

The Informative and Persuasive Functions of Advertising: A Moral Appraisal

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ABSTRACT. Advertising can be regarded as having two separate functions, one of persuading and one of informing consumers. Against some who claim that persuasive advertising using irrational means is moral as long as the product or service it represents is good or useful, this paper argues that by denigrating human reason such advertising is always immoral. On the other hand, advertisements which present information in a straightforward and truthful way are always moral no matter what they advertise; indeed, only such advertisements are moral.

Advertising in contemporary society is generally regarded as having two central and correlative functions, that of informing and that of persuading consumers. The informative function is likely to be stressed by the defenders of the advertising practise, for by providing information to consumers about products, services, and prices advertising allows the consumer to make reasoned choices about the things on which he/she will spend his/her money. On the other hand critics of advertising are likely to point to its persuasive function as dominant. Advertising does not only inform people of the availability of a product but entices them to buy it.¹

These preliminary observations do not by any means exhaustively cover the nature of advertising. In the first place, advertising may well have other important functions, such as reinforcing a set of economic institutions and practises or providing a kind of entertainment. There is little doubt, however, that the main rationale

for its existence as a marketing tool of business lies in its ability to inform and to persuade. In the second place, the informative-persuasive function of advertising does not clearly demarcate it as practise from other forms of rhetoric. Sales-talk, political speech making, parental advice-giving have clear and strong informative and persuasive qualities. A full discussion of the meaning of advertising as a species of rhetoric and its place in modern culture cannot be given here. My purpose in this paper is to offer a limited moral analysis of these two functions of advertising as though they could be abstracted from the total social and historical background in which they must ultimately appear. I take advertising to be that which nearly everyone sees on television and in magazines promoting some product or service, and, by taking a whole capitalist economy and liberal value system for granted, I shall try to determine when advertising should be regarded as moral and when immoral.

A similar limited approach to advertising, that is one which does not subject its ultimate social and economic presuppositions to critical analysis, has been tried by Burton Leiser.² Leiser attempts from a largely utilitarian point of view to determine when advertising is morally good and when it is morally bad (prescinding as he puts it from matters of its tastefulness). Like most intellectuals he is uneasy about the seductive attractions of advertisements and brands as immoral those advertisements which stimulate a want for those things which people do not need or which in fact are positively harmful to them. On the other hand, he believes that advertisements promoting products and services which people really need are moral "by any utilitarian standard".³ As an example he offers an insurance advertisement "that induced a young man to purchase a policy

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just a few days before his untimely death, thus assuring his widow and small children of a modest income".⁴ Since he does not say otherwise and since he explicitly appeals to utilitarian standards we should suppose Leiser to hold that advertisements using means primarily intended to stimulate wants, to seduce as it were its viewer into buying the product, would still be moral given the fact *ex hypothesi* that the consumer really needed the product and that the purchase had good consequences for everybody. Pressing this a bit we could say that a wide range of seductive devices could be morally proper for the advertiser in his efforts to persuade the consumer to buy something that is ultimately good for the consumer and which might not have been bought without such devices. Hence in assessing the morality of the persuasive function of advertising, Leiser would claim that it is not the style or content of the advertisement which makes it moral or immoral but the product being promoted and the existence of an actual need for that product on the part of those to whom the advertisement is being directed.

What then of the morality of advertising intended to inform rather than or as well as to persuade? Leiser contends that information about products or services which are essential and useful to people is clearly moral. Legal advertising would be an example of this type. If, however, advertisements inform us of "personally or socially harmful products or services" then they are "immoral on their face".⁵ Examples of this would be advertisements for cock-fights or slave auctions or job notices which were openly discriminatory. Advertisers may inform us in good conscience of their products or services if these things are themselves beneficial, otherwise not.

The scheme by which Leiser evaluates the informative and persuasive functions of advertising can be diagrammed this way:

	Essential Needed	Harmful Not Needed
<i>Informative</i>	Good	Bad
<i>Persuasive</i>	Good	Bad

The scheme is appealing and seems based on common sense. I would like, however, to argue for a different scheme for appraising the two functions of advertising.

Let us begin with the persuasive function. It is well known that the distinguishing characteristic of the modern system of marketing is that it seeks to create needs and cultivate wants for things beyond the basic necessities of life. To assess this aspect of advertising by moral criteria it would seem necessary to have a clear idea of the difference between a need and a want. This in itself could call for a long philosophical exposition, but it is possible to formulate a brief working definition of need and desire (or want) which is reasonable and clear. A *need*, we shall say, is an objectively real deficiency requiring fulfilment, whether or not that deficiency is known as such and whether or not that fulfilment is sought. For instance, one may be deficient in a vitamin but not know it; or one may lack a vitamin and know it but not care to do anything about it. I purposely eschew all questions concerning what are objectively real needs and how one knows them to be such. Suffice it to say that the definition will admit all sorts of specialized and changing needs as well as those considered to be constant and basic needs, although it is admittedly very difficult to determine in some cases when something is really a need. Turning now to a *want* or *desire*, we shall say that it is a felt deficiency requiring fulfilment, whether or not the deficiency can be objectively determined to be real. A want then is an emotion, while a need is an objective state of affairs. I may want another piece of steak while in fact there is no corresponding lack in reality which the consumption of the steak would fill. Of course, I could also *want* a steak and actually *need* its nutrients and calories.

The determination of a need calls for a rational examination of biological, social, religious, educational, artistic reality, for human beings have many types of needs. The fulfilment of needs, however, is not entirely a matter of reason, but also a matter of will and desire. Thus, for one who may well know he has a need for an item it may be necessary to arouse in him a desire for that item if he is otherwise indif-

ferent about fulfilling the need. A child may in some manner *know* she needs to drink milk, but nevertheless must be persuaded to do so by her parents. The arousal of a desire, however, is not a rational process unless it is preceded by a knowledge of actual needs. Whereas the process of filling needs has both a cognitive and affective component, the gratification of desires, considered as desires only in isolation from needs, is merely an affective process.

Now, in order for advertising to be morally persuasive by Leiser's criterion it must be addressing itself to a real need; if it is then it may also arouse the desire which will help to fulfil that need. Two relevant questions follow; first, how can advertisers restrict their message to those who really need their product or service; second, how can advertisers, or anyone else for that matter, determine the genuine needs of various individuals? By way of reply to the first question it should be noted that because nearly all advertising is directed to a general public there seems to be no feasible way of restricting advertising's slogans and models to appearing before target groups pre-selected on the basis of an existing need for what the advertisement is promoting. The great bulk of advertisements appears not in specialized journals but in public media indiscriminately broadcasted and distributed to anybody who wants them. Hence, while the young man in Leiser's example who was persuaded to buy life insurance just before he died was fortunate in being induced to buy something he needed, there would no doubt have been many thousands, conceivably more, who were also subject to the advertisement and prodded by it into *wanting* a life insurance they in fact did not need. Thus while rhetorical persuasion may be desirable and even necessary in individual cases with defined deficiencies where there is no movement to meet those deficiencies, a general appeal to a mass audience whose needs have not been defined in a rational way, certainly not by the advertising industry, seems neither desirable nor moral.

To reply to the second question, let us assume that genuine needs can be known only by those who are capable of rational understanding. Is it likely that a society subject to the persuasive

effects of mass advertising will be inclined to develop a rationality capable of an honest assessment of human needs? Consider the long-range effects of having desires for things implanted in people, irrespective of the fact that these people may actually not need these things, through an exclusive appeal to senses and emotions, taking place day after day, month after month, without interruption on television, on radio, and in magazines and newspapers. Consider also the fact that everybody in that society including advertisers and business persons is subject to commercial media. It is not plausible that in such circumstances anyone will acquire the objective understanding and insight necessary to determine what are and what are not real needs. Leiser defends the gimmickry of product promotion which meets genuine needs, but he does not see that it is precisely through the machinations of advertising that the education of a critical mind which is able to discern the difference between real and spurious deficiencies in the first place is hampered. Taken as a general, ongoing practise, addressed not to isolated individuals but to society as a whole, an advertising which concentrates on the cultivation of wants through irrational means fails to meet the criterion of utility for it lessens the well-being of society by undermining the cognitive means for understanding what our real needs are.⁶ Thus even if it were certain that everyone *needed* to drink milk, it would still not be proper for some agency to persuade people by irrational appeals that this is what they needed, since it would be better for society to have citizens so educated that they were able rational means to ascertain what their present and future needs were.

Let us now consider advertising as a type of information. The purest form of such advertising is to be found in the classified sections of newspapers and in the telephone book's 'yellow pages'. Here to advertise means to convey useful information without an overt intent to persuade or entice consumers. Such advertisements are like signs; they simply announce the availability of a product or a service. It is best to keep this kind of classified advertising in mind when judging the morality of the informative function since

that function is usually overwhelmed by the persuasive dimension in other more prevalent and powerful types of advertising.⁷

Can the sheer conveying of information be immoral in any way? Naturally, as a statement of facts the advertisement can be true or false and so would be subject like any other statement to moral principles concerned with lying. Leiser suggests, however, that even if an informational statement is true it can in the case of advertising also be immoral if what it speaks about is a product or service which is harmful or otherwise despicable. For example, suppose a prostitute were to inform us of her availability by a notice in the personal section of a newspaper. Suppose furthermore she were to do so without any effort to entice customers (an unlikely supposition to be sure). Or, take an example of a business man advertising a job with the blunt stipulation that no blacks need apply. Leiser would say that the advertisements in both cases are immoral because they are promoting immoral practices. Another way that advertising information could promote immoral activities and thus be immoral itself according to Leiser would be if such information were placed in a publication which was the organ of a 'hate' group such as the Nazi party. So, he is actually alluding to at least four ways in which the informative function of advertising could be regarded as immoral: (1) by advertising harmful or dangerous products; (2) by advertising immoral services; (3) by exposing immoral practices in an announcement for something which itself is neither harmful nor immoral (such as the discriminatory job announcement – it is not the job which is bad); (4) by advertising in media which are the organs and supports of immoral groups. Leiser's principle is a hypothetical one; he does not argue that things like prostitution, producing dangerous items, racial discrimination, and Nazism are bad, but only that *if* they are immoral then the advertising of such things is also immoral. Is his view correct?

There are really two ethics by which the morality of advertising can be studied and Leiser's analysis seems to miss this. There is an ethics proper to statement-making as such and a much more comprehensive ethics which investigates

the broader aims and conduct of the people and institutions who make statements. To illustrate this, let us suppose we are examining news reports in a Nazi newspaper. Does it make sense to demand morally that reporters make their reports as honestly and accurately as possible even when working for a Nazi newspaper? I think it does, and therefore from one standpoint, if their reports are honest and accurate, the reporter's giving of information is moral. Likewise, advertising, which is a type of statement, when it is presented truthfully, is morally proper no matter where it appears. Of course, the making of truthful statements is not the only moral issue connected with reporting or advertising. A quite separate issue, calling for an extensive and complicated discussion of different moral principles, would be concerned for instance with whether or not a reporter should work for the Nazis in the first place. This issue is concerned not with the reporter's statements as such but with the goals and values that the bearer of statements supports. Analogously, questions about the goals and values that advertising supports is different from questions about the propriety of the statements appearing in advertisements, and ought to be treated separately.

Leiser's work has given the appearance of suspending all investigation into the values and economic assumptions underlying the practise of advertising, and this paper has followed him in this. For instance, he does not reflect on the ends of the capitalist systems which advertising fosters, but takes them for granted, and purports to be dealing with the moral use of persuasive and informative advertisements. Whether or not an advertiser ought to advertise in a Nazi publication is a very large question akin to the question of whether or not there ought to be any advertising at all, given the fact that capitalist institutions benefit from it; it is not a question really which is concerned with the informative function of advertising in itself. Thus, as long as we refrain from making a moral critique of the basic values of our social and economic system there is no special reason to condemn an advertiser for speaking truthfully in a Nazi newspaper, no more than there would be to condemn him for speaking the truth in a capitalist or communist

newspaper. From the limits of moral discourse which are in place here, what one must conclude is that the evil aims of the publication in which advertising is displayed do not detract from the rectitude of accurate informative advertising. Such advertising is as morally proper as the truthful statements of a Nazi reporter.

If this position holds then it follows that the prostitute's advertisement, the advertisements of the manufacturer of defective goods, and the discriminatory job notices are also moral taken as statements of correct information, as long as we are interested in the morality of statement-making only and not in the morality of persons who use such statements. Surely, if I serve notice that I am willing to drown a person of your choosing at a reasonable price, there may be something wrong with my service, but there is nothing particularly wrong with my *saying* that it is my service. Equally, there is nothing wrong with informing the public about the availability of a harmful product, though there is no doubt a great deal wrong with the making and selling of such a product. While we may think there is something abominably evil in a corporation choosing its employees on the basis of race, must we believe that a corporation does wrong in *telling* people it does this – which is what effectively happens in a job notice? Consider also the possibility that advertising informing us about the availability of bad things is itself a positive good and ought by utilitarian standards to be welcomed in a society. One may simply assume that because the informative function of advertising is a means of making sales it must help to sustain the continuation of the service or product being advertised; and if the product or service is bad in some way, then the advertisement by perpetuating the existence of bad things is itself bad. But the opposite could be true. Classified advertising could be seen as a means of exposing the evils in a society. If citizens are seriously opposed to the product or practise being advertised then they should welcome the advertisement as a means for revealing their enemies. The point is that if one opposes a practise then one should want to eliminate that practise, not the very thing which reveals its existence and location. Simply find-

ing an advertisement disturbing or offensive, without being moved to do anything about the thing advertised, suggests that one does not believe the thing in question to be so bad or immoral after all or that one does believe it to be bad but is fleeing one's responsibilities as a citizen by making the *messenger* of evil the scapegoat of one's anxieties. If I were really convinced that prostitution and racism were evil then I would want the prostitutes and racists to continue to give notice of their whereabouts in order to keep track of them and better eliminate them. It would be much worse to have those activities remain concealed.

I suspect that some people will find this a remote and peculiar argument. The reason is of course that in real life the informative function of advertising is greatly minimized. I have been supposing that an advertisement is truthful and not intent on enticement. It seems to me that a truthful, arid notice about the availability of a dangerous thing is moral because I am assuming that the notice in order to be truthful must inform the consumer about the dangers of the product or service. To advertise a product without disclosing its dangerous characteristics is a type of fraud and enticement, since in any sale there is a tacit, but strong, presupposition that neither party will be harmed by the transaction.⁸ Since in the real world even the driest of classifieds tend to withhold much information, all advertisements will tend to be acts of irrational persuasion, and I have already categorized such things as immoral for denigrating human reason in decision making.

There is, however, one way in which the communicating of information can be regarded as harmful in itself and therefore immoral, even when it is as truthful as possible, and that is when those receiving the information are unable to respond to it in a normal, mature manner. It is wrong to tell children about death, sex, or rape when they are too young to assimilate this information in a healthy manner. Such information disturbs their judgment and emotional well-being and may lead them to harmful things. What is immoral about the purveying of pure information in this situation is *not the subject matter* as such but the confusion of young minds

unable to integrate the data into their experience. Likewise with advertising it is not the product or service that need be bad; information even about inherently good things such as medicinal drugs may be destructive if presented at the wrong time in the child's development. Therefore there is a moral obligation on the part of advertisers and parents to be prudent about having children see and hear even the most non-enticing information about the best of products.

My scheme for evaluating advertisements is then different from Leiser's. Unlike Leiser I have argued that *all forms of persuasive advertising are immoral* whether or not they help supply real needs. Furthermore, I have argued that *all forms of informative advertising are moral* whether or not the things advertised are good or bad, with the qualification that those obtaining the information are mature enough not to be seriously harmed by it (and experience suggests that the possession of knowledge is rarely harmful in itself). My scheme looks like this:

	Essential Needed	Harmful Not Needed
<i>Informative</i>	Good (excepting children)	Good (excepting children)
<i>Persuasive</i>	Bad	Bad

Prescinding as we have done from raising the question of whether the capitalist system of production and distribution is moral, we should conclude that the only moral kinds of advertising are straightforward announcements of the availability of goods and services which are honest about all relevant matters and which are directed to those who can hear them without harm. To be morally defensible advertisements should be purged of all attractive and colorful properties and slotted in a functional system much like newspapers classifieds and the 'yellow pages'. This may sound extreme but there is no reason why this should hurt the economy. People can still make things and sell them; people can still need things and buy them; advertising can still exist. The change would be to have the consumer-citizen be responsible for

ascertaining what it is he or she needs and for seeking out those products and companies in some list, for example, which would meet those needs. If some companies go under because nobody sought them out and because they were not able to use skin and sand and catchy tunes to attract customers, we ought not to worry; it is clear no one needed what they had to offer and so they should not exist anyway.

Notes

¹ Littlefield and Kirkpatrick define advertising as "mass communication of information intended to persuade buyers so as to maximize dollar profits". *Advertising: Mass Communication in Marketing* (Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1970, p. 100). Cited in Alex C. Michalos, 'Advertising: Its Logic, Ethics and Economics', in J. A. Blair and R. H. Johnson (eds.), *Informal Logic* (Edgepress, Inverness, Calif., 1980, pp. 93-111). This definition blurs the distinction between the informative and persuasive functions and ignores the latent tension holding between them; a tension well brought out by Robert Arrington: "The central issue which emerges between the above critics and defenders of advertising is this: do the advertising techniques we have discussed involve a violation of human autonomy and a manipulation and control of consumer behavior, or do they simply provide an efficient and cost-effective means of giving the consumer information on the basis of which he or she makes a free choice. Is advertising information, or creation of desire?" 'Advertising and Behavior Control', *Journal of Business Ethics* 1 (1982), 6.

² Burton Leiser, 'Beyond Fraud and Deception: The Moral Uses of Advertising'. A paper presented at the Loyola University of Chicago Mellon Foundation Lecture Series: 'Socio-Ethical Issues in Business', February 6, 1978. Reprinted in Thomas Donaldson and Patricia Werhane (eds.), *Ethical Issues in Business* (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1979, pp. 59-66).

³ Leiser, p. 60. In a much more cautious way Michalos also takes the same view, p. 102.

⁴ Leiser, p. 60.

⁵ Leiser, p. 63.

⁶ This of course derives from Plato's analysis in the *Republic* of the corrupting effects of art. Applied to advertising his analysis is essentially correct, although it missed the nature of art. Those who argue that the alluring qualities of advertisements are themselves part of the 'subjective satisfaction' that a customer gets from a product or that valuable information about the worth of products is transmitted, albeit 'indirectly', even by

seductive advertisements do so in order to justify advertising. But such arguments take a short-range view of advertisements and miss the centrality of the debilitation of rationality brought about in the long run by advertising. These issues are brought out in Arrington (especially pp. 4–7, 9–11). Arrington himself underestimates the importance of reason in the proper assessment of needs.

⁷ Probably no advertisement can be said to be purely informative or for that matter purely persuasive. Even the simplest sign can have an emotional appeal to somebody and the most crude efforts at seduction such as commercials for sun-tan lotions can have some informational content. It is, however, bizarre sophistry to claim

that information can be conveyed in a commercial regardless of its content (!). See Arrington, p. 4 and Phillip Nelson, 'Advertising and Ethics', in Richard T. De Goerge and Joseph A. Pichler (eds.), *Ethics, Free Enterprise, and Public Policy* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1978, pp. 187–198).

⁸ See Michalos' efforts to get the sponsors of the Canadian national lottery to publish the odds of winning in their advertisements for the lottery, pp. 96–99. Also, "If an advertiser produces ads in which false claims are intentionally made then the advertiser is a liar. All and only people who intentionally make false claims *can* be liars" (p. 103).

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