The ethics of means and ends in persuasion

In assessing the ethicality of persuasive activities, we need to look both at the means of persuasion (the techniques used) and the ends (the results sought). Public relations scholars Benton Danner and Spiro Kiousis provide us with a “taxonomy of means and ends” that charts the possibilities in four categories.¹

1. **You can engage in ethically justifiable persuasive acts in an ethical manner** (good ends, good means). This type of act occurs in two manifestations:
   - A *morally permissible act*: One in which the moral agent is neither required by ethics to perform the act nor prohibited ethically from performing the act; that is, to perform the action is moral and to not perform it is also moral.
     - An example of a morally permissible act in the realm of public relations might involve a public health campaign designed to persuade a public of the benefits of appropriate cardiovascular exercise. Although this is a good act, there is no obligation to perform it.
   - A *morally obligatory act*: An act that the agent has a moral obligation to perform. To not perform the act would be unethical.
     - For example: Suppose you are the vice president of public relations in a corporation that manufactures children’s clothing. You have discovered information that conclusively shows that the children’s pajamas manufactured by your company are highly flammable. As the public relations chief for your company, you would have a moral obligation to not only attempt to persuade management to reveal this information (so that the danger can be publicized and appropriate recalls initiated), but that if you fail in the attempt to persuade superiors to reveal the defect, you would have a moral obligation to reveal the defect yourself (often referred to as “whistle blowing.”)

2. **You can engage in persuasion that is ethically unjustified, but do so in an ethically proper manner** (bad ends, good means). Although you could argue that the means justify the ends, you would be on shaky moral ground.
   - For example, you could use ethical means of persuasion to attempt to convince others of the benefits of selling or using methamphetamines or crack cocaine.
   - You could promote racism by using completely acceptable persuasive tactics—say a speech in which all the rhetorical techniques are ethically sound.

3. **You could engage in unethical tactics of persuasion in a persuasive act that is itself morally justified** (bad means, good ends). Because you are using morally suspect means to achieve a good end, you might be able to argue for the ethicality of the entire act; however, the questionable tactics would taint your achievement.
   - For example, you might engage in lies in order to solicit donations for a charity that legitimately helps the homeless.

Danner and Kiousis suggest another set of cases under this category that may be morally permissible. These are instances in which the ends pursued are extremely significant—for

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example, the lives of a large number of people are at stake. For instance, would you lie to save the lives of a great many human beings? Our basic humanness would probably have us say yes to this one.

4. *Neither the persuasive act itself nor the means employed in persuasion are morally permissible* (bad means, bad ends). Acts in this category will always be morally prohibited.
   - For example, you could be employed by a tobacco company and engage in deceptive persuasive acts designed to entice children to start smoking.

To summarize:

- When the means and ends of a persuasive act are each morally sound, the overall act will be ethical. The act may be either *ethically permissible* (that is, ethics permits one to perform the act) or *ethically obligatory* (that is, ethics requires that one perform the act).
- When the persuasive means are unethical but the ends sought are ethically justified, the ethicality of the act as a whole isn’t as clear. The justification for using unethical means would have to be a strong one.
- When the means are ethical and the ends are not justified, an argument can be logically made in defense of the act, but bad ends are rarely justifiable.
- When both the means and the ends of persuasion are ethically unjustifiable, then the persuasive act itself is unethical (that is, it would be unethical to perform the act).