

COMMENT AND RESPONSE

AN OBJECTION TO FELDMANN'S "OBJECTIONS?"

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In her article "Discovering the Truth: The Operation of Ethos in Anti-Smoking Advertising," Rebecca Feldmann analyzes the rhetoric of a set of antismoking advertisements named the Truth campaign and succeeds in arguing that the commercials effectively target their audience of youths aged twelve to eighteen. In the section entitled "Objections?" Feldmann raises the issue of whether the Truth commercials use ethical rhetoric or if they fall to the manipulative level of the cigarette ads they speak against. Feldmann defends the moral character of the Truth campaign, arguing that its commercials "are aiming for the truth" (73). However, what if we closely examine the means the campaign uses to reach its desired outcome? Although the Truth campaign has its audience's best interest in mind, in my view, the rhetorical tactics used in the campaign are not ethical.

First, the financial supporters of the Truth advertisements pose a problem for the validity of the campaign's rhetoric. Ironically, Truth's funding comes from the tobacco companies. Six cigarette companies agreed to pay \$1.5 billion to fund the Truth campaign, but only for so long as they continue to maintain over 99% of the U.S. market share (Teinowitz). The central question here is whether it is ethical to have the entity you are speaking out against fund your campaign. I believe that this scenario creates an obvious conflict of interest between the advertiser and the backer in which neither can honestly accept nor work with the other. Feldmann quotes James L. Kinneavy and Susan C. Warshauer, who argue that virtue "is established when speakers give evidence that they are sincere and trustworthy. The audience must be convinced that the speaker will not deceive them" (174). If we assume that this statement is true, then the Truth campaign betrays its audience by its use of funding from the enemy. Once an audience becomes aware of the fundamental betrayal in the Truth campaign, such awareness will trump any evidence the campaign might present to prove that it is "sincere and trustworthy." However, because I believe we would be naive to assume Kinneavy and Warshauer's statement to be true, I would like to take the argument a step further. Kinneavy and Warshauer make the simple mistake of forgetting the popular maxim "Appearances can be deceiving." It is often when an audience believes a speaker to be "sincere and trustworthy" that the speaker is able to deceive them. Even unethical speakers must earn the trust of their audience—sucker them in, if you will—before they can swindle them. Their only other option is force, which moves outside the realm of rhetoric and into coercion—it's the difference between being a robber and being a grifter.

Secondly, the Truth ads try to blame and vilify the cigarette companies almost as much as they try to stop people from smoking. While this method of persuasion may prevent teenagers from lighting up, it raises very serious ethical questions. It is rhetoric that is more concerned with consequences than with ethics. In his essay "Persuasion and Community," James Boyd White uses Sophocles' *Philoctetes* to discuss the nature of unethical rhetoric. He shows that a speaker must always focus on the means of rhetoric rather than the ends. For instance, in *Philoctetes* Odysseus convinces his partner,

Neoptolemus, that they must trick Philoctetes into giving them his magical bow. Odysseus does not care about using honest means or persuasion (*peitho*), but concerns himself only with achieving the ultimate goal. However, after they have successfully taken the bow, Neoptolemus realizes that he must undo this wrong by returning it to Philoctetes and using ethical persuasion to attain it instead. Unfortunately, Philoctetes is not persuaded by Neoptolemus's attempt. Even though he fails to achieve the desired end, Neoptolemus still succeeds, because he redefines himself as an ethical character (22). This story illustrates how an orator must recognize that the possibility of failure is always implied in the art of rhetoric and that moral failure is far worse than failure to achieve the desired end. With this recognition comes the responsibility of ethical rhetoric, as White suggests, for by its definition manipulation in rhetoric will never create the character and community that a just world requires (23).

Works Cited

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