We live in an age of advocacy; an age characterized by an omnipresent, persistent, pervasive environment of persuasion, partisanship, sponsorship, and endorsement in broadcast, print, internet, and social media. It has become increasingly and glaringly apparent that advocacy has very real large-scale and global consequences, as well as significant impacts on individuals. Given this environment, an open, broad-based societal discussion about the ethics of advocacy is needed.

(Baker, 2018, pp. 312–313)

INTRODUCTION: FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter on “The Ethics of Advocacy: Moral Reasoning in the Practice of Public Relations” begins with the assumption that “advocacy and persuasion in general are noble enterprises” (Baker, 2018, p. 312).

Societies and individuals rely on ethical advocacy for many functions, including: democratic discourse and self-governance; the circulation of ideas informing individual and collective decision-making; the advancement of truth, knowledge, and innovation; the facilitation of commerce, and the promotion and provision of goods and services. The caveat, however, is that these positive benefits and outcomes are fragile, and that harm and negative consequences can result if those engaged in the practices of advocacy are unprincipled.

(Baker, 2018, p. 312)

This chapter’s discussion of public relations and advocacy ethics, and the decision-making models presented, are intended to encourage practitioners to use their talents and their power as communicators for worthy purposes, with moral means, while also achieving effective and noble professional objectives and behaving professionally as persons of integrity.
Advocacy ethics as an area of inquiry arises from a concern about practices of persuasion that operate only on the basis of what is effective in the quest to achieve advocacy objectives, without sufficient regard for the basic moral principles that might be violated, or the people and interests that might be harmed in the process. In broad terms, the field of advocacy ethics pushes back against the (Adam) Smithian notion that “out of self-interest…harmonious societies grow” (Kagan, 1998, p. 189). It challenges from a variety of perspectives the assumption that caveat emptor (let the buyer beware), and related attitudes, is a legitimate moral position for advocates to embrace (Patterson and Wilkins, 2005, p. 61; Baker, 1999a).

Nothing in this chapter is meant to imply that advocates and public relations practitioners should not be competitive, or that they should have no interest in achieving their worthy professional objectives. The injunction against raw self-interest (unfettered egoism) that is achieved with disregard for the interests of others is not an injunction against legitimate self-interest (see Foot, 2001, p. 17). The theories, principles and models suggested in this paper do, however, suggest means by which practitioners can achieve and act upon the moral perspective in which personal interests and those of others can be properly balanced.

The chapter begins by exploring the theoretical ground for advocacy ethics, or the social and societal sources from which arise the moral requirement for professional advocates to behave ethically. Then, moving more closely to moral behavior and decision-making, it examines moral temptations, ethical dilemma paradigms, and ethical issues faced by practitioners in public relations practice. Three models for moral reasoning are reviewed – each taking a different approach to ethical decision-making in the practices of advocacy. The question of the relationship between moral reasoning (knowing the right thing to do) and moral behavior (actually doing the right thing) is then explored, as is the relationship between ethical behavior in the workplace, and the practitioner’s sense of personal well-being. The chapter concludes with a discussion, from several points of view, about moral perspective-taking as it relates to moral reasoning.

The ultimate objectives of the chapter are to increase understanding of the basic ethical issues in advocacy, to provide various tools by which practitioners might think through ethical issues relating to the practices of advocacy, and to emphasize the ways in which ethical behavior in professional practice leads one not only to do good, but to experience personal growth, fulfillment, and a sense of living a life that is worthwhile.

THE THEORETICAL GROUND FOR ADVOCACY ETHICS

A Covenantal Model

Ground: “a source of standards or norms which are binding on a certain class or group of agents.”

(Koehn, 1994, p. 8)

This section explores the theoretical ground or source from which arises the moral requirement for professional advocates to behave ethically, and suggests that this ground is best conceptualized within a covenantal model of advocacy.

Daryl Koehn (1994) has written that a profession “is a set of norm-governed practices grounded in a relationship of trust between professionals and clients…and potential clients” (Koehn, 1994, p. 8). The centrality of the relationship between the professional advocate and the client, however, does not assume that the advocate is a service provider whose only responsibility
is to service client desires (Baker, 2002, p. 194). Professional advocates have additional moral duties to self and others connected to the functions they perform. “The professional must have a highly internalized sense of responsibility; must be bound to monitor his/her own behavior” (Baker, 2002, p. 196, citing Koehn, 1994, pp. 55–56, 65).

While the professional’s key responsibility is to the client, the professional/client relationship exists within the larger context of professional responsibility to society. “Professionals, then, are not exclusively client-oriented; they are not unconditional loyal servants of the individual client at hand. … Rather, the client is an individual member of a community before whom the professional has made a ‘profession’” (Baker, 2002, p. 198, citing Koehn, 1994, pp. 173–174).

The covenantal model is based in professionals’ and clients’ responsibilities to each other and to the public good. The following list summarizes key points in the covenantal model as the theoretical ground of advocacy ethics, as discussed by Koehn (1994).

- The ground of advocacy ethics consists in a covenantal relationship of trust between advocate and client, and between advocate and society.
- The loyalty of the advocate to the client does not sanction promoting the client’s interest to the direct sacrifice of the well-being of other members of the public.
- The professional encourages ethical behavior on the part of the client.
- The professional serves the client’s good, but the client also is obligated to act in ways that engender that good.
- The professional advocate does not serve client whim, but client good, and is not obligated further if the client does not behave in ways that foster that good. (For example, clients are responsible to conduct their affairs reputably rather than expecting the advocate to spin away disreputable behaviors.)
- The professional refuses to engage personally in unethical practices even if, or merely because, the client requests or demands it.
- The professional refuses to promote evil or to represent clients and causes that directly result in harm to others (see Baker, 2002, pp. 200–201).

**MORAL TEMPTATION AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE**

When faced with a situation that has ethical implications, is one actually dealing with a genuine ethical dilemma, or is one simply tempted to do something that clearly is wrong? The distinction drawn by Kidder (1995) is that ethical dilemmas are right-versus-right situations and moral temptations are right-versus-wrong situations.

Ethical dilemmas have good and right arguments to commend them on all sides of the situation. They require careful moral reasoning to arrive at the most appropriate action. Right-versus-wrong issues, on the other hand, are moral temptations. They do not require deep philosophical/ethical analysis because they are simply wrong from the outset.


This distinction allows practitioners and decision-makers to clarify the nature of the decision they are dealing with. If the ethical course of action is not clear, they are grappling with a true ethical dilemma, and must engage in moral reasoning to arrive at a morally justifiable course
of action. If, on the other hand, they can acknowledge that they know what their moral responsibilities are in the situation, but are inclined to do otherwise – they can recognize that they are being enticed by a moral temptation. In this case, their only choice is whether or not to do the right thing.

Assuming that a genuine ethical dilemma (not a moral temptation) has presented itself, Kidder writes that there are four value sets that are so fundamental to the right-versus-right choices all of us face that they can be called dilemma paradigms. These four paradigms are (1) truth versus loyalty; (2) individual versus community; (3) short-term versus long-term; and (4) justice versus mercy. Kidder says these are the classic tensions in most ethical dilemmas (Baker, 1997, p. 200, citing Kidder, 1995, p. 18).

The paradigm of truth versus loyalty sets honesty in opposition with allegiance, fidelity, and promise-keeping. Individual versus community pits self or us against them or others. Short-term is concerned with immediate needs and desires (the now) as opposed to long-term which is concerned with future goals or prospects (the then). Finally, justice is concerned with fairness and equity which sometimes comes into opposition with compassion and empathy (Baker, 1997, p. 201).

Kidder acknowledges that neither side of the dilemma paradigms invariably is right. Nevertheless, he argues that all things being equal (when both sides of the argument have equal weight or good arguments to support them), he would choose truth over loyalty, community over individual, long-term over short-term, and mercy over justice (Baker, 1997, pp. 201–202; Kidder, 1995, pp. 219–221). It is up to the individual or corporation to decide which ethical value should take precedence in any given situation, and to be able to justify their decision.

These conflicting value paradigms (especially the first three) are useful for broadly conceptualizing the moral dilemmas inherent in the practice of public relations. Truthfulness versus loyalty, for example, is a core ethical dilemma in advocacy. What are the limits of loyalty to corporation or client as balanced against the moral requirements of truthfulness in communications? Individual versus community (us versus them) also is a central ethical dilemma in advocacy. Should people behave solely in a self-interested (us) manner, or should their concerns also be with receivers of their persuasive messages (them)? Short-term versus long-term considerations are critical, and are related to each of the other paradigms. Should practitioners make their decisions in a particular circumstance based upon the best short-term consequences – or should they act with a primary consideration for long-term interests?

As these questions make evident, the dilemma paradigms overlap and interrelate. In the practice of public relations, for example, the truth versus loyalty dilemma spills over into the us versus them dilemma. Should practitioners and decision-makers engage in partial truths in their own self-interest (an emphasis on “us”), or should their concerns be with receivers of their persuasive messages (an emphasis on “them”) in providing others with the truthful information they need to make rational decisions about an issue? Similarly with regard to short-term versus long-term considerations, is long term interest served best by truth or by loyalty; by an emphasis on us or on them?

Table 11.1 lists some examples of ethical issues that arise in the practice of public relations. It includes several categories of public relations activities (such as advocacy through front groups, and communicating across cultures) that raise particular ethical challenges. The items and activities listed are diverse, and they illustrate that while in some circumstances and contexts, a practitioner clearly might be dealing with a moral temptation, it is more likely that the complexity of the issues and activities involved present difficult and challenging ethical dilemmas.
In their foreword to a seminal special double issue on ethics and professional persuasion in the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, editors Ralph Barney and Jay Black wrote that “a major frustration of professionals in media fields is the academics who don’t provide definitive answers to the important questions” (Barney and Black, 2001, p. 73).

When a professional queries an expert, and expects a “this is what to do” answer, she or he often finds the response lays out a myriad of alternatives, perhaps without even a hierarchy. If, for the

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*Partial list of ethical issues as identified in Baker (1997); in six public relations textbooks: Bagin and Fulginiti (2005); Guth and Marsh (2006); Lattimore et al. (2004); Newsom et al. (2007); Seitel (2004); Treadwell and Treadwell (2004); and in Bivins (2006); Palenchar and Heath (2006); Seib (2006); Hon (2006); Wright (2006).*
professional, closure and solution are discussion goals, scholars exalt discussion with closure low in priority. And so it is, perhaps in spades, with media ethics, particularly on a topic as prickly as professional persuasion.

(Barney and Black, 2001, p. 73)

Applied ethicists often are hesitant to make definitive statements as to what general behaviors and practices are ethical or unethical. This is because nuances in facts, circumstances, potential outcomes, and the actors involved (including their motivations) often can be determinative of an appropriate course of action. Applied ethicists do, however, strive to provide ways by which practitioners can think about and clarify moral issues and thus find for themselves, through their own reasoning processes, ethically justifiable, if not definitive, answers to important questions.

Professional codes of ethics are examples of tools designed for moral reasoning in the practice of public relations. These include codes of ethics for the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (all available online), and the codes of ethics of individual corporations and workplaces.

Additional aids in systematic moral reasoning are classical ethical theories that help focus one’s attention on various aspects of a moral dilemma. The utilitarian perspective, for example, draws attention to finding in any situation the action that will result in the greatest good for the greatest number, and Kant’s categorical imperative requires that as a matter of moral duty one must identify and act upon correct principles – those maxims that one would want everyone to honor in similar situations.

The three models reviewed below take classical ethical theory into account in developing rubrics for systematic moral reflection in the applied area of advocacy and public relations practices. Taken together, they constitute a set of tools by which to facilitate clear thinking and moral reasoning about various aspects of advocacy. They are designed to make the ethics of advocacy “accessible, teachable, applicable, behavior-influencing and empowering for practitioners, students, and instructors” of professional persuasive communications (Baker, 2008, p. 249).

**FIVE BASELINES MODEL FOR ASSESSING MOTIVATIONS AND JUSTIFICATIONS IN ADVOCACY**

The motivations that drive one’s actions are an important issue in ethics, as is the moral requirement that one should be able to explain or justify one’s actions. The “Five Baselines” framework below (adapted from Baker, 1999b) “allows conceptual clarity both about differing motivations that underlie action in professional persuasive communication and differing grounds or baselines from which action is justified” (Baker, 1999b, p. 79). The five baselines (to be explained below) are: Raw Self-Interest; Entitlement; Enlightened Self-Interest; Social Responsibility; and Kingdom of Ends. As the structure of the framework implies (beginning with Raw Self-interest and ending with the Kingdom of Ends), each successive baseline represents higher moral ground than the one before it (Baker, 1999b, p. 69).

1. The **Raw Self-Interest** baseline assumes legitimacy in pure self-interested egoism or looking out for oneself, even to the detriment of others. It assumes that advocates may use society or other humans for their own benefit, “even if it is damaging to the social order” (Baker, 1999b, pp. 70–71). While many may act according to this standard, it clearly is not a morally justifiable position.
2. The Entitlement Model represents the position that all clients, legal products, and causes are entitled to professional assistance and representation (despite their moral indefensibility); that professional persuaders have a right to advocate for legal products and causes, even if they are harmful; that caveat emptor (let the buyer beware) is a morally acceptable position; that clients and advocates have no responsibility for the negative effects on others that result from their legal persuasive communications; that professional communicators have a responsibility to serve their clients well despite potential harm to society or personal moral aversion; and that if a product or cause is legal, its promotion is ethically justifiable (Baker, 1999a, p. 1).

The Entitlement baseline asserts communicator rights and entitlements “without the balancing acceptance of ethical responsibility for one’s behavior and for the welfare of others. Essentially, the model fails the basic ethical requirement that people take responsibility for the effects of their actions on others” (Baker, 1999a, p. 20.)

3. The Enlightened Self-Interest baseline assumes that “businesses do well (financially) by doing good (ethically), and it is, therefore, in their bottom-line interest to engage in good deeds and ethical behavior” (Baker, 1999b, p. 73). This baseline has much to recommend it, in that it encourages ethical behavior (albeit by providing economic incentives). However, this approach assumes that all actions should result eventually in a reward to self or corporation (Baker, 1999b, p. 75). By this rationale, if an action or policy did not result in bettering a bottom-line interest, it would not be justified, even if it were the morally correct thing to do.

Martinson (1994) has cautioned that enlightened self-interest “ignores the social dimension of ethics, the concern for the common good. It fails as an ethical baseline because ethics ‘is about doing what is right where others, both individually and collectively, are concerned’” (Baker, 1999b, p. 75, quoting Martinson, 1994, p. 106).

4. The Social Responsibility baseline takes Martinson’s concerns into account. This baseline assumes that persons in society are interdependent, and that “the focus of one’s actions and moral reasoning should be on responsibilities to others and to community” (Baker, 1996b, p. 76).

5. The name of the Kingdom of Ends baseline derives from Kant’s well-known categorical imperative. The defining characteristic of the Kingdom of Ends as a guiding model for behavior in advocacy is that …

People should always act by those maxims (laws of conduct) to which they would want everyone to adhere if we all lived in an ideal community, a community in which everyone always is moral, one in which all people were treated as ends in themselves rather than as means to someone else’s ends.

(Baker, 1999b, p. 78)

The Kingdom of Ends baseline assumes that professional communicators can contribute to creating the kind of world in which they would wish to live, and in which the rights, needs, and interests of others are respected.

THE TARES TEST: FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR ETHICAL PERSUASION

The TARES Test (Baker and Martinson, 2001) is comprised of five principles that articulate the basic moral duties of advocates: Truthfulness (of the message); Authenticity (of the persuader); Respect (for the persuadee); Equity (of the appeal); and Social Responsibility (for the common
good). All ethical persuasive practices, according to this model, will take place within the boundaries of these five prima facie duties or principles of action.

The TARES Test is designed to be comprehensive, in that it addresses ethical principles relating to all elements of an advocacy message or campaign – the message, the advocate, the receiver(s) of the message, the conduct and elements of the advocacy campaign, and society as a whole. The test asserts an ethical requirement that the message must be true; the advocate must be an authentic representative of the cause or message; receivers of the advocacy message must be shown respect by empowering them to make good decisions and voluntary choices for themselves; the persuasive campaign must be fair in every respect; and the product or service advocated, as well as the campaign itself, must be socially responsible for the common good of society.

The following are questions that practitioners might ask themselves from the perspective of the TARES Test (see Baker and Martinson, 2001).

**Truthfulness (of the Message):** Is the message factually accurate and also truthful? Does it deceive overtly or covertly? Does it lead people to believe what I myself do not believe? (Bok, 1999, p. 13) Does it satisfy the listener’s information requirements?

**Authenticity (of the Advocate):** Am I acting with integrity? Do I endorse this message? Would I take personal responsibility for it? Would I persuade those I care about to do this? Do I believe that people will benefit from this?

**Respect for the Persuadee (or receiver of the message):** Have I respected the interests of others? Have I given them substantially complete information so they can make good decisions? Have I made them aware of the source of this message?

**Equity of the Appeal (or the Advocacy or PR campaign):** Is this campaign fair? Does it take unfair advantage of receivers of the message? Is it fair to targeted or vulnerable audiences? Have I made the communication understandable to those to whom it is directed? Have I fairly communicated the benefits, risks, costs, and harms?

**Social Responsibility (for the Common Good):** Will the cause I am promoting result in benefits or harm to individuals or to society? Is this cause responsible to the best interests of the public?

A sincere and well-intentioned consideration of all elements and principles of the TARES Test should lead practitioners of advocacy and persuasion to morally justifiable decisions.


Usually, discussions of applied ethics center on what one should *do* – what actions one should take. Virtue (or character) ethics takes a different perspective. The central question is not “What should I *do*?” but rather “What sort of person should I *become*?” (Pojman, 2006, p. 156, italics added; see also Baker, 2008, p. 237). Character or virtue ethics is “the arena of the virtues and the vices” (Machtyre, 1984, p. 168). A moral virtue is a “disposition to follow the moral rules” (Gert, 1998, p. 284), while a moral vice is a disposition to violate a moral rule when there is a conflict between the rule and one’s own interests or inclinations (Gert, 1998, p. 283).

Moral virtues have corresponding moral vices … just as moral vices have corresponding moral virtues. (For example, the virtue of truthfulness has a corresponding vice of deceitfulness.) Virtue and vice are developed by and exhibited in habitual actions and consistency of behavior.
MacIntyre writes that practices provide “the arena in which the virtues are exhibited” (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 187; see also Baker, 2008, p. 241). Public relations and advocacy are examples of such practices. “A good human being is one who benefits her or himself and others … both qua human being and also characteristically qua the exemplary discharge of particular roles or functions within the context of particular kinds of practice” (MacIntyre, 2002, p. 65, italics added). Persons who represent the embodiment of the virtues are ideal persons (or ideal types), moral exemplars, or moral heroes. “These are role models, who teach us all what it is to be moral by example, not by precept. Their lives inspire us to live better lives, to be better people” (Pojman, 2005, p. 166). This moral exemplar aspect of the virtue perspective can facilitate decision-making, and can be action guiding, in that one might either look to the example of particular role models (whom one knows or knows about) to influence behavior, or one might ask oneself more theoretically what a virtuous person would do in similar circumstances (Hursthouse, 2001, p. 36; Baker, 2008, p. 246). The virtue perspective also is action guiding in that each virtue generates a prescription (such as “do what is honest”) and each vice generates a prohibition (such as “do not do what is dishonest”). Hursthouse calls these rules of virtue ethics “v-rules.” V-rules are virtue-based prescriptions, or vice-based prohibitions (Hursthouse, 2001, pp. 36–37; Baker, 2008, p. 240).

As mentioned above, virtue ethics also is related to the issue of “becoming.” According to MacIntyre, we are the authors of the narratives of our own lives, and the virtues (or vices) are “components of the narrative unity of life” (MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 215, 222–223; see also Baker, 2008, p. 240). Lebacqz proposes that this notion of the coherence of one’s life story is one tool by which virtue ethics provides guidance for action. One would ask oneself if a particular contemplated action fits his or her life story – if it lends integrity to him or her, or rather if it threatens his or her integrity. One might ask, “Which act has the most integrity in terms of the kind of person I want to become?” (Lebacqz, 1985, pp. 85–86, italics added; see also Baker, 2008, p. 240).

The model (Table 11.2) of The Model of The Principled Advocate and The Pathological Partisan: A Virtue Ethics Construct of Opposing Archetypes of Advocates and Advocacy (Baker, 2008, 2009, 2018) is based in the virtue ethics perspective. As discussed above, virtue ethics focuses on the actors (or advocates) themselves, rather than on the acts they perform. It asserts that good people (people who possess the virtues) will do the right thing; and that people who do the right thing will become virtuous. One becomes a virtuous or Principled Advocate by habitually engaging in ethical practices of advocacy. Conversely, one becomes a Pathological Partisan by habitually engaging in unethical practices of advocacy. (For more about this model and for a broader discussion about virtue ethics as applied to advocacy, see Baker, 2018.)

The term “Pathological Partisan” has been adopted from the philosopher Sissela Bok. According to Bok, the virtue of loyalty, taken to an extreme, can become the vice of pathological partisanship. A Pathological Partisan “uses loyalty as a justification to condone abuses in the name of a cause …. [Pathological Partisans] blind themselves to the kind of harm they are doing to those on the outside” of their cause (Bok, 1988; see also Baker, 2008, p. 241, 2009, p. 124, 2018, p. 323).

The Principled Advocate advocates for noble (or morally justifiable) causes with moral virtue, and with principled motives and means. He or she embodies and enacts the virtues of humility, truth, transparency, respect and concern for others, authenticity, equity, and social responsibility.

The Pathological Partisan, by contrast, abandons moral virtues, principles, and values in support of a cause. He or she embodies and enacts the vices of arrogance, deceit, secrecy, manipulation, disregard for others, artifice, injustice, and raw self-interest.

The virtues of truthfulness, authenticity, respect, equity, and social responsibility are familiar from the TARES Test. Their corresponding vices (deceit, artifice, manipulation of others
for one’s own ends, injustice, and raw self-interest) appear in The Principled Advocate vs. The Pathological Partisan model. The additional virtues of humility, concern for others, and transparency (together with their corresponding vices of arrogance, disregard for others, and secrecy/opacity) have been added as a contribution from the virtue ethics perspective.

Humility involves, in part, the recognition that one is fallible and vulnerable (MacIntyre, 2002), and that morality applies to oneself as it does to everyone else (Gert, 1998, p. 306; Baker, 2008, p. 244). Humility’s opposing vice is arrogance, which includes “the view that one is exempt from some or all of the moral requirements to which all other moral agents are subject” (Gert, 1998, p. 306; see also Baker, 2008, p. 238).

The virtue of concern (humane concern or concern for the common good) relates to the notion of mutual dependence (MacIntyre, 2002). Concern for others goes beyond the more rational notion of respecting the rights of others. Concern includes treating people with respect, but is motivated by care for them and their welfare as fellow vulnerable human beings (see related discussions in Slote, 2000, pp. 331–345; Arjoon, 2000, p. 166). Disregard for others is the corresponding vice.

Finally, the virtue of transparency is a key element in the profile of the Principled Advocate. Plaisance (2007) has stated that transparency “is an essential element of credibility” (p. 193). “The virtues of transparency and openness result in practice in substantial completeness in meeting others’ reasonable requirements for information” (Baker, 2008, p. 243). The vice corresponding to transparency is secrecy (or opacity) which would involve, in part, failing to be forthcoming, and hiding or obscuring information that others have a legitimate need to know.

The critical and significant essence of this model is the graphic opposition of the antithetical virtues and vices. However, it should be noted that the model also is constructed such that the Principled Advocate and the Pathological Partisan are conceptual constructs at opposite ends of a scale. In practice, the virtues and vices in the model should be viewed as if on a continuum. “As
a person moves away from one end of the scale, she necessarily moves toward the other" (Gert, 1998, p. 284; see also Baker, 2008, p. 237).

The virtue ethics perspective can be applied in moral reasoning by seeking advice from or following the example of a role model, a moral exemplar, or an admired colleague; by contemplating if a particular course of action would enact particular virtues or vices identified in the model, and if a particular decision would lead one to become more like a Principled Advocate or a Pathological Partisan; or by asking oneself if a particular action would augment or diminish one’s integrity and good reputation.

Gardner et al. (2001) invoke virtue ethics themes in their book Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet. Among the concerns that sparked their interest in studying good work was “the loss of powerful ‘heroic’ role models that inspire the younger members of a profession …” (p. xi, italics added). They define good work as “work of expert quality that benefits the broader society” or is “socially responsible” (Gardner et al., 2001, p. xi). They write that a central element of identity is moral, and that people must determine for themselves “what lines they will not cross and why they will not cross them” (Gardner et al., 2001, p. 11). They propose that we experience work as “good” when it is “something that allows the full expression of what is best in us …” (p. 5, italics added). Doing good work “feels good” for those individuals who are “wholly engaged in activities that exhibit the highest sense of responsibility” (Gardner et al., 2001, p. 5). Doing good work creates “a holistic sense of identity: a person’s deeply felt convictions about who she is, and what matters most to her existence as a worker, a citizen, and a human being” (Gardner et al., p. 11) (see also Plaisance, 2014, about moral exemplars or heroic role models in public relations).

THE MORAL PERSPECTIVE

The models presented above are designed to assist practitioners of advocacy to arrive at decisions about morally appropriate and justifiable courses of action. Sometimes, however, knowing what one should do does not always determine what one actually does.

James Rest (1994) has proposed a theory of the determinants of moral behavior. He writes that there are four psychological components that must be in place for people to behave ethically:

1. Moral Sensitivity (awareness of possible lines of action, and of how our actions might affect other people);
2. Moral Judgment (the ability to use moral reasoning to determine what behaviors are morally justifiable);
3. Moral Motivation (the desire to prioritize moral values over competing values); and
4. Moral Character (having the courage and ego strength to do the right thing, despite the costs and difficulties in doing so).


All four psychological components are necessary for moral behavior to occur, and “moral failure can occur because of deficiency in any [one] component” (Rest, 1994, p. 24). One must have enough moral sensitivity to recognize an ethical issue when it presents itself (such as a situation or communication that could cause harm to others). One must have also the moral judgment or moral reasoning skills to be able decide the right thing to do. Further, one must have the motivation to prioritize and act on moral values, even when those values come into conflict with other cherished values and priorities (such as economic gain or career success). Even when moral sensitivity, moral judgment and the desire to prioritize moral values are in place, one must also have enough “ego strength, perseverance, backbone, toughness, strength of conviction, and courage” under pressure to do the right thing (Rest, 1994, p. 24).
Kidder (1995) has written that “standing up for values is the defining feature of moral courage” (p. 3, italics added). It is moral courage that “lifts values from the theoretical to the practical and carries us beyond ethical reasoning into principled action” (p. 3).

The models for systematic moral reasoning discussed in this chapter relate primarily to Rest’s Moral Judgment element (no. 2) in that they provide tools by which to determine what behaviors are morally justifiable in the practices of public relations. Nevertheless, a deep understanding of the underlying philosophical assumptions of the models also should contribute to the other three elements by augmenting sensitivity to moral issues in advocacy, increasing the desire to prioritize moral values over other conflicting values, and strengthening the practitioner’s courage to do the right thing.

Rest’s “moral sensitivity” component is related to the concept of “the moral point of view” (Pojman, 2005, p. 34) or moral perspective. Moral perspective involves, in part, the recognition that one’s actions have consequences for others as well as for oneself. It involves the process of considering and caring about the ramifications of one’s actions for others. Bok (1999) refers repeatedly to this perspective when she asks her readers to broaden their view about deception. She writes that liars often deceive to achieve some advantage for self, with insufficient consideration for the harms that result from those deceptions to those lied to (the dupes). Often, liars deceive to gain power over others; to help themselves achieve their objectives by diminishing the knowledge and power of the dupes in the situation.

Power is an important concept for advocates and public relations practitioners to consider. Communicators are powerful. The information they disseminate (or withhold) has the power to inform (or misinform) individuals and the public, to shape their assumptions about truth and reality, and to influence their decision-making, spending, attitudes, votes, choices, behaviors, and lifestyles. Like deception, the vices of arrogance, unwarranted secrecy, manipulation, disregard for others, artifice, injustice and raw self-interest all operate in one way or another to assist the Pathological Partisan to withhold power from others, and to garner it for themselves or their clients.

John Rawls’s (1971) Veil of Ignorance exercise provides a useful conceptual tool by which to help facilitate the moral perspective. In this exercise, when a decision is to be made, one imagines everyone who will be affected by the decision to be standing behind a veil of ignorance, in an “original position” where everyone is equal in value, humanity, and power. Behind the veil, “no one knows his situation in society, nor his natural assets, and therefore no one is in a position to tailor principles to his advantage” (Rawls, 1971, p. 139). The objective is to make a decision that will be fair to all stakeholders when they step out from behind the veil and assume their identities in society. The process of decision-making from a position behind the veil thus “represents a genuine reconciliation of interests” (Rawls, 1971, p. 142). One result of the perspective-taking or “reflective equilibrium” provided by the deliberative veil of ignorance process is that “weaker parties will be protected” (Patterson and Wilkins, 2005, p. 143). The ethical perspective gained from behind the veil would discourage practices of advocacy that are designed to take unfair advantage of parties who are in weaker positions than advocates for a variety of reasons, including a lack of necessary and truthful information.

CONCLUSION

Moral perspective is perhaps most easily accomplished by applying the time-honored test of reversibility (or the Golden Rule) (Edgett, 2002, p. 17); to look to our own experience, and to ask ourselves how we want to be treated on the receiving end of advocacy. (I quote (or paraphrase)
directly and at length in this paragraph and the next from my chapter on “Principled Advocacy,” Baker, 2018, pp. 320–322.) Most probably would agree that we do not want advocates to treat us with disrespect or disregard in the process of persuading us. We do not want to be lied to, or to have information withheld from us that we genuinely need to inform our correct understanding of the truth, and by which to make important decisions about our lives. We do not want advocates to persuade us to actions, viewpoints, or proposals in which they themselves do not genuinely believe – that they would not sincerely recommend to their own family or friends. We do not want advocates to deliver persuasive messages that are untrue, unfair, or misleading in their content, or unfair in the methods by which they are delivered. We do not want advocates’ loyalties to their particular favorite causes, or to their desires to achieve particular outcomes, to be considered a justification for using artifice to manipulate us – our thoughts, decisions, and actions. We do not want to be influenced, personally or collectively, by advocates who act only in their own raw self-interest, who fail to consider the legitimate needs of ourselves and others, and who exempt themselves from moral responsibility to the common good, and to the betterment of society.

These are the vices of advocacy. Virtuous behaviors in advocacy would be the converse. We might ask ourselves, based upon our own experience, how we want to be treated when we are on the receiving end of advocacy. Most would probably agree that we want advocates to treat us with respect in the process of their efforts to persuade us. We want them to provide truthful information, and to be open and transparent in providing the information we reasonably need, and in identifying the sources and sponsors of their advocacy messages. We want them to deliver to us persuasive messages that are fair, just, and equitable in content and in the methods by which they are delivered. We want them to attempt to persuade us only to actions, viewpoints, or proposals in which they themselves genuinely believe – that they would sincerely recommend to their own family or friends. We want them to be principled advocates – to care about us to the extent that they recognize their basic moral responsibilities to us, to others, and to the common good, and to recognize and respond to our rights to self-determination free of manipulation (Baker, 2018, pp. 320–322).

This recognition of the rights and needs of others is the essence of the moral perspective, and it should propel the practitioner toward what Roy Peter Clark of the Poynter Institute has called the “green light” (versus the “red light”) view of ethics. Red light ethics proscribe. They focus on restraint, suggesting what one ought not to do. Green light ethics, by contrast, prescribe. They mobilize creative energies and resources; they focus on mission and results, power and duty – on what one ought to do. Red light ethics constrain; green light ethics empower (Black and Steele, 1991, p. 9).

By providing a variety of ethical considerations, as well as practical tools for deliberation in moral reasoning in the practices of advocacy, this chapter’s discussion is intended to empower public relations advocates, and to assure them that they are on solid ethical ground when these perspectives and decision-making methods have been implemented.

REFERENCES


11. THE ETHICS OF ADVOCACY


