THE CONCEPT OF APPROPRIATENESS: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN PERSUASIVE ARGUMENT

By

GERMAIN G. GRISEZ

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Certain ethical considerations are relevant to argumentation in general, whether the objective be persuasion or not. In general, it surely is immoral knowingly to ground argumentation on purported evidence or reasons which are unsound, or to pretend that the basis of one's argument is more secure than one sincerely believes it to be. The immorality in these cases is that of simple deception. Both the degree of maliciousness and the possibilities for exceptions to the general prohibition must be evaluated in the same way that all lying and deception are judged.

Moreover, it surely is immoral knowingly to use sophistic arguments. The assumptions of such arguments can be sound, but the procedure itself is defective. Since the ordinary person is much less observant of the claims of logic than he is of the claims of truth, the sophist is more subtle and effective than the outright liar.

Advertising, which has been prevented by public authority from making false statements, nevertheless efficiently deceives with sophistic arguments, especially with unsound generalizations and analogies. The undoubtedly well certified fact that a certain antiseptic kills bacteria at a wonderful rate under test conditions does not prove its utility for inhibiting disease causing viruses in the human throat under normal conditions of use. The invisible plate glass shield which protects an announcer against a missile has little to do with the problem of dental hygiene.

The immorality of sophistic arguments includes that of deception, but it includes the additional immorality of miseducation. A public habituated to accept the sophistries of toothpaste and antiseptic advertising is poorly trained to detect the sophistries in arguments of extremist political movements, when, for example, they present total victory or abject surrender as the only alternatives before us in the face of Communism.

But besides deception and sophistry, which can pervert every kind of argument, there are certain special ethical considerations relevant to persuasive argumentation, the traditional province of rhetoric. Persuasive argumentation is distinguished from argument in general by the fact that it aims not merely at judgment, but at value judgment—decision—and ultimately at full commitment and action. Persuasion is a key instrument in the dynamics of human life in community.

Because persuasive argumentation aims at choice and action, its premises ultimately must appeal to goods that are more or less urgently the objects of interests already present in the audience, either as a result of previous choice or owing to nature. If the premises of argument make no appeal to motivations al-

Germain G. Grisez (Ph.D., University of Chicago, 1959) is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown University. Much of the ethical theory suggested in this article is developed at much greater length in his book, Contraception and the Natural Law *(Milwaukee, 1964), and in a forthcoming article that will appear in the* Natural Law Forum *for 1965 under the title, "The First Principle of Practical Reason."*

ready vitally active in the audience, then the argument will not be able to move the audience and it will fail to be persuasive.

Now, this aspect of persuasive argument—that it appeals either to espoused values or to inescapable motives—opens it to special abuses. Obviously, it is possible to appeal to base motives, as does the politician who plays upon racial hatred by promising "to keep the Nigger in his place." From an ethical point of view, any such appeal to base motives must be condemned, because action arising from them will be vitiated by that very fact, and because the appeal to such motives only tends to extend their influence and to intensify their force.

Persuasive arguments also may deserve ethical censure if it addresses itself not to the rational mind but to preconscious or unconscious motivations. An interesting study of this question is Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*. His chief ethical stricture upon the techniques he describes is that they constitute the manipulation of the hearer by methods that invade the privacy of his psyche, circumventing his ability to freely decide the extent to which he wants to direct himself rationally.

But besides base motives and irrational motives, there also are incidental and non-specific motives. And my main point in this paper is that persuasive arguments which appeal exclusively or primarily to incidental or general motives deserve ethical condemnation. However, this way of abusing argument is subtle, and the maliciousness involved in it is far less obvious than is the evil of other perversions of argument.

We may consider, for example, the arguments often used to persuade students to remain in high school or to enter college. One argument is that education is useful, because the greater income of the more highly educated person during his working years compensates well for his investment of time and money in further education. Now this argument is factually sound and it need not be formulated in a sophistical way. Moreover, the motives to which it appeals are neither base nor non-rational. Still, the peculiar value inherent in education is not its instrumental function in improving one's financial position in later life.

John Dewey, among others, pointed out very clearly how genuine education is hindered by being reduced to the status of a mere means or pure instrument to future success. Unless the student finds his satisfaction and enjoyment in the work he is doing, unless he experiences the attraction of its inherent value and finds a fulfillment of himself through its peculiar qualities, he will not truly learn, truly grow, and truly achieve maturity.

Another argument for education is that it provides opportunities for social life. Again, this argument can be sound both in its premises and in its process, and the motivation is neither inherently base nor non-rational. But opportunities for social life are present in many other situations, and colleges have goods to achieve that are more appropriate to themselves.

It might be thought that such appeals to general motives and consequences are wrong only in some cases. We cannot be sure that they always are malicious unless we can see the reason for their being so. Can we say why it should be wrong to appeal to general or incidental motives rather than to the peculiar and specific values inherent in that toward which persuasion is attempted?

There are several approaches we might try to provide the required explanation. Here I wish to suggest three possibilities for tentative consideration and possible development.

In the first place, as is evident in the examples of arguments for further edu-

cation; persuasion which aims solely or primarily at general or incidental motives tends to distract attention from actual, present, inherent values. The result is a progressive desensitization which tends to render those constantly subjected to such arguments inattentive and unreceptive to available goods and present opportunities. Life becomes thin and empty as the wonderful variety and rich concreteness of appropriate values are ignored due to fascination with a few general, conventionalized goods—such as status, security, and pleasant living—always expected beyond the horizon of current experience.

A striking and extreme example of this way of spoiling life is the sort of religious teaching that regards all man's life in this world as a mere period of testing, valueless in itself, endowed with extrinsic worth only because it is possibly productive of a reward—or preservative against a punishment—in a future life. Contemporary atheistic humanisms, whether Dewey's instrumentalism, Sartre's existentialism, Nietzsche's vitalism, or Marx's dialectical materialism, all agree in their sound reaction against such fanaticism of the supernatural. Where they are perhaps mistaken is in not considering whether religion, including even orthodox Christianity with its transcendent God and its expectation of life in the world to come, may not be compatible with a truly human appreciation of the natural values of this life and the importance of its achievements.

In the second place, an appeal to values that are not specific and peculiar to the matter under consideration seems to reveal an attitude of contempt for the dignity and rationality of one's audience. Why should such an appeal be used as the sole or primary source of argument? The obvious answer is that obtaining the decision and action desired by the persuader is his first concern. He appeals either solely or primarily to general or incidental motives when such appeals prove to be effective or are thought to be so. The end, in short, is considered sufficient justification for the means.

Whether such arguments really are as effective as they seem to be is an interesting question in its own right. David Ogilvy, in his *Confessions of an Advertising Man,* suggests that long, descriptive copy filled with detailed facts and specific comparisons is more effective than vague arguments derived from general or incidental motives. Certainly, sounder and more appropriate motivation seems a more prudent policy when long-term persuasion and cooperation are sought.

However, my present concern is not to show that appropriate values may be effective motives, but to notice that arguments appealing to such specific and peculiar motives arising from the very objective of action itself tend to enhance freedom. And the dignity of one's hearers seems better respected if their freedom is enhanced rather than if their less self-determined and less reflective action simply is elicited as efficiently as possible.

The statesman who argues the issues offers a more human form of cooperation to the citizens of a democracy than does the politician who manipulates them by appeals to slogans of peace and prosperity or national interest and states' rights. The statesman educates while he persuades; the politician moves his audience without increasing its own understanding and rational self-commitment.

Does anyone have the right to persuade another by an appeal to his existing motives merely because such an appeal will elicit voluntary action which the persuader happens to desire for his own reasons? Our culture seems to assume that the answer is—"Yes." Practically all advertising and the greatest

part of public relations are based on this assumption. I think a sounder and more humane ideal of human community would require us to direct all common efforts toward genuine goods which can be shared by both parties.

Perhaps he was hopelessly idealistic, but I think Marx was right in holding that production need not be directed primarily toward profit, in such a way that advertising must create artificial needs in order to stimulate the consumption required to keep the economy solvent. Rather, productive effort could and should be directed primarily toward genuine needs in such a way that advertising could appeal to the inherent values of products, and consumption could remain an economic end. In this case, the freedom of the consumer would not be reduced to the status of a mere means to economic growth.

A third approach to showing why appeals to general or incidental values are malicious requires a consideration of the motivational system of the mature and good man. To develop this consideration fully would involve the work of a complete ethics. However, the following will suggest how one might begin.

A mature and good man cares about a whole spectrum of basic human values. Among these are human life and health; skill and competence of all sorts; the appreciation of beauty; the knowledge of truth; suitable inter-personal relationships, which imply justice and concord; the use of intelligence in the direction of life, which implies freedom; and a realistic relationship to the fundamental principles of reality. All together these basic values provide the points of departure for every possible human achievement and development.

But short of maturity or falling short of goodness, a man may limit himself to some of these values at the expense of others; he may submerge some of them in favor of others. And that is the essence of moral evil. It is partiality and exclusiveness in the face of possible goods; it is the fanaticism of the closed system of values which excludes openness toward the indefinite development of human potentialities.

The general motives to which persuasive argument can so easily appeal are true values. They are *parts* or *aspects* of the basic goods toward which the mature good man directs his concern and his life. But these general motives—such as reassurance, pleasure, success, status, and security—are the subjective or *felt* aspects of all achievement and fulfillment. In the face of difficulty in attaining complete goods, merely felt goods are a tempting alternative. Hence to appeal solely or primarily to them is to encourage the acceptance of the easiest and most readily accessible way of getting them as if it were perfect human fulfillment.

On the contrary, to direct attention to the peculiar and specific good—the appropriate value—inherent in any course of action and its natural, specific consequence is to appeal to whatever basic inclination or motive happens to be served by it. Education, for instance, does tend to serve the development of a whole spectrum of skills, it enhances the appreciation of beauty, and it contributes to knowledge of truth. The moral balance of students and parents is subverted if education is promoted only or mainly for its contributions to success, security, and enjoyment. But if it is made attractive by the power of its appropriate values, the moral balance of those persuaded to pursue education already is rendered more humane.

To conclude this paper, I wish to indicate the relevance of this consideration of the ethical aspects of persuasive argumentation to the proper concerns of

those studying and teaching the art of debate.

When Aristotle planned his *Rhetoric,* he was able to divide all persuasive argument according to the temporal distinction of past, present, and future. In an adversary proceeding a speaker might attempt to win the conviction or acquittal of a defendant by persuading the judges concerning the value of his action *in the past.* In the assembly a speaker might attempt to win approval for a proposal by persuading his fellow citizens of its value *in the future.* And a speaker might honor the worthy by commending their nobility *in the present.*

Since Aristotle's time, new applications of persuasion have developed. Historical study, a process of constant social self-examination, tries to evaluate the past as a basis for approving or condemning present institutions. Deliberation now occurs in all manner of public and private societies and committees. Moreover, a great deal of persuasion is directed toward deliberation with regard to private actions which affect others—e.g., advertising directed toward buying which affects profit. Literary, artistic, and social criticism also contain important elements of persuasive argumentation. At their best, they aim to educate taste and moral sense.

The social sciences themselves, despite their concern to be value-neutral, presuppose a deeper layer of values than those with respect to which they try to be neutral. Much of the work of social scientists consists in their effort to persuade us to form policies and to make social judgments on the basis of the facts which are interpreted and the values which are assumed by social scientists rather than on any less rational basis. Preaching and teaching have as their most basic tasks to persuade congregations and students to make fundamental, personal self-commitments with regard to basic goods.

In short, rhetoric as Aristotle understood it has been divided into many parts. No single professors of the universal art remain to be found. Nevertheless, there are aspirants to this role. The technicians of advertising and public relations, the manipulators of mass audiences, have offered their services—for a price—to all comers, and their offer has won eager acceptance in many domains besides that of commerce. We need only look at recent political campaigns to be appalled by the consequences and frightened for the future.

Those who study and teach the art of debate have a different and more wholesome tradition. The discipline of debate tends to demand attention much more for specific and essential goods—for appropriate values—than to encourage appeals to general and incidental motives. The already close relationship between this field and the study and teaching of literature and criticism suggests that even more fruitful communication across that boundary is possible.

I believe it would be well if those whose concern with rhetoric is academic and educative would make every effort to rehabilitate it as an art subordinate to ethics and as a key discipline in the intellectual communication of normative ethics in the course of liberal education. The program I envisage would include the following points.

First, it is important to extend present investigations of persuasive argument with a view toward further clarifying the motivating values to which various modes of argument appeal. Second, it is desirable to develop and apply a criterion of appropriateness, such as I have sketched out, so that no general or incidental value is permitted to displace the peculiar and specific motive to which a rational appeal should be primarily ad-

dressed. Third, the ties between the study and teaching of rhetoric, on the one hand, and criticism and the social sciences, on the other, must be strengthened at as many points as possible. Fourth, it is important to seek to extend the criteria of good debate to other domains.

Those whose concern with argument is liberally educative should take as their role in the attainment of a more perfect human community the provision of the chief instruments of rational persuasion. Rhetoric should be taught in such a manner that its claim to the powerful and noble role of the universal method of persuasive argument may be more and more realized. This art ought not be permitted to be eclipsed by such less worthy competitors as the techniques of mass manipulation and human engineering.