Public relations ethics: A simpler (but not simplistic) approach to the complexities

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Professional public relations bodies internationally have established ethics codes in an attempt to regulate members' ethical behaviour. This paper critiques the code-based framework on philosophical and practical grounds, suggesting that such frameworks are inadequate because they leave practitioners free to interpret these guides in ways that advance their own and their clients' interests. We argue that this latitude does not foster ethical behaviour. We then contrast rule-following, action-based ethics with agent-based ethics, conceived in Aristotelian terms, and suggest that the virtue ethics advanced by Aristotle and his interpreters represents a more challenging but more authentically ethical path for practitioners to consider.

Introduction

Even if many public relations practitioners are not "amoral sheep that blindly service their clients with reckless ethical abandon" (Lieber, 2003, p.43), the public relations industry has become synonymous with ethical slipperiness to the extent that a leading academic at a recent conference equated public relations directly with "deceptive communication" (cited in Galloway, 2004, ¶.1).

This is just one indicator that ethical issues remain pressing for public relations professionals, who may if they wish inform their decision-making with a considerable range of recommended guides and models, including professional ethics codes, or tests such as TARES, "mum", or "front page" (Lieber, 1998; Tilley, in press). The existence of such aids is no guarantee of ethical behaviour, as a recent case in the US demonstrates. The case involved a commentator, Armstrong Williams, failing to disclose he was paid by a client of Ketchum Public Relations, the US Department of Education, to tout a piece of Bush administration legislation. In a statement on the case, Ketchum acknowledged that its work "did not comply with the guidelines of our agency and our industry" (van der Pool, 2005, ¶.5).

Ethical nostrums designed to address professional practice issues often rest on the bedrock assumption that clarity is the chief question. This is true of the business ethics debate generally, as well as the public relations ethics debate specifically. For example, in a recent *Economist* piece on business ethics, Clive Cook (2005) comments, "It is lack of clarity about business ethics that gives rise to confusion over what managers' responsibilities are, and where the limits of those responsibilities lie" (p.14). The assumption has been that if only practitioners knew what was ethical (or not), if only they had a practicable ethical model to apply, they would be able to choose to operate in an ethical way: and would, in fact, do so. In line with this belief, public relations professional bodies around the world have developed ethics codes,[1] and some (in the US) have introduced an ethical decision-making advisory service to help meet this perceived need for lucidity.

These are action-based approaches to ethics (Dobson, 2004). However, whether expressed as

[1] The authors accept that code authors sincerely seek to improve the industry's ethical performance. However, other motivations may include a desire to pre-empt external regulation (Longstaff, 1994) or to provide "one of the key attributes of any profession" (Tallant & Ryberg, n.d., p.2) with the aim of reinforcing perceptions that public relations has or should be accorded the status of a profession.

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a preoccupation with rules governing action, as in ethics codes, or as a consequentialist utilitarian calculus (meaning that, within a free market framework, maximum collective utility is seen as a sum of individual utility represented as pursuit of self-interest) such action approaches to ethics do little to truly illuminate the ethical dilemmas practitioners frequently face. By contrast, agent-based approaches focusing on the character and motivations of individual agents tend to provide much greater clarification of actual ethical issues.

A comparison between action and agent approaches enables us to evaluate the relevance to public relations of Dobson's (1997) "Trojan horse" argument. Dobson proposes applying agent-based Aristotelian ethical concepts to business ethics in general, but believes that this application exposes as simulacra actions undertaken simply for the sake of acquiring material wealth. He argues that bringing in agent-based ethics acts like a Trojan horse, opening the door to significant system changes.

We explore responses to a key question that crystallises the virtues approach to ethics—'What is it that public relations practitioners do of which they are (or can be) proud?'—in order to show that a virtues approach to ethics does more to illuminate the daily dilemmas of public relations practitioners than code and consequentialist approaches. Our purpose is simply to highlight this illuminative value rather than to offer any comprehensive prescription for public relations ethics: we do not believe that one exists. In moving to explore approaches to substantive ethical behaviour in public relations, we critically extend the work of writers such as Martinson (2000) and Harrison (2004), who seek to apply Aristotelian concepts to public relations practice.

Complexities

It is in the nature of professional (including public relations) practice that when work begins on a client brief or employer assignment, only the immediate contours of the landscape are visible. Best practice in public relations calls for "input research" (Singh & Glenny, 2004, p.142) when a public relations campaign is being planned. Without it, practitioners can be "reduced to taking, at best, educated guesses regarding the problem and potential intervention programs" (Stacks, 2002, p.4). The input research results guide programme planning decisions. At this initial stage it is entirely possible that ethical choices may not present themselves: or at least, may not appear in the forms in which they later develop. As an example, one of the authors previously worked for a major telecommunications utility. The job required sustained policy advocacy with politicians and officials. This was not problematic when the issues in play revolved around regulatory matters. Debates in these areas were more a question of which school of economic thought was preferred (although there were clear financial consequences for the company if a more-regulation approach was adopted, and the author's brief was to advocate for the least regulated market possible). Continued work in an advocacy role did, however, become problematic at a later stage, when the company's personnel policies were at issue. The author felt that it was not possible in conscience to make a sustainable case for these policies, which arguably focused on promoting shareholder value at the expense of employee wellbeing. Ultimately a decision was made to seek a job elsewhere.

In this case and others like it, determining an appropriate path is not simply a matter of consulting an ethics code. As previous writers (Luegenbiehl, 1983, cited in Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions, n.d.; Wright, 1993) have pointed out (and corporate scandals such as Enron and, in Australia, James Hardie and HIH, have highlighted), the faith that business broadly and public relations in particular (see, for example, Marshall, 2002) puts in ethical codes is misplaced.

Ethics codes contain only a few general principles or key values (Longstaff, 1994). Public relations codes typically include ethical advocacy, honesty, integrity, expertise, and loyalty. Such values need to be understood and interpreted before they can be applied to specific situations, however. In promoting such principles, public relations industry bodies whose ethical stance suggests that practitioners should be committed to ‘serving the client’s interest’ through principled advocacy and confidentiality, while simultaneously serving an undefined ‘public interest’, risk ignoring the potential for conflict between these values. The resulting outcomes may reflect practitioner confusion about which ethical path to take.

Faced with potentially clashing values, and given the generic nature of codes, public relations practitioners in effect remain free to favour the value which best serves their career and employment prospects. They can do so while remaining confident they are adhering to their professional code and keeping its specific ethical credentials intact (Olasky, 1985, cited in Hunt & Tirpok, 1993). In practice, however, they are most likely to prioritise client or employer interests. Olasky quotes a practitioner as saying: “There are no lies anymore, just interests waiting to be served” (cited in Pearson, 1989, p.68). As Pratt (1993) notes, public relations practice aligns with each client organisation’s strategic direction and its dominant coalition’s interests.

In practice, the clarity envisaged in codes-focussed public relations ethics literature seems elusive: instead, practitioners must make the best choices they can as shifting day-by-day practical needs require a tack in this or that direction. The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (GAPRCM) seems to recognise these limitations in the preamble to its ‘Guiding Principles for the Ethical Practice of Public Relations’:

> A code of ethics and professional conduct is an individual matter that should be viewed as a guide to make (sic) sound values-based decisions. Ethical performance, not principles, is ultimately what counts. No-one can dictate precise outcomes for every situation. However, we can apply common values and decision-making processes to arrive at a decision and justify it to others. (GAPRCM, n.d., ¶.2)

The Alliance highlights the dilemma for practitioners in its “decision-making guide” when it advises professionals to “select the ethical principles to guide the decision-making process” (GAPRCM, n.d., ¶.10). In proffering this vague counsel, the Alliance fails to recognise that neither in practice nor in academia is there consensus or common ground as to which principles are to be preferred (c.f. Ryan & Martinson, 1984, cited in Pearson, 1989). On the one hand, authors like O’Malley (n.d.), Martinson (2004), and Edgett (2002) argue for prioritising client interests, while on the other, authors such as Walle (2003) represent a stream of thought that advocates prioritising public interest. There is no consensus as to how practitioners are to weave their way through the minefield of competing ethical imperatives.

In light of the generalised nature of codes and the fact that they “are not taken seriously by the majority of those who practice public relations” (Wright, 1993, p.16), it is not surprising that “the predominant ethical system in the public relations field is a situational perspective” (Leeper, 1996, p.134; c.f. Pratt, 1993). Ethical orientations that have been labelled ‘situationalist’ range from utilitarian versions envisaging decision-making based on “what would cause the least harm or most good” (Skinner, Mersham, & Valin, 2003, p.17) to an ‘anything goes’) approach which sees whatever action an individual is able to live with, at least short-term, as the only constraint (Leeper, 1996). Public relations is largely tarred with this latter brush: “Too often the public perceives practitioners as people willing to ‘do anything’ to further a client/organisation’s special interest” (Martinson, 2004, p.4).

Caught in ethical cross-currents, practitioners may well resort to situational relativism while at the same time asking themselves whether there is an alternative. Below we identify a broader backdrop to public relations’ ethical issues before introducing Aristotle’s agent-based concept of virtue ethics, and exploring its applicability to public relations decision-making.

Murkiness

Aligning ourselves with Wright's criticism of ethics codes in public relations as "more cosmetic than anything else" (1993, p.16) we suggest that the concerns driving development of public relations ethics codes belong to a wider picture of corporate moral murkiness. Public relations is both caught in this murk and a contributor to it (CPRF, n.d.). Public relations' complicity in corporate economising with the truth is one reason why the good intentions behind ethics codes are so often undermined, and a cause of growing interest in the concept of messenger liability, which seeks to extend potential legal liability to every firm involved in the communication chain before and after information is released to the public (Lasky, 2002). Public relations' ethical dilemmas are systemic as well as specific, inherent in the way contemporary organisations operate (or choose to function) as much as in the particular nature of public relations practice. The 'crisis of trust' in contemporary capitalism, and public relations' implication in this crisis, has led to renewed calls for moral corporate behaviour, including moral communication performance.

Interestingly, the United States-based Council of Public Relations Firms locates the root of corporate debacles and failures in "a bankruptcy of morality" (CPRF n.d., ¶.4), rather than in misdeeds legally defined. In a white paper on trust—"the intangible corporate value that forms the basis of public confidence"—it speaks of top executives tarnished by the "virus of distrust, scepticism and cynicism" (n.d., ¶.4) introduced by Enron. The Council suggests chief executives wanting to restore public trust in their organisations could: embrace transparency; set new standards such as safeguarding the corporate brand; be accountable for more than profits; and be socially responsible. Concerns about communication are raised in their comment that:

> Implicit, however, is the need for sophisticated talent capable of addressing and expressing the elements of trustworthiness. The challenge is to sensitively find ways to communicate that are credible and consistent with company action, to walk the talk (CPRF, n.d., ¶.34).

Leaving aside the question of whether a company's action is itself ethical, and taking the Council to be referring to a challenge for public relations practitioners employed by its member firms, the Council's opinions raise the issue of whether the necessary communication talent exists. If so, how is it to guide itself in a way that fosters trustworthiness? If the Council is correct in its assessment that corporate scandals "represent moral failings and abandonment of ethics and integrity as well as possibly blatant legal violations" (CPRF, n.d., ¶.8), can public relations, as an integral part of much contemporary corporate life, find a path for itself and its clients out of what a 1932 *New York Herald Tribune* editor described as the "red-light district of human relations"? (cited in Baker & Martinson, 2002, p.15).

Agent ethics

Even where ethics codes are presented simply as sets of guidelines, there is an underlying expectation that they will offer sufficient support to wise practitioners confronting ethical choices to enable resolution. Yet most practitioners have "little training in ethical analysis or decision making" (Bowen, 2004, p.85). The ambiguous expectation integral to public relations ethics codes—that practitioners can somehow simultaneously serve both their client's interest and the public interest—means codes can offer little practicable guidance in specific situations. The Public Relations Society of America's descriptions of its code as a "useful guide" (n.d.b., ¶.1) and a "model" (¶.5) still leave interpretation dilemmas firmly in the practitioner's lap, even though an advisory service is available (c.f. Bowen, 2004, p.75).

Industry reliance on codified ethical crutches runs deep: while Martinson (2000) refers to virtue ethics as a source of assistance to practitioners, he does so in the context of repairing ethics codes' deficiencies when it comes to confronting a particular set of ethical decisions. Martinson is not attempting to replace codes with an alternative approach to public relations ethics. Rather, he advances the idea of seeking some kind of middle way between competing demands and expectations, recommending practitioners resolve a conflict between serving their client's interest and the public good by responding "to the legitimate concerns of the client and the news media, but not in such an extreme fashion that his or her professional and ethical obligations to one are sacrificed in an effort to serve the wishes of the other" (2000, p.20).

Martinson's basis for this recommendation is his interpretation of Aristotle's description of virtue as "a kind of mean, since … it aims at what is intermediate" (Aristotle, 1941, 1106b27). However, as Harrison (2004) points out, both Martinson (2000) and Walle (2003), who followed his lead, misinterpret Aristotle on this point. Martinson (2000, p.20) is interpreting the following passage from Aristotle's 'Ethica Nicomachea':

> *Virtue is a state of character* concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle and by that rational principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed that which is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. (Aristotle, 1941, 1106b36, emphasis added)

However, the mean Aristotle refers to does not envisage balancing any competing duties and obligations (Harrison, 2004) to be found in ethics codes. While Martinson reads Aristotle as saying that it is the intellectual virtue of "practical wisdom" that enables us to choose that which lies upon the mean, in fact Aristotle (Aristotle, 1941, 1106b36) is saying it is the moral virtue or state of character, which lies on the mean. It is moral virtue that "makes us aim at the right mark", not practical wisdom (an intellectual virtue) which allows us to identify and "take the right means" towards the end identified by moral virtue (Aristotle, 1941, 1144a8).

Habits

Martinson (2000) is right to assert that Aristotle sees moral virtue as comprising habits acquired by doing virtuous acts, but he pays insufficient regard to Aristotle's view that these habits are dispositions to feel *pleasure* at virtuous actions (Aristotle, 1941). Virtue therefore lies not in an action (thus rendering action-oriented codes redundant) but rather in the feelings an individual or agent associates with this action. While Aristotle does discuss some examples of deficit and excess in relation to action, an analysis of the relation between passions and virtues is necessary to illuminate the dynamic Aristotle is describing. (See **Table 1** for a list of the virtues and their corresponding vices.)

While both a virtuous person and one without virtue can perform the same virtuous action, the former experiences pleasure and the latter experiences it as unpleasant or painful. According to Aristotle, it is as a result of misdirected or inappropriate feelings of "pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of the pain that we abstain from noble ones" (Aristotle, 1941, 1104b10). Action-based ethics asks whether a particular action is ethical, whereas agent-based ethics focuses on the individual agent's character and motivations, and asks whether they are virtuous. In doing so, the agent-based approach reflects the Council of Public Relations Firms' concern with fundamental morality rather than mere rule-following.

Aristotle says virtuous behaviour is developed through training that adjusts desire by acquiring positive habits. He has in mind not mindless habits (such as—in our age—always putting your car key in your pocket as you leave your vehicle), but rather mindful habits that reflect in a constructive way Foucault's (1977) idea of disciplinary practices. Take, for example, an unfit person who decides to become a jogger. At first, the roadwork is unpleasant (and probably painful). Over time, however, the jogger's body may adapt to the point where running is pleasurable. This is Aristotle's concept: and when virtue is located in such apposite feelings, discussing virtue in Aristotelian terms requires attention to desire, passion, pleasure, and pain just as much (if not more) as to reason and rational calculus. In this light, individual public relations practitioners cannot escape attending to their motivations as well as their moves, their passions as well as their purpose.

Consider the case of a practitioner who treats someone they wish to influence to lunch, relying on the meal to function as a persuasive clincher. Of course, there is pleasure (and occasionally indulgence) in a fine meal and perhaps enjoyable company. But if the person taken to lunch succumbs to the schmoozing in a way that would not have happened without it, they are being led astray from the good if they act on some matter (such as a decision on awarding a contract) because of the pleasure in the meal rather than in serving the intrinsic good of the matter. The virtuous person would feel discomfort rather than pleasure in this situation: they would feel uncomfortable at the attempt to manipulate through legitimate enjoyment of food. When public relations uses techniques like this it can be exploiting people's vices to achieve results, rather than acting in accordance with virtue.

Contra Martinson (2000), while Aristotle does describe virtue as the mean in relation to a passion between deficit and excess (1941, 1106a28), the mean of most of the virtues is not simply situated between excess and deficit of the passion involved. Rather, it involves a quite different psychological orientation towards self than that of the vices: for example, one that includes a focus on pursuing excellence even at considerable personal cost.

In the next section of this paper we delve more deeply into Aristotelian virtue ethics, seeking to adjust some misinterpretations and to identify points at which this ethical approach can aid practitioners' understanding and performance of public relations activity.

Table 1: Table of Virtues (by K. Harrison based on Aristotle's discussion in his *Nichomachean Ethics*)

Passion	Deficit	Mean	Excess
fear (1115)	rash	courage	coward
appetite (pleasure) (1117)	asceticism*	temperance	self indulgence
greed (money) (1119)	meanness	liberality	prodigal
judgment (riches) (1122)	niggardliness	magnificence	vulgarity
self-regard (1123)	false humility	pride	vanity
desire for honour (1107)	unambitious	*	ambitious
anger (1124)	wimp*	good temper	irascibility
shame (1108)	shameless	modest	bashful
desire for approval (1126)	churlish	*	obsequious
self presentation (1127)	mock modest	truthful	boastful
sense of humor (1128)	boorish	ready witted/tact	buffoon

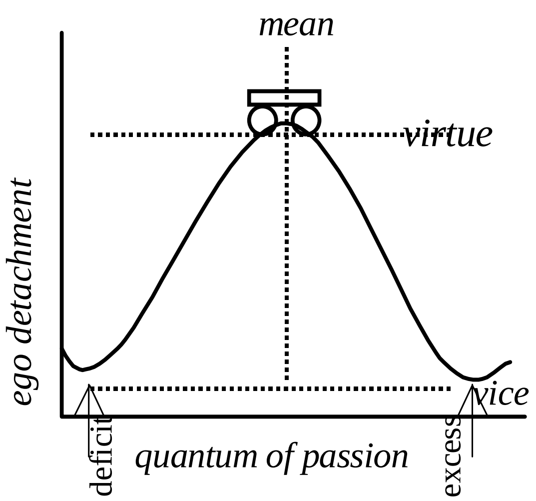
*Concepts that Aristotle had no word for. Sometimes we do, which tells us something about social change. Obsequiousness for example is such a prominent vice for us that we have lots of (vulgar) words for it.

Opposition

In his discussion about applying Aristotelian ethics to public relations, Harrison (2004) contrasts his approach with that of Martinson (2000) and Walle (2003), who follows Martinson on this point, by using the idea of a triadic opposition to show that the mean is not the midpoint between excess and deficit (as Martinson suggests). Rather the vices of excess and deficiency oppose both each other *and* their corresponding virtue. Like Martinson, however, Harrison neglects the differing orientation to the relevant passion that is central to this opposition, and concentrates on the virtues and vices themselves, independently of the passions associated with them.

Whereas Harrison (2004) describes the vices of excess and deficit and the mean of virtue as being at the opposing points of a triangle, **Figure 1** illustrates the relationship between the two dimensions of ego detachment and quantum of passion by mapping them along the two axes of a graph. This also works as a visual metaphor representing virtue as being at the top of a physical peak or mountain upon which we attempt to balance, like the cart at the top of the hill in the diagram. We are liable to roll down to the pit (of vice) if we move in either direction.

Figure 1: Virtues and Vices



The representation in **Figure 1** captures Martinson's (2000) emphasis on virtue as a mean between vices. It does this by showing, on the horizontal axis, virtue on the one hand lying between the vice associated with a deficit of passion and, on the other, lying between the vice associated with an excess of passion. The figure also explains the idea of balance and midpoint emphasised in Harrison's (2004) triadic opposition by showing, in the vertical axis, that whereas both vices result from an over-concern with others' opinions, virtue requires achieving the psychological autonomy and independent judgement characteristic of healthy adulthood. Achieving the peak of psychological integrity and ego detachment avoids the excesses or deficiencies of passion that push us off the mean or balance point down towards vice. Interestingly, this psychological interpretation of Aristotle's virtue ethics situates him closer to Eastern traditions such as Buddhism, whose "criterion of ethics is not theological but psychological" (Sangharakshita, 1997, p.128) than to the Christian tradition, which emphasises accountability to God and the development of a different moral outlook following conversion (Hanigan, 1983).

A comparison of false modesty and boastfulness with truthfulness, for instance, demonstrates the common psychological orientation of apparently opposed vices. While both false modesty and boastfulness involve concern with what others will think of you, they differ in their judgments about what will impress or avoid antagonising people. The truthful person, on the other hand, is plain spoken about what they think is the case, without worrying about what other people will think of them for saying it. A public relations practitioner who tells a client what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear, resting on professional opinion rather than a mere desire to please, could be described as demonstrating the virtue of courage, as they are taking a practice-enhancing action at the risk of losing the client or, at the very least, damaging the practitioner-client relationship. Such an action enhances the practice by running counter to popular conceptions of public relations people as professional pullers of wool over the public's eyes who have little or no concern for the public's need or right to see an issue clearly. The idea of a practice bears directly on the question of virtue-based ethics.

Caring for some practice or person as we care for ourselves is one of the ways we can reduce our ego involvement with ourselves. Caring for others shifts our focus from our 'self'. In relations of reciprocal caring, like friendship and marriage, honesty in self-presentation is a precondition. If either of us presents a false appearance to the other so that the other will like us, only the appearance can be liked, not our true 'self'. Paradoxically, only by ceasing to worry what others think of us, can we be liked for who we really are.

While this idea of caring for others as ourselves enables us to distinguish caring relationships from contractual ones which centre on mutual obligation, Ledingham's (2003) account of public relations as concerned with "mutually beneficial" (p.185) relationships does not. Relationships can be mutually beneficial either because the parties care for one another and their mutual wellbeing, or because they form a coalition of self-interested parties who can more effectively compete for resources against outsiders by working together. Such instrumental relationships are at odds both with virtue ethics and with the Kantian categorical imperative to treat other people as ends (in themselves) not as means (for getting what you want).

Just as caring for a person will help us develop courage because we are willing to take risks on their behalf, so if we care for a practice for its own sake, we will do whatever self-endangering action is needed to promote the practice, even if it earns us disapproval or threatens promotion prospects. In caring for the practice, we are just as interested in it doing well as we are in our 'self'. We will choose not to 'suck up' to the people employing us by telling them only what they want to hear. Rather, we will show both courage and honesty by telling them what they need to know if they are to be able to act well for the practice. MacIntyre (1984) describes a practice as a well-defined human activity (such as poetry, medicine, and chess) and asserts that it is in this context that virtues are primarily defined, developed, and exhibited. More specifically, he defines a 'practice' as:

> any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods *internal* to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those *standards* of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that *human powers* to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically *extended*. (MacIntyre, 1984, p.186)

What, then, is required to achieve excellence in a practice and how is this related to virtue and its expression in public relations work? Doing something for its own sake both requires and develops the virtues of justice, honesty, and courage. According to MacIntyre (1984):

Justice demands that we:
- recognise the skills, knowledge, and expertise of other practitioners; and that we
- learn from those who know more and have greater experience than we do.

Courage requires that we:
- take self-endangering risks;
- push ourselves to the limits of our capacities; and that we
- be prepared to challenge existing practice in the interest of extending the practice, despite institutional pressures against such critique.

Honesty asks us to:
- be able to accept criticism; and that we
- learn from our errors and mistakes.

MacIntyre gives the example of teaching a child chess. You might initially bribe the child with promise of candy if they win in order to get them to play. However, as long as the child only plays for the sake of the candy, there is no reason for them not to lie, cheat, or steal. If the child comes to value chess for its own sake, however, then lying, cheating, and stealing are self-defeating and incompatible with the child's desire to develop their capacity to play well.

Dishonesty such as stealing other people's work or fabricating evidence may result in increased prestige and status, but only at the expense of the purpose of the activity one is engaged in. To the extent that we value the activity for its own sake, cheating is self-defeating. For public relations practitioners to be virtuous, then, they need to be able to answer the question, "What is it I am doing for its own sake that makes actions such as 'editing the truth' or creating dishonest impressions self-defeating? What is it in what I am doing that requires justice, honesty, and courage to achieve its excellence?" A public relations example of doing something for its own sake might be to undertake *pro bono* work for a community organisation simply because the cause is worthy and the practitioner desires to contribute to it for that reason alone, rather than doing so because of possible networking opportunities or for the sake of being seen to be demonstrating good citizenship.

Practices which develop these virtues are living traditions that are enhanced through historically extended, socially embodied argument, in part about the goods which constitute the tradition (MacIntyre, 1984). Public relations demonstrates this feature of a tradition in its engagement with argument directed towards achieving consensus as to what constitutes its good. The fact that it is having this discussion is in itself evidence that public relations is operating as a practice in MacIntyre's terms. For virtue to be promoted by a practice, the shared conceptions of the goods by members of that community must be "the raison d'être of … the organisations and institutions that control and direct" (Dobson, 2004, p.7) that practice. Caring about a practice also requires, then, being committed to reproducing the community engaged in the practice, and continuing and extending the tradition associated with that practice.

Longstaff's (1994) view that ethics codes can at most supplement an organisation's cultural transformation and its "active creative management" (p.240) of organisational culture takes on a new perspective in light of discussion about a practice's internal goods. Longstaff proposes that the process of involving all members of an organisation in identifying, articulating, and committing themselves to the organisation's underlying values "can have a profoundly positive effect on the [ethical] culture of an enterprise" (1994, p.242). While Harrison (2004) argues that Longstaff states codes fail because they do not have effective sanctions, are not enforced, and are not publicised, Longstaff lists these and other points as "regrettable" (1994, p.240) examples of undesirable processes for developing and relying on ethics codes, rather than dismissal of codes *per se*.

As Dobson (2004) points out, virtue ethics casts the firm or professional organisation as the community within which collective goals (oriented towards a good such as producing quality and intrinsically good products and/or services) provide opportunities for developing and practicing virtue. Community members who are committed to the community developing its goods will place personal integrity and protection of such goods above material considerations. If, then, we care for a practice for its own sake, we will do what promotes the practice, even if it earns disapproval from peers or colleagues or threatens our promotion prospects. By caring for the practice, we are just as interested in it doing well as we are in advancing the interests of our 'self'.

MacIntyre contrasts such internal goods of a practice with external goods (or rewards) such as "prestige, status and money" (1984, p.188) which are only contingently related to any particular practice. (See **Table 2**, below for more information on the contrast between internal and external goods.) Achieving the internal goods of a practice can only occur within that specific practice, whereas external goods are transferable across fields of activity.

Table 2: Internal vs. External Goods (by K. Harrison based on MacIntyre, 1984, pp.188-194)

	Internal Goods*	External Goods
1)	• Specific to the practice	• Many ways for achieving the goods
2)	• Can only be identified and recognised from experience within the practice	• They can be identified and compared by those outside the practice
a)	• Those who lack the relevant experience or expertise are incompetent as judges	• Relatively objective and measurable observable properties.
	PRACTICE	**INSTITUTION**
	• development and use of *specific* skills • excelling in achieving the *telos* of the practice • extending the practice in a way compatible with its *telos*	• prestige • status • money
3)	**public** • create resources that can be shared by whole community	**private** • competition for scarce resources

*Dobson (1997) characterises internal goods as 1) unique to a particular activity; 2) intangible; and 3) not of finite supply.

In the next section of this paper, we discuss what pursuing internal goods might mean for public relations practitioners, contrasting this approach with applying ethical tests and codes. We highlight how a virtues-based approach can be more challenging and costly for the individual than simply using tests or consulting codes.

Costly

Dobson asks, "Are agents who build reputations for trustworthiness because it is in their material self-interest to do so really in any way ethical? What do these agents do when trustworthiness is not in their material self interest?" (1997, p.5). Game-theoretic attempts to prove that morality can arise from self-interest founder on the fact that if people do act out of self-interest or in the pursuit of external goods, it normally will only be in their self-interest to refrain from lying, cheating, breaking agreements, stealing, or murder, if there were a risk of getting caught (Fukuyama, 1999). The farthest self-interest gets us to a commitment to the principles of honesty, reliability, respect for others, etc., is cultivating the appearance of commitment to these principles. Attempts to motivate adherence to a public relations code of ethics based on external rewards—the "good ethics is good business" (Enderle, 2001, ¶.5) argument—run foul of the fact that the appearance of ethical behaviour can be as effective as actual ethical behaviour. While some may wish to settle for the appearance rather than the substance of ethical behaviour, they cannot claim the cloak of virtue for their actions.

Tilley holds that using virtue ethics alone is problematic both because of variances between individuals' values and because of the potential for practitioners' personal values to differ from those of groups either involved in or affected by their activities, for example, across cultures. However, the sort of simple ethical rules-of–thumb such as she refers to (in press, p.12) in the context of a wider argument suggesting practitioners should work through a stage-by-stage process of examining ethical issues in their public relations campaign planning, are not sufficient in themselves either.

Tilley refers to the so-called "front page test (would you feel comfortable with your behaviour in the decision you've just made being on the front page of the newspaper)" and the "Mum test (would you feel comfortable that your mother, or any significant other whose values you admire and approval you desire, would applaud your behaviour in the decision you've just made?)" (in press, p.12).

Such tests are at odds with the idea of developing virtues by pursuing the internal goods of a practice. They diverge in two ways:

1. Both the "front page test" and the "mum test" identify behaviour to be avoided, not the good of the practice towards which one is trying to aim. They might help practitioners avoid the most unethical behaviour, but they will not lead them towards virtue.
2. Both the tests are oriented towards what others think. Given that (according to Aristotle) vices result from being overly concerned about what others think, whereas virtue requires that one *not* be overly concerned with what others think, both these tests will promote the development of psychological tendencies at odds with virtue, rather than fostering those that promote it.

While for-profit organisations are legally obliged to maximise profits, such external rewards for action cannot serve as values that will motivate ethical behaviour in their members (they may well promote various kinds of behaviour, but not behaviour that can be recognised as virtuous in Aristotelian terms). According to Longstaff (1994), if organisations are to improve their ethical performance, they need to identify and commit themselves to the values of the internal goods of the practices they sustain, not the external rewards they derive from doing so.

Acting ethically and being prepared to gainsay external rewards for the sake of internal ones is, of course, not easy. MacIntyre's (1984) description of the unavoidable tension between the internal goods of a practice and the institutions which sustain them reminds us of this point. MacIntyre notes that institutions entice individuals away from the good of the practice by offering them external goods as a reward for their contribution to the institutional acquisition of money, resources and power. In his 'Rhetorica', Aristotle goes so far as to say that "most men are bad—slaves to greed, and cowards in danger" (Aristotle, 1941, 1382b4).

To the extent that a corporation or profession is primarily focused on external goods, such as profit or reputation, rather than the quality and intrinsic good of the services or products it produces, it can neither qualify as a practice nor develop the virtues. If rejecting a focus on external goods such as profit and reputation "challenges the very tenets of western corporate culture" as Dobson (1997, p.5) suggests, then opening the gates to virtue ethics may indeed be a Trojan horse for western corporate culture.

For virtue ethics to be relevant to public relations practitioners without opening the door to drastic consequences, it needs to determine not what principles we should abide by (as ethics codes prescribe), nor what others would think of us (as the 'front page test' and the 'mum test' mentioned by Tilley would have us do), nor "how ought a person of good character, a person of integrity, feel and act in this situation?" as Harrison (2004, pp.2-3, emphasis omitted) recommends, but rather, 'What is it that public relations practitioners do of which we can be (or are) proud'?

Phrasing the question this way crystallises the issue of the nature of the internal good that practitioners may choose to seek for its own sake. In focusing on the excellence the practice requires, this question functions as an effective touchstone for issues of virtue.

But what exactly is the internal good particular to public relations? We move to consider some possible approaches to this question:

1. Public relations is an integrative field drawing from a range of disciplines: psychology, economics, law, sociology and a variety of others may be relevant to particular public relations programmes. This integrative approach has made it hard to distinguish features unique to public relations. It has led to a plethora of proposed definitions, to debate about whether public relations has any theoretical foundation of its own, and to attempts to delineate boundaries between public relations and related activities such as marketing and advertising. The definition proposed by the Public Relations Society of America, that "Public relations helps an organisation and its publics to adapt mutually to each other" (PRSA, n.d.a., ¶.4) appears to be an attempt to define public relations' internal good.

Public relations people are expert in facilitating and managing this mutual adjustment process. While 'relationship counsellors' and therapists exist to help individuals with relationship difficulties, public relations' special field is to fulfil such a function at an organisational level: to help organisations (corporate communities) build and enhance relationships with groups within the wider community important to the organisation's ability to fulfil its mission. While public relations sees itself as directly involved in helping organisations achieve strategic goals, it is not enmeshed in the business process as immediately as a sales function, for example, which operates according to specific dollar targets. While aspects of public relations counselling may be analogous to management consulting (both can be about addressing business problems), public relations' relationship focus identifies a good that is particular to it.

Building and enhancing relationships for one set of groups does not reduce the quantum of enhanced relationships available for other sets of groups, so it is not a zero sum game. There is not a finite quantity of enhanced relationships in the world, whose use reduces the supply for everyone else. In fact, one group's enhanced relationships can serve as a model for others, and thereby increase the opportunity for enhanced relationships for others.

If excellence and virtue are related to community, as Aristotle suggests, then public relations' chief internal good is its contribution to maintaining and enhancing the community's health. This may be the health of the community in the sense of everyone who lives in a particular place, or the firm as a community (Dobson, 1997)[2], through facilitating mutual adjustment and adaptation between organisations and their publics.

The advocacy model of public relations, as discussed in the literature and in point 2 below, is one attempt to situate public relations within the context of enhancing the community's health, in the sense of everyone who lives in a particular place. Point 3 below considers public relations in terms of enhancing the health of the firm as a community.

2. Edgett (2002), O'Malley (n.d.), and Martinson (2004) suggest that just as lawyers' advocacy for particular clients serves "the greater common good/public interest" (Martinson, 2004, p.2), so public relations professionals can be proud of their role as advocates for particular clients because in doing so they are "promoting and preserving the values of liberal society" (Bayles, 1981, cited in Martinson, 2004, p.2) by "assisting in articulating ideas/viewpoints into the marketplace of ideas" (Martinson, 2004, p.2).

When we compare the "criteria for ethically desirable public relations advocacy" developed by Edgett (2002, p.22) with the characteristics of the existing marketplace of ideas within which public relations advocacy takes place, it becomes apparent that this market's structure and operation would need to change before client advocacy could be guaranteed to serve the common good or promote liberal social values. Martinson's recruitment of the metaphor "the

[2] We recognise that neither in the sense of everyone living in a particular place nor in the sense of everyone working for an organisation can 'community' be considered an unproblematic, homogeneous entity. It is beyond this paper's scope to extend this aspect of the discussion.

marketplace of ideas" (2004, p.2) to his argument reminds us that persuasion and advocacy, whether in economic markets or in parliamentary democracies, take place within a competitive, adversarial framework. Fair outcomes in an adversarial context require mechanisms to minimise or eliminate resource and power inequalities.

Several writers—Edgett (2002), O'Malley (n.d.) and Martinson (2004) among them—see an analogy between advocacy by lawyers and that undertaken by public relations practitioners, as both operate within adversarial structures. However, whereas public funding of legal aid and the provision of *pro bono* legal services is available to those who cannot afford to pay within the legal system, there would need to be something like public funding of public relations services for non-profit organisations, and the extension of some public relations professionals' existing commitments to providing *pro bono* services, to ensure that all parties within adversarial disagreements had equal access to professional advocacy. As Skinner, Mersham, and Valin (2003) comment, "If the advocate serves the client and employer interest in that situation [where only one side has a voice], who proposes the countervailing view?" (p.20).

If such a mechanism were in place, the public relations professional working for a for-profit organisation could have more confidence that not-for-profit community and environmental organisations with different perspectives on a particular issue were also receiving appropriate and effective public relations advocacy.

3. Even if public relations professionals cannot agree on a good distinctive to public relations, they can participate in and contribute to the internal good of organisations they choose to work for, as long as that organisation's focus is on doing something that is good for its own sake.

For example, The Warehouse, a discount retail chain in New Zealand and Australia, operates a sustainable development policy and has as one of its three key values, "the environment matters" (Warehouse, n.d.). The company is also heavily involved in community fundraising and sponsorship. Its concern extends to working conditions in the factories forming part of its supply chain: it both conducts its own on-site visits in Asia and participates in wider studies to assess these conditions as well as the quality of the goods being produced. The company's policies presumably aim to build customer preference through being seen as socially responsible, but it is arguable (and we argue) that the pervasive nature of these policies throughout the organisation demonstrates a commitment to sustainability and social responsibility for their own sakes. A public relations practitioner working for The Warehouse would both share in and be able to help enhance the internal good of this organisation's strong orientation towards its social, economic, and physical environment.

However, to the extent that values-oriented organisations like this inspire their workers, including public relations staff, to put their commitment to the organisation above and beyond commitment to society at large, there is a risk that those working for them will see any threat to the organisation as a threat to the good itself. Skinner et al. (2003) discuss the risk of values-oriented companies inspiring deeply committed employees to undertake illegal actions in the company's service. For example, Paula de Roeper of the New Zealand state-owned forestry company Timberlands West Coast Ltd, writing in a public relations strategy document, described Timberlands' critics as "opponents" and their criticisms as "misinformation" (cited in Hager & Burton, 1999, p.181). While the public relations advisors working for Timberlands could be described as taking courageous "self-endangering risks" by providing support to pro-Timberlands "community groups", the appropriateness of their action has been vehemently debated by other practitioners (Harrison, 2004; Harrison & Bartlett, 2002; Marshall, 2002).

In fact, it is people's willingness, indeed desire, to work for a company whose values they are committed to, and the propensity this creates in them to put the good of the company before all else, that enables virtue ethics to explain how so many 'good' people can end up doing questionable things in the service of 'their' company where other accounts of ethics would be devoid of explanatory power.

It is precisely because people's ethics in practice are virtues-based rather than rule-based that they may be led astray if the good of the company they work for is not also a good for society, and particular actions considered in the service of the company good are not continually tested against the wider social good. Virtue ethics can explain, in a way that codes-based approaches do not, how 'good' people can be led into acting badly because they care for the wrong person or organisation.

4. Many authors have promoted consensual dialogue as the good towards which public relations ought to aim. This includes proponents of two-way symmetric communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), those who see public relations as the 'ethical guardian' of the firms they work for (L'Etang, 2003), and those who promote Habermas's communicative ethics (Leeper, 1996).

Consensual dialogue is oriented towards reaching understanding, rather than winning an argument. Success depends on absence of coercion, and opportunities for all involved to participate in the conversation and raise issues of concern. Discussion and exploration of multiple perspectives to reach understanding and consensus can result in creative re-conceptualisations that produce win-win outcomes.

In a world in which unequal power relations are the norm, rather than the exception, those with more power are more likely to impose their will to get what they want as well as to maintain the inequalities upon which their power depends. To the extent that public relations professionals are primarily employed by those who have the most power and resources (i.e. those who can afford to pay for their services) their brief is likely to include—in effect—doing whatever is necessary to maintain or increase such inequalities.

Because the corporate world's massive resource and information inequalities are not entirely conducive to symmetric communication, it is unsurprising that Tilley, undertaking a survey of large public relations firms' websites, could find only one expressing an apparently symmetrical world view: Edelman. However, as Tilley also noted, Edelman's self-description on their website, that they are in the business of crafting strategies that are "constantly monitored—and modified as necessary" in response to the firm's "attentive and continuous engagement" (Edelman, cited in Tilley, in press, p.6) with stakeholders, is as compatible with a strategic adversarial relationship as it is with a symmetric one.

Two-way symmetric communication, then, requires not just slight changes to corporate behaviour or public relations practice, but the sort of fundamental changes to western corporate culture that Dobson's (1997) Trojan horse argument might lead us to expect.

When we consider the potential cost to individuals of acting virtuously, Aristotle's judgement seems apt. As MacIntyre says:

> The cultivation of truthfulness, justice and courage will often, the world being what it contingently is, bar us from being rich or famous or powerful. Thus although we may hope that we can not only achieve the standards of excellence and the internal goods of certain practices by possessing the virtues *and* become rich, famous and powerful, the virtues are always a potential stumbling block to this comfortable ambition. We would therefore expect that, if in a particular society the pursuit of external goods were to become dominant, the concept of the virtues might first suffer attrition and then perhaps something near total effacement, although simulacra might abound. (1984, p.196)

The challenge for public relations practitioners trying to act virtuously is to identify and work towards a conception of the good that is accepted as such within the profession. The literature referred to above in our discussion of alternatives 1-4 indicates that the discussion is well under way. At bottom, in the murky world of contemporary capitalism, public relations people face a challenge. Will they choose to make their path the more demanding one of virtue ethics or will they be content with mere rule following – or even the appearance of it, knowing that in today's image-oriented market, simulacra sell?

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