

In Pursuit of Rhetorical Virtue
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Taking my title literally, I might simply read to you from Wayne Booth's prose and tell stories about his teaching. I wrote this talk before his death last week, but one need look no further for rhetorical virtue than the example of Wayne Booth.

I take it that I do not have to persuade you that we live in a culture and time when unscrupulous and deceptive means of persuasion abound. I am inclined to think they abound in every culture and every time, but the particular problem we face is how to encourage reasonableness in the prevailing atmosphere of demagoguery, verbal aggression, and lying – all of the vices Deborah Tannen itemizes in her book, *The Argument Culture*. Though she wants to replace argument with dialogue, she must admit that she is herself arguing her case for dialogue, and so she makes the poignant distinction between *having* an argument and *making* one. I suppose I could be said to be making an argument today --later we can have one-- but as I do make my case I am conscious of something I first heard from Howard Nemerov, "I never saw an argument I couldn't lose."

In thinking about how to make the best argument, which we would like everyone to know how to do, rhetoricians can offer sound advice about what is most effective and what is least effective, as a matter of strategy, given the nature of the issue, the audience, the situation. If we ask instead how to make the best argument in the sense of the most ethical one, rhetoricians for the most part have less to say.

Do you remember the Monte Python routine called "The Argument Clinic?" Guy walks into the clinic and says, "I'd like to have an argument, please." Man at a desk says, "No, you don't." Guy says, "Yes, I do." Man at desk says, "No, you don't." They go back and forth like that for a while, until the guy says, "That's not an argument, that's just contradiction." Man at desk says, "No it isn't." Guy says something like "An argument is where you have to give reasons." Man at desk says, "No it isn't." And so on.

Argument might, as in this skit, imply either a kind of expected reasonableness or a refusal to be reasonable. Argument is a tricky and paradoxical business, as Socrates and Deborah Tannen both discovered when they tried to make winning arguments against winning arguments. The ultimate argument of the eristic kind, i.e. antagonism for its own sake, is to absolutely refuse to argue, as that great anti-Ciceronian Bartlesby the Scrivener, personifies.

When I hear condemnations of the corrupt rhetorical culture in which we live, Booth's no less than Tannen's, I think of one of my favorite lines from Shakespeare. Following the first appearance of the ghost of Hamlet's father on the battlements, Marcellus explains to Horatio that when the cock crows all night ghosts dare not stir abroad, to which Horatio responds, "So I have heard and do in part believe it." Is our culture

ethically and rhetorically sick, "So I have heard and do I part believe it." On the other hand, here we are--aren't we?--engaged in a world of discourse so bountiful and diverse, none of us can begin to understand its wonders. Such a vast and rich assortment of rhetorical goods. Or so I have heard....

I added a chapter on ethical argumentation to the 4th edition of my textbook, *The Shape of Reason*, some parts of which I'll repeat in this talk. In an attempt to illustrate for students the extremes of unethical argument, to diagnose the disease, as it were, before prescribing the cure, I looked for an example students could readily identify, so I chose the popular tv debate show, *Crossfire*. How was I to know that before the edition in fact appeared, *Crossfire* would be canceled? So now the students won't have any idea what I'm talking about and I will seem to them, as always, to be tilting at obsolete windmills. This is the problem with trying to be relevant when writing a textbook.

But you remember *Crossfire*, don't you? That verbal boxing match between ideologues on the left and right who try to shout each other for an hour. No one listens to anyone on the other side. If they ask questions, they don't wait to hear the answers. They call those they disagree with names ("fanatics of your ilk," "the strychnine-drinking, serpent-handling rolling on the floor crowd," "the buttoned-down, Brooke's Brothers-suited, portfolio-ed, golf-playing money men"...), they interrupt each other, talk at cross purposes, and talk at the same time—moments the transcripts of *Crossfire* denote as "crosstalk," i.e. portions of the show when no one, not even the transcriber, can understand what's being said. This is all in the name of dialogue.

It's clear that what passes for political debate, instead of argument as informed inquiry into what is most warranted to think, we have argument as theater.

Consider your own favorite issue as I run quickly through the list of things various people have said is sick about our public discourse:

- It is expressed in anger, as on Jerry Springer.
- The media, and often public policy, identify the resolution of arguments as destruction of the enemy, with brute force always as an option. To win an argument is to be the last person still talking.
- Verbal argument is itself a form of violence, as in the use of threatening, seducing, cajoling, demonizing...
- Disagreement is always polarized between two sides, thus complicated issues are reduced to simple oppositions.
- All beliefs are assumed to derive not from reasoned argument but from some underlying dogmatic fundamentalism, religious or political.
- Single-issue politics results from seeing all issues only in terms of some supremely important one, which is itself not subject to questioning.
- Public argument uses all the strategies of advertising and propaganda, making lying just a form of "spin," and using appeals to vanity, desire, and image as psychological manipulation.

- Only "facts" count and arguing about anything else is a futile exercise, and so the kind of careless relativism expressed in the universal sophomore shrug, "whatever!"
- Government and corporate control of the media results in monopolies of thought and suppression of dissenting ideas.
- Critical thinking is not taught in schools.
- Reason itself is distrusted as a means of arriving at truth or assent, since it is nothing but rationalization hiding the only real motives: self-interest, power, or sheer illogical preference.

Well, if all of these are true, we are sick indeed. So I have heard and do in part believe it.

I recently had students read George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* in which they show how the argument-as-war metaphor controls our attitude toward argument as a process of winning by any necessary means. We *attack* and *defend positions*, we *marshal* our evidence, we *battle it out*. To prove their point, Lakoff and Johnson ask us to imagine a different metaphor for this process, and the one they choose is dancing. They challenge us to think of argument as dance precisely because they think we will be unable to do so, and thus we will see just how deeply ingrained the argument-as-war metaphor really is. I asked my students if they could imagine argument as dance. They were puzzled. Then I asked them which metaphor best fit the kind of arguments we had been having in this class, and suddenly the possibility of argument as dance became a reality for them. I don't have to imagine the possibility of argument as dance, I told them, thinking of Kenneth Burke's "dancing attitudes," because I have lived it.

Then after that I was in a faculty seminar in which we read Rosemarie Garland Thomsons' *Extraordinary Bodies*, a foundational work in disability studies, and found myself suddenly forcefully confronted with the rhetorical effects of some of my habitual metaphors: "take a stance," "rise to the occasion," "think on your feet," and of course "dancing attitudes." Thomson reminds us how often the implied audience of our discourse is able-bodied, or as she says, "normate." Representation is such a wonderfully complicated business.

The only terms we have are embedded in some kind of contest among life-forces. The terms *argument* and *debate* are meaningless without the idea of conflict. The only alternative I can see to that is no discourse at all, or the Orwellian state of being in which everyone thinks the same way. The question is, how do we manage inevitable disagreements so that they are fought, conducted, performed, danced, rolled... *made* in such a way that they do not break down into violence, especially when we reach the limits of our ability to persuade using reasons. It is unreasonable to think that if we could only find the right reasons, others would agree with us. This is what makes rhetoric rhetoric.

It should be evident by all this that the problem of ethical argument is difficult, having social, political, psychological, philosophical and even religious dimensions, bound up, that is, with the human condition. So if we want to go from diagnosis to cure, we have to

imagine that there will be a similar range of therapies available, political, economic, social, psychological, religious... There are as many therapies being advocated as there are symptoms. I happen to think that is a good thing. If going to church, getting a massage, taking a seminar, joining Greenpeace, or voting republican makes you a more tolerant, judicious, reasonable arguer, then I won't argue with it. Given that none of us are ever going to become perfectly ethical arguers all of the time, my question is: what is going on when people do argue ethically?

Those philosophers and rhetoricians most interested in that question are for the most part engaged in a process of analysis of conditions and formulation of rules for verbal conduct. I have encountered a variety of lists of conditions and rules, and instead of running through them I will illustrate the phenomenon with an example from the exemplar, Jurgen Habermas, the philosopher of "communicative action." Here are some rules for ethical, rational, practical discourse (derived by Habermas from R. Alexy):

- (1.1) No speaker may contradict himself.
- (1.2) Every speaker who applies predicate F to object A must be prepared to apply F to all other objects resembling A in all relevant aspects.
- (1.3) Different speakers may not use the same expression with different meanings.

- (2.1) Every speaker may assert only what he really believes.
- (2.2) A person who disputes a proposition or norm not under discussion must provide a reason for wanting to do so.

- (3.1) Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in the discourse.
- (3.2)
 - a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatsoever.
 - b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatsoever into the discourse.
 - c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires, and needs.
- (3.3) No speaker may be prevented by internal or external coercion from exercising his rights as laid down in (3.1) and (3.2).

....

These are great rules, and you can perhaps imagine the kind of inquiry necessary to derive them and the kind discussion needed to make them understood. You have heard, I take it, the joke at Habermas' expense: "He said *what* about communication?"

When I read such lists, I wonder, who is the audience for them? Imagine beginning each program of *Crossfire* or even a high school debate with this list on display as constituting the ground rules. What would happen? "You rule-breaking hypocrite, what you just said violated 1.3." "Oh yeah, and you wouldn't know 3.2 if it bit you on the ass."

It's fairly obvious that although these rules address the problem, they probably have moral force only for other people engaged in thinking about the philosophical problem of communicative action, but not the people out there making arguments. I'll return to this issue in a moment.

I want to show you a list I have made up for students, not to suggest that it is better, but to say why I think it may be futile to approach the problem from the point of view of normative rules. So after I present my own rules I will critique them. These appear in a different form in the new ethics chapter of *The Shape of Reason*. This list has come to be known by my students as "Gage's Decalogue." To avoid the "thou shalt not" mountain-top stance, however, I have adopted the invocative voice, "let us try to acknowledge that..." to suggest that this is an invitation rather than a commandment, and that it applies to me as much as it does to you. My glosses will be minimal, perhaps you will want to talk further about the implications or rationales. You will, by the way, see Wayne Booth's fingerprints all over these.

- 1. Let us try to acknowledge that no matter what we might disagree about, we share a vastly larger number of agreements.** Similarities always define the context for all differences. There is always common ground somewhere to be found.
- 2. Let us try to acknowledge that as we engage in argument, our purpose is not to silence each others' voices on any matter.** No argument can eliminate an idea, it can only complicate it.
- 3. Let us try to acknowledge the necessity of disagreement, then, to the overall welfare of our culture.** Any culture, that is, that values freedom. This principle I think I heard first from my mother, who would say, "If we agreed about everything, then one of us isn't necessary." The interplay of agreement and disagreement forms the dialectic of an open society.
- 4. Let us therefore try to acknowledge that when we enter into discussions of our disagreements, our own mind might be changed.** This principle underlies any distinction between argument as sheer persuasion and argument as inquiry, or dialogue, or negotiated assent, and the history of rhetoric gives us examples of both general kinds.
- 5. Let us then try to acknowledge the possibility that some claim or conclusion we wish to support might be wrong.** Belief has a way of feeling permanent and inevitable, but all we have to do is recall when we have been wrong. Anyone here who hasn't been?
- 6. Let us try to acknowledge therefore that our conclusions, claims, and assertions are only as good as the case we are able to make for them.** Unless they came from nowhere or from revelation, we like to think our ideas came from good reasons not bad ones. If we know there can be such a thing as bad reasons we are obliged to try to make better ones.
- 7. Let us try then to acknowledge that we will not judge others' claims outside the context of other's stated reasons for believing them.** As a good practitioner of "motivism," as Booth calls it, if I think people only use reasons to rationalize beliefs that are in fact derived from psychological needs or political or religious affiliations, then I have no good reason to take anyone's stated reason seriously, nor to expect them to take mine seriously.

8. Let us try to acknowledge further that we have a responsibility to be sure that we understand what others are saying before we set out to refute or challenge them.

Understanding is the real challenge if we are not to rush to refute the ideas of people who have never really uttered them.

9. Let us try to acknowledge that our audience is always potentially larger than the so-called "intended audience." The rhetorical bromide, "know your audience," begs an ethical question. If I think I am arguing to an audience of red-heads the only reasons I care about are red-headed reasons. This is pushing buttons. The bigger the audience, or in Perelman's terms the more "universal," the less specific strategies will suggest themselves, leaving only the most rational case as our goal.

10. Let us try to acknowledge the need to avoid the temptation to be a rhetorical exceptionalist. Do the ways I want others to argue apply to me? Do as I say, not as I do? I once had a student who said "I just hate clichés, why can't people just tell it like it is." We all know a deconstructionist who has asserted "all words are meaningless." The more that is at stake for us when we argue, the more we are tempted to argue by means we think would be unethical if others used them on us.

Since we will not always persuade others as we would have others persuade us, being fallen creatures, or as Burke says, rotten with perfection, I have added an eleventh commandment, which comes from the poet William Stafford: "in writing to forgive each other much."

These rules, after all, will never be followed. Do you know the joke about Moses coming off the mountain top with a progress report? "I have good news and bad news: The good news is that I have got Him down to ten. The bad news is that adultery is still there."

To offer now a brief critique of normative approaches to discourse ethics, let me observe first that however good any set of rules is, no one is bound to follow them, there are no consequences, after all, except for contributing unnoticeably to the culture of argument that already exists everywhere around us. The anthropologist Emil Durkheim expressed this problem by saying that rules do not motivate. The consequence of following these rules, my students sometimes point out to me, is that the other guy will always win the argument.

Another way in which pragmatic philosophers have stated this problem is to argue that abstract rules, even if you wanted to follow them, cannot generate specific choices of what to do in specific circumstances. What to do in *this* case cannot be deduced from the rule. We need more rules for how to follow the rules. Stephen Toulmin puts it this way: "What applies everywhere and always holds good nowhere in particular." A more post-modern, social critique of such rules is simply based on the question, "Whose rules are these, anyway?" I've been told by a colleague that my 10 principles only apply to 5 % of the world's population.

And so I am forced to ask, as in the choice of the dance metaphor, who is silenced by my rules? This makes me ask in turn, what kinds of discourse is ruled out by such rules? I sometimes think that so-called normative ethics should be augmented by ab-normative ethics. Consider speech acts that openly defy prevailing discourse norms and rules, on occasion, because there is a need to speak outside those norms. Protest often takes forms that are uncivil, in the name of a civil good, such as "Hell No We Won't Go," or Martin Luther's theses nailed to the church door, or Bartleby's "I prefer not to." Are we ready to call such speech acts unethical? I hope not. It seems there ought to be in any prescriptive ethics an escape clause: "When necessary, break these rules." A rhetoric of incivility, which is something like how Burke saw the function of art, may be needed to keep the dominant discourse from becoming too dominant, or as Burke put it: "When in Rome, do as the Greeks." I would not want any set of rules, however necessary they might seem to restore civility, to rule out *a priori* the potentiality of any rhetorical act.

This puts me on shaky ethical ground. How do we know when we are breaking a rule for the sake of something necessary or breaking it for expediency? Indeed, another problem, I think, with these or any rhetorical rules is that they are easy to fake. I am reminded of a book about so-called Rogerian argument (in which one tries to understand without advocating) that advised applying its principles as a good way to disarm and weaken the opposition and enable one to win by apparent moral authority.

These problems warrant trying to look at the question of ethical rhetoric from a different viewpoint, perhaps one offered by virtue ethics seen as an alternative to normative approaches. This returns us, with a difference, to the Ciceronian solution to the problem of the sophists: what might we mean by a "virtuous person speaking well?"

Virtue ethics doesn't prescribe ethical norms based on the external motivation provided by rules but instead asks what qualities of character must be present for ethical choices to be made. Aristotle defined virtue as a habit acquired by performing certain kinds of actions, that is something like a predisposition, for the most part, to do things one way instead of another, and such actions are virtuous for Aristotle if they are based on free choice, deliberation, and a desired end. Aristotle's list of virtues, such as courage, temperance, justice, truthfulness ... all lie along a continuum between two extremes, excess and deficiency. There is then, an overarching virtue of knowing how to act in ways predisposed by those virtues along such a continuum, and that virtue he calls *phronesis*. *Phronesis*, sometimes translated as prudence or practical wisdom, seems to mean something like the capacity of making practical decisions based on the good, in particular situations, in the absence of absolute knowledge.

It is such a capacity, I think, that enables people who we consider (for the most part) to be ethical arguers to know, not *what* arguments to make, but *when* a particular *kind* of rhetorical act is appropriate and when it isn't, and for this reason a virtue ethic does not preclude decisions of the kind I described as ab-normative, but it will restrict them to moments when they are judged necessary and right. To be a mocker or to be angry might be a virtuous choice in a certain situation, but to always be a mocker or angry would be rhetorically and ethically wrong. There is something like rhetorical *phronesis* at work in

the pre-theoretical choice of what is best to say in a particular argumentative situation. This suggests to me further problems, and I will close by putting them forward, since they are problems which I am working on and have not solved to my own satisfaction.

The first problem is pedagogical: how is such a capacity, or sensitivity, or virtue attained; is it, as Aristotle says, something like a habit? It certainly isn't attained by rule, "Be prudent!" It seems only possible to acquire such a virtue by being in situations in which it must be exercised, and yet to exercise it in any situation one must already have it. Yet despite this paradox it seems right to me to say that as teachers of rhetoric, we need to be less concerned with teaching specific rhetorical strategies and more concerned with the kinds of situations that we create for students to argue their way out of. What qualities do we look for in the situations we create for them, that enable those situations to call for the exercise of practical wisdom? And how do we ask students to read in order to see how others have made such choices? Are there situations, for instance, unlike those on *Crossfire*, in which pure self-interest must be set aside to arrive at assent? Are there situations in which knowledge must be discovered collectively rather than treated as a pre-determined commodity to be sold to someone else? The choices made in such situations can only be generated and evaluated by the application of what might be called virtue. This is a challenging re-orientation of a teacher's typical responsibility as promoter of rules.

The second problem, for me, is whether it is possible to talk about specifically rhetorical virtues apart from the phronesis that must somehow accompany knowledge of all ethical choices, including rhetorical ones. This question constitutes my current pursuit. I am thinking of the possibility that such virtues would be considered as inclinations that are applied for the most part, in most cases, grounded solely in the character of the rhetor, inclinations that are there by virtue of one's *being* a rhetor -- or a "symbol-using, mis-using animal." You might liken such inclinations to a "sense of timing," which comedians are said to develop. And, indeed, timing, or *kairos*, is considered in classical rhetoric a necessary condition for exercising *decorum*. My idea that there are rhetorical virtues of this kind has led me to re-evaluate concepts such as "clarity," for instance, not as a rule to be followed (impossibly, it has always seemed to me) such as Strunk and White's "Be clear." Instead of a rule, and indeed instead of a linguistic phenomenon, a sense of clarity might be something like a habit, learned by experiencing it as a virtue -- which is certainly not how our students experience it when asked to read most current academic prose. In what kinds of situations is clarity sensed as an inherent responsibility?

So, among the rhetorical virtues of this kind, I am imagining a sense of form, a sense of beauty, a sense of playfulness, a sense of humility, a sense of compassion and justice, a sense of musicality, and a sense of humor, seen in their rhetorical manifestations. How therapeutic for our sick rhetorical culture would it be if these virtues guided the choice of how to argue? But it occurs to me that this is the wrong question, since there may be no rhetorical action that does not arise from some felt sense of its rightness, perhaps in both the strategic and ethical sense. So, how much more interesting would our critique of our rhetorical culture be if we thought of arguments as deriving from and therefore revealing

such qualities of character? Not in order to call names and judge those who sometimes fail, as we all do, but in order to in-habit such qualities in our own arguments. The ethical question for any act of argumentation, then, is not "Is this virtuous?" in order to praise or blame the character of the speaker, but instead "From what virtue does this arise?" and "Can I make it my own?"