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RHETORIC & ETHICS

Reconsidering Virtue

John M. Duffy

For some time now, I have been trying to work out a theory of rhetorical ethics, a way of thinking and talking about ethical discourse that we might bring to our students and that might inform the way we teach writing and argument. I've been interested in this project for two reasons: first, because the deeply polarized political and cultural moment in which we live seems ripe for a fresh way of making public arguments. Most people would agree, I think, that our present public discourse is deeply dysfunctional. And yet there seems to be little in the way of repair beyond the perfunctory, mostly fruitless calls for greater civility. I don't know if we in Writing Studies can do better in improving the debased state of public discourse, but certainly we are intellectually and structurally positioned to do so.

Intellectually, we find ourselves in the twenty-first century United States as the professional inheritors, the custodians or keepers, of the rhetorical tradition. We are charged with teaching those practices that are the materials of public argument, whether made in a college classroom, or in a county courthouse, or in the editorial pages of the *New York Times*. We know what good arguments look like, we know how to make them, and we certainly know how to teach them.

Structurally, there is nothing else quite like us. Our courses in writing and rhetoric are required at most post-secondary institutions, and our classrooms are typically bursting at the seams. In her 1998 essay, "Composition in the University," Sharon Crowley, citing data indicating that more than twelve million students were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities, suggested that if just a quarter of those students were enrolled in freshman composition courses, enrollment in writing courses would exceed four million students (1). Using Crowley's same calculations today, when The National Center of Education Statistics reports that twenty-one million students are enrolled in 4,495 degree granting institutions as of 2009-2010 ("Fast Facts"), the number of students in our classes is more than five million annually. Annually! Who is better positioned then, structurally and intellectually, to shape the future of public argument in the United States than us?

But what have we done with these advantages? Have we fully engaged our students in the ethical dimensions of writing and rhetoric? Have we explored with students the construction of the ethical identities of the speaker and the writer? Have we examined the ethical entailments of speech and writing? I would argue we have not, and so I am looking for a way to talk about rhetorical ethics that will resonate with our colleagues and with our students.

The second reason I have been trying to work out a theory of rhetorical ethics is because I've come to believe that in teaching writing, we are, in fact, already doing ethics, by which I mean the teaching of writing is necessarily and inescapably the teaching of ethical discourse. When we teach claims, for example, we are teaching students to

frame their arguments honestly and without deception. When we teach counter-arguments, we are asking students to inhabit, at least for a while, the perspective of another, which calls for empathy and generosity. When we teach practices of revision, we are encouraging students toward habits of reflection, discernment, and, as Paula Matthieu has advised, mindfulness (“Excavating Indoor Voices”). To teach writing, in this view, is to be always and already teaching ethics. And so I am looking for a language in which to make explicit that which is often implicit.

But to speak of ethics in the writing course raises immediate questions: What do we mean by ethics? What do we mean ethical discourse? Upon what intellectual traditions do we draw? If we would say to students, colleagues, and deans, as I believe we should, that our classes are a site for learning and practicing ethical arguments, and if we would say to the general public and to the legislators who fund our public institutions, as I think we should, that our classes will help students succeed in college but will also prepare them beyond college to contribute to civic arguments concerning the common good, what answer would we offer if they challenged us to define what we mean, exactly, by “ethics”?

Western moral philosophy has made available different answers to that question, but two traditions stand apart from the rest, consequentialism and deontology (LaFollette, 6). The latter, deontology, is the ethics of rules and obligations. In this conception, moral judgments are categorical and absolute. What is good is good without qualification; for an action to be considered good it must be good for all people in all situations and circumstances. Think of “telling the truth” or “keeping one’s promises” as examples. There are no contingent conditions or moral ambiguities in which those rules may be transgressed. If a murderer asks you where his intended victim is hiding, you do not lie to him because lying is wrong—categorically (Shafer-Landau, 156).

But moral absolutes are not a foundation for an ethics of rhetoric, not if we understand the functions of rhetoric to go beyond communicating received truths. Were we to import deontological ethics to the writing classroom, we would in effect tell students that ethical arguments are guided by inflexible rules, that moral ambiguities can be resolved by the applications of these rules, and that situation, context, and audience are subordinate to categorical imperatives. But moral ambiguities are often the impetus for rhetorical action, and we need rhetoric most when we can discern no rules or certain paths to follow. Deontological ethics seems more doctrinal than rhetorical, and does not offer us, in my view, an ethical language we can use.

The second major tradition in Western moral philosophy is the ethics of outcomes, or consequentialism. In this conception, the morality of an action is contingent on its consequences.¹ What will happen if I tell this lie? Who will be hurt, or spared from hurt? What harms will I cause by lying, and which would I prevent? In an ethics of consequences, an action is judged to be morally right if it produces a good outcome, and morally wrong if it results in a bad consequence (Shafer-Landau, 112). Unlike deontology, then, consequen-

1. This is sometimes known as “act-consequentialism,” in which the “moral rightness” of an act is dependent on good outcomes. In contrast, “rule-consequentialism” holds that the rightness of an act depends not on the consequences of that action but rather on the consequences of following a particular code of rules. See Hooker, 183.

tialism admits contingencies and ambiguities, bringing it closer to rhetoric and providing perhaps a firmer foundation for the development of a rhetorical ethics.

And yet do we teach students to judge their writing solely on the basis of its outcomes? In *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method*, Edwin Black tells the story of one John Jay Chapman, who read an account of “a particularly brutal lynching” of a black man by a white mob in Coatesville, Pennsylvania in 1911 (78). Chapman had no connection to the victim or to Coatesville, but the account so disturbed him that as the first anniversary of the murder approached, Chapman announced to his family that he was going to Coatesville to hold a prayer meeting and deliver a public address to commemorate the terrible event. He was not welcomed in the town, and had trouble finding a location from which to speak. Eventually, he rented a storefront and delivered his address to exactly three people: a woman who had accompanied him to Coatesville, an elderly African-American woman, and a third, unidentified person who Black says was believed to be a local spy. In terms of immediate outcomes, writes Black, the speech was a failure: the audience was tiny, the critical response negligible, and the social and political effects of the oration virtually nil.

And yet the speech, Black concludes, should not be judged on the basis of its immediate effects. Rather, Chapman’s speech should be understood as part of a broader cultural dialogue, one conducted over time and distances of the American moral landscape, and one that was joined at different moments, Black argues, by Jefferson, Lincoln, Melville, and Faulkner. In this sense, the audience for the speech was not those few gathered in the Coatesville storefront but rather all those “interested in a meaningful interpretation of history and moral status of this country” (84). Moreover, the dialogue to which John Jay Chapman contributed continues to this day, notes Black, meaning that the speech continues to be read, its audience continues to grow, and its transformative possibilities, its effects and outcomes, have yet to be fully realized.

Those of us who teach writing are not indifferent to effects and outcomes. Certainly we try to help students achieve good results in their writing, helping our students write accomplished college papers, successful application essays, award winning scholarships, and the like. But we also teach our students—I am about to generalize here, but not too inaccurately, I hope—that they may someday write, whether as citizens, as activists, as parents, for outcomes that likely will not be achieved. They may someday write for lost causes, knowing their words will not be heard, and their letters, essays, and petitions will be unread. And yet they may write regardless, our students, compelled by deeper motives than outcomes and effects. In such instances, our students’ writing will be judged not simply by results, the consequentialist ethic, but by the qualities of courage, compassion, and conviction in their written work. An ethics of rhetoric, I mean to suggest, should account for more than consequences.

My summaries of both traditions are oversimplified and perhaps crude, yet I do not see either providing a foundation for rhetorical ethics. And so far, neither has. So where does that leave us? I said earlier that to teach writing is to teach, by definition, the practices of such things as honesty, empathy, and discernment; of generosity, reflection, and mindfulness. There is a word for such practices. They are examples of what Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* called “virtues,” and which are today the focus of that branch of moral philosophy known as “virtue ethics.”

A virtue is a character trait, a disposition, a way of living that, as the philosopher Rosalind Hursthouse puts it, “goes all the way down” in defining the character of the moral agent (12). Virtues are characteristics such as truthfulness, judgment, and wisdom that provide answers to the questions, “What kind of person do I want to be?” and “How should I live my life?” And since character is not formed in isolation, the practices of virtue speak as well to the values of the community, its traditions, narratives, and beliefs (Velasquez et al.). To the extent that virtues become discursive acts, practices of ethical speech and writing, we may think of them as “rhetorical virtues.”

In the language of the virtues, we have a conception of ethics that is consonant with rhetorical practice. That is, the practice of rhetorical virtues is based not on rules, because good writers know when to break rules, nor on the calculation of outcomes, because at times we must write without fear of consequences. The virtues offer instead a conception of ethics that is context-dependent, responsive to the kairotic moment, social in nature, and developed, according to Aristotle, through instruction, practice, and habit.

The language of rhetorical virtues provides a vocabulary in which we and our students can think, write, and argue in ways that might move us beyond the corrosive rhetoric of our polarized cultural moment toward more productive ways of reasoning and writing.² In virtue-inflected arguments about race, poverty, or same-sex marriage, for example, topics on which students’ positions are often calcified long before they enter our classrooms, we may invite students to argue not on the basis of rigid ideologies, but rather in accordance with the discursive practices of tolerance, caring, open-mindedness, and more. In an ethics of rhetorical virtue, we encourage students (and we are encouraged ourselves) to speak and write less in the language of dogma, less in the language of tribe, and more the discourses of respectfulness, fair-mindedness, and regard for others, especially those others whose views are antithetical to our own. Nor does this mean we compromise our deepest values or argue any less passionately for our causes. Righteous anger can also be a virtue, called upon in the right moment, for the right audience, for the right purpose.

I am aware that many in the post-modern academy are skeptical of the term “virtue.” I understand the skepticism. When I first began encountering the word, virtue, I was reminded of what the poet Marianne Moore said about poetry: “I, too, dislike it.” Virtue has been associated with Christian fundamentalism, with right-wing punditry, and with the subjugation of women, among other things. There are reasons why the term “virtue” is not exactly trending in Writing Studies.

The historical baggage of the word should indeed give us pause. But it should not, I submit, cause us to reject the tradition. While is true, for example, that virtue is often associated with Christian doctrine, suggesting that it excludes or is less relevant to those outside the Christian faith, the virtues may be traced back to the decidedly non-Christian ancient Greeks, and to the Confucian concepts of *de* and *dexing* (roughly, “virtuous conduct” and “virtuous character”) before that (Lai, 15). And there are traditions of virtue in Buddhist, Islamic, Jewish, Ba’hai, and other faiths. There is nothing exclusively Christian about virtue.

2. I am indebted to Lois Agnew for this insight.

And while the concept of “virtue” has been appropriated as an ideological instrument by those on the political right—William Bennett’s best-selling *The Book of Virtues*, for example, was criticized for representing virtue as divorced from political struggle and social action (Porter)—appropriation of a word is not ownership. If five million students left our classrooms every year talking about the truthfulness of claims, the integrity of evidence, the generosity of trying to understand the arguments of the other side, I am willing to bet the word “virtue” would take on new meanings in American cultural and political life.

And, finally, while virtue has been used historically as a trope for subjugating and controlling women—the British historian Lynne Abrams reminds us that the “ideal woman” in Victorian England was confined to the home and expected to enact the virtues of “piety, patience, frugality, and industry” (“Ideals of Womanhood”)—does the misuse of a word in one era forever fix its meanings for future generations? Do we understand words to be frozen in historical amber, never to be reconceived and animated with fresh meanings? Contemporary philosophers such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, Julia Annas, and others have recovered the word “virtue” and given it a central place in their moral theories. Are such acts of recovery foreclosed to us? Or can we also redeem and rehabilitate words of our choosing, as we have redeemed and rehabilitated “rhetoric,” to use in our own time, for our own purposes?

Whether or not the concept of virtue will find a place in Writing Studies remains to be seen. I have tried to suggest that it provides a language for thinking about the ethics of rhetorical practice, and that it may offer us a way out of the blind alleys of our current dysfunctional discourse. But I think it finally does more than that. In the tradition of the virtues we find, or so it seems to me, the very *telos* or purpose of our work as teachers and scholars of writing: why we do what we do. Why do we care so deeply about the teaching of writing? Toward what ends do we work? What visions move and animate us. To speak to those ends and visions, and conclude these remarks, I will quote a wonderfully eloquent passage from Robert Yagelski’s “A Thousand Writers Writing,” to which I was introduced when reading Don J. Kramer’s equally eloquent essay “Just Comp.” In Yagelski’s essay he writes:

If the overriding purpose of formal education is to enable us to imagine and create just and sustainable communities that contribute to our individual and collective well-being . . . then teaching writing cannot be defined exclusively by the widely accepted but limited goals of producing effective communicators and academically successful learners for the existing consumer-oriented culture and for workplaces defined by economic globalization . . . Rather, writing instruction, like schooling in general, should ultimately be about creating a better world. (8)

In the ethical tradition of the virtues we are offered a language, those of us teaching writing, for the rhetorical work of creating that better world.



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