
What's wrong with asymmetry? Persuasion and power in public relations theory

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Abstract

There is an influential tendency in public relations theory to treat persuasion as always being an exercise of power over others, and thus as intrinsically equivalent to manipulation or domination. This paper attempts to uncover the presuppositions that underlie this ‘fear of persuasion’, as they operate in the work of James E. Grunig. It is argued that the equation of persuasion with manipulation or domination only makes sense if it is presupposed that preferences (and hence methods of preference formation) are non-rational. Once we remind ourselves that persuasion can have a rational dimension, it becomes possible to see how persuasion, despite its ‘asymmetry’, can nonetheless be an ethically legitimate part of public relations practice.ⁱ

As Fawkes (2007) points out, an influential part of modern public relations theory has been marked by a ‘fear of persuasion’. That is to say, there has been strong resistance amongst a number of theorists – with James E. Grunig being the most important of these – to the idea that persuasion could, or should, be a significant part of public relations. This is because there has been a tendency to see persuasion as a form of ‘domination’ or ‘manipulation’ – that is, as a means for an organisation to exercise *power* over its publics. Given this, persuasion is naturally viewed as intrinsically morally problematic. Unsurprisingly then, much theoretical effort has gone into conceptualising ‘proper’ or ‘ethical’ public relations in a way that distances it from the activity of persuasion (in addition to Grunig’s works, other examples of this line of thought include Jahoonzi 2006; Ledingham & Bruning 2000; Stoker &

Tusinski 2006). However, as Fawkes also remarks, this does not appear to be a satisfactory state of affairs. For it would seem that persuasion is, in fact, an almost inescapable part of actual public relations practice. Hence, any theory that announces that persuasion should have no part in that practice is in danger of rendering itself nothing more than an academic “fantasy” (Fawkes 2007, p. 26).

In order to make sense of why some public relations theorists are driven to produce such theories, it is necessary to have a closer look at the conceptual link between persuasion and power. For, as noted above, it is this link that lies behind the ‘fear’ pointed out by Fawkes. Through a brief examination of Grunig’s work, this paper attempts, first, to uncover the implicit assumptions that generate the view that persuasion is intrinsically a form of ‘manipulation’ or ‘domination’, and, secondly, to assess those assumptions. By way of this analysis, the paper argues that the ‘fear of persuasion’ stems from an impoverished conception of preferences, and therefore preference formation, as non-rational. Once this conception of preference formation is replaced by a richer (and, arguably, more realistic) one, it becomes clearer how ethically appropriate forms of persuasion can be a legitimate part of public relations practice.

As remarked above, rather than attempt to examine the ‘fear of persuasion’ as it operates across a range of public relations theorists, this paper takes the simpler route of examining it in one theory: that of James E. Grunig (as discussed in Grunig 1984, 1989, 2001). This is partly for reasons of space, of course, but also because Grunig offers us one of the clearest, best-developed, and most influential accounts of public relations to be found in the literature.

As is well known, the key distinction in Grunig's theory is between *symmetrical* and *asymmetrical* forms of public relations. This distinction refers simultaneously to the distribution of (a) the beneficial effects of public relations, and (b) the changes to beliefs and attitudes that are caused by public relations, and that produce its beneficial effects. Symmetrical forms have (a) "effects that a neutral observer would describe as benefiting both organization and publics" (Grunig 1989, p. 29), and (b) achieve those effects by bringing about "symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes, and behaviors of both the organization and its publics" (Grunig 1989, p. 30). To put this another way, symmetrical public relations practices attempt to maintain "a balance between self-interest and concern for the interests of others" (Grunig 2001, p. 28). Asymmetrical public relations approaches, on the other hand, are intended (a) to produce an effect that "benefits the organization and not publics" (Grunig 1989, p. 29), and (b) to achieve that effect by changing only the "ideas, attitudes, and behaviors" (Grunig 1989, p. 30) of its publics, and not those of the organisation. Grunig argues that public relations practitioners ought to engage in symmetrical practices, as these are both morally superior to, and more effective than, the asymmetrical forms.

In Grunig's model, persuasion is firmly located on the 'asymmetrical' side of the distinction. Grunig makes clear its morally suspect nature by regularly associating the term 'persuasion' with a range of terms with obvious negative connotations, such as 'manipulation', 'domination', and 'taking advantage of' (Grunig 2001). Symmetrical forms of public relations, on the other hand, are described in more positive, or at least neutral, terms such as 'bargaining', 'negotiation', 'mutual understanding', 'conflict resolution', and 'relationship building' (Grunig 2001). In fact, Grunig (1989) goes so far as to relate the symmetrical/asymmetrical distinction not just to public relations, but to the goals of communication in general, claiming that

"[t]he major purpose of communication is to facilitate understanding among people and other such systems as organizations, publics, or societies. *Persuasion of one person or system by another is less desirable*" (p. 38; emphasis added).

In Grunig, then, we have an account of public relations practice in which bargaining is seen as ethically superior to persuasion, because the latter is equated with the 'manipulation' and 'domination' of publics by an organisation. As an aid to unpacking the assumptions underlying this view, let us consider a schematic model of a prototypical 'public relations scenario'. Suppose there is an organisation and its public, each possessing a certain set of preferences (e.g., concerning how they want various scarce resources to be distributed). By hypothesis, let the organisation and its public be in conflict. That is, the organisation's preferences clash with its public's preferences (which is to say that their conjoined preferences are inconsistent, or not jointly realisable). In Grunig's account, the right task for the public relations practitioner of the organisation in this situation is: how can she assist the organisation in reaching a *bargain* with its public, so as to satisfy most of the organisation's preferences (or, to be more precise, maximise the organisation's utility)? Such a bargain involves the organisation and its public each compromising, by giving up some of their preferences, in order to produce a consistent set that allows them jointly to satisfy the rest of their preferences. As Grunig (2001) puts it, "[o]rganizations get more of what they want when they give up some of what they want" (p. 13).

This model of public relations can be seen as essentially an extension of the very influential liberal-pluralist conception of democracy. This conception views society as made up of competing 'interest groups', each with its own set of preferences. Politics is then conceived of as a matter of resolving the question of how to distribute scarce resources across these interest groups, in a way that allows them jointly to maximise their utility (for discussion see Baker 2002; Benhabib 1992; Ackerman 1989). This is achieved by orchestrating a bargaining process

amongst these groups (via their political representatives) in order to come up with a jointly consistent set of preferences (if you like, a ‘formula’ for distributing resources). Grunig (1989) is quite explicit about this conceptual background to his account of public relations, remarking that one of its key presuppositions is “interest group liberalism” (p. 39) and citing T. J. Lowie’s definition of “the public interest as a result of the amalgamation of various claims” (cited p. 39, n. 13). This ‘amalgamation’ is achieved via bargaining between groups, which is in turn facilitated by public relations practice (at least of the ‘symmetrical’ kind). Hence, on this view, the public relations practitioner ideally becomes a key participant in the democratic process.

This schematic model of public relations, with its grounding in the liberal-pluralist conception of democracy, gives a plausible explanation as to why Grunig places so much emphasis on the ethical importance of ‘symmetry’, and why he thinks persuasion is necessarily akin to ‘manipulation’ and ‘domination’. An asymmetrical approach to public relations, on this model, is one in which an organisation seeks to get its public to accept a *bad bargain*. That is, the thought is that if the organisation manages to persuade its public to modify some of its (the public’s) preferences, without the organisation modifying any of its own in exchange, then its public has accepted a bad bargain, for its public has in that case given up something in exchange for nothing. In a bargaining situation between rational parties, it would seem that this could only happen through fraud or trickery of some kind (e.g., in which the badness of the bargain is hidden from the public), or coercion (e.g., implicit or explicit threats by the organisation). Hence, if persuasion is conceived of in this way (that is, as a means for getting a public to accept a bad bargain), it does indeed become equivalent to ‘manipulation’ or ‘domination’. The successful use of persuasion would seem to involve, in other words, a breach of a basic ethic of fairness.

If this account of the underlying logic of Grunig’s position is correct, then it also helps to uncover the key presupposition of his view, namely, that *preferences have no rational basis*. Consequently, the process of forming or changing preferences (e.g., via persuasion) is also treated as if it were entirely non-rational. That this follows from Grunig’s commitments can be shown as follows. As noted, Grunig holds that the morally preferable form of public relations practice is the facilitation of bargaining between an organisation and its publics. As argued above, this view only makes sense on the presupposition that the *only* good reason for changing or giving up a preference is if by so doing, one can satisfy one’s other preferences (that is, if it allows one to reach a compromise that will allow one to maximise one’s utility). In turn, this is to presuppose that the actors in the theory (that is, the organisation and its publics) have, as their sole interest, the satisfaction of their preferences in whatever way maximises their utility. In other words, the actors in this account treat their own preferences as simply ‘given’, or as ‘brute facts’. That is, the actors do not care what the preferences are or how they were formed; they care simply about satisfying those preferences, given that they have them. This view thus treats the content of the preferences as not open to rational consideration. This is because the actors’ rationality is limited to calculating instrumentally how best to satisfy the set of preferences, and has no role to play in assessing the content of those preferences.

The actors in Grunig’s account are thus conceived of as being like the actors in social choice theory, neo-classical economics, and (as remarked above) liberal-pluralist models of democracy. As has been widely noted, in each of these theories, preferences are treated as brute facts, and the agents’ sole interest lies in maximising their utility, via the calculations of instrumental rationality (see Sen 1984a, 1984b). In other words, just as with Grunig’s account, these theories treat preferences, and the process of preference formation, as non-rational. Grunig’s presuppositions, on the account given here, are thus no conceptual oddity, but rather are part of a broad movement in modern

thought – one tendency of which has been to narrow drastically the scope of human rationality.

Now, it is precisely because Grunig's account must presuppose that preferences have no rational basis, that he is driven to the view that persuasion *must* be an exercise of power by one party over another, and thus a form of 'manipulation' or 'domination'. In other words, as will now be argued, it is this conception of preferences as non-rational that is the ultimate source of the 'fear of persuasion' displayed in Grunig's account of public relations.

In order to make the case for this diagnosis of the 'fear of persuasion', it is worth reapproaching the topic by considering an historical analogue of Grunig's position. Grunig's thought that persuasion is necessarily an exercise of power, and thus essentially a form of 'manipulation' or 'domination', replicates similar fears expressed in ancient Greek philosophy. The following remark from Plato's dialogue *Philebus* sums up much of these fears, when he has Protarchus say that: "Gorgias used to remark that the art of persuasion is greatly superior to all other arts, for it enslaves all things not by force but by their willing submission" (Plato 1961 [c. 380 BC], 58a-b). In other words, according to Plato's portrayal, for Gorgias (a famous rhetorician of Ancient Greece), persuasion is a means of dominating ('enslaving') others (and for evidence that this was indeed the historical Gorgias's view, see Segal 1962). That is, persuasion is a method for exercising power over people, just as coercion ('force') is. Indeed, the suggestion made in Gorgias's remark (as reported by Plato) is that persuasion is a more effective means of exercising power over others, because, unlike force, people 'willingly submit' to it.

This latter idea is worth unpacking in more detail, as it helps to explain the pervasiveness and intensity of the 'fear of persuasion'. If I force, or coerce, you into doing an action *A* (e.g., I coerce you into handing me your wallet, by threatening you with a knife), you act from a motive you would prefer not to be

acting from (e.g., fear of the consequences of not doing *A*) (cf. Frankfurt 1988; Nozick 1969). In other words, you submit to what I want, but not willingly. However, suppose I manage, through a successful process of persuasion, to cause you to modify your preferences, so that you now want to do *A* (and want to want to do *A*). In this case, the outcome seems to be that you do what I want (namely, *A*), but willingly. You have, in effect, collaborated in your own 'enslavement' to my will.

In other words, persuasion appears fearful not just because it is a way of exercising power over others, but because it seems to have the insidious potential to undermine their autonomy in ways that crude coercion or force leave untouched (cf. Benn 1967; Berlin 1958). Consider the following. Suppose I imprison you in a cell. At first, you bitterly resent this, and are constantly trying to escape. However, over time, through a relentless effort of persuasion, I manage to wear down your resistance, and lead you to believe that you are better off living in my prison. From this point on you will stay in the cell of your own accord; I do not even have to bother locking the door. In one sense, you are now free, because you are doing what you want to do (namely, remaining in the cell); however, in another sense, it seems clear that you are suffering an even more pernicious kind of imprisonment than before – in that I have now imprisoned your mind, and not just your body. If this idea seems too fanciful, readers may wish to consider the case of José Padilla, arrested in 2002 and accused of plotting to detonate a radioactive 'dirty bomb' in the USA. After several years of being held and interrogated in isolation, Padilla apparently came to identify so strongly with the US Government that during his trial he complained that his defence attorney was being "unfair to the Commander-in-Chief" (quoted in Goodman 2007).

In such spectacular cases as this, persuasion does indeed look like a form of 'enslavement' (Gorgias), or 'manipulation' and 'domination' (Grunig); however, to see *all* cases of persuasion as variations on this theme is to slur over some crucially important distinctions. After all, we persuade, or try to persuade, one

another every day; it is a common feature of our social interactions with one another. I persuade you to take this bus rather than that one ('the 333 is the express route'); I persuade you to watch this movie rather than that one ('Owen Wilson is really good in it'); I persuade you to have the muesli for breakfast rather than the fried bacon ('remember your cholesterol levels'). It seems absurd that examples such as this *must* be characterised as outcomes in a 'zero-sum' game, in which I have 'enslaved', 'dominated', 'manipulated' or 'taken advantage of' you. This suggests that the basic assumption underlying the fear of persuasion – namely, the thought that persuasion *always* involves one party exercising power over another – needs to be re-examined.

In order to do this, it is necessary to look again at the reasoning that led to the view of persuasion as intrinsically being an exercise of power. Schematically, when A succeeds in persuading B, the following process occurs:

1. A engages in communication with B, with the intended purpose of getting B to believe and/or desire such-and-such (typically, with the further purpose of causing B to choose to *do* certain things).

2. B comes to believe and/or desire such-and-such, because of A's communications.

Now, put simply, to exercise power over a person is to subject her to one's will, or to get her to do what one wants her to do. Given this, the above schematic outline of the process of persuasion certainly makes it look, *prima facie*, like an example of A exercising power over B. After all, A intends that B comes to believe and/or desire such-and-such, and those beliefs and/or desires are then formed by B in accordance with A's intention. In other words, it looks as if B has done what A wants her to do; B has, to that extent, apparently been 'enslaved' or 'dominated' by A.

However, this schema, by itself, cannot be an adequate analysis of persuasion, and clarifying what is missing from it will help to make sense of the views of Gorgias and Grunig. To begin with, it should be noted that

this schema would apply equally well to a phenomenon such as 'hypnotic suggestion'. In other words, what is wrong with the schema is that it encourages the notion that A's communication *directly* produces the beliefs and/or desires in B. But, whatever might be true of 'hypnotic suggestion' (supposing such a phenomenon to exist), ordinary persuasive communications do not, of themselves, simply 'implant' beliefs or desires in us. Rather, beliefs and desires are produced in us via the mediation of our *rationality* (where this latter term is used in its broadest sense, to refer to all of the various ways in which we deliberate about, assess, and form beliefs and desires). Typically, in an attempt at persuasion, A provides B with various *reasons* for believing a certain conclusion or adopting a particular preference or desire; B then assesses those reasons, A's credibility, and so on and so forth, in the light of her other beliefs and desires. Hence, it is potentially misleading simply to say (as does the schema given above) that A's communication produces certain beliefs and/or desires in B. Instead, it needs to be emphasised that the beliefs and desires in question are produced by A's communication *in conjunction with the operation of B's rationality*.

To think otherwise, is to succumb to a fantasy of the human being as like a mechanical device, and, implicitly, to treat persuasive communication as a mere conduit for exerting causal influence on that device. Expressions of such a reductive fantasy can be found again and again in the writings of those who emphasise the potential for persuasion to be an exercise of power. For example, Jacques Ellul's famous discussion of propaganda is full of imagery of the human being as a complex machine, able to be governed by "technicians of influence", who utilise our "psychological levers", to bring about beliefs and desires as "a type of reflex action, by short-circuiting the intellectual process" (Ellul 1965, pp. 20, 32, 30). Similar mechanistic imagery is indulged in by that other evangelist for the power of persuasion, Edward Bernays, who remarks that "in certain cases we can effect some change in public opinion with a fair degree of accuracy by operating a certain mechanism, just as the

motorist can regulate the speed of his car by manipulating the flow of gasoline”, and thus we can “control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing about it” (Bernays 2005 [1928], pp. 71–2). Implicit in such images is a model of persuasion in which rationality (or, ‘the intellectual process’, as Ellul puts it) plays no part. This in turn is to conceive of persuasive communication as a mere conduit for causal influence on us (a mere force, whereby others can, as it were, ‘push’ and ‘pull’ us about). In other words, it is to think of persuasion as intrinsically an exercise of power.

It is not being claimed here, of course, that Grunig would explicitly want to embrace such an account of communication; however, it has been argued here that, implicitly, this sort of reductionism is what is lying behind the ‘fear of persuasion’ that his account of public relations displays. To recapitulate, the argument has been that to treat preferences as non-rational (as Grunig’s account must do, if it is to make sense) is to be committed to the view that processes of preference formation are also non-rational. Persuasion, of course, is a crucial method whereby our preferences (i.e., our beliefs and desires) are formed. And to think of persuasion as non-rational – as both the sophist Gorgias (at least, as portrayed by Plato) and Grunig do – is to treat persuasive communication purely as a means whereby one agent can exercise power over another, and thus as a form of ‘enslavement’, ‘manipulation’, or ‘domination’.

If, however, persuasion can have a rational dimension, then it is possible for it not to be an exercise of power (at least, not in any morally problematic sense). Once this is accepted, then the fear of persuasion will be seen to be unfounded. But before proceeding with this next stage of the argument, it needs to be clarified what is meant by saying that persuasion can have a ‘rational dimension’. Now, a full discussion of the rationality of preference formation is of course far beyond the scope of this paper; but it is, in any case, unnecessary for the argument at hand. All that the argument to be presented here requires is a very weak claim, namely, that there is a

distinction between communications that (as a matter of fact) succeed in persuading, and communications that are genuinely persuasive (i.e., which *ought* to persuade). In other words, to talk of the ‘rational dimension’ of persuasion, is simply to point out that persuasive communication is not just a causal force, but is also open to various forms of rational assessment. Such an assumption should be considered unproblematic, because it is made implicitly by anybody who engages in critical discussion with any degree of sincerity (after all, critique would be meaningless if persuasion were simply a ‘force’, with no normative dimension to it).

It now needs to be shown how this simple distinction (between what actually persuades and what ought to persuade) helps to show that persuasion need not be a form of ‘manipulation’ and ‘domination’. First, it needs to be noted that power, in the morally problematic sense which is under discussion here, involves being made subject to another’s will (Frankfurt 1988). To put this another way, one can only be enslaved, coerced, manipulated, or dominated by another *person* (where this can be a corporate person, such as an institution or organisation).

Second, insofar as a persuasive communication is rational, it is open to *public* discussion, assessment, and critique (e.g., in terms of whether the beliefs it expresses are true, or well justified by available evidence; whether the reasons it gives are good; and so on and so forth). This entails that insofar as a persuasive communication ought to persuade us, it is, in principle, separable or detachable from the agent who is attempting to persuade us. That is, the persuasive communication can be repeated by others, in other contexts, and still maintain its rational persuasiveness (for otherwise, public assessment of it would be impossible). This means that what ought to persuade us in a persuasive communication (i.e., its rational dimension) does not lie in its link with the persuading agent and her will, but in the communication itself. As Benn (1967) puts it, “[r]ational persuasion, in short, is impersonal, in the sense that it is the argument not the person that persuades” (p. 265). This is

so even when the credibility (Aristotle's ethos) of the persuading agent plays a crucial role in the persuasiveness of the message. For credibility does not mean that the identity of the agent *per se* (i.e., the mere fact that the communication issues from her will) gives the claim rationally persuasive force; rather, it means that the identity of the agent gives us *good reasons* for accepting the claim (e.g., because she has proved trustworthy in the past, because she has demonstrated expertise in the relevant field of knowledge, and so on and so forth).

In conclusion, when we are persuaded by the rational dimension of a communication, we are persuaded by the communication itself (e.g., the evidence and argument that it contains), rather than by the will of the persuader. So, when we engage rationally with persuasive communication, we are not being made subject to anybody's will. Hence, in such cases we are not being 'enslaved', 'manipulated' or 'dominated' by the persuasion, for it is not an exercise of power over us.

Consider a simple example. Suppose you are planning a bushwalk to Yankee Hat Mountain, and that there are two available routes (X and Y). You would rather take route X as it is more scenic and the slope is easier, but I then tell you (truly) 'do not take route X; the road is flooded out', so you decide to take route Y. I have thus persuaded you to take route Y, but in so doing I have not made you subject to my will. I have not exercised power over you, because you did not change your preference in response to my will, but in response to the good reason embodied in my persuasive communication.

It has been argued here that, insofar as a persuasive communication persuades in virtue of its rational dimension, then it is not an exercise of power. Before turning to look at what this conclusion implies for public relations ethics, it is worth briefly answering two potential objections. First, the claim being made here is not that there could be a *purely* rational form of persuasion, in the sense of a communication that was 'entirely logical', with no rhetorical dimension. The

argument made above does not rely on the presupposition that there could be any such 'ideal speech situation', free of all forms of non-rational influence (that is, in Habermas's term, *herrschaftsfrei*) (Williams 2002). Rather, the claim is simply that insofar as we are persuaded by the rational dimension of a persuasive communication, we are not being made subject to the persuader's will. Second, it is not being claimed here that persuasion cannot legitimately make use of 'emotional appeals' (Aristotle's pathos). Emotion is not external to, or opposed to, rationality (see, e.g., the arguments in de Sousa 1990). Hence, emotional appeal can be a component of the rational dimension of a persuasive communication, so long as the appeal is reasonable and properly convincing, rather than specious and manipulative.

Returning now to public relations theory, if the argument developed in this paper is correct, then it means that the generalised 'fear of persuasion' found expressed in Grunig's account (and, if Fawkes (2007) is correct, also in much other public relations theory) is unfounded. Persuasion can have a rational dimension, and thus need not be a morally problematic exercise of power by an organisation over its publics. Persuasion can therefore be considered a legitimate tool of public relations practice. *Pace* Grunig, public relations practitioners are not morally obliged to restrict themselves to bargaining over actually existing preferences; they can also legitimately seek to change and to form preferences via persuasive communication. To put this another way, there is no moral obligation for public relations practitioners to restrict themselves to 'symmetrical' forms of communication. Indeed, the asymmetrical-symmetrical distinction is not a *moral* distinction.

However, the argument developed here also entails that not all forms of persuasion are morally acceptable. An obvious example of when persuasion becomes unacceptable is when it relies upon deceit. This is because persuasion that involves lies is straightforwardly manipulative. It deceives its audience into responding to what is a product of the

persuader's will (namely, the lies), as if it were the truth. It is thus a direct attempt by the persuader to control the audience's beliefs and desires, by denying the audience the opportunity to respond rationally to good reasons (cf. Williams 2002, p. 118; Bok 1999). In other words, persuasive communications involving lies are a direct attempt to exercise power over another.

Whilst the moral unacceptability of persuasion involving lies is obvious enough, there does not seem to be a similar requirement for the public relations practitioner to be candid. That is, whilst the practitioner is, no doubt, morally required to tell the truth, it does not seem that she or he is similarly required to tell the *whole* truth. However, failures of candour shade into deceit, so it is not clear where the line between them should be drawn. For example, it is possible to tell a truth in such a way as to encourage the audience to draw a false implication from it (what the logicians term the fallacy of *suggestio falsi*). Now, the extent to which candour is demanded seems to be dependent in part on the nature of the relationship that exists between the organisation and its publics (Williams 2002). Where that relationship is characterised by high levels of trust, a correspondingly high level of candour seems morally demanded. However, in relationships that are highly antagonistic, the moral requirements on truth-telling may be quite different. In addition, the extent to which candour is demanded, as well as the sorts of persuasive methods that are permissible, also seems to depend upon how vulnerable the public in question is to being misled by particular forms of persuasive influence. For example, publics that lacked certain kinds of mathematical education may be vulnerable to being overly swayed by selective use of statistics; in such cases, deliberate use of such persuasive methods certainly looks manipulative.

These remarks, of course, have no pretence to be even the beginnings of a comprehensive theory of the limits of acceptable persuasion. Rather, they are offered merely as illustrations of the sorts of areas in which

more investigation is required. For if the argument given in this paper is correct, then there is no good reason for public relations theory to be 'afraid' of persuasion. Instead, what is required is a careful examination of the ethics of persuasion in the context of public relations practice, and the development of a theory that shows where, and why, persuasion changes from being acceptable, to being an attempt to exercise power unjustly over others.

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