp. 34–35).<sup>3</sup> Thus, the 18th century carries over Newtonian science and Cartesian mathematics into its conception of human nature as defined by rational choice, that is, by the "fixed quantitative judgment" we call "calculation" (Levi, 1959, p. 35). Rational calculation becomes the foundation of utilitarian ethics, for example.

Scientific knowledge dominated by Descartes' mathematical physics is the optimistic version of 1848 which asserted that human thought moves through the stages of religious speculation, then through metaphysical abstractions, and finally to scientific reasoning (Comte, 1848/1910). Instead of the primitive tools of theology and philosophy, social science should be ordered on statistical precision, on sophisticated procedures of induction and logic.

In the first half of the 20th century, logical positivism emerged out of a marriage between Cambridge and Vienna. One of the sacred texts is the three-volume *Principia Mathematica* by Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead (1910–1913) in which mathematics is established as formal logic. With Russell declaring that "the method adopted by Descartes is right" (Levi, 1959, p. 349; cf. p. 350), in his rationalism the world contains clear and distinct facts and properties that are true if they correspond to reality. In turn building on Russell and Whitehead's seminal work, Rudolph Carnap (1937a, p. xiii; cf. 1937b, pp. 35, 99) of the University of Vienna developed a mature scientific philosophy in which the logical analysis of the languages of science and not metaphysics is the philosophers' task.<sup>4</sup> In logical empiricism, all normative assertions are scientifically unverifiable, and because they are not factually testable are merely "emotion-laden expressions of moral sentiment" (Levi, 1959, p. 345). As Carnap (1937b) put it, "In logic, there are no morals" (p. 52); falling outside of science, morals are irrational. "Being essentially unverifiable," religious, poetic, and ethical assertions "are meaningless; being meaningless, they cannot possibly be true; being incapable of being true, they cannot pretend to make a rational or logical claim upon human choice" (Levi, 1959, p. 377).<sup>5</sup>

Although not replicating the structure and content of logical positivism, the scientific method applied to communications research reflects its mathematical rationality. The groundbreaking work in information signaling by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver (1949) explicitly adopts the title *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. In surveys, laboratory experiments and content analyses, communication research in this tradition defines itself with a positivist temper. Methodologies are preoccupied with operational precision, internal and external validity, independent and dependent variables in experimental design, and statistical inferences.

### Being-in-the-World

The essentialist paradigm rooted in linear rationality has had its detractors within the Western tradition since classical Greece. The Greeks identified the interpretive impulse as a pervasive condition of human existence. Their philological curiosity brought the hermeneutical consciousness into focus. They located *ars interpretandi* within philosophical anthropology as a property of human beings. Aristotle found *hermeneia* (interpretation) worthy of a major treatise by that title, and he outlined a formal theory of communication in his *Rhetoric*. And as Gadamer reminded us, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, interpretation is explicit and irreducible, presumed to differ from intellection. *Hermeneia* (in this case, self-knowledge governing moral action) belongs to the higher and purer operations of the mind, but it is not just theoretical knowledge (*episteme*), nor is it practical skill (*techne*) because it concerns more than utility. Making a moral decision, Aristotle argued, entails doing the right thing in a particular circumstance, and this discernment, the moment of interpretation in the concrete situation, requires that we deliberate within ourselves; yet it cannot be confused with logical analysis. In this manner, Aristotle confirmed an orienting process beyond the senses, yet differing from *episteme*.<sup>6</sup>

This willingness to consider interpretation as a valid way of knowing persisted through the centuries. Vico was a professor of rhetoric at the University of Naples for 42 years (1699–1741). The main product of his study was an expansive work called *New Science* (1725/1948). His *Study Methods of our Time* (1709/1965) is a testimony to his genius also, considered by some scholars the most brilliant defense of the humanities ever written. *New Science* was a detailed account of the history of language and cultural customs. He contended, contra Descartes, that philology ought to pre-occupy philosophers because language was the central human activity. Mathematics, in his view, was a form of knowledge appropriate to the natural order.<sup>7</sup>

Like Aristotle's *hermeneia*, Vico (1725/1948, pp. 114–137) protected a domain of the mind that coheres in imaging, not in a rational linear process.

He contended that animal rationale is an overdrawn summary, at best, of classical Greek culture. He reminded us that one must account for the Homeric tradition—the dominance of a mythopoetic oral culture, a culture so strong that Plato in his *Republic* seeks to drive it from the city. He stressed the poetic imagination that was far from abstract and rational, but rather felt and experienced. Greek literature includes such dramatists as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripedes, and the comic Aristophanes. Vico was at pains to demonstrate that there have always been the alternative voices who recognize an intuitive knowing that transcends the linguistic realm and is broader in scope than rationality alone.

Vico (1725/1948) was fascinated with the human power to give imagistic form to experience—*fantasia* he labeled it (see Verene, 1981). He placed the image over the concept, the mythopoetic over the fact, and language over logic. He redefined science, not as an examination of external events, but as the power of imagination to create reality and give us an inside perspective on it. His highly original theory of imaginative universals was rooted in his conviction that grasping the whole is the flower of wisdom, and it remains an ideal of humanists until now.

Hegel's successor at Berlin, Wilhelm Dilthey, illustrated the ongoing concern in the 19th century for a wholistic understanding of our humanness. He considered *New Science* "one of the greatest triumphs of modern thought" (Dilthey, 1966, vol. 14/2, p. 698) and believed with Vico that understanding (*Verstehen*) was the illuminating and inescapable issue. Dilthey put *Verstehen* into the framework of lived experience (*Erlebnis*). *Erlebnis* becomes the ultimate basis and givenness of knowledge. *Erlebnis* is not an epiphenomenon for him, but an irreplaceable, inexhaustible, and immediate grasp of meaning that underlies reflexive thought.

For Dilthey (1958), lived experience is an ever-flowing stream. The relations of life are historical in nature. Our forms of consciousness and expression are determined by history, he argued: "Life contains as the first categorical definition, fundamental to all others, being in time (*Zeitlichkeit*)" (vol. VI, p. 192). He defined the problem of understanding as recovering a consciousness of our historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*). Human experience he saw as intrinsically temporal and therefore our understanding of experience must also be commensurately temporal.

While broadening our definition of human beings beyond rational being, the concept of essential human nature prevailed. Insisting on moral discernment beyond the rational faculty, and emphasizing *fantasia* and *verstehen*, did not in themselves deny the notion of essence that is central to the tradition of rational being. Existentialism, whose central figure is Martin Heidegger, contradicted essentialism per se. From his early classic *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1927/1962) through his last major book in 1958 (*What Is Philosophy*), the presupposition and preoccupation of philosophi-

cal inquiry was Being. As a student and later successor of Husserl at the University of Freiburg, he pursued his existentialist agenda through a phenomenological method.

In Heidegger's existentialism, human beingness can be properly known only in its concreteness. Heidegger (1927/1962) called human being *Dasein* (literally meaning "therebeing") to indicate that intentional existence distinguished people from all other entities. The human species actualizes the presence of Being, and Being can show itself only through humanity. Humans alone are the beings to whom all things in the world can reveal themselves as meaningful. Phenomena disclose their is-ness through the human opening. Human beings are "the clearing of Being." Humans are in the peculiar position of raising the problem of Being through their unique self-consciousness. Human beingness is not a static substance, but a situated existent receiving and expressing the significance of things. There is no subject-object dichotomy; "the disclosure of things and the one to whom they are disclosed are co-original" (Hood, 1972, p. 353).

Rather than homo faber (humans as tool makers to meet basic needs such as food and shelter), humans build a world as a struggle to overpower death. Heidegger's being is defined by mortality. "We now call mortals mortal—not because their earthly life comes to an end, but because they are capable of death as death.... Rational living beings must first become mortals" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 179). "Being can only presence itself through death" (Fry, 1993, p. 88).

### Cultural Being

We contend that philosophical anthropology be taken seriously, but within it are major disputes over the necessary and sufficient conditions of being human. Therefore, we offer a contemporary definition of Homo sapiens as a cultural being. In this view, "we are language-using and culture-incorporating creatures whose forms of experience, conduct, and interaction take shape in linguistically and culturally-structured environments, and are conditioned by the meanings they bear" (Schacht, 1990, p. 173). This philosophy of humanness is not trapped in the essence-existence dispute. It provides a framework and orientation for public relations policy and practice. Empirical social science gives a description for public relations professionals that resonates with their personal observations of everyday life, but it does not yield normative guidelines for the ways public relations ought to be practiced.

The symbolic motif is nurtured in the 19th century by Frederick Schleiermacher's *Hermeneutik* (1805–1833), August Schleicher's *Comparative Grammar* (1848), Jacob Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), and George Simmel's *Problems of Philosophy of History* (1892).

It also establishes definitive form in an intellectual trajectory from Ferdinand De Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) to Ernst Cassirer's four-volume *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923–1929/1953–1957/1996). For Cassirer, symbolization is not merely the hallmark of human cognition; our representational capacity defines us anthropologically. Cassirer (1944) titled his summary monograph, *An Essay on Man*. He identified our unique capacity to generate symbolic structures as a radical alternative both to the *animale rationale* of classical Greece and Descartes' modernity, and to the biological being of evolutionary naturalism. Arguing that the issues are fundamentally anthropological rather than epistemological per se, Cassirer's creative being is carved out against a reductionism of intellectus and disciplined thinking on one hand, and a naturalistic neurophysiology and biochemistry on the other.<sup>8</sup>

In this shift from rational being to cultural being, reason is reoriented and redefined, but it does not disappear. Charles Taylor (1985), in fact, on the question of reason saw a "displacement of its center of gravity" but not a major leap "between the traditional formulation of the nature of man" and that "twentieth century thought and sensibility" (p. 217) where language is central to our humanness. The shift takes place within the "thought/language complex, where the intersection is defined by thinking, words, reasoning, and reasoned account" (Taylor, 1985, p. 217). Language is not a vehicle of private meaning and subjectivism, but belongs to a community where it is nurtured in reflection as well as action. Reason is not the domain of my innermost being isolated from communications, as Locke argued, nor is it a separate faculty. However, as humans create worlds through language, this creation itself is permeated by thinking, ideas, analysis, and generalization.

*Animale symbolicum* contradicts at its roots the stimulus–response model in which stimuli are presumed to impact inert receptacles. Cassirer (1944) collapsed the hoary differences among human symbolic systems. Music, art, philosophical essays, mathematics, religious language, and Bacon's scientific method are placed on a level playing floor. James Carey (1988) called communication as a symbolic process the ritual view—rituals being ceremonies or sacraments in which we define meaning and purpose; they are events of celebration (graduation, weddings, birthdays) and not merely exchanges of information.

Symbol is the critical concept. What atom is to physical science and cell to biology, symbol becomes for communications. Cultures are interconnections of symbolic forms—those fundamental units of meaning expressed in words, gestures, and graphics. Realities called *cultures* are inherited and built from symbols that shape our action, identity, thoughts, and sentiment. Communication, therefore, is the creative process of building and reaffirming through



symbols, and culture signifies the constructions that result. Although not identical to that which they symbolize, symbols participate in their meaning and power; they share the significance of that to which they point. In addition, they illuminate their referents so as to make them transparent; they permit us to express levels of reality that otherwise remain hidden.

Because the symbolic realm is considered intrinsic to the human species, this tradition proves particularly significant for communications study. Humans alone of living creatures possess the creative mind, the irrevocable ability to reconstruct, to interpret. From this perspective, communication is the symbolic process expressing human creativity and grounding cultural formation. This definition operates with an integrated but cone-shaped paradigm of ever-broadening categories: symbol, communicative capacity, human species, and culture. Culture is the womb in which symbols are born and communication is the connective tissue in culture building; yet symbols precede culture. Symbol is the basic unit that carries meaning, thus anchors the communicative capacity, which in turn is central to our humanity, and humans are the culture builders. Communication is the catalytic agent, the driving force in cultural formation, and its most explicit expressions are symbolic creations (communications phenomena) such as the dramatic arts, discourse, literature, and electronic entertainment.

Culture is the result of human communicative ability. It is the distinctive and immediate human environment, the human heritage in time and place, built from the material order by men and women's creative effort. Culture is a set of practices, a mode of activity, and a process of creative imagination by which humans construct their environment. As we reduce spatial luxuriance by maps, so we impose organization in all areas to serve human purposes. As the alphabet organizes the complex world of sound into its phonemic parts—into a finite code—so humans find specific forms to endow their existence with order, to preserve what they consider the most important.

The cultural paradigm is decisively value centered. Values, signification, and meaning are the culturalists' stock-in-trade. Presuppositionlessness is considered a myth. If cultures are sets of symbols that orient life and provide it significance, then cultural patterns are inherently normative; they constitute the human kingdom by organizing reality and by indicating what we ought to do and avoid. Assuming that culture is the container of our symbolic capacity, the constituent parts of such containers are a society's values. As ordering relations, values direct the ends of societal practice and provide implicit standards for selecting courses of action. Our concern then is to articulate the appropriate use of language, the ends communication should serve, and the motives it should manifest.

With standards recognized as inherent in the concept of symbolic environments, we can begin putting content into the normative, asking what authentic social existence involves. Communities are knit together linguis-

tically, but because the lingual is not neutral but value laden, our social bonds are moral claims.

### **Framework for Advertising and Public Relations**

Our goal in this article was to begin the process of putting philosophical conceptions of human beings to work as a foundation for public relations ethics. We argue for a cultural definition as escaping the reductionistic and static view of humans as rational beings while bringing our humanness decisively into the public arena. We advocate an integrated view of the human as whole beings—body, mind, and spirit—who create and maintain through language the value-centered world we call culture. By applying that integrated view to persuasion, we suggest it is possible to evaluate in a different way assertions about the way culture-based selves operate. We use it to address the nature of accountability and autonomy, and to orient our thinking about such issues as veracity and role that are the core of many of the professional conundrums that arise in advertising and public relations. This attempt to outline a defensible view of the human based on philosophical anthropology is intended to provide practitioners with evocative ideas with which to assess and invigorate their work. It suggests the implications for humanistic social sciences most adequate for public relations research. In other words, it seeks to make the intellectual contributions of the ivory tower useful in the professional workplace, and in turn aid the academy in understanding the nature of humanity more productively.

---

*Our social bonds are  
moral claims.*

---

Dynamic cultural beings bring something to the message, not merely in an individual sense but the capacity to interpret reality that is grounded in shared myths, shared images, and the power to critique. Individual humans have both cognitive and behavioral connections to culture, to other individuals within the culture, and to society that we suggest both precedes and empowers the actualization of self.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, we argue that our robust concept of humanness embedded in culture as a more vital description of 21st-century humanity, means that activities based on caveat emptor lack moral suasion. We suggest instead a moral model of persuasion based on the notion of empowerment for multiple stakeholders. This foundation of empowerment at once allows advertising and public relations practitioners to retain loyalty to their employers and clients, to ac-

knowledge that even autonomous moral actors have moments of greater and lesser autonomy rooted in culture as well as in self, and that community by necessity plays a crucial role in interpreting reality.

In Paulo Freire's (1973) terms, our aim in persuasion is critical consciousness ("conscientization"). The question is how we can empower people to fill their own political space. For Freire, communication is dialogue and culture creation, with human linguistic relations a priori. Thus critical consciousness must always be nurtured dialogically, that is, dialogue is the only morally acceptable instrument of critical consciousness. When we gain our voice and pronounce our own word and project our own destiny, we demonstrate a critical consciousness. Through speaking a true word out of reflection and action, we build a new culture in the interstices and open spaces within the status quo and contrary to the power elite.

### Potential Maxims for Ethical Behavior in Persuasion

If our definition of humanity as creator of culture with rational dimensions is accepted, then the following guidelines are appropriate when the issue under discussion is persuasion.

1. Clients and the public need information that gives them "a good reason to adopt a course of action.... A reason to act is a non-arbitrary, thought-satisfying determination supporting one course of action over another" (Koehn, 1998, p. 106).

- In contemporary American democratic society, a single persuasive message exists in an ecology of other messages, many of them persuasive. Social science findings suggest that people do navigate between and among messages, and that they are capable of evaluation. The problem in such a society is when a single message dominates discussion of any particular issue, particularly for lengthy periods of time.

2. Rather than only proffering expert opinion, persuasion should foster ongoing discussion among people so they can explore what opinions are sound and which practical knowledge is superior (Koehn, 1998, p. 113). The aim is critical consciousness.

3. To foster "community of the best sort—an ethically reflective community—requires identification with, total commitment to, immersion in, and ongoing interaction with the community" (Koehn, 1998, p. 119).

- A logical extension of this guideline is that persuasive communication that erodes trust among members of the community or between community members and essential institutions should be considered morally blameworthy. In this sense, selling a product and espousing a particular point of view should not trump essential social connection. Critical con-

sciousness can and does distinguish between the criticism necessary to promote needed change and the sort of cynical communication that makes no distinction between means and ends.

4. Because we are not isolated individuals but cultural beings who create organizations and social structures, we must know the historical background and underlying issues. The question is not merely the personal decisions of executives but enabling individual assessment of institutions and policies.

5. As cultural beings we are situated in such cultural contexts as race, gender, class, and religion. Persuasive discourse must reflect with authenticity those multiple voices and identities.

Having developed these general guidelines, the next step is application.

### **Application I: The Case for Political Persuasion**

Media ethicists have long suggested that political persuasion represents a “special case” through which to examine the ethical issues underlying the persuasive process (Seib, 1995; Denton, 1991). Critical theory, extending at least to the work of Marcuse, makes similarly powerful assertions; political persuasion, because it has the capacity to influence the lives of both individuals and the societies in which they live, represents an important test for any discussion of the ethics of persuasion.

Furthermore, social science has spent a great deal of time investigating at least some of the effects of political persuasion—on both individuals and on institutions and political community. Both schools of thought acknowledge, based on very distinct world views, that people do acquire knowledge based on political communication, including advertising and propaganda, but that the knowledge acquisition is neither universal nor uniform. Political communication can influence both action and belief (cultural) systems; furthermore, action may contradict belief systems. Political communication, then, is part of a communication environment in which the human being exists. It helps people to understand and participate in political culture, it provides part of the necessary impetus to promote and provoke political change, and it can be a stabilizing force within political community—in both a positive and negative sense. Political communication is thus a contributor to human political behavior—it is part of the environment in which the organism functions (Davies, 1964).

For this case study, we consider one small, but important, element of the environment of political communication: political advertising. We base our analysis on the findings of social science research about the impact of political advertising on individuals and larger social institutions. In addi-

tion, we imbed our analysis in a robust democratic system; we acknowledge that significant alterations in political culture would have an impact on our discussion.

As the work of Jamieson (2000) and others indicates, political advertising occurs within a media ecology of political messages, some of them news based and others of them more overtly persuasive. This is a system that is open to at least imperfect correction from a multitude of sources—political journalists, opposing candidates, supporters of various candidates, third and fourth political parties, and so forth. We agree with Thomas Jefferson that democracy, although messy and imperfect, does represent the best-to-date effort at human self-governance. Democracy is not a rational process, at least in the sense that Descartes would have acknowledged, but it does represent a robust intersection of narrative, culture, rationality, and emotion where the sort of dynamic human being we have outlined can and does function. It is a reflective equilibrium of sorts, not necessarily lodged only within individuals but lodged within a culture as a whole, where various forces balance one another but where change is sometimes necessary and possible.

In addition, political theorists as well as contemporary social scientists do acknowledge that politics is about community. Political persuasion about politics must respect the power of community, in both a negative and positive sense, as well as the autonomy of the political individual. In such a polity, the oft-stated rationale of persuasion—let the buyer beware—is a distinctly insufficient rationale to justify the content of political persuasion. Instead, we believe a better aphorism in terms of political persuasion in a democratic society is persuasion that allows the “buyer” or citizen to “buy in” to a process that requires and responds—albeit imperfectly—to thoughtful critique. Political persuasion that fundamentally distances the recipient from political community serves no one; it carries within it the seeds of destruction of polity itself.

With the foregoing as background, we posit the following specific maxims for ethical evaluation of political communication.

1. A political ad is ethical when it presents needed information.

Needed information is not always policy based. Recent work indicates that one form of political advertising—the candidate biography—is not only approved of by voters but serves the necessary political function of introducing a candidate, or aspects of a candidate, to the voters. Biographical ads tend to make cultural connections; they allow the voters to decide whether a candidate shares their history and perhaps a world view.

Thus, advertising that accurately recounts the candidate’s life history—birth, education, job history, family, and geographic connections—provides voters with important cultural as well as policy information. Vice

President Al Gore's ads emphasizing his life history, particularly his disagreement with his father over the Viet Nam war, would be an example of ethical advertising of this sort.

Biographical ads attempt to place the candidate in a political context, they are open to outside correction, and they provide the voters with reason to consider their sponsor as a possible elected official. In fact, recent work on political advertising indicates that about one third of all political ads fall into the "biographical category" (Benoit, 2000); Jamieson (2000) and her colleagues have discovered that voters find them worthwhile.

In our view, a more troubling kind of advertising—the political image ad perhaps best captured in former President Ronald Reagan's "morning in America" ad campaign—would only marginally meet this test. This series of ads provoked an emotional response without providing much information. As such, they were models of highly produced political vagueness. They call on culture, an important component of politics, but blunt reflection. And, because many of the "claims" in such ads are couched in their visual content—content that, as many scholars have noted, is designed to bypass some of the brain's more logic-based cognitive structures—they appear to attempt to substitute emotion for reason.

2. A political ad is ethical when it provides a logical and/or emotional reason to vote for a particular candidate providing that appeal allows for counterargument and reflection.

Our inclusion of emotion in this maxim is deliberate. People can be appropriately emotionally moved by political choices. Some of those emotional responses are what the Greeks would have categorized as base, for example fear of the outsider that the infamous Willie Horton ad came to epitomize. But other emotions arise from connection. Political ads that focus on issues surrounding education or the provision of various services and entitlements for the elderly rightly stir those who are concerned with immediate and social connections.

Counterargument and reflection can, of course, be promoted in a variety of ways. Furthermore, our base emotions, although they can be intransigent, can also be modified through the collection of additional information and reflection. Recent scholarly work indicates that one of the most common methods to encourage reflection is the "contrast" ad where the stances of candidates on specific public policy issues are compared. Such contrast ads have several virtues: They are information rich, within the ad itself there is a call for reflective comparison, and voters do not perceive them as a political "turn off" (Jamieson, 2000, p. 77). In short, for one candidate to subject an opponent's policy stance to comparison is the stuff of political debate as the founders probably intended it.

Similarly, ads that employ subliminal messages (the now well-known “bureaucRATS” ad recently pulled by the George W. Bush campaign) that distort an opponents’ record (by the misleading use of graphics or editing the candidate’s words or votes out of context), or that emerge at a time in the campaign (the last 24–48 hr) when corrective response is logistically impossible, all would fail to meet this test.

So, too, would negative or attack political advertising that does not employ comparison or that attempts to campaign against the system without providing reasons. Some negative political advertising employs other questionable techniques, among them deception, ridicule, invidious comparison, hate mongering, and so forth. But most important, voters find them a political turnoff; they eat away at the connections that are the core of the democratic electoral process. Also, recent research indicates that voters are fairly savvy about negative ads and that they dislike them (Jamieson, 2000). In addition, the dislike often backfires on the campaign individual voters believe promulgated the negative ads.

Although negative advertising is subject to correction, it often takes that correction some time to permeate political discourse. What cannot be corrected, however, is the increasing load of cynicism that negative political advertising contributes to the cultural understanding of politics.

These two maxims, of course, do not cover all the various forms of political advertising that will be created in the next century. However, we suggest that they fall within the general guidelines for persuasion that we propose and that they can be applied broadly in a democratic society. At least as important, they do not appear to contradict the emerging body of social science research on how voters actually react to political ads. In sum, we suggest that they attempt to apply theory to practice in such a way as to reaffirm the core of each—one important test of the usefulness of theory in examined life.

## **Application II: Firestone and the Corporate Narrative**

Most crises tell a story of sorts, and the unfolding events surrounding the Bridgestone/Firestone<sup>®</sup> controversy seem to represent one part soap opera and one part cautionary tale. It is to the insight that narrative provides that we now turn.

First, because we have characterized human beings as culture-creating entities, it is important to understand the corporate history of Bridgestone/Firestone. One of America’s oldest industrial enterprises, Firestone was almost driven into bankruptcy in the early 1970s for stonewalling a tire recall effort by the U.S. government. Business historians sug-

gest Firestone never financially recovered from the battle that led, in turn, to its acquisition by a Japanese firm—Bridgestone—in 1988.

In the larger industrial world, the 1970s also provided two additional illustrations of the potential role of public relations in a crisis: the Ford Pinto<sup>®</sup>, where profit outweighed human life to the detriment of the corporation's reputation and bottom line, and the Johnson & Johnson<sup>®</sup> Tylenol<sup>®</sup> crisis, where prompt public communication about a life threatening act of sabotage saved lives and left the corporation financially healthy less than 2 years later. Public relations practitioners working for Bridgestone/Firestone should have known their own corporate history, and as professionals, they should also have understood two of the classic ethics cases of their profession.

Rather than attempt to summarize all the events of the Bridgestone/Firestone crisis, events that are unlikely to be resolved in the near future, we suggest that the events in their totality have provided a narrative on how this particular corporation has dealt with a crisis. Like many cultural narratives, there are some essential lessons in this understanding of the interweaving of persuasion and corporation. Among them are these three:

- Most corporations that produce products that can have an impact on human life and health are, fundamentally, in the safety business. This is particularly true in a postindustrial culture where “normal accidents” (Perrow, 1928/1984) are to be expected, but where both government and consumers have taken some actions to minimize those consequences. In the Pinto case, Ford did not understand that it was in the safety business; in the Tylenol case, Johnson & Johnson did. Bridgestone/Firestone had its own corporate history that could have informed it of the same thing.

- When normal accidents take on a pattern, to develop a critical consciousness of what is at issue the public needs information that provides good reasons to act. Action, in this case, may include seeking more information, taking particular steps to avoid risk, or continuing as before but with better information and deeper understanding.

This need for complete and continuing communication is the basic lesson of the Johnson & Johnson case. Although current news accounts have not yet documented the internal communications at Bridgestone/Firestone, it does appear that certain portions of the corporation, for example that portion of the company that dealt with warranty problems, was not “talking” to engineering about the pattern of tire problems that began to emerge in 1997. Ford, which recalled cars outside the United States, also wasn't talking to Firestone about the problems it was finding or to the U.S. government. Although there is no legal requirement for Ford to report its recall domestically, prudence—and willingness to acknowledge the multiple voices involved—might have suggested such a course of action. Perhaps



just as importantly, when a Houston television journalist began reporting on the story in February 2000, not only did Bridgestone/Firestone deny any problems, the corporate attorneys wrote letters to the television station that could have been interpreted as threatening litigation. Reflective communities are less able to flourish when major stakeholders demand silence; the corporation should have understood that the news story would fall into an ecology of messages, including persuasive messages from Bridgestone/Firestone, that would have helped individuals develop reasons for courses of actions. Furthermore, such individual activity could have functioned as part of a feedback loop to Bridgestone/Firestone, providing at least some support for what is obviously an economic gamble.

---

*Reflective communities are less  
able to flourish when major  
stakeholders demand silence.*

---

Bridgestone/Firestone's initial reaction to the journalistic reports employed the corporation's "old" narrative. However, the corporation did demonstrate that it had learned from past events; a voluntary recall was eventually instituted. Whether it occurred soon enough to preserve the corporation's reputation and financial health is yet to be determined.

- Finally, both corporations are involved in the substitution of expert opinion for practical wisdom, at least in their Congressional testimony. Engineering, particularly the technical engineering that produces sports utility vehicles and the tires they move on, is subject to the sort of debate that characterizes cutting edge science as opposed to textbook science. Only years more testing will determine whether the Ford Explorer® has a design flaw that can't be corrected by underinflating tires or whether the tires themselves, the result of complex engineering, are fundamentally flawed or flawed when underinflated and driven at high speeds in hot climates. But, while the experts debate, practical wisdom would suggest that there is something problematic in the combination. Such an evaluation is not strictly rational, at least in the terms of the scientific evidence that is currently in hand, but it makes common sense. Although litigation is a looming presence, both corporations could have done much to foster community by doing less blaming of one another and more cooperation to correct whatever problems do exist.

This recounting cannot "solve" the Bridgestone/Firestone tire case, at least in terms of the public relations professionals involved. It does, how-

ever, demonstrate how understanding the narrative of a crisis can spur ethical action. Firestone, unwittingly or not, violated all the guidelines we have suggested for ethical persuasive activity. Although we do not know how much actual access public relations practitioners had to corporate decision making, we suggest that had the people in charge at Bridgestone/Firestone understood the impact of the narrative they were creating, their own narrative history, and their connection to community by being in the “safety” business, perhaps the corporation would have responded differently internally. Externally, consumer trust, corporate health, and lives might be saved.

### Conclusion

When we set out to write this article, we realized that we had taken on an “impossible” task. No brief recital of philosophical debate can deal with the profound questions that surround the nature of humanity, particularly humanity that makes ethical choices. But we do believe it is important for the findings of social science to speak to philosophical understanding. No single theory from either discipline will adequately answer all questions; what we have tried to do instead is to provide a different way of thinking through the questions that the persuasive enterprise raises. We have not dismissed rationality but attempted to place it on equal footing with other human intellectual efforts, those that spring as much from poetry as they do from deduction. Our work draws almost equally from ancient and contemporary theory. We have made some controversial assertions. However, we suggest that continued application of this alternate view to the problems of persuasion may help make those problems more tractable to those working in applied ethics, both in the academy and in the larger community.

### Notes

1. The status and character of philosophical anthropology are controversial. “It is not always included in the ranks of classical philosophical disciplines: metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics.... Metaphysics considers it not sufficiently general and fundamental; individual sciences consider it too much so” (Landman, 1974, p. 9). For Marx, it “fails to recognize the essentially historical and changing nature of man” (Landmann, 1974, p. 11). Yet, Landmann (1974) concluded correctly, “it survives as a school of philosophy.... In its substantive origins, it dates back to Greek philosophy. In the Renaissance and the Age of Goethe it reached new peaks” (p. 9). And it “was reestablished in the 1920s by Helmut Plessner and Max Scheler” (p. 9). For Richard Schacht (1990), philosophical anthropology has received little attention in Anglo-American philosophy, because of the influence of positivistic

thought and the fact that the philosophy of mind filled in its intellectual space (p. 155). On the European continent it “may have been eclipsed by existential philosophy, and may have been criticized by European philosophers as diverse as Heidegger, Althusser and Foucault; but it has persisted as a philosophical enterprise, and remains an area of serious philosophical inquiry” (Schacht, 1990, p. 155). It has been “part of the European philosophical landscape for the past century and a half, emerging as a main interest and focus of post-Hegelian philosophers from Feurbach and Marx to Nietzsche and Dilthey” (Schacht, 1990, p. 155; see Schacht, 1975; Gehlen, 1988).

2. The Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1949) rejected Descartes on the ground that his dualism of mind and matter was a category mistake that confused the discourse concerning minds with the logic of discourse pertaining to physical bodies.
3. Between the rationalistic, scientific philosophy of the 17th and 18th centuries, and the mature positivism of Russell and Carnap, are two explicit paths not developed here: (a) Hume’s shift in causal inference from the necessary connection of things to the connection of ideas in the mind, and (b) the discovery of non-Euclidean geometry in the first half of the 19th century (cf. Levi, 1959, p. 334).
4. As Hempel has pointed out, given Carnap’s emphasis on the empirical, on factual propositions and on logical syntax, the correspondence theory of verification in Russell becomes a coherence theory of truth in Carnap. For the complexities of their intellectual connections and an extensive bibliography, see Levi (1959), “The Passion for Logic: Bertrand Russell and Rudolph Carnap” (chap. 9, pp. 331–382).
5. Positivism differs from Cartesian rationality in that it accounts for logic and mathematics without appealing to philosophical concepts of ultimate meaning. In developing a universal language of science, positivism eliminated metaphysics, or rather than highlighting its antimetaphysical bias, Levi (1959) correctly argued that it established “a metaphysics founded upon logic” (p. 347).
6. In addition to the work of Aristotle, *hermeneia* and its cognates appear in such familiar ancients as Plutarch, Xenophon, Euripides, Longinus, Epicurus, and Lucretius. One already detects the faint beginning of a theoretical enterprise when Plato uses the phrase *he hermeneutike techne* (the hermeneutical art; *Politicus* 260D). The history of the Hermes mythology (god of language) from the Iliad and Odyssey to the Stoic period illustrates the refinement of Greek thinking on *hermeneia*. For a summary, see Grossberg and Christians (1981, pp. 60–62).
7. For documentation that Vico was not merely anti-Descartes, but was inspired by a living, pre-Enlightenment tradition, see Janik (1983). For stimulating essays on Vico and the Counter Enlightenment generally, see Berlin (1982, pp. 1–24, 80–129).
8. For understanding cultural beings in the context of Enlightenment rationality, see Cassirer (1951). For a systematic treatment of the cultural sciences that emerge from his philosophy of language, see Cassirer (1960, pp. 3–38, 117–158) especially.
9. Taking human selfhood seriously after deconstruction and postmodernity is controversial. The death of the human is a common motif in contemporary literature. Michael Foucault (1970), for instance, contended “man is an invention of recent date” and will soon “be erased like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea” (p. 387). This “death of man” motif has taken on “a variety of

formulations, to wit ... the 'death of the author,' the 'deconstruction of the subject,' the 'displacement of the ego,' the 'dissolution of self-identity,' and at times a combination of the above" (Schrag, 1997, p. 2). We follow Schrag (1997) in his argument that contradicting the essentialist rational self and versions of being-in-the-world do not "entail jettisoning every sense of self" (p. 9). Our definition of the human is consistent with Schrag's (1997) effort to construct "a praxis-oriented self, defined by its communicative practices, oriented toward an understanding of itself in its discourse, its action, its being with others, and its experience of transcendence" (p. 9).

## References

- Benoit, W. (2000). *The spot*. New York: Praeger.
- Berlin, I. (1982). *Against the crowd: Essays in the history of ideas*. New York: Penguin.
- Carey, J. W. (1988). *Communication as culture*. Boston: Universe Hyman.
- Carnap, R. (1937a). *The logical syntax of language*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Carnap, R. (1937b). *Philosophy and logical syntax*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Cassirer, E. (1944). *An essay on man: An introduction to the philosophy of human culture*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Cassirer, E. (1951). *The philosophy of the enlightenment*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cassirer, E. (1953–1957, 1996). *The philosophy of symbolic forms* (R. Manheim and J. M. Krois, Trans., Vols. 1–4). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. (Original work published 1923–1929)
- Cassirer, E. (1960). *The logic of the humanities* (C. S. Howe, Trans.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Comte, A. (1910). *A general view of positivism* (J. H. Bridges, Trans.). London: Routledge. (Original work published 1848)
- Davies, J. C. (1964). *Human nature in politics*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Denton, R. E. (Ed.). (1991). *Ethical dimensions of political communication*. New York: Praeger.
- Descartes, R. (1938). *Discourse on method*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing. (Original work published 1637)
- Descartes, R. (1964). *Rules for the direction of the mind*. In *his philosophical essays* (pp. 147–236) (L. J. Lafleur, Trans.). Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Dilthey, W. (1914–1982). *Gesammelte Schriften*. (19 vols.) Leipzig & Berlin, Germany: Teubner; Göttingen, Germany: Vadenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Foucault, M. (1970). *The Order of things: An archeology of the human sciences*. New York: Random House.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Fry, T. (Ed.). (1993). *RUA TV? Heidegger and the televisual*. Sydney, Australia: Power.
- Gehlen, A. (1988). *Man: His nature and place in the world*. (C. McMillan, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Grossberg, L., & Christians, C. (1981). Hermeneutics and the study of communication. In J. Soloski (Ed.), *Foundations for communication studies* (pp. 57–81). Iowa City: University of Iowa Center for Communication Study.

- Heidegger, M. (1958). *What is philosophy?* New York: Twayne Publishers.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row. (Original work published 1927)
- Heidegger, M. (1971). *Poetry, language, thought* (A. Hofstadter, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Hood, W. F. (1972). The Aristotelian versus the Heideggerian approach to the problem of technology. In C. Mitcham & R. Mackey (Eds.), *Philosophy and technology: Readings in the philosophical problems of Technology* (pp. 347–363). New York: Free Press.
- Jamieson, K. H. (2000). *Everything you think you know about politics ... and why you're wrong*. New York: Basic Books.
- Janik, L. G. (1983). A renaissance quarrel: The origins of Vico's anti-cartesianism. In G. Tagliacozzo (Ed.), *New Vico studies* (pp. 39–50). Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities.
- Koehn, D. (1998). *Rethinking feminist ethics: Care, trust and empathy*. New York: Routledge.
- Landmann, M. (1974). *Philosophical anthropology* (D. J. Parent, Trans.). Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- Levi, A. W. (1959). *Philosophy and the modern world*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Niebuhr, R. (1964). *The nature and destiny of man. Vol. 1: Human nature*. New York: Scribner's. (Original work published 1941)
- Perrow, C. (1984). *Normal accidents: Living with high risk technologies* (H. Meyerhoff, Trans.). New York: Basic Books. (Original work published 1928)
- Rasmussen, D. M. (1971). *Mythic-symbolic language and philosophical anthropology: A constructive interpretation of the thought of Paul Ricoeur*. The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Ricoeur, P. (1967). The antinomy of human reality and the problem of philosophical anthropology. In N. Lawrence and D. O'Connor (Eds.), *Readings in existential phenomenology* (pp. 390–402). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Rotzoll, K. B. (2001). Persuasion Advertising. In C. Christians, K. B. Rotzoll, & K. B. McKee (Eds.), *Media ethics: Cases and moral reasoning* (6th ed., pp. 127–196). New York: Longman.
- Russel, B. & Whitehead, A. N. (1910–1913). *Principia mathematica*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Ryle, G. (1949). *The concept of the mind*. New York: Barnes & Noble.
- Schacht, R. (1975). *Existentialism, existenz-philosophy, and philosophical anthropology* (pp. 228–253). Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburg Press.
- Schacht, R. (1990, Fall). Philosophical anthropology: What, why and how. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 50, 155–176.
- Schrag, C. O. (1997). *The self after postmodernity*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Seib, C. & Fitzpatrick, K. (1995). *Public relations ethics*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace.
- Shannon, C. & Weaver, W. (1949). *The mathematical theory of communication*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

- Taylor, C. (1985). Language and human nature. In *Human nature and language. Philosophical Papers 1* (pp. 215–247). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Verene, D. P. (1981). *Vico's science of imagination*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Vico, G. (1948). *The new science of G. Vico* (T. G. Bergin & M. H. Fisch, Trans.). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. (Original work published 1725)
- Vico, G. (1965). *On the study methods of our time* (E. Gianturco, Trans.). Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill. (Original work published 1709)

Copyright of Journal of Mass Media Ethics is the property of Lawrence Erlbaum Associates and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.