The Good Writer: Virtue Ethics and the Teaching of Writing

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To write is to make choices, and to teach writing is to teach rationales for making such choices. We tend to think of these choices, those of us who write and teach writing, as belonging to certain categories, or domains, such as the rhetorical, the linguistic, or the aesthetic. These are not airtight compartments, independent of one another, but mutually informing, each having a part in the development of a given text. For example, the writer makes rhetorical decisions about topic, evidence, and organization in response to the constraints and opportunities of particular audiences, purposes, and occasions. The writer’s linguistic choices, which are also rhetorical, may involve the degree of formality or informality in the text, or what sociolinguists call the linguistic register (Fairclough, 70). The aesthetic choices of the writer, both linguistic and rhetorical in their own right, may call for decisions about sentence variation or word choice, with one word selected over another based on the writer’s ear for patterns of rhythm and sound.

We understand these categories, the rhetorical, linguistic, and aesthetic, and we are skilled at teaching them. However, there is another category, another domain, one that is perhaps less often discussed in our classes but nonetheless calls for decisions on the part of the writer. I am referring to the domain of ethics and the ethical decisions writers make in the process of composing. Writing involves ethical decisions because every time we write, as I have argued elsewhere (“Writing”), we propose a relationship with others, our readers. In proposing

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such relationships, we raise those questions moral philosophers attach to the ethical: What kind of person do I want to be? How should I live my life? What does it mean to be a good person? “At the point when you begin to write,” James E. Porter has written, “you begin to define yourself ethically. You make a choice about what is the right thing to do—even if that choice is a tentative and contingent one” (Rhetorical 150).

I do not mean to suggest by this that we should teach ethics or that we ought to teach practices of ethical communication. Rather, I am suggesting that as teachers of writing we are always already engaged in the teaching of rhetorical ethics and that the teaching of writing necessarily and inevitably moves us into ethical reflections and decision-making. Should I use this inflammatory metaphor? Shall I include this questionable source found on the Internet? How do I address this provocative counterargument? And when we discuss these choices with students, when we engage students in conversations about why they make some choices over others, we are in effect teaching ethics; more accurately, we are exploring with our students what it means to be, in an ethical sense, a “good writer.”

But if this is true—that the teaching of writing involves the teaching of ethics and ethical language practices—what kind of ethics are we teaching? What traditions, norms, or values inform the ethics we offer students? Indeed, how do we, as teachers of writing, define “ethics”? Traditionally, answers to such questions were to be found in one of the two preeminent moral theories in Western moral philosophy, the so-called “Big Two”—deontology, the ethics of rules and obligations, and consequentialism, the ethics of outcomes and results. In recent decades, these moral theories have been challenged by the emergence of postmodern ethics, which has arguably become the dominant ethical paradigm throughout much of the humanities, including writing studies (Porter, Rhetorical; Berlin, “Postmodernism”). Each of these theories offers students and teachers of writing a framework, or a set of principles, norms, and values, for guiding ethical decision-making in the writing class, And yet none of these frameworks, or so I shall argue, provides an adequate account of how writers define themselves ethically as they make choices, recalling James Porter, about “the right thing to do.”

In this essay, I propose a different concept of ethics for the writing course, one derived from a moral theory that is both old and new, discarded and recalled, and one that inevitably engages us in discussions of the qualities of honesty, accountability, practical wisdom, and others. There is a word for such qualities. They are examples of what Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics called “virtues,” from the Greek arête, or, broadly, “excellence,” and they are today the subject of that branch of moral philosophy known as “virtue ethics.” A virtue, according
to Rosalind Hursthouse, one of the most prominent contemporary philosophers of virtue, is “the concept of something that makes its possessor good; a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent, or admirable person who acts and reacts well, rightly, as she should—she gets things right” (13).

Plato and Aristotle analyzed the virtues in their writings, and philosophers from Confucius to Alasdair MacIntyre have explored virtue-based approaches to ethics. Virtue ethics offers an alternative to ethical traditions grounded in rules and consequences, and offers, as well, a way of thinking beyond the critical ethics of postmodernism. And it is in the language of the virtues, in what I will call “rhetorical virtues,” by which I mean the discursive practices of honesty, generosity, and others, that students and teachers of writing can find “principles for action,” or rationales for making ethical decisions in the writing class.

Talk of “virtue” may sound strange, or worse, to our modern ears, having faded, Brian Treanor writes, “from common use and public language, to the more narrow and more or less private sphere of sexual or religious morality” (15). Certainly, the term has little purchase in writing studies. While we have embraced Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, we have mostly ignored his *Ethics*. Perhaps this is because “we postmodern skeptical academics,” as Patricia Bizzell has written, “are habitually fearful that any talk of teaching virtue will tend to introduce exclusions, as socially privileged groups in our diverse nation arrogate to themselves the right to define what virtue is taught” (“Politics,” 6). If we are to teach an ethics of virtue, I understand Bizzell to be asking, whose virtues do we teach? Perhaps, too, we are wary of the troubling historical associations and ideological inflections of the word, which has been associated with the subjugation of women, right-wing ideology, and an exclusively Christian worldview. There are reasons why virtue is not exactly trending in writing studies.

And yet there are better reasons, I submit, for reconsidering virtue. My purpose in this essay is to explore these reasons, considering what the virtues and virtue ethics can offer teachers and students of writing in a skeptical, postmodern moment. More specifically, I will attempt in this essay to address the following:

• What is “virtue”? “Virtue ethics”? What do we understand these terms to mean? How do we derive from these terms the construct of “rhetorical virtues”?  
• Why virtue ethics for writing studies, and why now? What reasons—political, cultural, and rhetorical—suggest a disciplinary reconsideration of the virtues?  
• Finally, what might a commitment to rhetorical virtues mean in the writing classroom? How might it shape teachers’ and students’ understandings of what it means to be a “good writer”?  

Along the way, I will discuss those troubling historical associations and ideological inflections of the word *virtue* as well as the problem of whose virtues...
we might privilege in a multicultural age of global migrations. Before addressing the vices of virtue, however, let us first consider what is meant by the terms *virtue*, *virtue ethics*, and *rhetorical virtues*.

**Reconsidering Virtue**

For many centuries, moral philosophers regarded the concept of virtue as a historical artifact, a relic of pre-enlightenment philosophy long eclipsed by moral theories grounded in concepts of God and duty. In recent decades, however, the study of virtue has been ascendant, and the “aretaic turn” has led to new insights into problems unresolved by traditional Western approaches to ethical theory (Aberdein). In what has become known as virtue ethics, which is not a single, unified theory but rather an “umbrella term” used to describe a plurality of related theories (Walker and Ivanhoe), the emphasis is on the character of the moral agent and the traits, dispositions, and attitudes that we typically associate with a good person, living a good life.

The modern revival of a virtue-based ethical theory is generally credited to the publication in 1958 of Elizabeth Anscombe’s essay, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” in which Anscombe critiqued ethical theories grounded in concepts of duty and obligation, the ethics of “should” and “ought” (30). She argued that such theories historically derived their authority from God as a lawgiver, a conception that modern moral philosophy no longer assumed, thus rendering doctrines of obligation unintelligible. Anscombe recommended that philosophers discard the language of obligations and duties and return to Aristotelian theories of virtue. Alasdair MacIntyre, writing some two decades after Anscombe, made a similar critique, arguing in his celebrated book, *After Virtue*, that modern societies, having rejected what MacIntyre considered the rational ethics of Aristotelian teleology, were morally incoherent, borrowing from multiple ethical theories without having any rational means of deciding among incommensurable moral claims (8). MacIntyre recommended, much like Anscombe before him, a revival of a neo-Aristotelian ethics of virtue.

The discourse of opposition that characterized the revival of contemporary virtue ethics perhaps explains why so many discussions of virtue ethics since Anscombe and MacIntyre begin by contrasting it with other moral theories, specifically deontology and consequentialism. So, for example, Hurthhouse’s *On Virtue Ethics* begins by describing virtue ethics as “an approach to normative ethics which emphasizes the virtues, or moral character, in contrast to an approach which emphasizes duties or rules (deontology) or one which emphasizes the consequences of actions (utilitarianism)” (1). Similarly, Christine Swanton’s
Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View opens by observing that the modern context of virtue ethics “has largely been its opposition to the two kinds of moral theory [grounded in rules and consequences] that have dominated moral philosophy in recent times” (1). And Stan van Hooft devotes the entire first chapter of Understanding Virtue Ethics to distinguishing virtue ethics from “the ethics of duty” (7–48).

In contrast to such approaches, virtue ethics offers a broader landscape of moral inquiry, one that makes a place for addressing, Hursthouse writes, “motives and moral character, moral wisdom and discernment, friendship and family relationships, a deep concept of happiness, the role of emotions in our moral life, and the questions of what sort of person I should be, and of how we should live” (3). And the philosopher whose work serves as a principal touchstone for such questions, and who is regarded, Dorothea Frede observes, as “the protagonist of virtue ethics” (17), is Aristotle.

Aristotle is neither the first nor the last word on virtue. Socrates, Plato, and Confucius visited the subject before him, and thinkers as diverse as Thomas Aquinas, David Hume, and Friedrich Nietzsche have followed (see Besser-Jones and Slote for a sampling). Nonetheless, it still seems fair to say that modern students of virtue typically depart from, build upon, and quarrel with Aristotle’s work, even as they reject what Hursthouse described as “the lamentable, parochial details of Aristotle’s moral philosophy,” and in particular his “deplorable views on both slavery and women” (2).

Aristotle describes his ethics as an “inquiry” through which he might examine certain broad questions about how to live: What constitutes the good? How does one live a good life? What is happiness, and how it is achieved? Aristotle does not treat these as abstract questions but rather as practical concerns for living well: “We are studying,” reads J. A. K. Thomson’s translation of the Nicomachean Ethics, “not to know what goodness is but how to become good . . . since otherwise it would be useless” (Aristotle 1103b28–29).

For Aristotle, the supreme good, the *summum bonum*, the end to which all other ends contribute, is what he calls *eudaimonia*, typically translated as “happiness,” “well being,” or “flourishing,” though a better rendering might be Hursthouse’s idea of *eudaimonia* as “the sort of happiness worth having,” by which she means the happiness that comes with a life of purpose (10). *Eudaimonia* is not a transitory emotional happiness, the way we might be happy at learning we have won the lottery or landed a promotion, but rather represents the activity of living well throughout the course of a lifetime. What constitutes “living well” in Aristotelian ethics is complex but is grounded in the idea of a “function,” or purpose. All things, living and nonliving, may be said to have a function distinc-
tive to the thing: the purpose for which the thing exists. Aristotle’s ethics in this sense are teleological, meaning they assume there is a purpose, or telos, for all things, living and nonliving. So, for example, the knife has the function to cut, the plant to grow, and the horse, let us say, to run. Human beings, too, have a purpose, and that “distinctly human” activity, that which separates us from knives, plants, and horses, is rationality, the ability of humans to exercise reason.

Aristotle observes that things, animals, and people perform their functions well or poorly. The knife that cuts cleanly as opposed to badly may be said to have the “virtues of cutting well”: a sharp edge, a hard blade, a good handle. A horse that runs fast as opposed to slowly may be said to have the “virtues of racing well”: a strong body, long legs, a bold spirit. And human beings who perform their distinctively human function well—who are, in essence, good at being human beings (van Hooft 51)—are those who exercise the “virtues of reasoning well.”

To practice the “virtues of reasoning well” in Aristotelian ethics is to react appropriately to a given situation. For Aristotle, reacting appropriately is to find the mean, the middle path, between extremes of excess and deficiency. The foolhardy person rushes heedlessly into danger, while the cowardly person flees from it. To practice the virtue of courage is to find the mean between these extremes. What may sound like little more than “cautionary folk wisdom,” Frede writes, is “one of the most original and central aspects of Aristotelian ethics” (20). Before Aristotle, virtues and vices were understood as pairs: courage and cowardice, justice and injustice, and so forth. Frede points out that Aristotle offered instead a “triadic schema of virtues and vices” (21), one that called for the exercise of judgment and practical wisdom. What constitutes the Aristotelian mean in any given situation is open to interpretation, though the mean does not imply moderation in all things. The right response to injustice, for example, is righteous indignation, not tempered forbearance (Pakaluk 108).

Aristotle provides a list of exemplary virtues, distinguishing between the “intellectual virtues” such as knowledge and wisdom, which are acquired through teaching and experience, and the “moral virtues,” or virtues of character, such as kindness, self-control, and generosity, which are developed through practice and habituation. In instances where virtues appear to clash—should I be honest and tell you I do not like your gift?—the good person will exercise the virtue of phronesis, or practical wisdom, which enables us to choose the right course of action in a specific set of circumstances. A virtue, then, is the disposition to act in the right way, at the right time, and in the right manner.

Much of the Aristotelian edifice has been worn away by time, cultural changes, and emergent theories of virtue. Most contemporary virtue ethicists, for example, no longer propose foundational lists of virtues, as did Aristotle, but are more inclined to regard virtues as expressions of particular cultures,
traditions, and narratives (Crisp; MacIntyre). Others have discarded specific virtues idealized by Aristotle—few virtue ethicists today prize “liberality,” or the getting and spending of money, as highly as did Aristotle. Perhaps the most striking development in contemporary virtue ethics, however, has been its shift from a normative theory, a theory for determining right and wrong actions, to a theory of applied ethics, or how one should live and act in response to specific situations. To this end, contemporary theorists have applied virtue ethics to the problems of specific fields and professions, such as argumentation (Aberdein), education (Carr and Steutel), law (Koller), medicine (Pellegrino), sustainability (Treanor), and human rights (Tessman, Burdened). (For an excellent review, see Axtell and Olson.)

Acknowledging Swanton’s admonition that “[a]ttempts to distill the essence of virtue ethics in a simple clear formula raise more questions than they answer” (315), we may say that common to conceptions of contemporary virtue ethics is the idea that virtues are the traits, attitudes, and dispositions of character that we associate with a good person. We may say, too, that virtues are context-dependent, responsive to the kairotic moment, and social in nature, expressing the values, traditions, and narratives of specific communities and cultures (Velasquez et al.) Finally, we can observe that virtues are not thought by moral philosophers to be innate, but developed through instruction, practice, and habit.

The rhetorical virtues, in turn, are the discursive practices of virtue, the expression in speech and writing of honesty, accountability, generosity, and other qualities. Like the virtues from which they are derived, the rhetorical virtues reflect the traits, attitudes, and dispositions we associate with a good person, speaking or writing well. More, they are, like rhetoric, kairotic, calling for the right words at the right moment, and they are social in nature, conveying in speech and writing the values, traditions, and narratives of the communities in which they were developed. Neither are the rhetorical virtues innate but learned, at least in part, through the instruction, practice, and guidance offered in the writing classroom.

Vices of Virtue

Despite its resurgence in moral philosophy, virtue retains for some its troubling associations with an exclusively Christian doctrine, with right-wing ideology and with the historical oppression of women. The theological undercurrents of the word, for example, and in particular its close association with Christian doctrine, would seem to exclude non-Christians from participating in a virtue-based ethical theory of rhetorical ethics. For example, the thirteenth-century Catholic philosopher Thomas Aquinas, arguably the most important and influential virtue theorist since Aristotle, made the case for a Christian concept
of virtue in his treatise, *Summa Theologica*, in which he distinguished between moral and intellectual virtues, available to all people seeking to live a better life, and the “theological virtues” of faith, hope, and charity, which are said to be imparted by God and available only to believers. The Catholic Catechism has retained the concept of theological virtues, describing them as “the foundation of Christian moral activity” and “infused by God into the souls of the faithful.”

And yet there is nothing necessarily Christian in a virtue-based ethics. We recall that the origins of the virtues can be traced back to the decidedly non-Christian classical Greeks, and to the Confucian concepts of *de* and *dæxing* (roughly, “virtuous conduct” and “virtuous character”) before that (Lai 15). Moreover, traditions of virtue can be found in Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and other faiths (Perrett and Pettigrove; Goodman; Jackson, respectively). Nor do the practices of open-mindedness, tolerance, and humility presuppose religious commitments, but rather can stand for themselves, philosophically and rhetorically. In short, there is nothing exclusively Christian about virtue.

A second reservation concerning virtue is its appropriation by those identified with neo-conservative ideology. Lisa Tessman (“Critical”) argues that the language of “character” has been adopted by neoconservatives who have used it as a racialized discourse through which to shift conversations about poverty and inequality away from social causes and toward the supposed “individual character deficiencies” of the poor, particularly African Americans (89). Tessman cites as an example James Wilson’s 1991 book, *On Character*, in which Wilson argues that “a variety of public problems can only be understood—and perhaps addressed—if they are seen as arising out of a defect in character formation” (11, qtd. in Tessman 89). More recently, former United States Secretary of Education William Bennett’s best-selling *The Book of Virtues* presented a conception of virtue as divorced from political struggle and social action (Porter).

Such moves have little to do with the traditions or philosophy of virtue. Rather, they are cultural and political performances of appropriation intended to remove the word from ordinary discourse and enlist it as an instrument of ideological combat. In response, Tessman recommends the development of a “critical virtue ethics,” one in which a virtue ethics framework can be used by those “engaged in analyzing oppression and creating liberatory projects” (79). Such a framework would call for its own catalog of virtues, such as courage in confronting oppression, endurance in continuing the struggle, “proper” anger in addressing injustice, and an aesthetic “according to which one finds socially rejected bodies to be beautiful” (95). Whether or not one embraces Tessman’s conception of virtue ethics, her work makes clear ideological appropriations of virtue are neither preordained nor immutable.
A third difficulty with the word is its history as a trope for subjugating and controlling women. 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.” Jean Grimshaw writes that much of eighteenth and nineteenth century political and philosophical thought assumed the gendered nature of virtues, from which emerged “a sentimental vision of the subordinate but virtuous and idealized wife and mother, whose specifically female virtues both defined and underpinned the ‘private’ sphere of domestic life” (491).

Feminist moral philosophers have responded to the notion of gendered virtues in different ways. Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, for example, have embraced the concept of female virtues, representing these not as inferior but as distinctive ways of reasoning that provide their own criteria for making moral judgments. In what has become known as “the ethics of care,” Gilligan and Noddings propose “care” as an essentially female virtue that is oriented not toward moral rules and principles, but rather toward relationships, receptivity, and the particulars of a given situation. Other feminist philosophers, however, reject the idea of “feminine virtues” as essentialist and retrograde, a means for re-inscribing the subordinate social and political position of women. The feminine virtues, Sarah Hoagland has written, are “virtues of subservience” (in McLaren 107).

For her part, philosopher Margaret A. McLaren argues for a “feminist virtue ethics,” asserting that virtue ethics is “the most promising framework from which to approach feminist ethics” (101). As McLaren envisions it, a feminist virtue theory would understand virtues as a response to specific social and political situations, acknowledge the significant role of moral perception, judgment, and practical wisdom in moral life, encourage the importance of character and friendship, and recognize the “inseparability of the ethical and the political” (112). The feminist philosopher Sandrine Berges has offered a historical perspective, recovering such feminist exemplars of virtue as the Middle Ages thinker Heloise of Angenteuil, the fifteenth-century French writer Christine de Pizan, and the eighteenth-century English writer Mary Wollstonecraft.

Perhaps the most we can say in response to critiques of virtue is that the history of a term is not necessarily predictive of its future and that the tensions between past and contemporary understandings of a word can be productive, causing us to see more clearly what the word has represented, what it represents currently, and what it might represent going forward, should we engage it. We need only look for an example to the word rhetoric, which accommodates diverse histories, conflicting narratives, and, for those of us who study and teach it, transformative possibilities.
WHY AN ETHICS OF RHETORICAL VIRTUES, AND WHY NOW?

To the questions of why we might reconsider the concept of virtue, and why we would do so now, I offer three responses, practical, theoretical, and cultural.

The Practical

Practically, I would argue, we are already teaching an ethics of rhetorical virtues, whether we use the word or not. Consider the teaching of argument, a common subject in many writing programs around the country. Arguments are generally thought of in terms of winning and losing, authority and control. Argumentation theorist David Zarefsky, for example, describes argument as the act of applying superior to inferior force in “an attempt to limit other people’s freedom of choice” (17). Yet argument can equally be understood as a practice of radical humility, in the sense that when we argue, we agree to submit ourselves to the judgment of others, offering our ideas up for scrutiny, criticism, rejection, even ridicule.

We can be more specific. If we define arguments as the teaching of claims, proofs, and counterarguments, we are necessarily and inevitably engaged, as I have written previously (“Virtuous”), in practices of ethical deliberation. To make a claim in an argument, for example, is to propose a relationship between others and ourselves. “Claims are above all invitations,” James Crosswhite writes, “to share a particular way of making sense of something” (62). For that invitation to be accepted, a degree of mutual trust must exist among participants, meaning that readers must be assured that claims are made without equivocation, and writers must be confident that readers will consider judiciously the ideas advanced in the claim. When we teach students how to make claims, then, we are inviting them to practice the rhetorical virtues of honesty and mutual respect.

Similarly, to offer evidence for claims is both an acknowledgment of the rationality of our audience, which again must be trusted to judge our arguments justly, and a statement of our own integrity, our willingness to support our assertions with proof. When we teach students how to find, assess, and present evidence in this perspective, we are teaching them to be accountable by supporting assertions with proofs.

And when we teach students to include counterarguments in their papers, considering seriously opinions, facts, or values that contradict their own, we are teaching, potentially, the most radical and transformative behavior of all: we are asking students to inhabit, at least for a while, the perspective of The Other and to open themselves to the doubts and contradictions that attach to any worthwhile question. In teaching counterarguments, we are teaching the rhetorical virtues of open-mindedness and intellectual generosity.
To teach argument, in this view, is to teach rhetorical practices, whether defining terms, citing sources, or expressing dissenting views, that necessarily involve ethical judgments. And it is in the construct of a “practice” that we find answers to the vexing questions of whose virtues we might teach in a multicultural society and on what basis we might teach these. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre posits that virtues are expressed within practices, which he defines as “coherent and complex forms of socially cooperative human activity” through which certain goals and degrees of excellence may be realized (187). As examples of practices, MacIntyre offers the activities of chess, architecture, painting, and others. Practices enable individuals to realize the goods “internal” to the activity; for example, the practice of playing chess will lead, if the practice is learned, to the pleasures of playing chess for its own sake, rather than for the sake of winning or earning prize money. To realize the internal goods of a practice, according to MacIntyre, one must subject oneself to the standards and rules that govern that practice, such as learning the rules of chess. The standards of a practice are not “immune from criticism” (190), MacIntyre notes, and they are culturally specific, the product of particular histories, narratives, and traditions.

Following MacIntyre, we find an answer to the question of whose virtues we should teach in the writing course: our own. As teachers of writing, we share a loosely defined set of practices that we teach as essential means to realizing the internal goods of the activity of writing. Examples of our shared practices may be found in our common textbooks or in such documents as the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, which lists the skills, experiences, and “habits of mind” said to be necessary for realizing the internal goods of becoming a successful college writer.7 Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle’s recent publication *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* elaborates thirty-seven “threshold concepts” that provide a disciplinary core of knowledge about the teaching of writing. In these concepts, we may locate the traditions, narratives, and histories that express our collective knowledge about what it to be a good writer, making good choices.8

Neither are the shared practices that express the virtues of the writing class “immune from criticism.” In a globalized, multicultural world of diverse ethnicities, languages, and more, the practices we teach writing class will continually be tested by other rhetorical traditions and other ethical commitments. If we cannot productively engage these other traditions and commitments, and if we cannot adapt our shared practices in response, then we do indeed risk, as Bizzell cautioned, enforcing exclusions and privileges in the writing course (“Politics”).
The Theoretical

Theoretically, virtue ethics offers a more fully realized account of the ethical dimensions of teaching writing than can be found in the rival moral theories of deontology and consequentialism. In deontological ethics, for example, from the Greek *deon* or “obligation,” the good is grounded in foundational and absolute principles of obligation and duty. Deontology is typically associated with the work of Immanuel Kant, and while the complexity of that work is well beyond the scope of this essay, we may say, acknowledging the abridgment, that in the ethics of duty, moral principles are considered *a priori*, or outside the particulars of human experience, and apply to all moral agents in all situations, regardless of social and historical context (van Hooft 30). While deontological thinkers have located the source of such principles in divine command, in human authority, and in institutions of various kinds, Kant located them in human reason. Since we are incapable of understanding transcendent reality to which we have no access, Kant argued, the source of our moral principles must come within ourselves, from our status as rational agents (O’Neill 176). Once we have established these principles of reason, they are binding and absolute on all people, in all circumstances. They are, in Kant’s language, “categorical imperatives” that represent the supreme principles of morality.

Kant formulated several expressions of the categorical imperative, the most famous of which is, “I ought never to act in such a way that I could not also will that my maxim [principle] should be a universal law” (30). An action is considered a categorical imperative, in other words, if it articulates an objective principle that can be made universal, applied to all people, at all times, in all human conditions. Think of “telling the truth” or “keeping one’s promises” as examples. Once the categorical imperative is established, there are no contingent conditions or moral ambiguities by which it may be transgressed. If a murderer asks you where his 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 good writers subordinate situation, context, and audience to existing and inflexible imperatives. Yet moral ambiguities, as we know, 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 would seem more doctrinal than rhetorical and does not offer us an ethical language we can use in teaching writing.
In the other pre-eminent Western ethical theory, consequentialism, the ethics of outcomes, the morality of an action is contingent on its consequences. What will happen if I tell this lie? Who will be hurt or spared from hurt? As is true of deontology, consequentialist moral theories are not without their nuances and internecine debates, and these, too, are beyond the scope of this paper. For the moment, let us observe that in an ethics of consequences, moral actions are judged right or wrong, William Shaw writes, “Because, and only because, of their consequences” (463). Consequentialism thus determines moral actions through a kind of cost-benefit analysis in which the good of a potential outcome is weighed against the possible harms it produces.

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, teaching them how to write accomplished college papers, successful application essays, and the like. Moreover, whenever we put a grade on a student paper, we are, in effect, practicing an ethics of outcomes. So long as we teach in institutions that call upon us to evaluate and rank our students, we are practicing, and our students are learning—indeed, most have already learned—an ethics defined at least in part by outcomes and results.

However, outcomes and results are insufficient measures of what constitutes good writing. We understand—I will generalize here, but not too inaccurately, I hope—that some of our students may one day write, whether as citizens, activists, or parents, for outcomes that likely will not be achieved. They will write for unpopular ideas, improbable purposes, and lost causes. They will write, some of them, with the understanding that their letters, essays, proposals, and petitions will go unread, effecting no change. Yet they may write regardless, compelled by motives beyond the calculus of outcomes and effects. In such instances, the worth of their writing will be judged not by results, the consequentialist ethic, but by such virtues as the conviction and courage expressed in their writing. A framework for rhetorical ethics, I mean to suggest, should account for more than outcomes.

An ethics derived from traditions of the virtues, in contrast, offers a quite different conception of the good and the good writer. Recalling the claim made at the start of this paper—writing involves proposing a relationship with others, our readers—the good in an ethics of rhetorical virtues is defined in the context of that relationship, and the good writer is one who writes in ways that promote the health, well-being, or flourishing of the relationship. An ethics of rhetorical virtues is in this sense eudaimonistic, committed to the health of the reader-writer connection. Good writers enable the connection of readers and writers, repair it when it breaks down, and regenerate it with each new essay. As is true of most relationships, the achievement of the good is an ongoing project.
Just as *eudaimonia* does not refer to a single episode of happiness but rather to a life well-lived, good writing is not typically realized in a single text but achieved through the writing and revision of many essays, arguments, narratives, and other forms of writing.

I want to say the good writer is one who creates conditions of friendship between readers and writer, but this raises the question of what we mean by *friendship*. If the relationship of readers and writer is one in which writers of, say, political arguments, write only for those readers likely to agree with the writers’ arguments, and if readers of those same arguments read only because they know in advance they are likely to agree with the views expressed, this may be more flattery than friendship. In contrast, a relationship between readers and writers in which both sides acknowledge differences, defend commitments, accept criticisms, however withering, and yet remain willing to engage one another, this may promote *eudaimonia* and conditions of rhetorical friendship. “Friendship is not an emotion but a practice,” the political theorist Danielle S. Allen has written, “a set of hard won, complicated habits that are used to bridge trouble, difficulty, and differences of personality, experience, and aspiration” (xxi). The good writer, in an ethics of rhetorical virtue, is one whose writings might enable such friendships, even as writers and readers engage in prolonged cultural, political, and economic competitions.

*The Cultural*

Perhaps the most urgent reason for considering an ethics of rhetorical virtues, and for considering it now, is the culture of contemporary public argument in the United States. Scholars of public discourse have documented the polarization, divisiveness, and dysfunction characteristic of contemporary public argument, a condition widely perceived to undermine democratic practice, increase mistrust of institutions, and attenuate commitments to a common civic culture (Rodin & Steinberg). Our political arguments are characterized by rancor, duplicity, and spectacle, and we seem largely incapable, as Allen puts it, of talking to strangers, or addressing productively issues of inequality, race, the environment, and other compelling concerns. More troubling still, we inhabit a rhetorical climate in which there is no widely shared agreement as to the nature of a fact, or what counts as evidence, or how to interpret such evidence as may be presented.10

In such a cultural context, what are the ethics of the good writer? How do we, teachers of writing, support the ethical development of the good writer? For many in our discipline, answers to these and related questions are to be found neither in the deontological ethics of obligation, nor in the consequentialist ethics of outcomes. Rather, many in writing studies have looked instead to the ethics of postmodernism, which may be described as a set of strategic language
practices that collectively offer a sustained critique of Western ethics, its traditional codes, systems, and narratives. Postmodernism reflects a vision, Zygmunt Bauman writes, in which “there are problems in human and social life with no good solutions, twisted trajectories that cannot be straightened up, ambivalences that are more than linguistic blunders yelling to be corrected, doubts which cannot be legislated out of existence, moral agonies which no reason-dictated recipes can soothe, let alone cure” (245). Central to the postmodern ethic is the repudiation of what Bauman calls “the twin banners” of “universality” and “foundation” (9) in favor of an ethics that acknowledges moral uncertainties, persistent ambiguities, and “messiness of the human world.”

One does not pull down such long-billowing banners without a vigorous language of critique, and postmodern ethics, as I have written elsewhere (“Ethical”), has provided that vocabulary. The language of “truth,” “universal,” and “foundational,” has been supplanted in the postmodern idiom by “contingent,” “subjective,” and “ideological.” The vocabulary of “reason,” “rational,” and “systemic,” has given way to the language of “difference,” “negotiated,” and “hermeneutic.” The very possibility of ethics has been questioned, as when Gary A. Olson noted that the postmodern ethos has led some theorists to declare that “ethics is dead, that no system or code of moral values can universally regulate human behavior” (71). Others have attempted to map the meeting place of ethics and postmodernism, laying the foundations, however shifting these might be, of a postmodern ethics. James E. Porter has offered one of the most cogent accounts:

> Ethics is not a set of answers but a mode of questioning and a manner of positioning. That questioning certainly involves principles—but it always involves mediating between competing principles and judging those principles in light of particular circumstances. (“Developing” 223)

The influence of postmodern ethics on the teaching of writing has been invigorating, providing students and teachers with an expanded and expansive framework for making ethical decisions. In her excellent *JAC* essay, “‘Just Multiculturalism’: Teaching Writing as Critical and Ethical Practice,” Laurie Grobman argued that postmodernism has exposed the oppressiveness of foundational claims; led to a reconsideration (and some redress) of injustices based on race, class, and gender; recovered previously silenced voices and discourses; and led to a committed effort to respect cultural differences and to refrain from imposing privileged views on the colonized. (817)

Nor is it accurate to characterize postmodern ethics as an entirely negative hermeneutic. The ethical vision of Emmanuel Levinas, for example, offers a radical and profoundly humane view of engagement with The Other (1969).
If, however, ethical principles are, as the postmodern ethos would have it, grounded in the “particular circumstances” of the contingent and the positioned, and if they are a product of prevailing social and cultural discourses, it is worth asking whether an ethics of postmodernism is adequate for addressing the particular circumstances of the current cultural moment. From the ethics of postmodernism, we have learned to unmask, interrogate, distance, and destabilize. We have become skilled, and we have helped our students to become skilled, in the practices of skepticism and critique.

However, if we would construe writing and rhetoric as constructive arts, and if we would understand our work as the teaching of what Allen calls “trustful talk among strangers” (xiii), then we perhaps need another language, and another form of rhetorical ethics. We require an ethical vocabulary that speaks beyond the practices of skepticism and critique to address the possibilities of opening dialogues, finding affinities, acknowledging interdependencies, and talking to those strangers we most fear and mistrust. Such a vocabulary, I submit, may be found in the language of the virtues, and so provides another rationale for recommending to writing studies an ethics of rhetorical virtues and for recommending it now.

**Rhetorical Virtues in the Writing Class**

How practices of rhetorical virtue might be enacted in the writing classroom is best worked out, I believe, in the particulars of local contexts, accounting for the needs of students and communities, the goals of teachers and programs, the availability of resources and teacher training, and other considerations. What is appropriate for one group of students may be inappropriate for other students, and fruitful discussions of rhetorical ethics in one context may be unavailing in another. For writing programs “to be good,” Bizzell has written, “they must be indigenous” (“Introduction” 15). So I will proceed cautiously, setting aside discussions of lesson plans, syllabi, and other teaching materials to consider instead the two broad concepts of situation and exemplars.

In his overlooked essay, “In Pursuit of Rhetorical Virtue,” John Gage argues that teachers of writing should concern ourselves less with teaching rhetorical strategies and more with creating within the classroom those situations that call for students to exercise practical wisdom, or *phronesis*. “What qualities do we look for in the situations we create for [students],” Gage asks, “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?” (36). Gage seeks to challenge the traditional responsibility of the teacher as the “promoter of rules,” the deontological role, to posit an understanding of the teacher's
responsibility as the creator of situations (emphasis mine) that will help students develop the rhetorical virtues of judgment and wisdom.

Such situations, as I imagine them, would be driven by context and responsive to the exigencies of students and teachers. What would be distinctive to these discussions, whether addressing economic injustice, environmental destruction, gun violence, or other topics, would be their focus on the ethics of rhetorical practices, including the integrity of the claims, the accountability of the proofs, the fair-mindedness in considering the other side. These conversations call for a shift from the traditional rhetorical question of “How do I speak and write to persuade in this argument?” to the ethical question of “How would a good person speak and write to persuade in this situation?”

Such questions assume that persuasion is possible, and that people of different views are committed, recalling Crosswhite, “to share particular ways of making sense of something.” What of those situations, however, where there is no such commitment, no shared understandings, and in which one side has historically been silenced? What of situations, many experienced by our students, characterized by conditions of racial bigotry, economic deprivation, anti-immigrant violence, or state-sponsored brutality? What constitutes the good and the good writer in such contexts?

Gage provides one answer to such questions by arguing that normative ethics of speech and writing must be augmented by “ab-normative ethics,” by which he means those examples of protest speeches and writings that “openly defy prevailing discourse norms and rules . . . because there is a need to speak outside those norms” (35). Speech and writing “outside those norms” may be angry, confrontational, and unreceptive to compromise. And yet may be no less ethical for that. Rhetorical ethics do not presuppose civility, and ethical discourse is not defined by adherence to norms that function to preserve social or economic inequities. In situations where reasoned argument is not productive or even possible, the relevant questions become “How does a good writer resist such conditions?” “How might my words and actions promote justice?”

One way students and teachers can work toward answering such questions is through exposure to exemplars, those speakers and writers who provide models of ethical rhetoric. We can expose students, as many teachers already have, to well-known texts such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” We can also introduce students to lesser-known speeches and writings like Mary Fisher’s “Whisper of AIDS” speech delivered to the 1992 Republican Convention, Justice Sandra Sotomayor’s “A Latina Judge’s Voice” speech delivered at the University of California Berkeley School of Law, and Missouri Highway Patrol Captain Ron Johnson’s address to the congregation at the Greater Grace Church in Ferguson, Missouri, after the shooting of Mi-
chael Brown, a speech that a *Newsweek* report described as “riveting” (Mejia). We might study such speeches and writings to see how they embody rhetorical virtues, whether candor, courage, empathy, or others, and we can address with students how those same virtues might animate their own writings, as well as our own. We might also ask students to provide their own exemplars and invite them to collaborate on defining the ethical writer for themselves.

I do not mean to overvalue the promise of teaching rhetorical virtues as a means of addressing cultural and ideological divides. There are differences that cannot be reconciled and chasms that cannot be crossed. What MacIntyre calls the “conceptual incommensurability” of certain moral and social problems may be beyond the capacities of rational argument to repair. For these, perhaps we need to look to genres and mediums that transcend rational argument, whether narrative, poetry, music, painting, dance, or others. Yet neither should we overlook the place of ethical argument in defining who we are and what we do—our *telos*—as teachers of writing. In his eloquent essay “A Thousand Writers Writing,” Robert Yagelski 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 practice of rhetorical virtues, we are offered a language, versatile, generative, and exacting, for the rhetorical work of creating that better world. Should we commit ourselves to that language by speaking it in our classes, debating it at our conferences, and examining it in our professional literature, we may further clarify, for our students and for others, what it means to be a good writer in the twenty-first century.

**Notes**

1. Throughout this essay, I will use the pronouns “we” and “our” to refer to all readers who teach and study writing.
2. I use “writing studies” to stand in for all designations of our discipline: rhetoric and composition, composition studies, and others.
3. See also, Gage 2001.
4. I am indebted to my colleague Norbert Elliot for this apt phrase.
5. I am grateful to John Gallagher for pointing me toward this understanding of *eudaimonia*.
6. *Phronesis* is sometimes translated as “prudence.” It was one of the four Cardinal Virtues, along with temperance, courage, and justice, recognized in classical antiquity.
7. Among these “habits of mind” are curiosity, openness, engagement, and responsibility. I read this document as offering a twenty-first-century, discipline-specific list of desired virtues. In the spirit of disclosure, I have a brief essay in Adler-Kassner and Wardle. 

8. For many years, of course, we told students something very near to that. Grammar and usage manuals such as H. W. Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* and Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* posited linguistic forms and rules that were said to be correct, proper, and binding upon good writers. Such manuals expressed implicit (and sometimes explicit) moral judgments about the “right” and “wrong” of rhetorical choices. Fowler, for example, was criticized by his contemporary Jespersen as “an instinctive grammatical moralizer,” a description Fowler apparently welcomed (Gowers viii). The introduction to the fourth edition of *Elements*, meanwhile, communicated the authors’ “orders,” “commands,” and “pronouncements,” as well as their “scorn” and “revulsion” for those constructions that “violated” the prescribed principles. The composition classroom of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States was equally a scene of unconditional judgments about what constituted good writing. In what we have come to call current-traditional rhetoric, writers were taught rules and principles governing the structure of the sentence, the coherence of a paragraph, and the arrangement of an essay, and more (Berlin, *Writing Instruction*). The rhetoric textbooks of A. S. Hill, Boylston Chair of Rhetoric at Harvard from 1876 to 1904, for example, assumed “an overall tone of dogmatism,” and “reduced rhetoric to lists of principles and rules, set forth *ex cathedra*” (Reid, qtd. in Crowley, 338).

9. There are those who argue, correctly, that toxic discourse has always been with us and that there is nothing unique to our present distempers. In his book, *Scandal and Civility: Journalism and the Birth of American Democracy*, historian Marcus Daniel writes, 

[T]here was no golden age of American politics when public spirited men debated issues of great moment with a rationality as sharply honed as their classical rhetoric, when public debate was conducted within well understood and widely accepted limits of civility. On the contrary, scandal and civility have always been part of American politics. (5)

Nor was such discourse necessarily destructive. Daniel asserts that the “tempestuous, fiercely partisan, and highly personal” politics of the eighteenth century post-revolutionary United States contributed to the creation of a “vibrant and iconoclastic culture of political dissent” and “the emergence of a more democratic social and political order” (6). Yet if we properly reject nostalgia for a golden age that never was, neither should we dismiss the realities of our present public argument. These realities, rhetorical scholar Clarke Rountree argues, represent something “completely new,” a product of developments in media, political party affiliations, campaign finance laws, and what Rountree calls “our post-9/11 culture of fear” (431).

10. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this essay for reminding me of this. I was introduced to Yagelski’s essay by Don J. Kraemer’s equally eloquent essay “Just Comp.”

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