Madison Smith 12 October 2016

The Ethics and Ecology of Persuasion Summary and Commentary

In Roger Soder’s chapter on “The Ethics and Ecology of Persuasion,” Soder tackles the issue of ethics when making choices meant to persuade and how persuasive language interacts and impacts the world.

Soder first shows how choices made to influence people have ethical implications. He writes that there are three choices we make when we persuade people- what our end goal is, how we are going to argue for the goal, and how we are going to talk when persuading. First, Soder argues that persuasion requires that one values some things over other things and how we determine which things are more important to us has ethical importance. Second, the methods one uses to persuade people has ethical implications as well. He argues that there are different kinds of arguments and each of these arguments has various ethical implications. The facts that we do or do not include in our arguments has ethical implications as well. Third, how one talks when attempting to persuade people is significant. The words we choose, how precise the words are, how we define the words we use, and more all contribute to how our persuasive attempts are perceived.

Then Soder tackles the ecology of persuasion or how persuasive language interacts and impacts the world. He writes that bad ecology builds on itself, so bad persuasive arguments grows over time. He argues that language can have a powerful impact on the world, even when not intended to do so. Persuasive words can lead to violence and mistrust which can have significant impacts on society. He also points out that untrue arguments used repeatedly will build on itself until it is its own justification. Soder ends with a call to recognize the importance of one’s choices involving persuasive speech.

I thought that this chapter brought up some interesting points. If someone had asked me before reading this chapter about how ethics and persuasion are connected, I would have told them that persuasion is meant to get people to chose the ethical outcome. I would not have looked at the ethics behind persuasion, only the ethics involving the end goal of persuasion. I think it is sometimes tempting when using persuasion to only consider the end goal. Sometimes it seems better to have an ethical end goal and persuade others to pursue that end goal through slightly unethical means than it is to persuade people towards a slightly unethical goal with ethical means. I suppose in many ways this chapter is arguing that the choices we make when we persuade people have their own impacts- those impacts may not be the end goal but they have impacts all the same. It is important to recognize the choices we make when we persuade people and consider their impacts and rather than taking the tempting ‘do whatever, just get it done’ approach.

I think this chapter has an interesting connection to the current presidential election. All candidates both have the end goal of persuading enough people to vote for them to win the election, however, I would argue that both are making somewhat unethical choices when using persuasive arguments. For instance, a large portion of the most recent presidential debate was spent tackling scandals involving one of the candidates. Many of their arguments used the scandals to argue that that person was unfit for presidency. I think that their selection of facts is somewhat poor because their do not involve the issues, rather the faults of the other person. Also, their arguments often concluded with something like “given my opponent’s scandal, you have no other choice than to vote for me” and I believe that that argument has little ethical value because focused on the faults of the other person rather than their own strengths. Additionally, I think the language used in the presidential debates has brought about an ecology of bad ideas. The focus on scandals, insults, and lies in this campaign has reduced the candidates abilities to address important issues and clouded the purpose of debates. Overall, I think that many of the persuasive techniques used by the presidential candidates has become increasingly unethical.