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INTRODUCTION

John Duffy and Lois Agnew

In the popular narrative, familiar to all who have read Plato's *Gorgias*, the character of Socrates is sent forth to engage a trio of Sophists—Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles—in a public debate concerning the nature and morality of rhetoric. It isn't much of a contest. Socrates easily dispatches the first of his two interlocutors, showing Gorgias to be an amiable charlatan, unclear on the nature of that which he professes to teach, and Polus a naive hothead whose arguments about oratory are confused and contradictory. Callicles proves a more formidable adversary, amoral and contemptuous of Socrates's philosophy, which he regards as a pursuit unworthy of mature adults. By the end of the dialogue, however, Callicles, too, is vanquished, growing sullen and silent as Socrates expounds on his ideas of justice, virtue, and the good life. As for rhetoric, Socrates dismisses it as "pandering," "cooking," and a "counterfeit" art, "useless in establishing the truth" (Plato 1960, 44). So does Plato introduce the famous division—locating philosophy, knowledge, and truth on the high side of the river, with rhetoric, ignorance, and duplicity occupying the lower, muddier bank.

This searing indictment of rhetoric, which has achieved a historical staying power that might have surprised even Plato, has preoccupied rhetoricians for centuries, raising questions about the place of ethics in rhetorical theory, practice, and pedagogy. After Plato, rhetoric became something of a dirty word, signifying dishonesty and insincerity, as in the expression "give me truth, not rhetoric." After Plato, rhetoric was understood as cheap ornamentation, as in the command "spare me the rhetoric; just say it plainly." After Plato, rhetoric was construed as the opposite of productive activity, as in the headline "governor calls for action, not rhetoric." These and similar denunciations are part and parcel of the accepted narrative, in which Plato effectively separated rhetoric from ethics.

And if Plato's views of rhetoric were more complex than the popular narrative admits, which they were, and if rhetoricians long ago rejected binary thinking about the relationship of rhetoric and ethics, which

they have, there yet remains the challenge for those of us who teach and study writing to think past popular conceptions to delineate for ourselves the relationship of rhetoric and ethics as this has been enacted in our own historical time and place, in our own cultural moment.¹

How do we understand the relationship of rhetoric and ethics at a moment when objective truth is under assault, reason is derided, racism is intensifying, conspiracies are rampant, and authoritarianism is on the rise in the United States and Europe? What does it mean to be an ethical speaker and writer in conditions of strident polarization, economic inequality, mass incarceration, and environmental destruction? What sorts of arguments would the ethical speaker or writer make in addressing these conditions? What stories would she tell? What principles would guide her choice of metaphors, analogies, allegories, or ironies?

For teachers of writing, other questions present themselves. Should we be teaching practices of ethical rhetoric in our classrooms? Is that part of our charge, another of our many responsibilities? If we would answer “yes” to such questions, what deliberations would follow? What decisions? What choices would we make, for example, in our first-year writing classrooms, our Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs, our writing centers, our teacher training courses, and elsewhere?

Such questions compel us to address more basic questions: What do we mean by the words *ethics* and *ethical*? These are familiar, even commonplace terms. We encounter them, perhaps use them, in contexts of civic life, policy debates, commercial transactions, religious discourses, and personal communications. But what do we mean, exactly, by these words? What do we mean by “ethical rhetoric?” What theories, principles, concepts, or experiences organize our understandings and our practices? How have our conceptions of the terms *ethics*, *ethical*, and *ethical rhetoric* been influenced by recent scholarship in such areas as feminism, transnationalism, postmodernism, non-Western ethics, and other schools of thought?

We are not, of course, the first to ask such questions. In his review of scholarship on the relationship of ethics and rhetoric, William Duffy (this collection) references writings in philosophy, public sphere theory, and new rhetoric, citing such figures as John Dewey and Jürgen Habermas, Richard Weaver and Kenneth Burke, Wayne Booth and Sharon Crowley. In the field of what is now called writing studies,² publications such as Sheryl I. Fontaine and Susan M. Hunter’s *Foregrounding Ethical Awareness in Composition and English Studies* (1998), James E. Porter’s, *Rhetorical Ethics and Interneted Writing* (1998), and Frederic G. Gale, Phillip Sipiora, and James L. Kinneavy’s, *Ethical Issues in College*

Writing (1999) have explored intersections of ethics and rhetoric from a variety of theoretical, philosophical, historical, and ideological perspectives. More recently, ethics has been the subject of scholarly inquiry in Krista Ratcliffe's *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* (2005), Ira Allen's *The Ethical Fantasy of Rhetorical Theory* (2018), and John Duffy's *Provocations of Virtue: Rhetoric, Ethics, and the Teaching of Writing* (2019), to name but a few of many.

This essay collection is intended to extend and enrich such conversations. Featuring chapters by some of the most accomplished scholars in the field, *After Plato* explores the diversity of ethical perspectives animating contemporary writing studies, including feminist, postmodern, transnational, non-Western, virtue, translingual, and other perspectives, and examines as well the place of ethics in our classrooms, writing centers, prison education classes, and other settings for the teaching of writing. Collectively, the chapters demonstrate the integral place of ethics in writing studies and provide a roadmap for moving forward in conversations about ethical rhetoric that will play an essential role in the future vitality of our field.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

Section One: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives

After Plato is arranged in two complementary sections. The first section, Historical and Theoretical Perspectives, offers seven chapters that explore different frameworks for developing an ethical rhetoric in writing studies. In the first of these chapters, James Porter argues that the revitalization of rhetorical ethics can be furthered through reframing Western rhetorical history. Porter contends that the ethical force of rhetoric has been diminished not by accident but by the deliberate suppression of strains of the Western rhetorical tradition that asserted rhetoric's integral role in ethical decision-making. Porter seeks to reclaim a historical lineage that creatively imagines the intrinsic relationships among language, ethics, and the public good. Although this important strain of thought has been elided as a result of the persistent impulse on the part of thinkers such as Peter Ramus to diminish rhetoric's power, Porter argues that recovering ancient notions of rhetoric as both *techné* and praxis can recapture the emphasis on rhetoric's transformative potential that has been obscured by dominant versions of rhetorical history.

Porter's essay is followed by William Duffy's "Practically Wise and Good: Understanding *Phronesis* as a Rhetorical Virtue," in which Duffy connects rhetorical action to the subfield of moral philosophy known

as “virtue ethics.” The chapter begins with an acknowledgment of the challenges of defining rhetorical ethics and agreeing on whose judgment matters in that ongoing determination. Duffy’s response to that challenge begins with the search for an internal ethical standard that resides in the field, a quest that takes him to Aristotle’s virtue of *phronesis*, which arises from the notion that “to choose the right or most expedient course of action in most situations requires the ability for good deliberation.” Duffy maintains that the value of *phronesis* lies in Aristotle’s understanding that the particularities of circumstance always matter, an issue that “falls squarely in the realm of the rhetorical.” While Duffy notes that *phronesis*, like other rhetorical virtues, is not completely relative, it provides a framework for cultivating an ethical disposition that facilitates appropriate responses across varying rhetorical contexts.

In concert with the other writers in this section, Lois Agnew begins with the disciplinary assumption that rhetoric and ethics are intrinsically connected but considers the question of “precisely where our field’s connection to ethics lies.” Although many prominent Western rhetoricians have conceived of style as a central resource for grounding and furthering rhetoric’s ethical potential, competing strains in rhetorical history have viewed excessive attention to language use with suspicion. Agnew’s exploration of Western rhetorical history supports her argument that style should be imagined “as a focal point for revitalizing the ethical potential of language,” a goal that has assumed increasing urgency in the present day.

Bo Wang suggests that Confucius’s perspectives on “the self, human relationships, speech, and ritual practices” can usefully inform conversations about ethical practices in rhetoric and writing studies today. Wang argues that “the *Analects* can be read as a virtue-oriented rhetoric” and offers a methodical discussion of the central ethical principles found in Confucius’s text. In Wang’s view, the complex concept of *ren* can be seen as the key to ethical rhetorical engagement, since “the concern for the good of others makes the exemplary person irreducibly communal and relational.” Although she acknowledges interpretations that have emphasized Confucius’s ambivalence toward eloquence, Wang advances the compelling argument that the significance of language in Confucius’s system can be more fully understood through tracing the intricate connections among the cultivation of *ren*, ritual practices, and speech.

Rasha Diab seeks to “provoke further discussion of the (*trans*)national in a world that prides itself on the compression of time and space, border crossing, transnational identification, and a global community.”

Diab's investigation of the border offers a framework for interrogating the material reality that is often elided by the terms used to discuss transnationalism. She interrogates how we can read differently the (in)visible presence of national doxa that informs our perception of and discourse about the movement of bodies, bodies of knowledge, technologies, and capital across national borders. Drawing on Seyla Benhabib and Denise Ferreira da Silva, Diab centers relationality to explicate how we "include an other in our spheres of attention, intention, and ethical consideration." Diab calls for a relational ethics, which is "a manifestation of a moral philosophy, a relational worldview, and an interdependent, relational self."

Xiaoye You, in turn, explores questions about the ethics of translingual practice. You begins his chapter with a discussion of ancient thinkers such as Confucius, Plato, Aristotle, and Diogenes, who not only engage directly with issues of cultural difference but also use multilingualism "as resources in their composing process." The recognition that "writing often matters tremendously to the writer and his or her community" creates an opportunity for greater awareness of the high stakes that are at play whenever monolingualism is asserted as the norm without acknowledging the potential value of embracing the range of resources that multilingualism makes available to writers and audiences. In light of the ethical complexities surrounding translingualism and its potential compatibility with the expedient goals of neo-liberal capitalism, You proposes that the field encourage students to develop a cosmopolitan perspective that not only encourages an appreciation for multilingual/translingual language practices but also cultivates a relational awareness across sociopolitical boundaries.

The section concludes with an ambitious vision of the role of rhetorical ethics in addressing a world plagued by division and environmental destruction. Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch offer strategies for ethical action defined by rhetorical listening and response, the pursuit of productive interactions and collaborations across multiple levels of difference, and the exploration of possibilities for a more just and peaceful society. Although Royster and Kirsch draw from their work in feminist rhetorical studies in exploring the questions at hand, they insist that this ambitious project requires an intersectional approach; their inspiring call for awareness of "hierarchies of difference in human value systems and practices" establishes a foundation for the "deliberate de-centering of the primacy of human beings and the primacy of Western ontologies, theories, and practices" that they consider central to their ethical project. Their extensive discussion of how rhetorical studies can

pursue this goal offers practical steps for re-inscribing ethics as a central concern of our field and offers a call for action that brings a note of hope in troubled times.

Section Two: Disciplinary and Pedagogical Perspectives

The second section of the book, *Disciplinary and Pedagogical Perspectives*, builds on the theoretical foundations established in the first, examining how ethics is conceived and enacted in the institutional spaces in which we teach and assess students.

The section begins with Robert J. Mislevy and Norbert Elliot's "Ethics, Psychometrics, and Writing Assessment: A Conceptual Model," which outlines the challenges of addressing the topic of ethics and writing assessment. The authors respond to this challenge by establishing a framework for assessment defined by "a sense of reason tempered by consequence, convictions revisited by reflection, and fairness enacted in communities" and then use their framework to design ethical writing assessments. Although the authors issue a "warning label" concerning the fact that the technical nature of their expertise gives rise to a chapter that is "complex at times in its use of terminology," their explicit attention to the ethical principles underlying their work supports their view that a multidisciplinary approach to writing assessment has tremendous value in illuminating the complex, relational, and ethical nature of all communication.

Michael A. Pemberton shifts the conversation to the writing center, addressing the unique challenges in determining ethical courses of action in the context of the tutorial sessions central to writing center pedagogy. His chapter offers a critical discussion of the complexity that surrounds the notion of "the good" in writing centers, particularly as any absolute ideal is persistently challenged by the highly contextual nature of every writing center interaction. Pemberton's introduction of William Lillie's list of ethical standards serves as a provocative framework for a consideration of how key principles might be applied to establish an ethical system that is fully situated in and attentive to the ever-changing demands of the writing center tutorial session.

Vicki Tolar Burton considers what it means to bring ethical considerations into Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines (WAC/WID) pedagogy. Drawing from Michael Hyde's notion of ethos as a means for establishing "dwelling places," Burton argues that WAC/WID programs provide opportunities to explore "the concept of disciplinary discourse as a dwelling place of disciplinary ethics." This insight

entails an awareness of the ways writing within disciplines supports the discovery and instantiation of values that guide particular fields and also of how teaching students to write according to the standards of particular disciplines should be seen not simply as an endeavor to acquaint them with a set of rules and generic expectations but instead should be more broadly conceived as “the places where their professional character (ethos) and knowledge develop and where they learn to write as ethical citizens of their field.” Burton makes a thorough and compelling case for the ways students and faculty engaged in WAC/WID initiatives can benefit from greater awareness of how their encounters with disciplinary discourse provide a means to engage with rhetorical ethics.

Don J. Kraemer takes up the complex and relational nature of rhetorical ethics. Kraemer applies “the revisionary zeal in Plato” to the context of teacher training, as he considers what it means to apply the goals of Plato’s “democratic city” to a TA training program in which the “citizens,” teacher and students, hold widely different values and professional objectives. Kraemer’s case study of a single student demonstrates how an ethically responsive approach to teacher training obligates both teacher and student to commit to an honest exchange of ideas that will open the door to new insights and perspectives. While Kraemer’s proposed method of “pedagogical hospitality” in teacher training does not offer a remedy to the ethical challenges that can arise in a TA training program, which Kraemer frankly acknowledges, the method does provide a productive way forward for imagining the type of “city” an ethical teacher education program can create for prospective teachers.

Paula Mathieu proposes mindfulness as an alternative framework for developing ethical responses to the life circumstances we encounter. Mathieu argues for the importance of rhetorical and pedagogical strategies that support self-awareness, by which she means the cultivation of a personal presence that facilitates “conscious and purposeful” action. Although Mathieu acknowledges that “mindfulness is a tool that in itself is neutral,” she argues that aligning mindful practices with ethics can lead to a type of consciousness that purposefully enables us to “reduce suffering in ourselves and others.” In addition to explicating a theory of mindful ethics, Mathieu’s chapter offers insight about the role of writing in promoting mindful practices, and she suggests a variety of contemplative teaching practices that teachers might adopt in mindful writing classrooms.

Our field’s scope is not limited to the academy but requires a consideration of the ethical issues that can arise as students and faculty engage with community partners. Patrick W. Berry addresses the pressures that

emerge as the outcomes of prison literacy programs at times deviate from the expectations of those who participate in them. Berry calls for a thorough consideration of the imagined function of higher education in prison, insisting that such an investigation requires that we “listen rhetorically to how discussions about higher education in prison are framed, interrogate the cultural logics that inform them, and create spaces for alternative understandings.” Berry argues that rhetorical listening, which fosters an understanding of the range of perspectives of participants in prison literacy programs, is an eminently ethical stance, as it fosters resistance to a limited and limiting model of prison education.

Section Two concludes with John Duffy’s “Toward a Common Tongue: Rhetorical Virtues in the Writing Classroom.” Duffy argues that while writing studies is characterized by a rich diversity of approaches to the teaching of writing, what is common across our various pedagogies is the teaching of what he calls “rhetorical virtues,” or the discursive enactment of such qualities as truthfulness, accountability, intellectual generosity, intellectual courage, and other such traits and disposition. By way of illustration, Duffy compares two seemingly distinct approaches to the teaching of writing—community-engaged pedagogy and new media pedagogy—to show how each is grounded in the teaching of rhetorical virtues. Duffy concludes by arguing that teachers of ethical rhetoric have an indispensable role to play in repairing the toxic condition of contemporary public argument.

EPILOGUE

In his wise and engaging epilogue to this book, Frederick Antczak acknowledges that the place of ethics in writing studies is something of a moving target, responsive to transformations of theory, politics, economics, and other urgent forces. And yet it is possible to view present challenges, Antczak writes, as versions of earlier contentions or to understand that everything that was old has been made new again. However, if questions concerning the relationship of rhetoric and ethics are enduring and unresolved, Antczak argues that the appropriate response should not be to deny

that understandings can grow and deepen; nor is it to be skeptical about whether debates can progress. Indeed, sometimes they progress so much that they begin to connect to, even anticipate, other contemporary discussions. Scholarly inquiries into the ethics of rhetoric in writing studies and in communication ramify so often and powerfully that they practically careen toward interdisciplinarity. These sorts of connections

seem like signs of making real headway, as well as a rough map of future directions—although, of course, it was ever thus.

We offer *After Plato* in that spirit, proposing that the very old, indeed, the ancient quandary of the place of ethics in rhetorical theory and pedagogy has been made new again by contemporary situations that pose new questions, challenge new audiences, and call for new expressions of ethical rhetoric. We hope you will find value in the understandings and insights offered in this collection as you work out your own responses to the urgent ethical challenges facing our students, our colleagues, and our society in the twenty-first century.

NOTES

1. We use the pronouns “we,” “our,” and “us” to refer in the broadest possible sense to anyone who teaches or studies writing, as well as to those who administer writing programs.
2. We use the term *writing studies* inclusively, intending that it stand for each of the various disciplinary labels that have been applied to the teaching and study of writing, such as composition studies, rhetoric and composition, and others.

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