

The New “Available Means”: Rhetoric, Ethics, and the Teaching of Writing

Provocations of Virtue: Rhetoric, Ethics, and the Teaching of Writing, by John Duffy. Utah State UP/UP of Colorado, 2019. 176 pp.

After Plato: Rhetoric, Ethics, and the Teaching of Writing, edited by John Duffy and Lois Agnew. Utah State UP/UP of Colorado, 2020. 264 pp.

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John Duffy has been reviving the classical concept of ethics for incorporation into the teaching of writing for the past several years for good reason: a short time ago, what we were calling “incivility” in public discourse has devolved into something worse, evident in our political leaders’ and their supporters’ language use (and actions) built on lies, white supremacy, dehumanization, gaslighting, and purposeful, hard-to-look-at denial of facts, evidence, and reality generally speaking. While normally, “rhetoric” is always already lambasted by pundits and political observers, at the present moment—because of the weight and horrible repercussions of our worst leaders’ worst examples—almost *all* language use is up for lambasting, even the most honest and earnest persons’ actual attempts to speak reasonably to resolve misunderstandings or solve problems. For me and other colleagues in our field, the last few years have been an unnerving and baffling time in which to teach writing and rhetoric.

Duffy’s new book *Provocations of Virtue* and its counterpart, edited collection *After Plato*, edited by John Duffy and Lois Agnew, offer cohesive reactions to “toxic rhetoric” and potential solutions to what *After Plato* contributors, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa A. Kirsch, call our present moment of “*uber* challenges” (126). Both books share the subtitle “Rhetoric, Ethics, and the Teaching of Writing,” and both define and reclaim the classical concept and practice of ethics for contemporary rhetorical and writing studies in today’s context of a general distrust of speakers and writers in the public sphere. Recent work by Reyman and Sparby (2020) and Colton and Holmes (2018) have also revived ethics as a central principle in understanding the toxicity in public discourse on the internet. But, *Provocations* and *After Plato* offer their updated perspectives on ethics as an additional—some say forgotten or misunderstood—classical rhetorical principle à la Quintilian: teaching good people to speak/write well in the field of writing and rhetoric in particular.

Yet, each treatment of ethics is more nuanced and contextualized for the complications of the 21st century than simply referring to what Duffy calls “the Q [Quintilian] question.” In particular, chapters in Duffy and Agnew’s

collection think globally, and both texts acknowledge—and in one case, transforms—the knee-jerk reaction that feminists might have to terms like “virtue.”

Duffy continues his work of polishing a definition of “ethics,” which, for many, is synonymous with moral philosophy. His definition of ethics is built in steps, identifying the concept first as a *telos*, foundation, or “language” of the work of teaching writing” (10). He suggests such a *telos* is needed in our discipline because the field is neither cohesive nor does it have an influence on public discourse in the way that it might if its purpose was to teach students to be good people through rhetorical choices, such as selecting appropriate metaphors and anecdotes and considering others’ points of view. Duffy wants to help students learn to “talk to strangers” and “repair the broken state of our public arguments” (12).

Duffy positions ethics under the umbrella term “virtues,” an even harder-to-define term that refers to many good qualities people aspire to evince in their characters and lives, such as honesty, courage, justice, compassion, and many others. (I counted twenty or so characteristics identified as virtues throughout the book.) Virtues in our character “enable us to make good choices, to act and react rightly, and to live as good people” (67). Thus I offer an interpretation of Duffy’s title: virtue to many is a slightly mysterious and therefore provocative topic to claim for the teaching of writing—and, as Duffy points out, plenty of his audience will be provoked by a perception of “virtue” as a sexist religious concept. Duffy’s purpose is to dust off its old reputation and convince us that it is not the “virtuousness” of your great-great-grandmother that kept young women subjugated and controlled in terms of sexual roles and rules (14).

To do this, he delineates a modern virtue ethics for rhetoric by explaining three ethical traditions and their rhetorical inflections in the history of teaching writing. Deontological ethics, or an ethics of rules, boils down to a prescriptive grammar, where good writing follows the rules. A consequentialist ethics prizes outcomes and therefore categorizes good writing as that which gets good grades. And, finally, a postmodern ethics inflects the teaching of writing with its critical habit, casting a good writer as one “who can absorb and articulate the fragmented moral landscape [through the] postmodern arts of interrogation and irony” (60). This is a compelling way to argue: since writing will be inflected by *some* ethic, virtue ethics—with its emphasis on being good—is the right tool to counter today’s toxic rhetoric.

To me, Duffy’s robust description of toxic rhetoric itself is most insightful: he pulls together recent definitions, examples, and analyses of the problem that his sources argue has been building in the US since the Reagan era. Causes include the deregulation and conglomeration of media corporations beginning in the 1980s; deep political polarization evident as early as the 1988 Michael Dukakis campaign; the ideological shifts to the far right since 9/11; and, simply,

a historical acceptance of bad-mouthing opponents publicly exemplified by the nasty names Jefferson and Adams called each other (35). Duffy identifies the features of toxic rhetoric as dishonesty, unaccountability, demonization, violence, denial, and poverty of spirit, and, most importantly, he identifies the primary terrible effect of these rhetorical tactics as not only persuasive, but constitutive. The power of toxic rhetoric is that “it invites us not only to affirm or deny a given rhetorical argument, but more, to define ourselves within the terms and tropes of the rhetoric” (41). Since this is the context of public discourse, Duffy’s exhortation to teach hundreds of thousands of young people a “good” framework for discourse in our first year writing classes makes sense.

Duffy’s set-up is more compelling than the practical aspects of its application to the classroom, but his suggestions for how to teach within a virtue ethics framework is logical and follows directly from his claims about the need to teach good people how to write well. He offers anecdotes of how students’ arguments could have landed better if they had considered their choices from an ethical point of view, and he covers how teachers can think ethically through assignments for making arguments, using evidence, considering counterarguments, and revising. The last chapter also offers gentle help for the difficulty of conducting the type of discussions that can ensue in a polarized political context and classroom with strategies such as modeling, dissensus, and creating situations in which students would imagine all the rhetorical choices available to them—a suggestion reminiscent of the ancient practice of using the *topoi* to systematically imagine and select the best of every possible approach to an argument (125).

An important final point about teaching ethics is that it is a practice. One is not born with virtues; they can be acquired and should be practiced like a skill (66). In his conclusion, Duffy turns the “Q Question” into the “P Question,” a question of possibilities for the teaching of ethics in the writing classroom. This is a turn from the somewhat magical thinking of Quintilian—that the learning of rhetoric will make one a good person—to a more realistic expectation for the teaching of writing in the university classroom: when one teaches ethics, it becomes part of a routine practice of considering the available means for learners to both reflect on what they already bring to us (their backgrounds, their consumer savvy, and their political orientations) and to consider the ramifications of the language they put out into the world. Duffy looks to their futures when he says: “we teach writing so that our students will speak and write as ethical human beings committed to the discursive practices of truthfulness, tolerance, justice, discernment and others” (144).

While Duffy’s monograph is focused on first year writing as a seat of possibility for change and delivery of a better rhetoric and citizenry, his and Agnew’s edited collection offers more range in terms of contexts in which ethics

may be productively considered for attending to what they together label as “urgent ethical challenges” of our society (11). The collection is divided into two parts: “Historical and Theoretical Perspectives,” and “Disciplinary and Pedagogical Perspectives” with seven chapters in each. I will take Section Two first, as I found Section One to pack a bit more of a punch than its counterpart.

The best feature of Section Two, “Disciplinary and Pedagogical Perspectives,” is its purposeful discussion of ethics in as many contexts for the teaching of writing as one can think of, including assessment, the writing center, WAC/WID, training graduate students, and prison education programs. And, when higher education curricula is the focus, there are chapters devoted to teaching argument, mindfulness as ethics, and community-engaged learning. Chapters by Michael A. Pemberton and Vicki Tolar Burton represent the whole section well since their application of ethics in their contexts—the writing center for Pemberton and WAC/WID for Tolar Burton—does not yield concrete answers, but instead offers heuristics for identifying and attending to ethical questions.

Specifically, Pemberton considers how ethics applies to the complex social, pedagogical, individual, disciplinary, and institutional factors in writing center interactions, policies, and ways of helping students. Using an example of a difficult decision a tutor faced in helping a non-native graduate student with a very long, important, and technical piece of writing in one writing center session, Pemberton applies a multi-rubric of ethics, drawn from ancient and more contemporary Western thinkers, to play the scenario out in two ways, neither of which are right or wrong, and both of which are created through a heightened concern for ethics through *casuistry*, or ethical decision-making. Pemberton claims this is an appropriate path for pursuing ethics in the writing center because it “encourage[es] tutors to be self-aware and reflective, helping them analyze and articulate their own ethics of tutoring” (176).

Similarly, Tolar Burton explores the dwelling places of ethics in disciplines, including in “humble” genres such as a lab notebooks and the institutional values they represent (e.g. academic integrity, accuracy, etc.) in terms of the discipline’s inquiry practices (182); in problem-solving practices and genres with a focus on rhetorical concerns such as audience and most often, the public addressed by scientific disciplines (186); in citing courses correctly across the curriculum and its various style guides (188); and in critique of performance and artifacts (190). Tolar Burton suggests that “it falls to faculty teaching WID, encouraged and assisted by WAC/WID leaders, to make clear and explicit the ethical principles that abide in disciplinary genres and ways of writing” (192). Both of these chapters reflect Duffy’s claim that ethics is a practice, and I might add, an orientation similar to what Tolar Burton reminds us creates a discipline: “a way of knowing, doing, and writing” (Carter qtd. in Tolar Burton 179).

Section One of *After Plato*, “Historical and Theoretical Perspectives,” is a hard act to follow, and I was spellbound by almost every chapter, which convey imaginatively wide landscapes of what ethics are, who constructs them, and where they apply.

Chapters by Lois Agnew and James Porter offer what amounts to a mini-master course in rhetorical history. In “Reimagining the Ethics of Style,” Agnew traces the role of style through two major historical periods of the rhetorical tradition to trouble the idea that style is simply the reflection of an individual’s rhetorical preference. Agnew argues that style can better serve the present moment of uncivil discourse in an ethical dimension as a way to highlight difference and call on the imagination to diversify language use and hence political and social perspectives. She reviews the Phaedrus, Isocrates, and Cicero’s arguments on the role of style in the rhetor’s ability to use rhetoric for its important purposes of contributing to society, not as mere decoration: “The assumption that language has a fundamental role in the formation of a healthy society appears for many ancient and early modern theorists to connect naturally with the idea that both intellectual growth and social relationships are achieved through attention to style. Yet [...] various developments within and beyond the academy have altered perceptions concerning the value of style” (55). Citing Porter’s chapter, Agnew attributes this alteration to Plato, Ramus, and 17th century thinkers like Locke and Sprat who believed that too many ancients imprinted their imaginations on the “truth.” In the opening chapter, “Recovering a Good Rhetoric: Rhetoric as *Techne* and *Praxis*,” Porter provides a stunning and succinct history of the discrediting of rhetoric and an explanation of how virtue, ethics, logic, and even the artistic parts of writing such as style were lost (taken!) from the field. I would call these two chapters required reading for any rhetorical scholars committed to standing up for our perpetual underdog.

A needed counterbalance to a focus on Western traditions, the three middle chapters by Bo Wang, Rasha Diab, and Xiaoye You bring in Confucian, transnational, and translingual notions of ethics, respectively. You, in particular, points out that foundational thinkers and writers in Eastern and Western traditions of rhetoric and ethics—namely, Confucius, Plato, Aristotle, and Diogenes—were translingual, using words from their contemporaries’ languages and cultures within their own (such as the North African colonies of Greece for Aristotle, for instance). This little-explored fact prefaces You’s argument that “negotiating with or breaking away from the authorized system [of language] is a common practice in everyday language use and is even more critical for those who have to cross language and cultural boundaries to survive or prosper” (104). This perspective pairs nicely with Diab’s consideration of what a transnational perspective on ethics offers to the teaching of writing and

rhetoric, which defines transnationalism and analyzes the reception of two viral photos of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, a little boy who drowned while fleeing Syria with his family in 2015. Diab offers possibly the most challenging ethics of the two books for a middle-class, white American like me: “Considering the photo and transnational persons through a relational lens resists ‘aestheticizing border crossing or disseminating images of dead bodies while cropping them out of sight when alive’” (97). I would characterize this as an ethics of not looking away.

In a similar spirit of looking to solve the “*uber* challenges” of our world through non-Western (or at least blended) traditions, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch bring their inspiring reach-for-the-stars practicality to a discussion of ethical feminist scholarship, new materialism, a de-centering of humans as the only action-oriented agents, and two instances of the idea of “mattering”—the explosive 2018 Watson conference keynote address and the 2018 Western States Conference on Matter and Mattering, which emphasized non-western ways of knowing (121). Royster and Kirsch suggest strategies and practices for listening and responding skills, abilities for interacting with others, and capacities for engaging in respectful and sustainable dialogues to collaboratively address these challenges and create and sustain peace.

Far different in their source of ethics and site of application, Royster and Kirsch’s chapter connects the collection to Duffy’s monograph through their discussions of the purpose and framing of education as a way to attend to global problems, whether material or discursive. The scholars and many contributors in *After Plato* offer contemporary reasons and ethical frameworks to answer Duffy’s call: teach people to use communication to solve problems for the betterment of humanity. The comparison of these writings begs the question: which is more persuasive or workable—diving deeper into our rhetorical traditions and interpreting them for a 21st century ethical emergency, or scanning wider than the Western philosophical canon to consider perspectives such as Confucian, indigenous, feminist, mindfulness, or new materialism to do the same? I am personally drawn to a both/and claim here, which I believe reflects the ethical orientation toward argument, rhetoric, and writing that each book endorses: considering all points of view, responding appropriately for the current reality, and benefitting many over few are the new “available means” (Duffy 144).

For citizens, rhetoricians, and writing teachers who are more than tired of and beyond vexed by toxic rhetoric, I urge readers to consider these texts’ claims about and for ethics as a thought-provoking addition to (or revival of) our field’s arsenal of principles on which to rely in a moment when many of them—reason, evidence, academic integrity, acknowledging bias, considering multiple perspectives, etc.—are not mounting the strong defense against

toxicity that we would like. Both *Provocations* and *After Plato* deepened and complicated my understandings of classical rhetoric and ethics, its ancient counterparts, and contemporary locations and frameworks for ethics as well. They gave me more reasons, energy, and hope for continuing to fight the good fight.

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