

Review of *Provocations of Virtue: Rhetoric, Ethics, and the Teaching of Writing*, by John Duffy, Louisville, CO: Utah State UP, 2019.

Jeffrey Klausman

I think most of us would agree that we're in a critical time, rhetorically. Whether at the time of the publication of this review, we're even more deeply into a "post-truth" era or perhaps have pulled out a bit, no doubt the crisis in public discourse brought about by the proliferation of social media-based news and the lingering aftermath of the rescinding of the "Fairness Doctrine" in 1987 (Fletcher) will continue for some time. So John Duffy's enlightening and incisive presentation of virtue ethics as a basis of teaching writing at the college level comes at a propitious moment. For many of us teaching writing, we continue to ask "why?" Why am I teaching what I'm teaching? Why do I believe that what I'm doing is the right thing? Why do I think that what I do matters?

These questions and others are adroitly addressed in Duffy's surprisingly accessible and concise work. In it, Duffy offers an overview of the various ethical systems that might ground our teaching, including virtue ethics, as well as argues that regardless of whether we consciously choose an ethical system or not we're already expressing an ethical position. But more, he suggests that virtue ethics opens possibilities to teaching writing that are potentially more valuable to the rescuing us from the contentious and problematic public discourse that all us, no doubt, fear and lament. If I have any serious criticism of Duffy's argument—and I do—it's that he doesn't go far enough: I think Duffy should argue more forcefully that virtue ethics offers the best way out of the mess we're in and should be considered as more than merely offering opportunities: rather virtue ethics might just be our a lifeboat. Or to use a better metaphor, virtue ethics and their manifestation in writing, rhetorical virtues, might serve as a compass and map by which we can navigate ourselves out of the morass of fake news, cynicism, and vitriol. Or to go even further: they might be a club to fight back with.

Provocations of Virtue is developed through an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. In the introduction, Duffy sketches the current "public discourse" as "intolerant and irrational, venomous and violent, divisive and dishonest" (5) and claims that writing teachers "*always and already*" teach ethics, as making value judgment is inherent in the job (11, emphasis in original). Given that, it would make sense to know what we're doing and why, which is what the book takes on. The first chapter, "Toxic Discourse: Character, Causes, and Consequences," offers the lay of the land in a "post-truth" world, defining terms and offering examples. This chapters shows us what we're up against and why we should address ethics directly, taking up, in short what Richard Lanham dubbed "the Q question," as Duffy reminds us, after Quintilian, who was asked the question and dodged it of whether specific rhetorical actions necessarily led to a moral life (23). The second chapter, "Imagining the Good Writer: Moral Theories in the Writing Classroom," presents an overview of three major ethical theories: deontological ethics, consequentialism, and post-modernism. The next chapter, "Habits of the Heart: Virtue and Virtue Ethics," offers an explanation of virtue ethics in various forms, from Aristotelian, to Sentimentalism, to non-Western. In chapter 4, "Rhetorical Virtues: Toward an Ethics of Practice," Duffy offers an analysis of a few of our common practices, such as teaching what a claim and how evidence operates, showing that at the heart of any explanation of such rhetorical practices lies a judgment of what is good and what is not good, essentially a set of rhetorical virtues. These rhetorical ethics are observable in nearly all we promote as good writing (or the good teaching of writing, for that matter), such as the virtue of "open-mindedness" inherent in "counter-argument" (108-09) and "diplomacy and empathy" inherent in

offering and receiving feedback as part of revision (113). From here, in “Teaching Rhetorical Virtues,” Duffy lays out and explains six “broad concepts” that can ground our teaching of rhetorical virtues: situation, naming, modeling, exemplars, dissensus and institutional culture (121) and demonstrates how these might look in a classroom through two imagined professors teaching. Then Duffy goes further, imagining the potential impact if institutions across the country explicitly teach rhetorical virtues:

How might public discourse be transformed if millions of students each year graduated from universities and colleges having studied writing in programs committed to the teaching of rhetorical ethics, to promoting the discursive enactments of truthfulness, accountability, fair-mindedness, intellectual generosity, and intellectual courage? How might that alter the character of our public arguments? What might it mean for our democracy? (135)

Finally, in the “Conclusion: Revisiting the Q question,” Duffy returns to the beginning and asks whether we can know the teaching of rhetorical virtues can translate to virtuous people. Acknowledging that “certainty” is beyond the capacity of writing teachers, Duffy poses what he calls the “P question”: What possibilities open up if we adopt the teaching of rhetorical virtues? There are many, he claims, and divides them up into past (helping students make conscious the ethical principles they bring with them), the present (helping students develop an alternative rhetoric to the toxic discourse of the present culture), and the future (imagining students having the power to take with them the principles of a virtuous rhetoric to shape public discourse).

The strengths of *Provocations* are many, not the least of which is Duffy’s command of the subject. He writes with the quiet authority of someone who has been working in this vein much of his professional career. As a result, we have a wise and caring guide through the various ethical systems, which allowed me to understand the landscape much more coherently (though I’ve taught introductory philosophy courses in the past and thus knew most of the material presented). This is not to be underestimated: having a clear taxonomy of different ethical systems allows us to see the clear demarcations and the consequences that arise from adopting one or another position. Another strength is the skillful weaving of concrete examples—both real and imagined—such as those of different students’ situations, imagined professors’ practices, and “exemplars” of texts that exhibit admirable rhetorical virtues. This concretizing of pretty heady abstract concepts helped me appreciate their direct applicability. Finally, for a book coming in at under 150 pages, *Provocations of Virtue* is surprisingly comprehensive, addressing all the questions a critical lay-reader might have (though with a concision that obviously limits what can be presented, a potential short-coming Duffy acknowledges).

For all these strengths, and they are considerable, I find two fairly important weaknesses: Duffy doesn’t go far enough nor does he push hard enough. In the conclusion, Duffy offers his “P question,” referring to imagining the possibilities of adopting virtue ethics explicitly as a ground for pedagogical and programmatic reforms we might undertake. Yet, in my view and I think even in Duffy’s, the times call for much more—and I here I refer to both the “times” of our field and the times of our culture.

For our field, our “times” require empirical research; we want to know if something “works” and a sound argument for why it should work or what possibilities it might offer is simply not sufficient any longer. For example, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robinson, and Kara Taczak, in *Writing across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*, offer us some empirical evidence to support their claim that the application of knowledge-transfer theory to writing pedagogy has some demonstrable

desired effect. They did so by designing and running a controlled study, using a double-blind method at a variety of institutions.

We might find plenty to fault in the research methods and the interpretation of those results, but their book has the virtue of offering us something concrete to argue over. This is significant since it begins, at least, to answer some of the complaints that since we don't that what we're doing has any value, we should therefore stop, most explicitly argued in David Smit's *The End of Composition Studies*. In my view, Duffy owes it to us not to dodge the "Q question" as Quintilian and others have done, but rather to call upon his R1 colleagues to conduct a study to find out if the teaching of rhetorical virtues might actually have some measurable effect on how students conceive of themselves and express their ethics in the public discourse they produce, perhaps over one year, three years, or five years, whether through a double-blind study or some other means.

We at open-access institutions depend upon the research conducted at R1 and other research-focused institutions. Arguments for pedagogical approaches are necessary, of course, but not sufficient. I have been able to initiate a cultural shift in my writing program on the power of Yancey, Robinson, and Taczak's research-backed argument. For while we were able to see the flaws in their research and results, in the end, when we looked around, we simply could not find anything better that has any empirical evidence to support it at all.

Which brings me to a second and possibly even more challenging weakness. We want something more and the times demand it.

Duffy himself makes clear in the opening and throughout the book that the current public discourse is dominated by toxic rhetoric. "Toxic" is not a word that should be used lightly nor is it here. Toxic means poisonous, deadly, lethal. It's not just injurious. It's not just unfortunate. By labeling violent and other similar discourse "toxic," Duffy and others are implying that such discourse may well kill our culture. Are we facing the end of some long grand experiment of reasoned self-governance that, for us in the West anyway, began with the Greeks and found popular expression during the Enlightenment? Rather than saying, "possibly," I want Duffy and others to demonstrate rhetorical virtue of courage and say the truth that is only implied and backed away from: "Yes. Toxic discourse and 'post-truth rhetoric' may well just kill Western civilization, plunging us into greater and greater nationalism, tribalism, and other sorts of vile retrograde 'isms.' Battling that with reason and virtue is a matter of life or death."

This is not the time for "considering possibilities," I'm saying; while we're "considering possibilities," the practitioners of toxic discourse are burning down the house. Duffy has the professional capital and the intellectual gravitas to exhort our field to move in the direction of rhetorical virtues. The alternative, I believe and *Provocations* almost asserts, is to occupy ourselves with trivialities.

So in the end, I find *Provocations of Virtue: Rhetoric, Ethics, and the Teaching of Writing*, a timely, highly valuable, important, and somewhat disappointing book. I think everyone should read it. I think everyone should consider how important it is that we push back as strongly as possible on the public discourse that threatens the foundations of our democratic culture. And I think everyone should take some time to thank John Duffy for the work he has done, offering us the tools we may well need to fight back at the time we need them most. And then we should challenge him to get to work and join with others who have the capacity to find out if teaching rhetorical virtues really makes a difference to the discourse of

students (and if not, then why do it?) and then making sure that the shift to teaching rhetoric as ethics actually happens. I'll help in whatever capacity I can.

Works Cited

Fletcher, Dan. "A Brief History of the Fairness Doctrine." *Time*, 20 Feb. 2009.

<http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1880786,00.html>

Smit, David. *The End of Composition Studies*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2004.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake, Liane Robertson, and KaraTaczak. *Writing across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*. Louisville, CO: Utah State UP, 2014.