

Preparing Students for Ethical Communication in the Marketplace: Plato and Augustine's Views of Rhetoric

Business instructors regularly help students to learn persuasive techniques, or rhetoric. Teaching about marketing, managing, selling, or communicating often involves helping students to win others to their (or their company's) points of view. In textbooks, ethical issues regarding persuasion are addressed but mostly in terms of avoiding deceit and preventing legal liability. For example, in Guffey and Loewy's *Business Communication* (2015), they assert that "Persuasion becomes unethical when facts are distorted, overlooked, or manipulated with an intent to deceive" (p. 338). The authors also warn that customers will not trust companies that practice this kind of unethical persuasion. Companies risk losing credibility when they deceive audiences in their persuasive communication.

This pragmatic view is what Sherry Baker calls the "Enlightened Self-Interest Model": an ethic of considering long-term consequences when making business decisions. Baker notes that being ethical for the sake of self-interest is on only a moderate "moral ground" instead of a high one (1999, pp. 69-70). In their *Essentials of Business Communication*, Thill and Bovee emphasize legal ramifications for deceit in persuasive tactics, but they also emphasize demonstrating the "'you' attitude by showing honest concern for your audience's needs and interests" (304). This latter concern is a helpful starting point for considering the ethics of persuasion beyond mere pragmatism and avoiding lawsuits. However, one might ask if "showing" honest concern for the audience and "having" honest concern for the audience are exactly the same. Is a pragmatic approach to ethics helping students to apply ethics? Is there more that students should consider regarding persuasive ethics? Is there a distinctly Christian approach to teaching persuasion and ethics? How can business instructors assist in students' moral formation as they learn how to persuade others? In this paper, I will contend that Plato's skepticism of rhetoric on an ethical basis can helpfully inform the concerns that Christian business faculty should have, and Plato and

Augustine's criteria of ethical rhetoric can help students to use persuasive techniques with a careful consideration about their weight and the necessity of considering what is good for the audience.

Christians throughout church history, particularly following the Protestant Reformation, have debated the role of rhetorical practices in Christians' speech and writing. N.H. Keeble (1987) summarizes the qualities evident in post-Reformation Puritan prose as "clarity, simplicity and plainness," a repudiation of "rhetorical excess" (p. 240). Puritans tended to avoid rhetorical flourishes because they recognized a dangerous capacity to deceive and manipulate an audience through these persuasive techniques. Brian Vickers (1970) similarly emphasizes that these Puritans revived Platonic attacks on rhetoric (p. 54). Centuries prior, Plato had serious ethical concerns regarding rhetoric.

In Plato's dialogues, he shows a deep distrust of rhetoric because of its lack of a basis in what is really good. In book six of *The Republic*, Plato critiques sophists, teachers of rhetoric, by comparing them to animal-keepers. They learn what an animal, his metaphor for a group of people, likes and dislikes, what brings it pleasure and pain, and, as a result, animal-keepers can motivate the animal to cooperate with its human caregivers. However, Plato asserts, the animal-keepers conflate wisdom and the good with pleasure. They lead their animals using what is pleasurable, just as sophists lead crowds by appealing to their pleasure but not necessarily to what is good for them (2000, p. 197). This metaphor shows a dehumanizing of the rhetor's audience, as mere animals coming to feed or responding to an external stimulus. What is missing in this common rhetorical scenario is the rhetor's understanding of the good.

Similarly, in *Gorgias*, Plato speaks through Socrates, who shows that oratory really has no knowledge of right and wrong; instead, oratory mostly "requires a shrewd and bold spirit naturally clever at dealing with people" (p. 30). Socrates calls persuasive speech "pandering" (p. 30), and he claims that it "pays no regard to the best interests of its object, but catches fools with the bait of ephemeral pleasure and tricks them into holding it in the highest esteem" (p. 32). Plato rejects the

philosophy that would become utilitarianism, with its emphasis on the good being the gaining of pleasure. So, a Platonic notion of rhetorical ethics contrasts with Messina's (2007) recommendation of utilitarianism, which he takes from Jeremy Bentham, that action should be judged "according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish happiness of the party whose interest is in question" (qtd. in Messina, 2007, p. 39). The reason why is because happiness is not always the same as good. For Plato, rhetoric that appeals solely to people's sense of pleasure is ethically problematic.

In *Phaedrus*, Plato has Socrates note that rightly used rhetoric would be "a kind of skillful leading of the soul by means of words" (p. 48). This definition implies that people are more than just animals; they are beings with souls, and this definition implies the weighty responsibility of the rhetor in leading another person's soul for good or ill. So, what is involved in ethically leading a "soul," for Plato the essence of a person?

For Plato, if rhetoric were to be ethical, it would be grounded in a deep knowledge of what is true and a desire to improve the lives of the audience. First, the rhetor must possess a deep knowledge of the truth. For Plato, the true and the good were transcendent Forms. Plato's Socrates, who is reluctant to define the good, describes it as "that which just things and anything else must make use of if they are to be useful and beneficial" (*Republic*, p. 210).

Some critics have voiced loud skepticism over Plato's model of ethical rhetoric because they contend that truth and the transcendent Forms are difficult at best or impossible at worst to ascertain. For example, Jaeger (1944) commented that Plato's insistence upon knowing truth was "repulsive to ordinary common sense" (p. 57). In this philosophical quandary, the Christian reliance upon divine revelation in the Scriptures is helpful. Secular knowledge can helpfully indicate what is but not always what ought to be. Because of the Church tradition and the Scriptures upon which Christians rely for an understanding of truth and goodness, Christian instructors could use Plato's model well in detailing the notions of truth and goodness as the attributes of God and the moral imperatives revealed in the Bible.

In fact, Christian business faculty members can make the teaching and discussion of what is true and good distinct and specific, such as promoting peace instead of dissension, showing mercy to the poor, and fighting the sin of pride.

An implication of the “truth” criterion that non-Christians could also embrace is that Plato’s notion of truth and goodness was also related to knowledge of reality. In the *Republic*, Socrates asserts that the philosopher, the highest type of person who should rule his metaphorical city, “is always in love with any learning which helps to reveal that reality which always is” (187). In addition to leading audiences toward transcendent truth, Plato would also endorse the rhetor’s having deep knowledge about his or her subject. Therefore, if applying this model, Christian business faculty should hold students responsible for knowing their subjects well. Secondly, the rhetor must argue for the good of his or her audience—not for mere personal gain. The rhetor should seek to know his or her subject well and convey fair and complete knowledge of the subject to the audience in order to seek the audience’s good. And the rhetor must remember that pleasure is not necessarily good. One obvious example of this principle is tobacco advertisements in the late twentieth century, after the Surgeon General had begun warning about the health ramifications of smoking, which show a clear appeal to pleasure but not to the audience’s good. In contrast to these self-serving attempts at persuasion, Socrates admits that the extremely rare form of ethical rhetoric involves “making the souls of [the audience] as good as possible and...always striving to say what is best, whether it is pleasing or not to the ears of the audience” (*Gorgias*, 1987, p. 98). For Plato, the communication of truth with the aim to educate and the intention of leading the audience to good with the aim to better themselves are the two essential, and—as Plato believed—uncommon, components of ethical rhetoric.

This notion of ethics in rhetoric is similar to Baker’s (1999) model of what she calls the highest moral ground in persuasion, which is a “Kingdom of Ends Model” (pp. 76-79). She takes this categorical title from Kant: “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the

person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end” (qtd. in Baker, 1999, p. 77). In a kingdom of ends, we make decisions and act toward people as if they are all valuable, ends in themselves. Plato would agree that we should treat them as if they have souls, and we should move their souls carefully toward what is good and true.

The early Church father, Augustine, laying the groundwork for homiletics, believed more strongly than Plato that people (Christian teachers, specifically) could use rhetoric responsibly for good. Augustine asserts, “Since, therefore, there has been placed equally at our disposal the power of eloquence, which is so efficacious in pleading either for the erroneous cause or the right, why is it not zealously acquired by the good, so as to do service for the truth, if the unrighteous put it to the uses of iniquity and of error for the winning of false and groundless causes?” (2008, p. 39). Much less skeptical of rhetoric than Plato, Augustine saw rhetorical strategies as neutral tools that could be used for good or evil, but he always assumes that when rhetoric is used for good, it is benefitting the audience in the service of truth. For Augustine, of course, truth and goodness are not Forms; they are embodied in the transcendent God, which humans learn about through creation, the written revelation, and Church tradition.

As a Christian, Augustine provides more specific applications than Plato of what it might look like to use rhetoric ethically. For example, Augustine explains that Christians should use rhetorical strategies for the purpose of encouraging virtue in their listeners: [L]et us turn...to aim...to make good morals esteemed or evil morals avoided....Thus it is that we use [rhetoric] not ostentatiously, but wisely, not content with its own purpose, namely, merely to please the audience, but rather striving for this, to help them even thereby to the good toward which our persuasion aims (2008, p. 165). Augustine assumes that rhetoric can be positive if is used for the audience’s good—not to help them avoid pain and pursue pleasure but to help them avoid vice and pursue virtue. For Augustine, classical rhetoric should be rightly used for noble, protreptic purposes. Peter Candler (2006) emphasizes that the Augustinian aim

of persuasion is ultimately “synonymous with the movement of the will toward its proper object” (58). Even more than just intellectual or moral edification, Augustine believed that effective use of persuasion can rearrange human affections, which is a huge weight when business instructors consider the ethics of what they teach in their courses. Students would benefit from considering what they are making their audience love.

What the pagan Plato would call “the good” or “the true” the Christian Augustine might simply call “love” toward the audience. Deepening what this ethic might mean for students could help them to cultivate and practice ethical reasoning. How might Augustine’s notion of persuasion to arrange human affection apply not only to preaching but also to persuasion in the marketplace? How might business instructors teach their students truly to know their subjects, to want the best for their audiences, and to move their audience’s affections wisely and soberly toward their good? Three practical pedagogical applications follow.

First, instructors could encourage students to think of how to write in a way that aligns with virtues and considers the good of the audience. For example, students could choose their topics for persuasion after considering the result for their audience. Instead of selecting a product or service that they like, to practice marketing or selling, students could choose a product or service that would really benefit their audience—not just to increase their pleasure but to attain a good from God’s character or from a Scriptural moral imperative. They could then try to move their audience’s affections toward what might biblically be seen as a right order. Instructors might also require students to reflect upon the way that the audience might be moved positively as a result of their persuasion.

Second, the knowledge of the truth of one’s subject could change the kind of assignments instructors give. Assignments might require research as an essential element of persuasive assignments, for example. Sometimes, instructors assign students to identify a service or product and to describe that service or product in terms of its benefit to a particular audience—to sell a pen, for example, that they

know nothing about. This kind of assignment requires students to use persuasive techniques without real knowledge of the product and/or the audience's good. These assignments could unintentionally reinforce an unethical perspective, according to Plato, that persuasion can be separated from truth.

Finally, it might be helpful to students to learn some history about the controversy of rhetoric. Probably many of them have never considered that learned people such as Plato have thought that rhetoric could be a dangerous enterprise. Having students read a short Platonic dialogue (such as *Gorgias* or *Phaedrus*) about rhetoric might help them to wrestle with the unethical possibilities inherent within persuasion. Students might also read the rhetorical treatises of persons who have a malicious intent (such as Hitler's *Mein Kampf*) or examine advertisements for damaging products or services to investigate the ways in which persuasive techniques have not been used for good. An assignment asking students to read and discuss a Platonic dialogue and create their own philosophy of persuasion ethics might also be helpful.

These ideas could help students' ethical formation, to see knowledge and persuasion as inextricably linked, to see the dangerous potentiality in persuasion, and to consider how they might move away from using persuasion for mere self-interest and move toward using persuasion for their audience's good.

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