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Public and Relational Communication Ethics in Political Communication: Integrity, Secrecy, and Dialogue in 'The Contender'

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Abstract

There is no denying the omnipresence of media in the twenty-first century. One form of media that is particularly influential is film. Unlike print forms of entertainment, in which age and reading ability dictate accessibility, movies are accessible to virtually everyone. And, regardless of the producer's purpose for making the film, all movies provide an insight into our culture and the individuals who reside within it. Some movies are produced solely for entertainment value, but others seek to convey some type of message or to stimulate thought on the part of the viewer (Good & Dillon 2002; Kupfer 1999; Lipkin 2002). All movies have ethical content, but for some the ethical content is not the focus of the film, while for others, directing viewers' thoughts toward particular moral issues is the primary purpose of the movie. Sometimes filmmakers seek to raise questions about cultural, social, and political practices; sometimes they seek to move viewers to consider points of view that perhaps they have not previously encountered or thought about. When they do, these goals are communicated through visual images and character dialogue situated in various realistic or metaphorical sites of our social and political culture.

Movies that invite viewers to consider communication issues in the American context include: *All the President's Men* (1976), *Wall Street* (1987), *Philadelphia* (1993), *Sling Blade* (1996), *The Apostle* (1997), *The Truman Show* (1998), *The Contender* (2000), *Artificial Intelligence* (2001), and *Chicago* (2002). Each of these films, in its own way, depicts powerful social and interpersonal communication issues. Because these films are a form of mass speech and expose large numbers of people to their messages, it is important to consider what they have to say about communication ethics.

Disciplines

Communication | Ethics and Political Philosophy | Film and Media Studies | Interpersonal and Small Group Communication | Other Film and Media Studies

Comments

Permission documentation is on file.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Public and Relational Communication Ethics in Political Communication: Integrity, Secrecy, and Dialogue in *The Contender*

Jon A. Hess and Joy Piazza

There is no denying the omnipresence of media in the twenty-first century. One form of media that is particularly influential is film. Unlike print forms of entertainment, in which age and reading ability dictate accessibility, movies are accessible to virtually everyone. And, regardless of the producer's purpose for making the film, all movies provide an insight into our culture and the individuals who reside within it. Some movies are produced solely for entertainment value, but others seek to convey some type of message or to stimulate thought on the part of the viewer (Good & Dillon 2002; Kupfer 1999; Lipkin 2002). All movies have ethical content, but for some the ethical content is not the focus of the film, while for others, directing viewers' thoughts toward particular moral issues is the primary purpose of the movie. Sometimes filmmakers seek to raise questions about cultural, social, and political practices; sometimes they seek to move viewers to consider points of view that perhaps they have not previously encountered or thought about. When they do, these goals are communicated through visual images and character dialogue situated in various realistic or metaphorical sites of our social and political culture.

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ligence (2001), and *Chicago* (2002). Each of these films, in its own way, depicts powerful social and interpersonal communication issues. Because these films are a form of mass speech and expose large numbers of people to their messages, it is important to consider what they have to say about communication ethics (Valenti 2000).

Aristotle considered politics to be that "master science of the good," because it is through politics that we work for the good of all people (1962, p. 4). Although our connotations of the term *politics* have become considerably more negative over the years, there is no denying the importance of politics and government when considering ethics. For this reason, a movie focusing on politics is especially appropriate for an examination of ethics in popular film. *The Contender* (DreamWorks, 2000) is a good film to analyze not only because of its topic, but also because the writer-director Rod Lurie did an excellent job of demonstrating that making ethical communicative choices is an inherently complex and difficult task. The ethics and communication issues raised through this film are also applicable to our everyday interaction vis-à-vis the choices we make for ourselves and the judgments we make about others. On both personal and public levels, this film is provocative for its presentation of the tension between an individual's goals and motivations, and the communicative choices one makes while seeking to protect those interests.

Like *All the President's Men*, *The Contender* was produced on the heels of a political scandal. Whereas the specific issues in Watergate were different from the issues in the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, both scandals share fundamental communication issues surrounding integrity, secrecy, and deception among government leaders, both in public and interpersonal communication. *The Contender* is a fictional political drama about the events that unfold as the president attempts to fill the vacant position after the untimely death of the vice president. The main characters in the movie are the Democrat president, Jackson Evans (played by Jeff Bridges); the Republican-turned-Democrat senator and vice-presidential nominee Laine Hanson (Joan Allen, who was nominated for an Academy Award for her performance in this movie); Shelly Runyon, a ruthless Republican congressman determined to destroy Hanson's confirma-

tion (Gary Oldman); Democrat congressman Reginald Webster (Christian Slater); and Virginia governor Jack Hathaway (William L. Peterson).

The film begins with a tragic accident in which a car goes careening off a bridge just above where Hathaway is giving an interview to a reporter while in a fishing boat. Hathaway dives into the water attempting to rescue the woman inside the car, but his efforts are to no avail and she dies. After this incident the audience learns that the sudden death of the vice president has required President Jackson Evans to select a replacement. Instead of selecting Hathaway, whose popularity is soaring after his heroic rescue attempt, Evans makes a radical choice when he chooses Senator Laine Hanson to become the nation's first female vice president.

Hathaway's friend and supporter Shelly Runyon is a powerful congressman who is the head of Hanson's confirmation hearing. Firmly against Hanson's nomination and preferring Hathaway instead, Congressman Runyon secretly gathers a team to destroy Hanson personally and professionally. Photographs emerge on the Internet allegedly depicting Hanson having sex with two men during her freshman year in college as part of a sorority initiation. Depositions are taken from people who claim to have been witnesses, and the nightly news airs interviews with others who claim to have attended or participated in the initiation. Runyon slyly finds ways to insert references to the website photographs during Hanson's confirmation hearing. Hanson refuses to respond to the allegations, even to Evans, taking the position that her private life is not the public's business and challenging the public-private double standard that female political candidates face during their bids for higher-level political offices. Hanson handles the scandal with dignity and resoluteness. She never plays victim, but rather portrays a model of an individual who stands by her principles, even "when it's not convenient."

Meanwhile, an FBI agent investigates the circumstances surrounding the automobile accident that Hathaway witnessed, and finds that Hathaway paid the woman to drive off the bridge so that he could save her during his news interview. As Runyon's campaign to destroy Hanson approaches success, Evans is in jeopardy of los-

ing his legacy—what he calls his “swan song.” Evans meets with Runyon to negotiate a deal whereby he cunningly induces Runyon to agree to publicly back Hathaway’s nomination, agreeing because “his fall is your fall.” Runyon acts as agreed, telling the media that he would stake his career on Hathaway’s smooth confirmation. Evans then exposes Hathaway’s criminal behavior, ruining Runyon’s credibility and clearing the way for Hanson’s confirmation.

The Contender offers insight into some of the constructs most central to communication ethics. In this chapter, we examine three of these constructs: integrity, secrecy and deception, and dialogue. We begin with integrity. It is the foundation of all virtue, because ethical values can hardly be said to exist if people do not adhere to those values with some consistency. Second, we examine secrecy and deception. There is probably no issue in communication ethics more widely discussed than complete and truthful disclosure of information. These issues—integrity, secrecy, and deception—are major themes in *The Contender*, so it is natural that we direct our attention to them in our analysis. The final construct we examine in this chapter is the dialogic ethic. Whereas the other concepts are salient due to their centrality in the movie, this theory is salient due to the complete *absence* of dialogue depicted in the film. The presentation of a world in which dialogue has almost completely ceased to exist allows viewers to confront the question of how feasible dialogue is in certain situations and what the consequences are of abandoning it altogether.

Integrity

The most salient ethical issue addressed in *The Contender* is integrity. Ostensibly, the theme of the movie was Senator Laine Hanson’s struggle to maintain her integrity in the face of immoral opposition. Hanson felt that there should not be a double standard as to what questions are asked of men and women, specifically as pertaining to a person’s sexual history. The charges levied against Hanson, that she had been involved in a sexual orgy as part of a sorority initiation rite during her freshman year in college, were charges that she believed a man would not be asked to answer. Thus, the

movie is about her quest to adhere to her principle of equality by not answering these charges in the face of great risk to her career and reputation.

The ideal of integrity is not only a central focus in *The Contender*; it also turns out to be an essential starting point for discussion of ethics because of its nature and importance. Integrity is not an ethical system itself, but rather it is the adherence to whatever ethical beliefs people value most highly. Different people may hold different beliefs, but as long as each person adheres to what he or she most highly values, they maintain their personal integrity. Without faithfulness to some value system, though, all other ethical issues become meaningless. It is pointless for a person to contemplate ethical values if that person is not prepared to consistently abide by the values he or she feels is most justified.

Stephen Carter (1996) defines integrity as the act of doing three moral tasks: (1) discerning right from wrong, (2) acting on that discernment, even at personal risk, and (3) telling others what principles one is adhering to. In his description of integrity, Carter suggests several qualities of integrity that makes it admirable. Among these, steadfastness and risk are particularly notable. Risk is an essential quality of integrity because it shows people what values are most important. Only when people must make choices, accepting some conditions and sacrificing others, do we see which values are most strongly held. Thus, it is when people expose themselves to significant risk that we know which principles are truly essential to their character. As Carter notes, "we can never really know whether we are acting from deep and steadfast principles until those principles are tested" (p. 23). Steadfastness is important because once people take a risk and make a stand, they are likely to encounter criticism and opposition. In order to maintain their integrity, people need to stand firm to their principles under such challenges.

Integrity of Senator Laine Hanson

Integrity exemplified by Hanson. *The Contender* makes no mention of the discernment process Senator Laine Hanson goes through to arrive at her decision; instead it focuses on her actions in adhering to

it, on the costs she bears, and on her messages to others about this decision. Hanson refuses to deny the charges of sexual impropriety not only to the public, but also to the president and his aides, who are her support team. When confronted by Kermit Newman (who is implied to be Evans's chief of staff), Hanson defends her choice not to answer as simply being beneath her dignity. This course of action shows integrity not only in her consistent adherence to her principles (she refuses to answer both to her enemies and her allies), but also integrity due to the risk involved. Were the president to withdraw his support, Hanson would not only lose her nomination but also her reputation, because such a withdrawal would be seen by the public as a concession of guilt. Hanson's actions force the president to make a choice—support her whether or not the charges are true, or replace her with someone who would not risk smudging the administration's reputation.

Senator Hanson's integrity is shown in the movie in several other ways. First, when Chief of Staff Newman suggests fighting the attack by finding salacious information about Runyon, she objects, saying, "If we do that, we're no better than he is." Second, Hanson's multiple refusals to refute the charges show steadfastness. Third, Hanson explicitly identifies the role risk plays in integrity when she says, "Principles only mean something if you only stick by them when they're inconvenient." Finally, if the dialogue was insufficient to make the point, the movie producers add some other signals as well. In the climactic conversation between Senator Hanson and President Evans, when she finally reveals the truth to him (as personal friends rather than as the president and appointee), the producers introduce the music under the voice track just as she begins telling him about her moral views—starting with her view that this personal, private encounter was not his or anyone else's business. This production cue directs viewers' attention to her integrity as the central element in this ordeal.

Shortcomings in Laine Hanson's integrity. If the viewer watches this movie and concludes that Senator Hanson is indeed the moral star of the movie, we ask them to watch it again. Although Hanson's integrity is the thematic centerpiece of the movie, we argue that another character, Representative Reginald Webster, may bet-

ter embody integrity. Despite the movie's celebration of Hanson's integrity, a closer inspection shows several potential shortfalls in her integrity.

The first potential shortcoming of Senator Hanson's integrity can be seen not in her actions, but in the overarching storyline of the movie. The movie's vindication of Hanson's integrity stems from the results of her choice. Hanson stands by her principle and eventually triumphs by achieving a victory over Congressman Runyon in the hearings, and doing so without compromising on the values she so strongly holds. This outcome sounds good, but the viewer cannot escape the fact that her victory is not achieved because of her integrity, or even in spite of it, but because of President Evans's unscrupulous manipulation of Runyon. As the movie develops, it is clear that Hanson's integrity would have caused her defeat if Evans had not stooped to Runyon's level. In fact, viewers are forewarned of this fact by Chief of Staff Newman's response to Hanson's objections earlier in the film. When she protests that his tactic of finding something harmful in Runyon's past would be no better than he (Runyon) is, Newman responds, "*We are no better than he is.*"

A second potential weakness in Senator Hanson's integrity lies in her moral reasoning. Although the film does not show her process of moral discernment, it does show her steadfastness being tested. And, while she does indeed stand firm, the matter of whether she exhibits sound moral judgment in her discernment is open for discussion. Later in the chapter, we will examine some support for her position based on the theories of Sissela Bok. At this point, we will address some possible weaknesses in her moral discernment. Hanson's unyielding devotion to one good (equality) is countered by the fact that she might be shortchanging other goods that are being compromised (for example, setting a moral exemplar), which she seems unwilling to consider. This unwillingness to contemplate is a serious moral deficiency, because without adequate discernment a person risks adhering to a fallible position. Carter (1996) notes this when he writes, "If we refuse to take the time for discernment, a discernment that might challenge cherished beliefs, then it is hard to see how we can ever construct a politics of integrity" (p. 28).

It is also unclear why Hanson does not object to answering the question of whether she has ever committed adultery. Although adultery is different from collegiate premarital sexual encounters, Hanson does not explain why this question is acceptable to answer, leaving the audience to wonder why one incident in her sexual history should be open to public discussion whereas the other incident should not. This contrast creates confusion about Hanson's moral stance on the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable questions, and makes her discernment appear potentially flawed.

Integrity of Representative Reginald Webster

The character who we believe may best embody the ideal of integrity is Reginald Webster, the newly elected congressman from Delaware. Although Webster's integrity is more subtle than Senator Hanson's prominently portrayed integrity, he displays some aspects of integrity that seem superior to Hanson's adherence to virtue.

Webster's own integrity is depicted in the film starting with his first attempt to get onto the committee hearing Hanson's confirmation. When asking to be on the committee, Webster first tells Congressman Runyon, "I believe you'll find me industrious and hardworking." The following exchange then occurs:

Congressman Runyon: I take it you have a predisposition ... about the confirmation, I mean?

Congressman Webster: Uh, no. Actually I'm one hundred percent objective.

Although Runyon chastises Webster for such a stance (saying that his constituents want him for his opinions and philosophy, his "subjectivity"), the point about Webster's character is made clear for the audience. When Webster approaches Runyon later and again requests membership in the committee, he says it is because he feels Hanson's policies belong in the Republican party.

Although Webster's integrity could be criticized for his seeking membership on a committee in order to sack someone, this stance can be partially defended in that Webster does examine the facts

and makes a decision based on his principles and what he thinks is best for the public, not because of a personal vendetta. Furthermore, Webster is exhibiting integrity in taking risk, as he stands a lot to lose by going against his own party. The other way Webster can be vindicated is to say that his initial actions constitute a moral lapse. But, because he begins from a fallible position, his eventual conversion to the other perspective shows that he is remaining vigilant in looking for the truth. Ultimately, there is some element of truth to both these positions. The best description is to say that Webster is not completely integral in his reasons for trying to get onto the committee, but he does have some justification and in his actions on the committee he eventually corrects for the shortcomings he initially showed.

Webster's integrity is also shown in several key dialogues. In one of these, the president asks him to support Senator Hanson's nomination as a personal favor. Webster responds that he will not do that, saying, "I am nothing if I do not follow my heart, sir." Later, when Webster finds that Runyon has been feeding false rumors to the press, the two have the following exchange:

Congressman Runyon: I, uh, think I have some self-righteous indignation coming my way.

Congressman Webster (rolls his eyes): Well, is there any truth whatsoever to this story?

Then, Webster does something no one else in the movie does—he tries to talk to all parties, in an attempt to find the truth and to do what is most right. In so doing, he visits Hanson in an attempt to discuss the moral issue of setting the sexual standard for America's girls. Instead of engaging in this moral discussion, Hanson abruptly ends the conversation. In this scene, the viewer sees Webster reflecting on the moral questions while Hanson refuses to do so.

If these scenes were not enough, the filmmakers add other clues about Webster's integrity. As he waits to speak to the president, the movie allocates over a minute to a scene showing him admiring portraits of great presidents, suggesting that he admires their virtues as well. Second, when Webster gives the president the affida-

vits that prove Hanson's innocence in the sexual scandal, President Evans says of him, "He may not know his right from his left, but apparently he does know right from wrong."

In the end, we judge Webster as showing greater integrity than Hanson, not on account of what values each adhere to, but because of how both go about enacting their integrity. Hanson's integrity is in her faithfulness to gender equality; Webster's integrity emerges from his commitment to finding the truth and making a choice that is best for the greater good. Both values are worthy. And both characters take risks in their actions—Hanson risks losing her nomination, and Webster risks loss of support, first by going against his party and then later by changing sides. However, where the two characters diverge in the level of integrity they show is in Webster's vigilance for the truth and in his ongoing attentiveness to moral issues. When he becomes suspicious of Runyon's tactics, he begins to investigate the allegations on his own. And, whereas the process of discernment seems to end for Hanson once she arrives upon her stance, Webster continues to ask and reflect on the emerging moral dimensions as the events continue to unfold.

The Contender's depiction of integrity suggests some implications for our understanding of integrity. For instance, the movie shows the importance that discernment and steadfastness play. Carter (1996) treats discernment and steadfastness as parts of a sequential process (with discernment culminating in the decision that is upheld through steadfast commitment), but the movie reveals the fact that while discernment must take place before steadfastness can begin, discernment should not be abandoned once an initial decision is reached. Instead, steadfastness should be added to ongoing discernment. Hanson's discernment is limited to her initial decision, and she seems unwilling to reconsider the issue in light of other aspects of the issue that she may not have thought about initially. Webster, on the other hand, shows integrity by keeping active in his discernment process, such that he can change his position—without changing his principles—when new information comes to light. Steadfastness is indeed to be admired, as Carter notes, but we should add the caveat that blind adherence is not equivalent to steadfastness, and it is not to be admired. Integrity is an ongoing

process, and it is premature to complete one's discernment before the situation has fully played itself out.

Secrecy and Deception

In Senator Hanson's quest to preserve her integrity, the issue at stake is when it is appropriate to disclose certain personal information versus when such information ought to remain secret. Thus, the moral conflicts in this movie revolve around matters of secrecy and deception. The most central issue of secrecy is Hanson's refusal to respond to charges of sexual debauchery during her freshman year in college. In addition to Hanson, however, many other characters in the movie also deal with issues of secrecy and deception. Foremost among these other characters is President Evans, who makes choices of disclosure and deceit related to Governor Hathaway's plot and Congressman Runyon's campaign to thwart Hanson's nomination.

Moral reflection on secrecy and deception in *The Contender* forces the viewer to confront several difficult issues. For Hanson, the movie leads the viewer to wrestle with two central issues. The first of these is the question of when silence is deception. This is the issue that Congressman Webster raises with Hanson when he expresses concerns that she is setting the moral standard for the nation's girls. The second is a multifaceted issue related to the construction of one's identity. To what degree should an individual be able to control her or his own identity? How can we determine the legitimacy of requests (or demands) for openness of personal disclosure?

In her analysis of secrets, Sissela Bok (1983) lays out a theoretical foundation that provides a good starting point in addressing these issues. First, Bok establishes the point that secrets are not always intended to deceive, nor always interpreted as deception. For example, voting is often done by secret ballot. This practice is not done to deceive, but simply to protect privacy. Second, Bok establishes two key principles that underlie all other judgments about secrecy: (1) equality of secrecy and (2) partial individual control over disclosure of personal matters. Bok's argument about equality of secrecy is that "whatever control over secrecy and openness we conclude is legitimate for some individuals should, in the absence of special

considerations, be legitimate for all" (p. 27). This argument is essentially a requirement of impartiality, found in almost every major ethical perspective (for example, Kant 1997; Rawls 1971).

Bok's second principle asserts that people should be allowed a degree of personal autonomy in control over secrecy to protect their identity, because secrecy protects our vulnerability, our sense of uniqueness from others, and our sense of possibilities for the future self. In her words,

Human beings can be subjected to every scrutiny, and reveal much about themselves; but they can never be entirely understood, simultaneously exposed from every perspective, completely transparent either to themselves or to other persons. They are not only unique, but also unfathomable. The experience of such uniqueness and depth underlies self-respect and what social theorists have called the sense of the sacredness of the self. (1983, p. 21)

Secrecy in order to protect sacredness of self helps us understand why a right to privacy is so important to many Americans. It is why the argument in defense of the Patriot Act that includes the question "If you have nothing to hide, why does it matter whether someone is monitoring your e-mails, reading your mail, or tapping your telephone?" has yet to be universally persuasive.

Based on these two principles of individual control over disclosure, Bok (1983) proposes the following question, which is essential to answer: "What considerations override these presumptions?" (p. 28, emphasis removed). That is, under what circumstances should some people be forced to disclose information that others are not, and when should people have to give up sacredness of self? In Bok's eyes, each situation must be judged on its own merits; there are no blanket rules for secrecy and disclosure that can be applied to all cases at all times. In light of this foundation, Senator Hanson's refusal to disclose secrets of her sexual history invites a challenging ethical analysis.

Secrecy of Senator Laine Hanson

Senator Hanson's silence and thus refusal explain or defend herself against the allegations about her moral character invites the audience to interrogate the tension between the public's right to know

and personal privacy for political candidates, particularly at the executive level. The first issue is whether her secrecy constitutes an act of deception.

Silence as deception. The issue of secrecy as deception is a significant issue. As this chapter was being written, Americans were debating whether the Bush administration used secrecy as a means to deceive the public into believing that Iraq represented a greater security threat than it really did (allegations were also surfacing that the president and his administration had also simply lied about certain facts, but that is a separate issue that is not germane to the present discussion). Of particular interest was a memo from the CIA to the president, which was heavily censored before being released to the public. The publicly released document "was stripped of dissenting opinions, warnings of insufficient information and doubts about ... Saddam Hussein's intentions" (Landay 2004, p. A1). In instances like this one, the use of secrecy as a means of deception is clearly at the fore.

Not all secrets involve deception, but deception inevitably involves secrecy. Indubitably this begs the question, When is secrecy deceptive? Bok argues that, in the case of those with government power, secrets are deceptive when concealment is motivated by a desire to shelter information from open discussion and debate. Thus, the Bush administration's use of secrecy seems likely to be an instance in which secrecy is used as a means of deception.

The questions for viewers of *The Contender*, then, are whether Senator Hanson's secrecy is deceptive, and under what circumstances secrecy is a means of deception. The best response in the case of Hanson is to say that her secrecy, while not done for the purpose of deception (as was President Evans's secrecy toward Congressman Runyon about Governor Hathaway's guilt), is still misleading. Near the end of the film, Evans tells Hanson he will call a press conference to present evidence that the sexual allegations are unfounded, and she asks him not to do so. "You would sacrifice your reputation?" Evans asks, to which Hanson replies, "Yes, I would. I really would." In this exchange, the movie makes it clear that Hanson's silence does indeed lead people to accept a false claim about her past behaviors.

Legitimacy of requests for openness. The second major issue that Senator Hanson's silence invokes is how to determine whether or not a request for disclosure is appropriate. For answers to this question, we turn to Bok's two principles—equality and individual control. Hanson uses both arguments. When Congressman Webster attempts to privately discuss the issue with Hanson, she justifies her silence with the principle of equality before abruptly ending the conversation: "If I were a man, nobody would care how many sexual partners I had when I was in college. And if it's not relevant for a man it's not relevant for a woman." To President Evans, Hanson begins her argument with the principle of limited individual control by suggesting that this just is not appropriate material for conversation:

President Evans: K [Chief of Staff Kermit Newman] told me about your little sexual romp in college.... Were you married at the time?

Senator Hanson: I was a freshman in— You know sir, I'm just not going to comment. The whole thing is beneath me and it's beneath the process.

Based on this reasoning, not only is Hanson's refusal to speak to the matter ethical, but also it is essential to her well-being. Her silence can be defended as an ethical choice in order to protect her identity, because protecting one's identity is a legitimate pursuit. We could even take this argument a step further and suggest that her silence seems to be an ethical choice that serves both fundamental individual human needs and the greater good for women in society. This idea is exemplified in an exchange between Senator Hanson and the wife of Congressman Shelly Runyon. Mrs. Runyon approaches Hanson with some damaging information about Shelly. In explaining her rationale for offering harmful information about her husband, Mrs. Runyon tells Hanson, "In this business with so much at stake, it's not enough to believe in yourself, you have to be right. This [attack on you] is an ideological rape, of all women." To this comment, Hanson replies, "Well, then I'll survive it for all of us."

If equality and individual control were all there were to the judgment, this matter would be simple enough. However, the question is much more difficult. Bok describes this right as "limited," to

acknowledge the fact that there are times when someone's right to protect identity is overridden by larger concerns. Larry J. Sabato, Mark Stencel, and S. Robert Lichter (2000) offer some factors to clarify the limits to secrecy of a public official's sexual activities. Among the factors they identify as supporting the legitimacy of a request include sexual activity that impacts an official's public role (for example, sexual relations with a staff member or lobbyist), sexual activity where conflict of interest exists or where there is coercion, or sexual activity that is compulsive and indiscreet (and therefore potentially dangerous). In contrast, they specify that sexual activity can be legitimately kept secret if it does not fit these categories, or if it is from a person's distant past (more than a decade ago).

Because these are abstract categories, it can be difficult to know exactly how to categorize some of Senator Hanson's behaviors. So, these additional criteria require further discussion. But, in general, we can view the allegations against Hanson as targeting behavior that was noncompulsive, unrelated to her role as a public official (especially since she was not a public official at the time), and past the statute of limitations. The problem for Hanson is that the allegations are that she participated in sexual activity that was indiscreet, at least by some standards. Nonetheless, Hanson seems to fare pretty well by these standards.

The complicating factor is that as the first woman to serve at the highest office of government, Hanson will not only be a policy-maker but also a role model. Here is where her moral justification for not taking a stand becomes more problematic. Hanson argues, with some merit, that her refusal to answer to the charges is the most moral way to respond. Critics, however, could respond—also with merit—that her silence creates some harm because it would be interpreted as a confession. This is the concern of Congressman Webster:

Congressman Webster: I just feel like there should be some back and forth between us; you and the committee.

Senator Hanson: I'll give you back and forth: on social security, relations with Israel, the Dow Jones, the census, almost everything, but not this. Not my personal life. It's just nobody's business.

Congressman Webster: Well that's not what the people will tell you. They'll tell you it is their business. They'll tell you that you're setting the standards of morality for their children, especially their girls.

When looking at all the facts, Senator Hanson's position based on equality and control over identity seems reasonably sound. Yet, we argue that her position was not completely morally praiseworthy. Why do we criticize the moral soundness of her action? We suggest two points. First, her claim that standards of privacy are unequal for men and women is debatable. The Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, which was mentioned in this film, was a recent case in which a male political figure was asked questions about his sexual history. Just as Clinton was asked, so too is Senator Hanson asked to confirm or deny the moral charges against her. Thus, her presumption about the status of equality in her historical moment is suspect.

Second, what appears as steadfastness on the part of Senator Hanson could be evaluated as moral blindness (or at least short-sightedness). In *The Contender*, viewers are never given a sense that Hanson has considered options other than flat refusal to discuss. If it were the case that the only two available options were to answer the charges or remain silent, then we would be content with what she does if we agree that her choice was based on sound reasons. However, in seeing only these two choices, Hanson creates a false dichotomy. One option would have been for Hanson to have made a statement about the moral reasons why she felt that the question was inappropriate to answer and that her lack of response should be considered neither an acceptance nor a denial of the information being circulated in the press. In doing so, she would have retained the secrecy about her sexual past, but also possibly mitigated the negative impact that Webster and others were concerned her silence was having on the sexual morals she was presenting to girls by making her principles clear. Furthermore, while not a certain outcome, it is possible that such a response could even be a catalyst for a public discussion over whether there is a sexual double standard in political inquiry.

We suggest that the choice Senator Hanson makes is of positive moral quality, but that it does not maximize possible ethical qual-

ity in her actions. Vernon Jensen (1985) posits that ethics are better judged as a matter of degree, rather than dichotomous right/wrong positions. For ease of discussion, he suggests using a continuum, with the low end reflecting behavior that is of extremely low ethical quality, the midpoint representing ethically neutral behavior, and the high end signifying behavior that is of extremely high ethical quality. One advantage to this conceptualization is that it prevents philosophers from being satisfied with one ethical behavior when another choice that is of higher ethical quality is readily available.

If we adopt Jensen's stance, we can easily evaluate Senator Hanson's communication. It is clear that her actions are of positive ethical quality, thus meriting a score above the scale's midpoint. But it is also the case that her choice is not the *best* option that she has available, particularly in light of her reluctance to share her moral reasons with many parties involved, such as President Evans, Representative Webster, and the American public. Thus, we suggest that while Hanson's actions are indeed of positive ethical quality, they are deficient in the sense that they are not as positive as they could have been.

Secrecy of President Jackson Evans

Secrecy and deception are relevant to an analysis of the communicative choices made by Jackson Evans as well. Early in the film President Evans seems preoccupied not with important matters of the state, but rather with the petty pleasures that power in high places provides. He enjoys demanding exotic foods from his cooking staff, bowling, and trying to catch his staff unprepared for an unusual request. But as his character unfolds, the audience is shown a man who is determined to win, who is shrewd and cunning, and who has a loyal right-hand man to facilitate his success. The appearance of absorption with petty pleasures is a ruse in service of his strategy to have his term in office end with a "swan song." Because his vice president has passed away while in office, leaving the position vacant and in need of an appointment, he has a unique opportunity to appoint a woman to serve in the highest executive office of government in the history of the country. His challenge is to win a

confirmation from the head of the hearing committee, a man who is not only on the other side of the ideological aisle from Evans, but who was Evans's losing opponent in his campaign for president. Both Evans and Congressman Runyon are shrewd competitors, who use secrecy and deception to win their game, yet Evans's strategies seem more acceptable.

Beginning with his meeting with Governor Hathaway just after the tragic accident, subtle cues in the film (such as Evans's nonverbal behaviors) suggest inauthenticity from the president's gestures of sympathy and condolence, almost as if he knows something is suspicious about the incident. Late in the film, the plot suggests that the likely reason Evans never pushed Hanson to abandon her silence was that he had an ace in the hole—the truth about Hathaway.

Ends and means. This reading of the text seems to forgive President Evans for what is recognizably ruthlessness, because the film suggests that Hathaway and Runyon are immoral, and Hanson is upright. But does Evans's behavior stand up to basic tests of ethics? After all, his goals were to win, "to beat Shelly at his own game," and to end his administration with a claim to fame—hardly moral goals. When Governor Jack Hathaway learns that he will not be the vice-presidential nominee, this latter motivation is made clear. Hathaway asks Chief of Staff Newman, "I don't understand ... can't you do something?" to which Newman replies, "I've tried, but he's already made up his mind. Filling the slot may well be his swan song."

The issue of whether the good ends justify the use of bad means is an ancient question in ethics. In general, ethicists tend to be negative about the possibility of good ends justifying otherwise immoral means, pointing out such problems as the fact that the means is just as important as the end and that actions often have consequences other than those intended (Johannesen 2002). However, the issue is not as simple as it might appear. First, some people argue that under extreme circumstances we may need to make exceptions to the usual principles (see, for example, Bok 1978). Furthermore, when inspected more closely, the idea of ends justifying means relates

to the issue of utilitarianism (Mill 1947). The difference between these two perspectives is that utilitarianism seeks to determine whether the means are acceptable based on the outcomes, whereas the means-ends approach seeks to excuse an admittedly bad means because of its morally desirable outcome. But how can a utilitarian thinker judge the means other than by their outcomes? From a utilitarian perspective, the moral quality of the means is a blank slate until the ends determine it, and so in a sense, when reasoned from this theory the ends always justify the means (whatever they are).

One answer to the question of whether good ends justify bad means is presented by Warren Bovée (1991). He argues that good ends can justify bad means, but rarely. To determine whether the ends justify the means, he suggests six questions. These questions involve matters of what the good is, the likelihood of the evil means achieving it, and the other available options. In the competition over Hanson's nomination between President Evans and Congressman Runyon, both Evans and Runyon use secrecy and deception in seeking their ends. Yet the viewer is led to see Evans's actions as less vile than Runyon's. Why is this? Although Runyon argues that he wants to block Hanson's confirmation because he does not see the promise of greatness in her, the film portrays him as simply being a misogynist, thus undermining any claims to righteous motivation. Evans, on the other hand, warrants a mixed evaluation. The film makes it clear that his motivation is to leave a legacy, and so that cause is self-serving. But virtually every ethical theory accepted today would reject the idea that women are categorically unfit for the presidency, and thus Evans's attempt to rectify this glaring inequity meets moral acclaim, as long as the woman he nominates is fit for office.

Where the two characters' courses of action more strongly separate, however, is in availability of other choices. Runyon makes no attempt at morally commendable strategies, but jumps directly to deceit and treachery, whereas Evans only resorts to such tactics when all other possibilities are exhausted. It is worth noting here that strategizing for such contingencies, as Evans is clearly doing throughout the movie, is not the same thing as actually doing the

behaviors when other choices are still available. Furthermore, the position Evans finds himself in when he resorts to manipulation was created by Runyon's treachery. This action is different from resorting to foul tactics when it becomes apparent that one is losing a fair fight; in this case Evans is defending himself with the same tactics his attacker is using against him. Thus, even though both parties use deceptive tactics, viewers can tolerate Evans's actions better than Runyon's.

Dialogic Ethic

One ethical theory that is conspicuous by its absence in the characters' interactions is the dialogic ethic. The dialogic ethic is an ethic for interpersonal interactions, especially under circumstances in which persuasion is important. It is one of the few theories specifically designed for communication in personal relationships, and seems like an ideal fit for guiding relationships among political leaders because of the centrality of persuasion in such relations.

As delineated by Paul W. Keller and Charles T. Brown (1968), the dialogic ethic calls for people to discuss issues in a spirit of dialogue. Key elements of dialogue include presenting oneself in the most genuine manner possible, showing the other unconditional positive regard, being fully present in the interaction, showing empathetic understanding of the other person's perspective, and similar behaviors (Johannesen 1971). Furthermore, Keller and Brown assert that communicators need to recognize their mutual influence on each other, and treat each other with the greatest of respect. In their view, communication is ethical to the degree that it enhances the other person's self-determination, and unethical to the degree that it develops hostility toward the other or attempts to subjugate the other. Communication that opposes these goals is described as monologic, because it stifles dissent and tries to subjugate the other person.

Lest the reader quickly dismiss this theory as being an unrealistic relic of the 1960s, two reminders are in order. First, the theory's impact has been significant, and dialogue continues to be an important area of interest in philosophy of communication (see, for example, Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna 2004; Arnett & Arneson 1999;

Cissna & Anderson 1998). Second, while many of the ideas in the theory seem naïve and idealistic, Keller (1981) argues that ethical theories should be ideals people strive toward, not realistic reflections of what we most commonly do.

The interactions depicted in *The Contender* show a cast of characters who almost universally abandon any pretense of engaging each other in a spirit of dialogue. President Evans's dealings with Governor Hathaway are set against a backdrop of the secret investigation he is conducting of Hathaway's role in the fatal accident, Congressman Runyon deems Senator Hanson unfit for service as vice president before he ever interacts with her, Hanson walks out on lunch with Runyon after a brief skirmish, and Runyon's wife secretly gives Hanson information she can use to publicly embarrass her husband without giving him a chance to learn about or respond to the issue. When Congressman Webster tries to initiate dialogue with Hanson about her ethical choices, she demeans him, saying, "You know what? You're young. That's okay, it's okay. You're young. And, um, I'm just gonna choose to be amused by your naïveté, give you the benefit of the doubt, and spell it out for you even more clearly."

Furthermore, the movie makes it clear that these characters see their interactions as confrontational, not mutually cooperative, as the dialogic ethic suggests. Evans says, "I'll die before Shelly Runyon checkmates me!" indicating that he sees the essence of their relationship as a match against each other. Runyon, for his part, states that politics and war are "one and the same," and therefore the interpersonal dimensions of their interactions are like combat. In *The Contender*, it is clear that these characters live in a world defined by survival of the fittest, where even one's allies are sharks (a metaphor that is instantiated in the movie).

One liability of using the dialogic ethic is that both parties must be able to trust each other to participate fully and honestly, because a person communicating dialogically with someone who is monologic will be taken advantage of (Keller 1981). Clearly, that assumption of dialogue is not a safe one to make in the realm of political dealings. The word *politics* has taken on a connotation of self-interest, dirty deals, and disloyalty, a sharp contrast with Aristotle's notion of politics as the "master science of the good," as noted at

the beginning of this chapter. It is hopeful to many people that their own workplaces involve a greater degree of dialogic interaction with at least some of their coworkers than that portrayed in *The Contender*, and that their personal relationships involve even more.

The question for ethicists is, Should we advocate dialogue as an ideal form of involvement in political professional relationships, or is such a stance unrealistic? If it is unrealistic, should we still seek it as an ideal that we strive to work toward, or do we abandon it altogether, as nice but impossible? Although the movie does not make an explicit or intentional statement about this matter, the characterization it gives of political dealings paints a picture of dialogue as impossible, and thus not wise to strive for. In fact, the movie's portrayal of President Evans as an admirable figure, in spite of (maybe even because of) his manipulation of Congressman Runyon, may even lead to the interpretation that a spirit of dialogue will leave a person weak and vulnerable.

The challenge to this interpretation is that Representative Webster does act dialogically in several cases—talking to Runyon about the false rumors, attempting to discuss the moral issues with Senator Hanson, and sharing the results of his investigation with both Runyon and Evans. What is interesting is that while Webster is portrayed as a good person, it is Hanson's character that is of greater focus, yet it is Webster's approach that allowed Hanson to succeed. So, despite the general rejection of dialogue in the movie, viewers could still see the dialogic ethic as viable, even if only in limited ways.

Ultimately, this balance may be what the film best portrays—the idea that blind adherence to dialogue leaves a person vulnerable, but that, strategically used, dialogue can be beneficial. Should dialogue be relegated to a cautious maneuver, situated in otherwise strategic relations? That issue is left for viewers to decide. In our view, it may be wise to suggest that even if dialogue cannot become the dominant mode of communication, people should strive to interact in that manner wherever possible, and seek to inject some element of dialogue into even the most stubborn and resistant pockets of today's culture.

Conclusion

One reason this film lends itself so nicely to an analysis of communication and ethics is that the characters deal with the same type of challenges that real people face when making communicative decisions and ethical evaluations about the communication of others. *The Contender* shows us that moral judgments require deep investigations rather than surface treatment, that things are not always as they appear, and that, in fact, no one is a completely virtuous moral agent. Humans are flawed and ethical evaluations are not appropriately made by drawing a line in the sand where right is clearly on one side and wrong clearly on the other. Complex interrelationships require investigation of the moral facts and an evaluation of relative good and relative bad contained within.

The Contender proves to be a good tool for exploring the intricacies of many ethical theories. When we start trying to understand these ideals in light of what is portrayed in the movie, we must confront subtle nuances that we might miss if just reading about or describing the theory. For instance, the contrast between Hanson's and Webster's renditions of integrity bring to light issues of discernment, steadfastness, and integrity as a *process* that would otherwise go unnoticed in a simple description of integrity. The uses of secrecy in the movie show how secrecy can be used for both morally praiseworthy and morally questionable ends. And, the role that monologue and dialogue play in the film invites viewers to consider difficult issues of how people should relate to each other interpersonally. Through the examination of the ethical theories discussed in this chapter, the reader should gain insight not only into the ethical elements of this film, but also, more important, into the ethical issues all people face in everyday interactions.

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