

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Morality in Advertising: An Introduction to Some Ethical Problems of Modern American Advertising

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Philippine Studies vol. 11, no. 3 (1963): 449—452

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

MORALITY IN ADVERTISING

AN INTRODUCTION TO SOME ETHICAL PROBLEMS OF MODERN AMERICAN ADVERTISING. By Thomas M. Garrett, S.J. Rome: The Gregorian University Press, 1961. 209. pp.

Fr. Garrett's thesis which is an "introduction to selected ethical problems of modern American advertising, and of consumer advertising in particular" is no small contribution to the growing need to develop and apply the traditional moral principles of general ethics to contemporary moral problems in neglected or as yet unexplored areas of special ethics. His attempt to explore the ethical, social, and economic implications of present day American advertising might draw criticism from advertising men and experts in motivation research and marketing operations, but it will also stimulate further studies on other and more complex advertising problems and, particular, on the "morality of *individual* advertising techniques".

In evaluating the validity of the proposal of the American advertising profession that "advertising by raising the standard of living can make an important contribution to the growth of the American economy", Fr. Garrett's method takes into account: (1) the intention of advertisers, (2) the actual effects of their advertising on the individual consumer and on society as a whole, and (3) whether these effects are accidental or the necessary result of the techniques used.

We divide Fr. Garrett's book into three main parts. The first part tries to establish ethical norms that should guide both the advertiser (ch. IV, The Ethics of Persuasion) and the consumer (ch. V, The Ethics of Consumption). The second part deals with the *psychological* assumption of the advertising profession that advertising has the power to increase the propensity to consume. The third part concerns the *economic* assumption of the advertising profession that advertising contributes to economic growth. Before challenging the claims of the advertising profession in the United States, Fr. Garrett first investigates its two-fold assumption. Only when these assumptions of fact have been examined does he proceed to an application of classic ethical principles, such as the principle of double effect. Thus he is equivalently saying that the ethicist should not try to deduce *a priori* the moral obligations of advertising men before he has carefully investigated all the relevant facts of the actual social and economic situation. It is not sufficient for the ethicist to work solely on the level of principle; he must also work on the level of fact. By studying the relation of advertising to the media of mass communication as well as to overall consumption and the potential utility of advertising in relation to the actual economic situation in present-day America, Fr. Garrett is perhaps the

first to bring social psychology and modern economics to bear on the ethics of persuasion and consumption. In so doing, he calls attention to the necessary relevance of the positive sciences about man to the normative science of ethics.

In developing the ethics of persuasion, the basic guiding principle is right reason. "Persuasion," states Fr. Garrett, "is ethical if it respects the rational nature of man and the obligation of the individual to reflect." In judging the liceity of the various general methods of persuasion used in advertising, Fr. Garrett distinguishes between truthful advertising which seeks to inform and "suggestive" advertising which seeks to persuade:

Truthful informative advertising is, of course, licit in and of itself. Persuasive advertising, however, poses a real problem since *some* of the persuasive *techniques* used are intended to by-pass the intellect and reduce rationality, and *may, if successful*, lead to improvident actions.

Three conclusions follow from Fr. Garrett's moral reasoning: (1) "suggestive" advertising, because its intent is of itself unethical, cannot be justified by alleged contributions to economic growth (the end does not justify the means); (2) advertising which creates or reinforces an ethos which embodies a set of pseudo-values cannot be morally acceptable; (3) mass-media persuaders have an obligation to protect and where possible to promote the free flow of necessary information. In short, "in attempting to influence consumption and to further economic progress, the advertising profession must refrain from any direct interference with the *practical* freedom of the mass media and from the exercise of indirect influence over the content of the media."

"Man is to use material goods for the attainment of his existential goal." With this basic premise, Fr. Garrett discusses the morality of individual and social consumption. Consumer advertising must respect not only the needs of the individual but also of society as a whole. Advertising is legitimate if it encourages the consumption of products which have a real, though perhaps, limited utility; persuasion which aims at promoting the sale of intangible qualities and of products of little worth may be licit so long as it does not encourage immoderate or dangerous uses of these particular products. In other words, informative advertising and non-suggestive persuasion should not seriously disturb the psychic equilibrium of the individual, nor should it distort the hierarchy of values. Applying these norms to the concrete situation which obtains in the United States, Fr. Garrett claims that there is no real need for a forced or artificial stimulation of personal consumption by means of suggestive advertising, or by persuasive advertising in favor of products of little or secondary utility. Furthermore, Fr. Garrett believes that "*if advertising were actually effective in increasing total*

consumption, it would probably cause social and economic maladjustments."

With regard to the power of advertising to influence the propensity to consume (psychological assumption), Fr. Garrett's study shows that "advertising in general, whether informative, suggestive, or persuasive in an acceptable manner, is not a force which can guarantee to stimulate consumption in any and all circumstances." His factual study of the American setting reveals that as long as the basic forces are in the direction of increased consumption and as long as the possibility obtains that advertising has at least some influence on the all important groups, "*advertising can, in all probability, have some influence in increasing the propensity to consume.*" "At the same time," he adds, "*advertising cannot guarantee to influence the propensity to consume, since the basic forces are beyond the control of advertising.*" Fr. Garrett concludes that advertising cannot create but merely harness and canalize existing forces; it is an instrumental rather than a principal cause of changes in consumption. It follows that, though useful in other ways, it is not a reliable socio-psychological tool.

With regard to the claim that advertising can make an important contribution to the growth of the American economy (economic assumption), Fr. Garrett's factual study concludes that (1) inasmuch as the long run economic, social, and political situation in the United States does not call for an artificial stimulation of personal consumption, suggestive advertising cannot be justified on the grounds that it is needed to stimulate economic growth; (2) advertising does not appear to be a suitable instrument for the systematic and efficient mitigation of either recessions or inflationary pressures; (3) the connection between advertising, consumer credit and psychological obsolescence raises the suspicion that advertising, if successful, might actually increase instability. Therefore, economists are probably correct when they charge that advertising is not a reliable tool for stimulating or stabilizing the movements of the American economy.

As a final word, Fr. Garrett first of all cautions the ethicist to be very careful in assigning moral responsibility to various groups in modern society. Amateur moralists have in the past been too quick to blame advertising for sins which it has not committed. In view of the fact that advertising is not the principal cause of changes in consumption, the burden or responsibility rests on agents other than the advertiser alone. The consumer himself according to Fr. Garrett, must, for the time being, until further studies are made, bear much of the moral responsibility. Secondly, Fr. Garrett cautions that though his "conclusions as to the ethical or unethical nature of certain techniques have a universal value, the principles involved must be applied with care." Therefore Fr. Garrett's tentative

and carefully qualified conclusions should be applied to the Philippine scene only after the factual situation here has been carefully investigated. Fr. Garrett's study is only a beginning but it suggests that the numerous problems of advertising are more complex than moralists might have been led to believe.

It must be pointed out that although, from a moral stand-point, Fr. Garrett's general ethical norms are beyond dispute, nevertheless his socio-psychological and economic analysis on the level of fact have been seriously questioned by at least one critic (Douglas J. Murphy, Vice-President, Young & Rubicam, Inc., N.Y., in *Social Order* XII (February, 1962), pp. 91-92; Cf. also Fr. Garrett's rejoinder, *Ibid.* (March, 1962), p. 144). Because of an exaggerated claim in the past, perhaps occasioned by such books as Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*, that advertising is a principal factor in creating new and previously non-existent consumer needs, Fr. Garrett, on the basis of his findings, tends to minimize the extent of the power of advertising to create changes in consumption. Whether or not Fr. Garrett's factual evidence warrants his conclusion may be questioned. This debatable point should be left open to further investigation.

At the end of the book, Fr. Garrett gives a one-page summary in the form of a "check list" for "judging the liceity of any given advertising, advertising campaign or general movement in advertising as whole". It is excellent. Fr. Garrett has admirably expressed the principle of double effect and the three determinants of morality as found in ethics handbooks in a terminology intelligible to advertising men. In the absence of an advertising code of ethics, advertising men who use Fr. Garrett's "check list," if they are reasonable and honest, will find that good ethics is also good business. The 25 pages of extensive bibliography, perhaps the largest ever to be published on this topic, will be invaluable to future students of the problems of advertising.

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CLEAR DESCRIPTION OF AN OLD FOE

CANCER. By R. J. Harris. Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, Inc., 1962. 127 pp.

In nine short chapters this book gives a clear and simple explanation of the cancer problem—its nature and control. For a good number of years, scientists have been exploring different avenues of research in their fight against cancer. Dr. Harris' explanation