THE STATE OF THEORY BUILDING IN PUBLIC RELATIONS ETHICS: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN MASS COMMUNICATION

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2006
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My reflective views on ethics began as an undergraduate student at West Point and continued through my work as a master’s candidate in philosophy at Texas A&M University. They were further challenged, defended, and modified as a result of many conversations with both students and fellow faculty at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. While I continue to explore, challenge, and modify my views, I am always grateful to those who have helped me by challenging both established notions and my own, sometimes unconventional, ideas.

I am grateful as well to the many fine graduate faculty in the Department of Public Relations in the College of Journalism and Communication at the University of Florida. They are a fine, reflective, and dedicated lot, all.

Finally, I am thankful to my family: My parents, for encouraging the kind of reflective thinking that leads to an examined life and, perhaps most of all, my wife and daughters. It is they who give meaning to all the things in life that are truly important.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1  INTRODUCTION: WHY ETHICS IS IMPORTANT TO PUBLIC RELATIONS...</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  THE CALL FOR A PUBLIC RELATIONS ETHIC THAT RESTS FIRMLY ON</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHILOSOPHICAL ETHIC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  IS WHAT HAS BEEN DONE SUFFICIENT TO ANSWER THE CALL?.................</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edgett’s Ethical Framework</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baker and Martinson: TARES</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martinson and the Distributive Justice Argument</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitzpatrick and Gauthier’s Professional Responsibility Theory</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habermas, Pearson, and the Dialogic</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowen, Kant, and the Decision-Making Model</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying Two Models: The Enron Scandal</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson’s Dialogical Theory of Public Relations Ethics</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowen’s Ethical Decision-making Model</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Are the Ways Ahead?</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  THE VIRTUES OF VIRTUE ETHICS</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is Virtue Ethics?</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Virtues, Business, and Public Relations</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Might a Virtue-Based Approach Prove Useful for Public Relations?</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Potential Virtues for Public Relations</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtues Applied to Enron</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Public Relations</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-1 Edgett’s Ten Criteria for Ethical Advocacy</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-1</td>
<td>The Branches of Philosophy</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-1</td>
<td>TARES Model</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-2</td>
<td>Normative Model of Ethical Issues Management</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An examination of the current state of theory building in public relations ethics reveals that the quest for a public relations theory of ethics that is solidly grounded in philosophical ethics has not been achieved. Several models and theories are considered and two accounts of public relations ethics are examined in detail: Ron Pearson’s dialogical theory of public relations ethics and Shannon Bowen’s Kantian based deontological model of public relations ethics. Finally, an account of public relations ethics based on an Aristotelian version of virtue ethics is explored. This type of model, I suggest, has great potential to answer the call for a public relations theory of ethics that is squarely grounded in philosophical ethics.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: WHY ETHICS IS IMPORTANT TO PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public relations has been referred to as the “social conscience” of the organizations they represent, even though the degree to which public relations professionals have been able to impact the ethics programs of their organizations remains debatable (Fitzpatrick, 1996). Many seem clear, however, on the need for such impact (Baker & Martinson, 2001; Bivins, 1987; Bowen, 2000; Curtin & Boynton, 2001; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001; Harrison, 2004; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Leeper, 2001; Martinson, 2000; Pearson, 1989a). Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002), for example, acknowledge ethics as the 10th principle of public relations excellence. They note that while personal and professional ethics are of great importance, what may be of greater importance is the role of public relations in the ethical decision-making of an organization. That is, public relations, as the ethical conscience of an organization, must be able to guide and influence the decision-making process of the organization or public relations cannot function as an ethical voice at all. In their own words, “[p]ublic relations is the function that introduces the values and problems of stakeholders into strategic decisions and that introduces a moral element to those decisions” (555). Likewise, Bowen (2000) notes that “[a]s public relations strives for inclusion in the dominant coalition, the study of ethics increases in importance.” (8). Under these conceptions, for public relations to function as public relations ought to function, ethics will be an inherent part of the public relations function.
There are other reasons that ethics is important to public relations. Among them is the necessity of ethics to any account of public relations as a profession (Boltan, 1997; Edgett, 2002; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). That is, for public relations to gain and, or, maintain status as a profession, its ethical bases and practices must be sound. Second, and tangentially related to status as a profession, is the necessity of a solid ethical base for the reputation of public relations practice itself. As Baker and Martinson (2002) note, “[t]hat there is considerable distrust of public relations and public relations practitioners is a reality that even those active in the field must acknowledge” (15). Finally, ethics is important to public relations for a much more fundamental reason, a reason that has to do with the nature of ethics itself: Perhaps most important of all, the best reason for acting ethically may simply be the knowledge that one has acted in a morally appropriate manner, that one has done the right thing, ethically speaking.¹

There seems to be little doubt among public relations scholars and practitioners of the importance of ethics to the profession and to the practice. Just as there is no comprehensive and uncontested account of public relations, however, there is also no unchallenged notion of just what public relations ethics entails or what it is to be ethical in public relations. Grunig, Grunig & Dozier (2002) argue that public relations must build its theories of ethical public relations on established philosophical theories of ethics, though few have risen to this challenge. Two notable exceptions are Shannon Bowen (2000) and Ron Pearson (1989a), each of whom have produced robust normative accounts of a public relations ethic that are grounded in philosophical ethics. Bowen

¹ There is considerable discussion in the philosophical literature concerning the issue: Why be moral? One apparent paradox of morality is that while acting in an ethical manner ought to have some practical value (that is, be good for something), morality itself is often taken to be an intrinsic good, a good in and of itself. See, among others, Pojman (1999) and Smith (1995).
(2000) has developed a deontological theory of ethical decision-making in public relations, one that she argues dovetails nicely with current public relations excellence theory and the two-way symmetrical model. L. Grunig and J. Grunig (2002) note that Bowen has made great progress towards establishing an ethical theory that helps balance conflicting loyalties among publics, the corporation, the public relations profession, and the individual professional while engaging in symmetrical communication.

Eleven years before Bowen (2000) proposed her theory, Pearson (1989a) argued, in his 1989 dissertation entitled “A Theory of Public Relations Ethics,” for a dialogic theory of public relations ethics, one based on the theories of the German communications scholar and philosopher Jürgen Habbermas. Pearson’s theory is a comprehensive normative theory of public relations ethics that incorporates Habbermas’ unique and not uncontroversial view of communication and what Habermas terms the “ideal speech situation” (Habermas, 1984; Johannesen, 1983).

Others have hinted at normative accounts. Edgett (2002), for example, argues that for public relations to be taken seriously as a profession, the profession must rest on a solid ethical foundation, a foundation she thinks is possible by adhering to ten criteria for ethical advocacy. Baker and Martinson (1999; 2002) propose a five-pronged test that defines moral ends, establishes guidelines, and provides action-guiding principles. Martinson himself has offered both that a distributive justice model (Martinson, 1998) might fit the bill as the basis for a public relations ethic and that the answer might be found by an appeal to Aristotelian ethics (Martinson, 2000). Fitzpatrick (2001) has

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2 The test is termed the TARES test, and is discussed in more detail in the next section.
argued for a professional responsibility theory of public relations ethics. It is a thick
soup, indeed.

In what follows, I examine these accounts in terms of their suitability for
answering the call for a public relations ethic that is solidly grounded in philosophical
ethics. Before going there, however, I examine the issue of why we ought to want to
ground a public relations ethic in that manner in the first place. In considering previous
normative accounts, I examine Pearson’s (1989a) and Bowen’s (2000, 2004) models in
detail, looking at both the justification and internal consistency of the models themselves.
The theories and the models associated with them are applied to a specific scenario,
yielding observations of the strengths and weaknesses of each. Finally, in light of all
these observations and analyses, I examine the suitability of virtue ethics to answer the
call for a public relations ethic that is philosophically grounded, briefly outline what an
applied ethics of virtue might entail, consider the outline in light of the same scenario,
and briefly consider the implications for public relations of such an account.
CHAPTER 2
THE CALL FOR A PUBLIC RELATIONS ETHIC THAT RESTS FIRMLY ON PHILOSOPHICAL ETHIC

The central goal of this project is to examine the state of theory-building in public relations ethics, specifically whether there exists a public relations ethic that is grounded firmly in a philosophical ethic. One might reasonably ask just what constitutes philosophical grounding for an ethical theory and why such a grounding is a desirable thing for a public relations ethic. This section attempts to answer those questions, both because they are important to the task at hand and because answering them will provide one measure against which to gauge the suitability of different accounts of public relations ethics.

Ethics is most formally the reflective or philosophical study of morality (Feezell, 1991; Pojman, Ethics: Discovering right and wrong, 1999). It is a sub-branch of philosophy that is concerned with the nature of goodness and the study of right action, taking as its substantive questions both what ends we, as rational beings, ought to choose, and what moral principles should guide us in pursuing those choices (Deigh, 1997). It is a rich, full, and complex area of philosophy and it is not the purpose of this paper to give a detailed account of it or to consider in any specific manner its fundamental issues. It is important, however, to note that I use the term ethics in its philosophical sense, and that I use the terms moral and ethical interchangeably, as is one convention in philosophical
ethics (Pojman 1999, Harris 1992). It is also important, while avoiding any particularly complex explanations, to offer a general account of just what philosophical ethics entails.

Philosophical ethics is a sub-branch of the major branch of philosophy called axiology, or the study of worth or value.\(^1\) Within the discipline of ethics, there are generally recognized three areas: normative ethics, meta-ethics, and applied ethics (Darwall, 1998; Harris, 1992). Figure 2-1 below depicts these relationships. Normative ethics is primarily concerned with the issues of how we, as rational beings, ought to act. As such, it considers questions such as the nature of the good, providing answers justified by reason and rationality and resulting in normative ethical theories that provide guidance on both the ways in which we ought to live (if we want to be ethical) as well as the way to go about living in this ethical manner. Figure 1 shows the relationship of these three disciplines to the branches of philosophy. Normative ethics will be discussed in more detail below.

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\(^1\) The other sub-branch under axiology is aesthetics, or the study of beauty and artistic worth.
Meta-ethics is a field that is concerned with the nature of ethical claims. When I make a moral claim, for example, that murder is wrong, just what kind of a statement am I making? Is it a factual claim, describing some true state about the world? An emotive claim, simply expressing a particular subjective emotion (i.e., “Murder makes me feel bad;” or, “Murder: Boo!”)? Or, perhaps, some other kind of claim? Meta-ethicists consider these questions as well as questions such as whether or not there can be any objective or absolute ethical values and what it means to say that something is good (in the moral sense).

The third area, applied ethics, considers the rightness or wrongness of a particular action, such as abortion, or a particular area, such as medicine, the environment, or warfare, in light of particular normative ethical theories. Examples of applied ethics include business ethics and medical ethics. A public relations ethic, then, is a kind of applied ethics based (presumably) on some normative ethical theory.

Normative ethical theories are generally categorized by three different labels: Deontological, teleological, and virtue-based (Barcalow, 1998; Harris, 1992; Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering right and wrong*, 1999). Deontological (from the Greek Deon, roughly “obligation”) ethics describe a category of normative ethical theories that hold that right actions are those that are performed in accordance with one’s duty (to oneself, someone else, or some other entity, such as a god). Examples of theories in this category include Kantian ethics (named after the German philosopher Immanuel Kant) and religious ethics such as divine command theory.

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2 Ethical relativism, even when formulated under the guise of “normative ethical relativism,” is actually a meta-ethical issue, taking as its central tenet that there can be no universal, objective ethical principles.
Consequentialist describes a category of normative ethical theories that maintain that right action is determined by appealing to the results that such an action is likely to bring about. The most popular among consequentialist theories is utilitarianism, a normative ethical theory that generally holds that the right action is the one that is likely to bring the greatest happiness to the greatest number affected by that action. Egoism is another example of a consequentialist normative ethical theory, one that holds that right action consists in maximizing happiness for the agent performing the action.

The third category, virtue ethics, describes a category of ethical theories that take as a primary concern not so much what actions an agent should perform but what kind of person that agent should be. Said another way, while deontological and consequentialist theories are concerned with what to do, virtue ethics is concerned with what one should be. Specifically, one ought to strive to be an excellent person. Just what constitutes an excellent person and how one should go about becoming one is the specific subject matter of virtue ethics.

These three categories, then, constitute three different kinds of normative ethical theories. Why would we want a particular public relations ethic grounded in one of these kinds of theories? The question is important one, though one seldom posed. Grunig, Grunig & Dozier (2002), for example, argue that public relations must build its theories of ethical public relations on established philosophical theories of ethics, adding that this is “something rarely done in the literature on public relations ethics” (555). They fail, however, to explain the justification for such a demand. In the same manner, Bowen (2000) presents her theory of ethical issues management, grounded in philosophical ethics, but never explains why grounding a theory of public relations ethics in this way is
desirable. Others have remained largely silent on this issue as well, with public relations textbooks often explaining ethics by appeal to normative philosophical theory but not explaining the rationale for such an appeal. The question remains, then, why we would want to ground a theory of public relations ethics in philosophical theory in the first place.

The answers are both broad and nuanced. First and foremost, as mentioned above, the reflective consideration of morality has been in the realm of philosophy for some time, yielding a both rich tradition of works and a long history of development and introspection. The critical introspection of philosophy is fueled by a standard of evaluation based on reason and rationality. That is, philosophical theories that tend to stand the scrutiny of reason, that do not run contrary to our established and most deep-seated notions of reason and rationality, will be, ipso facto, better than theories that do not stand as well under such scrutiny. Established philosophical theories of normative ethics fall exactly into this category of theories that have, to varying degrees, withstood this type of scrutiny and emerged as a better, rather than worse, theory.

Even so, public relations could—and has to some degree, as discussed in the next section—develop its own theories of applied ethics without appealing to or relying on philosophy. Somewhat ironically, depending on how fully and intricately such theories

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3 Logic, or the study of the art of reasoning, is one of the four main branches of philosophy, as noted earlier. While it is beyond the scope of this work to give an account of logic or critical reasoning, it is worth noting that all of academia, science, and indeed our daily lives rely on notions of reason, notions that the branch of philosophy takes as its primary function to identify, justify, and explain. Chief among these is what Aristotle called the “First Principle,” or the principle of non-contradiction. The principle roughly states that a thing cannot be what it is and not what it is at the same time. Or, a thing cannot be both “A” and “not-A” at the same time.

4 Harris (1992) suggests four criteria for evaluating a moral theory: consistency; justification; plausibility; and usefulness (pp. 63-65). While I do not apply these criteria in a rote manner to the theories considered here, the criteria are by no means unique to Harris, and all of them are considered implicitly in evaluating the applied ethical theories that follow.
are developed, however, they may turn out to be philosophical nonetheless. That is, theories of applied ethics that provide a justification for acting in a particular way just are philosophical in nature. As Darwall (1998) points out, ethical propositions concern justification, “and whether a thing is justified depends on whether it is supported by reasons” (p. 7). Theories that offer reasons in this way inherently deal with the fundamental question of ethics: What is the nature of the good and in what ways ought we to pursue that good? Ethical theories that do not provide such justification, while they may be internally consistent, will be inherently void (from an ethical standpoint) of compelling reasons for accepting that particular theory in itself and will certainly be lacking a compelling reason to accept that theory over another that does offer good reasons. That is, for any theory of applied ethics that does not ultimately appeal to a larger sense of the nature of goodness, its acceptance will be arbitrary, at least to some degree, and it is better to accept a theory for a good reason rather than for no reason at all.

Codes of conduct, for example, provide normative guidance in the way one ought to act but do not generally provide any justification or account of the nature of goodness. As such, they provide no philosophical reasons for accepting those particular tenets over some other set of tenets. The Nazis had codes of conduct and ethics, though one would be hard pressed to offer a coherent philosophical ethical grounding for such codes.

While practical reasons might exist for accepting such codes or similar theories, such as “theory X will improve our reputation” or “we are likely to be more successful in our pursuits by accepting theory Y,” accepting these practical reasons as justification inherently moves the theory from the realm of normative or applied ethics to the realm of the simply pragmatic. There may be compelling reasons to follow the rules of etiquette,
but that does not mean that the rules of etiquette are rules that are ethical in nature.\(^5\) Put another way, applied theories of ethics that rely solely on such justifications (either overtly or by omission) have only those justifications to rely on as an account of the nature of goodness. What will be considered ethical under such accounts will simply be what makes us “more successful in our pursuits” or “whatever improves our reputation.” To offer compelling reasons, based on rationality and reason, of why and how things are (or ought to be) they way the argument proposes is what distinguishes better theories from worse ones. In the realm of ethics this includes offering (or relying on) an account of the nature of the good to ground one’s ethical theory.

Grounding a theory of public relations ethics in a philosophical theory of ethics will inherently provide some sort of grounding, most usually against the backdrop of the rich tradition of philosophy itself and of philosophical ethics in particular. For a theory of applied ethics, in particular, it will provide grounding in the form of a normative ethical theory that has already provided some compelling answer to the questions of why we should act in that particular way. Ethical theories that do not have such a grounding are subject to being labeled arbitrary, or worse, inconsistent. As Bivins (1987) points out, “[i]t is clear that codes alone are not enough. Unless all practitioners, professional and nonprofessional alike, undertake to measure their actions against the various theories of moral philosophy, these actions will continue to be formulated haphazardly with little or no consideration for moral content” (200). If we want a theory of public relations ethics that is much less likely to be arbitrary or inconsistent (and we ought to want that, for

\(^5\) There are interesting discussions in philosophy regarding what makes an ethical issue an ethical issue (and not simply a matter of etiquette, law, or social custom). See, among other, Pojman (1999) and Darwall (1998).
obvious reasons), then seeking a theory that is grounded in philosophical ethics seems like the best place to seek one.

Public relations theorists themselves often seem reluctant to embrace the normative (Bivins, 1987; Bowen, 2004; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002), but seeking a philosophical grounding for an ethical model for public relations will, by its very nature, involve embracing the normative quality of philosophical ethics and the overriding nature of ethical considerations. If we are not willing to venture there, then perhaps we should begin to seek a different discipline within which to ground our ethical theory, though I do not know what that discipline would be. For now, however, the next section examines several accounts of public relations ethics in terms of their suitability in answering the call for a public relations ethic that is grounded solidly in philosophical ethics.
CHAPTER 3
IS WHAT HAS BEEN DONE SUFFICIENT TO ANSWER THE CALL?

In this section I examine several accounts of public relations ethics and evaluate their suitability in answering the call for a public relations ethic that is grounded solidly in philosophical ethics. Specifically, I examine:

- Edgett’s Ethical Framework
- Baker and Martinson: TARES
- Martinson and the Distributive Justice Argument
- Fitzpatrick and Professional Responsibility
- Habermas, Pearson, and the Dialogic
- Bowen, Kant, and the Decision-Making Model

I then apply the two models that have fared particularly well in this evaluation to a specific scenario in order to see what else may be revealed in terms of their suitability.

To begin, then, is Edgett’s (2002) suggestion for an ethical framework for advocacy in public relations.

**Edgett’s Ethical Framework**

Edgett (2002) argues that it is possible to build a solid ethical foundation for public relations that embraces its advocacy role, a foundation that rests upon ten criteria she proposes. The argument, in essence, is this:

1. For public relations to advance as a profession, the profession must rest on a solid ethical foundation.
2. Advocacy is a central function of public relations, though many practitioners are not comfortable with that role.
2.1. As a necessary condition, then, to embracing a solid ethical foundation, the profession must reconcile its role as facilitator for social communication with its advocacy role.
2.2. The profession has not reconciled its roles.
   2.2.1. There is discomfort arising from the notion that objectivity is distinct from and morally superior to persuasiveness.
   2.2.2. This notion is mistaken.
3. The salient characteristic of advocacy with respect to ethics is persuasion.
4. It is possible to practice persuasion, and therefore advocacy, in an ethical manner.
5. Therefore, it is possible to build a solid ethical foundation for public relations that embraces its advocacy role – Edgett’s ten criteria.

Those ten criteria are depicted in Table 3-1 below.

Table 3-1: Edgett’s Ten Criteria for Ethical Advocacy

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<th>Ethically Desirable Criterion</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<td>1. Evaluation</td>
<td>Detached or objective evaluation of the issue–client–organization before determining whether it merits public relations advocacy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Priority</td>
<td>Once the public relations practitioner has assumed the role of advocate, the interests of the client or organization are valued above those of others involved in the public debate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Sensitivity</td>
<td>Balancing of client priority on the one hand with social responsibility on the other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Confidentiality</td>
<td>Protection of the client’s or organization’s rights to confidentiality and secrecy on matters for which secrets are morally justified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Veracity</td>
<td>Full truthfulness in all matters; deception or evasion can be considered morally acceptable only under exceptional circumstances when all truthful possibilities have been ruled out; this implies trustworthiness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Reversibility</td>
<td>If the situation were reversed, the advocate–client–organization would be satisfied that it had sufficient information to make an informed decision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Validity</td>
<td>All communications on behalf of the client or organization are defensible against attacks on their validity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Visibility</td>
<td>Clear identification of all communications on behalf of the client or organization as originating from that source.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Respect</td>
<td>Regard for audiences as autonomous individuals with rights to make informed choices and to have informed participation in decisions that affect them; willingness to promote dialogue over monologue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Consent</td>
<td>Communication on behalf of the client or organization is carried out only under conditions to which it can be assumed all parties consent.</td>
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Adapted from Edgett (2002, p. 22)
Edgett (2002) points out that “although [her] framework is consistent with codes of professional practice, it attempts to go a step further by providing some philosophical basis for determining the rightness or wrongness of actions” (23). In providing some explanation of that philosophical basis, Edgett (2002) cites religion, Kantian ethics, and Habermas, as well as a host of communication and public relations scholars. She concludes that the research “has been sufficient to answer two basic questions in the affirmative: a) whether persuasion is a legitimate public relations function, and b) whether it can be performed to high ethical standards” (23).

Edgett (2002) presents an insightful and well-researched argument and it is not the purpose of this work to evaluate her conclusions. It seems clear, however, that the work does not answer the call for a public relations ethic that rests solidly on philosophical grounds. This is so for several reasons. First, the argument is concerned solely with public relations as advocacy, so that if one does not accept the notion that the primary role of public relations is that of advocacy, one cannot accept the conclusions of the argument. Second, and more importantly, even if one were willing to accept the notion that public relations is primarily a function of advocacy, Edgett has not presented us a philosophical basis for a public relations theory of ethics (nor was this her intention). What she has presented are some philosophical justifications for some of the criteria that constitute her framework. Further, she has presented several different and sometimes mutually exclusive theories as philosophical support. While she has shown that, at any particular point, one or several of the criteria may enjoy some level of philosophical justification, the framework, as she has it, does not rest upon any single philosophically justifiable ethical foundation. Indeed, it seems to rest on several conflicting
justifications, all of which cannot be true at the same time. Finally, as Edgett points out, the framework is not meant to be a normative theory of public relations ethics in the first place but rather a framework that, if followed, would lead to more ethical practices, much like a code of conduct or a code of ethics.

**Baker and Martinson: TARES**

Baker and Martinson (2001; 2002) propose a five-pronged test that defines the moral end of persuasion in public relations, establishes guidelines, and provides action-guiding principles. The argument is that a moral framework of persuasive ends can help dispel the illusion of public relations as morally inferior to other mass communication endeavors. In one form (Baker and Martinson, 2001), the argument looks like this:

1. Most of the ethical issues of persuasion with regard to advertising and public relations are either focused on the means employed or confuse the means with ends.
2. This leads to the illusion that public relations and advertising are morally inferior to other mass communication endeavors (such as journalism).
   2.1 If this continues, public relations and advertising will likely continue to have an increasingly dysfunctional role in communications.
   2.2 This misconception should not continue.
3. A moral framework of persuasive ends can help relieve the confusion and dispel the illusion.
4. The TARES test provides this framework.
   4.1 Defines the moral end of persuasion
   4.2 Establishes guidelines for persuasive practice
   4.3 Provides action-guiding principles

The TARES Test, further, is depicted below in Figure 3-1.
Taken together, the five principles of the TARES Test provide a framework of persuasive ends to ensure that the end sought in a persuasive act is a moral one. Taking into account a wide swath of ethical considerations, the test allows for a reflective consideration of the ethical implications of the ends one seeks and steers one towards what Baker and Martinson (2001) call legitimate and moral ends, noting that while “professional persuasion is a means to an immediate instrumental end (such as increased sales or enhanced corporate image), ethical persuasion must rest on or serve a deeper, morally based final (or relative last) end” (172).

Though Baker and Martinson (2001; 2002) appeal to such ethical notions as respect, genuineness of intent, truthfulness, and the common good, in the end the TARES test is not (nor is it intended to be) a normative account of public relations ethics. It serves, once again, as a framework or set of guidelines, the following of which is likely to place one in a better, rather than worse, moral position. There is no accounting of why these particular values and not others are morally superior, and thus, as discussed previously, the ethical model is not itself philosophically grounded. TARES too, for all
its utility, will not answer the call for a public relations ethic that is solidly grounded in philosophical ethics.

**Martinson and the Distributive Justice Argument**

Distributive justice is a concept that concerns itself with the fairness of the distribution of resources within a society (Rawls, 1978). Martinson (1998) uses this concept, and in particular the Rawlsian version of it (from political philosopher John Rawls’ defining work *A Theory of Justice* (1971)), to frame the issue of public relations practitioners justifying their actions by appealing to the notion of the marketplace of ideas. The marketplace of ideas concept generally holds that free expression is justified through analogy to the economic marketplace. In the competition of ideas, the better ideas (or truth) will eventually prevail over the less good (or false) ideas.

While the idea of distributive justice is not formally a normative ethical theory, it inherently appeals to the idea of justice (or, in Rawls case, justice as fairness), a concept Aristotle held to be the greatest moral good (Aristotle, [c. 340 BCE] 1984). Justice is linked to ethical conduct in the sense that justice is the greatest good, the good toward which all other goods strive, and it is in this context that Martinson (1998) can be seen to be making an ethical argument.

By making an appeal to a Rawlsian account of distributive social justice, Martinson (1998) makes the point that those who would justify particular actions in public relations by appealing to the marketplace of ideas concept incur themselves additional moral obligations in terms of distributive social justice. In particular, even those who sincerely believe in the marketplace of ideas and appeal to the notion in order to morally justify advocacy for a particular client are required to consider not only the narrow view that, in the marketplace of ideas, truth will eventually reign supreme, but also to consider
whether participation in such an endeavor is conducive to bringing about a general situation in which all citizens have a reasonable chance of having their views heard and perhaps acted upon. As Martinson (1998) puts it, “[t]he question is whether, in contemporary America, an adherence to a narrow individualist marketplace model—within a functional public relations context—demonstrates a level of respect for the distributive and social justice rights to which all members of society are entitled” (150). A strict adherence to the advocacy model of public relations is simply not morally justified by an appeal to the marketplace of ideas, he suggests.

Martinson (1998) tackles some complicated material and his account is considered here not so much as a normative model of ethics for public relations itself but rather as an example of an ethical appeal within public relations that is grounded in a normative account of what the “good” is, in this case in the Rawlsian notion of justice as fairness. In the end, however, Martinson’s (1998) argument, while important in itself, does not quality as an action-guiding normative account of public relations ethics, though he has certainly pointed the way for further exploration. The account is philosophically grounded in an account of the good (justice as fairness); what is needed is a further explication of the ways in which that grounding translates into guidance in terms of a public relations ethic.

**Fitzpatrick and Gauthier’s Professional Responsibility Theory**

In what is both a selectively comprehensive accounting of public relations theories of ethics and a proposal for a normative theory of public relations itself, Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) argue the merits of what they call a “professional responsibility theory of public relations ethics.” After first surveying several categories of normative justifications of public relations ethics (including enlightened self-interest, social
responsibility, advocacy, and two-way symmetry) and finding them lacking, the authors go on to suggest three principles that could provide a basis for a professional responsibility theory of public relations ethics. Ironically, these three separate principles seem to clearly derive from: 1) some form of utilitarianism; 2) Kant’s ([1758] 1956) second formulation of the categorical imperative; 3) a version of distributive justice that is not unlike that of Rawls’ notion of “justice as fairness” mentioned above. In the authors’ own words (Fitzpatrick and Gauthier, 2001, p. 207):

Three principles that could provide the foundation for a theory of professional responsibility in public relations are:

1. The comparison of harms and benefits: Harms should be avoided or, at least, minimized, and benefits promoted at the least possible cost in terms of harms.

2. Respect for Persons: Persons should be treated with respect and dignity.

3. Distributive Justice: The benefits and burdens of any action or policy should be distributed as fairly as possible.

While borrowing principles from such divergent accounts may help to capture more of the nuances of our commonsense notions of what is morally right while avoiding some of the deficiencies of a particular ethical theory, it is a philosophically unsound method if one is seeking to ground one’s theory solidly in philosophical ethics. Borrowing principles from three distinctly different theories of normative ethics may, as well, be of great practical value in guiding the kind of ethical reflective introspection the authors seem to be seeking from practitioners, though what is missing from this account is how three different philosophical accounts of what the “good” is could ever be reconciled.

Indeed, Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) seem to think, in their own words, that “[t]he ethical principles that form the philosophical foundation for the professional responsibility theory also may provide more concrete guidance than do other approaches
in resolving ethical dilemmas caused by conflicting obligations to a variety of competing interests” (210). It is hard to fathom how this could be so from a standpoint of grounding the ethical principles themselves. And, as we have seen, ethical principles without grounding, or, in this case, with contradictory grounding, are no more philosophically sound than arbitrarily written rules drawn out of a hat. While this professional responsibility theory of public relations ethics may have practical value as noted above, as presented it (or other such normative mish-mashes of theories) cannot provide the solid grounding in moral philosophy that is at issue here.

Habermas, Pearson, and the Dialogic

Jürgen Habermas (1929-present) is a German philosopher, social critic, and communications scholar who has written extensively on many topics. Through the 1970’s and 1980’s he developed a comprehensive theory of “communicative competence” that explains how language, as a uniquely human capacity, functions to foster mutual trust and understanding, shared knowledge, and interpersonal relationship (Habermas, 1984; Johannesen, 1983; Pearson, 1989b). His aim in this regard has been to develop a descriptive social theory that also functions as a normative moral framework, a framework that is both inclusive and non-oppressive.

Habermas identifies four assumptions that underlie all normal human communication. For ordinary communication to even function, he argues, each participant in a communicative act inherently assumes that the communicative acts of the other participants meet these four conditions (adapted from Habermas, 1984):

1. All statements made are capable of being comprehended and are in a grammatical and syntactical form that is capable of being understood by others.
2. All statements are made are true representations of agreed upon, factual states of affairs.
3. All statements sincerely and accurately reflect the true intentions of the speaker.
4. The statements are appropriate in terms of shared social values and rules.

Without these implicit assumptions, he argues, ordinary communication would not be possible. Furthermore, these four assumptions form the basis for ethical communication. That is, ethical communication that aims at mutual understanding is inherently communication that is comprehensible, true, sincere, and appropriate.

Using these four conditions as a backdrop, Habermas (1984) goes on to argue that there is such a thing as an “ideal speech situation” (182), a situation that, whether the speech is public or private, can be approximated only when four conditions are met. These conditions are (adapted from Habermas 1984, 185-7):

1. All participants must have equal opportunity to both initiate and to continue the communicative act.
2. All participants must have equal opportunity to present arguments, interpretations, representations, explanations, and corrections as well as equal opportunity to criticize the views of others.
3. All participants must have equal opportunity to express personal intentions, feelings and attitudes.
4. Finally, all participants must have equal opportunity to express directive statements and must have equal opportunity to criticize or refuse the orders of others.

As Pearson (1989a) notes with respect to these conditions, Habermas views them not simply as an ideal, but as “a type of scientific, reconstructive process” (246), without which “it is not possible to make sense out of communication and argumentation aimed at reaching understanding” (246-7).

Pearson (1989a), in his dissertation “A Theory of Public Relations Ethics,” proposes a dialogical account of public relations ethics that relies heavily on the ideas presented by Habermas. Indeed, Pearson defines public relations itself specifically as “the management of the dialectical interaction among interorganizational discourses”
(177), the dialectical being a specific kind of communicative act that allows two-way communication.

Pearson (1989a) sets out early in his work to link ideas of postmodern philosophy and postmodern rhetorical theory with ideas of public relations. Exploring the nature of dialogical relationships, Pearson concludes that a dialogical relationship is genuine (by which he means genuinely dialogical) only to the degree to which its influence is symmetrical or balanced. From there, he poses the proposition that the practice of public relations is ethical only to the degree that it is dialogical. Or, combining his earlier definitions¹, public relations (the management of the dialectical interaction among interorganizational discourses) is ethical only to the degree to which the two-way influence inherent in relationships of this kind is symmetrical.

From here, Pearson (1989a) invokes Habermas in order to show how dialogical communication is related to ethics and to develop a theoretical definition of dialogue. Invoking Habermas’ ideal speech situation (as explained above), Pearson (1989a) argues that it provides a theoretical definition of dialogue, a definition that, combined with previous arguments, yields two ethical imperatives of public relations (adapted from Pearson, 1989a, 329-30):

1. It is an ethical obligation to establish and maintain communication relationships with all publics affected by organizational action.
2. It is an ethical obligation “to work to improve the quality of these communications relationships such that they incorporate elements of an ideal public relations situation” (329).

¹ This is my combination of Pearson’s definitions, not his own, though I suspect that I remain true to his intent.
Furthermore, under (2) above, no topic should be excluded from discussion except as agreed to by all parties involved. Or as Pearson (1989a) says, “[d]ecisions regarding all agenda-related issues are to be decided within the communication system, and not outside of it” (329). Likewise, decisions about particular modes or types of communication must be mutually agreed upon. Finally, and what Pearson (1989a) calls most importantly, all communicators must have the option of changing the structure of the communicative act.

This final caveat is important, Pearson (1989a) argues, because “inter-organizational communication systems cannot be structured perfectly and .. the need to challenge their efficacy in producing legitimate outcomes is a constant requirement” (330). That is, since the conditions of Habermas’s “ideal speech situation” are not likely to be met, each participant in the public relations dialogue must have the opportunity to criticize the characteristics of the dialogue situation itself, and must have that opportunity from within the system in use.

Pearson’s theory, then, allows for a rich account of what it is to practice ethical public relations. The theory relies on a very specific definition of public relations—the management of the dialectical interaction among interorganizational discourses. It further relies on a postmodern, dialogical explanation of communication and in the end it is from this basis that the normative force of his theory must be derived. In these aspects, it meets the screening criteria to be further considered as a theory of public relations ethics that is grounded solidly in philosophical ethics. In the next section, I apply Pearson’s ethical imperatives to a specific situation in order to see what else may

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2 The theory is postmodern primarily in the epistemic sense, as I see it. Pearson’s theory relies on a consensus account of epistemic truth. That is, the only objective epistemic truths are those that, in this case, are arrived at through dialogical consensus. The concept is analogous to the postmodern concept of establishing shared meaning through dialogue. I discuss this concept more in the following section.
be revealed about the theory itself. Before that, however, I present Bowen’s
deontological model of ethical decision-making.

Bowen, Kant, and the Decision-Making Model

Bowen (2000, 2004) presents a thought-provoking account in which she attempts to
combine Kantian ethics and public relations excellence theory in order to provide a
normative model of ethics for public relations decision-making. I offer below an
overview of her account along with a brief description of the path that led her to it. I
assume a general knowledge of the theory of public relations excellence and two-way
symmetrical public relations as espoused by Grunig et al.

Bowen (2004) latches on what she considers a weak spot in excellence theory noted
by J. Grunig and L. Grunig above: Namely, that while ethics is the tenth principle of
public relations excellence, there is no coherent account of ethics to accompany that
principle. The result is that not only is there is hole in our current public relations theory,
but there is no informed and coherent normative account to which practitioners can turn
when an issue of ethics enters in the decision-making process. We are left potentially
floundering, or, perhaps worse, making arbitrary, uninformed and inconsistent decisions.
Bowen’s (2004) basic argument is:

1. Public relations excellence theory should have a model for ethical
decision-making.
2. None of the current models is sufficient.
3. A Kantian version of ethical theory can provide the base for a model that
dovetails nicely with current public relations excellence theory and the
two-way symmetry model.

For the argument to work, then, Bowen must show that none of the current accounts fit
the bill. She must also show why a deontological (and in particular, a Kantian version of
deontology) not only fits the bill, but fits it most appropriately.
That public relations excellence needs a model for ethical decision-making is not a controversial claim and Bowen (2000, 2004) cites many advocates of this view, including Grunig, Grunig and Dozier. A more interesting claim is number two above, the claim that none of the current models is sufficient to inform public affairs decision-making. Bowen (2004) considers four models and finds them all lacking, noting that a model must be consistent, relevant and “defensible.”3 She first rejects industry codes (such as PRSA’s Code of Ethics). They are good, she maintains, only as general guidelines. Furthermore, she notes, they are not enforceable (and, she makes a nice argument, perhaps should not be).4 Situational ethics will not fit the bill either, since they acknowledge no universal moral code and therefore are not particularly action-guiding.

The “Potter Box,” a sort of four-step model requiring consideration of facts, values, principles, and loyalties, fails on several accounts, according to Bowen (2004). While it provides a “systematic analysis of ethics” (Bowen, 2004, 77), it yields no universal norms. Since one chooses the relevant principles, any analysis using this method is inherently biased, Bowen (2004) argues. Additionally, Bowen points out, the Potter Box ignores intentionality and the morally good will.5 Finally, the Potter Box “requires the decision maker to choose loyalties to the stakeholders” (Bowen, 2004, 77), a situation that could lead one to compromise on larger ethical issues.

Last, Bowen (2004) considers and rejects an advanced model proposed by Bivins (1993). Though it is an “excellent overview” and is based on a “deontological

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3 It is unclear whether by “defensible” Bowen means that a model must be grounded in a justifiable ethical theory or simply pragmatically justified.

4 It is interesting that Bowen does not mention that none of the codes have grounding in a particular ethical theory. One would think this a more damaging reason to reject them.

5 Though it need not. Presumably, one could choose these as the relevant principles.
perspective,” in the end it merely advises practitioners to “compare obligations and weigh the ‘competing values for each stakeholder’” (Bowen, 2004, 77). It fails, then, to provide a method or model for analysis of ethical issues.

Having rejected several current models as candidates for informing public affairs decision-making, Bowen (2004) must now find a philosophical ethical theory that can provide a grounding for her own model. Among the leading candidates of ethical theory that she considers might inform public relations theory are situational ethics (a theory similar to moral relativism), consequentialist theory, and deontological theory. Bowen (2004) dismisses situational ethics for the reasons listed above. She then considers consequentialist ethics and deontology, noting that Grunig has stated that these types of theories are best suited as candidates for an account of ethics for public relations. While not outright dismissing utilitarian theories, Bowen (2000, 2004) notes that deontology is better suited to public relations ethics because of its inherent similarities with public relations theory and the fact that one need not predict the consequences of a particular course of action. The moral autonomy of deontology, she notes, is “similar to the autonomy and freedom from encroachment that public relations seeks to be considered excellent” (Bowen, 2004, 70). A deontological approach, therefore, provides Bowen’s theory with “a solid theoretical foundation with the practice of public relations as well as normative theory of the function” (Bowen, 2004). Kant, she further notes, provides the best deontological account.

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6 It is not clear why Bowen does not consider another leading normative account of ethics: virtue ethics. It may be, as she herself notes, that Grunig and Grunig offer consequentialist and deontological normative accounts as best suited to public relations. If this is so, it is not clear why Grunig and Grunig do not mention virtue ethics as a candidate to inform public affairs decision-making.

7 See also Bowen, 2000, 194-5.
Bowen’s answer, then, is to combine a deontological account of ethics and the symmetrical model of public relations. From Kant we get rationality and moral autonomy to frame the model. From public relations theory we get Grunig and Hunt’s symmetrical model of public relations. The model of ethical issues management that emerges starts with values and identification of issues, passes through a quasi-Kantian model of moral reflection, is imposed on by the symmetrical model and finally yields a framework for ethical issues management. The model, adapted from Bowen (2000, 2004), looks something like this (adapted from Bowen, 2000, 196 & 416):

![Bowen’s Normative Model of Ethical Issues Management](image)

Figure 3-2: Normative Model of Ethical Issues Management
The model begins with values simply as a reminder that organizational and individual values will have an impact on not only the way managers identify issues, but on what (and whether, I might add) issues are identified. It is against the backdrop of these values that issues will come to light as issues (or not).

The next stage of Bowen’s model is issue identification. In this stage, issues have come to light as a result of symmetrical communication, environmental scanning, lawsuits, media inquiries, or other traditional methods of issue identification. As Bowen (2000) notes, the decision-maker handles many issues of smaller importance or impact immediately, as the issue arises as an issue. We are concerned, in this model, with the complex issues requiring in-depth analysis.

From issue identification, we enter the issue decision-making portion of the model. In this phase, issues managers meet to discuss the issue. For Bowen’s model, they are asked to choose an ethical framework from among deontology, utilitarianism, or what she labels materialism. For groups or issues managers who choose utilitarianism or materialism, the model can provide no further guidance. For those who choose a deontological approach, however, there is more to come. Bowen (2004) notes, I should say, that independent research “found that a deontological framework was naturally used in organizations concerned with the ethical implications of their decisions” (80).

For those who have already chosen a deontological framework to guide their ethical decision-making, the next stage is to engage Bowen’s version of the law of autonomy, a version based on Kantian principles. For Bowen, this involves all participants being both able and willing to discuss their interests “without feeling constrained by their organizational position or roles” (81). Moreover, each member of
the group must implicitly acknowledge this autonomy to “encourage an atmosphere of respect in which all ideas can be discussed without trepidation” (81). Once this autonomous input is gained, the model moves to the next step: pose the categorical imperative.

The categorical imperative is a complex notion of Kantian moral philosophy. It involves the notion that every rational being is bound by reason to make decisions based only on their universal duty. It is categorical in that it applies to all rational beings in all situations everywhere; it is an imperative in that all rational beings are obligated by it in virtue of the fact that they are rational beings (Kant, [1758] 1956). While there are several formulations of the categorical imperative, for this model Bowen (2000, 2004) chooses Kant’s ([1758] 1956) first formulation: [A]ct only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant [1758] 1956, p. 88). Or, as she more practically poses it for purposes of the model: “Could we obligate everyone else who is ever in a similar situation to do the same thing we are considering?” (Bowen, 2004, p. 80). Posed and discussed in this way, the categorical imperative serves as an aid in decision-making by exposing subjectivity among proposed alternatives. The most ethical alternatives, then, are those which seem to pass Bowen’s (2000, 2004) formulation of the imperative.

The model’s fifth phase involves three parallel areas that roughly approximate other formulations of the categorical imperative. These areas involve the notions of dignity and respect; duty (in the moral sense); and intention in the form of the morally good will. In application, issues managers should consider (questions in quoted text are Bowen’s (2004); other text is mine):
1. Treat others with dignity and respect: “Does this decision convey to our publics that we have seriously considered their view on the issue?” (83).
2. Moral duty: Does this decision fulfill my moral duty to myself and to other parties who may be affected?
3. Intention and the morally good will: “Does this decision make us worth of earning trust, respect, and support from our publics? (83).

Considering these parallel areas, again, gives insight to the issues manager and allows a level and perspective of moral reflection that might not otherwise be afforded.

The final step in the model involves using the two-way symmetrical model of public relations to communicate with publics. This step overlaps with the previous step. That is, issues managers should have ongoing communication with their publics both informing the decision-making and discussion process of step five and communicating with publics when a decision has been reached. Hence, the two-way arrows connecting the three areas of phase five with phase six indicate that symmetrical communication is ongoing in both of these phases.

The result of following this model, according to Bowen (2004), is ethical issues management that “can lead to a more credible reputation for the organization and the field of public relations as a whole” (p. 84).

Bowen provides a thought-provoking account. Any theory of public relations management (or any theory, for that matter) that includes an ethical element must ensure that the ethical theory upon which the management theory rests is itself on solid ground. Additionally, an ethical theory as part of a public relations management theory ought to be action guiding or it is simply not of much use. As others have pointed out, public relations excellence theory has yet to yield one and Bowen makes some nice progress in
this area. There are, however, some issues. These, as well as some issues with respect to Pearson’s theory of public relations ethics, are discussed next.

**Applying Two Models: The Enron Scandal**

In order to better get at the nuances of Bowen’s (2000) and Pearson’s (1989a) theories, each will be applied to a specific scenario to determine what is revealed in the way of strengths and weaknesses. The general situation I have chosen is the Enron scandal of 2000-2001. I begin, then, with an explanation of the situation and the specific scenario.

Enron began in 1985 as the merger of two pipeline companies. It struggled until 1988 when, after deregulation of the electrical power markets, it redefined its business from energy delivery to energy broker. Enron began trading natural gas commodities, eventually becoming the largest natural gas merchant in North America and the United Kingdom. The scandal that eventually emerged was the result of a number of factors, some more complicated than others. Relevant to the discussion here, Enron had continued to grow and acquire, merge with, and create other companies. In the winter of 2001, Enron’s own auditor, Arthur Anderson, began to question some of these mergers and how they were represented in terms of public disclosure and accounting. In the spring of 2001, Enron repurchased one of its own subsidiary’s investments in yet another of Enron’s subsidiaries. In the meantime, several top executives of Enron had profited nicely from the sale and repurchase of stocks in these subsidiaries. By normal accounting, however, the company was in trouble.

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It is against this backdrop that Enron announced to its investors, in April of 2001, a first quarter profit of $536 million. In reality, this bottom line figure failed to account for a number of failing subsidiaries. Several things then happened over the spring and summer of 2001. Enron top executives began dumping stock; Enron stock shares continued to drop in price; at least one employee began to question, directly to the CEO, Enron’s accounting practices; and, significantly, the company executives continued to assure investors and employees (many of whose retirement accounts were significantly comprised of Enron stock) that everything was fine. In fact, as late as September 26, 2001, CEO Kenneth Lay, in an online forum, told Enron employees that Enron’s accounting practices were “legal and totally appropriate” and that “the third quarter is looking great” (Brainy-Encyclopedia, 2005). Less than three weeks later, Enron announced a third quarter loss of $618 million. The next day, Enron’s shareholder equity was reduced by $1.01 billion to correct an accounting error and the Enron 401(k) retirement plan was frozen. The next week, the Securities and Exchange Commission began an inquiry into Enron’s accounting practices with its partnerships. The company filed for bankruptcy December 2, 2001, its stock virtually worthless.

Business ethicists point out that part of the irony of the Enron ethics scandal was that, prior to the scandal, Enron looked like a model corporate citizen, with all the right business ethics tools, codes, and programs in place. Against that backdrop, however, executives “in practice created an organizational culture that put the bottom line ahead of ethical behavior and doing what’s right” (Sims, 2003, p. 243). Enron failed in its obligations to communicate with its publics, both internal and external. At its core, however, Enron demonstrated first and foremost “a violation of an essential requirement
for the functioning of a market economy: public disclosure” (Leeds, 2003, p. 78). They failed to communicate not only effectively, but failed in a way that violates law, ethics, and violates the principles of the very enterprise that allowed the company the successes it had heretofore seen: the market economy. Their actions in the end were, ironically, self-defeating.

Pearson’s Dialogical Theory of Public Relations Ethics

The issue with respect to Enron and Pearson’s theory is whether and in what ways Enron violated either of the ethical imperatives Pearson (1989a) derives from his theory. Recall that Pearson’s (1989a) theory is a dialogical theory of ethics that forms as its moral basis the idea that public relations is a practice that is inherently communicative in nature. Against the backdrop of Habermas’ ideal speech situation, Pearson (1989a) proposes two ethical imperatives for public relations:

1. It is an ethical obligation to establish and maintain communication relationships with all publics affected by organizational action.
2. It is an ethical obligation “to work to improve the quality of these communications relationships such that they incorporate elements of an ideal public relations situation” (329).

At issue, then, is whether Enron violated either of these imperatives in its actions as described previously.

Enron faced many issues in the period 1989 to 2000 and no doubt our understanding of these issues might benefit from an application of Pearson’s imperatives. Let us assume, however, for the sake of this analysis, that the issue at hand concerns the period 2000-2001 and involves Enron not being forthright with its investors and its employees about the financial state of the company. Many ethical issues should no doubt
have arisen before this one, but this one seems to capture the essence of what was to become the scandal and seems a good fit for applying the theory and its imperatives.

The first imperative tells us that Enron had an ethical obligation to establish and maintain communication with all publics affected by its actions. The two most obvious publics in this scenario are Enron employees and Enron stockholders. The two groups are not mutually exclusive, though they can easily be viewed as distinct publics with at least some mutually exclusive concerns and needs. Did Enron meet the demands of this imperative?

There is no doubt that Enron was passing information to its employees and its shareholders. Indeed, as pointed out above, Enron’s CEO assured employees in August of 2001 that everything was fine with respect to the company and its financial accounting practices. Its quarterly financial reports to investors were likewise reassuring. Did this kind of communication meet the criteria of what Pearson calls a “communication relationship”? Hardly. In fact, what was going on might be descriptively termed a dysfunctional communication relationship.

The CEO and other top executives were using this dysfunctional communication relationship in order to deceive both employees and shareholders about the company’s true financial position. Moreover, they were doing so, at least in part, to further their own financial positions at the cost of ruining the financial position of others involved in the relationship. It seems clear that the actions of Enron leadership violate Pearson’s first imperative of maintaining a communication relationship. As such, we can count the actions described as normatively prohibited under Pearson’s theory. Let’s see, however, how the second imperative might be applied.
The second imperative maintains that it is an ethical obligation “to work to improve the quality of these communication relationships such that they incorporate elements of an ideal public relations situation” (Pearson 1989a, 329). This includes making all decisions regarding the communication agenda within the communication system as well as arriving at a consensus about particular modes or types of communication. It seems obvious from what we already know about the scenario that neither employees nor other shareholders were intimately involved in the ways described above. Indeed, to involve them in this way might have functionally precluded the leadership of the corporation from successfully deceiving these publics for as long as they did. To allow the kind of openness and two-way communication implied by this imperative would have likely resulted in the suspect accounting practices and subsequent inquiries and reports becoming well known long before the leadership had the opportunity to systematically deceive these publics. It seems clear, then, that the second imperative is violated as well in Enron’s public relations with its employees and shareholders. What does this tell us about the theory itself, however?

First, as noted previously, Pearson’s (1989a) theory relies on a particular conception of public relations. He defines public relations as “the management of dialectical interaction among interorganizational discourses” (177) and concludes that it is ethical only to the extent that the influence in the discourses is symmetrical. It is from this premise that the ethical imperatives he posits are derived. But this seems inherently circular when applied to the Enron scenario.

As applied to Enron, the theory seems to say simply that Enron’s public relations with their employees and shareholders were not ethical primarily because they were not
dialogically symmetrical. But notice that if we ask the question: What is it about
dialogically symmetrical communication that makes it a condition for ethical public
relations, we are left with only the answer that dialogically symmetrical communication
is the most ethical communication. In short, we are left with the notion that Enron’s
pubic relations with these publics were not ethical because Enron’s communications were
not ethical. Or, the pubic relations were not ethical because they were unethical. In
logic, this is called begging the question, or circular reasoning.

To be fair, Pearson (1989a) goes to some lengths to explain why Habermas and
consequently Pearson consider this type of symmetry essential to ethical communication.
In the end, however, the explanations rest on a postmodern account of epistemic truth that
itself rests on notions of consensus. Put simply, the argument is that in the grand,
epistemic sense, truth is whatever we decide that it is. The trouble with this kind of
epistemic account as the basis for an ethical theory, however, is at least twofold.

First, we need only decide (through consensus) that the account of truth presented
above is not indeed true to render that account of truth paradoxically void within its own
system of truth validation. Or, in another way, we can only accept such an account of
truth if we already accept such an account of truth. The second problem may be more
damaging. If truth is simply a dialogic construct validated through consensus, then the
very foundation of any ethical theory that rests upon such an account is at risk as
consensus changes. The ethical theory will have a philosophically sound foundation
only as long as people are willing to accept the consensus account of truth and accept
“truths” derived from that consensus account. In short, such a theory will always be only
contingently sound: sound as long as we are willing to accept it; not sound otherwise.
There is no higher power to appeal to because under a theory such as this, both truth and consequently rationality are contingent in this same way.

Positing a theory of ethics that relies on a consensus version of epistemic truth forces one to either accept a consensus version of epistemic truth—and all the baggage that comes along with it—or to reject both the account of epistemic truth and all the theories that are derived from it. And the application of such a theory, while illuminating in its own right, can only lead us to the insight in the end that Enron practiced unethical public relations with their employees and shareholders because they used unethical communication. Alas, it seems, the theory requires, at a minimum, more explanation to achieve the philosophical grounding we seek.

Next, I consider Bowen’s model using the same Enron scenario.

**Bowen’s Ethical Decision-making Model**

One might easily conclude based on the general facts and some well-placed intuition that Enron, as a company, likely did not practice excellent public relations. The question for this analysis, however, is what Bowen’s normative model of ethical issues management might have had to offer whether Enron practiced excellent public relations or not. I assume simply for the sake of ease in applying the model that Enron had a public relations manager who was a member of the dominant coalition and had input in the decision-making process. In considering several courses of action and applying the model, I also consider what is revealed about the model itself.

Recall that Bowen’s model begins by mentioning values, since they are the backdrop against which issues managers and others identify ethical issues and bring them to light. Recall also that Enron, by many accounts, had created a corporate culture under which the bottom line mattered more than ethical considerations. To borrow a phrase
from Bowen, it is difficult to conceive of more “complex issues requiring in-depth analysis” than the issues facing Enron in 2000 and 2001. For the sake of consistency in analysis, I assume once again that the issue that arose was that Enron was not being forthright with its investors and its employees about the financial state of the company. Identifying the issue satisfies the first stage of the model.

From issues identification the model next takes us to issue decision-making, where we must choose from among utilitarianism, deontology, and materialism as ethical frameworks for our decision-making. Bowen’s “materialism” appears to be a version of egoism or enlightened self-interest that Bowen briefly explains as doing what is best for the decision maker. We can easily imagine Enron choosing this framework and the results of many of the decisions they did make as a company seem to fit within this framework. If we choose this as a framework, however, the model can no longer help us.

Although the model Bowen (2000, 2004) presents can indeed be normative (in the action-guiding sense), it is, Bowen says, only action-guiding for organizations that already “use a deontological approach to ethics and problem solving” (80). Kantian principles of ethics, however, are both universal and immutable (Kant, [1758] 1956), as Bowen herself points out (Bowen 2000). It follows under Kantian moral theory that they provide a normative model for all rational beings. Bowen, however, stops short of the obvious conclusion she sets up: For Kant (Kant, [1758] 1956), her model ought to be action guiding for all organizations, whether they already embrace a deontological approach or not. Indeed, as Pojman (Ethics : Discovering right and wrong, 1999) points out, Kant developed his moral theory partly as a reaction to claims that desires and consequences ought to play a role in grounding morality. That is, Kant (Kant, [1758]}
clearly rejects both utilitarianism and materialism. It is unclear why a normative model based on Kantian ethics, then, would allow a decision maker to “opt out” for a utilitarian or other consequentialist approach.

To be fair, Bowen’s point is that if an organization does not embrace a deontological approach to decision-making, then the model will not be of much use to them. But why let an organization off the hook so easily? The argument she sets up leads us right to the conclusion that, if we accept the argument up to that point, we must conclude that all public relations organizations should follow a Kantian deontological approach. Bowen stops short of stating this point. She instead qualifies the normativity of her model by excluding certain types of organizations. In doing so, she seems to embrace the very thing she finds lacking in situational ethics and the “Potter Box.” Namely, that one gets to choose one’s own values or principles depending (in this case) on the organization. To reject these models on that basis and then include the same option in her model seems prima facie contradictory. It is a problem that is easily fixed, however, simply by removing the option to choose from competing value systems. Leaving the option to choose among competing ethical frameworks jeopardizes the entire model by compromising its Kantian grounding, contrary to the goal of grounding a theory of ethical public relations on an established philosophical theory of ethics.

Our Enron manager, then, will be obligated to choose a deontological framework for issues decision-making. This brings us to the next step in the model: engage the law of autonomy. Engaging the law of autonomy in this case will involve soliciting candid input from each issues manager. The issues managers talk freely and openly, each respecting the moral agency of the others, and each speaking without empowerment or
constraint by virtue of their organizational position. We have already noted that the organizational climate of Enron ran contrary to this notion, but that is not damaging for Bowen’s theory. It merely shows that if one does not follow this model, then there may be no real certainty that one will arrive at a decision that is ethical. That is hardly surprising, however, and hardly a mark against the model itself.

The next step is a parallel one that involves proposing the categorical imperative in three of its formulations while simultaneously engaging in symmetrical communication with publics in order to inform the decision-making process and discussion. In the case of Enron, this involves posing questions such as:

- What is our duty to ourselves and to our publics with respect to disclosing our financial status?
- Could we make it a universal maxim that whenever a company is in the same position we are, that the company would withhold information from its publics?
- Does withholding information about the financial status of the company from our stockholders treat them merely as a means to an end and not as an end in themselves?
- Does a decision to withhold information from our stockholders convey to them that we have seriously considered their interests?
- Does withholding information about the financial status of the company from our employees treat them merely as a means to an end? Does it convey to them that we have seriously considered their interests?
- Does withholding information from our publics make us worthy of their trust, respect, and support?

These questions are not simply tools for use in the decision-making boardroom but are part of the ongoing symmetrical communication with publics. Employing the symmetrical model of public relations communications with publics may even reveal new issues that, if identified as ethical issues, are then subjected once again to the normative model of ethical issues management.
Notice, however, that for this particular step, engaging in two-way symmetrical communication with publics using the questions as formulated above is tantamount to asking someone outright if it would be okay to lie to them about a specific issue. The mere asking of the question will preclude one from ever being successful at the lie. In the same way, engaging in dialogue with stockholders over whether the company should withhold or misrepresent information about its earnings would preclude one from actually doing so because, if the stockholders believe the company will actually do it, they will likely take steps to prevent it from happening or expose it when it does happen. This situation may actually highlight an advantage of the model, for it may show that sometimes, merely employing the model forces one towards the more ethical course of action.

Unfortunately, it does not always force the decision maker to the ethical course of action. After completing the steps of the model, including iterations involving the embedded symmetrical model, decision makers are autonomously free to make whatever decisions they choose. This is problematic from a couple of standpoints.

The very nature of ethics requires that ethical considerations be overriding, and this is especially true for Kant ([1758] 1956). Pojman (1999) points out that ethical principles “are not the only principles, but they take precedence over other considerations, including aesthetic, prudential, and legal ones” (8). While Bowen does not understate the importance of integrating an ethical decision-making model as a generic principle of excellence in public relations management, neither does the model acknowledge the supremacy of the ethical component. That is, Bowen (2004) seems to consider the normative model of ethical issues management as one tool among many in the kit bag of
decision makers. Strictly following the model will result in a more reflective and informed decision maker as well as a more informative issues management process, but there is no requirement in the model to choose the most ethical course of action.

In fact, there is nothing in the normative model that requires a decision maker to do anything more than consider and discuss. Important as these considerations are to the ethical decision-making process, for the model to truly be normative, it must tell us what we *ought* to do, what we are morally *required* to do. That is the very nature of normativity and it is the natural result of applying Kantian ([1758] 1956) moral theory. Bowen’s model does not do this, and as a result, it is logically possible, using her model as part of an overall model that includes symmetry and excellence, to arrive at decisions which are unethical by Kantian standards but still in line with the normative model of ethical issues management. This seems *prima facie* contradictory and particularly troubling if the intention of the model is in part to ground public relations ethics on a solid theory of philosophical ethics.

Among the things we see in applying the model to the Enron case is that the model is wonderfully powerful for discovering various ethical nuances inherent in the issue at hand. Seeing things from another’s perspective; raising issues under the guise of a disinterested, autonomous decision maker; considering whether a particular decision will use someone or some group simply as a means and without considering them as an autonomous moral agent themselves – these are all illuminating questions in the process of moral reflection and the model does a nice job in bringing them to the forefront. In the case of Enron, we see as well that Enron could not have steadfastly applied the model and continued to do business the way history has documented they did. This should be a
prima facie indicator that the model captures some particular notions about ethics and decision-making within an ethical context in a way that is both useful and appropriate.

What remains to be seen is whether the model indeed provides a solid philosophical grounding for a public relations theory of ethics. I consider this issue for both Pearson’s theory and Bowen’s model.

**What Are the Ways Ahead?**

As others have pointed out, public relations has yet to yield an ethical model that rests solidly on philosophical ethics. Both Pearson (1989a) and Bowen (2000) make some nice progress in this area. Any theory of applied ethics (or any theory, for that matter that includes an ethical component) must ensure that the ethical theory upon which the public relations theory rests is itself on solid ground. And, if one’s intent is to ground the applied ethical theory, one must remain true to the normative theory upon which the applied ethical theory rests. Finally, a theory of public relations ethics ought to be action guiding or it is simply not of much use.

Pearson’s (1989a) theory of public relations ethics rests on a dialogical account of ethical communication espoused by the German social commentator and philosopher Habermas. Habermas’ account, in turn, rests on a consensus theory of epistemic truth, an account that carries with it certain philosophical baggage, so to speak. If one is willing to embrace an ethical theory that itself relies on a consensus theory of epistemic truth, then one must be prepared to jettison the entire project as conceptions of the “truth” change. One must be prepared, as well, to accept the views of those who reject the theory because their own view of the consensus-derived “truth” is not in accordance with that of the theory. In the end, it is a heavy load of baggage and the degree to which it damages the practical application of Pearson’s (1989a) theory may yet remain to be seen. I have
admittedly applied the theory in only a limited scenario but with what I would nonetheless call good practical results for the theory itself. In the end, if one accepts Pearson’s (1989a) definition of public relations, the theory displays a great degree of parsimony in that it covers the gambit of what Pearson (1989a) considers public relations and does so in a way that is both action-guiding and relatively simple in its application. To accept, however, both Pearson’s (1989a) definition of public relations as well as a consensus-derived version of epistemic truth seems, in the end, a bridge too far.

In terms of Bowen’s model, choosing a deontological, and in particular a Kantian ([1758] 1956), theoretical grounding for a public relations model of ethical issues management is a decision that is not without its own philosophical baggage. Kantian moral theory is intricate enough that one must borrow it in its entirety or face loosing the philosophical grounding upon which Kantian ethics itself rests. Put another way, you can borrow only a little bit of Kant in the same way you can be only a little bit pregnant: There is an all-or-nothing threshold quality to the endeavor. If the intention in going to Kant ([1758] 1956) is to find a solid theoretical grounding for a public relations model of ethics—and there is little doubt among philosophers that Kant ([1758] 1956) can indeed provide that—then it will be self-defeating to sacrifice the philosophical grounding of Kantian theory in the process. For the normative model of ethical issues management, as we have seen, some revisions may be helpful in saving this philosophical grounding. The question will be whether public relations theorists are willing to accept the “baggage” that will arrive with these revisions. As it stands, however, the model loses its philosophical grounding in the transition from Kant to issues management.

There may, however, be another way.
CHAPTER 4
THE VIRTUES OF VIRTUE ETHICS

In this section I give an account of Aristotelian virtue ethics; consider what others have said with respect to applied virtue ethics in business and public relations; show how a virtue ethics account might be useful for a public relations ethic; offer a glimpse at the framework for a such an account; and consider how such framework have affected the previous Enron scenario. Finally, I consider the implications of such an account for public relations.

What is Virtue Ethics?

Virtue ethics has a rich and full history of its own, dating back to at least the time of pre-Aristotelian philosophy (Liszka, 2002). Whereas deontological and consequentialist accounts of ethics focus on what actions or acts an agent is morally justified in performing (and, indeed, why they are justified), virtue accounts of ethics instead focus on the agent who is performing (or not performing) those actions. Put another way, deontological and consequentialist accounts of ethics focus on what to do, whereas virtue accounts of ethics focus on what to be. Specifically, in the Aristotelian account of virtue ethics, one ought to strive to be an excellent (or virtuous) person. The way in which one becomes an excellent person is by practicing the virtues.
Though there are several accounts of virtue ethics nowadays,¹ they all share some strong basis in Aristotle. In what follows, then, I give a basic account of Aristotelian virtue ethics, with some emphasis on its philosophical grounding. My goal is that the reader should have a basic grasp of both virtue ethics and the general manner in which it is philosophically grounded.

Aristotle’s writings on ethics survive primarily in three works: *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Eudemonian Ethics*, and *Magna Moralia* (Barnes, 1995), the *Magna Moralia* being the more fragmentary (and disputed, in terms of authorship) work. Although there are differences (both in method and content) in Aristotle's account of the human good and his account of the virtues as described in these works, there are enough similarities to form a coherent picture of the human good. Here I concentrate on the *Eudemonian Ethics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *EE* and *EN*, respectively).² The *EE* begins with the notion of happiness, and then goes on to discuss the nature of goodness. The *EN* begins with the supreme good as subject, and goes on to argue that *eudaimonia* (translated as “happiness” or “flourishing”) is the best answer to the question “What is the supreme human good?” Happiness (*eudaimonia*) is the good at which all human action (*praxis*) aims. Aristotle establishes this in the first book of *EN* (primarily iv-xii) and asserts the supremacy of happiness again in Book X (vi-viii).

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¹ See, among others, MacIntyre’s (1984) *After Virtue*, a work many credit as a driving force in the reemergence of virtue ethics in the late twentieth century; and Swanson’s (2003) account of a pluralistic virtue ethics.

² This and subsequent references to Aristotle use a common method of Aristotelian reference: The Bekker method. Works are cited by one standard abbreviation for the work in question and then the Bekker code for page number, column number, and line number: For example: *EN* 1097b14-21. This method was chosen in order to allow reference to different translations and editions of Aristotle, as most modern translations, whatever their format, utilize this reference system. My particular source is the Barnes (1984) *The Complete Works of Aristotle*.
ultimate object of pursuit, for it includes all the goods worth pursuing for their own sake (*EN* 1097b14-21). It is also the goal of all rational activity (*EN* 1094a18-22; *EE* 1214b6-11). Rational actions are the ones we perform because we think they will contribute to our happiness, and our rational desires are for objects we want because we think they will contribute to our happiness. Although we may be mistaken about what this particular happiness consists in, we nonetheless pursue what we think will make us happy when we act on rational desires. Furthermore, this happiness (or flourishing) is not a fleeting, momentary phenomenon which we may enjoy one day and lose the next, but a general condition which encompasses the whole of a man’s life, inasmuch as that life displays activities in conformity with virtue (*EN* 1100b10). Thus happiness, as the human good, the good at which all human action aims, a good in and of itself, is a state of living well or acting well.

The method one uses to live in this manner is to live and act in accordance with virtue (*arête*, also translated as “excellence”). Virtue in this sense denotes a teleological excellence; that is, a set of qualities, the display of which allows a man to fulfill his function as a man properly and well. Ethical or moral virtue is a deliberately cultivated disposition which is characterized by attaining a certain kind of mean which lies between excess and deficiency as these pertain to emotion and action. This mean is discovered through the use of reason such as it is exercised by a prudent person (*EN* 1106b36-07a2). Moral virtue consistently possesses the character of the mean, at least with respect to substance. With respect to doing well and achieving the best, moral virtue is an extreme (*EN* 1107a6-8).
While Aristotle identifies several character traits as virtues (temperance, magnanimity (or generosity), a sense of humor, wittiness, good temper, modesty, courage, being, and justice) he does not claim that these are the only virtues. They are virtues, however, in light of the fact that they contribute to the flourishing of those who practice them. Virtues are tendencies or dispositions to act in a certain way under certain circumstances, and that includes having certain attitudes or desires. That is, the virtuous person has the proper attitudes and desires with respect to any particular virtue, not simply performs actions that demonstrate that virtue. (Recall that virtue ethics is primarily concerned with what to be, not what to do. While being the right kind of person leads one to perform certain actions, the emphasis is on becoming or being that kind of person, not on the resultant actions that flow from such manifestations of character.)

With respect to the virtue of temperance, for example, a temperate person’s desire for physical pleasures (such as food, drink, and sexual activity) are moderate. It is not simply that their behavior with respect to such pleasures is moderate; the virtuous person (with respect to temperance) has actually cultivated their desires to the point that they delight in this moderation, and act with moderation out of habit. If you resist the temptation to overindulge yet regret resisting it, you are not actually displaying temperance. Likewise, if a person feels fear that is inappropriately intense, such as terror at the sight of a gecko, yet nevertheless stands their ground (though they hate every second of it), that person does not display the virtue of courage. As Aristotle posits it *(EN 1140b 5-10)*:

*The man who abstains from bodily pleasures and delights in this very fact is temperate, while the man who is annoyed at it is self-indulgent, and he who stands*
his ground against things that are terrible and delights in this or least is not pained is brave, while the man who is pained is a coward.

Additionally, Aristotle finds those who do not display an appropriate desire for physical pleasures on a par with those whose desires are towards overindulgence. That is, to be virtuous with respect to temperance is to desire neither too little nor too much (or too few or too many) of the physical pleasures. This concept, mentioned above, is often referred to as Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean. This mean, however, is not the same for every person. It is dependent on a person’s situation and circumstances. An appropriate appetite for food, for example, will be different for an NFL lineman than it will be for a child. Moreover, while Aristotle emphasizes that most virtues represent a mean between two extremes—one extreme being a deficit and the other extreme being a vice—he does not say that all virtues are of this ilk.

In fact, it should be clear now that just what counts as a virtue is not the same for every person at every time. As Barcalow (1998) points out, “Each trait that is a virtue or vice is a tendency or disposition to behave and feel in certain characteristic ways under certain characteristic circumstances. Thus, if we know what traits are beneficial and help their possessor flourish, we know what traits are virtues” (p. 116). More will be said on this later, particularly with respect to public relations.

The moral virtues and their corresponding vices are part of the voluntary and, as such, belong to the range of things that fall within our power (EN 1114a11-31). Among these things is included the development of our character. While we cannot control all the aspects of our character development (for example, we might be born with a defect of some sort), to the extent which we are not born with some sort of defective character and have received some kind of decent upbringing, the shaping of our character is, in a
significant way, in our own hands. It follows then that we are also responsible for what we perceive as the good to be pursued in action, since this too is a function of the character we have developed.3

The human good, then, is happiness, and this can only be achieved through a life which exhibits the moral virtues, moral virtue being an expression of character, formed by habits reflecting repeated choices. Moral responsibility, moreover, has to do with not only character and the virtues, but a distinction between voluntary and involuntary action.

Voluntariness is significant for Aristotle because it is a condition of moral responsibility and hence of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness. From EE:

And since excellence and badness and the acts that spring from them are respectively praised or blamed--for we do not give praise or blame for what is due to necessity, or chance, or nature, but only for what we ourselves are causes of; for what another is the cause of, for that he bears the blame or praise--it is clear that excellence and badness have to do with matters where the man himself is the cause and source of his acts. (1223a10-14)

And, from EN:

Since excellence is concerned with passions and actions, and on voluntary passions and actions praise and blame are bestowed, on those that are involuntary forgiveness, and sometimes also pity, to distinguish the voluntary and the involuntary is presumably necessary for those who are studying excellence. (1109b30-34)

Similarly, as alluded to above, involuntariness will be a condition of pity or forgiveness. Further, on the basis of whether one feels remorse at appropriate times, Aristotle makes a distinction between the involuntary and non-voluntary.

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3 For an interesting account of the extent to which we are responsible for our character and for character change, see Bondeson (1974). For a refutation of the view that one is responsible for one’s actions only to the extent that one is responsible for one’s character, see Curren (1989).
Aristotle’s account of the virtues, then, is grounded in a teleological conception of the ultimate purpose of a rational being. The ultimate end towards which rational beings strive is *eudaimonia*, or happiness. To achieve this type of happiness, a flourishing that comprises the whole of one’s life, one must lead an excellent life. Leading an excellent life requires that one habitually practice the virtues, often designated as the mean between two extremes. One must actively and consciously *practice* the virtues, and the person who has done so and acts virtuously because they have conditioned themselves to act in this way, is worthy of moral praise. Motivations, as well, play a part for Aristotle. The person who refrains from stealing because they are afraid of being exposed and subsequently punished as a thief is not as morally praiseworthy as the person who has conditioned their self not to steal because stealing is wrong. Likewise, remorse can play in a part in one’s moral worth. The person who has accidentally caused the death of another but feels no remorse is not as morally praiseworthy as the person who has committed the same act but feels remorseful.\(^4\) The virtues serve as a means to an end, the intermediate end of which is to become an excellent person. It is only by being an excellent person that one can achieve *eudaimonia*, the rational goal of all human beings.

Just how, then, are the virtues to be practiced, and how do we identify what virtues are appropriate for our particular circumstances?

\(^4\) It is in these cases that Aristotle’s distinction between the involuntary and the non-voluntary comes into play. Aristotle holds that voluntary and non-voluntary actions are worthy of praise or condemnation, whereas involuntary acts are not. For the person who feels no remorse at having accidentally caused another’s death, however, Aristotle would classify their action as non-voluntary and therefore subject to praise or (in this case) condemnation. The action is non-voluntary for Aristotle in the sense that, had that person chosen to practice the virtues in the appropriate way, they would be a person who would feel remorse at the appropriate times. Since, through a choice of their own, they have not practiced the virtues, we can thus judge their particular actions on the basis of things they have voluntarily chosen not to do: To wit, practice the virtues. There are many subtle nuances to Aristotle’s account of the voluntary, the non-voluntary, and the involuntary, but what is important for this particular project is simply to recognize that remorse can play a role in whether or not one is appropriately virtuous.
The Virtues, Business, and Public Relations

Virtue ethics as applied ethics is certainly not a new idea. As Harrison (2004) points out, “Since the publication of MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* in 1984, Aristotle has become a major, if not the major, influence on applied ethics among academics and practitioners who are working to foster integrity and ethical conduct in organizations and professions” (p. 1).

Arjoon (2000), for example, has developed a theory of applied virtue ethics for use as a dynamic theory of business. Her theory links the ideas of virtues, the common good, and the economy “into a unifying and comprehensive theory of business” (p. 159). Likewise, Dobson (2005) advocates the application of virtue ethics to business, embracing the idea that virtue ethics would allow a professional to “evaluate an ethically charged decision from within” the role of the profession itself (p. 2). He goes on to argue that virtue ethics “dovetails rather neatly with the increasing focus among financial economists on the motivations of agents in business” (p. 2). Whetstone (2001) advocates a position that virtue ethics can form one leg of a tripartite ethical approach to business ethics that also includes a deontological component and a consequentialist component.5

Brewer (1997) advocates a position that views management as a “practice” (in the MacIntyre sense and against the notion that management is not a “practice,” as MacIntyre has argued) and therefore subject to be viewed in light of a virtue-based evaluation. Dawson and Bartholomew (2003) examine potential barriers to employing a virtue-based approach to ethics in a business management environment and argue that such are obstacles are not only surmountable, but that it is desirable to do so and adopt a virtue-

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5 Such an approach is ill-advised, I believe, if one seeks to ground an applied ethic in a normative philosophical theory, primarily for reasons stated earlier.
ethics approach. Seeger and Ulmer (2001) propose “a set of post-crisis virtues grounded in values of corporate social responsibility and entrepreneurial ethics” (p. 369). Sommers (1997) has argued that an Aristotelian notion of friendship, one that functions through expectation of moral behavior, provides “both motive and context for the performance of acts of virtue in a business setting” (p. 1453). Hartman and Beck-Dudley (1999) have proposed virtue ethics as a basis for a marketing ethic for “analyzing the ethical implications of their own [marketers] character along with their marketing decisions and strategies” (p. 249). In journalism, Adam, Craft, and Cohen (2004) have produced a series of articles on journalism and virtue.

A few in public relations (Harrison, 2004; Leeper, 2001; Martinson, 2000) have hinted at a virtue-based account of ethics for public relations as well, though no one has as yet produced a working version of such an account. David Martinson (2000), for example, suggests that Aristotle might offer some help for practitioners “faced with at least a perceived conflict between what he or she sees as the demands of a client and requests from the news media” (p. 19). Martinson (2000) invokes Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean to suggest that the appropriate ethical course of action would be “one which balances the practitioner’s ethical obligations to each party” (p. 20). Such a route application of Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean, however, belies a fundamental misunderstanding of the way in which Aristotle conceives both the virtues and the doctrine of the mean. Martinson (2000) rightly relates that virtue is a state of character and rightly identifies the virtuous person as acting between the means of excess and deficit. To act between the means of excess and deficit, however, is quite different than selecting a balance between competing obligations. Monica Walle (2003), citing
Martinson (2000), picks up on this thread and belies the same kind of misunderstanding when she echoes that for “Aristotle, then, the ethical practitioner would be the one who balances between the welfare of the public and the welfare of the client” (p. 2). As we have seen, Aristotle’s notion of virtue ethics is concerned with cultivating good habits (or dispositions) of character. With Aristotle, we are not particularly concerned with duties (in the deontological sense). As Harrison (2004) puts it, “Aristotle was not concerned with resolving conflicts between competing duties, such as duty to society versus duty to client…Aristotle’s whole ethic of virtue transcends duty-based (or deontological) approaches to ethics” (p. 1). That is, while Martinson (2000) and Walle (2003) are essentially correct in their accounts of the virtues, they commit a fundamental error when interpreting the doctrine of the mean.

Harrison (2004) provides a fuller but still limited picture of a public relations ethic based in the virtues. Alluding to MacIntyre (1984), Harrison (2004) explains the nature of the virtues and also offers some critique of Walle (2003). Because his work is not intended to present an outline of what a virtue-based public relations ethic might look like, however, he stops at this point and offers critiques of several public relations codes of conduct by applying the codes to a specific historical case. He concludes by arguing that the institutionalization of ethics, and, in particular, codes of ethics, have fallen short of their aim of promoting and enforcing ethical behavior among practitioners. We need, he says, “an approach [to ethics] that genuinely fosters habits of good character in practitioners” (p. 6). He rightly notes that it “is not a direction easily pursued” (p. 6).

Are there advantages to such an approach?

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6 The case is the Timberlands case from New Zealand. See Harrison (2004).
Might a Virtue-Based Approach Prove Useful for Public Relations?

There are several potential advantages to be gained from a virtue-based approach to public relations ethics. First and perhaps foremost, there would be a shift in focus. Traditional deontological and consequential ethical theories are most often seen as constraints on what one is allowed (ethically) to do. Kantian ethics, for example, prohibits telling a lie, even a “small” one. Under an act utilitarian moral theory, one is prohibited from any action that is not likely to result in the greatest benefit for the greatest number. Virtue ethics, however, is different, focusing on the person and not the act. The focus of virtue ethics is the achievement of eudaimonia by becoming an excellent person and leading an excellent life. In this way, ethics can be seen as a liberating rather than a constraining force, one that depends on the individual’s ability to pursue excellence through his or her own choices.

The second potential advantage has to do again with the nature of virtue as compared to a deontological or consequentialist approach. Since one is never “through” becoming an excellent person, and since one is required to cultivate and habituate the virtues as a matter of living well, there is a constant focus on the moral aspect of the profession (or field) that is inherent in a virtue approach but lacking in the other approaches. Moral education and practicing being excellent just are part of being an excellent person. Ethics is not relegated to a class or seminar once or a quarter or twice a year but is ingrained in the very fabric of what one does and how one lives.

Third, the fact that our motivations play a part in determining our moral worth captures nicely some of our commonsense notions about ethics and morality in way that is just not possible under deontological or consequentialist approaches. Our
commonsense notions of morality tell us that the person who does the right thing for the wrong reason is not on par (ethically) with the person who does the right thing for the right reason, and virtue ethics inherently accounts for this notion, even stressing that we ought to want the right things for the right reasons.

Finally, because the virtues themselves are defined with respect to what “being an excellent one of those” entails, where “those” is specific to a situation against the backdrop of a particular culture and time, a virtue-based ethic is much more likely to allow for the many nuanced and significant differences of culture, regions, and practices, while still retaining its normative quality. Katayama (2003), for example, argues that a virtue approach to moral education is not only viable in a pluralistic society (and, one can reasonably extrapolate, in a pluralistic, global environment) but it is, in fact desirable. One of the major obstacles, of course, would involve coming to some consensus on just what shared virtues would constitute the base for a public relations ethic. The problem is not insurmountable, however. Swanton (2003), in *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic Approach*, makes an extended argument that such an endeavor is both possible and worthwhile, while Leeper and Leeper (2001) offer “harmony and the development and maintenance of community” as a goal of public relations. Using this goal as definitive of flourishing for a corporation or agency with respect to public relations might readily yield an initial set of virtues with which to begin the task.

**Some Potential Virtues for Public Relations**

The task of determining just what shared virtues should constitute a pluralistic, global, virtue-based public relations ethic is both enormous and complex and is well beyond the scope of this work. Still, below I offer five virtues, as both a starting point and as a vehicle with which to examine the application of a virtue-based model to the
previous Enron scenario. The selection of these particular virtues, while not entirely arbitrary, is offered with scant explanation and no in-depth justification, as justifying a particular set of virtues for public relations is a work in its own right. In the end, my selection of these particular virtues should not be terribly controversial. Further, simply having a set of virtues (whether, to some degree, arbitrary or not) while not inherently necessary, will help in discussing how an ethics of virtue might work with respect to the Enron scenario.

Recall that virtues are cultivated dispositions, the possession of which will allow the possessor to flourish. They must be practiced and habituated over a lifetime, and reflected upon regularly. In the instance of public relations (for the purposes of illustration), I have chosen five. While a complete list of essential virtues for a public relations manager would likely contain more than five virtues, the virtues below will do nicely to give some idea of the kind of a model a virtue-based public relations model would be. The five virtues, then, for the purpose of example, are:7

1. Honesty
2. Respect
3. Tolerance
4. Courage
5. Justice

Honesty is a virtue that involves several areas, including truthfulness, cheating, and stealing. Barcalow (1998) considers honesty as strongly tied to fair-mindedness, seeing truthfulness as fairness with regard to information. In a similar way, cheating can be seen as fairness with regard to the particular rules of a practice, and stealing as fairness with

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7 A longer list of virtues considered includes perseverance, prudence (which Aristotle considers an intellectual virtue and not a virtue of character), loyalty, courage, justice, industry, respect, tolerance, fair-mindedness, honesty, and generosity.
regard to the rules of property relations. One can be dishonest by omission (nondisclosure) as well as dishonest by simply lying. The person who displays an excess of honesty may always tells people what she is thinking, without regard for the feelings of others. An excess of honesty might be displayed as well in the case of a person who informs a murderer of the whereabouts of his potential victim when lying might save the victim’s life. A deficit in this area, of course, involves habitual deception in terms of lying, cheating, or stealing. Honesty as a virtue is directly applicable to public relations practice, where neither always speaking one’s mind nor always revealing everything one knows would constitute an excellent practice. In a similar way, engaging in deceptions, or covering up the deceptions of one’s employer, can be seen as a deficit with respect to the virtue of honesty.

Respect in this instance involves the tendency to regard others as having some worth, as rational beings, and to therefore treat them with civility. Barcalow (1998) maintains that respect viewed in this way is a form of fairness, since in recognizing someone’s worth you are, in effect, giving them their due. Some are deserving of more respect than others, and to consistently give others (or a particular other) more respect than they deserve counts as an excess (or vice) with respect to this virtue. To give others (or another) less respect than they deserve is to demonstrate a deficit with respect to this virtue. In public relations, respect can be manifested by treating all publics (and individuals within those publics) with the respect they deserve, and never treating any person or group as not worthy of at least some degree of civility.

Tolerance involves the cultivated propensity to allow others to lead a life based on beliefs contrary to one’s own. To have a deficit in this virtue would involve having too
little tolerance for those with whom one fundamentally disagrees and perhaps interfering in their lives to attempt to change their beliefs or to keep them from acting on those beliefs. In a public relations context, one can imagine, say, an organization attempting to prevent an antagonistic public from staging a legal protest. To have an excess of tolerance could lead one to accept the actions of mass murderers or child molesters as just “another” way of life. For public relations, it could involve not standing up for the rights of abused employees (or members of a public or other interest group) because one sees the side of the abuser as equally worthy of tolerance.

Courage is the fourth virtue chosen for the sake of this example. While courage can involve bravery, the two are not synonymous in this case. Courage involves performing some noble action despite being afraid of the inherent danger of the action. Thus, the man who jumps a motorcycle over 50 cars in hopes of winning a cash award may be seen as brave, since he recognizes and confronts the dangerous nature of the task, but may not be considered to display the virtue of courage, since he is performing the action primarily for his own benefit. To possess too little courage is to be cowardly; to display an excess in this area is to be foolhardy. With respect to public relations, we can imagine courage being displayed by a public relations manager who advocates for the rights of oppressed or abused stakeholders, though he knows by doing so he may lose his job. Cowardice might be found to be displayed by the public relations manager who refuses to perform such a role through fear of losing his job.

Justice is the highest virtue of all for Aristotle (EN 1130a10), involving (as a moral virtue) the idea that an individual possesses a fair-mindedness in relation to others. The demonstration of justice as a virtue may require someone to do without something
she would otherwise have (such as material goods or money) or to endure some hardship she might otherwise not have to endure (to go hungry, for example, so that others might be fed). The practice of justice often requires one to demonstrate other virtues, such as honesty or courage. The person who has cultivated and habituated the virtue of justice is in possession of virtue in the most complete sense, Aristotle tell us, because she can demonstrate her virtue both to herself and towards others (EN 1129b30-35). A person might demonstrate a deficit in the virtue of justice if, for example, she deliberately fails to pay her taxes but routinely enjoys the benefits (such as traveling on roads or police protection) that are incurred as the result of taxation. In the arena of public relations, a deficiency with respect to justice could result in the view that a corporation ought to perform actions to the detriment of its employees or other stakeholders, particularly in violation of some rule or law, as long as the corporation benefits and there is good chance that the corporation will not be caught.

These virtues, then, while not offered as a complete account of virtues for public relations, at least give some idea of the way in which the virtues might be defined and referenced in a public relations context. It is important to remember that the virtues are not a set of principles against which we are to evaluate the actions of individuals. Instead, they are excellences of character, the inculcation and practice of which allow one to lead a flourishing life, or (in this instance) allow one to perform as a public relations manager in a flourishing way. How, then, might some of these virtues have been displayed in the Enron case discussed previously?

**Virtues Applied to Enron**

The first thing to note in the application of a virtue-based applied ethic to the Enron scenario is the nature of this approach as compared to other normative approaches. We
are more concerned here with agents than with actions. That is, as virtue ethics is primarily concerned with what to be and not what to do, both the approach and the kind of results one gets are likely to be different than those of theories of applied ethics. For the sake of analysis, as before, the assumption is made that the public relations manager is a member of the dominant coalition.

Recall that the Enron scenario, as previously described, involved (among other things) Enron top executives deceiving both their employees and other shareholders about the nature of the company’s financial well-being. The primary action-guiding question to ask in light of virtue theory is “What would the virtuous person—top manager, public relations officer, etc.—have done in these circumstances?” The answer seems obvious, even without consulting the five virtues offered above, that the virtuous CEO (or other top managers) would not have deceived his shareholders in a way that apparently Enron top executives did. It seems likewise obvious that a public relations manager who practiced the virtues would not have allowed shareholders, employees, and other key publics to have been deceived if he could have avoided it somehow.

Consider, for example, the virtue of honesty, involving truthfulness and fairness with regard to information. Embracing and practicing the virtue of honesty, either as a corporate virtue or as a habituated character trait displayed by the top public relations practitioners of Enron, would naturally preclude the corporation from engaging in deceptive practices and from passing information to its shareholders and employees that was not truthful. Likewise, practicing the virtue of honesty would preclude these same people both from stealing and from covering up for those who they knew to be stealing. Likewise, having habituated the virtue of courage, the courageous practitioner of public
relations would be one who would stand ready to expose such corruption and goings-on, despite potential resistance to such activity. These results, while rather trivially intuitive, show something important about the virtue-ethics approach.

Enron, in creating a corporate culture where the bottom line mattered more than ethical considerations, was, de facto, acting contrary to the very notion of demonstrating and habituating the virtues. While this may not seem particularly insightful at first glance, it does serve to show that, in a corporation where the virtues are embraced (whatever those virtues turn out to be, and because virtue is a notion based on flourishing for a particular circumstance in a particular cultural context, the virtues may be different for a corporation in one culture or country at one particular time than for another at another time), a situation such as Enron found itself in would not have developed. And it will not do here to say that Enron did the things they considered to be in the interest of their own personal and, or corporation’s flourishing – the nature of the virtues of honesty, courage, and justice, as briefly explained above, run contrary to such a notion of flourishing. The responsibility to know better, to know that such actions were not in the best interest of the flourishing of the company or its individuals, as well, is captured in a virtue-based model. Additionally captured is the idea that even when Enron top executives may have been doing things that appeared to be ethical, such as creating all the “right” business ethics tools, codes, and programs, their motivations were not in accordance with the virtues of honest, respect, tolerance, courage, or justice. It is a unique feature of virtue ethics to consider motivations in this way and a unique result of

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8 It should be noted here that the bottom financial line can itself be an ethical consideration, inasmuch as public corporations have a moral obligation to their shareholders to, within certain bounds, maximize profits. Enron, it seems, did not recognize particular boundaries and, in the end and somewhat ironically, their actions initially aimed at making profits ultimately caused the entire corporation to fail.
applying a virtue-based ethic that such motivations count as a factor in the character of those involved.

In a corporation where the virtues are embraced, practiced, and habituated, situations such as Enron’s do not arise. Granted, corporations such as this may be few and far between, but that is not a knock on a virtue-based approach to ethics. What it may show is that a corporate change in the very way we think about ethics may be promising in terms of ensuring ethical outcomes in the many and complicated situations that corporations face. Even if such an applied ethic is *prima facie* plausible, however, what would it mean for public relations?

**Implications for Public Relations**

Accepting a virtue-based account of public relations ethics leads to several implications for public relations. The most obvious (and immediate) would be a change in the way we conceive of ethics and ethical issues. As I have stressed previously, virtue ethics is concerned with what to *be*, what kind of person to be. Its focus is on character, and as such, it is less concerned with generic principles of action (such as codes of conduct) and much more concerned with the development of one’s character through the habitual practice of the virtues. Accepting a virtue-based account of public relations would represent a fundamental shift in thought away from commandment-based thinking about right and wrong and towards thought about what it is to be an excellent person, a person of character. This advantage, however, can also be seen as a limitation. As MacIntyre (1984) has pointed out, changing the way in which people view ethics is no easy task and is certainly not one that is quickly performed. As it involves a fundamental change in the way in which many people conceive ethics, much education is required
over the course of a long period of time. Public relations practitioners, as communicators and relationship builders, and as the ethical conscious of an organization, may be in a uniquely advantageous position to begin such an endeavor.

This shift in thought would naturally entail a new emphasis on moral development and education. For, as we have seen, to live the virtuous life is not to practice the virtues for a day or a week, but to cultivate habits of excellence over the course of one’s lifetime. Integral to an account of the virtues is the idea of consistent and daily emphasis on excellence. To paraphrase Aristotle from the Nicomachean Ethics: One swallow does not a spring day make, nor does one sunny day. It is only by inculcating the virtues and practicing them habitually that one becomes virtuous, and this kind of moral development requires emphasis, education, and reflection in a way that other outlooks on ethics do not. While this type of constant emphasis is no doubt a challenge as well as an advantage, keeping ethics in the forefront of thought and inherently integrated in the daily activities of public relations practitioners and corporations not only would reap its own benefits, but synergistically serves to habituate such virtues.

A final implication to mention here is that no matter what theory of public relations one subscribes to, it will likely be compatible with a virtue-based approach to ethics. For this kind of general approach is not dependent upon any particular conception of what public relations is. Granted, just what counts as a virtue, or what virtues are emphasized the most, may change slightly according to which theory of public relations one subscribes to, but the theory in its essence will not change. Thus, there would be the potential for greater flexibility in talking cross culturally, indeed globally, about both ethics and ethical issues. Such an approach would meet Kim’s (2005) call for
universalism in public relations ethics while recognizing and accounting for differences of culture and situation.

In the end, the shift in emphasis from action-centered theories of applied ethics to a virtue-based theory has many advantages. Whether public relations managers and corporations themselves would be willing to accept such a radical shift in emphasis remains to be seen. It is the nature of the normative, however, to show what ought to be and not simply what is likely to be accepted, and the nature of this work, for now at least, remains in the realm of the normative.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Ethics is important to public relations for a number of reasons, including maintaining (or establishing) the reputation of the profession and, perhaps more importantly, for guidance in doing the right (ethically speaking) thing for the sake of doing the right thing. The call for an applied ethic in public relations that is grounded firmly in a philosophical ethic is a sound one. Ethics that are not grounded in this way are inherently arbitrary or, worse, contradictory.

This work represents a critical examination of the state of theory building in public relations ethics. Among the forays into an applied ethic for public relations, two attempts notably stand out: Ronald Pearson’s (1989a) dialogical account of public relations ethics and Shannon Bowen’s (2000, 2001) deontological model of ethical decision-making. While each of these models makes much progress toward establishing an applied ethic that is grounded in philosophy, in the end each falls short. Pearson’s theory relies on a consensus version of epistemic truth, and in doing so requires one to subscribe to the same version of truth or to reject the model. Further, in application, Pearson’s theory can yield results that lie on dubious philosophical ground: specifically, that an action is wrong because it is wrong. Bowen’s model, on the other hand, loses its philosophical grounding in the transition from issues management to the categorical imperative. When the model strays from Kant, it loses its philosophical grounding in the process. Finally, as presented, Bowen’s (2000, 2004) model applies only in light of an excellence model of
public relations; other theoretical underpinnings for public relations are not considered or accommodated.

It is important to keep in mind just what kind of thing we are seeking if we are indeed seeking a public relations ethic that is firmly grounded in philosophy. We are seeking a kind of applied ethic, one that has its basis in some normative theory of philosophy. While the possible candidates and varieties are as numerous as the many scores of variations on traditional and non-traditional normative ethical theories, some will be a better fit than others. Whether the fit is better or worse may, in large part, depend on one’s conception of public relations in the first place. Virtue ethics, I have tried to argue here, can provide one variety of normative ethical grounding for a theory of public relations ethics that can not only accommodate many different conceptions of public relations, but do so across many different geographic and cultural boundaries. Under such a model, agents are required to become virtuous persons by practicing the virtues, a process that itself requires conscious and continuous development and practice. One advantage of such a model is that it can allow for a plurality of virtues, making such a model much more likely to enjoy global application while still retaining its normative philosophical grounding. There are challenges and limitations to such an approach, to be sure, and much hard work and commitment would be required of those who seek to employ such an approach. It remains to be seen whether such an approach would be practical in the current global environment. I believe that it is, at the very minimum, worth exploring.

Further research might expand the outline of a model presented here to explore in much more detail just how the model would work for private corporations, charities, the
government, and multinational corporations. Concurrently, one could actually explore the compatibility (i.e., the plausibility) of a virtue-based public relations ethic within a particular organization. Another important area for further exploration would be to attempt a description of the virtues in terms of the various practices within which public relations takes place. One might, for example, describe the particular set of virtues unique to practicing public relations for private industry in China, and the way, within the particular cultural context of that situation, one would go about inculcating and habituating those virtues. With enough such accounts, the job of determining what shared virtues ought to account for the basis of a pluralistic, global, virtue-based public relations ethic could begin. There is much work left to be done.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Benton Danner is an 18-year active-duty Army officer commissioned into the Armor Branch from the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, in 1987. He has served as a tank platoon leader; scout platoon leader; tank company executive officer; Battalion Logistics Officer; Squadron Maintenance Officer; commander of an M1A1 tank company; an Assistant and then Associate Professor of English at West Point; a Public Affairs Officer for the 11-nation Multinational Force and Observers in the Sinai, Egypt; and most recently as the Public Affairs Officer for U.S. Army Alaska. He has also seen duty in Germany, Southwest Asia, and stateside assignments including Kentucky and Kansas. A native Texan, he holds a Bachelor of Science degree in general engineering from West Point and a master’s degree in Philosophy from Texas A&M University. He currently resides in Gainesville, Florida, with his wife of 16 years, Susan, and their two daughters, Annie and Molly.