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# Grounding Twenty-first-Century Public Relations Praxis in Aristotelian *Ethos*

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## ABSTRACT

By grounding public relations praxis in Aristotelian *ethos*, practitioners can function as liaison officers with balanced perspectives, capable of co-creating meaning with both client organizations and their publics between whom experts are hired to facilitate mutually beneficial relationships. This approach locates persuasion at the nexus of speaker *ethos* in the public relations process. It allows practitioners to balance their commitment to the ethics of their profession with loyalty to clients, while empowering audiences (organizations and their publics) to function as the final arbiters of any courses of action proposed to them. Moreover, because the approach enables practitioners, based on their credible *ethos*, to participate in organizational decision-making, it has the potential to transfer their ethical worldview to client organizations. Ultimately, the central theoretical contribution of this essay is an alternative approach to public relations praxis founded on an analysis of Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*, *arête*, and *eunoia*.

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## Introduction

As a professional practice and academic discipline, public relations suffers credibility deficit, being derogated by critics as a tool employed by the wealthy and powerful to perpetuate their dominance in society (see Mickey, 1997; Hackley & Kitchen, 1999; Holtzhausen, 2002; Motion & Leitch, 2007). To change this negative perception, scholars and practitioners continue to explore different possibilities in the social sciences (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Prior-Miller, 1989; see also Grunig, 1966) and humanities (see Leeper, 1996; Haugland, 1996; Botan, 1997; Leeper & Leeper, 2001; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Toth, 2002; L'Etang 2005) to demonstrate the positive contributions public relations praxis can make to society (Daugherty, 2001; see also Heath, 2006b). The present essay continues the ongoing efforts by scholars to draw on perspectives from the humanities, specifically rhetoric, to make public relations theoretically robust and ethically responsible.

Specifically, this paper seeks to construct a normative public relations praxis grounded in the Aristotelian notion of *ethos* (that is, a speaker's discursive character). By public relations praxis is meant a communicative activity informed by theory (Arnett & Arneson, 1999; Schrag, 2003; Grabowsky & Fritz, 2007). Public relations praxis thus implies that decisions, choices, and actions taken by public relations practitioners and their client organizations, scholars, and researchers are informed by clearly defined theoretical constructs. Public relations is therefore more than just a practice, by which is meant

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 187; see also Fritz, 2013; Leeper & Leeper, 2001)

Implicit in the concept of practice, however, as scholars have noted, is the reality of a routinely unreflective activity (Arnett & Arneson, 1999). It is for this reason that the present work conceptualizes public relations as a praxis. By conceptualizing public relations as a praxis, this essay seeks to emphasize the fact that effective public relations is philosophically grounded and involves careful thinking, reflexivity, and clear objectives (see Arnett & Arneson, 1999; Roberts, 2006). It argues that by grounding public relations praxis in Aristotelian *ethos*, practitioners and scholars can assert perspectival autonomy<sup>1</sup> over audiences (be they client organizations or publics of organizations)<sup>2</sup> and consolidate their professionalism, thereby contributing to the betterment of society. In other words, this essay locates persuasion in the public relations process at the confluence of communicators' expertise (*phronesis*), right action (*arête*), and goodwill (*eunoia*) toward communication partners. Accordingly, it seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How might public relations practitioners and their client organizations appropriate Aristotle's notion of *ethos* to effectively and persuasively communicate in the public relations process? (2) How might practitioners maintain independent/balanced perspectives in their professional transactions with client organizations and publics? (3) How might public relations praxis be made more ethically responsible? By bringing the Aristotelian idea of *ethos* to public relations praxis, the essay hopes to contribute to efforts by scholars and practitioners to make the discipline much more ethically responsible.

What is left of the paper begins with a review of relevant literature in the field of public relations, followed by an examination of the construct of Aristotelian *ethos* and its threefold elements of *phronesis*, *arete*, and *eunoia*, as well as *krisis/krites*, and *eudaimonia* as explicated in Aristotle (2004) *Rhetoric*. Next, the essay discusses how public relations praxis can be grounded in Aristotelian *ethos*. Before concluding, the work points out some limitations to the approach being proposed and accordingly provides directions for future research. The paper concludes by summarizing the coordinates that emerge from the findings of the study.

## Literature review

### *The relationship between public relations and rhetoric*

Scholars have long established a connection between public relations and rhetoric (see Toth & Heath, 1992; Heath, 1993; Elwood, 1995;; Hoover, 1997; Marsh, 2001; Edgett, 2002; L'Etang, 2006; Edwards, 2006; Marsh, 2013), as both disciplines deal with persuasive discourse. As Heath (2009) writes, "The rhetorical heritage provides an evolving body of strategic and critical insights to help practitioners be effective and ethical as they participate in the process by which society creates meaning – or meaning is created in society" (p. 20). Besides, convinced that rhetoric provides the ethical grounding for public relations, Heath (1993) asserts that "rhetoric is the essence of public relations" (p. 14). Similarly, in the view of Elwood (1995), rhetorical discourse "constitutes the core components of public relations" (p. 12). Going further than earlier scholarly works, Porter (2010) and Mackey (2013) argue a synonymy between rhetoric and public relations. For Porter (2010), "rhetoric is public relations" (p. 128). In making this bold claim, Porter (2010) seems to "acknowledge persuasion as an ethically acceptable and a legitimate and even critical part of public relations" (p. 127). This view resonates with Heath's (2009) claim that rhetoric's relevance to public relations is mediated by its ability to facilitate an understanding of "the process of decision making, collective efforts, and the give and take of conversation, debate, advocacy, accommodation, negotiation, and collaborative decision making" (pp. 23–24).

Furthermore, Marsh (2001, 2013)) argues that public relations as a relationship builder can enhance its ethicality by drawing on Isocratean rhetoric, one that was essentially moral and symmetrical. For Marsh (2001, 2013)), present-day public relations practitioners can realize Grunig's (2006) two-way symmetrical ideal by modelling their professional practice on that of Isocratean rhetoricians, "Because Isocratean rhetoricians seek unification and consensus – and

because they cannot be certain of a divinely ordained best of action – they consider the interests and arguments of others in a debate” (2001, p. 88). The Isocratean public relations that Marsh (2001, 2013) proposes is therefore one in which all actors are winners.

#### Dominant Themes Characterizing the Relationship between Public Relations and Rhetoric

Looking at the literature that advocates a marriage between rhetoric and public relations, this essay identifies three dominant themes, such as, the role of rhetoric in society, the role of audience in discourse, and the role of a speaker’s character or *ethos* in the communication process. When advocating the need to ground public relations in rhetoric, scholars usually reference the ever-recurrent emergency and uncertain situations where leaders and stakeholders are called upon to make immediate decisions. According to Heath (2009), “The role of rhetoric enters where there is difference of opinion, doubt, uncertainty, and even firmly held opinions that may be wrong” (pp. 22–23; see also Marsh, 2001, 2013). In such contingent circumstances, that is, situations where there is lack of clarity, certainty, and consensus regarding the best response to an existing problem, it becomes necessary for somebody to frame the course of action that needs to be taken in ways that make sense to all stakeholders. No one can play this role better than the rhetorician. Accordingly, Heath (2009) notes, “Rhetoric is relevant to any context in which humans are compelled to make enlightened choices. It is the rationale of suasive discourse which can and should lead to enlightened choices” (pp. 23; 37). The challenge to the rhetorician in any social context, then, is not just the articulation of a problem confronting an audience, but more than that, the ability to articulate a course of action in response to a problem and to move an audience to adopt it. It is this function of rhetoric that makes it a natural ally of public relations. Like its ancient counterpart (i.e., rhetoric), public relations, through discursive engagements between organizations and their publics, can bring order out of a chaotic society fraught with contingencies and uncertainties. In the words of Heath (2006b, p. 100), to help society function at an optimal level, public relations as a management function must nurture in organizations attitudes of reflexivity, attentiveness, collaboration, proactivity, and responsiveness. Ultimately, because in their line of work practitioners must employ good reasons to urge their audiences make choices in unclear and chaotic circumstances, they must look to rhetoric for guidance (Wallace, 1963).

Moreover, the need for public relations to demonstrate that it is not an instrument of control by powerful organizations and rich individuals in society requires that the discipline seek refuge in rhetoric whose existential reality is manifested in the contesting voices of actors and the struggle to co-create meanings in an ethical fashion (Edwards, 2006; Heath, 2009; Marsh, 2001, 2013). Explaining the role of the rhetor in a rhetorical discourse, Burke (1951) asserts,

A rhetorician, I take it, is like one voice in a dialogue. Put several such voices together, with each voicing its own special assertion, let them act upon one another in cooperative competition, and you get a dialectic that, properly developed can lead to views transcending the limitations of each. (p. 203)

Similarly, public relations, a relatively young discipline compared to rhetoric, must contend with different perspectives in the public sphere; therefore, public relations should draw on the wealth of insights rhetoric has gathered in the course of its long period of existence. Indeed, in a postmodern era of value contention and cynicism, any public relations model that either directly or indirectly suppresses the voices of publics is bound to be branded as a tool of powerful organizations and thus lose credibility. As Moloney (2005) points out, public relations involves allowing different groups and organizations with competing values and perspectives to advance their agendas and interests (p. 551; see also Marsh, 2001, 2013; Heath, 2006b). Hence, an effective public relations approach must promote pluralism and diversity in the public arena (Moloney, 2005, p. 551). By grounding public relations theory in rhetoric, practitioners and scholars can create discursive space for claims and counterclaims, as well as reflexivity in the marketplace of ideas (Curtin & Gaither, 2005; Edwards, 2006; Heath, 2009; Toth & Heath, 1992). As Edwards (2006) affirms, rhetoric allows “audiences, legislators and policy makers [to] judge the merits of the groups’ proposals and make decisions about future law and policy” (p. 840).

Then, also, source credibility is another area where public relations needs the assistance of rhetoric. This need arises from the fact that public relations practitioners are normally treated with suspicion, being perceived as spin doctors and propagandists interested in only fulfilling their fiduciary responsibilities (that is, using their expertise to help organizations increase their revenue, reduce costs, and minimize risks), and thus promoting the interests of client organizations (Curtin & Gaither, 2005; Heath, 2009; see also Grunig, 2011). To rid itself of this negative perception dating back to Bernays (1923), arguably the “father” of American public relations (Butterick, 2011, p. 12), the discipline must appropriate the rhetorical practice of foregrounding a speaker’s character in rhetorical discourse in order to move audience members to accept a course of action proposed to them (Edwards, 2006; Heath, 2009; Marsh, 2001, 2013). The fact is that audience members are more likely to accept views coming from speakers they believe to be credible than those whose intentions they suspect. Expounding on the role of Aristotelian *ethos* in rhetorical discourse, Heath (2009) writes, “Persons with more credibility are more believable and trustworthy because they associate their lives, arguments, and purposes with higher order of values” including truth, morality, and virtue (p. 27). In a world where grand narratives are proscribed, a world where views are contested every day, it is important that public relations practitioners adopt approaches that cast them as caring about their audiences, whether these audiences are client organizations or the publics of organizations.

### ***Aristotelian and Isocratean rhetorical perspectives***

The open-hearted endorsement of Aristotelian *ethos* by Heath (2009) referenced above has however been rejected by Marsh (2001, 2013) on the grounds that Aristotle’s rhetoric, unlike that of Isocrates, is amoral. He writes,

Aristotle ... taught that *ethos*, the belief-inducing character of the speaker, need exist only in the speech – not necessarily in reality. Logos, strategic appeals to the audience’s intellect, can include wanton falsification in epideictic [ceremonial] speeches. Pathos, strategic appeals to an audience’s emotions also can favor appearance over reality” (Marsh, 2001, p. 87; see also, 2013).

This essay, however, considers Marsh’s (2001, 2013) view of Aristotelian rhetoric as a gross misreading. First, that Aristotle’s *ethos* is constructed in the course of speech event does not mean it is not based on reality as Marsh (2001, 2013) would want us to believe. *Ethos*, for Aristotle, has three elements, namely, *phronesis*, *arête*, and *eunoia*, all of which are born out of a speaker’s attentiveness and responsiveness to subject matter, speech context, speech purpose, and audience. Marsh (2001, 2013) ignores the role of audience as judges who, based on their interest or happiness (*eudaimonia*), must evaluate any proposal made by the Aristotelian rhetor. Thirdly, the views advanced by the Aristotelian speaker must conform to societal values.

For this essay, the benefit of rhetoric to public relations lies, not in opposing Aristotle to Isocrates as Marsh (2001, 2013) does, but in appropriating their respective rhetorical theories to make the discipline ethically responsible. A student of Plato, Aristotle (2004) conceptualizes rhetoric as an art by which speakers seek the best means to persuade a given audience. These means include appeal to reasoned arguments, appeal to the emotions of audience members, and appeal to a speaker’s character. The persuasive speaker must also have a broad understanding of the subject matter under discussion and know the composition of his or her audience as well the political constitution that governs their society. This brief background will be given further elaboration below in the section on Aristotelian *ethos*. Like Aristotle (2004), Isocrates (2000b) understands rhetoric as a discourse intended to address a present existential challenge in which there are no easy answers. Using practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and broad knowledge about subject matter, the rhetorician should be able to make the best proposals to his or her audience for their consideration. Yet, unlike Aristotle (2004), Isocrates (2000b) believes the effective persuasive speaker is one previously known by his or her audience to have strong ethical values such as justice and moderation (see Marsh (2001, 2013)).<sup>3</sup>

## Significance of study

Looking at the existing literature on the intersection between rhetoric and public relations, the present paper recognizes that, apart from Edwards (2006) and Marsh (2001, 2013) who ground public relations in the specific rhetorics of Aristotle and Isocrates respectively, most of the scholars who have sought to align rhetoric and public relations do so in a general and broad manner. Accordingly, this essay believes that it is necessary to explore further innovative ways to specifically connect rhetoric and public relations. To that end, it seeks to ground public relations praxis in the Aristotelian notion of *ethos* constructed by a speaker in rhetorical discourse.

Significantly, the approach being proposed here has the potential to shore up the credibility of public relations praxis, even as it seeks to restore and safeguard practitioners' professional commitments. By foregrounding strategic communicators' *ethos* (whether these communicators are practitioners or client organizations) in the public relations process, the essay invites them to pay attention to the character they construct, insisting that audience members evaluate communicative offerings based on whether they are mediated by *phronesis*, *arête*, and *eunoia*, and whether they serve their *eudaimonia* (interest). At the same time, the approach treats publics as key stakeholders with the power to judge (*krisis*) whether courses of action suggested to them will serve their interests (happiness or *eudaimonia* in Aristotelian terms) (Aristotle, 2004). Moreover, apart from elevating audience members (that is, organizations and their publics) to the level of judges (*krites*) of speakers' discourses, the approach can help independent public relations practitioners as well as researchers and scholars seek a fruitful balance between loyalty to client organizations and fairness to publics. Such a balance can be achieved by practitioners' treating organizations and their publics as key audiences of public relations communication toward whom public relations programs and activities must be directed in a professional manner, that is, in a way that shows good judgment or practical wisdom (*phronesis*), virtue (*arête*), and goodwill (*eunoia*) (Aristotle, 2004).

Besides, if the goal of public relations praxis is the management of the connections (or relationships)<sup>4</sup> organizations have with their publics (see Coombs & Holladay, 2015), then scholars must pay attention to how this goal can be ethically realized. By foregrounding the elements of *phronesis*, *arête*, and *eunoia* in the public relations process, this paper calls upon scholars, researchers, and practitioners to prioritize ethicality in developing relationship theories to facilitate the attainment of the goal of their discipline. Ultimately, then, this essay hopes to advance a public relations ethical theory that orients practitioners toward working with independent/balanced perspectives in order to promote meaningful and constructive interactions between client organizations and their publics in ways that ultimately serve the good of the larger society (that is, help organizations and their publics realize their mutual interests).

## Aristotelian ethos

Aristotle (2004) *Rhetoric* establishes the principles of rhetorical discourse as a legitimate means for making choices in contingent situations. He defines rhetoric, the counterpart of dialectic, as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle, 2004, p. 6). Rhetoric, for Aristotle, then, is not merely for persuasion qua persuasion; rather, it is a "faculty" or ability to determine the means of arriving at audience members' persuasion. These means, as clear from the text, refer to knowledge of audience and a comprehensive understanding of subject matter mediated by a moral purpose. For Aristotle (2004), therefore, "the term 'rhetorician' may describe either the speaker's knowledge of the art, or his moral purpose" (p. 6). Hence, in the view of Aristotle (2004), not every public speaker is a rhetor. As he points out in the *Rhetoric*, "What makes a man a 'sophist' [wise person] is not his faculty, but his moral purpose" (Aristotle, 2004, p. 6)

According to Aristotle, to arrive at the rhetorical end of persuading audience, a speaker must marshal one or more of the rhetorical proofs of *logos* (reasoned argument), *pathos* (emotional or pathetic appeal), and/or *ethos* (appeal to a speaker's character) (Aristotle, 2004, p. 7). Put differently,

there are three ways by which persuasion may be achieved, namely, (1) by proving the truth of the statements made, (2) by giving the audience who function as judges the right impression of a speaker's character, and (3) by the speaker's working on the emotions of the audience (Aristotle, 2004, pp. 7–8).

Of the three rhetorical proofs, *ethos* occupies a powerful status, as audience members believe what speakers, based on their character (*ethos*), construct in the course of a discourse, particularly in uncertain situations or contexts (see Ihlen, 2014). As Aristotle (2004) argues, what wins audience members over with persuasion in speech events is the credible *ethos* speakers construct, especially in situations that lack certainty or consensus. The fact is when audience members perceive a speaker to be good, they believe him or her (p. 7). Thus, Aristotle's conceptualization of the role of *ethos* in rhetorical discourse is different from that of other Greek rhetorical theorists like Isocrates. According to Isocrates (2000b), for example, what persuades speakers' audience members is the reputation they (speakers) bring to the discursive arena. As he says in the *Antidosis*, "the argument which is made by a man's life is of more weight than that which is furnished by words" (Isocrates, 2000b; see also Baumlin, 2001; Hyde, 2004). In contrast, Aristotelian *ethos* is a rhetorical construct, one formed by deep knowledge of subject matter and moral purpose. Aristotle (2004) insists that what secures persuasion is not just reasoned logic and/or emotional appeal, but also the rhetor's character and ability to put his or her audience in the right frame of mind. Clearly, then, for Aristotle, "The practice of rhetoric constitutes an active construction of character; *ethos* takes form as a result of the orator's abilities to argue and to deliberate and thereby to inspire trust in an audience" (Hyde, 2004, p. xvi). Hyde (2004) is thus right by claiming that in the *Rhetoric* "Aristotle ... directs our attention away from an understanding of *ethos* as a person's well-lived existence and toward an understanding of *ethos* as an artistic accomplishment" (p. xvi).

According to Aristotle (2004), *ethos* has three distinctive characteristics: "good sense [*phronesis*], good moral character [*arête*], and goodwill [*eunoia*]" (p. 60). He points out that when speakers fail to move their audience, it is because they fail to exhibit all three features of *ethos*. For Smith (2004), *phronesis* may be interpreted as follows: "good sense, practical wisdom, sagacity, expertise, and intelligence" (p. 10). Kinneavy and Warshauer (1994) understand this element of *ethos* as the "ability to make practical decisions, to choose the proper means to achieve an end" (p. 178). Such an ability can only be possessed by one who "know[s] a great deal" about the subject he or she talks about (Smith, 2004, p. 10). As Kinneavy and Warshauer (1994) rightly point out, good sense "displays the self-assurance and expertise of the speaker, who must come across as a person who knows the issue at hand and can advise an effective course of action" (p. 178). As experts, speakers propose courses of action only after a careful consideration of potential consequences (Hauser, 1999). In fact, good sense requires speakers to not only be experts of the subject they talk about, but also to understand their "audience and situation at hand (an awareness, that is, of the form of government, the feelings and character of the crowd, and the political and social climate" (Kinneavy & Warshauer, 1994, p. 179; see Aristotle, 2004, p. 30). With the benefit of *phronesis*, therefore, speakers can think through difficult, complicated, and conflicting choices in order to arrive at plausible solutions that resonate with audiences. Accordingly, Hauser (1999) reminds us that the goal of *phronesis* is "responsible action to resolve the differences of divergent perspectives that surface when we address concrete problems" (p. 12).

The second element of *ethos* is *arête*, which translates as virtue, moral character, or, simply, excellence of character (see Urmson, 1973). In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle (2004) frames virtue as consisting of

all actions done for the sake of others, since these less than other actions are done for one's own sake; and all successes which benefit others and not oneself; and services done to one's benefactors, for this is just; and good deeds generally, since they are not directed to one's own profit. (p. 33)

Virtue, whose synonym is "the noble," thus, consists of action and choice for the sake of the other and not the self (Aristotle, 2004, p. 31). This conceptualization of *arête* is given further articulation in

the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle (1998) defines the term as the “golden mean” or the mean between excess and deficiency (2.9; Urmson, 1973). Importantly, Aristotle, in the *Ethics* (1998) and *Rhetoric* (2004), observes that *arête* or virtue involves action and emotion. As Urmson (1973) explains, “In the view of Aristotle, (1) excellence of character is concerned with both emotions and actions, not with actions alone; (2) excellence of character is concerned with likes and dislikes ...” (p. 224). Therefore, the virtuous person, is one who chooses a right action and feels good about it. Such a person has both his or her action and feeling in a mean state, that is, he or she “feel[s] and manifest[s] each emotion and action when, on what matters, toward such people, for what reasons and in such a manner as is proper” (Urmson, 1973, p. 225).

In rhetorical discourse, speakers demonstrate virtue, excellence of character, or the golden mean by proposing the right courses of action and feeling good about them, as well as discoursing appropriately. Regarding how the golden mean is demonstrated in the narrative part of rhetorical discourse, Aristotle (2004) makes the following point:

Here, again, rightness does not consist either in rapidity or conciseness, but in the happy mean; that is, in saying just so much as will make the facts plain, or will lead the hearer to believe that the thing has happened, or that the man has caused injury or wronged someone, or that the facts are really as important as you wish them to be thought: or the opposite facts to establish the opposite arguments. (p. 150)

Aristotelian *arête*, thus, involves not only moral choices and their corresponding emotions, but also discursive choices in rhetorical events. Hence, for instance, speakers must avoid utterances that might appear contradictory, cause disaffection, or give the wrong impression about their upbringing. Such difficulties can be surmounted by “Put[ting] such remarks ... into the mouth of some third person” (Aristotle, 2004, p. 155).

For Aristotle (2004), *arête* is determined by society, not the individual speaker. In other words, as Kinneavy and Warshauer (1994) rightly stress, “to be convincing, a speaker must exhibit that quality of character that a culture, and not the individual, defines as virtue” (p. 174). Attentiveness to societal values in rhetorical discourse, thus, makes a speaker believable (Kinneavy & Warshauer, 1994, p. 175). The society-specific *arête* constructed in rhetorical discourse includes “justice, courage, temperance, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, prudence, and wisdom” (Aristotle, 2004, p. 32). Speakers must understand what these virtues and their opposites are. By casting themselves as possessing these virtues, speakers can make themselves believable.

The last element of *ethos* is goodwill (*eunoia*) by which Aristotle (2004) means a speaker’s display of friendship and concern toward an audience. Friends, for Aristotle (2004), are people “to whom the same things are good and evil; and those who are moreover, friendly or unfriendly to the same people” (p. 67; see also Aristotle, 1998). Put differently, “[Y]our friend is the sort of man [or woman] who shares your pleasure in what is good and your pain in what is unpleasant for your sake and for no other reason” (Aristotle, 2004, pp. 66–67; Aristotle, 1998). Friends, therefore, share the same values or have the same outlook on life. To display friendship or have a friendly feeling toward someone means to wish that person “what you believe to be good things, not for your own sake but for his [or her] sake, and being inclined, so far as you can, to bring these things about” (Aristotle, 2004, p. 66; see also Aristotle, 1998). Explaining Aristotle (2004) concept of *eunoia*, Kinneavy and Warshauer (1994) write that “To show good will, the speaker must somehow identify with the audience, holding some of their basic aspirations, speaking their language, and if necessary, sharing and affirming their prejudices” (p. 176). In other words, by consubstantiating with audience members emotionally, morally, and socially, speakers cast themselves as friends. Speakers become persuasive by virtue of the *eunoia* they demonstrate toward their auditors (p. 176). In this way, Aristotelian *eunoia* may be said to be synonymous with Burke’s (1969) construct of identification or consubstantiality, by which he means the finding of common ground with a speaker’s audience. As Aristotle (2004) himself elaborates, a speaker must befriend audience members by sharing in their worldview (p. 67; Aristotle, 1998).

Audience members gravitate toward speakers they perceive to be friendly and, hence, share in their perception of reality. Accordingly, Aristotle (2004) says of auditors: “[W]hen they feel friendly

to the man [or woman] who comes before them for judgment, they regard him [or her] as having done little wrong, if any; when they feel hostile, they take a different view” (p. 59). Such an Aristotelian view of *eunoia* or goodwill is similar to that of Isocrates (2000b), who, in the *Antidosis*, articulates the justification for a speaker’s goodwill toward audience members this way: “If you gratify people, they judge everything you do not according to how things actually are but in whatever helps your case; they overlook your mistakes ... (15.134). Thus, for Aristotle and Isocrates, goodwill is crucial to a speaker’s ability to secure positive audience judgement of communicative offering.

In the view of Aristotle (2004), then, despite all the efforts speakers must put into making their discursive presentations persuasive, their successes or failures depend, not on themselves *per se*, but their audiences. This reality is true in all three genres of rhetoric, but particularly with regard to the deliberative and forensic.<sup>5</sup> The reason is that, for Aristotle (2004), audience members are the ultimate judges of what speakers present as appropriate courses of action (in the case of deliberative rhetoric) or the reasons a past action was justified or unjustified (in the case of forensic rhetoric). Audience judgment, it is important to note, is based on whether a speaker’s defense or proposal is consistent with audience members’ interest or happiness (*eudaimonia*). Aristotle (2004) audience members are thus active participants in the rhetorical discourse in which they determine the actualization of courses of action proposed by a speaker for as long as these proposals serve their interest or ensure their happiness. In other words, Aristotle (2004) views audience members as a group of people who must listen to speakers and, based on their interest or happiness, pass judgment (*krites*) on what is proposed to them for consideration (Rorty, 1992, p. 68). This power to judge (*krisis*) the rhetor’s proposal (that is, whether one must be punished or acquitted in forensic rhetoric or whether Athens should go to war in deliberative rhetoric) makes audience members not mere listeners but active participants in the rhetorical construction of reality. Thus, Aristotelian rhetoric is a discursive practice whereby both speaker and audience co-create and co-define meaning in the rhetorical space (see Heath, 2009). The point here is that, although Aristotle envisions the aim of rhetoric as consisting in marshaling arguments to persuade audience members, the rhetorical act does not necessarily resort to manipulation and deceit to achieve that purpose; rather, it involves free and open discussions, contestations, and mutual agreement.

Finally, because audience members are the final arbiters in the discursive space, Aristotle (2004) requires speakers to carefully study and understand their characteristics. These auditors may be categorized into three groupings, namely, the young, those in their prime, and the old (Aristotle, 2004, p. 84). While the young are impulsive, passionate, quick-tempered, fearless, and optimistic of the future (p. 84), the old, because of life’s bitter lessons, are characterized as skeptical, suspicious, cynical, and fearless of the future (p. 85). On the other hand, those in their prime combine both the positive and negative features of the old and young. Besides understanding the characteristics of audience members, speakers must also be attentive to the various governments and constitutions that create the communities from which audience members come. Ultimately, persuasive public speakers are those with a sophisticated understanding of audience members and the communities they come from. The next section will attempt to construct a public relations praxis grounded in Aristotelian *ethos*.

## Grounding public relations praxis in Aristotelian ethos

The relationship between practitioners and their client organizations usually begins when the former are hired for their “expertise in the field of audience analysis, knowledge of the most efficacious persuasive techniques, and the proper methods of dissemination” (Bivins, 1987, p. 85; see also Broom & Sha, 2013). Once the relationship has been established, the extent to which practitioners are able to function with some degree of autonomy (freedom) largely depends on whether they do independent public relations, agency public relations, or in-house public relations (Bivins, 1987, pp. 83–84; see also, 2006). This fact means that the level of autonomy depends on the kind of relationship that exists between practitioners

and their clients. In the view of scholars and practitioners, independent public relations counselors are the most autonomous and professional, as they are “not subsumed within a larger, bureaucratic system – either corporate or agency” (Bivins, 2006, p. 23; see also, 1987; Broom & Sha, 2013).

Usually, independent public relations practitioners are retained by client organizations for their “autonomous professional advice, and by so doing accept the[ir] professional recommendations ... as sound” (Bivins, 2006, p. 23; see also, 1987). In-house public relations, however, is the least autonomous; and, as Bivins (1987; see also Bivins, 2006; Broom & Sha, 2013) has pointed out, “The level of autonomy and the weight of decision-making, and thus professionalism ... vary depending on whether the head of department is a middle-level manager, an upper-level manager, or an executive” (p. 84). Regardless of whether public relations practitioners do independent public relations, agency public relations, or in-house public relations, though, the perception that they are essentially stooges of client organizations, whose agenda they promote both ethically and unethically, persists. This perception thus problematizes the PRSA’s notion of professional independence by which is meant the freedom to have an objective view of an existential situation. As captured in the PRSA Code of Ethics (2000), “We provide objective counsel to those we represent. We are accountable for our actions.” The implication here is that by their independence and objectivity, practitioners function as the “conscience” of the clients they serve and as relationship builders and sustainers (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006; Graham, 2012; Grunig, 2014; see also Heath, 2001; Starck & Kruckberg, 2001). The problem, though, is that, as Polanyi (1964) asserts, authentic objectivity is an illusion because embedded in every assertion a communicator makes is some form of impassioned interest. Hence, for this paper, the PRSA’s (2000) principle of professional independence must be read as the “freedom to hold balanced and professional perspectives.” In other words, professional public relations practitioners function ethically when they balance their loyalty to client organizations with a commitment to the stakeholder publics of their employers, even as they strive to grow and sustain the relationship between the two. Achieving this ideal represents a huge challenge which the present project attempts to address by proposing a theoretical framework that independent public relations practitioners (*not in-house or agency public relations practitioners*) can appropriate in working for employers.

In view of the existential challenge in public relations praxis and in order to realize the Public Relations Society of America’s (PRSA) (2000) Code of Professional Standards pledge, that is, “To conduct [ourselves] professionally, with truth, accuracy, fairness, and responsibility to the public,” this paper argues that independent public relations practitioners must ground their practices in Aristotelian *ethos* and treat both client organizations and their publics as audiences to whom they must demonstrate *phronesis*, *arête*, and *eunoia*. In other words, to “persuade[] [their] audience[s] to form *krites* that will, in fact, affect their *eudaimonia* or [happiness/interest]” (Rorty, 1992, p. 68), independent public relations experts, having studied problems confronting client organizations, must offer solutions mediated by an Aristotelian *ethos* consisting in *phronesis*, *arête*, and *eunoia*. Here, the concept of audience is used as a generic term, referring to the target of any intended communication (Schroder, 2009). Grounding public relations in Aristotelian *ethos*, in the view of this essay, then, allows audiences (client organizations and stakeholder publics) a major say in the courses of action proposed by practitioners. Indeed, an important point that needs to be stressed here is that, by insisting speaker proposals be subjected to the *krites* or judgment of the audience, Aristotle seems to allow room for its rejection if found to not lead to the *eudaimonia* of hearers (Aristotle, 2004, p. 59; Rorty, 1992, p. 68). Thus, grounding public relations praxis in Aristotelian *ethos* will make it difficult for practitioners to easily manipulate client organizations or their publics. Such a public relations praxis has the propensity to “function to ensure inclusiveness of all voices that are affected by the organization ... thereby benefitting the publics as well as the organization itself” (Holtzhausen, 2002, p. 255).

Before practitioners can function as professionals with balanced perspectives, though, they must first understand and appreciate the meaning of public relations and its role in the life of an organization. In other words, practitioners must have a clear understanding of the essence of public relations and how it relates to client organizations. According to the PRSA (2011/12),

“Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.” Reading the PRSA’s (2011/12) “strategic communication process” as a function of organizational management, Broom and Sha (p. 5, 2013) define public relations as “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends.” Then, in the view of Grunig and Hunt (1984), public relations is “the management of communication between an organization and its publics” (p. 6). Also, according to Caywood (1997/2012, p. 3), “Public relations is the profitable integration of an organization’s new and continuing relationship with stakeholders including customers by managing all communication contacts with the organization that create and protect the brand and reputation of the organization.” Sharing Caywood’s (1997/2012) perspective, Daft (2011) asserts that “Public relations attempts to shape the company’s image in the minds of customers, suppliers, and government officials”, (pp. 150–151; see also Toth, 2002). For Cheney, 1991, p. 35), “Contemporary public relations is fundamentally concerned with representing major organizations and institutions in our society with values, images, identities, issue-positions, and so forth.” The common thread running through these definitions is the role that public relations plays in maintaining the connections between organizations and their publics.

Taken together, these definitions articulate public relations’ ontologico-existential reality, that is, what it is (strategic communication process) and what it does (functions). By referencing them, the paper hopes to work from a much broader and sophisticated perspective. The essay believes that the essence of public relations can be located at the nexus of what it is and what it does. Examining the different definitions offered by scholars, the essay recognizes the following significant points or coordinates: (1) Public relations is a process. (2) Public relations is strategic communication. (3) Public relations involves the management of the relationship between an organization and its publics. (4) Public relations is oriented toward the attainment of mutual benefits. (5) Public relations is about creating a good public image. (6) Public relations is about meaning creation. (7) Public relations is about managing crisis. These coordinates will guide the essay’s attempt to construct a public relations ethical theory grounded in Aristotelian *ethos*.

Yet, while this paper embraces the various definitions offered by scholars, it nevertheless views public relations as a process whereby organizations and their publics, through the mediation of experts, negotiate the dynamics of power to arrive at meanings oriented toward the flourishing of society (that is, the realization of the interests of organizations and their publics). Implicit in this conceptualization of public relations is the recognition that the creation of meaning in the process of public relations entails power negotiations between organizations and their publics. Moreover, this definition views the flourishing of both client organizations and their publics as the goal of public relations praxis. Critically, too, this definition recognizes the role of the practitioner as a mediator between clients and their publics in the public relations process. It is important that practitioners have such an expansive and sophisticated understanding of public relations (that is, what public relations is and what it does, as well as the role they as mediators play) in order to ground their praxis in Aristotelian *ethos*. What is left of this section is an analysis of how the elements of *ethos* will play out in the public relations process.

### **The role of *ethos* in the public relations process**

To effectively apply Aristotelian *ethos* to present-day public relations praxis, independent practitioners, upon being retained by organizations to help deal with crises or problems must keep in mind the three genres of rhetoric articulated in the *Rhetoric*, namely, forensic rhetoric, deliberative rhetoric, and ceremonial or epideictic rhetoric. The first step practitioners should take upon being hired is to learn their clients’ cultures and values by reading about the organizations and engaging in communicative encounters with organizational managements and stakeholder publics. These important coordinates (namely, cultures and values), constituting the identity of client organizations, guide their existential reality in terms of their self-expression and engagement with stakeholder publics. It

is important that early on practitioners embody and demonstrate a deep understanding and appreciation of organizations' histories, cultures, and core values in formal rhetorical settings like board meetings, management meetings, staff meetings, and other communicative gatherings. Such settings, functioning as epideictic contexts, should provide the opportunity for practitioners to identify with client organizations, celebrate their values, and, accordingly, justify why they qualify to represent their clients (see Cheney, 1983; Fritz, 2013). In other words, such rhetorical dances will legitimize practitioners as organizational strategic communicators.

Having established identification with their organizations, including their dominant coalitions, employees, and stakeholder publics within the context of epideictic rhetoric, practitioners can then embark on the process of determining the cause(s) of organizations' problems, their effects on stakeholder publics (and the make-up of these publics) and the organizations themselves, and the process of designing appropriate responses. This paper agrees with scholars such as Johnson and Sellnow (1995) that the stage establishing the cause of an organization's problem "demands forensic discourse" (p. 54) and that of designing an appropriate response, "deliberative discourse" (p. 54). Thus, the process of the Aristotelian public relations praxis may be conceptualized as consisting in three discursive moves, namely, epideictic discourse (oriented toward identification with client organizations and stakeholder publics), forensic discourse (oriented toward the unpacking of problems), and deliberative discourse (oriented toward making proposals that address organizational problems).

Regarding research into an organizational problem, independent practitioners operating through the prism of Aristotelian *ethos* must be guided by the following questions: (1) What problem is the client organization facing? (2) When did the problem start? (3) Who is responsible for the problem? (4) In what ways does the problem affect the image of the organization? (5) In what ways does the problem curtail the organization's ability to live its core values, maintain its relationship (or connections) with stakeholder publics, and achieve its interests? Independent practitioners arrive at plausible responses to these questions by engaging organizations' dominant coalitions and stakeholder publics in such rhetorical settings as open forums, questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions. The rest of the section will explain how an understanding and appreciation of the elements of Aristotelian *ethos* may be brought to bear on the persuasive articulation of public relations problems and challenges, and the construction of effective responses in the public relations process.

### **Phronesis (practical wisdom)**

As explained above, grounding public relations praxis in Aristotelian *ethos* requires that strategic communicators have *phronesis*, that is, they must bring practical wisdom to bear on the determination of the causes of an organization's problem or challenge and the construction of appropriate responses. In Aristotelian sense, to have *phronesis* is to make practical decisions, show good sense, and demonstrate expert knowledge in contingent and uncertain situations. As Aristotle (2004) himself puts it,

Most of the things about which we make decisions and into which therefore we inquire, present us with alternative possibilities. For it is about our actions that we deliberate and inquire, and all our actions have a contingent character; hardly any of them are determined by necessity. (pp. 9-10)

Hauser (1999) succinctly rearticulates the point this way: "Practical reasoning is concerned with making specific choices about the preferable and the good to the situation at hand" (p. 12). The organizational world and culture are complex and complicated, making it quite a herculean task to unpack any problem associated with it and design an effective and appropriate response. Therefore, in order to portray to their client organizations that they have *phronesis* (that is, understand publics and their concerns and how they affect the bottom line of client organizations), independent practitioners, as counselors or liaison officers with balanced and professional perspectives, must demonstrate a profound grasp and appreciation of the problems or challenges confronting client

organizations. Then, they must also facilitate the construction of appropriate responses, including making the right decisions, designing effective message content, and ensuring targeted and effective communication, as well as the anticipation of the potential consequences of the communication process. In other words, a clear demonstration of knowledge of the facts and professional conduct are critical in influencing and persuading the organizational leadership regarding the cause of a problem, how it might be curtailed, and the way forward.

Based on the findings of their research into organizational problems, independent practitioners must engage dominant coalitions in the context of forensic discourse in which they present the root causes of the problems facing employers. Typically, Aristotelian ethical public relations praxis requires that practitioners open further communicative avenues to dominant coalitions to either directly or indirectly evaluate or judge practitioner findings through questions, comments, and suggestions. Such inputs from dominant coalitions will function as evaluative judgments in the discursive construction of the causes of organizational problems. While the expression of disapproval from organizational dominant coalitions signals the need for expert practitioners to further clarify findings and perspectives regarding the causes of organizational problems, approval brings closure to the forensic dimension of the public relations process from the perspective of organizations.

Having been helped by independent practitioners to appreciate the problems or challenges at hand, client organizations must then take appropriate courses of action. Because independent practitioners are hired for their expertise in strategic communication and understanding of publics, they must be allowed to participate in the decision-making process just like organizational legal, financial, and marketing officers (Dozier & Broom, 2009; Grunig, 2014; see also Graham, 2012). At the table of the decision-making process, practitioners, employing deliberative rhetoric or discourse, must guide their client organizations to make decisions that address ongoing problems in comprehensive ways in hopes of maintaining the relationships between employers and their publics, and hence, helping them achieve their interests (*eudaimonia*). Practitioners must marshal effective arguments to support every input they make at the decision-making table, thereby demonstrating their *phronesis*. Here, again, Aristotelian ethical public relations praxis requires that practitioners allow dominant coalitions to judge their communicative offerings. Such judgements may be in the form of feedback. And, consistent with the Aristotelian construct of *phronesis*, practitioners must be willing to modify their inputs just so that the final products of the decision-making process will be ones that can be persuasively advocated to stakeholder publics. This way the final decision organizational managements make will demonstrate the *phronesis*, not only of practitioners but also the organizations they serve.

Once organizations have made their decisions relative to current problems, they on their part must engage their publics within the contexts of forensic and deliberative rhetorics in ways that demonstrate *phronesis*. This paper conceptualizes a public as any group of people who come together because they are “affected by the consequences of organizational behaviors ... or they seek consequences from organizations to solve situational problems” (Aldoory & Grunig, 2012, p. 93). Publics thus come into existence because of an issue to which they seek answers. As Aldoory and Grunig (2012) put it, “publics begin as loosely connected groups of individuals who perceive problems similarly but then evolve into organized groups that seek a relationship with an organization” (p. 94; Botan & Taylor, 2004). In the view of Kim, Grunig, and Ni (2010), a public is not a permanent social group, but “a rather fluid, amorphous group that has varying size and composition across problems, is motivated to create some action related to the problem, and eventually dissolves as the problem is solved” (p. 126). Depending on the effects of organizational problems on them, publics may be categorized into three, namely, active publics, apathetic publics, and non-publics (Aldoory & Grunig, 2012). Though organizations keep the different categories of publics on their radar, they give the most attention to active publics, groups of individuals who “perceive a connection or high level of involvement with the problem at hand” and seek active communicative engagements with the relevant organizations to address it (Aldoory & Grunig, 2012, p. 94; see also

Grunig, 2011, 2009). Following Aristotelian rhetoric, public relations practitioners and their client organizations must understand that they are dealing with multiple publics and, hence, should tailor their messages in ways that resonate with each of these hearers (see Grunig, 1992b; see also Hon, 2006). Because each of these groups of publics possesses different characteristics, they must be engaged differently in terms of substance and delivery of message.

As strategic communicators with practical wisdom, independent practitioners together with their clients must communicatively engage publics at different events and in different settings such as on the websites, blogs, and social media platforms of client organizations, and in emails, news and press releases, and town-hall meetings. The issues addressed in these different communicative contexts should include the causes of organizational problems, the kinds of laws and organizational core values breached, and whom to hold accountable. Because they enter these communicative contexts with the belief that the perspectives they bring are contingent and likely to be challenged, organizations, guided by independent practitioners, must listen to the views of the publics regarding the problems at hand. The feedback from publics should help organizations have a much-sophisticated understanding of the problems they are dealing with and give them a deep insight into how to address them comprehensively.

The next rhetorical move is for organizations, guided by independent public relations experts, to rhetorically deliberate with their publics the best and effective courses of action to address existing problems. In other words, organizations must engage publics in deliberative rhetorical settings where they articulate the courses of action they will take to address the crises facing them. At this stage, organizations under the guidance of experts must demonstrate that they possess *phronesis* in terms of the comprehensiveness and appropriateness of the solutions they proffer, the arguments they advance in support of such proposals, and the manner of their application. After presenting their solutions to publics, client organizations along with practitioners must find out from their auditors whether the proposed actions will serve their interests or ensure their *eudaimonia* (happiness). If in the judgment of the publics organizational proposals will serve their interests, then the deliberative rhetorical act will have been successful. If, on the other hand, organizations' publics judge the proposals to be detrimental to their *eudaimonia*, then, using their feedback, organizations must further work with their strategic communication experts to hammer out innovative solutions that will resonate with the publics. Ultimately, the successful narrative of the causes of problems and corresponding solutions, and the acceptance of proposals to resolve them will demonstrate the *phronesis* of independent practitioners and the organizations they serve. The demonstration of *phronesis*, though, is not enough to secure the credibility of the public relations process. Independent practitioners along with their client organizations must also prove in the strategic communication process that they possess virtue (*arête*).

### ***Arête (virtue/excellent character)***

Besides demonstrating *phronesis*, independent practitioners must also show virtue in their professional conduct. Specifically, independent public relations experts, relying on Aristotelian *ethos* in their practice, must demonstrate to client organizations that they are virtuous, possessing such virtues as “justice, courage, temperance, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, [and] wisdom” (Aristotle, 2004, p. 32) in terms of the choices they make, choices made because they are good in themselves and not because they serve the interests of practitioners. Because the Greek notion of virtue is action-oriented, independent practitioners must prove their virtues to client organizations by thoroughly articulating problems at hand, being fair in examining conflicting views, measured with respect to their presentation of adverse findings, and decorous in word and deed. More concretely, independent experts must demonstrate the virtue of justice by being fair and balanced with respect to assigning blame, examining the facts as they unfolded in the past, and calling client organizations for appropriate redress. Besides, they must put on the virtue of courage by showing strength of character in the face of opposition and

resistance from client organizations, being determined to take the necessary risk to arrive at the truth.

Furthermore, it is important they wear the virtue of temperance by demonstrating self-restraint and self-control when provoked by members of dominant coalitions. Public relations praxis being challenging, independent practitioners must also maintain their dignity, showing strength of character or demonstrating the virtue of magnificence in their moral choices. Such a virtue will be demonstrated in the thoroughness with which practitioners approach their investigations into problems, apportioning of blame, as well as dealing with any manner of challenges that will come their way. Also, in Aristotelian fashion, practitioners must show their magnanimity to client organizations by being generous in terms of the time and talent they put into scanning the environment to determine the effects of organizations' past actions on their publics. In addition, the virtue of liberality that independent practitioners bring to bear on their praxis must come through the sharing of important ideas and insights with client organizations. As well, independent experts must show the virtue of gentleness in their communicative engagements with client organizations by treating them with respect and politeness even in the face of negative findings against their employers. In other words, whereas the virtue of justice, for instance, calls for fairness in the application of the law, gentleness endorses a corrective approach that is respectful and nonconfrontational. To the virtue of gentleness must be added that of prudence, demonstrated by practitioners' carefully and judiciously examining the contours of organizations' past actions. In other words, being prudent means practitioners must examine every detail of the research phase carefully and thoughtfully to determine culpability. Finally, by the virtue of wisdom, practitioners must show that they have experience, knowledge, and good judgment in terms of the facts they unearth and the determination of culprits and why.

Additionally, independent public relations officers must demonstrate *arête* within the context of deliberative discourse as they facilitate their client organizations' construction of effective courses of actions to address problems at hand. To that end, practitioners must make sure that the proposals they make to dominant coalitions are both fair and bring the best out of the organizations they serve. In other words, as virtuous strategic communicators, independent public relations practitioners must clarify the moral purpose of the proposals they make to their clients even as they should not hesitate to raise red flags with organizational decisions they find ethically problematic. Essentially, practitioners can demonstrate to client organizations their virtuous disposition by acting as ethical compass in the decision-making process. By thus acting as the conscience of their employers, independent strategic communicators can help client organizations fashion out decisions that will serve the interests of all parties. In this way, independent public relations experts, working with an Aristotelian ethical perspective, can make their client organizations ethically responsible because the decisions they facilitate in the face of organizational problems are the products of communicative processes informed by Aristotelian virtues.

Having been helped by independent public relations experts who identify the nature of ongoing problems and design appropriate measures to address them, organizations must then engage their publics in discursive contexts in ways that cast them as virtuous, too. In other words, such virtues as justice, courage, temperance, magnificence, magnanimity, prudence, and wisdom must be seen in how organizations address the root causes of problems and the ways they resolve them. To that extent, under the guidance of their communication experts, organizations must speak to their publics in ways that show concern for them and the common relationship they share. Additionally, the implementation of organizational decisions must reflect virtuous concerns for those affected by existing problems. Such an ethical strategic communicative engagement with their publics will cast organizations as ethically responsible. The next subsection will examine the role that the ethical element of *eunoia* (goodwill) must play in the public relations process.

### *Eunoia (goodwill)*

Finally, practitioners and their client organizations must demonstrate goodwill in the contexts of forensic and deliberative rhetorics. On the part of independent practitioners, this element of *ethos* consists in their sharing the basic aspirations, language, and prejudices of their client organizations in the public relations process. Similarly, independent practitioners show goodwill to their client organizations by recognizing their concerns and identifying with them (see Aristotle, 2004, p. 67). As McCroskey and Teven (1999) have observed, goodwill is key to winning audience members over because it involves speakers' "understanding, empathy, and responsiveness" toward them (p. 92). Understanding, for McCroskey and Teven (1999, "is knowing another person's ideas, feelings, and needs;" and empathy consists in identifying with another's feelings and emotions (p. 92). Lastly, the authors explain responsiveness as the acknowledgement of "another person's communicative attempt" (McCroskey & Teven, 1999, p. 92). In a public relations context, independent practitioners can cast themselves as friendly or having goodwill toward clients by paying attention to their urgent needs and responding promptly and appropriately through listening to their stories, asking the right questions, and proposing appropriate and specific courses of action relative to the problems at hand (see Maier, 2005).

In articulating the causes of organizational problems, practitioners with balanced perspectives must demonstrate their *eunoia* by identifying with client organizations and their core values. Speaking in a language that resonates with their employers, independent practitioners must embody the visceral outrage that they expect their organizations to feel for those responsible for the problems confronting them, mirror their horror at the injustice, and commit to helping employers deal with perpetrators. Should their client organizations as the judges of their communicative enactments question their findings, practitioners must not feel frustrated; rather, they must professionally respond to client organizations' questions.

After addressing the causes of problems in forensic rhetorical settings, experts must also engage client organizations in deliberative discursive dances. Here, they offer proposals to help dominant coalitions make decisions that are both ethical and inure to their own benefit or *eudaimonia* (that is, sustain organizational relationship with publics and protect their bottom line). In other words, independent practitioners must ethically guide client organizations to make decisions that promote their interests and address publics' concerns. Here, both the communication of the proposals to client organizations and the final decisions by dominant coalitions must be characterized by understanding, empathy, and responsiveness. Typically, courses of action that demonstrate independent experts' understanding are ones that reflect an awareness and appreciation of client organizations' needs, ideas, and feelings. In other words, expert proposals must be tailored to the specific problems that organizations are dealing with, take into consideration the views of the clients, and be sensitive to the psychological well-being of client organizations. Moreover, independent experts must demonstrate their empathy to the organizations they work for by making proposals that truly reflect their employers' feelings in terms of fears, hopes, and aspirations. Additionally, proposals must take cognizance of the biographies of client organizations. Ultimately, independent practitioners demonstrate their *eunoia* to client organizations by not only offering proposals at the decision-making table, but by also being willing to review such proposals to reflect the stories and communicative needs of their clients.

The next move in the public relations process is for organizations, guided by their communication counselors, to demonstrate the same *eunoia* toward their publics by displaying understanding, empathy, and responsiveness in their communication with them and in the activities they undertake to address ongoing problems (Aristotle, 2004, p. 92; see also McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Firstly, at the level of forensic discourse in which the concerns of publics must be addressed, organizations, guided by their identity, core values, and interests (including the need for the continued existence of their relationship with stakeholder publics), must identify with stakeholder publics in ways that benefit all parties. To achieve this goal, client organizations must show to publics the injustice of existing problems affecting them and commit to seeking redress for them.

Besides, organizations must communicatively engage publics in regard to decisions made in response to current problems. Here, organizations must show sensitivity to publics' plight by being empathetic, understanding, and responsive. Nevertheless, consistent with Aristotelian *eunoia*, client organizations must be willing to review initial decisions with a view to accommodating the concerns of publics as and when necessary. And following their communicative engagement with publics, organizations must embark on concrete actions that demonstrate their *eunoia* towards publics. Ultimately, though, the demonstration of goodwill must mirror the one exhibited by Johnson and Johnson in the Tylenol crisis (Atkinson, 1982; Broom & Sha, 2013, p. 289). In an unprecedented demonstration of goodwill toward their critical publics, Johnson and Johnson privileged human life over the bottom line by doing three things: (1) asking the general public to cease the consumption of any Tylenol product to avoid further casualties; (2) recalling all Tylenol products in the market; and (3) co-operating with the Chicago Police Department, the FBI, and the Food and Drug Administration (Broom & Sha, 2013, p. 289; see also Atkinson, 1982). While these actions initially hurt the bottom line of Johnson and Johnson, they were a testament to the organization's commitment to its credo, namely, putting the welfare of stakeholders first. Such an expression of goodwill ultimately bolstered the bottom line, as well as the image and reputation of Johnson and Johnson as a virtuous organization (see Broom & Sha, 2013). By approaching problems as Johnson and Johnson did in the Tylenol crisis (*that is, not only speaking but also acting as virtuous friends of their publics*), client organizations will persuasively represent themselves as entities possessing not only the ethical element of *eunoia* but also those of *arete* and *phronesis* – *arête* because they make choices for the sake of publics and their concerns, and *phronesis* because the choices they make ultimately yield dividends (that is, bolster organizational reputations and increase profits) even if they are initially costly. The question, though, is how many organizations will be willing to embrace the ethical public relations approach being proposed here?

## Limitations

While bringing the Aristotelian notion of *ethos* to public relations praxis can potentially enhance practitioners and client organizations' credibility and ultimately promote the good of society, the approach being proposed here faces a big challenge in terms of its acceptability in the corporate world, where practitioners' fiduciary responsibilities require them to prioritize the financial interests of client organizations in the public relations process. The question is: How many organizations are willing to take financial losses in the face of crises as John and Johnson did in the Tylenol case? The present conceptual paper fails to answer this question.

A further limitation of the public relations approach being proposed is its narrow scope of applicability; that is, the approach is limited to independent public relations practiced by comparatively fewer professionals (see PRSA 2019). In fact, while the number of the PRSA's registered in-house and agency public relations practitioners in the United States is over 30,000, that of registered independent strategic communicators is only over 200 (PRSA, 2019). For this reason, one may rightly argue that the chances of the approach being employed are slim.

Besides, while the paper's separating out of the three elements of *ethos* importantly helps to understand and appreciate how persuasion can be achieved in strategic communication, such an approach is not empirically feasible. In fact, in real-life situations, the three elements operate concurrently. In view of such a limitation, future empirical research must examine the extent to which twenty-first-century organizations are willing to ground their public relations praxis in Aristotelian *ethos* (i.e., *phronesis*, *arête*, and *eunoia*) without compromising their bottom line. Alternatively, future public relations research endeavors should empirically determine which of the three elements can be easily applied in crisis situations. Moreover, researchers may also examine the role of Aristotelian *ethos* in organizations' evaluation of the communication of publics in the public relations process. Finally, researchers must demonstrate whether it is practical and feasible for independent practitioners to transfer their ethical values to client organizations. The present paper

located such a possibility in the influence strategic communication experts must exert at the decision-making table and the ethical ways they must communicate to achieve organizational goals and meet the needs of critical publics. In real life, though, can that possibility materialize?

## Conclusion

The present paper attempts to make public relations ethically responsible and theoretically robust. To that end, it has analyzed the three elements of Aristotelian *ethos* and demonstrated how they might be brought to bear on public relations praxis. The essay believes that in the public relations process independent practitioners with professional and well-balanced perspectives can function effectively and make client organizations behave ethically if they ground their work in Aristotelian *ethos*. Mindful of the PRSA's (2011/12) expectations of public relations practitioners as well as the essence of the process of public relations as strategic communication oriented toward facilitating a fruitful communicative relationship between organizations and their publics in ways that ensure mutual benefits, independent practitioners, retained as counselors, must be allowed to participate in organizational decision-making. Following the decisions, independent practitioners must also guide and direct the communication process between organizations and their publics. To be persuasive, independent practitioners and their client organizations must possess *phronesis*, *arête*, and *eunoia*. Besides, they must allow their audiences (that is, organizations where independent practitioners are speaking, and publics where organizations are speaking) to evaluate their every communicative offering to ensure that final decisions arrived at are both acceptable to all parties and serve the good of society in general.

Crucially, too, because independent counselors along with their employers bring ethical perspectives to organizational decision-making, the final products are likely to be ethical. This reality means that the longer independent Aristotelian ethical practitioners serve their client organizations, the more likely they will help them develop ethical values. As Aristotle (1998) says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is by acting virtuously that we become virtuous. In other words, it is by practicing ethical public relations that organizations will develop the disposition to infuse moral purposes in the decisions they make. The point to be emphasized here is that ethical behavior takes time to develop. It is therefore the hope of this paper that as organizations recognize the imperative of ethicality in a twenty-first-century environment where publics are not easily manipulated (see Grunig, 2014), they will embrace a public relations praxis informed by Aristotelian *ethos*. The fact is ethical persuasion in the public relations process can be located at the confluence of the *phronesis*, *arete*, and *eunoia* of every public communicator.

## Notes

1. The essay uses perspectival autonomy and perspectival independence synonymously. By the term perspectival autonomy or independence, the work means the balanced, professional view of the public relations officer retained by an employer organization. It is this balanced, professional perspective that helps the officer mediate the relationship between an organization and its key publics in ways that ensure their mutual benefits. There are times that the officer has to speak truth to power and push back against his or her employers who might want to adopt unethical practices to protect their bottom line (see Graham, 2012). But, at the same time the officer should be able to boldly advocate “the sound policies and principles that support corporate operations in the mutual interest of society” (Heath, 2006b).
2. The essay conceptualizes audiences and publics differently. For this paper, an audience is the intended target of any form of communication (Schroder, 2009, p. 63). A public, however, refers to a group of people who come together because they are “affected by the consequences of organizational behaviors ... or they seek consequences from organizations to solve situational problems” (Aldoory & Grunig, 2012, p. 93; see also Botan & Taylor, 2004).
3. For more on Isocratean and Aristotelian rhetorics see Isocrates' (2000) *Against the Sophists* and *Antidosis*, and Aristotle (2004) *Rhetoric*.

4. This paper agrees with Sha (2017) and Coombs and Holladay (2015) that the relationships between organizations and their publics are not the same as interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, the fact that both organizations and publics impact each other either positively or negatively implicates the existential reality of some form of relationships (see Hung, 2005; Smith, 2012; Swart, 2012).
5. The third genre of rhetoric is the ceremonial or epideictic (see Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, 2004; see also Ofori, 2017).

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