Between Saints and Snakes: Explicating the Historical, Philosophical, and Theoretical Foundations of Rhetorical Authority

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This dissertation titled
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ABSTRACT

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Between Saints and Snakes: Explicating the Historical, Philosophical, and Theoretical Foundations of Rhetorical Authority (284 pp.)

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This dissertation examines the historical, philosophical, and theoretical foundations of rhetorical authority through a hermeneutical lens in order to theorize and to articulate the qualities that distinguish a good, credible rhetorical authority from a bad, unreliable rhetorical authority. By focusing on three key terms (arete, phronesis, and eunoia) through which Aristotle based his explanation of a trustworthy ethos, this study reviews the scholastic traditions that have emerged from their origins in Classical Greek philosophy to establish the contemporary and conventional understandings of rhetorical authority. Through a critical examination of relevant scholarly research, this study investigates the epistemological assumptions and ontological foundations that often underlie the communicative environments where sometimes people with power employ coercion as though the practice of intimidation were a legitimate, ethical rhetorical strategy. To facilitate the instruction of the differences between a legitimate, rhetorical authority and a fallacious, coercive authority, this study introduces two rhetorical terms: the pro-agentic ethos, which designates the type of authority that respects the agency of its audience and the pythonic ethos, which does not. This study theorizes the need to discuss and to teach these two types of authority (the pro-agentic and the pythonic) within the composition classroom for the purpose of instilling within students a deeper
appreciation for the ways they might unwittingly undermine their credibility within their
own writing and to recognize how other writers damage their rhetorical integrity by
resorting to irrelevant coercive arguments to support specious points of view. Although in
the past couple of decades many prominent contemporary composition scholars have
offered (through their discourses on postmodern and anti-foundational theories) good
reasons to remain skeptical of theoretical claims that rely upon so-called “meta-narrative”
or universal standards of judgment, the need for a clear and succinct articulation of the
rhetorical qualities that distinguish good authority from bad remains a vital concern
throughout the field of rhetoric and composition studies. This dissertation suggests a
specific vocabulary and theoretical orientation for expressing the difference between
“good” and “bad” authority while remaining cognizant and respectful of the concerns of
anti-foundationalism.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forward</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sublime Qualities of Rhetoric and Composition</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Interlude: Lessons from my Childhood</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: The Pro-Agentic and the Pythonic</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why this Research Matters and How It Fills a Gap in the Field</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pro-Agentic and the Pythonic Ethos in the Writing Classroom</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethos in the 21st Century: Ethics, Agency, and the Paradox of Postmodern Morality</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with the Paradox of Postmodern Morality</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pragmatics of Agency</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemology, Ontology, and Doxa as Rhetorical Heuristics of Ethos</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the Pro-agentic and Pythonic Ethos Informs Writing Instruction</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: Arethē or Virtue</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the Epistemological and Ontological Implications of the Emerging Virtual Ethos</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority Dwells in the House of Character</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Interlude: Lessons from the Midway</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Maze of Glass: Plato’s Epistemology and Aristotle’s Ontology</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving through the Maze: Toward a Pro-agentic Understanding of Virtue</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finding a Place for Virtue: The Ontology of Moral Agency ........................................ 103
On the Essential Differences between Pro-Agentic and Pythonic Conceptions of Virtue ........................................................................................................................................... 107
On the Possibility of a Universal Morality that Respects Student Autonomy ............ 109
Chapter Three: Phronēsis and Sophia – Wisdom .......................................................... 123
The Mechanics of Authority and the Question of Belief ............................................. 125
Mapping the Origins of Wisdom ................................................................................ 129
A Brief Introduction to Doxastic Theory ..................................................................... 134
Wisdom and the Three Modes of Authority (Epistemology, Ontology, and Doxa) ... 141
Plato, Aristotle, and the Sophists: How the West was Won Over .............................. 148
Phronesis versus Sophia: The Fundamental Conflict of Communicating Meaning... 154
Personal Interlude: Wisdom as an Amalgam of Phronēsis and Sophia ...................... 159
The Politics of Wisdom and the Wisdom of Politics .................................................. 166
Chapter Four: Eunioa – Goodwill ................................................................................... 174
Goodwill and the Historic Subordination of Matriarchal Culture .............................. 176
The Greek Historical Foundations for Considering Goodwill .................................... 183
Plato and Eunoia ......................................................................................................... 185
Aristotle and Eunoia .................................................................................................... 190
Isocrates and the Sophistic Eunoia ............................................................................. 200
Personal Interlude: Goodwill, Authority, and Pro-Agentic Application of the Rules 211
Chapter Five: Taking the Pro-Agentic from Theory to Praxis ....................................... 224
Students and the Pro-Agentic Ethos ........................................................................... 229
Colleagues and the Pro-Agentic Ethos ................................................................. 251
The Community at Large and the Pro-Agentic Ethos............................................. 257
Appendix A: The Logos and Ethos of Coercion......................................................... 271
Appendix B: On the Ontology of Good English Teachers ........................................ 280
FORWARD

Janus, the Roman god of doorways and beginnings, has two faces pointed in opposite directions: one that sees the past and the other that looks to the future. As a means of beginning this dissertation, I evoke the image of Janus as a metaphor for my own experience in researching and writing this study on how conceptions of rhetorical authority impact writing instruction. Like Janus, I feel my interests pulled in two diverse directions. As I look back at my life history and the more than quarter of a century spent teaching students writing at the high school level, I see the experience that informs my understanding of authority on a very personal and pragmatic basis, and when I reflect upon what I have learned from the superb doctoral studies I have been blessed to receive (including the terrific instruction given by my professors, the stimulating discussions in graduate seminars, and the piles of research material amassed in my basement office), I see the experience that enlightens my understanding of authority in academic terms defined primarily by their complex and theoretical abstractions. In producing this dissertation, I have been cognizant of how my primary audience is meant to be other scholars who are linguistically and theoretically equipped to handle the intricacy and density of this particular scholarly research; nonetheless, as I have struggled to comprehend and synthesize the scholarship on the historic, philosophic, and theoretical factors that explicate current understandings of authority as they inform writing instruction at the college level, I have at times unintentionally written in the voice of the high school teacher who (for better or worse) comes with a different and distinctive set of concerns and priorities. As I have worked through the revision of the initial draft of this
dissertation, I have endeavored to push the concerns unique to the public high school teacher into the periphery. Nonetheless, because these concerns inform my initial motivation and offer my most relevant “real world” examples of the authoritative/authoritarian practices with which this text is concerned, much of the “other” material remains.

Perhaps the most glaring dissonance between the concerns of the rhetorical scholar focused on writing instruction at the college level and the public school teacher focused on instruction at the high school level emerges in discussions of Standard English. For the high school teacher, the central concerns of Standard English manifest as a response to the burdens placed on public school teachers by the standardized testing movement that has (due to the ramifications of the No Child Left Behind legislation) plainly become an overbearing distraction to quality instruction; for the college writing instructor, much of the considerations of Standard English can be contextualized in a much larger philosophical conversation about the appropriateness of various dialects within particular academic discourses, and as such, concerns over Standard English can provide a productive avenue for teaching students a more sophisticated appreciation of language usage. If, at different points in the dissertation, concerns over standardized testing and the constraints of Standard English seem atypical of most college writing instructors, it is not because I do not appreciate the gains college instructors have made in the past half century in learning to privilege issues of substance over issues of style (and mechanics) in evaluating student writing, it is, rather, that from my experiences on the other side of the academic fence, the rigidity of Standard English as presented through the epistemological
lens of the “nationally-normed standardized test” offers the clearest (and most toxic) example of a hegemonic, *pythonic* influence on writing instruction. Thus, while remaining committed to my primary audience of collegiate writing instructors, I remain hopeful that most readers will be willing to excuse my tendency to look in both directions as I move through various discussions of the impact a good ethos can have in both teaching and producing writing that others may regard as cogent and credible.

To conclude this forward, I would also like to return to the image of Janus to point out that while this Roman god looks in two directions, there remains a lot of territory in the area between his opposed gazes. Thus, as readers move through the rest of this text, I would hope they remain cognizant that the two primary modes of authority that I theorize here (the *pro-agentic* and the *pythonic*) are not true binaries when their qualities are used to assess the credibility of authorities in “the real world.” There lies a rich and complex continuum between these two modes of authority, and I hope if these two terms come into common usage among writing instructors that these instructors would emphasis with their students that most authority would be plotted between the extreme portrayals that are chiefly developed in this dissertation.
INTRODUCTION

Both scholarship and pearls begin in irritation. When a particle of sand finds its way into an oyster’s shell and disrupts the resident’s domestic serenity, the mollusk responds by obsessively gagging on its annoyance until it produces a precious stone of considerable value to humans who are chiefly, if not wholly, indifferent to the oyster’s initial disturbance and subsequent distress. If there is a substantive difference between the *pearls of nacre* produced by shellfish and the *pearls of wisdom* produced by academics, then it may be that many researchers are not only conscious of the circumstances that produced their initial irritation but are often covetous of some empathy for the bothersome trouble that spurred their initial search for answers.

For as long as I can remember, I have been irritated by my inability to understand the rhetorical elements that connect authority to credibility. Perhaps, because of a variety of unfortunate personal experiences in my life, I may care more than many others about understanding why in general people tend to believe some authorities and doubt others, but I find some solace in knowing that this is an ancient concern (with textual evidence going back at least 2500 years), and with the amount of time and energy I have put into researching the scholarship on this subject, I feel I can safely assert that this matter is far from settled. In his “Encomium of Helen,” the ancient Greek sophist Gorgias wrote,

(I)f everyone had recollection of the past, knowledge of the present, and foreknowledge of the future, the power of speech would not be so great. But as it is, when men can neither remember the past nor observe the present nor prophesy the future, deception is easy; so that most men offer
opinion as advice to the soul. But opinion, being unreliable, involves those who accept it in equally uncertain fortunes. (132)

In this speech, ostensibly given to restore the reputation of Helen of Troy, Gorgias attempts to impress upon the Athenians the belief that words can carry as much force upon a mind as kidnapping can carry upon a body. This is, of course, a fallacious and dangerous belief; fallacious because if rhetorical persuasion held a power equal to brute force, then skilled rhetoricians would presumably by now have used this power to garner money and prestige as currently enjoyed by celebrities and professional athletes, and dangerous because it equates verbal persuasion with an immoral, criminal activity.

The Sublime Qualities of Rhetoric and Composition

Many times over the past few years, I have been asked to explain exactly what it is that I have been studying as I have pursued my doctorate in English. How I respond to this question depends upon a great variety of factors including the degree of familiarity I have with the person who is asking, the amount of time either of us has for the answer, and the level of genuine interest I perceive coming from the inquirer. If either of us is in a hurry or I get the feeling that the other person is only marginally or politely interested in what I study, then I say that I am specializing in “composition,” and the other person typically smiles as though he or she knows exactly what I am talking about. If I get the sense that the other person is sincerely interested and has the time for an extended explanation or if I merely want to impress the other person by sounding erudite, then I say that I am specializing in “rhetoric,” and the other person usually squints as if I had said something utterly incomprehensible. In either case, whether I am with the people
who think they know what I mean by “composition” or the people who know they don’t understand what I mean by “rhetoric,” I am left unsatisfied with my response because both answers are inadequate for expressing how sublimely cool I feel it is to study “composition” and “rhetoric.”

Over the years in my forays across campus, I have encountered plenty of people who either had completed or were actively pursuing advanced degrees in subjects that I considered strange or unpalatable (such as entomology or accounting), and yet, while I could not share their enthusiasm for what they were studying, I often found their passion for their own academic field intoxicating. I remain optimistic that while I have been dissatisfied with the quality of my answers to the question “What are you studying?”, at least a few of the people who had the time and were willing to listen to my reply responded to the zeal with which I answered them if not to the substance of my response.

Although composition is perhaps most generally misunderstood by the general public as the science of tattooing mechanical and grammatical error on college writing and rhetoric is most commonly misperceived as the art of spinning pejorative language for the purpose of smearing a political rival, the fascination these subjects offer for me as an academic lies in their ability to articulate complex and significant distinctions. Even though sound political and historical reasons exist for labeling one set of complicated neurological behaviors as “composition” and another set of complicated neurological behaviors as “rhetoric,” from my position as a teacher and a scholar, I am more enthusiastic about their similarities than their differences. Both rhetoric and composition make similar critical demands upon our students’ intellectual abilities. Regardless of the
labels we prefer to use when we teach our students the importance and the intricacy of communicating intelligently with others, despite our personal preference for either textual artifacts or oral displays of student acumen, when we teach students composition and rhetoric, we require them to work towards a demanding state of mental consciousness and to inhabit intellectual positions that oblige them to consider and gauge the effectiveness of a host of important factors – including the circumstances of their status as communicators, the temperament of their audiences, and the validity of their opinions. While the general public may believe that our roles as teachers of writing and speaking is merely to educate our students to follow and maintain the conventions of Standard English, those of us who have studied composition and rhetorical theory understand that knowing which Standard English to use varies significantly according to the contextual relationships we want to develop between what we have to say, who we are telling it to, and how we expect to be perceived as we say it.

Although every academic field has its aficionados, I regard the study of composition and rhetoric as sublime because this particular pursuit helps its students to develop a vocabulary that facilitates both the comprehension of increasingly complex ideas and the recognition of obstacles that stand in the way of articulating those ideas to others. The study of composition and rhetoric teaches us that what often appears on the surface to be a simple idea can actually be a complex belief supported by a complicated matrix of unexamined assumptions. Furthermore, the study of composition and rhetoric not only helps to prepare its scholars to recognize the logical, cultural, and empirical problems inherent in all argumentative situations, it provides methods to analyze these
difficulties when they inhibit the processes that lead to fair and satisfactory resolutions. The study of composition and rhetoric offers metacognitive insights into the mechanisms of belief, and this scholarship helps its students contemplate how language usage contributes to the various ways we perceive and respond to the world around us. While all of this may not sound “sublimely cool” to others, for me, the opportunity to study a variety of techniques with which to critique and to comment upon (what I perceive to be) the most significant and fundamental issues of human existence offers endless fascination and has come as a soothing balm to help me tolerate a wide assortment of personal and interpersonal difficulties.

The most personally important difficulty that the process of studying comp/rhet has helped me address is now the basic underlying concern of this dissertation. Here is the impetus for this dissertation: I am profoundly and chronically disturbed by the widespread acceptance of coercion as an apparently legitimate method of psychological persuasion. Whether violence (or the threat of violence) comes from our highest elected officials and their military counterparts who command enormously destructive capabilities scattered throughout the planet or whether it emerges from the plethora of criminals and terrorists who feel their ability to destroy the lives of strangers should offer them a shortcut for obtaining their personal or political desires, the principal remains the same: the ability to motivate others to respond in a particular way through inflicting fear for life and limb does not offer any relevant reason to believe that the people who use violence are legitimized by it. This is to say, as I would suppose most of us learned in
our childhood, the ability to hurt others who are vulnerable does not demonstrate that we are morally superior to them – in truth, coercion tends to establish the contrary.

I argue here (and throughout the rest of this document) that the use of force (either physical or psychological) to compel others to behave in particular ways may be considered legitimate (under a variety of specific circumstances which I describe in detail later in this dissertation), the practice should never be considered rhetorical. As a point of origin, from which all the rest of my theorization begins, I assert that the single most salient quality of a rhetorical exchange is its respect for human agency. This simply means that the audience of rhetorical persuasion must have the option to disagree. As a rhetorician, I argue that the essential quality that distinguishes rhetoric from all other communicative endeavors exists in the space that allows other people to make up their own minds. Thus, my intention in writing this dissertation is to establish (if not “once and for all,” at least “here and for my readership”) that while a legitimate authority may be confirmed by a wide variety of social, cultural, and political conventions, a rhetorical authority is required to eschew coercion. Thus, it is possible (and perhaps even common) for authority to be both legitimate and rhetorical, but once authority introduces coercion as a strategy for achieving its ends, the authority may (through a wide spectrum of social and political conventions) maintain its claim to legitimacy, but it loses it standing as rhetorical.¹

¹ Although it is likely that few scholars in the field of Composition and Rhetoric would argue against the way I make a distinction between legitimate authority and rhetorical authority, the reason I emphasis it here is merely for the purpose of definitional clarity. I am not suggesting that anyone currently teaches that there is room for coercion in a rhetoric exchange. However, for more than two millennia, rhetoric has been defined in many ways, and my intention at this point is to be as transparent as possible about the way I intend to define rhetoric, which is (according to the way I will use the term throughout the rest of this
If I have a fundamental belief that informs my rhetorical theorizations within this dissertation, it is this: a threat may (at times) be a perfectly legitimate means of getting another person to do something, but it is never a legitimate means of getting another person to believe something. Although this fundamental belief may seem self-evident to most readers who are already well-versed in rhetorical history and traditions, I devote a substantial amount of space in Chapter One to arguing why the field still needs (despite this understanding) to develop the vocabulary for explaining clearly how an authority may be legitimate without being rhetorical. In Chapter One, I argue that the conflation of coercive power with rhetorical power needs to remain a primary concern for rhetorical scholars. As a rhetorical scholar, I contend the utter pervasiveness of violence in contemporary culture fosters a desensitized acceptance of its illogicality, and I hope to demonstrate how a vocabulary designed for explaining this illogicality to our students remains a pressing need for writing instructions teaching in the 21st century.

Personal Interlude: Lessons from my Childhood

Some things, you never get over.

When Charles Dickens was 12 years old, his parents sent him off to work in a rat-infested basement of a boot polish factory. In a short autobiographical piece that was later published by John Forster, his friend and biographer, Dickens wrote:

My whole nature was so penetrated with the grief and humiliation of such considerations, that even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often

(document) persuasive communication that eschews coercion and that regards agency as its primary concern.
forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a
man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life. (Forster 24)

The sadness and humiliation Dickens felt at being abandoned as a child so haunted his
adult life that despite being a successful and beloved writer, just walking down certain
streets in London could send him into tears.

Although the trauma of my childhood certainly cannot match Dickens’ in terms of
sheer pathos, I evoke his childhood ordeals as a way of acknowledging that my own
childhood tribulations certainly provide much of the fuel for this current rhetorical
project. I find a certain kinship in Dickens’ amazement that as an adult he could never get
past the grief he felt at his childhood abandonment; my tremendous respect and affection
for rhetoric and composition comes from a lifelong attempt to make peace with the
enormous amount of bullying and physical abuse I endured as a child.

For me, the twin studies of rhetoric and composition represent humanity’s highest
calling: the promise and the potential to resolve conflict without violence or gratuitous
coercion. Although I am deeply committed to these ideals, I am nonetheless pessimistic
in regards to the naïve hope that mere words will ever move the bullies of this world
(both children throwing punches and adults lobbing bombs) to abandon their practices of
brutality and intimidation. I no more believe that by demonstrating the wrongness in
believing force can be employed as a means of persuasion I can generate real change
among tyrants than I imagine Dickens believed he would eventually get over what
happened to him as a child; however, the impact of this project is ultimately irrelevant to
my pursuit of it – the desire to set things right may be nothing more than a lemming’s
path lying before me, but I have an irresistible urge to follow it. Somewhere within me lies a small boy who has lived with senseless beatings and who lived with the firm knowledge of more beatings to come. I feel I owe it to the child I once was to attempt to vocalize the sadness and outrage I still experience whenever I witness violence and intimidation being used as if they were legitimate rhetorical practices.

When I was seven years old, my family moved from a rural community to a neighborhood in a city where the very first time I walked around the block, I ran into some older boys who threatened to beat me up. Not many days later, they actually did. I suddenly found myself living on a different planet, one where strangers wanted to hurt me merely because that was who they were and brutality was what they did. For the first time, I experienced random violence. It was not that I was unaccustomed to physical assault; my mother beat me frequently during my childhood, but she always offered an explanation; whenever she beat me, she gave me her assurance that I had done something worthy of provoking it. At least with my mother, I was able to harbor the vain fantasy that if I could only learn to avoid the behaviors that instigated her beatings that someday I would learn to avoid them. The hope of never being beaten again disappeared completely when my family moved to a city and I met up with the feral neighborhood kids who wanted to beat me merely because they enjoyed the sport of it. As a child, it lay beyond my ability to comprehend why some children would want to hurt other children without offering any particular reason for it.

Within the file of sad childhood memories that my psyche allows me to access is a day when – still new to this city neighborhood – my two brothers refused to let me join
in a game of kickball at a nearby elementary school playground. As with children throughout the world, a couple of kids stood before a ragtag group of children and began to choose sides. That day I not only suffered the humiliation of being the last one to be picked, but I also had to endure the further mortification of hearing my two brothers refuse to allow me to play at all. I was new to this neighborhood; I did not have any friends yet, and my brothers made the conscious effort to persuade the other children, who they were just meeting also, that I was so hopelessly uncoordinated that any team who agreed to have me among its ranks were assured certain failure. My brothers and their newly met teammates operated under one of the most important rules of the culture in which we had been reared: the opportunity to win a spontaneous game of kickball (which held no other significance than a summer afternoon’s diversion) was more significant than the cost of making an awkward sibling into a social pariah.

When I went home, heartbroken and crying over the situation, my mother yelled at me as if the entire situation were my fault. “What do you want me to do about it?” she said angrily. “I can’t make them play with you.” I believed then (as I believe now) otherwise; she was, after all, an adult, and if I understood anything at that point in my life it was that adults could make things happen when they wanted to. Looking back upon the situation now, I can recognize much that would have escaped my notice as child; my mother obviously had her own problems – she too was new to the neighborhood and had yet to make her own friends, and she, like me, had been raised in a culture of *sink or swim*; she either could not (or would not) acknowledge my perspective that it was unfair to make a child a social outcast merely because he lacked his brothers’ speed and agility.
In order, I suppose, to become a part of this new community, my parents soon joined a church and began dragging my brothers and me to services on Sunday mornings. There I heard messages that conflicted with my everyday experiences. For example, one day the preacher said that to be accepted by Jesus, people had to “come unto him as a little child,” and I remember thinking, “What? Is Jesus nuts or something? Children are the meanest, most dangerous people I’ve ever met. Has Jesus never ridden a school bus?” This was only the first of many assertions I heard in church that bewildered me then and, frankly, continues to confound me today.

Of all the churches my parents could have chosen for my religious indoctrination, for reasons which still lay beyond my ability to fathom, they chose one that presented God as just another bully I had to contend with. Christianity, as presented to me by this particular sect, came down to this basic proposition: either believe that Jesus is the Son of God, or after you die, God will put you through more pain than you can possibly imagine for the rest of eternity. Given the amount of physical abuse I had already endured from my mother, my brothers, and the other random bullies who lived in my neighborhood, I could actually imagine a lot of pain – the concept of “more pain than I could possibly imagine” was pretty scary stuff; nonetheless, I had an inkling of how bad hell could get. What I could not grasp is why God – who apparently had everything and could do anything – would want to inflict so much monstrous torture on anyone; up until that point in my life, no matter what I did that my mother assured me I deserved a beating for (I’m unconvinced, by the way, that no matter what they do young children deserve sustained
and brutal beatings), the beatings always came to an end at some point. According to the leaders in my parents’ church, God threatened to deliver the beating that never ceases.

Today, I am something of a religious dyslexic; no matter how many people have tried to explain it to me and no matter how hard I’ve tried to understand it on my own, this particular version of religion still does not make sense to me. According to the people who attempted to indoctrinate me into this religion throughout my childhood, the only way to avoid God’s eternal beating was to believe that God had been pacified by the murderous beating Jesus had volunteered for. As explained to me as child, Jesus had taken one for the team, and all you had to do was accept that Jesus had been a willing victim, and God would not only leave you alone, but He would reward you for believing it. All we had to do was accept that God really did love us; that He really did not want to have to torture us for the rest of eternity; and that God was satisfied with the amount of torture Jesus had gone through on our behalf. Under no circumstances was the wisdom of this perspective to be challenged. Asking questions – such as why God would design sentient beings whom He would subsequently feel obligated to torture for not believing that a supposedly merciful and loving Ultimate Being would do such things – only gets you sent into the waiting room for the unspeakable, endless torture than comes after you draw your final breath.

Here then lies the great cognitive dissonance of my childhood and the impetus for this dissertation: I believe there is a critical difference between the use of coercion as a means of persuading others to do something and the use of coercion as a means of persuading others to believe something. Among the perverse bullies who enjoyed
hurting me as child, a few engaged in the special practice of sitting on my chest and smacking me in the face until I told them how great they were. “Tell me I’m great,” they would say, “and I’ll let you up.” If I learned anything from all the abuse I endured as a child, it is certainly this: physical violence (or even the threat of physical violence) is a terrific reason to do something; it is, however, the worst possible reason to believe something. If someone is sitting on your chest and smacking you in the face and all you have to do to get that person to stop is to say how great he is, then, of course, you should tell him how great he is. You would be a fool, however, to believe that person held any degree of “greatness” for smacking you in the face.

If, as I suggested earlier, the value of rhetoric lies in its ability to make complex and significant distinctions, then perhaps the most important distinction I can make to begin with is the crucial difference between a rhetorical practice (based in a deep appreciation for both the cultural circumstances of a conflict and a sincere respect for the agency of the audience) and a coercive practice that is focused only on the efficacy of achieving its own ambitions. Coercion is the antithesis of rhetoric; rhetoric does not exist in twisting another’s arm. Getting others to do one’s bidding through the use of violence robs others of their freedom to act; it should not rob them of their ability to think for themselves. Even under the most violent circumstances when the bullies of the world coerce their victims into silence with the threat of brutality or death, there remains the decisive distinction between conquering another’s body and conquering another’s mind. The interior space of the victims’ cognitive domain can remain wholly their own as long as they recognize this basic truth: we may not always be free to speak aloud what we are
thinking, but our fundamental humanity provides us the freedom to think whatever we want. As long as we recognize that violence provides only the leverage to coerce behavior, we can understand that power cannot legitimately leverage belief.

Several postmodern rhetorical theorists (led perhaps most prominently by Michel Foucault) have argued that what can be known (and thus believed) is a function of discourse, and thus, what is typically known by any particular population emerges out of the historical and cultural paradigms that sponsor the discourse. This argument complicates my assertion that coercion cannot legitimately support belief in interesting ways. That hegemonic forces do use their influence to coerce belief in ways that are both irrational and, yet, generally uncontested will be addressed later in this dissertation in my examination of the role of doxa in public perceptions of “normalcy.”

As writing instructors, we are responsible for helping our students recognize the rhetorical factors that promote or discourage authorial credibility; even if we grasp immediately the illogicality of using coercion as a relevant reason for belief, it would be presumptuous without explicit instruction to expect our students to understand this as well. Thus, in the chapters ahead, I hope to give writing teachers an expanded vocabulary for thinking about rhetorical authority and, perhaps, offer better resources for teaching these principals to our students.
CHAPTER ONE: THE PRO-AGENTIC AND THE PYTHONIC

Through my experiences as a child who grew up in both a violent neighborhood and an abusive family, and through my experiences as an adult who has spent a considerable amount of time reflecting upon the repercussions of terrorism, war, and other manifestations of hatred against society, I have come to believe that, in general, most people of this planet have become so naturalized to violence that we often do not recognize the important distinction between the use of force to compel behavior and the use of coercion to cultivate belief. Understanding the implications of this distinction and the ways in which hegemony converts coercive power into a nefarious surrogate for authoritative (rather than authoritarian) legitimacy is my primary interest in composition and rhetoric. From this perspective, composition and rhetoric manifest as the antithesis of coercion and brutality. It is my contention that composition and rhetoric, as the channels of nonviolent persuasion, comprise the central nervous system of civilization. Thus, as a rhetorical scholar, I contend that while the vast majority of rational people can quickly comprehend the irrationality of coercion when it is employed to stimulate belief, the utter pervasiveness of violence in contemporary culture fosters a desensitized acceptance of its illogicality. My chief rhetorical concern, then, is not only that people don’t recognize the irrationality of violence when it is employed as a motivation for belief, but, furthermore, that the practice happens so often without comment that those who do (immorally and unethically) wield coercive power can use this power to legitimatize their rationally baseless declarations. Mahatma Gandhi once commented, “Any society which is geared for violent action is by that very fact systematically
unreasonable and inarticulate” (7). As scholars of composition and rhetoric, we work to understand and teach rationality and articulation; therefore, it falls upon us to remain vigilant and to work assiduously to provide an articulate counter pressure against those forces in society who achieve their own selfish ends by exploiting irrationality and compelling silence. Thus, the essential problem from which this dissertation emerges is the difficulty composition instructors face in teaching students to be knowledgeable (both in writing and speaking) about the factors that legitimize authority (and those factors that discredit it as well) when we lack the specific vocabulary for explaining these critical distinctions. Although most professionals in this field may (through their education and experience) have a solid grasp in understanding the difference between an authority that is legitimized by rational discourse and an authority that is authorized by its access to coercive power, being able to find the language that clarifies this distinction for students is a different matter altogether. Thus, the goal of this dissertation is to help develop this vocabulary and to place it in a “theory-rich” philosophical and historical context.

The study of comp/rhet offers the promise that people who disagree can meet and discuss the issues that divide them without the expectation that someone will be hurt in the process. The idea that the threat of violence is an incongruous reason to believe something (while offering, under the right circumstances, an appropriate reason to do something) presents basically two types of authority: the type that eschews the use of intimidation in establishing belief and the type that embraces coercion as a means to control not just the hands of others, but their hearts and minds as well. The latter type of authority, in order to justify its use of force as a means of persuasion, either must remain
indifferent to the irrelevancy of coercion to the substance of the beliefs they want to compel or they must engage in some form of mental evasion to avoid considering the irrationality of their influence.

Of these two types of authority, I argue the first is primarily centered in an ethos that exhibits the three qualities that Aristotle first identified in his *Rhetoric* as essential for establishing a “good” ethos (virtue, wisdom, and goodwill). I argue the second type of authority originates primarily from a “bad” (i.e., irrational, unethical, and immoral) ethos that uses the power to coerce to achieve its intentions. Throughout the remainder of this dissertation, I refer to the “good” ethos as *pro-agentic* and the “bad” ethos as *pythonic*.

I coined the modifier *pro-agentic* to describe the “good” ethos after struggling (and failing) to find a suitable existing term to describe the behavior and attitude that originates in a profound respect for the agency of the participants engaged in a rhetorical disagreement. Because I intend to base a comprehensive explanation of the *pro-agentic* ethos upon the three primary qualities that Aristotle identifies with a good ethos, I originally considered referring to this type of ethos as “Aristotelian”; however, since I would like this type of authority to be more firmly associated with the qualities that Aristotle identified with a good ethos (virtue, wisdom, and goodwill) rather than with Aristotle himself, I decided to back away from that designation and create a new descriptor instead. Unlike the modifier “Aristotelian,” which brings with it the potential for unfortunate cultural baggage that I would not want associated with a conception of a “good” ethos (due in part to the exceedingly patriarchal society from which Aristotle’s
philosophy emerged), the unsullied term “pro-agentic” comes free of negative historical associations and, thus, may be more useful in establishing a positive cognitive link between an ethos that begins in respect for the agency of one’s self and one’s audience.

The essential three qualities that Aristotle associates with a positive ethos (and I now associate with a pro-agentic ethos) include the following: *arete* (which is often translated from the Greek as “virtue” or “morality”), *phronesis* (which is translated as “wisdom” or “prudence”), and *eunoia* (which is translated as the speaker’s goodwill toward the audience) (Aristotle 121). Following this chapter are three chapters (one chapter per term) that explore the philosophical, historical, and theoretical contexts that inform an understanding of the qualities of “virtue,” “wisdom,” and “goodwill” upon an understanding of a *pro-agentic* ethos.

I chose to label the “bad” ethos *pythonic* after coming across the modifier on a “page-a-day” calendar that introduces its readers to interesting and unusual words. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines *pythonic* as “1. Of, relating to, or resembling a python. 2. Of or resembling an oracle; prophetic. 3. Of extraordinary size and power.” I chose *pythonic* to represent the inverse of the *pro-agentic ethos* because all three of the definitions of *pythonic* listed above seem to contribute to the conceptualization of a “bad”

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2 In order to keep this study of the factors that contribute to a good ethos from growing into an encyclopedia, I had to make some difficult decisions regarding which writers from the classical age I would include when constructing the narrative of the historical influences that most weigh upon our contemporary understanding of “good character.” It could be argued, for example, that Quintilian’s “a good man speaking well” does a better job of informing my conception of “the pro-agentic” than Aristotle’s. However, the use of Aristotle’s writing (especially in *Rhetoric*) offers both an accessible structure (by organizing the material around his three key terms: *arete, phronesis*, and *eunoia*) and a chance to contrast the Aristotelian preference for empirical explanations with the Platonic preference for abstract and theoretical explications. Quintilian does enter into this text in Chapter Five (although briefly) when it becomes necessary to discuss the ethics of lying (Quintilian argued that “a good man can sometimes mislead a judge for the right reason”).
ethos. There is something reptilian about an ethos that is unconcerned with demonstrating the virtue (*arete*) or wisdom (*phronesis*) of its position and that is overtly indifferent to the audience’s goodwill (*eunoia*). Furthermore, rather than demonstrating concern for the agency of one’s audience, a *pythonic ethos* demands belief as if delivering decrees from a deific authority who stands ready to smite disbelievers for questioning the accuracy of his pronouncements or who remains utterly indifferent to problems caused by being misunderstood. And though I focus primarily upon the type of coercion that comes from physical threats (because I believe the best example of the worst type of authority emanates from those who physically brutalize others), I assert that coercion that originates in other forms of threats (e.g., economic or psychological) is just as irrelevant in offering *reasons* for belief as physical harm. For example, if in the course of performing her duties, an employee challenges her boss concerning the legality of something she has been asked to do at work, the employee might realize she has a financial *motive* to believe her boss (to avoid being fired or losing work hours) if he tells her not to worry about the legality of her duties; however, she might not have good *reason* to believe her boss – particularly if he has been known to lie to protect his own financial interests. In other words, given this scenario, documentation that a particular activity is legal is an example of a good reason to believe an activity is in fact legal.

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3 I mean no offense to readers who feel that snakes have an undeserved bad reputation in the ways in which they have been anthropomorphically depicted by Western culture. However, from *Genesis* to Saint-Exupéry’s *Little Prince*, talking snakes have come to symbolize deceptive and devious oratory. Furthermore, even *The New American Webster College Dictionary* defines reptilian as “a low, mean person.”

4 The priestess who spoke for Apollo at the Oracle of Delphi was known as the Pythia, named after the dragon, Python, that Apollo slew before establishing his temple there. While the Pythia did not give pilgrims false information, it was widely believed that whatever information Apollo offered through the Pythia was almost inevitably bound to be misinterpreted.
(suppose the employee has been asked to make copies of files that clearly state “Do not copy” and the boss produces a contract that authorizes the duplication), but the employer’s threat to hurt his employee financially for questioning the legality of her assignment (“Take my word that you are legally allowed to make these copies or you’re fired”) is not a good reason to believe an activity is legal, it is merely a good motive to believe. As I argued earlier in regards to the relevancy of a physical threat, an economic incentive may offer a motive to believe something, but there is no causal relationship between the need to believe something and its relationship to empirical reality.

The crux of differentiating between a “good” ethos and a “bad” ethos is recognizing the distinction between a source that is authoritative rather than authoritarian. What is at stake here is the recognition that hegemonic forces are frequently able to convert their ability to coerce behavior into the ability to co-opt belief, and furthermore, I assert that this practice happens all too often without many people questioning either the legitimacy or the rationality of this practice.

Why this Research Matters and How It Fills a Gap in the Field

I contend this extended hermeneutical study of the qualities that legitimate rhetorical authority is important because this study provides the field of composition and rhetoric with an original and comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding (and thus, articulating) exactly how legitimate authority respects and protects human agency when established within a rhetorical context while illegitimate authority hides behind coercive power both to disguise its exploitation of human agency and to keep others oblivious to this exploitation. Although the ability to recognize in news stories or
historical accounts examples of powerful authorities who have misused their authority to exploit others to achieve their own dubious purposes may be a relatively commonplace skill for most rational and literate adults, I contend the complex and holistic understanding of how legitimate rhetorical processes may be subverted by such powerful individuals remains an intellectual challenge for many people (even some readers who may be well-versed in rhetorical theory), and, furthermore, explaining to others how to recognize and dispute the subversion of human agency remains an even more difficult academic challenge. After reading widely and deeply into the research that helps explain how authoritarian power is at times able to employ its coercive influence as an illogical circumvention of authoritative persuasion, I have come to understand that an advanced articulation of the vital rational flaw in the unethical substitution of motive for reason in presenting an argument for belief (as opposed to a command to obey – a distinction that some may recognize as the difference between an authoritative declaration and an authoritarian imperative) requires a fundamental grasp of the philosophical vocabulary used to distinguish “epistemology” from “ontology” and “ontology” from “doxa”. Thus, in addition to supplying the field of composition and rhetoric with an original theoretical paradigm for understanding and teaching the irrationality and irrelevancy of coercion as an aspect of ethical argumentation, this study also explicates and extends the use of key philosophical expressions that support a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the parameters demarcating the boundaries that delineate and protect human agency. This is to say, this study extends contemporary conversations within the field of composition and

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5 “Original” in the sense that this is the first study of authority to explicate its philosophical foundations through the triangulation of three different approaches to how the concept may be understood (the epistemological, the ontological, and the doxastic).
rhetoric on the principles of ethical authority and, furthermore, offers an introduction to readers – who may be interested in the history of rhetoric as it emerged within Western Civilization – an understanding how historic philosophical assumptions (that originated in ancient Greece) concerning both the nature of understanding (epistemology) and the understanding of nature (ontology) continue to inform our current perceptions of hegemonic influence.

As long as society finds it mutually advantageous to have its citizens argue persuasively with each other rather than to permit sporadic acts of violence as an acceptable method for resolving conflict, those of us who are charged with the responsibility of teaching students to put their thinking into words will find it necessary to reflect upon how we go about teaching others to consider the role of power in critiquing the legitimacy of authority. By examining the philosophical and theoretical qualities that establish reasonable rhetorical authority, this study provides writing instructors with a historical context for discussing the origins of the cultural landmarks that guides common doxastic understandings of permissible civil behavior. As such, this study can be useful in helping writing instructors direct their students as they navigate the paradoxes of living within a culture that simultaneously emphasizes the impropriety of lying and hitting when focused upon individual behavior while demonstrating the evident respectability of mass destruction when delivered by our government’s military through the official commands of our elected leaders. This study requires readers to consider how teaching students to think critically about the misuse of authority may be an ethical necessity in preparing them for democratic citizenry and may also be a risky subversive
undertaking if, in opening their students’ eyes to how often people with real power over others (such as corporate executives and heads of state) expect their own abuses of authority to go without question or comment, informed students begin to understand of how people who hold power over others sometimes exact one set of behaviors from those they control while operating under an entirely different set of principles for themselves.

By beginning with the simple insistence that legitimate authority may (at times) command behavior but cannot legitimately command belief, this study traces the development of the contemporary understanding of authority as it began in ancient Greece and offers an explanation for how (throughout the course of Western Civilization) hegemony has been able to distort perceptions of their own coercive tactics to naturalize claims that they have an innate right to rule over others. Given this context, this study theorizes how illegitimate authority may at times become self-perpetuating when reprehensible, coercive practices go unchallenged because those who are being exploited have not been taught either to recognize the illogicality of their oppressors’ claim to rational legitimacy or to articulate the myriad ways in which their basic human rights are being trampled. This study offers readers a rhetorical theory of legitimate authority that helps provide those who would challenge illegitimate authority a more effective articulation of the culpability of irrational and coercive power.

The need to understand how to protect human agency within the rhetorical context must remain a primary concern for everyone who teaches others to write and to think for themselves. Therefore, this study matters because the ability to articulate to students and colleagues the limits of freewill and boundaries of oppression remains a central and
enduring concern for writing instruction. Taking seriously the need to be able to communicate to others (whether across classroom desks or conference tables) how the compulsion of belief is contemptible – while the facilitation of understanding is honorable – matters because as professionals we need to be able to communicate about the ethical use of language as fluently as we can communicate about the syntactical use of language.

Although this study is obviously not the first to argue that there are important moral and ethical differences between verbal persuasion and physical coercion, this study fills a gap in the field because it is among the first to make explicit how a rhetorical theory can demarcate the differences between legitimate persuasive authority and illegitimate coercive authority within a theoretical milieu that has (for at least the past quarter century) grown increasing cynical and suspicious of writers who claim they know how to draw the line between “right and wrong.” Given a postmodern/high theory atmosphere, many composition and rhetoric scholars have taken the position that to suggest (as I do here) that some human behavior is universally dissolute – regardless of context – is to invoke the “specter of the meta-narrative,” the “patriarch,” and the “colonist.” Given hegemony’s predilection to define for others how they must behave, it is understandable why in recent years authorial claims of absolute right and wrong have been met with howls of protest from the populations who have throughout history been victimized and marginalized by hegemonic authority. Nonetheless, I want to argue that there remains a pressing need within the scholastic field of composition and rhetoric to recognize a static point of origin in declaring not only are there definable boundaries to
rationality, morality, and ethical behavior, but these lines of demarcation begin with the resolute insistence upon the inalienable existence of human agency. This is to say that to escape the charges of relativism, which hegemonic forces have sometimes used as a verbal shield to avoid the necessity of defending their own irrational coercive behaviors, writing instructors and speech teachers need a clear point of origin from which to declare when and how illicit authority crosses the line, and this study argues that that line must begin with the belief that human agency, the ability to make up one’s own mind based upon relevant and reliable information, must never be contaminated by the confusion of coercive motives with justifiable explanations.

The Pro-Agentic and the Pythonic Ethos in the Writing Classroom

I am hopeful that by the end of this study I will be able to demonstrate to readers how an understanding of the pro-agentic ethos and the pythonic ethos (especially when they are conceived as polar ends of a continuum rather than as an absolute binary) can facilitate writing instructors in their efforts to teach their students 1) to orient rhetorical choices in ways that promote their credibility, 2) to recognize statements that hold the potential for eroding trustworthiness, and 3) to consider how choices made in selecting sources in support of rhetorical arguments also locates authority in ways that can be identified as contributing to (or detracting from) overall believability. Furthermore, I hope to demonstrate in this study how a conceptual map of ethos, running a wide gamut from the pro-agentic form as the idealized version of a “good” ethos to the pythonic as the most reprehensible form of an authoritarian argument or “bad” ethos, may also provide a nearly geometrical means through which writing instructors can locate their
teaching practice in terms of how they conceive of their own classroom ethos. By imagining a continuum consisting of the pro-agentic ethos on one end and the pythonic ethos on the other, we can consider the possibility of envisioning a linear graph that places markers of virtue, wisdom, and goodwill at different points along this line between the two extremes; thus, the more a rhetor (or writer) works to impress upon her audience that she locates these qualities on the pro-agentic end of the line, the more likely it would be for the audience to perceive the rhetor as operating from a position of earnest credibility rather than from a position of indifferent power and authority. Moreover, if as writing instructors we can train our students to distinguish between motives for behavior and reasons for belief, then we can give them an important heuristic for thinking reflectively (about the messages they create) and critically (about the information they consume) regarding the ways revelations of character contribute to or subtract from overall impressions of credibility.

By taking Aristotle’s three essential qualities of ethos (arete, phronesis, and eunoia) as measures of character, this dissertation’s research considers the complexities of understanding and teaching such nebulous (and certainly politically charged) concepts as virtue (arete), wisdom (phronesis), and goodwill (eunoia) when they are examined through the theoretical lens provided by a methodological study of their epistemological, ontological, and doxastic foundations. One of the most engaging problems for me both as a classroom instructor and as a theory-driven academic is the question: “How do we bridge the gap between theory and practice?” Thus, when focused on the issues central to this dissertation, I would like to understand both “How do we teach an understanding of
ethos that is nuanced by a complex and sophisticated comprehension of the myriad social, political, and linguistic factors that contribute to its formation without oversimplifying these factors?” and “How can academic scholarship address the ‘real world’ challenges of teaching such politically sensitive topics as ‘virtue,’ ‘wisdom,’ and ‘goodwill’ in ways that respect the need for universal and common definitions while remaining cognizant of the ways in which people are sometimes marginalized by hegemonic designations of these terms?”

As a writing teacher who has spent nearly a quarter of a century in the classroom, I recognize that in comprehending and teaching an Aristotelian approach to ethos, the primary difficulty may not lie with the question, “How do we teach students to understand the complexities that inform a scholastic comprehension of arete, phronesis, and eunoia?” but with the question, “How do we teach students about the concepts of virtue, wisdom, and goodwill while confronting the perception that we are more interested in imposing our own standards of morality upon students than in teaching them how to write and speak in Standard English?” Given the litigious times in which we teach and the inherent resistance many of our students express towards any instruction that they (or their parents) perceive as “spiritual” or “religious,” the conflict between the instructor’s desire to teach about character and the students’ qualms about potential infringements of their rights to maintain their autonomous religious beliefs and their privacy must be directly addressed. This conflict will be an instrumental part of Chapter Five when I discuss the connotations of this study upon the pedagogical choices we make in our classrooms. In Chapter Five, I argue that all of our pedagogical choices of what to
teach (and how much of our instructional time we devote to teaching it) are inherently political choices. Whether as writing/speaking instructors our instructional style overtly emphasizes or implicitly submerges our political orientations, I assert that we do our students a disservice if we do not actively work toward educating them to think critically about the credibility of the sources of the information they consume.

The focus of this study, then, seeks to explore the historic, philosophic, and cultural forces that often seem to legitimize the type of authority that uses a wide variety of coercive techniques to compel belief, to expose the irrational, immoral, and unethical foundations upon which such authority is built, and to distinguish and articulate the essential qualities of the alternative type of authority that seeks to persuade others by demonstrating the characteristics of virtue, wisdom, and goodwill. I believe the distinction between a pro-agentic authority (that operates to persuade others while demonstrating respect for their agency) and a pythonic authority (that operates to coerce belief through a power discrepancy existing between the speaker and the audience) is a critical distinction to teach students when instructing them in composition and rhetoric. Two important questions, then, as we consider teaching our students this critical distinction between a pythonic ethos that coerces belief and a pro-agentic ethos that seeks to persuade while remaining committed to a moral and ethical rhetorical practice, are 1) how do we conceptualize the differences between a “good” authority and a “bad” authority, and 2) how do we organize these conceptualizations to facilitate their instruction in the writing classroom?
Ethos in the 21st Century: Ethics, Agency, and the Paradox of Postmodern Morality

So far, I have argued that there is an important and critical difference between the acts of coercing others into doing things and coercing others into thinking things. Furthermore, I have asserted that this principle is useful in distinguishing a legitimate rhetorical practice from an illegitimate practice since there does not seem to be anything particularly rhetorical about making others “knuckle under” to coercion; after all, anyone with a gun can compel others to follow orders, but it takes the presence of an entirely different type of authority to get someone to change her mind when she feels she is under no duress to do so. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle identifies the type of argument that relies primarily upon the authority of the speaker as an “ethos” argument. Aristotle associates arguments that rely primarily upon the reasons speakers offer for belief with “logos,” and with the arguments that focus upon provoking particular emotional responses within the speaker’s audience, Aristotle associates with “pathos.” Of the “ethos” argument, Aristotle writes:

> It is not the case, as some of the technical writers propose in their treatment of the art, that fair-mindedness on the part of the speaker makes no contribution to persuasiveness; rather, character is almost, so to speak, the controlling factor in persuasion. (38)

If, as Aristotle proposes, the expression of character is central to the ability to persuade, then perhaps, as teachers of composition and rhetoric, we should consider instruction in establishing character and credibility as a fundamental responsibility in teaching our students to communicate effectively. Furthermore, if we are ever to renovate the
concepts of *composition* as more than mere instruction in the proper place to put a comma and *rhetoric* as other than the verbal means to manipulate or intimidate others, then a commitment to teaching students how to critically analyze the ethical factors of authorial credibility may be central to the development of our professional and scholastic reputations.

Unfortunately, whether or not we believe we have an obligation to teach our students about the benefits and pitfalls of establishing credibility in writing and speaking, a plethora of cultural and political forces complicates our current teaching climate and makes instruction in such concepts as “character” and “ethos” difficult. Many people, both from within and from outside the academy, have valid concerns about the propriety of having writing instructors, whose ideologies as a whole comprise the entire spectrum of political and religious orientations, teach students about character when such instruction appears to necessitate examining and defining such precarious and nebulous concepts as “ethical behavior” and “moral principles.” Given a postmodern theoretical environment, with the recognition that all discussions of “Truth” (that is to say: “eternal Truth” with a capital “T”) are by necessity fragmentary and subject to the social discourses that fosters them (see Faigley 33 and 226), we confront competing and conflicting pressures to teach our students both the importance of presenting themselves as moral and ethical agents and the recognition that such terms as “ethical” and “moral” are cultural products that we may feel we are ill-equipped (or ill-advised) to define. The conflict between 1) what we need to teach in order to help our students develop the ability to think critically about the factors that makes writing credible and 2) what we feel
we are able to teach our students without subjecting them to idiosyncratic and relative moralities, places us square in the middle of a pedagogical paradox. On one hand, we may feel duty bound to teach our students to think critically about the ethical and moral significance of the messages that they create and consume, and on the other hand, we may feel establishing standards for recognizing what makes a “good” ethos versus a “bad” ethos requires us to articulate values that lie beyond our capacities as writing instructors to establish. It is as though it is proper and necessary to teach our students to understand that there are important differences between a “good” ethos and a “bad” ethos, but we cannot (or should not) claim we possess the moral authority to define what is meant by the words “good” or “bad,” or even what it means “to be moral.”

Of course, we are not the only professionals who have had to face dilemmas originating in the establishment and application of useful moral definitions. For decades, judges who have had to rule on obscenity cases have come to recognize the difficulties that manifest when they are asked to determine the boundaries of what is and what is not pornographic. As with rhetoricians charged with explaining the differences between the factors that make an authority credible or not, many judges who have no problems affirming the existence of obscenity, find themselves at a loss to define precisely the qualities that can be used to definitively determine whether any particular work is or is not obscene. Possibly the most frequently cited example of this quandary comes from the 1964 case *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. Justice Potter Stewart wrote in his opinion of the case that pornography can be recognized as such without explicit definitions; he wrote, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within
that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But *I know it when I see it*, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that" (italics added for emphasis).

As writing teachers, we face the similar problem of telling our students that when doing research (particularly on the Internet) some of the sources they may be referring to should not be trusted, and while it is sometimes difficult for us to articulate those qualities that make a source questionable, we typically feel we can confidently echo Judge Stewart by saying, “I know it when I see it.” The problem, then, is how do we demonstrate to our students that any particular source they may bring to us is “bad” or “dubious” without setting ourselves up as the primary legitimate arbitors of all that is “good” or “true”? This problem is compounded if we are sincere in acknowledging that our own sensibilities are a byproduct of our cultural affiliations and life experiences and, thus, we may not always be comfortable claiming to know who should or should not be trusted. Although we may have many years of classroom experience, a wide range of academic credentials, and the full confidence of our academic institutions behind us to support the legitimacy of our pronouncements of “I know it when I see it” when it comes to deeming any of our students’ sources “dubious” or “untrustworthy,” there may remain something in our declarations that leaves us (and more likely our students) dissatisfied with our assessments. If a student brings in a printout of a webpage that asserts “the Holocaust never happened” or “space aliens were behind President Kennedy’s assassination,” we know (basically from Hume’s formula that the more incredible something is the more unlikely it is to be true) that the student’s sources cannot be
trusted, but we may not bother to reflect upon how it is that we have come to know what we know about credibility. Given our legitimate employment in the classroom, we may have earned the right to rely solely upon our own professional ethos to declare students’ sources of information as not worthy of credibility, but when we do so, especially if we offer no other justification than “as an expert I can tell you that your source is full of baloney,” what are we actually teaching our students about the nature of authority other than the necessity to trust in the credibility of people who claim to know more than they do? If this pedagogical mode is our common practice in a writing classroom, then how can we expect our students to recognize the difference between an authoritative source and an authoritarian source the next time they bring in questionable material to support their arguments? At a workshop a few years ago, I heard a presenter say, “The more people rely upon authority to answer their questions, the more they come to rely on getting their questions answered by authority,” and the truth of that adage certainly has been reflected in my experience as a classroom teacher. Quite often, students are not as interested in getting a good answer that can be reasonably defended as they are interested in merely having any answer that allows them to move on to their next concern.

If the circumstances of respecting both student autonomy and the need to define “good” and “bad” (in order to distinguish “good” from “bad”) has ensnared us in postmodern paradox, then perhaps a consideration of paradox itself may lead us to a useful way to consider how to move beyond this conundrum. To clarify the problem that emerges from the need for practical and usable definitions of terms that resist simple definition because of their reliance on relative moral contexts (such as “good” and “bad”
or even “legitimate” and “illegitimate”), I offer The Writing Instructor’s Paradox of Postmodern Morality: “Writing instructors need to acknowledge and honor the wide diversity of contexts from which conflicting representations of truth can emerge while also remaining resolute that some persuasive activities are always wrong and that the people who rely upon them cannot be trusted.” The problem, then, essentially is “how can we claim to embrace the belief that human understanding is contextual and also claim we hold an authority that is somehow just far enough outside of context to judge when someone else’s contextual understanding is flawed?” It is as though we want to claim both that while there are lots of ways that people can come to their understandings, when it comes to identifying writers and speakers who are not credible, “we know it when we see it.” From this perspective, as writing instructors our professional ethos seems to balance upon three (apparently) incompatible premises: 1) we want to recognize that knowledge is located in historical/cultural/personal circumstances, 2) we want to concede that whenever we do not share someone else’s historical/cultural/personal circumstances, we open ourselves up to the perceptions of egocentrism if we claim to know better than others about the veracity of the truths they present in their writing, and 3) we want to retain the authority that (when we deem it necessary) can legitimately claim to recognize the qualities that impinge upon credibility in writing. The contradiction, of course, is that to hold these premises simultaneously we need to maintain that somehow the qualities that impinge upon credibility are outside the boundaries of historical/cultural/personal circumstance. Even as far as this chapter goes, I want to assert both the belief that a particular persuasive behavior (i.e., coercion) is always wrong (when presented as
“rhetorical”), and still affirm that I am committed to the belief that rhetorical truths are inherently susceptible to the contexts from which they emerge. In other words, if it is my intention to maintain a consistent internal logic and my academic integrity, then how do I
1) honor and respect the broad spectrum of human experience from which such concepts of “right” and “wrong” emerge,
2) acknowledge the fragmentary nature of truth,
3) question the authenticity of meta-narratives that claim insights to timeless truths, and
4) still insist that there is a real difference between a “good” rhetorical authority that respects individual agency and a “bad” rhetorical authority that is mostly (if not entirely) concerned with the efficacy of its coercive techniques when such a perspective apparently requires a rigid moral authority to make such a pronouncement?

The answer, I hope to demonstrate in the following section, lies in accepting the implications of this postmodern paradox and moving on.

Living with the Paradox of Postmodern Morality

In writing about the nature of paradox, Anna Orlandini identifies three types: logical, semantic, and cultural. According to Orlandini, paradoxes “represent the actual meeting-point, or intersection, between philosophy, rhetoric, and linguistics”(66). Although there are many ways to define paradox, the essential quality of paradox is the contradiction that arises from trying to assert two mutually exclusive truths simultaneously. In the case of the Writing Instructor’s Paradox of Postmodern Morality
(referred to above), the contradiction arises from wanting to maintain both 1) that such concepts as “right” and “wrong” are open to contextual interpretation and 2) that some persuasive techniques are always “wrong” and not open to contextual interpretation (when being defined as “rhetorical”). On one hand, I want to defend the assertion that I am committed to a reflexive tentativeness in regards to the application of such historically and culturally defined terms as “good,” “bad,” “ethical,” and “moral,” and on the other hand, I want to assert that I believe coercive methods indifferent to the agency of those they are directed at are categorically “unethical” and “immoral.” The central problem is a common feature of many paradoxes; whenever one tries to establish the truth of a premise that is self-referential, then the resulting circularity produces an endlessly repetitive loop. For example, Epimenides is remembered for saying that “All Cretans are liars” while being from Crete himself. Thus, if his statement is true, then being a liar, we are not to believe it, but if his statement is not true, it offers support to his contention that Cretans tell lies. If I say that I am committed to the importance of contextual circumstances in understanding authorial credibility, then I seem to be contradicting myself when I assert that the use of coercion as an instrument to foster belief is universally unethical. I do not believe, however, this is a fatal contradiction as I hope to demonstrate below.

Fortunately, I am not the first postmodern compositionist to consider the paradox that emerges from being self-reflective about one’s rhetorical practices. In “Rhetoric and Reflexivity,” Yameng Liu confronts the notion that the paradox of being committed to a scholarship that both embraces and challenges the existence of universal realities should
lead to a rhetorical paralysis. In recognizing the logical and ethical ramifications that a postmodern awareness may bring to rhetoric and composition, Liu writes that many rhetorical theorists appear to be convinced that having accepted the postmodern, anti-objectivist assumption about the inevitable situatedness of human discourse, we would be less than ‘honest’ if we were to avoid talking about the partiality or contingency of our own perspective, and we would certainly be guilty of inconsistency if we were to avoid applying what we say of language and discourse in general to our own text. (336)

However, Liu offers a reasonable concession out of this postmodern loop of self-referential circularity by suggesting that our concern with the ethical ramifications of the universal aspects of rhetorical theory can be managed by remaining focused on our common humanity and our principled intentions. Liu writes, “For a contemporary rhetorician, the proper locus for addressing whatever ethical concerns we may have in scholarship should be the network of motives, expectations, and obligations governing the conduct and interaction of writers and their audiences” (337). Thus, in keeping with my designation that a “good” ethos (the pro-agentic) originates in a deep and abiding concern for the agency of both one’s audience and oneself, I am willing to commit myself to defining such terms as “ethical,” “moral” and “reasonable” as necessary to explain the salient qualities of authorial credibility. The primary ethical apparatus for justifying the choices I want to make in using Aristotle’s three essential qualities of a “good” ethos (virtue, wisdom, and goodwill) is that I am arguing for a rhetorical theory that places the
ability to consider what is right (and, thus, to make decisions based upon the best information available) as the nexus for understanding rhetorical morality. Since I propose that the basis of a legitimate rhetorical practice lies outside of a practice that resorts to coercion, I am asserting that the zygote of rhetorical morality lies in a comprehension of (and an appreciation for) the agency of one’s audience.

Perhaps the central issue of the Writing Instructor’s Paradox of Postmodern Morality is the presumption that any invocation of morality into a theoretical space that needs to clearly define a persuasive practice (such as the use of coercion) as “unethical,” “immoral,” and “irrational” is somehow equivalent to evoking some form of “eternal” or “universal” value system. I contend this impulse – to conflate any expression of human values with the imposition of some all-inclusive doctrine (to which everyone should submit) – needs to be resisted. If there is a legitimate rhetorical path that leads out of the postmodern quagmire of defining what is or is not moral or ethical, then the path needs to be clearly identified with warnings signs and disclaimers that only lemmings follow trails without considering the implications for their own well-being. In “Symposium: The Limits and Alternatives to Skepticism: A Dialogue,” Wayne Booth and Peter Elbow challenge the usefulness of any rhetorical theory that emerges from the type of postmodern, radical skepticism that automatically dismisses human values as irrelevant to the mechanics of persuasion. Booth writes:

Through the past two centuries, attempts to reject dogmatic, radical empiricism often led to responses quite different from Peter Elbow’s and mine: not just “Let’s restore faith in the validity of some nonempirical
reasoning” but “Let’s acknowledge that all conclusions, all convictions, are shoddy – underminable by further inquiry. Nothing is demonstrable; every claim to truth, even claims about so-called hard facts, even the most rigorous scientific claims, can be deconstructed, considered as merely socially or culturally constructed and therefore unreliable.” Extreme versions of this kind of skepticism angered not just the positivists but many of us who were convinced that some values are real, genuine, rationally defensible, even though in one special sense socially constructed. (380)

The point that Booth makes so clearly in the passage above is that while it is possible to argue ad nauseam about the “absolute” truth of any proposition and furthermore, to deconstruct the validity of even the most universally held beliefs, the utility of doing so remains antithetical to genuine rhetorical pursuits. While “Arguing for argument’s sake” is often useful in classroom discussions when the purpose of the discussion is to recognize as many relevant factors as possible in contextualizing a debate or to help students hone their skills in critical thinking, in “real world” arguments that truly require some resolution and the disputants have serious psychological stakes in the outcome, acts of endless deconstruction merely serve to intensify the pettiness and hostility in the discourse. If in the course of an argument I assert that “water is wet,” and the person I am arguing with responds by insisting that “ice is water, and it isn’t wet,” then as a participant in the argument I have to make a value judgment as to whether the other person is offering a useful distinction (and I have yet to grasp its significance) or is
merely being hostile, annoying, and indifferent to finding a resolution to the conflict between us. How often do we find ourselves dealing with people who – while arguing for some course of action – are obviously more interested in retribution (for entering into conflict with them) than in resolution? Although we need to acknowledge that the type of human values that bestow meaning to such terms as “good,” “reasonable,” and “moral” are socially and culturally constructed, we would do well to remember that because all rhetorical conflict is inescapably mired in human sensibilities, the need for some mutual agreement in these terms’ definitions is essential if we are ever to discover the firm, common ground that will offer the possibility of rhetorical resolution to our differences.

The Pragmatics of Agency

Because I am identifying a “good” ethos (the pro-agentic) with one that is fundamentally concerned with respecting the agency of both the rhetor and her audience and a “bad” ethos (the pythonic) with the mindset that respects only the efficacy of getting others to go along with its pronouncements, it may be useful at this juncture to consider the concept of “agency” itself. Given a rhetorical situation in which a minimum of two parties are facing disagreement over the truth or applicability of a particular belief, what does it really mean to respect the agency of other people if, simultaneously, we are trying to convince them of the rightness of our own position?

Among the myriad ways that theorists have employed to consider the ramifications of the concept of “agency,” perhaps the most accessible approach begins with the recognition that what makes each of us unique is the incredible breadth of life
experience that we bring to understanding who we are and how we conceive of our place in the universe. A sincere concern for the agency of others begins with the acknowledgment that although we may share the same planet, each of us is born into a different multifaceted matrix of psychological, historic, cultural, economic, and biologic influences. In considering how these influences impact upon our conception of our personal identities and how these forces provide nuances to our understanding of agency, Charles Levine writes:

To be aware of one’s social and/or personal identity means that one is thinking about and deriving a generalized, transcontextual understanding of the meanings of one’s personal and social self-concepts. These identity domains are the major source of the ego’s sense of spatial and temporal continuity. (179)

Here Levine shows that as we internalize our life experiences into self-concepts that provide a sense of continuance as we grow and change, we are nonetheless always in the process of reevaluating our notions of who we are. Throughout our lives, but possibly with the most difficulty during our adolescence, we gain a sense of our own identities through the acceptance and rejection of the social and cultural mores of the people with whom we communicate on a regular basis.

Taking the agency of others seriously entails a commitment to respecting our inescapable human condition that limits our perspectives to our own unique life experiences. Whenever we are willing to expend the energy to convince others that their life experiences have led them to draw the wrong conclusion concerning some aspect of
our shared reality, we should be willing to accept the possibility that maybe it is our own misconceptions that need to be remedied. One rhetorical certainty is, that as human beings, we are all deeply committed to some ideals and principles while experiencing profound ambivalence toward other ideals and principles. That we regularly intermingle with other people who do not share our perceptions or commitments should not surprise us, and yet, whenever we encounter sober opposition to expressions of our most cherished core values (especially when this comes from the people we love and who we expect “to know better”), it almost always comes as a bit of a shock to our moral sensibilities. A genuine dedication to respecting the agency of others means we need to accept not only that other people may disagree with our beliefs, but they do not need to experience the importance of our beliefs with the same intensity as we do.

A sophisticated understanding of the *pro-agentic* ethos recognizes that rejecting another’s beliefs is – to a certain extent – a rejection of that person as well. While we are in the thralls of vigorously experiencing our strongest convictions (felt most poignantly perhaps as they emerge in the midst of a passionate and heated quarrel), it may be practically impossible in those moments to recognize that sometimes in argument we are not just defending the grounds for what we believe, but the very right to be the type of person who holds such beliefs. Thus, sometimes when we really care about the substance of what we believe, we are not just arguing over *the reasons* for our beliefs but over the very *right* to be the people who believe as we do.

As teachers of rhetoric and composition, sometimes we become so focused on offering instruction in the critical methods of analyzing an argument’s rationale that we
overlook the importance of telling our students that it is useful to pay attention to the psychic motivations that generate conflict in the first place. In other words, if the goal of an argument is to seek a resolution that is to be the most satisfactory to all the parties involved (and not merely to terminate the disagreement as quickly as possible by the disputant who wields the most forceful rationale), then in addition to teaching our students to pay attention to where an argument is heading, we need also to teach them to give serious consideration to where the others are coming from. This conception of *ethos* – that holds that the observation of character is not only significant to an argument’s rational legitimacy but is furthermore intimately related to the environmental forces that structure its participants’ moral constitution – began in Ancient Greece with some of the earliest considerations of the role of *ethos* in argument. In *The Ethos of Rhetoric* (2004), fourteen noted rhetorical theorists and critics presented essays on the usefulness of the term *ethos* when its definition originates from the pre-Aristotelian usage that translates from the ancient Greek as “a place of dwelling or habitat.” Given this particular definition of ethos, character arises from the social and cultural influences of the speaker’s home grounds; thus, to tell someone that you understand “where they are coming from” works both literally and metaphorically. Editor Michael J. Hyde writes:

> The *ethos* of rhetoric would have one appreciate how the *premises* and other materials of arguments are not only tools of logic but also mark out the *boundaries* and *domains* of thought that, depending on how their specific discourses are *designed* and *arranged*, may be particularly inviting and moving for some audience. The *ethos* of rhetoric makes use
of our inventive and symbolic capacity to construct dwelling places that are stimulating and aesthetically, psychologically, socially, and perhaps theologically instructive. (xiii) (Italics are from the original.)

Thus, the importance of such an understanding of *ethos* comes in an appreciation for how persuasion is as much a matter of presenting one’s position as a rhetor as one who lives in a moral terrain already familiar to her audience as it is a matter of grounding one’s reasons in a logical domain constructed from familiar linguistic milestones and landmarks. In differentiating between a logical argument and an ethical argument, Eugene Garver affirms the importance of this communal aspect of *ethos*:

> Ethical argument allows us to raise the crucial question of what is worth listening to. What *should* I hear? What *can* I hear? One person might feel great pain at being excluded from military service because he is a homosexual, while another feels equally great pain when she learns that gays are allowed to serve in the military. We still have to answer the political question of which feelings of pain deserve our attention. It is only the *ethos* of the community that can decide which emotions, and which reasons, we should listen to. (31-32)

An ethical rhetorical practice that is committed to taking the agency of others seriously necessitates the observance of three moral principles:

- first, while they may be in conflict over a wide gamut of issues, participants need to agree that authentic agency offers people the freedom
to make choices even if those choices are never completely understood by everyone involved in the dispute,

- second, *pro-agentic* communication requires that participants actually listen to what the other side has to say, and
- third, each participant must come to accept that genuine disagreement arises out of alternative experiences of perceived reality, and thus dismissing another person’s point of view may consequently come across as dismissing the validity of the other person’s life experience.

Because I am suggesting that life experiences are emblematic of agency, some readers may recognize the influence of John Dewey’s pragmatism upon my theorization of the *pro-agentic ethos*. For Dewey, life experience offers the “inclusive integrity” from which people gain knowledge from their social environments (*Experience* 11). In “Beyond the Postmodern Impasse of Agency: The Resounding Relevance of John Dewey’s Tacit Tradition,” Donald Jones argues that Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy has an important place in the writing classroom. With its emphasis upon experience as the foundation of knowledge, Dewey’s pragmatism offers writing instructors the means to help their students develop a greater sense of their individual agency, Jones suggests, by offering to students instructional choices that would have them explore their life experiences as a rhetorical inquiry into the linguistic and social influences upon their thinking. For Jones, a Deweyan writing instructor would base classroom instruction “on the following pragmatic principles: the primacy of experience, the experimental method of inquiry, the influence of language upon thought, an individual’s discursive
collaboration with others, and an individual’s transactional relationship with language itself” (100).

A consideration of Dewey’s pragmatism may be useful in establishing the ways a *pro-agentic ethos* exemplifies a vital moral component in rhetorical pursuits while a *pythonic ethos* operates exclusively to promote its own agenda (by whatever means it deems necessary). Instrumental in understanding the aspects of character that distinguish a pro-agentic ethos from a pythonic ethos is the recognition that a precondition of being persuasive is being heard. A pro-agentic ethos communicates an openness to entertain questions that challenge its *authoritative position* while a pythonic ethos dynamically seeks to quell inquiry by issuing decrees from an *authoritarian stance* that refuses to be disputed. In other words, an ethical and moral *rhetorical practice* embraces the process of dialogic investigation and is committed to modifying beliefs when facts or assumptions have been shown to be faulty while an unethical and immoral *coercive practice* remains dogmatic about the rightness of its beliefs and thus express only contempt for alternative explanations for whatever has been ordained as “Truth.” Central to Dewey’s philosophy of pragmatism is its reliance on an outlook that accommodates inquiry. According to *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*:

[Dewey’s] logic was a theory of inquiry, a general account of how thought functions, not in an abstract or purely formal mode, but in the inquiries of successful science and in the problem-solving of ordinary daily life. Dewey’s ‘instrumentalism’ defined inquiry as the transformation of a puzzling, indeterminate situation into one that is sufficiently unified to
enable warranted assertion or coherent action; and the knowledge that is
the object of inquiry is, Dewey insisted, just as available in matters of
morals and politics as in matters of physics and chemistry. What is
required in all cases is the application of intelligent inquiry, the self-
correcting method of experimentally testing hypotheses created and
refined from our previous experience. (Hanson 197)

The tentative quality that Dewey assigns to knowledge, its capacity for shape-shifting to
make room for innovative understanding or for mutating into something completely
different whenever experience deems it necessary to discard some newly obsolete
anachronism, has left many social critics with a lingering anxiety that such relativism
portends an inevitable downward slide into nihilism. After all, many such critics have
argued, how can we escape a belief that nothing really matters if everything we know and
believe to be true is ultimately open to repudiation? I contend this reading of Dewey’s
pragmatism is both misinformed and needlessly reactionary. The epistemological
foundation of pragmatism is based upon the understanding that what is known is a
function of what has been experienced (both individually and collectively), and thus, as
experience expands and changes, so too does knowledge. It is absurd to conflate
Dewey’s contention that “no bit of knowledge or moral principle is immune from
criticism and revision” with the assertion that “eventually everything we know will turn
out to be either wrong or unimportant.” Critics who would substitute pragmatism with
nihilism should recognize that before society discards what is already known, the
knowledge that comes to replace it must demonstrate its veracity and utility as something
better or it will fail to gain acceptance. Furthermore, Dewey points out that even though
hegemonic forces may for a while be able to sustain belief in their dogmatic
pronouncements through the use of draconian measures, eventually this type of
authority is doomed to fail. For instance, in “Authority and Freedom,” Dewey writes:

For a time, while in need of security and a sense of feeling of solidarity, men will submit to authority of this kind. But if history shows anything, it shows that the variable factors in individuals cannot be permanently suppressed or completely eradicated. The principle of individual freedom expressed in the modern individualistic movement is deeply rooted in the constitution of human beings. The truth embodied in it cannot die no matter how much force is brought down upon it. (par. 27)

In arguing for a pro-agentic ethos as the moral standard for rhetorical practices, I am asserting that a conscious commitment to persuasive methods that recognize and eschew the use of coercion is clearly not the final word in establishing authoritative credibility, but it is, at the very least, a useful place to begin in theorizing the essential qualities of a “good” ethos. I propose that teaching student rhetors and writers to take seriously the agency of their audiences as they construct their messages is more than a good rhetorical technique for generating empathy (or, perhaps as Kenneth Burke would have it, engendering “identification”), it is a diagram for charting their own moral orientations. In “Toward a Dialogical Perspective on Agency,” social theorists Paul Sullivan and John McCarthy recognize the importance of placing one’s own lived experience in the center of understanding the agency of others. They write:
Perhaps the most significant feature of agency in the context of experience is the reflexive awareness of our own agency (I-for-myself). It is this reflexivity that brings with it a sense of morals in our dialogues with the other. That is, we have some choice in how we author the value of another. As such, we have a sense of making the right choices, of making ethically particular choices that will enrich the other. This points us towards an aesthetic account of agency that puts potentiality and responsibility at the center of inquiry. (307)

In asserting the primacy of agency as the quintessential characteristic of ethos, I am attempting to underscore my fundamental critical thesis: a coercive authority (pythonic) may offer good motives to follow orders, but a rhetorical authority (pro-agentic) offers good reasons to be believed. A pro-agentic ethos is authoritative not only because it is willing to expose its warrants and assumptions, but because it welcomes challenges to its viewpoints and accepts change as a natural condition of human understanding. A pythonic ethos is overtly authoritarian and deals with dissent to its powerful and deific opinions with coercion, retribution, and censorship. Even when the fundamental persuasive engine of an argument lies within its apparent rationality, acceptance of the rhetor’s logic (supported by its organizational structure, its intellectual assumptions, and its empirical warrants) remains contingent upon the rhetor’s ability to establish her credibility through demonstrations of virtue (areté), wisdom (phronesis), and goodwill (eunoia). In the following section, I will explain how a consideration of these three qualities, which Aristotle identified as essential for establishing a good ethos, through
heuristics based in three singular philosophical orientations may offer us insights into their significance for speech and writing pedagogy.

Epistemology, Ontology, and Doxa as Rhetorical Heuristics of Ethos

Heuristics are cognitive devices useful for discovering information or developing understanding. In the next three chapters that follow this introductory chapter, I employ three philosophic orientations as heuristics for examining and understanding the three qualities that Aristotle associated with a good ethos (arete, phronesis, eunoia). Just as three different physical lenses (such as a microscope, a magnifying glass, and a telescope) can provide alternative perspectives and insights into a deeper understanding of visible material, I propose to examine the qualities of virtue, wisdom, and goodwill through three singular theoretical perspectives to observe and develop a deeper appreciation for their rhetorical significance – especially in regards to their relevance for establishing and maintaining a pro-agentic ethos. The three theoretical/philosophical contexts are epistemology, ontology, and doxa. Throughout the next three chapters, with an entire chapter devoted to each of the three Aristotelian qualities (commencing in Chapter Two with “virtue”), perspectives provided by considerations of epistemology, and ontology, and doxa upon these qualities may enhance our ability as writing instructors to teach our students how to gain an appreciation for the factors that either enhance or diminish rhetorical credibility.

The first of these three philosophical heuristics, epistemology, is the branch of philosophy that works to understand the processes by which knowledge is constructed, limited, and validated. Perhaps the most fundamental question to the study of
epistemology is the question of “How do we know what we know?” The attempt to discern the foundations of knowledge is a very old concern that arose among the ancient Greeks, and the debate over whether rhetoric can create knowledge (a notion the Sophists promoted through their understanding of *kairos*, a term that refers to the circumstantial conditions of truth) or if, rather, rhetoric can only transmit what is already known (an idea that Plato champions in *Gorgias*) epitomizes Plato’s aversion to Sophistic thinking. In considering this relationship between rhetoric and knowledge, Aristotle manages the dispute over rhetoric’s role in the formation of knowledge by asserting that rhetoric is a process unsuitable for handling perpetual, philosophic inquiries but is well-suited for handling the pragmatic questions concerning the administration of everyday life (Bizzell 30).

More than two millennia later, Robert L. Scott brings the recognition of epistemology as an important academic construct to the attention of the rhetorical field in his 1967 essay, “On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic,” and two decades later, James A. Berlin demonstrates how composition praxis can be classified according to their epistemological orientations in his influential book, *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges*, 1900 – 1985. Rhetorical theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin, who demonstrates that all discourse can be understood as dialogic, and Kenneth Burke, who represents knowledge as being filtered through “terministic screens,” served to usher in the advent of postmodern rhetorical theory and its attendant awareness of the fragmentary nature of truth and knowledge. For the past couple of decades, compositionists and rhetoricians have grown increasingly suspicious of “meta-narratives”
and increasingly aware of how social contexts construct and mold perceptions of what people accept as truth and the limits on what can be known. Thus, as the next three chapters of this study explore the epistemic nature of arete, phronesis, and eunoia, the telos (of this specific theoretical lens) will be to examine the ways in which rhetors make these qualities conspicuous (that is to say known) to their audiences through the course of their communicative acts and the signifiers by which audiences recognize these qualities.

The second philosophical heuristic I will be using for developing our understanding of arete, phronesis, and eunoia is ontology. Ontology is the branch of philosophy that works to understand and categorize what actually exists. As with epistemology, the ancient Greeks provide us with a conceptual basis for comprehending the rhetorical implications of the ontological question, “How do we know what really exists?” Throughout his dramatic dialogues (and perhaps most vividly in The Republic with his “Allegory of the Cave”), Plato’s ontology emerges from a view of eternal forms which lay beyond the perceived world of familiar existence, and Aristotle, who was Plato’s student, develops his ontology from an understanding of form as the dynamic target to which existence is forever in the process of becoming. In “Aristotle’s Rhetoric as Ontology,” Allen Scult writes, “Form, for Aristotle, is thus not a preexisting static ‘idea’ into which the world shapes itself. Rather, form is motion, the motion of natural phenomenon from potentiality to actuality” (152). An analogous ontological relationship concerning how we should understand the existence of an external reality can also be recognized in the affiliation between German philosophers Edmund Husserl and his student, Martin Heidegger. Terry Eagleton characterizes their different approaches to the
apprehension of reality as the difference between “essentialism” according to Husserl and “existentialism” according to Heidegger (Eagleton 53). Through his “phenomenological” method, Husserl endeavors to grasp experientially the essence of what could be reliably known about reality; by focusing on universal essences, Husserl hopes to achieve a transcendental understanding of phenomena that goes beyond the fragmentary perceptions of individual, empirical observations. Heidegger, on the other hand, bases his ontology upon the recognition of the absolute futility of trying to eliminate human subjectivity (especially as it is informed by social, cultural, historic, and linguistic contexts) from the perception of an “objective” existence. Eagleton writes:

Heidegger’s form of philosophy is generally referred to as “hermeneutical phenomenology” to distinguish it from the “transcendental phenomenology” of Husserl and his followers; it is called this because it bases itself upon questions of historical interpretation rather than on transcendental consciousness. (57)

Because Heidegger’s ontology, that is to say his method of understanding what is real, arises out of his conception of being human within an all encompassing Being, and Aristotle’s ontology arises out of an appreciation of form as it moves from potentiality to actuality, we may recognize how a rhetor’s ethos – as it is made apparent through the communicative act – may be both performative and authentic. Thus, as this study investigates the ontological aspects of Aristotle’s qualities of ethos, the function of this particular theoretical lens will be to observe both what is essential and extant in the enactment of rhetorical character and authority.
The third heuristic I will be using to examine arete, phronesis, and eunoia is doxa. Doxa, though a relatively obscure term among composition and communication theorists, refers to the knowledge based within the established mores of a given culture. In “Introduction to the Study of Doxa,” Ruth Amossy writes, “Inherited from ancient Greece, the notion of doxa as common knowledge and shared opinions haunts all contemporary disciplines that put communication and social interaction at the center of their concerns” (369). Because doxastic knowledge forms the foundations upon which cultures base their traditional wisdom, doxa represents the doctrines and conventions that are generally accepted without challenge; thus, as the term for beliefs that avoid scrutiny because they draw their authority from common consensus, the concept itself frequently goes unexamined as an aspect of rhetorical theory.

Although an essential component in understanding the elements that support the legitimacy of the pro-agentic ethos and challenge the legitimacy of the pythonic ethos, I leave an extended explication of doxa for Chapter Three’s discussion of wisdom (after explicating in depth the theoretical implications of epistemology and ontology in considerations of virtue in Chapter Two). A look at the recent theoretical discussions of doxa is useful in understanding the ways patriarchal forces have “normalized” the valorization of both “objective” theory and “empirical” methods in constructing authority that masks fascistic and undemocratic authoritarianism by hiding political impulses behind conservative social conventions.

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6 The Oxford English Dictionary currently lists the adjective form of the word doxastic, but neither lists nor defines the term doxa. An online search for academic articles using the word as a rhetorical term uncovered fewer than 30 examples of its use.
With this understanding of *doxa* as a theoretical lens, the *telos*, then, in regards to this study’s examination of Aristotle’s three qualities of ethos (*arete*, *phronesis*, and *eunoia*) is to consider how conceptions of virtue, wisdom, and goodwill are constituted by conventional discourses and to explicate how the mainstream understandings of these qualities are challenged by rhetorical theorists (several operating from feminist, queer, and post-colonial perspectives) who work to disrupt the otherwise normative definitions provided by traditional and hegemonic conceptions of authority and credibility.

Given the theoretical heuristics provided by the concepts of epistemology, ontology, and *doxa*, the work of the next three chapters will be to use these heuristics to examine the three qualities that Aristotle identified as being essential to constructing a “good” ethos in the minds of ones audience (the qualities of virtue, wisdom, and goodwill). Through the understanding that is generated by these three philosophical heuristics, the next three chapters intend to develop a theoretical model of ethos that distinguishes and elucidates a “good” ethos from a “bad” ethos while both acknowledging and explicating the factors that

1) construct our *understanding* of what is “good” and what is “bad” [epistemology],

2) define our *experiences* of what is “good” and what is “bad” [ontology], and

3) naturalize and normalize our *cultural expectations* of what is “good” and what is “bad” [doxa].

By identifying the pro-agentic ethos with the qualities of virtue, wisdom, and goodwill, I hope to establish and reify the connection between a “good” ethos as one
being centered in an essential concern for the integrity of both the rhetor and her audience, and the pythonic ethos as one being concerned with the success of its coercive, unethical manipulation. Once the critical relationships have been demonstrated between the Aristotelian qualities that designate the pro-agentic ethos and the indifference (or disdain) to these qualities with which the pythonic ethos operates, the final chapter of this study will consider how the connotations of these relationships could influence writing instruction. A clear and coherent exposition of how these qualities identify and establish a pro-agentic ethos (and a lucid explanation of how a pythonic ethos functions without them) holds the potential to help composition teachers recognize the sources of their own classroom authority, orient their students to the ways in which they may either enhance or erode their credibility in their compositions, and articulate more profoundly the factors that make source material credible or dubious.

How the Pro-agentic and Pythonic Ethos Informs Writing Instruction

The fifth and final chapter of this dissertation considers how the nuanced theoretical understanding of virtue, wisdom, and goodwill informs writing pedagogy. By considering the qualities by which we come to recognize and regard virtue, wisdom, and goodwill, I would like to reify the distinctions between the use of authority that persuades its audience and the use of authority that coerces its audience. This ability to distinguish between a pro-agentic ethos and a pythonic ethos, I believe, is fundamental to our roles as writing teachers to instruct our students in methods of communication that are not merely effective but are moral and ethical as well.
Through a comprehensive understanding of the epistemic, ontological, and doxastic factors that influence a contemporary theorization of ethos, we observe the enduring cosmic ballet between authority and credibility. This is an ancient dance perhaps originally choreographed eons ago to fend off fears of the dark unknown and to magically engender the benevolence of some mysterious universal sentience. When we trace this dance historically, we witness through the centuries of Western civilization the shifting weights and influence of its participants as Authority first held Credibility high above an empirical stage and later slowly released Credibility to stand beside its partner upon the floor of physical evidence. Through postmodern observation of this performance, we have come to recognize that the energies that light the stage and organize the foundations upon which the choreography emerges are as manufactured by the human imagination as the dance itself. Now, in viewing the mutual interplay between authority and credibility, I believe it is time to recognize the moral and ethical commitments we incur as the price of our gaze.

I assert that as writing instructors we can no longer afford to imagine that teaching students to write can be accomplished as amoral or apolitical employment. In the spring in which I write this chapter, another college student has gone tragically mad and has ruthlessly murdered more than two dozen of his peers in a desperate attempt to get others to pay attention to his worldview and his life experiences. On his way to chaining the doors and emptying the lethal magazines of his guns into his classmates and instructors alike, the embittered and emboldened killer stopped off at a post office to mail some of his writing and a videoed manifesto to a national news organization. Within two days of
the rampage, the news organization rushed to broadcast their unexpected bounty, and the killer was posthumously granted his final wish to be heard even though it was purchased with the blood and gore of many innocent people who died for no reason other than being caught within the killer’s path of destruction. Meanwhile, a half a world away, an even greater number of innocent people died in an Iraqi market when another sincere and tragically mad young man blew himself up with a bomb affixed to his waist. This catastrophe, however, did not impinge upon the American national consciousness because its commonness as a near daily occurrence in Iraq hardly makes it even newsworthy for our citizenry. I am not suggesting that either tragedy could have been averted by more competent instruction in writing; however, I am asserting that as writing instructors we have an ethical and moral obligation to point out that the philosophical assumptions that authorize the belief that killing oneself and/or random by-passers to make any statement (political or otherwise) is profoundly pythonic and, as such, is identical to the same philosophical orientation that would condone any act of coercion as if it were an act of legitimate rhetorical persuasion.

Although the term “immoral” is perhaps as difficult for us (as writing instructors) to define as “obscenity” was for Justice Stewart, I contend that any discourse that conflates coercion with persuasion, that cannot distinguish between convincing one’s audience and bullying one’s audience, or that prioritizes the outcome of its message over the agency of its addressees is not merely pythonic, it is manifestly immoral. As teachers of effective communication, I believe it is incumbent upon us to emphasize the morality of rhetoric (which may seek to persuade through a variety of ethical means) over the
immorality of coercion. As I have maintained throughout this chapter, I assert that there is not only a vital distinction to be made between rhetoric and coercion, but that an ethical rhetoric is the only moral alternative to oppression. Genuine rhetoric is moral; slavery as a result of thuggery is not.

The pro-agentic ethos makes consideration of the agency of one’s audience a priority. This commitment does not separate us from our common humanity; rather, it should bind it to us. As human beings, our passions have a legitimate place in our arguments. I assert, however, that there remains a need to distinguish pathos (as tempered by concern for virtue, wisdom, and goodwill) from pathology (as fueled by an irrational desire to compel others to think in specific ways to achieve specific ends). Just as coercion is antithetical to rhetoric, so too, I believe, is fear antithetical to education.

In recent decades while teaching our students to write, we have come to recognize how often anxiety over mechanical and grammatical error sometimes inhibits our students’ ability to organize their thinking and articulate their ideas. In the same manner that we have developed theory and methods to explain and contain this anxiety, I assert we now need to develop the pedagogy that recognizes the impropriety of fear and coercion as an acceptable feature of rhetorical discourse. In “Reality, Consensus, and Reform in the Rhetoric of Composition Teaching” (1986), Greg Myers writes that in helping students recognize the ideological forces that promote conformity to hegemonic assertions of “normality,” he was not interested in generating sample assignments, but instead, was keenly interested in the writing instructor’s attitude toward her students. Myers writes:
What I have to suggest is not a method but a stance toward one’s teaching. This stance requires a sort of doubleness: an awareness that one’s courses is part of an ideological structure that keeps people from thinking about their situation, but also a belief that one can resist this structure and help students to criticize it. (432) While finding room for feelings, logic, and character in teaching our students to write, I too am advocating a teaching stance. Our rapidly changing world requires a pedagogy that teaches students to distinguish between a pro-agentic ethos and a pythonic ethos. I contend we have a moral obligation to teach our students to write in ways that begin with the assumption that their audience’s agency is their foremost rhetorical consideration.
CHAPTER TWO: ARETHÊ OR VIRTUE

Have you ever noticed how often in the course of arguing with others we refer to ideological positions as though they were actual geographic locations? We make comments such as “I don’t see where you’re coming from,” or “Look here, you’re misconstruing what I’m saying.” In this chapter, I begin a contemplation of what it means to be virtuous within the rhetorical context with the recognition that what it means to behave ethically and morally has as much to do with where people define good character as it does with how they define good character. In the chapter that follows, the reader will find eight subsections that build upon the concepts of the pro-agentic ethos and the pythonic ethos that were first introduced in Chapter One. This chapter theorizes how considerations of virtue help to establish and reveal the type of authority one presents and encounters while inhabiting the rhetorical space where character emerges. Furthermore, this chapter examines some of the implications of this theorization upon how we model and teach representations of character within the writing classroom.

In the first subsection “On the Epistemological and Ontological Implications of the Emerging Virtual Ethos,” I highlight the importance of recognizing the humanity of others as a precondition for maintaining a healthy civilization, and I argue that the degree of respect we maintain for the agency of others is an important touchstone in gauging moral and ethical behavior whether we are meeting face to face or communicating digitally across virtual networks. In the subsection, “Authority Dwells in the House of Character,” the theories of Aristotle and Kenneth Burke are invoked to help explain how consideration of character impacts the rhetorical space that lies between the rhetor and
her audience. In “Personal Interlude: Lessons from the Midway,” I revisit a childhood memory of an Ohio State Fair for the purpose of introducing what becomes a central metaphor for explicating the differences between Plato’s epistemology and Aristotle’s ontology, “The Maze of Glass.” The next subsection, “A Maze of Glass: Plato’s Epistemology and Aristotle’s Ontology,” explores the metaphor introduced in the previous subsection, and explicates how an understanding of two ancient Greek conceptions of virtue can work to inform a contemporary understanding of what it means to be “virtuous.”

In the following subsection, “Moving through the Maze: Toward a Pro-agentic Understanding of Virtue,” I begin to theorize how a pro-agentic conceptualization of virtue would differ from a pythonic one. This subsection also examines the question of whether instruction in virtue is capable of producing students who are more virtuous as a result; an important reflection that emerges from this question is the observation that without such instruction, how else can we help the students who may want and need this help? The subsequent subsection, “Finding a Place for Virtue: The Ontology of Moral Agency,” demonstrates how an ontological approach to agency is useful in establishing the reality of character’s impact upon persuasion within the rhetorical context. The arguments established in this subsection then serve to develop the key distinctions that are presented in “On the Essential Differences between Pro-Agentic and Pythonic Conceptions of Virtue” in order to develop a deeper, more-nuanced understanding of how virtue emerges as it is reflected by either the pro-agentic or the pythonic orientation. In this subsection, I assert that a pro-agentic conception of virtue, as opposed to a pythonic
conception of virtue, forgoes a position of moral certainty in favor of a provisional commitment to one’s own principles and a willingness to consider the values of others.

In the concluding subsection of this chapter, “On the Possibility of a Universal Morality that Respects Student Autonomy,” I examine the moral and rhetorical theories of Immanuel Kant, Wayne Booth, James Kinneavy, and Dennis Lynch to explore and develop the conceptual qualities that may hold the potential to support a more universal understanding of “virtuous behavior.” The twin questions of who gets to define moral behavior and how it gets represented are significant keys to understanding the mechanics of character as it functions within the rhetorical context. Thus, a consideration of “virtue” informs not only our understanding of how to teach students to consider the impact of character while writing (or speaking) rhetorically; it also informs how we represent ourselves in developing our own professional ethos as well.

On the Epistemological and Ontological Implications of the Emerging Virtual Ethos

The recognition of our common humanity is the key to sustaining a vigorous civilization. Fundamental to maintaining a healthy society is the understanding that compassion is not a commodity that can be bartered for material goods. Dignity, integrity, and respect are qualities that we maintain for ourselves only through our acts of granting them to others. Our place in the world is a place of the world, and this is to say that we are not insensible mounds of carbon meandering atop the surface of a gigantic rock whirling through the vast emptiness of space; we are affective, sentient beings who struggle to find our places in an ever-changing human conglomeration of sympathizers and adversaries. I believe the need for good rhetorical skills that strengthen the ability to
assert and defend human dignity increases exponentially with society’s rapidly expanding technical capacity to communicate globally. Today, with the advent of technologies that allow us to communicate with people half a world away as easily as we can communicate with our neighbors next door, our place in the world has become far less geographic than it is communal, and our understanding of character arises from our negotiations and interactions within these mutual locations.

The original Greek definition of *ethos*, prior to Aristotle’s contextualizing the term for its rhetorical usage, meant “dwelling place.” In the introduction to *The Ethos of Rhetoric*, Editor Michael J. Hyde writes:

> [O]ne can understand the phrase “the *ethos* of rhetoric” to refer to the way discourse is used to transform space and time into “dwelling places” (*ethos*; pl. *ethea*) where people can deliberate about and “know together” (*con-scientia*) some matter of interest. Such dwelling places define the grounds, the abodes or habitats, where a person’s ethics and moral character take form and develop. (xiii)

Thus, more than two millennia ago, before Aristotle organized his thoughts on the elements of effective rhetorical practices into the writing that his students would collect and assemble into the book we now know as *Rhetoric*, considerations of moral character grew out of local cultural norms as they emerged in the nearby marketplace and within the restricted Greek polis (city-state). Now, due to our expanded technical capacities to communicate globally, we can – whenever we feel like it – seek out and interact with other people who share our common interests and concerns; furthermore, with small
movements of our fingers upon a keypad or a mouse, we can filter out the people who disrupt or disturb our own comfortable mores and convictions.

As we become increasingly “plugged in” to virtual communities via such technological marvels as laptops and cell phones, our access to a truly global agora continues to expand; consequently, the “dwelling grounds” for our considerations of moral character are shifting. Today our clans can be voluntary, transient, and (often) anonymous and invisible. In centuries past, local customs of dress and adornments such as emblems, flags, and family tartans marked tribal affiliations; now, we may recognize our kindred through their T-shirts, bumper stickers, and brand affiliations. Although we may recognize our clan members by their login names, it would not be unusual if we were to pass them on the sidewalk in our “real world” expeditions and not know them at all. Throughout most of human history, relatively small geographic territories confined people by the time-consuming necessity of securing the staples of survival, the economic and mechanical infeasibility of traveling long distances, and the superstitious prohibitions against associating with outsiders. Entrapped by these circumstances, people relied upon a relatively small number of kith and kin to supply them with both their physical provisions and their moral convictions. While we now enjoy forms of mobility undreamed of by our ancestors, we also have access to a virtual cornucopia of digital media that offers a nearly endless spectrum of political and moral orientations for us to sample, to embrace, or to ignore. These changes represent huge modifications to the traditional methods in which moral authority has been conventionally established and maintained. Before these epochal changes in our ethical foundations can be judged to be
either good or bad (either for us as individual consumers and citizens or for our nations as a whole), we must first recognize and acknowledge their ontological emergence and their epistemological implications. This is to say that before we can judge whether this paradigm shift – from gathering our knowledge and understanding of how we ought to live from local and specialized authorities who we may have once felt obligated to trust to a vast array of global commentators who cunningly compete for our attention through a host of digital avenues – is a blessing or a curse, we first must recognize the significance of this change and how quickly it has come upon us.

Because as a species we are conscious of our own inclusion in the human community, we come to our ontological notions of what it means to be human through our interactions with other people; thus, we are more apt to question the nature of our existence than we are to question existence itself. Since we share this planet with so many other people, the question “Do good people exist?” is probably not our primary ontological concern. Even the most hardened curmudgeons among us would grant that among a population exceeding six billion people there exists among us human beings who qualify for the descriptor “good person.” The fundamental ontological questions, then, as we begin to consider “virtue” and the qualities that distinguish “good people” from “bad people,” are “By what measurements do we differentiate the ‘good people’ from the ‘bad people’?” and “Through what means can anyone claim the authority to declare which particular measurements are appropriate for sorting ‘the good’ from ‘the bad’?”
Authority Dwells in the House of Character

A return to the Ancient Greek notion of *ethos* as a “dwelling place” helps us consider how the ascription of authority arises from an immanent assessment of character. Regardless of whether we are scrutinizing the beliefs of a few individuals from the perspective of a tight-knit local community or the claims of a pundit offering commentary from the vantage of a global network, the value of an opinion is contingent upon the degree of authority which can be brought to bear upon its contents. The theoretical crux of Chapter One was that when writers and speakers rely upon their own personal authority to convince others of the “rightness” of their positions, a *pro-agentic ethos* begins with a humanistic consideration of the agency of one’s audience and a *pythonic ethos* emerges from a calculated and callous myopia focused exclusively upon achieving its purposes. I argue that a *pro-agentic ethos* is rhetorical because its respect for its audience requires the formation of arguments that persuade rather than coerce, and a *pythonic ethos* is neither ethical nor rhetorical because a threat offers only good reason to surrender one’s conduct but no relevant reason to relinquish a belief. Thus, as this chapter explores what it means to be (or, at least, to appear) virtuous to one’s audience, one of the goals is to articulate what a *pro-agentic theory of virtue* might look like.

If the value of an opinion is proportional to the ethical and moral authority that can be demonstrated to support that opinion, then what qualities are necessary to demonstrate ethical and moral authority? Are there universal standards that can be identified to recognize moral authority? How can we think critically about ethical claims of “goodness,” and furthermore, even if we can agree upon some basal indicators of good
character, how do we teach these to students while still respecting their agency in deciding for themselves the qualities that distinguish “right from wrong”? Further complicating these issues is the problem of writers and speakers who often make claims to moral qualities when their actions and attitudes suggest otherwise; even when I was only thirteen, I did not believe President Nixon when he proclaimed, “I am not a crook.”

While in actual practice, ethos arguments combine with logical arguments as they supplement each other; in theory, the mechanics of an ethos argument works quite differently from a logical argument. Whereas a logical argument offers reasons for the reader to accept the rhetor’s argument, the persuasive force of the ethos argument operates from the assumption that the authority the rhetor brings to bear upon her opinions should be enough—in and of itself—to be persuasive. Thus, a well-established ethos functions as a logical short-cut; it says in effect, “If you have trust me as a human being, then you can trust that my opinions are good ones even without my having to go to all the bother of listing out all of my reasons for my opinions.” Conversely, the ethos argument also says, “If you do not trust me as a human being, you probably won’t trust in my ability to offer a good opinion even if I go to all the trouble of substantiating my arguments with a long catalog of facts and examples.”

The underlying premise of an ethos argument is that the rhetor brings her audience to recognize the common ideological and metaphorical landscape they share. This is to say, a rhetor persuades her audience with an ethos argument by making those who are paying attention to her “feel at home” with the ideas she is promoting. Writing in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke introduces the idea of “Identification” as an
accessory to traditional logical persuasion that works by having the audience recognize ideological common ground. Burke writes, “[I]dentification ranges from the politician who, addressing an audience of farmers, says, ‘I was a farm boy myself,’ through the mysteries of social status, to the mystic’s devout identification with the source of all being” (1019). And, thus, with an ethos argument, the rhetor must first work to develop for her audience a vivid sense of identifying with “where she is coming from” in order to develop within her audience a growing confidence for “where her assertions will take them.” Unless a writer and speaker can establish an initial common ground with her audience, the possibility of a rhetorical encounter can be short-circuited; logical arguments that are never heard have no chance of moving anyone. This is why, I believe, Aristotle puts forth in Rhetoric that character can be more persuasive than logic.

In Rhetoric, Aristotle lays the burden of ethical persuasion squarely on the shoulders of moral character; therefore, if a speaker does not first engender trust in her moral character, then the logic that is brought to bear on her position may be rendered irrelevant. If an audience does not first trust who is speaking, it is unlikely that they will trust what is being argued. Aristotle writes:

There are three reasons why speakers themselves are persuasive; for there are three things we trust other than logical demonstrations. These are practical wisdom [phronēsis] and virtue [aretē] and good will [eunoia]; for speakers make mistakes in they advise through [failure to exhibit] either all or one of these; for either through lack of practical sense they not form opinions rightly; or though forming opinions rightly they do not say what
they think because of a bad character; or they are prudent and fair-minded but lack good will, so that it is possible for people not to give the best advice although they know [what] it [is]. These are the only possibilities. Therefore, a person seeming to have all these qualities is necessarily persuasive to the hearers. (120-121)

Notice in the quotation above that Aristotle recognized, however, that rhetors who are conscious of their audience’s prejudices and predispositions and who say only what their audiences want to hear are people of “bad character.” Today, when we recognize a writer or a speaker saying something only for the purpose of engendering favor with the audience, we refer to this practice as “pandering.” The “pandering” type of ethos, George Yoos writes in “A Revision of the Concept of Ethical Appeal,” is both immoral and fallacious. Yoos writes:

A speaker has two choices in making ethos causally effective. He may distort the audience’s perception of his own personal qualities, or he may develop rhetorically effective personal qualities by being a good person. . . . In short, the emphasis in Aristotle is on persuading an audience of the speaker’s intellectual and moral virtue and the kindred quality of good will. Basic to an understanding of the Aristotelian concept of ethos is seeing how attitudes, beliefs, and the actions of audiences are conditioned by the audience’s expectations about speakers. To trust is to depend upon someone for something, to have reliable expectations; the basis of persuasion in Aristotle’s theory of ethos is causally conditioned by the
speaker's generating or controlling expectations in his audience. Consequently a speaker needs to be cautious; in order to be accepted he needs to identify with the audience’s views of the true, right, and good. Even though he may have views to the contrary, the speaker must adjust to his audience in both temper and character. Ethical appeal is ad hominem.

(44-45)

Ad Hominem, as Yoos is using the term, is a blatant form of dishonesty. Traditionally, ad hominem is the fallacy more commonly recognized as “name calling,” and is the fallacy committed whenever a rhetor or writer draws attention away from the issues at hand by making aspersions regarding the moral character of those opposing one’s position. If, as I have suggested, the intention of the rhetor is more focused upon achieving results than on considerations of audience agency, then my usage of the pythonic ethos fits squarely with Yoos contention that such behavior is both immoral and fallacious. Whatever else we may learn about virtue in the course of this chapter, we must begin with the supposition that, at the very least, a virtuous person believes what she is asserting.

Personal Interlude: Lessons from the Midway

When I was thirteen, my parents took my brothers and me to the Ohio State Fair. Although there were many things to see and do at the fair, the main attraction – as far as my brothers and I were concerned at that age – was “The Midway” with its carnival rides and its “freak shows.”

The rides were mechanical monstrosities designed to hurl their passengers around with such vigor that they would induce nausea and some mild sense of altered
consciousness. The “freak shows” offered a variety of live entertainment in numerous canvas tents each with its own brightly painted mural of the strange attraction concealed within and collectively presenting a bizarre assortment of illusions, rip-offs, and a few, genuine, human mutations. This was the 1970’s, a time in my memory when apparently Americans who visited state fairs did not spend much time reflecting upon the ethics and morality of putting people who were abnormally small, abnormally large, or abnormally strange on display. Many of these acts were pure illusion; the show with the girl in the bikini who transformed into a gorilla was achieved (I learned much later through some difficult adolescent investigation) with a sliding mirror. Some acts were a complete swindle; the act promising to allow its patrons to gawk at the mother of twenty-two children turned out to be a monkey, and really, we didn’t expect to see a monkey and, furthermore, how could we even know if all those little monkeys were actually hers?

As far as the genuine mutations were concerned, the only act I can now remember is the tiny fellow whose banner reputed him to be the “World’s Smallest Man.” Standing (if he were to stand – he was seated in a miniature folding chair when I met him) just slightly taller than a Barbie doll, he entertained people with no special soliloquy about his life; he merely sat in front of an electric fan, smoked a cigar the size of his fist, and answered people’s questions until they reckoned they had seen enough of this tiny fellow and decided to move on. Today if you go to the state fair, the rides are still there to indulge any adolescent urge for nausea and vertigo; however, the “freak shows” are gone, a victim of ever changing public sentiment of what is or is not appropriate to put on display. The “freak shows” have been inadequately replaced with a “video arcade” tent
containing noisy video machines that take people’s money without ever having to be paid a wage. Maybe my sentiments are overly nostalgic, but I seriously doubt the video games available in the modern arcade tent will ever evoke in the minds and souls of their adolescent clientele the same sense of awe and wonder at the gamut of what it means to be human that I felt meeting face to face people who are extraordinarily different; the violence and mayhem displayed on the screens in the arcade tent seem more likely to provide instead a numbing and pervasive conviction of the utter interchangeability of the ordinary pedestrian and (perhaps) even desensitization training to the revulsion of intentionally hurting others with powerful and lethal weapons.

Also on the midway were a few “fun houses” which were small, claustrophobic structures that presented something of a hybrid of both ride and freak show. After paying admission and entering into their labyrinths, partakers would move through their dark interiors while encountering floors that rolled, walls that slid, and an assortment of dimly lit latex ghouls and monsters displayed behind clear plexiglass displays. The goal, if I remember correctly, after entering a funhouse was to leave as quickly as possible while frequently exclaiming to one’s companions (with as much bravado as one could muster) that there was nothing remotely frightening about the experience. One particularly ingenious operator of a funhouse employed a carnival worker in a Halloween mask to wait behind the final plexiglass window near the exit to startle the living daylights out of customers who had grown immune to the terror of immobile, mannequin fiends.

Of all the funhouses available on the midway, there was one that was different in its aesthetics and logistics, and it was my favorite: the “Maze of Glass.” The “Maze of
Glass” was unique because spectators standing outside of the maze could see all of the participants struggle through their journey in its interior. This funhouse was like a combination “human fishbowl” and “human ant farm.” Upon entering, participants faced the challenge of making their way through a labyrinth where the walls were nearly as clear as the passageways. The urge to keep up with the people who had gone ahead – or to stay ahead of those who lagged behind – meant occasionally smashing one’s face into an unforgiving, shatterproof pane of glass. Adding to the disorientation that came from repeated blows to the head and the weirdness of being lost while being able to see one’s precise location in the maze, warped panels of mirrors that made observers ridiculously wide or absurdly tall were scattered throughout.

The “Maze of Glass” is an apt metaphor for considering the quality of virtue. Often in the midst of an argument, we can see where we want to go, but we find ourselves constrained by moral and ethical barriers that may be both simultaneously solid and transparent. Sometimes we recognize that as we navigate our way toward a rhetorical goal, our self-images are distorted by the reflections of others who do not share our perspectives.

**A Maze of Glass: Plato’s Epistemology and Aristotle’s Ontology**

A well known truism from geometry is “the shortest distance between two points is a straight line.” As a writer who is trying to demonstrate an accessible understanding of the concept of “virtue,” I wish it were as easy as finding and following a straight trajectory that clearly demarcates “what is virtue” from “what is not virtue.” Geometry, however, has the glorious luxury of inhabiting a perfectly abstract space, and my readers
and I do not. In the “real world,” the shortest distance to some other place is almost always blocked by some structure that must be navigated before reaching the destination. Thus, while in geometry the quickest, easiest, and clearest way to get from Point A to Point B is the line that connects them, in our “real world” experience the best way to get from “here” to “there” is typically a matter open to disputation. Even when the obstructions between “where we are now” and “where we want to go” are purely physical, disagreements about the best way to go around the impediments are common. Anyone who has ever been frustrated in traffic when the corridor ahead gets blocked by an accident or road construction knows exactly what I am talking about; the driver says the “best way” (which could mean the “shortest way” or “the easiest way” or “the quickest way” but practically never all three at the same time) to get where they want to go is to use “Alternative Route A” and the passengers begin to argue for “Alternative Route B” or “Alternative Route C” because A has too many stoplights or involves “backtracking.” The problem of resolving the “best” way to plot a course when the obstacles themselves are abstractions (i.e., rules, codes, traditions, etc.) exacerbates the difficulties of finding agreement. If somehow (perhaps magically or through some technology yet imagined) we could always get others to see and to agree upon the best way to negotiate the obstacles that prevent us from getting directly to our destinations or hamper our plans for resolving the problems set before us, then the usefulness of many rhetorical skills would become obsolete. In a similar vein, Kenneth Burke writes:

In pure identification there would be no strife. Likewise, there would be no strife in absolute separateness, since opponents can join battle only
through a mediatory ground that makes this communication possible, thus providing the first condition necessary for their interchange of blows. But put identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric. (1022)

Perhaps, the reason Plato had such little use for the art of rhetoric (in *Gorgias* he has his dramatic spokesperson, Socrates, compare it to “cookery”) is because so much of his philosophy emerges out of the contemplation of “ideal forms” exiting in a transcendent reality where, as in geometry, there are no obstacles between Point A and Point B. Although Plato may have been able to conceive of concepts such as “virtue” as ideal forms existing as metaphysical prototypes within a transcendent reality and accessible to the human consciousness through identification of their degraded (but recognizable) versions, I simply cannot make sense of a concept such as “virtue” outside its presence in the messy and complicated human matrix of cultural, social, and historical contexts. This is to say that for me, knowledge of such a term as “virtue” – as Plato offers an understanding of it (in the Greek, *episteme*) – as a theoretical (and, thus, *epistemological*) construct does not seem to offer us much to consider without some specific association to ground it within the ontological realm of lived human experience.

The same was apparently true for Aristotle. While Plato’s metaphysical philosophy emerges from a transcendent realm of ideal forms, Aristotle’s philosophy breaks with his teacher’s *epistemology* and originates from a compulsive observation and organization of his (presumed) *ontological* experience with (what he considered) ordinary
reality. For Aristotle, then, an understanding of a concept such as “virtue” emerges not from a contemplation of the ideal, but from the identification of qualities he associates with the concept as they manifest through human interaction. Thus, within a 50-year span of history, two of the foremost Greek philosophers demonstrate – through their musings and speculations upon the human relationship with reality – two diametrical starting points for considering the essence of a concept such as “virtue”; the first (Plato’s system) arising from an extended meditation of the ideal and then extrapolating how such as understanding of the ideal could inform our understanding of corporal existence, and the second (Aristotle’s method) emerging from an understanding that becomes apparent through the organization and qualification of lived experience. In naming the philosophical underpinnings of these two orientations, Plato’s understanding arises as a form of epistemology because for him, knowledge (the focus of epistemology) comes as a recognition of ideal forms through a process of mystical recollection (see Plato’s Phadeo especially 72e -78b), and Aristotle’s understanding emerges as ontology because what exists (or, at least, what Aristotle recognizes as existing through his many life experiences of perceiving what exists, and thus, the focus of ontology) provides the understanding that leads to our knowledge of things. An important (and, perhaps, clarifying) distinction between Plato’s epistemological approach and Aristotle’s ontological approach is that Plato’s philosophical endeavors are aimed at gaining knowledge from understanding eternal forms that – being eternal – do not change, and Aristotle’s studies are directed at the classification and understanding of temporal things that are in constant change – all that he perceives as both being and becoming.
As a scholar who has set before himself the task of examining and articulating an accessible and contemporary understanding of “virtue” (with the intention of learning and discussing how such an examination informs my designations of “pro-agentic” and “pythonic” authority), I begin this investigation in harmony with Aristotle’s theoretical, ontological perspective. However, I recognize from this point of departure the importance of distinguishing between employing Aristotle’s organizing structure as a means for discerning “virtue” and relying upon Aristotle’s historical persona as a model for exemplifying this quality. While Aristotle’s writings provide contemporary theorists a useful and accessible framework for articulating the factors that structure a pragmatic conceptualization of virtue, it would be (I believe), given Aristotle’s clear (albeit historically situated) misogynistic and xenophobic views, a mistake to hold his prejudices towards the people he marginalized with the same regard we may reserve for the underlying philosophic humanism he established in writing such works as *Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Rhetoric*. Thus, in using Aristotle’s classic Greek paradigm as both a starting point and a standard of reference in studying a contemporary contextualization of “virtue,” I feel an incumbent moral obligation to surgically extract the extant qualities that Aristotle established as useful in recognizing “virtue” from the abhorrent historical mindset that condoned the institution of slavery, accepted the marginalization of women, and promoted the brutalization of outsiders as “natural” or “ordinary” elements of civilized society.

It is disheartening that more than two millennia after Aristotle writes of “the principles of natural slavery” (see *Politics* 1252a30-35) and “the inferiority of women”
(see *Politics* 1254b5-24) the attitudes that accept bigotry as ordinary and promote the brutalization and objectification of anyone who merely maintains views contrary to their own ideological, dogmatic perspectives of morality are still such a widespread, powerful, and ever-replicating feature of our modern global society. Although we may begin to visualize how a *pro-agentic ethos* may function by respecting the common humanity of all stakeholders within a particular rhetorical situation, it nearly staggers the imagination to conceive of a contemporary world where everyone has learned to respect the fundamental dignity of all people – regardless of ethnicity, gender, economic status, sexual orientation, age, physical stature, religion, or any other quality that is commonly maintained as an acceptable reason to objectify and exploit others. How is it possible that in commenting upon Aristotle’s conception of virtue from a distance of more than 2300 years, it is still necessary to emphasize the importance of separating the heuristic qualities that Aristotle identifies (and from which we can build an appreciation for mutual respect and establish the universal agency of all people) from those aspects of Aristotle’s writings that were oblivious to the immorality of conceiving of other human beings as private property to be used and disposed of at the convenience of the “master” when these most heinous aspects of society should, by my reckoning, have been discarded by now as relics of an antiquated and dysfunctional social malignancy?

Daily we learn from our vast global networks of news sources that this planet is still populated by many desperate groups and individuals who are so filled with hate for anyone outside their small circle of influence that they are literally willing to blow themselves up as long as they can die knowing they have murdered at least a few of their
ideological enemies. Furthermore, it does not take a major leap from our abhorrence of these isolated barbaric incidents to recognize that various governments around the world operate from this same pathologic mentality. For many world leaders, state-sanctioned mass murder of foreign citizenry at the hands of their well-funded militaries presents an acceptable (and, within the narrow paradigms of their minds, perhaps even moral) method for coercing political change in otherwise independent, sovereign nations. Whether we are focused on the individual basis or on the national level, as long as the practice of destroying the lives and personal property of others remains an acceptable (or even widely regarded as useful) means of instigating change or furthering idiosyncratic ideological agendas, then the need for a clear and articulate theory of authority that challenges the morality of such behavior will remain painfully self-evident.

My theorization of the “pro-agentic” and the “pythonic” ethos is not the first scholarship to focus on the need to respect the agency of stakeholders within a given rhetorical context. However, that society’s technical ability to construct weaponry has exceeded its ethical ability to recognize the sad and psychotic practice of hurting others to achieve one’s own ends demonstrates the ongoing necessity of this type of scholarship. In my theorization of agency, I would like to focus attention upon how the desire to do what is moral and ethical needs to exceed the appetite for expediency. Too often, what I

7 Specifically in the educational field, agency (often presented as an aspect of freedom or liberation) has been addressed by such diverse theorists as bell hooks, Jane Tompkins, Zan Meyer Gonçalves, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and Ira Shore. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks investigates student agency through the lens provided by interrogating the biases that emerge from White supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalistic value systems. In *A Life In School: What The Teacher Learned*, Tompkins explores agency in education by focusing on divisions and distinctions that are often made between the “personal” and the “academic.” And in *Sexuality and the Politics of Ethos in the Writing Classroom*, Gonçalves explores agency as an aspect of identity performance in the ways student gender roles are constrained by social contexts.
have come to label as the bad type of authority, *the pythonic ethos*, extols the merits of efficiency to its cronies and supporters while turning a grim, blind eye to the misery inflicted upon the outcast victims of their hegemonic policies. Thus, as I remain hopeful that most readers will indulge me in the belief that extracting Aristotle’s humanistic framework for establishing a good ethos (stated as succinctly as possible as the combination of *arête*, *phronesis*, and *eunoia*) from the same documents that express Aristotle’s overt bigotry against women, foreigners, and those he considered “natural slaves” is both feasible and worthwhile, I am also sympathetic to those readers who might consider such a rhetorical endeavor misguided or perhaps even, disingenuous. Nonetheless, the trip through the “Maze of Glass” that is the modern explication of virtue that lies before me offers few direct passages from here to there and must be navigated with both a critical consciousness and a compassionate belief in the universal dignity of all people. Though entering into the maze through the passage labeled “Aristotle” may be fraught with potential political liabilities, I am optimistic that following a thread woven from the loom of human agency will help guide me as I fumble through the rest of this chapter.

**Moving through the Maze: Toward a Pro-agentic Understanding of Virtue**

So, here I stand – as if dropped in the middle of a strange dream – in the midst of my own metaphorical Maze of Glass. Perhaps some of my readers are here in the maze with me while others may be entirely on the outside looking in. For clarity’s sake, here’s where I am standing: on my far left, there is an exit marked *Plato’s Epistemology* and on my far right, there’s another exit marked *Aristotle’s Ontology*. I suspect that behind me
there are other exits, perhaps an important one marked *The Sophistic Doxa* which I intend to explore later⁸, but for now all the other exits are hidden behind those warped mirrors that distort my reflections when I look into them. My goal is to move through this ethical maze constructed of both philosophical (i.e., abstract and theoretical) restrictions and pragmatic (i.e., “real world” or practical) limitations to reach an accessible, sensible, and contemporary understanding of the concept of virtue. As I weave my way through this maze, it is my intention to move toward the ontological exit because, as I mentioned earlier, my interest in understanding virtue lies more with how it gets expressed in rhetorical being than understanding how it gets expressed as a theoretical ideal.

Obtaining a nuanced historical and pragmatic understanding of virtue, I believe, will be helpful in distinguishing a good authority (*pro-agentic*) from a bad one (*pythonic*).

Before I take another step toward working my way through this maze, I would like to point out something that I feel should be obvious to the spectators who are watching from the outside as I weave my way through this funhouse: although I have a pretty good sense as to where I want to go, I would never assert that the path I am tracing is the only path through this labyrinth. I would not even go so far as to assert that the path I am about to follow through the issues that lie before me is even the best route; I have no doubt that others who are more intelligent or more articulate than I am could zip through the barriers that lie before me without ever feeling the blunt trauma of running headfirst into one of the dozens of nearly invisible social and cultural restrictions I am attempting to navigate in articulating what it means to be virtuous. However, I hope in

⁸ An exploration of the “Sophistic Doxa” will be an important section in Chapter Three’s discussion of “wisdom.”
making plain my assumptions and suppositions as I move forward toward my destination that others may find this track useful in working through these same issues for themselves.

Since, ultimately, my concern with virtue is to inform the model of how to teach students to distinguish between the qualities of “good” authority and “bad” authority, the leading questions before me at this point is not just “How do we identify the salient features of aretē?” but also “Can virtue even be taught?” Classroom experience demonstrates that one sure method of gaining a firm grasp of a concept is to struggle through the process of explaining it to students. Thus, a reflection upon “what is being taught” when “virtue is being taught” is perhaps as good a place as any to discern the qualities of virtue that most support and reveal a pro-agentic character.

The question of whether or not virtue can be taught was a major concern for the ancient Greek philosophers, and one that Plato addressed specifically in his dialogue Protagoras. As he first encounters Protagoras in this dialogue, Plato’s teacher, Socrates, asserts that he believes virtue cannot be taught, and he challenges Protagoras to demonstrate why he believes it can (Protagoras 319b-320c). Protagoras responds to Socrates challenge by retelling the myth of Epimetheus, who – while distributing the qualities to animals that would ensure their survival – neglected to give the human race any special ability or knowledge. This neglect prompted his brother Prometheus to steal the gifts of fire and technical skill from the gods (though he was forbidden from doing so) and give them to mankind. Subsequently, Protagoras explains, Zeus recognized that a human race with technical skills would not survive very long without the political
wisdom to get along with one another because humans are more likely to use their technical abilities to kill others than they are apt to use these skills to develop the resources necessary to sustain life. Thus, Zeus commanded Hermes to distribute justice, piety, and eloquence to everyone equally so that collectively people would know virtue and learn to live together. Protagoras goes on to argue that although everyone starts out with the capacity to know virtue, this capacity can be expanded upon either by punishing (or disciplining) those who would turn away from virtuous practices or by demonstrating the rewards (both intrinsic and extrinsic) that come to those who exemplify moral excellence. Thus, Protagoras asserts virtue can be taught. Socrates is not persuaded by Protagoras’ arguments and points out that sometimes good parents end up with dreadful children and it remains to be seen whether these children could ever be taught to be virtuous.

In “Teaching Writing and Teaching Virtue,” Eugene Garver highlights the underlying problem of teaching virtue that Plato dramatized more than two millennia ago in the repartee he scripted between philosopher Socrates and sophist Protagoras – although we can teach our students that there are rhetorical benefits both in being moral and in asserting one’s moral attributes, we can not have any assurance that such instruction, in and of itself, will make our students any more moral. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that those students who lack a strong sense of virtue would have any

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9 Given the comment I made earlier in this chapter about the sustained commitment that many particular groups of people have in murdering their enemies, the ancient wisdom that seems to recognize that any technological advancement will be somehow converted into weaponry appears chillingly accurate. I am not arguing, by the way, that the world is deplete of good people who are continually seeking new ways to use technology for the betterment of one and all; I am merely pointing out that whenever a technology can be used a weapon, there inevitably are people who are willing to exploit it as such.
qualms about making empty pretences to being better people than they actually are if they felt doing so advanced their standing with the audience. The willingness to say whatever is necessary to achieve one’s purposes is a significant indicator of what I am theorizing in this dissertation as the pythonic ethos. Thus, the conundrum: Are people trained in virtue really more virtuous or are they merely better at giving the impression that they are more virtuous? Garver argues that writing instructors face this same moral quandary whether or not they recognize the full moral implications of teaching composition. For Garver, the ethical question of teaching writing is almost identical to the moral question of teaching virtue: Are people who are trained in writing at an elevated level of eloquence better at articulating their thoughts and beliefs in ways that make them easier to be understood or does this training simply prepare students to be better equipped to smooth talk audiences with the verbal acrobatics that amplify their chances of being persuasive? In reflecting upon these questions, Garver writes:

Learning eloquence and virtue then appear as ways of hiding one’s true intentions rather than expressing one’s intentions effectively. For both virtue and eloquence, there is something shameful about having to learn them, as though one’s natural gifts were not enough, and therefore someone who is well taught hides the facts that he has been well taught, the best art concealing that it is art. It is no wonder that teachers shy away from professing to teach virtue, since learned virtue seems almost like a contradiction in terms. (54)
This ambivalence many writing instructors feel about the relationship between teaching students how to be better writers and teaching students how to be better people goes to the very heart of the ethical paradox of writing instruction that I presented in Chapter One. It seems to me that as writing teachers we have little choice but to feel conflicted if we want to preserve the authority that says we know what we are talking about when we make claims to having special understanding about what makes writing and speaking rhetorically effective, but at the same time we are squeamish about presenting ourselves as authorities who would make the claim that we know how to teach students the qualities that promote and demonstrate good, moral character.

This conflict – between giving students better rhetorical skills and expecting them to be better people for it – is an ancient discrepancy and obviously has no simple resolution. As Rhetoricians and Compositionists, some portion of our professional identities as academics and scholars is contingent upon the notion that we do more than merely teach students the skills that are necessary to put commas in the right place, to have verbs agree with their subjects, and to distinguish between using the word “good” as an adjective and the word “well” as an adverb. We understand that good writing instruction is more than simply helping students to avoid the nuisance of mechanical error; it is rather more akin to teaching them engineering or design as we educate students to take seriously the concerns for aesthetics as well as functionality, and critical analysis as well as grammatical correctness. Perhaps it is not our place to make moral judgments about our students when they do reveal disturbing aspects of their character in their written assignments or classroom behaviour, but to what degree are we doing them a
disservice if we don’t point out to them how others may react to their public displays of flagrant moral deficiency? If we tell our students that we are disturbed by some illicit or illegal behaviour that they blurt out during class discussion or reveal in their writing assignments, are we guilty of overstepping our teaching obligations by imposing our own sense of morality upon them or are we doing them a favour by cautioning them about the potential ramifications of confessing boorish behaviour without considering who they are saying it to?

Sometimes it is difficult – when wanting to model virtuous behaviour for our students and expecting our students to exemplify virtuous behaviour for us – to recognize with whom our highest loyalties should lie: our own personal sense of right and wrong, our tolerance of moral perspective that diverge from our own, our obligation to uphold the codes of conduct of the institutions we work for, our responsibilities as conscientious citizens, our commitment to do what we think is best for either individual students or a classroom of students as a whole. It is not uncommon for us, as writing instructors, to find ourselves caught up in situations where seemingly each of these aforementioned factions can be in conflict. Here is an example: several years ago, I was teaching a college freshman composition class, and in the midst of a peer editing activity, I overheard a student boasting about embezzling a rather large sum of money from a former employer. The student had written a paper about how he was able to scam thousands of dollars from an amusement park where he had worked during one summer as a cashier. As I look back at this incident in retrospect, I still do not know if I reacted appropriately; perhaps there is no single appropriate response. If my highest loyalties lie
with my classroom as a whole, perhaps I needed to make an example out of this student by explaining to the rest of the class how foolish it was for this student to confess to a crime in a writing assignment and to so freely share that information with people he did not really know all that well. If my highest loyalties lie with a commitment to being a good citizen, I suppose I should have duplicated his paper and forwarded it to the sheriff’s department in the county where the amusement park is located. If my highest loyalties lie with the institution I am working for, perhaps I should have gone to some higher campus authority to ask them how they wanted instructors to handle such controversial and sensitive information. Perhaps if my highest commitment is to tolerating moral perspectives that diverge from my own, I should not have said anything and graded the paper for its mechanical correctness and its appropriate use of vocabulary.

What I did do, however, was 1) take the student aside and tell him he was an idiot for documenting his criminal activity in writing, 2) point out to him that although he had no apparent moral qualms about stealing from an employer, I did have a serious moral problem with it and he should expect that others in the class would have a problem with it too, and 3) gave him a chance to write a new paper that reflected upon the consequences he would have to face when and if he were ever caught. I did not reassure the student that either I or someone else in the class might go to the authorities with what they knew about what he had done.

If one of our explicit goals is to help students become more effective at achieving their rhetorical purposes (either through writing or speaking), then to what extent are we morally obligated to communicate to them the importance of being good citizens as well?
Is it our duty to convey to our students that they need to be as respectful of the agency of their audience as they need to be cognizant of when to use a semicolon? As we teach students how to go about the process of organizing their thoughts and articulating their ideas, we expect them to learn to take into consideration the circumstances of their audience’s predispositions as well as the dynamics of their rhetorical purposes; can we expect our students to take seriously the importance of how they present their own moral positions if we feel stymied at defining or defending our own personal boundaries of acceptable behaviour? Teaching students to be better writers and speakers seems to carry some of the same ethical trappings as required in teaching the martial arts. We would expect upon entering into a Karate, Judo, or Taekwondo class that the instructor would emphasize the importance of using these skills as self-defensive over the immoral alternative of going out and looking for victims to beat up for the pleasure of it. Although as writing instructors we may feel uneasy about defining for our students what it means to be “good,” we should not have any problems with pointing out what we feel it means to be bad. We can and should point out egregious behavior and discuss the consequences of it. Teaching rhetoric is a way of teaching people how to be in the world, and understanding being as such is the primary function of ontology.

Garver points out that teaching writing is not an amoral act; working toward teaching students to become more articulate and sophisticated in their ability to think about the myriad circumstantial factors that bear upon their rhetorical choices in what to say and how to say it cannot be achieved without accepting the responsibility for teaching them to consider their moral duty to tell the truth in expressing themselves. Furthermore,
students as writers have a moral obligation not to use their verbal abilities to manipulate others into behaving in such ways that would contradict the agency of others. Just as Zeus recognized in the necessity of giving all humans equal shares in piety and eloquence lest the mortal race come to a quick demise from the weaponry that would arise out of the contraband technical skills given to us by Prometheus, as writing instructors, we, too, should recognize that any skill that can be taught can also be subsequently put toward nefarious endeavors. Garver asserts, however, if the training in effective rhetorical eloquence requires consideration of the moral principles brought to bear through deliberation and judgment (what he calls “practical reasoning”), then at the very lest we can teach students to engage in the fulfillment of their own moral agency. Garver writes:

Because the same ability allows someone to speak persuasively and to reason practically, it does not follow that the ability will be used for its proper purpose; there is no guarantee that eloquence will further the cause of the right; there is only the guarantee that without the abilities learned through rhetoric, there is no chance of acting fully morally. (61)

This is to say that while we cannot insure that students will always use their rhetorical training in a “virtuous” manner that serves the agency of their audience, it is nearly a certainty without such rhetorical understanding our students will be shackled by their inability to think critically about their own moral agency. Of course, teaching people to swim does not guarantee that they will never drown; however, good swimming instruction seems to increase people’s ability to survive when they find themselves in deep waters that place them well over their head and in turmoil.
Finding a Place for Virtue: The Ontology of Moral Agency

One key to understanding how virtue manifests within a rhetorical context is noticing how Aristotle insists that a rhetor’s ethos arises out of the speech act and not from a pre-established credibility that precedes the speech itself:

[There is persuasion] through character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence; for we believe fair-minded people to a greater extent and more quickly [than we do others] on all subjects in general and completely so in cases where there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt. And this should result from the speech, not from a previous opinion that the speaker is a certain kind of person . . . (38)

The importance in this recognition is that Aristotle seems to be suggesting that the human perception of virtue needs to emerge from a specific context; this is to say that we recognize “goodness” in people by how they conduct themselves in the circumstances of whatever is the current rhetorical dispute that awaits adjudication. This is an interesting assertion because it seems to run contrary to the common sense notion that tells us that a person’s prior reputation is important to his or her credibility when coming into a rhetorical situation. However, what Aristotle seems to be teaching is that a prior reputation for “goodness” adds little to a current rhetorical endeavor because what really matters is how moral the rhetor appears in the midst of the speech act itself (or as far as I am concerned how moral the writer appears in her composition). Virtue, then, it seems is not a quality that one obtains as much as it is a quality that one pursues while
communicating to the audience where he or she is coming from. Aristotle is asserting here that in order to be persuasive, a speaker or a writer should not rely upon a reputation to convince others of the rightness of one’s position, but he or she needs to come across as being fair-minded in the current dispute. Aristotle seems to recognize that being human, we all have at times been right about whatever we are arguing for and we all have at times been wrong. While a historical pattern of fair-mindedness may seem to us to indicate a greater probability of someone being right within a new rhetorical dispute, it really is whatever the person is saying at the moment that is going to convince us whether a rhetor is being virtuous or not. Even people who are frequently wrong (or untrustworthy) could in the circumstances of a specific rhetorical dispute be right for a change (and thus strike us as “good” or “reasonable”) while someone known to be a good and trustworthy person could give us the impression that within this particular circumstance, he or she is dead wrong or not to be trusted.

Aristotle asserts that we believe people whose personal character makes them seem credible more readily than those whose character does not (38). This understanding of what it means to be virtuous arises out the cultural context of the person with whom the rhetor is trying to persuade. Writing in “Ethos Dwells Pervasively,” Craig R. Smith defends Aristotle’s assertion that the audience’s recognition of a rhetor’s virtue is a function of their shared cultural assumptions; he writes, “Thus it is not enough for a speaker to be good, a speaker must understand virtue; the virtue of the culture is one of the fonts (dwelling places) of ethos” (5). Good authority, then, makes itself known as
credible by understanding first the local factors that contribute to the perception of reliability.

As I move through this maze in search of a pro-agentic understanding of virtue, I am inching my way towards the exit that is labeled “Aristotle’s Ontology” for this reason: with Aristotle’s ontology, the reality of virtue emerges out of the interaction of human agents in a communal and rhetorical milieu that is both provisional and apparent. Whereas Plato theorizes the human ability to recognize such a construct as “virtue” comes from a degraded, but yet – eternal – understanding of a transcendental (and, thus, ideal) “good,” Aristotle places the human capacity to recognize virtue entirely within the province of mortal behavior primarily as it is currently manifested within a present (and, thus, ongoing) rhetorical context. This is to say that people establish their virtue through demonstrations of virtuous behaviors while under the gaze of others who have some stake in the rhetor’s trustworthiness. At the risk of being extravagantly obvious, I feel the need to point out here that in order to be believed, a rhetor should first accept that credibility is more of a loan from the audience than an outright gift; and that in order to be persuasive, a rhetor needs to behave in ways that support, rather than erode, her integrity. Credibility, then, is granted by the audience to the speaker (or writer); it cannot be forcefully extorted from them. Understanding this principle, Aristotle writes:

But since rhetoric is concerned with making a judgment (people judge what is said in deliberation, and judicial proceedings are also a judgment), it is necessary not only to look to the argument, that it may be
demonstrative and persuasive but also [for the speaker] to construct a view of himself as a certain kind of person. (120)

As I theorize, then, the constitution of a pro-agentic understanding of virtue and the means by which we are to recognize it, perhaps a good place to situate this understanding of virtue is with the acknowledgment that its ontological manifestation (i.e. how, for us, it comes into being) is through two primary qualities that are dependent upon: 1) provisional and cultural designations of “what is good” and 2) a reality evidenced entirely through human interaction. A pro-agentic understanding of virtue, then, requires the rhetor to take into account the agency of those she would persuade because it is only in the agency that is offered by giving the audience the room to make up their own minds that the recognition of the rhetor “as a virtuous person” can come into being. This is to say, for example, that writers and speakers can demonstrate for their audiences examples of their virtue by discussing acts of charity or relating incidents in which difficult choices had to be made, but they must leave it up to those they intend to persuade to decide for themselves whether or not these examples indicate virtue. Placed in the context of the pythonic ethos, what this means is a rhetor cannot force (or coerce) an audience into believing she is a good person; she can only demonstrate her virtuous qualities before them and hope the audience will recognize her as “a good person.” A pythonic ethos – in its insistence that its authority must be obeyed because of the violence or turmoil it can inflict upon its audience for disobedience – demonstrates not only a lack of good reasons to believed, it furthermore crushes the only space from which genuine trustworthiness can emerge. A pro-agentic ethos, that begins with an abiding respect for the agency of
those it would persuade, understands that virtue is neither a mere façade that works to trick an audience into agreement as if it were a distraction a magician uses while engaged in sleight-of-hand or a lever for prying consent from an audience by exploiting their loyalty to fundamental principles. A pro-agentic ethos, by clearly establishing for its audience the space for disapproval and disagreement, builds in its relationship with the audience not just an appearance of virtue, but the materialization of the real thing itself.

How the pro-agentic ethos is expressed in the classroom is the primary intention of Chapter Five; a brief example here, however, of how this looks in the classroom is the teacher who is willing to accept challenges from her students regarding the correctness of specific content information. A pro-agentic teacher may, for example, admit not being certain about some historical knowledge and may be willing to be corrected by students who have access to sources that contradict the content presented during class discussion; a pythonic teacher would confront, first and foremost, the students’ motives in contradicting her authority and would establish an atmosphere in the classroom that would make students uncomfortable with challenging anything presented as instruction.

On the Essential Differences between Pro-Agentic and Pythonic Conceptions of Virtue

Obviously, as mere mortals, our lack of omniscience means that some of what we think we know and, perhaps, much more of what we believe to be true is incorrect. This element of insecurity in our worldviews (both as individuals and societies), however, does not need to strip us of our ability to make reasoned assertions nor should it prevent us from acting upon our best intentions. Acknowledging that some of what we think we know to be true and that some of what we believe to be true is incorrect can provide us
with the essential motivation to remain open to change as we proceed to make decisions and act based upon the best information we have available to us. Thus, the crux of a pro-agentic theory of virtue, then, is the acceptance of the possibility of being wrong about the particular qualities that exemplify decent or admirable behavior while advocating for choices that demonstrate one’s existing conceptions of what it means to act as a good person. A pro-agentic display of virtue demonstrates both a commitment to the integrity of one’s own principles while clearly communicating a provisional openness to changing one’s position if presented with suitable justification for doing so. While the types of evidence and the quantity of substantiation necessary to alter one’s views naturally vary greatly from person to person, notice how, at least, a pro-agentic conception of virtue contrasts with its pythonic counterpart: a pythonic conception of virtue begins with a certainty in the infallibility of its own understanding of right and wrong and is, therefore, vehemently indifferent to opposing worldviews. With the most extreme presentations of the pythonic ethos, consideration for the possibility of internal change is tantamount to an act of religious heresy or ideological sacrilege. Because the only category of change a pythonic orientation is interested in resides in the transformation of others, a pythonic conception of virtue typically maintains a self-righteous prerogative to be steadfastly indifferent to the ideas of others; after all, the pythonic ethos would ask, where is the profit in listening to others when one has already achieved the proper certainty in the rightness of one’s own opinions? A moral indifference to the ideas of other human beings not only robs people of their agency, it simplifies for the pythonic personality the need to justify using whatever practices are necessary to get others to submit to its
pronouncements and dictates. To reiterate, then, an idea I set forth at the beginning of this chapter, the key to sustaining a public civilization (both for us as individuals through our daily interactions with others and as citizens through our vigilant monitoring of our government’s leadership as it interacts with other nations upon the world stage) is in the recognition of our common humanity and in the need for an enduring respect for agency. When the respect for the agency of others has collapsed, people’s lives become mere factors in equations, and spreadsheets emerge which bloodlessly categorize human misery as efficiently as train routes or weather patterns. A pythonic conception of virtue that dismisses its own possibility of error, then, maps the short distance between the indifference to the ideas of others and the indifference to the desolation of others as a natural progression. A pro-agentic conception of virtue, as opposed to a pythonic conception of virtue, eschews moral certainty in favor of a tentative and fluid balance between a commitment to one’s own principles and a willingness to entertain the value of the principles of others.

On the Possibility of a Universal Morality that Respects Student Autonomy

Here, then, is the proverbial rub: if the recognition of virtue arises out of the specific, local, and contingent context the rhetor establishes as the common ethical “dwelling space” between her audience and herself, does this necessarily preclude the existence of “universally accepted” moral demarcations of good and bad behavior? I would like to answer, “No, the recognition of unique communal standards of right and wrong does not exclude the likelihood that beneath it all, there are some principles of virtue that underscore a common human understanding of what it means to behave
appropriately”; however, given my commitment to both explicating and demonstrating the pro-agentic ethos, I will only go as far as to aver that I will continue to believe in the existence of these underlying moral values until someone demonstrates to me their manifest infeasibility. That is to say, I will keep an open mind.

What I would like to propose in exploring how these “universally accepted” moral demarcations for virtue may become evident is that their ontological emergence through human communication is conditioned by the need to recognize and embrace the limitations which protect the agency of the audience from exploitation and manipulation while promoting the essential integrity of the rhetor to maintain and develop his or her own way of thinking. Thus, any principles that might be common to all notions of virtue would need to be able to clear both the filters that originate in either an extreme individualism or an excessive communalism. The origins, then, of what comes into view as the fundamental moral principles from which vantage we can subsequently orient a reasoned and reasonable conceptualization of virtue (aretē) arises out of the responsibility to both our internal sense of integrity and to the agency of our fellow human beings.

So, what does it mean to make a serious commitment to one’s integrity (i.e., a candid representation of one’s principles) and the agency of one’s audience (i.e., a complete acceptance of their privilege to form opinions contrary to one’s own views concerning the matters at hand), and how does this commitment inform what (and how) we teach our students in regards to the manner they represent themselves in their rhetorical encounters? Furthermore, supposing it is even a justifiable possibility, how do
we teach students to differentiate between being true to their core principles (and thus, presenting and defending their personal integrity based upon their interior beliefs) and being obstinate and prejudicial toward the alien concerns of others that offer the greatest potential for expanding their philosophical horizons? The best representation of a pro-agentic conception of virtue seems to pull rhetors in opposite directions: the first, in the direction of being true to oneself and the second, in the direction of being respectful of the agency of those with whom one differs. As teachers of rhetoric and composition, what guidelines can we offer to help students find the balance between being true to themselves and being respectful of those with whom they disagree? In the remainder of this subsection, I will contextualize these questions by leaving for now the philosophy of Ancient Greece behind, and by putting these concerns into the context of Immanuel Kant’s “categorical imperative”, Wayne Booth’s “rhetoric of assent,” James Kinneavy’s theory of a “social ethics,” and Dennis Lynch’s ideas regarding student autonomy.

Simply put, when speaking of virtue in universal terms (as opposed to the recognition of virtue within specific circumstances) characterizations of “a good person” or “a bad person” ultimately come down to how well someone has either fulfilled (or, conversely, avoided) her moral obligations. This is to say that in order to be regarded as having “a virtuous character,” a rhetor needs to meet the ethical duties as designated by her audience’s standards of right and wrong and by remaining true to her own internal values. Since people typically argue primarily over the things upon which they disagree (it is tautological to argue over things upon which there is complete accord), it makes sense to recognize that frequently the source of disagreement within a dispute is over the
proper margins of “what is” or “is not” permissible and honorable behavior. Historically, when moral philosophers have considered the possibility of universal standards of virtuous behavior, they have tried to formulate the limits to the obligations or duties that everyone has (maybe more accurately, should have) towards their fellow human beings. For the past two hundred years, philosophical examinations of our moral duty to one another have inevitably begun with Immanuel Kant’s conception of the categorical imperative.

*The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* identifies Immanuel Kant as “Perhaps the most important European philosopher of modern times” (434). The centerpiece of Kant’s moral philosophy is his “Categorical Imperative,” a formal universal moral law that Kant attempted to base entirely upon an appeal to reason. With his categorical imperative, Kant begins with the assumption that given a basal level of rationality, human beings would agree upon a common moral ideal regardless of their religious predispositions or cultural indoctrinations. According to Kant, an imperative is a rational obligation; that is to say, it is a responsibility a sensible person must fulfill to behave according to the dictates of reason. Kant explains in “Good Will, Duty, and the Categorical Imperative,” that there are two types of imperatives: the hypothetical, which are the things people do as means of achieving specific, premeditated results, and the categorical, which are the things people do because they are universally required to do them regardless of circumstance or consequence. Kant writes, "If now the action is good only as a means to something else, then the imperative is hypothetical; if it is conceived as good in itself and
consequently as being necessarily the principle of a will which of itself conforms to reason, then it is *categorical* "(31).

Because Kant is interested in formulating a conception of morality that is both entirely rational and ultimately free of situational considerations (he refers to the moral understanding that meets these conditions as *a priori* – meaning this understanding of morality exists “before experience” and is, thus, free of empirical concerns), he bases his conception of the Categorical Imperative in an abstract belief in a moral “good will” shared by all rational people. By locating his moral philosophy in a “universal good will,” Kant intends to avoid the ethical systems that seek empirical motivations as explanations for human behaviors (such as pleasure or happiness) because such motivations reduce human moral duty from *categorical* to *hypothetical*. For Kant, only the abstract notion of a universal human good will can establish the existence of the good outside the messy and complicated field of ordinary human relations. In *Groundwork and the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant writes, “Nothing in the world--indeed nothing even beyond the world--can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a good will” (9).

According to *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, “Maxims are the general rules or principles on which rational agents act and they reflect the end that an agent has in view in choosing actions of a certain type in given circumstances” (436). With his formulation of the categorical imperative, Kant offers a means of testing whether a maxim of behavior ought to be considered *hypothetical* or *categorical*; in “Good Will, Duty, and the Categorical Imperative,” he writes, “Act only on that maxim whereby thou
canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (31). Kant’s prescription in his categorical imperative, then, is to ascribe moral righteousness only to those acts that would be considered moral if universally adopted; for example, Kant explains that while people in particular circumstances may have good reason to tell a lie, (to protect an innocent person from being murdered, for example), lying could never be considered a categorically moral behavior because a world where people never lie is clearly preferable to a world where people regularly lie to one another. Thus, if people seek to behave in ways that are universally moral, then they must consider if their actions would be considered moral if adopted by everyone as a universally accepted behavior. Categorically moral behaviors are good unconditionally; therefore, according to Kant, consideration of circumstances and consequences are not useful in developing moral laws that are universally applicable.

Despite Kant’s intention to develop a moral law that avoids the authority evoked by religion in favor of a “purely rational” explication of virtuous behavior, many critics have recognized and commented upon the similarity between “Act only on that maxim whereby at the same time you can will that it shall become a universal law” and “Do unto others as you would have done unto them” (which, of course, is widely recognized as “The Golden Rule”) (see Hirst). Kant himself alluded to the idea that the golden rule could perhaps be derived from his categorical imperative. The underlying essence that is important here in regards to my theorization of a pro-agentic theory of virtue is that a fundamental and universal explanation of morality needs to recognize the agency of others by taking into account the right of others to form opinions that may differ from
one’s own. The relationship, then, between Kant’s categorical imperative and my theorization of a pro-agentic theory of virtue lies in the understanding that moral behavior cannot use (i.e. exploit or manipulate) other people because it is categorically untenable. Within the rhetorical situation (and as far as I am concerned it matters not where the rhetor is addressing her audience in a public speech or within a written composition), the pythonic aim of manipulating others to gain a specific end demonstrates the lack of character that should be necessary to be convincing. Eugene Garver (writing in Aristotle’s Rhetoric: An Art of Character) notes how Kant disproved of the type of persuasion that sought only to manipulate others; Garver quotes Kant writing in Critique of Judgment:

Rhetorical power and excellence of speech (which together constitute rhetoric) belong to fine art; but oratory (ars oratoria), the art of using people’s weaknesses for one’s own aims (no matter how good these may be in intentions or even in fact) is unworthy of respect whatsoever.

(Garver 10)

Although Kant bases his moral philosophy in a single maxim (the Categorical Imperative) to establish a universal principle from which the rational assessment of good behavior can be derived, Wayne Booth begins his consideration of virtuous character in the rhetorical situation by relying upon the traditional values that have withstood the test of time. In Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent, Wayne Booth asserts that the ability of rhetors to apply good reason to contentious situations relies upon the mutual need for respect that comes from conventional religious and philosophic ideals. Booth
writes, “[T]he philosophy of good reasons leads us to a reaffirmation of those central values that other philosophies and religions have reached by other routes: of tolerance, of justice or fairness, of ‘democratic’ equality of vote in matters that concern all men equally” (149). Here, Booth shares with Kant the belief in the need to respect the agency of those with whom one disagrees as a moral precondition for the possibility of a truly rhetorical encounter. Booth writes:

Kant once remarked that the result of all his philosophizing was to establish a rational basis for the pious beliefs of his ancestors: the golden rule reappears for him as the categorical imperative, and it reappears in our rhetorical view as the command to pay as much attention to your opponent’s reasons as you expect him to pay to yours. (149)

If we return to the question of virtue, then, as it becomes evident within a rhetorical context, the qualities that seem to define good behavior from bad behavior are those that demonstrate respect for three independent and interdependent elements: the integrity of the rhetor (indicated by a commitment to communicate what she believes is true whether or not it furthers her cause within the minds of her audience), the agency of the audience (exhibited by the rhetor by communicating either explicitly or implicitly a tolerance for disagreement), and a reverence for the circumstances that has brought the rhetor and her audience into disagreement. Early in this chapter, I referred to the original conception of ethos as “the dwelling ground,” the space where people come together to deliberate about their common interests. In some respects, the rhetorical scene where people meet to negotiate and resolve their disagreements is a sacred space in that it
requires an understanding that beyond respect for the other and respect for oneself, there is an acknowledgment that for the process to work, some behaviors must be forbidden in this area including lying for the purpose of getting one’s way and extorting others to submit through the threat of violence. A respect for the process as well a respect for each other is vital for sustaining a civil social order; Booth sustains this idea as well by writing:

A society cannot exist, the past seems to teach us, unless it can somehow constitute itself as a rhetorical field . . . and this means that we cannot exist without recognizing that some of our shared values carry an inescapable weight for all of us. . . . we must build new rhetorical communities, we must find a common faith in modes of argument, or every institution we care about will die. (149-50)

If, as I have asserted, a pro-agentic virtue respects all three elements of the aforementioned elements of the rhetorical context and a pythonic virtue respects only its belief in its own infallibility, then what can be taught to students about good moral values that nonetheless honor their autonomy? What values can be held up as important without impinging upon the students’ right to decide for themselves about the issues and concerns they want to care about? Can we avoid assuming the pythonic authority in order to insure the creation of the rhetorical space in our classrooms that promotes non-judgmental attitudes concerning diversity? Listen up, students, people who does not demonstrate respect for themselves and others in this classroom will be disciplined accordingly;
furthermore, anyone who has serious moral issues with any other student’s lifestyle better think twice before opening his or her mouth.

On the surface the paradox between wanting to teach our students to be more morally responsible and wanting to teach them the implications of moral irresponsibility may seem irresolvable; however, James Kinneavy reminds us in “Ethics and Rhetoric: Forging a Moral Language for the English Classroom” that our first responsibilities as teachers is to teach. Kinneavy asserts that often what gets recognized by teachers as reticence, reluctance, and resistance to discussing moral issues in the classroom is actually an inability of the students to articulate their thinking. Kinneavy claims that often students just do not have the needed vocabulary to express an understanding of moral or political issues. Kinneavy writes that because the “classic view of morality” (as represented by Greek philosophy and the three major monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) has been supplanted by an alternative and fragmented view of morality called “emotivism,” most students have not had sufficient opportunity to discuss moral issues and, thus, have not acquired the vocabulary necessary to intelligently converse upon many moral themes. By researching the common moral concerns that arose in the world-wide news coverage of a local tragedy, Kinneavy identifies four ethical themes that occurred in nearly all reported accounts: a respect for life, a respect for family, a respect for truth, and a respect for property. After recognizing how common these themes were to other systems of morality (including the monotheistic religions and Buddhism), Kinneavy began researching anthropological data to see how often these four

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10 By “emotivism” Kinneavy is referring to a paradigmatic world view that holds all distinctions made between “right and wrong” or “good and bad” fall entirely up to the discretion of individuals; this world view denies, for example, the possibility of universal moral principles.
themes arose in the work of anthropologists and discovered, here too, these four themes provided a moral unity to many diverse populations around the world. In the conclusion of this study, Kinneavy proposes that these four themes (respect for life, family, truth, and property) can form the basis of a social ethic than can be adapted to teach students to approach ethical concerns from a common language that is accessible regardless of whatever individual moral code the student brings into the classroom with the exceptions of “the radical individualist or extreme libertarian or anarchist” (17). By approaching rhetorical issues from the vantage of these four concerns, Kinneavy offers an approach to discuss issues and teach commonly held notions of virtue to students without necessarily imposing an particular ideology. Kinneavy writes:

Thus the common language based on respect for the rights of all to life, family integrity, property, and truth enables the teacher to take a neutral stand in a class while allowing students with many different compatible moral codes to work out their own problems, and it also enables students with different moral codes to talk to one another. (17)

What I hoped to discover upon setting out to delineate within this dissertation the identifiable qualities of a “good” ethos as distinguished from a “bad” ethos was as Kinneavy puts it “the language and conceptual skills to write about moral issues” in the disciplines of Composition and Rhetoric. In this chapter, I have asserted that in regards to virtue, a pro-agentic ethos “inhabits the dwelling space” between the rhetor and her audience by communicating both her own integrity and a commitment to respect the agency of those she would like to persuade. A pythonic ethos, I have argued, is only
really committed to attaining its goals and, thus, recognizes no moral problems by doing whatever it believes is necessary to get the result it desires to obtain. I believe that it is clear that unethical practices – that manipulate and exploit others through such tactics as offering lies or generating threats within the sacred ground that constitutes the rhetorical context – do not deserve to be regarded as “rhetoric” at all and should be identified by some other name, perhaps “subterfuge” or “knavery.”

In “Teaching Rhetorical Values and the Question of Student Autonomy,” Dennis Lynch recognizes that the choice we make as instructors to teach rhetoric constitutes a political and moral act. With this recognition, Lynch asks how then, do we acknowledge the implicit values we embrace (and find perhaps requisite to doing a good job of teaching writing and speaking) while avoiding the imposition of our own political and moral agendas upon our students? Furthermore, what is expected of us as professional teachers? Lynch writes:

> Seen as a tool or as a body of knowledge, rhetoric feels as free of specific values as “matter in motion.” But placed within the context of its social and political function, rhetoric quickly loses the image of being value-neutral. If a rhetorical education serves in the process of constructing good citizens, then it can do so only because it reflects the values implied in the very idea of ‘good citizenship’ (contested as they may be). The shape of rhetoric – in other words, its subtle directives and unquestioned norms – adapts to its functions at any give historical juncture, and its
destiny is tied to the reproduction of attitudes and values that in turn protect and make possible the activity itself. (353-54)

Those, both inside and outside our ranks, who have concern for student autonomy, that somehow students need to be made resistant or immune to the exploitation of writing instruction, while perhaps well-intentioned, nonetheless need to understand that sometimes the arguments made in favor of curbing the instructor’s propensity to indoctrinate her classes and to keep students “safe” from viewpoints that run contrary to the worldviews they bring with them on the first day of class, are arguments against teaching students how to defend their principles and to examine the sources of their biases. Lynch argues that if writing instructors do not prepare students to critique and analyze the information that is thrown at them, whether from the media, their peers, or even us their instructors, then who will prepare them? Lynch writes:

Clearly, one can hold any political beliefs one chooses and still teach or practice rhetoric. My argument functions more as Kant’s categorical imperative does: It claims that to disregard the social and political values inherent in the practice of rhetoric, though possible in discrete situations, will, if universalized and consistently carried out, undermine the very activity in question by destroying the conditions – the framework, institutional and otherwise – that supports it gives it a serous place in our daily lives. (368)

Perhaps, then, the best I can offer as I find myself briefly standing in the sun, free from the maze of professional expectations and moral obligations, is the admission that in
being human, all I really have is my best intentions. If we are to produce students who are capable of articulating their beliefs about those issues that are most important to them, we need to give them both the respect and the practice at articulating them, and we cannot be mesmerized by our own reflections in the fun house mirrors that we pass along the way.
CHAPTER THREE: PHRONÊSIS AND SOPHIA – WISDOM

In the first chapter, I introduced the concept of the pythonic ethos (and its counterpart the pro-agentic ethos) with the aim of laying the groundwork for a rhetorical theory that distinguishes “bad authority” from “good authority.” In considering the qualities that exemplify either good or bad authority, several significant rhetorical issues complicate any easy attempts to discern simple keys for the identification of the most significant factors regarding human credibility. Among these issues are concerns for validity (that is to say matters of relevance and justification), reliability (matters of consistency and dependability), sincerity (matters of honesty and earnestness), power (matters of dominance and privilege), expertise (matters of experience and contextual understanding), and the subject that is the primary focus of this chapter – wisdom.

In the sections that follow, I investigate wisdom, the second of the three terms Aristotle identified as essential for establishing credibility within a rhetorical situation. In creating an authoritative ethos worthy of trust and respect (the ethos that I am now labeling pro-agentic), Aristotle chose the Greek word “phronēsis.” In Aristotle’s Rhetoric: An Art of Character, Garver defines phronēsis as a specific type of wisdom that is conflated politically with what is generally held to be true. Thus, for Aristotle, to a certain extent, what should be recognized by an audience as reliable is what is said that already matches their expectations. Graver writes, “(P)hronēsis and political wisdom are the same virtue, the means of coming to a decision individually and collectively should be the same” (132). George Kennedy, in his translation of Aristotle’s Rhetoric, defines phronēsis as a “practical wisdom” (121). As I tried to make clear in the previous chapter,
I am interested in this dissertation in using Aristotle’s framework for an authoritative ethos (based upon the three qualities of aretē, phronēsis, and eunoia) as a springboard to investigate what can currently be understood about rhetorical authority because much of what is still taken for granted about human credibility originates in classical Aristotelian rhetorical theory; however, I think it is necessary to emphasize that while Aristotle’s paradigmatic explanations for what establishes a reliable character are a good place to begin the discussion, it is clearly necessary to move beyond the patriarchal misogyny and xenophobia of Athenian culture that informs Aristotle’s understanding of “good” character to theorize a contemporary understanding of good authority sensitive to the agency of people who are often the victims of political domination. Thus, in this chapter on wisdom, I examine the concept of phronēsis, which Aristotle set apart as a wisdom generating from a political prudence, by contrasting the term with another ancient Greek word for wisdom, sophia. For the ancient Greeks, sophia exemplified a more abstract and universal type of understanding often born (as I propose to demonstrate in the text that is to follow) from experiences that fell outside of the dominant status quo and, therefore, this form of wisdom was typically derided by the mainstream as a “theoretical” wisdom disconnected from their own perceptions of what is “normal” or “practical.” Hence, it is worth noting before even developing the distinctions between phronēsis and sophia in the discussion that is to come that the English word “sophistry,” which is now commonly defined as the type of reasoning that is not to be trusted, finds its etymological origins in the type of wisdom that originates outside the experiences of hegemony and
thus has become synonymous with the kind of arguments that are dismissed as
impractical rather than subversive.

As with virtue (the subject of the previous chapter), I discuss the concept of
wisdom through the historical lens of its origins in classic Greek philosophy by
explicating both its epistemological and ontological foundations. Unlike virtue, however,
here in this chapter, I reintroduce the concept of doxa as an important and neglected
vehicle for understanding how hegemonic forces are able to define wisdom in ways that
regularly exclude and marginalize the thoughts, judgments, and beliefs of people whose
life experience contradicts mainstream tenets of what is generally maintained by the
status quo to be “normal,” “natural,” and “ordinary.” Clearly, whenever the historically
patriarchal forces that have dominated Western culture for the past two thousand years
define their authority as “normal” or “ordinary,” then confronting such authority becomes
as a matter of doxa (i.e., common knowledge) unwise. I am not suggesting, by the way,
that hegemonic authority should not be challenged; on the contrary, among the goals of
this dissertation is to demonstrate how to recognize such authority and how to teach
students to confront it through both rational and ethical approaches.

The Mechanics of Authority and the Question of Belief

Although a list of existential questions that has beleaguered the human race since
it first became self-conscious would perhaps include such significant concerns as “Why
are we here?” “Is there an ultimate purpose to our existence?” and “Is there a
transcendent reality that lies beyond our corporal means to perceive it?” – as a rhetorical
scholar, the central existential question that propels my academic interests is the question,
“How do we know who to believe?” From my perspective, understanding the mechanics of authority is primary to contemplating all the other “big questions of life” because unless we understand the factors that establish authoritative credibility, we are hampered in our ability to judge those who make claims to already possess the answers we are seeking. This is to say, the answers that others offer us on the other great existential questions of human existence are of dubious value if we are unable to recognize the extent to which the credibility of such oracles impacts our consideration for accepting the quality and accuracy of their answers.

The mechanics of belief – the cultural mechanisms through which people exchange notions of what is true and what is real – has bedeviled my scholastic thinking for many years in obsessive ways that have been some times captivating and other times tiresome. While some people may be allergic to strawberries or peanuts, I feel as though I have often suffered from some private allergy to balderdash. That many people – whom I would otherwise categorize as intelligent and rational – believe in ideas that strike my own personal sense of reality as farfetched and nonsensical bothers me on a deep level of my psyche. Beyond the weariness that comes from a neurotic wondering if there is any remote possibility that the most improbable explanations they offer could be true, I have at times experienced the absurdity of others as though it were a psychic splinter infecting my spirit. I freely admit that I am more than a little neurotic about how much I care about what others think. That I compulsively care so deeply about the goofy ideas of others is as much a curse as it is a fascination. Many times over the past couple of decades, I have yearned for some type of spiritual balm that might soothe over the
poignant irritation that comes from the myriad ontological disagreements that (for a multitude of reasons) I am unable to let go.

Part of my discomfort comes from a lacking of confidence that ultimately my own understandings of reality will turn out to be no better than those of the people whose worldviews I currently consider ridiculous. This realization is disconcerting and bewildering. I do not pretend to know the technicalities of reality, and yet, my consciousness nags at me when it encounters (what I consider) the strange beliefs of others. Shouldn’t it be possible to recognize a wrong answer without absolutely knowing the right one? Given the great mysteries of life and the nearly countless ways people have offered for answering them, even if, somehow, someone eventually knew some of the right answers, how would the rest of us ever recognize this? By what qualities would we recognize her authority? Does understanding truth generate authority or does authority merely generate its own truth? These are questions as old as the study of rhetoric itself:

*Who are we going to believe? How do we know when we should or shouldn’t believe someone?*

As a matter of everyday life, we trust some people and others we do not. A good question, then, is to what degree is the ability to gauge credibility a skill or a talent? The difference, of course, between a skill and a talent is that a talent is an innate ability (such as hearing) and a skill is an ability that can be developed through practice and instruction (such as listening). If the ability to gauge credibility in others is a skill like other common human communicative skills (such as judging how angry a speaker is by her tone of voice or estimating how well-read a writer is by the references she uses), then as with all such
skills, some people are bound to be better at them than others. Furthermore, common
sense seems to tell us that if a skill is capable of being learned, then there should be
accessible methods that promote its practice and improvement.

The theorist in me wants to believe that the ability to distinguish good authority
from bad can be based upon universally discernable criteria that can be identified and
taught. The writing instructor in me, however, is acutely aware of the political, cultural,
and legal hazards that must be navigated to avoid accusations of indoctrinating students
rather educating them. Thus, as a scholar, I am intrigued by the notion as to whether the
ability to gauge credibility in others can actually be taught or not. Presumably, teaching
students to think critically about the quality of the information that is put before them is
high on the writing instructor’s list of responsibilities; however, feeling accountable for
teaching students to be analytical as a rhetorical habit and actually being able to instruct
them in methods for distinguishing good sources of information from bad are two
separate issues. My intentions in this dissertation are to outline the historical and
philosophical qualities that inform a complex and balanced understanding of authority in
the first four chapters, and in the final chapter, explore the pedagogy that best teaches this
understanding to students. In Chapter Two, I examined the concept of “virtue” as it
informs a pro-agentic and pythonic understanding of authority; here in Chapter Three, I
explore the ramifications of the concept of “wisdom” upon an understanding of the pro-
agentic and the pythonic.
Most people, I imagine, if asked to consider the essence of wisdom, would likely connect the term with the ability to respond to the larger moral and spiritual concerns of human existence. As I write this chapter in the beginning years of the 21st Century, the question of who deserves our trust when offering us answers to the most profound questions of our existence has become increasingly complicated by our new found technical abilities to seek out and discover many of the people who presume (or, at least, make the claim) to know the answers. As I pointed out in Chapter Two, we are no longer limited (as our ancestors once were) to the communal intelligence of a tiny geographic region; with a few short clicks of a mouse, we can now access through the internet what is often purported to be the collected wisdom of the entire world. Unfortunately, the collected wisdom of the world comes bundled with the collected folly of the planet as well, and the responsibility for teaching our students to sort through the pile to pick out the trusted authority from the unreliable crackpot has become a part of the writing instructor’s duties as we teach our students to think critically about the sources they employ to support their ideas.

I, for one, know that I don’t know the answers to the great mysteries of life, and I am grateful that my ability to write this chapter upon the subject of “wisdom” relies upon my ability to read heuristically what others have to say about the subject and is not, therefore, dependent upon my own personal capacity for demonstrating this quality. This is to say, that I, by no means, consider myself to be any form of sage, prophet, or shaman. I am merely an academic writer who is trying to identify the salient characteristics that
others have used to recognize “wisdom” as it manifests in good authority. As I have constructed my theory of “good authority” I have given much thought as to the manner and style in which I lay a path (and certainly not the path) for discussing who (I believe) deserves to be trusted and who does not deserve to be trusted – because the question of my own authority (and trustworthiness) lies at the very heart of the question of good authority. *Who am I, I often wonder, to try to tell others who should or should not be believed? What makes me believable? How can I establish any basis for dependability as a general theory if I cannot establish my own?*

Sincerity, I have come to believe, is not enough to merit the designation of “good authority.” Of course, anyone lacking sincerity is categorically a bad authority (because it’s tautological that we should not trust liars); nonetheless, it’s not difficult for us to invoke a list of people (both modern and historical) who were fanatically sincere in what they believed and who were, nonetheless, absolutely wrong about what they believed. So, while it is absolutely essential that in order to be credible, we expect our authorities to be sincere, sincerity, in and of itself, is not sufficient to establish an authority worthy of credibility.

Power, I believe, is also not by itself a good reason to surrender belief to another’s authority. Perhaps my most basic assumption, the *terra firma* from which I construct the *pro-agentic* theory of “good authority,” is based upon the principle that *the ability to inflict some means of destruction (whether it is physical, emotional, or spiritual) does not equate a sound (rational, reasonable, intelligent) reason to be taken as a “good authority.”* One difficulty here is that although people who have expertise in a particular
field should be granted a certain amount of respect and preferential authority over people with less expertise when it comes to resolving matters requiring that particular expertise; sometimes we (the public-at-large, the consumers of mass media, the ordinary citizen who does not have any direct connections to those with the legislative, judicial, or executive power to influence the dictates and regulations by which the rest of us must live by) conflate the ability to establish belief with the wisdom to do so. This is to say, that due to the influence of a culture driven by mass media, people often confer upon others the so-called mantle of expertise when it is not experience that has informed their ideas but any number of irrational substitutes such as wealth, fame, or social status. The deference that is due to those who really know what they are talking about – experts who have gained important and relevant experience and who can demonstrate their knowledge to the rest of us – becomes diluted when authority is granted to people whose opinions should hold no more weight than anyone else’s merely because they have either the financial wherewithal or the political clout to make other people’s lives miserable. Later in this chapter, I discuss a study by Jean Goodwin who identifies three distinct types of authority: those based in the ability to command, those based in expertise, and those based upon the dignity of the authority. Although there has been very little rhetorical research into identifying different types of authority, Goodwin’s typology of different authoritative appeals meshes well with my own theorization of the types of authority worthy of trust and credence.

In Chapter One, I began to articulate the difference between “good authority” and “bad authority” by naming them the pro-agentic ethos and the pythonic ethos,
respectively. The primary distinction I wanted to demonstrate in the first chapter is that somehow a *pro-agentic ethos* (that is to say, an authority that is worthy of trust and belief) communicates in tandem with her primary message, a message of concern for the agency of both herself (as speaker) and her audience (as consumers of whatever else she has to say) while a *pythonic ethos* communicates (either through overt statements of coercion or implicit gestures of domination) that achieving one’s ends is more important than any concerns for people’s choice or freedom of expression. I argue that while there are, perhaps, many circumstances in which coercion is an appropriate vehicle for motivating people to take some action, the use of coercion should not be considered rhetorical because the use of force negates the ability to choose, and choice is a necessary and fundamental aspect of persuasion. Thus, in a nutshell, I theorize that while the *pythonic ethos* may sometimes masquerade as a *rhetorical* authority (or even make claims to rhetorical legitimacy), this type of authority should be recognized as “arhetorical” because it relies upon something other than rhetoric to impinge upon the consciousness of its audience. Through this idea, I base the assertion that while a *pythonic ethos* may offer an excellent coercive reason for doing something, it cannot provide a legitimate rhetorical reason for believing something.

In Chapter Two, I began to discuss virtue, the first of three aspects of character that Aristotle identifies as essential for developing a trustworthy ethos. One assertion from the previous chapter that I would like to expand upon in this chapter on wisdom is the idea that the value of an opinion is contingent upon the degree of authority which can be brought to bear upon its contents. The importance of this assertion as it relates to the
concept of wisdom is in the way in which it reminds us that what we know, and how we think we know it, is a function of both 1) our own observed experiences and 2) the theoretical explanations of experts who we expect to understand more than we do. In the previous chapter, I associated these two sources of understanding with ontology (in regards to our observed experiences because as humans, we connect our personal experiences with perceptions of reality – the focus of ontology) and epistemology (in regards to expert theoretical explanations because what gets labeled as knowledge – the focus of epistemology – is the domain of such people as philosophers, scientists, and scholars who toil to establish the veracity of information and who mediate its discourse for the rest of us). In the previous chapter as I explored the historical origins of the concept of virtue as it emerged in ancient Greece, I connected the concept of epistemological understanding to Plato and the concept of ontological understanding with Aristotle. Plato’s understanding of epistēmē, the Greek word for “true knowledge,” is oriented in a theoretical understanding of ideal forms that exist in a transcendent realm accessible only by astute philosophers who can see beyond the shadows of this existence to perceive the true nature of all things (see “The Allegory of the Cave” in Book VII of Plato’s Republic). Aristotle, on the other hand, while being Plato’s protégé, diverges from his teacher’s theoretical orientation to base his understandings in what he observed through empirical experience; therefore, I designated Aristotle’s approach to understanding as ontological due to his concerns for how his understandings correspondence with his perceived reality.
Here in this chapter, as I explore both the epistemic and ontological considerations that help develop a nuanced understanding of a *pro-agentic conceptualization of wisdom*, I feel the need to add a third approach to understanding *wisdom* based in a contemplation of *doxa*. If an *epistemic* understanding is based upon considerations of knowledge as a function of theoretical discourse and an *ontological* understanding is oriented upon perceptions of empirical justifications, then a *doxastic* understanding is based upon the hegemonic and normative paradigms that leave many assumptions uncontested that could (and should) be challenged.

**A Brief Introduction to Doxastic Theory**

Doxa, though a relatively obscure term among composition and communication theorists, refers to the knowledge based in the established mores of a given culture. In “Introduction to the Study of Doxa,” Ruth Amossy writes, “Inherited from ancient Greece, the notion of *doxa* as common knowledge and shared opinions haunts all contemporary disciplines that put communication and social interaction at the center of their concerns” (369). Because doxastic knowledge forms the foundations upon which cultures base their traditional wisdom, doxa represents the doctrines and conventions that are generally accepted without challenge; thus, as the term for beliefs that avoid scrutiny because they draw their authority from common consensus, the concept itself frequently goes unexamined as an aspect of rhetorical theory.

In “Isocrates’ Use of Doxa,” Takis Poulakos asserts for the ancient Greeks, the term *doxa* has significant differences in connotation according to its usage; for its use in

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11 The Oxford English Dictionary currently lists the adjective form of the word *doxastic*, but neither lists nor defines the term *doxa*. An online search for academic articles using the word as a rhetorical term uncovered fewer than 30 examples of its use.
the political sphere (which Poulakos refers to as “the secular tradition”), doxa carries a positive connotation: “[D]oxa came to signify an appropriate form of knowledge for the imprecise world of politics, a world characterized by change, ambiguity, and contingency” (66). In the usage that Poulakos refers to as “the philosophico-religious tradition,” doxa possesses a somewhat negative connotation as it represents mere belief as contrasted to the Greek concept of true knowledge, *epistēmē* (67). In *Meno*, Plato (through the voice of Socrates) offers an extended explanation on the difference between an understanding of virtue when it is conceived as episteme (knowledge) or doxa (belief); writing in “Plato and the ‘Socratic Fallacy’”, Prior clarifies the difference between the Platonic conceptions of “knowledge” and “belief” by explaining, “[T]he person who has knowledge is able to offer a reasoned explanation of the item in question, whereas the person with true opinion is not” (105). Prior adds, “What makes for knowledge, then, is not certainty or practical reliability but the ability of the person who has knowledge to give a reasoned explanation of what he or she knows” (106). Thus, in the political realm of the *polis*, arguing from a doxastic position is considered by rhetors and audience alike an intelligent and legitimate maneuver; however, for the philosophers seeking to understand essential truths, doxa is an inferior and potentially suspect form of understanding.

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle chooses to use the word *endoxa*, instead of *doxa*; *endoxa* is a similar term which in his book *Topics*, Aristotle describes in more detail as “the views of everyone, or of the preponderant majority, or of the recognized experts – either all the experts, or most, or the most famous” (Bolton 157-58). As with his teacher, Plato,
Aristotle distinguishes between what is known to be true (epistēmē) and what is generally believed to be true (endoxa) and, furthermore, he assigns epistēmē to the field of metaphysics (which he regards as a science) and relegates endoxa to rhetoric (which he regards as an art). Susan Jarratt points out in *Rereading the Sophists* that comprehension generated through rhetorical means is represented by Aristotle to be subordinate to the understanding generated through philosophical processes; she writes, “Though practical wisdom plays an important role in the life of a good citizen for Aristotle, it is dependent on and ultimately inferior to ‘theoretical wisdom,’ i.e., the knowledge of permanent truths derived through induction and syllogistic logic” (xvi). This subordination of rhetorical understanding to philosophical comprehension, however, needs to be considered in regards to the purposes for which Aristotle intends these cognitions; in the polis, endoxa, though considered a less certain form of understanding than epistēmē, is better suited for the rhetorical purpose of persuading audiences in regards to matters that are immediate and contingent. Episteme, though held by Aristotle to be a more certain representation of the truth given its philosophic foundations, is often based in a comprehension that is either too complex for the general understanding of the audiences who are in the process of adjudicating forensic concerns or too complicated to be adequately summarized under the limitations of these unavoidably oral circumstances, and thus, doxa, emerging from the beliefs that are most commonly held to be true, is considered both readily accessible and an acceptable foundation from which to argue the merits of one’s position before the Greek assembly. “To build the life of the group or the nation, people have to rely not on some problematic and unreachable Truth, but on what seems sensible and plausible to the
majority” (Amossy 372). According to Aristotle, one effective way to introduce what is generally held to be true is through the use of maxims, \(\text{gnōmē}\), he writes:

> Maxims make one great contribution to speeches because of the uncultivated mind of the audience; for people are pleased if someone in a general observation hits upon opinions that they themselves have about a particular instance . . . people enjoy things said in general terms that they happen to assume ahead of time in a partial way. (Rhetoric 186)

According to Jean-Louis Dufays, the modern critical usage of the word *doxa* began in 1975 with Roland Barthes in his book *Roland Barthes*, “as an elegant term for a received idea, ideological belief” (444). For Barthes, an awareness of doxa is an appreciation for how a hegemonic mentality functions in society; Dufays writes:

> If Barthes without a doubt enriched the tools of ideological analysis by importing the concept of doxa, his approach presented itself as more prescriptive than scientific: in his opinion, doxa was a phenomenon that belonged especially to the dominant ideology, which he characterized as ‘petite bourgeoisie.’ (444)

In 1977, Pierre Bourdieu uses the term *doxa* in a similar fashion by focusing upon the ideological environments created by people living in specific cultural groups; he refers to these spaces as *habitudes*. According to Bourdieu, different habituses become distinct from one another based upon the practices and attitudes that establish what members of the group are able to think in their own ideological paradigms (72).
“Neoliberalism as Doxa,” Rohit Chopra explains Bourdieu’s conception of doxa this way:

To question the doxa is an act essentially in the order of heresy, for it is to question the very basis on which not just particular practices or dispositions ultimately rest, but on which the very system that is the basis of all practices in a habitus ultimately rests. Hence Bourdieu argues, for those who inhabit any particular habitus, what counts as liberal, radical, conservative or orthodox is all within the realm of the thinkable, that is, within the ambit of what does not challenge the doxa. The doxa may be viewed as akin to a substratum of presuppositions, and the acquired practices and dispositions within a habitus as reflections, albeit unselconscious, unarticulated or untheorized, of taken-for-granted deductions about reality itself. (426)

When Barthes identifies doxastic thinking as the opinions and beliefs that are permitted within a pervasive and all encompassing hegemony, it is as though dissent and opposition to conventional ideology grows in an atmosphere in which the power to define what is “natural” or “normal” comes from the air – in the same manner as a plant that can only grow in an environment that will tolerate its presence. Bourdieu’s conception of doxa sees the type of thinking that would challenge such notions as “natural” or “normal” as springing from the very ground that makes such notions possible – in the same way a plant must emerge from a seed lodged in the soil. Thus, in comparing Barthes’ conception of doxa to Bourdieu’s, we can recognize that Barthes’ conception of doxa
functions as an aspect of epistemology (that is to say what is understood as undertheorized or taken for granted is an aspect of what is permitted by what is culturally known to be true) and Bourdieu’s conception of doxa functions as an aspect of ontology (that is to say what can be understood as undertheorized or taken for granted exists in a phenomenological relationship to what is experienced by human beings). Doxa, then, which can thus be considered as aspects of both epistemology and ontology, can be differentiated from both when conceived as the type of understanding that is neither wholly under the management of hegemonic forces that operate in societies nor completely grounded in the reality offered by mainstream experience due to its existence as the rhetorical mechanisms which we accept without critical investigation.

Writing in “Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis,” Raymie McKerrow brings an understanding of the ideological function of doxa into the field of rhetoric by envisioning how the process of rhetorical criticism can be conceived as fulfilling a doxastic rationale. McKerrow observes, “Rather than focusing on questions of ‘truth’ or ‘falsity,’ a view of rhetoric as doxastic allows the focus to shift to how the symbols come to possess power – what they ‘do’ in society as contrasted to what they ‘are’” (454). In responding to McKerrow’s conception of rhetoric as doxastic, Jim Kuypers argues that if rhetoric is to accomplish the task of exposing the power relations that are inherent in a hegemonic understanding of a society’s established conventions, then a greater emphasis must be placed on understanding the ethical responsibilities the critic must bear as an agent of social change when responding to texts in this fashion. Kuypers writes, “[W]ith doxa viewed as conceptually distinct from episteme, the amoral dimensions of critical rhetoric
are further exacerbated; there needs to be some method of judging an agent’s actions that
does not rely solely upon universal or relativistic conceptions of *episteme*” (455).

Kuypers’ answer for the means upon which to judge the ethics of a rhetorical agent in
light of a doxastic rhetoric is a return to the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, which
Kuypers translates as *prudence*. Kuypers argues for an understanding of *prudence* based
upon how the action of the agent works to constitute itself as ethical. Kuypers writes, “In
order for an agent to act prudentially he or she must be able to draw successfully upon the
doxa operating in a given society in order to ascertain the ethical dimensions of the
discourse at hand” (458). Although notions of truth are contingent in a rhetoric
conceived as doxastic, Kuypers argues that an awareness of prudence enables critics,
audiences, and other agents constituted by the discourse to be held to recognizable ethical
standards; he writes:

> [T]he performative aspect holds prudence as a norm for action in which
value judgments are made based upon a community’s needs, doxa, and
with awareness of the contingent. Thus, it involves the ethical dimension
associated with action; choice itself, in order to be ethical, must be
constitutive of being itself. (459)

Thus, understandings generated through a rhetorical theory that conceives of itself as
doxastic needs to commit itself to adhere to a pragmatic and principled praxis despite the
awareness that conceptions of what is “pragmatic” and “principled” are based in
traditional and ordinary notions of moral judgments that themselves are arbitrary and
relative to the contexts that produced them. When Kuypers refers to ethical choices as
being “constitutive of being itself,” he is alluding to the ontological aspects of doxa, the aspects of human existent that goes unobserved due to our cultural habits of overlooking whatever we customarily consider “commonplace” or “ordinary.”

With this understanding of *doxa* as a theoretical lens, the *telos*, then, in regards to the next portion of the study’s examination of wisdom, (*phronēsis* being the Greek term Aristotle used when he identified wisdom as one of the three essential aspects of a “good” ethos, and *sophia* being the Greek term for wisdom employed by the Sophists), is to consider how conceptions of *wisdom* are constituted *doxastically* by conventional discourses and to explicate how the mainstream understandings of these qualities are challenged by rhetorical theorists (several operating from feminist, queer, and post-colonial perspectives) who work to disrupt the otherwise normative definitions provided by traditional and hegemonic conceptions of authority and credibility.

Wisdom and the Three Modes of Authority (Epistemology, Ontology, and Doxa)

Given the explication of doxa in the previous section and both epistemology and ontology in the previous chapter, I have at this point presented a three pronged foundation for understanding wisdom. Metaphorically speaking, if we were to put our understanding of wisdom upon the base of an easel, the easel would be supported by three legs: the *epistemic leg* which embraces knowledge as originating in theoretical and academic discourse, the *ontological leg* which interprets human perceptions of reality as a source of experiential meaning, and the *doxastic leg* which maintains assumptions concerning what we expect to be true as an offshoot of our idiosyncratic cultural backgrounds especially as they are created and maintained by patriarchal hegemony.
Thus, as we behold wisdom as an object of critical reflection, we do so with the awareness that our understanding rests upon three different sources of validation: the explained (as epistemic), the experienced (as ontological), and the assumed (as doxastic). The importance of recognizing these three separate legs of understanding’s foundation lies in the awareness that as we consider their relationship to wisdom, each strand offers a different model of authority. To fully theorize a pro-agentic and pythonic understanding of wisdom it is necessary to consider the implications each of these models of authority bring to bear upon the concept’s substantiation.

Writing in “Forms of Authority and the Real Ad Verecundiam,” Jean Goodwin points out that although many rhetors are suspicious of appeals to authority, such appeals are nonetheless “manifestly inevitable” in a wide variety of rhetorical situations (267). Goodwin notes also that identifying the different modes of authority “has not received persistent scholarly attention.” Upon reviewing the academic literature on distinguishing types of authority, Goodwin uncovered only one other scholar (Douglas Walton) who went so far as to separate the modes of authority into more than two categories (268). Although the few scholars who have written about the types of authority have referred to them by a variety of names, Goodwin identifies the two most commonly recognized distinctions as “authority of command” and “authority of expertise.” To these two modes of authority, Goodwin also adds “authority of dignity.”

In regards to the two most commonly recognized modes of authority (command and expertise), Goodwin writes,

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12 I will have much to say about the implications of “the authority of dignity” after discussing the two most commonly recognized modes of authority “command” and “expertise.”
One method of distinguishing among authorities might be to rely on the features conspicuous in their exercise. There is an authority which puts forward statements and there is an authority which puts forward imperatives. The former looks for the auditor to take what is stated as true and believe it, or at least give it weight. The latter looks for the auditor to take what is commanded and make it true, by making it what is decided, chosen, intended, willed – in short, for the auditor to do it. (268-69)

What Goodwin and other rhetorical theorists have recognized is that there is a vital and fundamental difference between the authorities we rely upon for answers because they have specialized knowledge and experience (experts) and the authorities we follow because they hold positions of power that enable them to issue orders (commanders). Goodwin also recognizes that these distinctions are rarely simple and practically never mutually exclusive. This is to say that many of the social conditions that allow us to recognize somebody as an authoritative expert also give credence to the perception that he or she is also someone who can issue authoritarian commands. A sheriff’s deputy, for example, is someone whom we expect to have expertise in the field of law enforcement and the legal status to issue commands to civilians when necessary. Composition instructors are expected to have both the authoritative expertise in teaching and evaluating student writing and the authoritarian power of an administrator who is charged with enforcing attendance policies, detecting and reprimanding plagiarists, and compelling civil decorum between students when classroom discussions get particularly heated.
Notice, then, how our understanding of authority is informed by epistemic, ontological, and doxastic implications which often remain outside of our daily field of consciousness. When students get drafts back with instructor comments written in the margins (which may or may not include editing marks correcting their English), some students will recognize the instructor’s annotations as “suggestions” for improvement and other students will see the same marks as “commands” which require conformity. The recognition of the “style” of authority lies in both the student and her instructor and in the very same classroom can be experienced differently from day to day and from assignment to assignment. Some students see every mark and comment upon their work as an obligation requiring response; others see instructor input as counsel which can be accepted or ignored as will. Some writing instructors require evidence that their students have implemented their changes (by obliging students to hand in additional drafts with their changes incorporated into the text), and other instructors expect their students to learn from their commentary and to consider how it applies to new material as the students continue to write throughout the rest of the term. In all these cases, the perception of authority (whether it lies in an expertise that counsels or a power that must be obeyed or, perhaps, even more commonly in a hybridism that demonstrates some qualities of both) lies in the experience of the beholder and, furthermore, may lie entirely outside of any conscious cognitive awareness. Clearly, the judgment which determines whether the use of authority is “good” or “bad” (pro-agentic or pythonic) should not be based on the mode of authority (command or expertise) but rather on whether or not the mode of authority is being employed in a legitimate manner. Both modes of authority
(command and expertise) can be used in legitimate ways, and both can be used in inappropriate ways. A teacher who requires a student to do additional writing may be using her authority inappropriately if she assigns the writing as some form of punishment (handwrite “I will not be late to class” five hundred times) or misuses her expertise by consciously devaluing writing from students that reflects a political ideology other than her own.

The *pythonic* use of the authority to command is unconcerned about the rights of those it demeans and is motivated by either a misguided and inflated sense of its own power to push people around or a devotion to some nebulous principle that is more concerned with maintaining control of others than in maintaining their rights. In regards to the writing classroom, perhaps the best way to consider the difference between the pro-agentic instructor and the pythonic instructor is to note that pro-agentic teachers are more concerned about *teaching their students* and pythonic teachers are more concerned with *teaching their material*.

To fully expatiate an understanding of authority’s relationship to wisdom, it is necessary to move beyond the two most commonly recognized modes of authority (expertise and command) to engage a consideration of a third mode of authority Goodwin refers to as “the authority of dignity” (275). Goodwin asserts there is a need for naming a third mode of authority based not upon how the authority is invoked, but rather based upon an awareness of the consequences that follow from the auditor’s disregard or defiance of the pronouncements of authority (273). I assert that it is from this
consideration for the consequences of not following authority that the nuanced understanding of the epistemic, ontological, and doxastic elements of wisdom emerges.

Goodwin points out that a consideration of the consequences of choosing not to follow authority leads to a better means of distinguishing the modes of authority than by solely relying upon the import of their messages (command or information) to determine the mode of authority at hand (273). The consequence of disregarding the declarations of the expert is characteristically classified as “imprudent,” because not following the advice of an expert is usually considered “foolhardy” or “reckless.” On the other hand, ignoring the directives of the authority who commands power is not merely “imprudent,” this behavior is typically labeled “disobedient” (273). Although with either case any negative results that arise from disregarding authority may often be regarded as deserved by outside spectators, the key difference in not following the words of the expert results in what is often considered a “natural” consequence and the upshot of disregarding those in power brings about what is considered “punishment” or “retribution.” If, for example, we end up in the hospital because we refused to follow our doctor’s advice about taking an expensive prescription, the result of not listening to the expert would be considered a consequence of ignoring good medical counsel, but it would not usually be considered punishment. On the other hand, if we refuse to pull over when the deputy commands us, the time we spend in jail or the cost of the fine we end up paying is clearly not a “natural” consequence but must be regarded as a punishment for showing contempt for legal authority.
In considering the consequences that come from not listening to authority, Goodwin identifies a third mode of authority that offers, perhaps, a different result than either not following the expert or the commander. This third mode of authority results in a public criticism for disregarding the dignity of the authority making the pronouncements. For example, if you went to a wealthy relative for financial advice on whether to sell your old house or to rent it to tenants (prior to your own move into a new home), and after seeking this advice, you choose not to follow it, you may not suffer any financial consequence or legal punishment, but you may be considered by other family members guilty of “embarrassing” the authority by deciding to go your own way. This is to say that ultimately your decision may be considered neither “imprudent” nor “disobedient” but it may be considered by some as “shameless” for not “deferring” to an authority who holds a higher social status. Goodwin writes, “If one does not defer to dignity, one is shameless, and the likely consequence, as far as we can tell from this account, will be to be styled so – to be subject to a certain sort of public humiliation” (274).

Although Goodwin bases her theorization of the “authority of dignity” in both the writings of Locke and Aristotle, she recognizes the authority of dignity (which Locke refers to as *ad verecundiam*) as applicable to only those who have attained a certain elevated status in society, i.e., people who are commonly recognized as having “rank” or “standing” in a community such as doctors, teachers, and religious leaders. Given, however, a critical consideration of the doxastic assumptions of hegemonic powers of society, I would like to offer an alternative theory of the “authority of dignity” by
applying it as well to those who have been marginalized by their experiences as society’s outsiders. This is to say, that the “authority of dignity” is not necessarily an exclusive privilege of those who can make claim to a prominent position in society, but given a deeper appreciation for a pro-agentic theorization of wisdom, “the authority of dignity” can provide a powerful rhetorical means for displacing the injustices sanctioned by pythunic leaders who misuse (and underestimate) the advantages granted to them by society for merely being lucky enough to be from the most influential race, gender, economic class, sexual orientation, or political affiliation. To appreciate how an understanding of a pro-agentic theory of the authority of dignity can perhaps help reverse the inequalities of power distribution in Western Civilization’s historically patriarchal social order, it will be necessary to first revisit the establishment of the doxastic norms in Ancient Greece that continue even today to categorize life in the 21st century.

Plato, Aristotle, and the Sophists: How the West was Won Over

Although it is unfashionable given certain postmodern sensibilities to present the history of Western Civilization as a linear series of progressive movements, following this thread of philosophic thought does offer us a means to recognize how some hegemonic groups of people were able to reify their power to dominate others and to do so in ways that allowed them to present their authority as doxastically “natural,” “normal,” or even at times “God-given.” An understanding of how throughout the course of history hegemonic power becomes naturalized provides a specific awareness essential for teaching students to think critically about the aspects of authority that most often go unchallenged and unrecognized.
If we begin to trace this narrative in Ancient Greece (an academically traditional and equally doxastic choice for a starting place), we witness in the thinking of the pre-Socratic philosophers a movement from Mythos (which relied upon stories of supernaturally based explanations for phenomena) to Logos (which esteemed rationally based explanations for phenomena). Writing in “Logos Without Substance: Wisdom as Seeing Through the Absence,” Bambang Sugiharto comments:

The departure from mythos to logos in the early Greek culture
had marked a cultural revolution in the way the society organizes its knowledge and process of learning, that is, a fundamental shift from oral to literate culture; a change of priority from icon to idea, from image to concept. While the shift appeared to be inevitable and later on proved to be very fruitful for the mastery of the world, in fact it had also created its own peculiar pitfall right from that very beginning. The logical clarity, the grammar and syntax of abstract terms that were made possible by the logos had to be gained at the expense of the richness and complexity, that is, the truth, of the life world. It seemed that when Plato and Aristotle embraced the Logos to rescue self-reflexivity from the uncritical traditional mnemonic-imagistic mode of learning of the poet and the rhetor, they had thrown away the baby along with its bathwater. (158)

The salient point I want to emphasize from the quote above is that because the rational approach to knowledge (with its embrace of the logical, empirical, and pragmatic) was so successful in providing answers and solutions to many of humanity’s most pressing
needs, its importance was elevated beyond merely being considered a good way of understanding truth, it came to be treated as though it were the only way of understanding truth. This is to say that other ways of knowing (metaphorical, spiritual, and intuitive – to name a few) were not only displaced by the emergence of the logical/rational worldview, they became castigated, despised, and proscribed. Due to its successes in providing an accessible organization to understanding everything from biology to politics (Aristotle’s students published his systematized lectures into more than thirty books providing a virtual encyclopedia of the classical world), the logical/rational worldview’s epistemology became conflated with its ontology; thus, knowledge that could have been recognized as socially constructed became accepted as though it were a transparent window to reality itself. Other ways of perceiving and structuring meaning (and arguments against the infallibility of reason) were paved over while constructing the Greek rational road to knowledge, and the sacrifices of complexity and alternative understandings were considered to be of no real consequence by those who were doing the mapping and engineering of this road. The rational/logical insistence that thinking the right way will produce not just the best answer, but the only true answer has left doxastic repercussions that are still with us today, and the emergence of post-structuralist, feminist, post-colonial, and queer theories in the past few decades has underscored the need to challenge the normative hegemonic explanations of the traditional/patriarchal worldview and to acknowledge how alternative explanations of power and authority are both valid and important.
One way to examine the tension between the logical/rational worldview as it emerged in Ancient Greece among the philosophers and (as Sugiharto put it) the “mnemonic-imagistic mode of learning of the poet and the rhetor” is to consider the treatment of the Sophists (and their ideals) in the works of Plato and Aristotle. In *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured*, Susan Jarratt explores these tensions between the traditional patriarchal/hegemonic *weltanschauung* as represented in the established ideals of Plato and Aristotle and the unorthodox matriarchal/marginalized worldview as represented in classic Greece in the teachings and rhetorical practices of the Sophists. If the easel that upholds our understanding rests upon the knowledge that gets socially constructed and explained (the epistemic leg), the observed experiences of empirical reality (the ontological leg), and the unchallenged assumptions of what is alleged to be normal (the doxastic leg), then in this book, Jarratt challenges the readers to consider how the construction of the doxastic leg subverts challenges to the status quo.

Jarratt writes:

Aristotle, indeed, offers a rich and complicated view of rhetoric well worth investigating. But a more crucial issue than the mere presence or absence of a particular classical figure is the often unspoken acceptance of foundational features of Aristotelian thought on which current histories sometimes rest. Particular discourses – rhetorical or other – are always located within a knowledge structure: i.e., an episteme (Foucault, Order xx – xxii) or noetic field (Berlin, Writing 2). A historian, then, who uses Aristotle uncritically as a point of departure may be in danger of
reinscribing the epistemic field in which his rhetoric dwelt. The purpose of rereading the first sophists for rhetoric and composition studies today is to bring to light that Aristotelian orientation and offer an alternative. In reconstructing the sophists, the task lies in bringing to awareness the screen through which they are inevitably filtered for us by our location on the other side of Aristotle, and then re-seeing them as far as possible, within their own fifth-century intellectual, political, and artistic milieu. (xvii)

Although as a point of departure in this dissertation I begin with the three qualities Aristotle designated as essential for establishing a “good ethos,” I embrace Jarratt’s challenge to critically investigate the doxastic elements that Aristotle observed as key to the credentialing of “good” authority. By accepting that Aristotle was apparently unable (or unwilling) to recognize the moral flaws in discounting the humanity of women, slaves, and foreigners in his Greek society, it is one of the missions of this chapter to identify how his rationalization of wisdom could bracket out the misery of so many of the people whose lives he encountered on a daily basis. Furthermore, I seek to explicate how this act of bracketing out the experiences of others has become a doxastic feature of Western Civilization as it has habitually continued to promote the interests of the powerful and wealthy at the expense of those it has left, for all intents and purposes, silent and censored.

Over the past two millennia, Plato and Aristotle’s disparagement of the sophistic ideals has through the establishment of their logocentric paradigms helped to cultivate a
condescending attitude among the conservative custodians of the status quo toward intellectual positions and political stances that challenge customary ways of thinking. Because the sophists were itinerate instructors who frequently encountered a variety of cultural differences as they traveled, they came to value the importance of considering time and place when teaching people to construct messages for the purpose of achieving rhetorical ends. For many of the sophists, the concept of kairos, a Greek term for appreciating the nuances of context in picking the optimal moment for making one’s case, is a central rhetorical concern; however, for Plato, whose philosophy is oriented toward understanding the unchanging timelessness of ideal forms, the concept of kairos is an anathema, the tool of those who are more interested in transient deception than in perceiving eternal truths.

In their writings, Plato and Aristotle cast the sophists as people who would say whatever was necessary to win an argument and thus, in effect, began a tradition of considering people who offer alternative explanations as both intellectually substandard and morally suspect. Jarratt writes, “Despite the ways in which the two later Greeks appropriated features of the first sophists, the power of a simple, moral contrast between the sophists and Plato/Aristotle has infected the history of thought for centuries” (2). In this conflict between what is presented as a search for eternal truths and what is treated as the willingness to undermine the truth to achieve transient ends (which is often promoted by the guardians of the status quo as the rejection of all moral values because it is an explicit rejection of their moral values), the search for the meaning of wisdom becomes explicitly attached to word choice and the credibility we give to those making that word
choice. In the section below I explore how Aristotle’s word for wisdom “phronesis,” a word commonly associated in English with “prudence” (as an aspect of establishing character in the rhetorical context) and the sophists’ word for wisdom “sophia,” a world commonly associated in English with “theoretical wisdom” (as a reflection of contextual nuance) exemplify the doxastic problems of a contemporary understanding of authority.

Phronesis versus Sophia: The Fundamental Conflict of Communicating Meaning

As professionals whose stock in trade includes acquaintance with both literature and composition, English teachers understand that texts may be read (i.e., interpreted) in more than one way. As humans lacking the clarity of perfect mental telepathy, English teachers understand that meaning is negotiable and contextual, and often what is read by one person to mean one thing can be read by another person to mean something else entirely. Because we understand language is inherently ambiguous, we expect misinterpretations to happen, and we recognize the futility of getting upset over it when it happens, especially when we have asked our students to struggle with difficult texts. Usually, I suppose, most English instructors are willing to accept an unorthodox reading of a text if the student is able to articulate the ideas that led to her alternative interpretation. Although we may be charitable to unconventional impressions of a text, nonetheless there are times when we feel it is necessary to draw upon our authority (as an amalgam of expert, commander, and dignitary) to assert that a particular reading of a text is just plain wrong. Commonly when this happens, a student has taken a writer’s metaphor literally, and when this happens, it becomes our job to explain the metaphor
and to point out how a literal interpretation actually prevents a deeper understanding of the text (and sometimes, how improbable a literal interpretation would be).

Because we deal in both metaphorical and literal expressions, we understand the value in both. In short, there are some truths that cannot be expressed literally. Many human experiences are not just resistant to literal expression; they are fundamentally beyond the language of concrete absolutes. One problem then we frequently encounter then occurs when students (especially those who have come to believe that their grades are absolutely dependent upon their ability to regurgitate the one right answer on a test) seek the security of a literal interpretation of a text when the real understanding lies in the complex, hazy, and richness of the insecure metaphorical reading. This conflict between reading and writing in ways that lend themselves to literal simplicities that are universally true and those that lend themselves to metaphorical expression of real human experience is the fundamental conflict between the Aristotelian worldview and the sophistic understanding of kairos. The ability to value the ephemeral as well as the eternal is perhaps the best way to approach the understanding of wisdom, although as we shall see, Aristotle’s compulsion towards the ontological led him to devalue a contextual appreciation of wisdom in favor of a more universal application of the word. In trying to set down reliable conventions for recognizing the attributes of good character, it seems Aristotle not only missed in his inability to recognize the humanity of those he considered beneath him, but he also did not identify that the only real constant in human experience: change itself. By truncating human experience into manageable segments of his own worldview, Aristotle not only played it safe by conflating wisdom with “prudence,” but
he did not recognize (as the sophists did) how understanding what is transient in the
given context is a reflection of a deeper wisdom than what is literally accessible.

Sugiharto writes:

Perhaps wisdom lies in the courage to recognize the fact that ultimately
reality or the so-called Being is not a substance, but rather, fleeting
relations, ever-changing networks, or elusive flux. Wisdom ultimately
might mean an ability to come to terms with insecurity, an ability to see
through the “absence.” (157)

What Sugiharto is suggesting is that the sophistic notion of *kairos* (the appreciation for
context) comes closer to the crux of wisdom than Aristotle’s reliance on “prudence”
which attempts to conserve experience rather than communicate it.

Although both Aristotle and Plato portrayed the sophistic understanding of
wisdom as a superficial and facetious concern for reality, Jarratt’s reading of the sophists
reminds us that this is not at all the case; the sophists took the responsibility of
communicating the truth seriously. Unfortunately for the sophists (as far as their
historical reputations are concerned), it was their understanding of the truth that was not
taken seriously by the established and dominate powers who had an interest in
maintaining their own claims to authority. The ability to claim what is “right” or what is
“natural” serves as a doxastic foundation upon which the politically dominate tiers of
society can marginalize those whose experiences do not match with the established truths
of the hegemonic forces. Thus, anyone who challenges the naturalism of the powers
ruling society must first demonstrate that their claims can fit within a system of
understanding that has already truncated and discredited the value of their experiences. According to W. K. C. Guthrie writing in *The Sophists*, the Greek word “nomos” was the term for the ordinary customs which are generally believed, practiced, and “held to be right” (55). Thus, *nomos* is the Greek predecessor for the English word “normal.” In teaching people how to wield persuasive power through rhetorical means, the sophists threatened the “normal” status quo by offering a voice to people who “normally” would have been discounted. Jarratt writes:

Thus rhetoric can be closely linked with nomos as a process of articulating codes, consciously designed by groups of people, opposed both to the monarchial tradition of handing down decrees and to the supposedly non-human force of divinely controlled “natural law.” These definitions help to locate an understanding of nomos in the context of the movement from mythos to logos. If the mythic world is based on an uncritical acceptance of a tradition warranted by nature (physis), then a sophistic interest in nomos represents a challenge to that tradition. If on the other hand, logos in its ultimately Platonic form signifies a necessary system of discourse allowing access to certain Truth, then nomos stands in opposition as the possibility for reforming human “truths” in historically and geographically specific contexts.

It is unclear whether Plato or Aristotle were aware (or even concerned) about how their promotion of a logical/rational worldview established the doxastic foundations to support “rightful” claims to powers that dominated groups of people as though they had no more
claim to human experience than animals or objects. What is clear is that in order to reverse the doxastic underpinnings of hegemonic authority it is necessary to now recognize and validate the human experiences of all types of people whose lives have been marginalized and censored.

Although in his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle used the word “phronēsis” to communicate the wisdom of demonstrating one’s principled and pragmatic judgment while establishing credibility in the ethical context of a rhetorical scene, the sophist’s word “sophia,” from whence they drew their name, indicates a higher “theoretical” wisdom and seems to take into account not just circumstances of the rhetorical encounter, but an additional appreciation for the life experiences of those one would wish to persuade. Thus, an important difference, then, between “phronesis” and “sophia,” is the difference between focusing on how one’s own experiences match the “normalized” expectations of the status quo and focusing on how the experiences of others should be taken into account when shaping the message to suit the particular needs of ones audience. Aristotle’s choice of the word “phronēsis” over the word “sophia” suggests the patriarchal tendency to say what is “prudent” or “expedient ” rather than speak with a wisdom informed by an open acceptance of the views that conflict with one’s own. Thus, this understanding of the difference between “saying whatever the audience expects to hear” in order to manipulate them into agreement with one’s own agenda and communicating to the audience a respect for their variant and unique outlooks informs the pro-agentic conception of wisdom. This is to say that the appreciation for and acceptance of different visions of reality other than one’s own is a vital step towards accepting the responsibility of taking “the other’s”
agency with sincerity and good faith. The pro-agentic conception of wisdom being concerned with one’s own agency as well as the agency of those it seeks to persuade also maintains the expectation that one owns understanding of what is “right” or “true” will be given the benefit of a respectful hearing before being accepted or rejected by one’s audience.

**Personal Interlude: Wisdom as an Amalgam of Phronēsis and Sophia**

Early in my high school teaching career, I was called into the office one day by my principal, Mr. Adams. Although this happened nearly twenty years ago, I can still see plainly with my mind’s eye, Mr. Adams sitting and smiling as I walked in – as if he were already in on some grand joke that I had yet to hear. It wasn’t a joke, but Mr. Adams was amused by the situation nonetheless. Mr. Adams had an earnest and steady disposition. He was a sincere administrator who exemplified all the best qualities of someone you would want to work for, and it was his ability to respond with a gentle good humor rather than with any irritation to the regular aggravations of public education that perhaps made him the best administrator I ever worked for. He made it clear to us, his staff, that he cared about the quality of instruction that was being offered in his building, but as far as I know he never interfered with either the manner or the substance of what his teachers chose to teach. He relied upon his staff’s own professional discretion to decide how and what should be taught (of course, this was also in the days before standardized tests became an ubiquitous indicator of classroom success and thus, Mr. Adams, who retired before the first standardized high school exams were implemented in our district, never felt the threat of public scrutiny and official judgment from distant bureaucrats who
apparently always know better what our local students need to know and how it should be
taught to them than those of us who serve our students every day). Mr. Adams was an
excellent mentor also, and though he held the power to insist that his teachers handle
situations in specific ways, he rarely, if ever, used this control. Instead, whenever a
situation requiring intervention from the principal’s office arose, Mr. Adams would
calmly suggest how he would handle the situation and then left it up to the teacher to
decide if that’s the way he or she wanted to deal with it. On those rare occasions when a
teacher decided not to follow his advice, he never raised his voice in anger or contempt;
his he would patiently wait to see how the situation played out and would comment at some
later time whether he felt his own ideas would have ultimately been better or not.

Being young and in the early stages of my teaching career, I always felt in those
days a visceral reaction to being summoned to the office; perhaps teaching in the same
high school that I attended as a student did not help matters. It did not matter, really, that
I had completed college and was working as teacher; a call to the principal’s office still
felt like an invitation to be disciplined.

I sat down in the chair Mr. Adams’s kept on the other side of his desk from where
he sat, and asked (with some trepidation even though I knew the trouble could not be too
awful given the wide smile on Mr. Adams’s face), “What did I do now?”

“I want you to read this,” he said, and he handed me a white envelope with a letter
in it. The contents of the letter could not have seemed stranger to me had it been written
in Chinese. I had to read the letter a second time just to be sure I was getting the meaning
right. By the time I looked down from the letter over to Mr. Adams, he was already
laughing. “Is he serious?” I asked, hoping from Mr. Adam’s amusement that that was some form of a joke. It wasn’t a joke.

The letter had been written by a minister of a church one of my students attended. Basically, the letter was a threat. According to the minister, my student had told him that we had been practicing breathing exercises in my drama class, and it was the minister’s belief that such exercises opened the student up to the risk of demon infestation. Although I haven’t seen the letter in more than twenty years (and, of course, I regret today that I do not have a copy of it to place in this dissertation’s appendix), I can still quote practically the entire contents from heart. “If you do not stop teaching this New Age Hinduism,” the letter’s author demanded, “I will see you in court.”

I was stunned. At first I didn’t know how to react, but quickly my confusion was replaced with anger. “Is he serious?” I asked again hoping for a better response. “Can he really sue me for having my students do breathing exercises in an acting class?”

“Tell me about the breathing exercises,” Mr. Adams asked.

“Well, I learned them in a relaxation class I am taking at OU,” I replied. “It’s a simple and common technique for increasing the body’s relaxation response by increasing the oxygen available in the bloodstream. I have my students do it before we begin acting because I want them to clear their heads before I have them participate in the acting exercises.” I was at the time in midst of earning a Master’s degree in Community Mental Health Counseling. “It has nothing to do with New Age Hinduism. In fact, that’s the first thing I’m going to tell this guy when I write him back, New Age Hinduism is an
oxymoron, and he should know such things before he starts making ridiculous accusations about what I’m teaching in class.”

Very quietly, without even the least tone of being controlling, Mr. Adams said, “No, you are not.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, sounding I suppose even more frantic and irritated than I actually felt. “You don’t think I should write this guy back?”

“No, you are not going to write this guy back.”

“You can’t tell me that,” I told him. “You can’t keep me from writing a letter if I want to. This is America. Just because I’ve got a job here doesn’t mean you’ve got a right to tell me not to respond to crackpots if I want to. Anyone can write a letter.”

“I know that,” he said. “But you’re not going to write this guy back because it doesn’t make any sense to write the guy back.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look, it does not matter if you are absolutely right about what you know and about what you are teaching. Do you really think that there’s anything you could say that’s going to change his mind about the risk he believes in and that you’re exposing this girl to demon infestation?”

I didn’t answer right away. I had to think about it, but, of course, he was right, and I had to admit that there was probably nothing I could say that would change this person’s mind about anything.
“You can write your letter if you want to, but think about what’s going to happen if you do. It’s not going to change his mind, and it will probably only provoke a sermon about you in front of his congregation. There’s a better way of handling this.”

“Okay,” I said, “I’m listening.”

“Do you really care if that girl does these breathing exercises in your class?”

“Of course not,” I replied, “if I knew it made her feel uncomfortable, I wouldn’t have asked her to do them in first place. In fact, I guess that’s my biggest source of irritation in this situation, that she did not come to me first instead of having her minister write me a letter threatening to take me to court.”

“I knew that,” he said. “So, why don’t you just tell the girl she doesn’t have to do the exercise, and let it go?”

“Because it’s the principle of the thing,” I said. “There’s nothing wrong with what I’m asking her to do.”

“I know that, and you know that, but how’s turning yourself into a pariah in the eyes of a small fundamentalist congregation going to change anything?”

“It won’t, I suppose”

“And that’s why you are not going to write that letter even though you have every right to write that letter if you want to.”

“Because it wouldn’t change anything.”

“That is correct,” he said. I left his office still composing in my head the response I wanted to write, but wouldn’t actually put to paper. The next afternoon, I took the girl aside and told her that she didn’t have to do the breathing exercises, but if she wanted to
she could quietly say a prayer to herself. I also told her that studies had shown that prayer
has the same physiological response as the breathing method we had been doing. And I
suggested to her that the next time she had a problem with something that was going on
in one of her classes, it might be better to speak to the teacher about it before going to
trouble of having her minister write a letter. I also added that perhaps if she felt demon
infestation were a real possibility, that perhaps, an acting class is not the best place for
her because how could she be sure when she was acting that an evil spirit was not
controlling her thoughts and actions. Within a week, I was over the initial frustration and
anger I had felt at being accused of teaching “New Age Hinduism.” In all likelihood, the
minister had forgotten about it too since I never heard from him again.

Although I did not appreciate the depth of Mr. Adam’s wisdom at the time, I have
the deepest regard for it now. Now, with twenty-five years of my own teaching
experience behind me, I feel better able to appreciate the mixture of prudence and good
judgment that he showed me, not just in this particular case but, really, in all our many
transactions together. Although I did not have a name for it then, it is clear to me now
that Mr. Adams with his focus on what was best for the student and what was best for me
as teacher exemplified a pro-agentic mode of authority. Instead of demanding, as many
administrators would have done, that I not write a letter in response to the minister’s
threat, he was able to get me to recognize my choices and to allow me to choose for
myself the course I wanted to pursue based upon the foreseeable outcomes.

From my perspective, the minister in this story exemplifies the pythonic ethos: he
was only really interested in a one-way communication, and he wanted to control my
behavior through the use of a threat. He was not interested in convincing me of the truth of his perspective; he merely wanted to impose it upon me. Notice, as I have tried to explain throughout this dissertation when describing the pythonic ethos, that the minister was not at all interested in what I thought, but was, rather, completely occupied with how I behaved. He wanted me to stop teaching students to use a breathing exercise, and he did not care a whit whether I agreed with his reasons or not. Had he been interested in a two-way dialogue, then instead of writing a letter to my administrator, he would have either called me on the phone or come to see me in person. Instead of asking me how I felt about his problem with this particular teaching method, he chose instead to have an ultimatum delivered to me through my boss: either stop using the breathing exercise or be prepared to defend myself in court.

The minister in this story expected that by being demanding and threatening that I would be “persuaded” into doing what he wanted me to do (stop using the breathing exercise in class). The point I would like to emphasize here is that the act and intention of forcing someone to change his behavior is entirely different from the act and intention of getting someone to change his way of thinking. The former is coercion and the latter is rhetoric. Coercion is pythonic because it is focused upon behavioral results rather than conscious intentions; rhetoric is pro-agentic because it respects the necessity of choice in order for real persuasion to occur. The minister was indifferent whether I agreed with him or not; he was only interested in obtaining the results of his demands.

Another pythonic aspect of the minister’s letter is that he expected me to stop using the breathing exercise with all of my students when he was actually concerned only
with the welfare of one of them. It is typical of the pythonic mindset to focus on the application of a universal rule (or outcome) that affects all who fall beneath it rather than consider the specifics of circumstances and make adjustments accordingly. Although he was apparently satisfied when his student no longer performed the breathing exercise in class (I make this assumption because I never heard from him again), his original demand for me to stop using the exercise with all students would have impacted the vast majority of students who over the years have communicated to me that they have found real benefit in knowing and using a relaxation method in moments of high stress (such as just prior to going on stage to perform). I see this illustration as pythonic because in the minister’s focus only on the behavioral aspects of his demand, he was unable to recognize how the breathing technique might be benefiting some students who (had I stopped teaching the technique and explained to them the coercion behind its sudden cessation) would have found his concerns over demon infestation laughable and absurd.

The Politics of Wisdom and the Wisdom of Politics

The two types of wisdom (phronēsis, which is often translated from the Greek as “practical wisdom,” and sophia, which is often translated from the Greek as “abstract wisdom”) reflect different attitudes concerning one's place in the world. The pythonic attitude toward writing instruction teaches English and is more concerned with prudence (an impulse to embrace "the correct answer" or the simplest explanation according to the style books that do not recognize the impact of context upon appropriate usage); the pro-agentic attitude toward writing instruction teaches students and is more concerned with helping them understand the sophistication necessary to adapt language usage for the
contextual or generic requirements (an impulse to embrace complexity). Prudence loves the rules and the enforcement of the rules; sophistication understands the purpose of the rules is to further enhance communication and human agency. Sophistication recognizes the importance of context over universals; those who love universal rules (the pythonic) want others to conform to their expectations. The sophistic (pro-agentic) attitude is adaptive and responsive to circumstances; the pythonic attitude wants people to accept universal rules as "natural" and "normal" and is only threatened by those who understand that what is maintained as "normal" is a product of a doxastic social construction.

For the pythonic, hegemony provides an orientation that privileges status and symbols of dominance over human dignity; therefore, the pythonic attitude will proclaim for example that a tuxedo is as a rule a better suit of clothes than a pair of overalls without considering how context determines that the overalls are better suited for the context of gardening. In the same way, the sophistic (pro-agentic) attitude understands that one's language choices should adapt with circumstance in the same way we choose our clothes to fit our environment. The pythonic attitude maintains such faith in the "universalism" of the rules that it will maintain (for instance) that Standard English is always easier to understand and comprehend despite the circumstances; the pythonic attitude cannot understand how according to the occasion, Standard English can be the "inappropriate" diction. The pythonic attitude cannot recognize how it is demeaning and inappropriate to correct someone else's usage in the midst of a casual or social situation.

The pythonic belief in the superiority of Standard English (as driven by reliance upon universal rules of usage) is doxastic. Hegemony relies on "common knowledge" to
support its position that "everyone knows" that Standard English is superior language usage. Hegemony uses its own diction to replicate what it wants to refer to as "Standard English"; this gives it the power to marginalize others it wants to label as inferior. It is as though – through its idolization of Standard English – hegemony is emboldened to proclaim, "If others want to be treated as equals, they first must learn to speak as I do. If they are willing to work hard enough to learn to speak as I do naturally, then I will grant them a modicum of respect for conforming to my standards." The sophistic (pro-agentic) in its embrace of complexity is willing to accept that within many contexts "Standard English" is the best usage choice; therefore, pro-agentic English teachers teach Standard English with the caveat that when circumstances seem to require Standard English, students should be able to produce it as necessary; however, empowering people to communicate well and express themselves artistically should be our guiding light, not a fetish for "correctness." The fetish of correctness as an emblem of authority grew out of the historic need for poorly-trained and overwhelmed writing instructors to process piles of undergraduate compositions in a mechanical way that reduced feedback to symbols referring to specific rules; overwhelmed by the enormity of students and the mountains of papers that needed to be processed, a fixation on Standard Usage enabled writing instructors to handle their responsibility while appearing "objective" and minimized the need for commenting on their students "content" or "expression of original thought." The pythonic does not value original thought; it values defense of the Status Quo. Thus, Phronēsis, prudence, is the wisdom of the Status Quo (as promoted by Aristotle), and Sophia is the wisdom of the marginalized.
I expect most college writing instructors have conceivably read, assimilated, and put into practice the research on the benefits of the more “sophisticated” approach to teaching composition in which issues of voice, context, and audience consideration are given at least as much attention as the traditional mechanics, usage, and grammar. The reason I invoke the specter of Standard Written English here, as emblematic of a *pythonic* mindset, is because much of the political power behind what gets taught in the writing classroom still resides outside of the instructor’s prerogative. To some extent politically conservative forces, which are admittedly more of an issue at some institutions of higher learning than others, exert pressure upon writing instructors to produce students capable of demonstrating what they have learned from their composition courses. This means, of course, writing that is evaluated by some “standardized” testing method that (like it or not) relies upon judgments based on criteria that can be easily (or reliably) measured, and this means the qualities that writing instructors often prize and esteem the most within their students’ work (such as originality and depth of analysis) – which are not so easily measured – are at risk of becoming peripheral or even subversive. Although many college writing instructors enjoy the academic freedom to teach their students to write in accordance with the best practices they have been able to discern from their experience and research, some college instructors are already finding themselves charged with preparing students to master some form of “exit exam” in order to fulfill their writing requirements, and increasingly the pressure to focus their instruction upon the traditional mechanics of writing (which is more easily testable) than the more nuanced and sophisticated aspects of writing are becoming manifest as course assignments and tenure
decisions become routine expressions of how well individual writing instructors are considered to be “doing their jobs.” I am suggesting here that the discussion of what gets taught in the classroom, which skills get emphasized and which markers of quality are esteemed, should be itself a source of classroom discussion. If (or when) the surface qualities of Standard Written English are made to represent the hallmarks of “good writing,” composition instructors can still teach their students how the generic requirements of SWE are embedded within a greater historical context of linguistic domination and assimilation.

Bringing the politics of domination out into the open enables students to recognize how the language of tradition and normalcy fosters the empowerment of the few at the expense of the many who find themselves disadvantaged because their own life experiences (informed by race, gender, economic class, and sexual orientation to name a few) do not match up with the pythonic forces that provide others with privileged and doxastic advantages. Teaching students to challenge critically the doxastic assumptions that undermine the agency of others, even if they may count themselves among those who are advantaged by social factors beyond their control, is important for placing issues of mechanical correctness and grammatical usage into a perspective in which “what is said” becomes as significant as “how it gets said.” If the people who enjoy the benefits of hegemony want to deny that they enjoy any special advantages by belonging to the historically dominate classes of society, then teaching them the differences between a pro-agentic authority and a pythonic authority will, at the very least, compel them to defend their positions based on a concern for agency and not through a mere doxastic fiat.
At this point, I think it is important to remember that for Aristotle, the wisdom of
the sophists was not just imprudent or impractical, it was immoral. In *Aristotle’s Voice*,
Jasper Neel writes:

> The reason that the sophist is such a vicious, evil, untrustworthy,
destabilizing force in society is that sophists do not inhabit the system that
reveals true knowledge. As a result of some strange perversity (perhaps a
 genetic defect), they go around doubting all the time. Not only do they
believe nothing, they continually unsettle those who believe something. . .

Real knowledge is the sort that “enables us to know by the mere fact that
we grasp it,” and we know such knowledge by knowing sophistry as the
opposite of such knowledge, for sophistry offers the sort of knowledge
that remains forever mixed up in contradictions and refutations (Posterior
Analytics 71b9-19). (194)

Here, Neel is pointing out how easy it is to be dismissed by those in power when one’s
experiences deny the doxastic truth of the mainstream. By portraying the sophists as evil
people whose experiences could be discounted because they fell outside the doxastic
mainstream, Aristotle was able to write about morality without reflecting on his own
*karios* or recognizing any problems with the ancient Greek practices of enslaving people
of color, degrading women, or killing foreigners. Unfortunately, because his version of
wisdom (as one of the three pillars of character) focused on saying what was prudent
(that is to say what reinforced what the audience already expected to hear) instead of
what was distinctive or unique to any given circumstance, the type of wisdom that belong
to those whose life’s experiences do not fit the norm has been characterized as suspect and insignificant. Even today, when people’s experiences run contrary to mainstream expectations, their stories are often dismissed by those who worship exclusively at the alter of empirical evidence as “anecdotal” and thus, not worth of any serious consideration until enough people from the mainstream can also verify these experiences and the understandings of the marginalized get assimilated into status quo.

In constructing the “progressive” version of the history of Western Civilization, those who write the narratives in such a way as to naturalize the political and cultural dominance of the ruling elite like to point to the achievements of science and politics as evidence for the “rightness” of the Aristotelian method of observation and categorization in constructing the foundations for modern society. Unfortunately, because of the silencing and censoring of those whose lives were marginalized, today we have no way of knowing the true cost of the sublimation of *sophia* beneath *phronēsis*. We can only imagine what was lost when people are murdered, enslaved, imprisoned, or otherwise silenced for contradicting all that is “commonly known” to be true.

Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that Jean Goodwin’s “authority of dignity” could be employed to move toward reversing the inequalities of power distribution within Western Civilization’s historically patriarchal social order. I do not see this as some distant or utopian dream. I assert that if people such as Gandhi and Rosa Parks can change the attitudes of others by their steadfast insistence for respect for the dignity of those whose experience defy the doxastic traditions of the mainstream, then as writing instructors we have the opportunity to rewrite the rules of social justice by teaching our
students to articulate and respect the agency of anyone and everyone with whom we disagree without resorting to or even tolerating the coercive authority of the pythonic ethos. If, as some have suggested, the overtly political nature of this goal makes writing instruction seem other than the promotion of good writing, I would respond by saying that the decision to focus on comma placement is equally political, but far less important.
CHAPTER FOUR: EUNIOA – GOODWILL

The subject of “goodwill” here in Chapter Four offers both the opportunity to tie together several of the concepts of the first three chapters of this dissertation and a gateway to introduce a few other issues that have been central concerns for many rhetorical and composition theorists for the past couple of decades. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I introduced the concept of the *pro-agentic ethos* as a signifier of “good” authority (i.e., those deserving of trust and credibility) and the *pythonic ethos* as a signifier of “bad” authority (i.e., those undeserving of such consideration). From the beginning, the central argument concerning the distinction between a *pro-agentic* authority and a *pythonic* authority is that the former relies upon virtue, wisdom, and goodwill to establish credibility and to stimulate persuasion while the latter relies upon either its ability to threaten or upon its doxastically-based hegemonic dominance to force others to accept its decrees and declarations. In the second chapter, I examined the history and philosophy behind the term “virtue” to demonstrate how indications of character are established in the minds of audiences through both epistemic and ontological means. In the third chapter, in addition to explicating epistemic and ontological considerations for the term “wisdom,” I also worked to demonstrate how doxastic considerations furthermore influence perceptions of credibility and trustworthiness when audiences are developing their impressions of a rhetor’s character.

Here in the fourth chapter, the focus is upon the notion of “goodwill,” the third term identified as essential for establishing a persuasive ethos when engaged in a rhetorical endeavor. For this term, Aristotle used the word “eunoia.” In “Book 2” of
Rhetoric (1378a), Aristotle differentiates *eunoia* from the previous two terms that define character (*aretē* [virtue] and *phronēsis* [wisdom]) by highlighting the affective substratum that underlies its classification. As I will attempt to demonstrate in the rest of this chapter, I regard Aristotle’s interest in what he identifies as *eunoia*’s emotional core as a significant departure from his rhetorical accounting of *aretē* and *phronēsis*.

According to Aristotle, then, an understanding of what it means to be good and wise comes from an analytical assessment of their phenomenological (i.e., ontological) properties while an understanding of the feelings associated with friendship and concern for others originates in a contemplation of their emotional foundations. Aristotle writes:

> The means by which one might appear prudent and good are to be grasped from analysis of the virtues; for a person would present himself as being of a certain sort from the same sources that he would use to present another person; and goodwill and friendliness need to be described in a discussion of the emotions. (121)

This distinction Aristotle designates between *eunoia* and the previous two characteristics that exemplify a good ethos (virtue and wisdom) is important to my theorization of rhetorical legitimization because he seems to be suggesting that the recognition of the moral and prudent aspects of a rhetor’s character emerge as an aspect of the audience’s *intellectual* capacity to comprehend these qualities while the recognition of concern for the audience’s welfare comes from the audience’s *emotional* competence. This is to say that, at least as far as Aristotle was concerned, when we appraise the character of others, we perceive their virtue and wisdom with our minds, but we feel another’s concern for
our wellbeing in our gut. The argument I develop in the rest of this chapter is that due to
the hegemonic glorification of knowledge considered by patriarchal authorities as
“objective” and the ruling elitist disdain for knowledge considered “subjective,” the
importance of goodwill within rhetorical arguments diminished throughout the course of
Western civilization while regard for ethical virtue and practical wisdom grew in tandem
with the belief these other two qualities could be quantified. I argue a pro-agentic ethos
restores the status of goodwill in the rhetorical context (thus making it a true coequal of
virtue and wisdom) by regarding genuine concern for the welfare of others as an
indispensable quality of legitimate authority.

Goodwill and the Historic Subordination of Matriarchal Culture

Whether or not it is true that we apprehend moral virtue and practical wisdom
with our intellect and altruistic goodwill of others with our emotional sensitivity,
Aristotle’s establishment of a paradigmatic schism between them is important to us today
because the history of Western Civilization has demonstrated among the hegemonic
powers a veneration of Plato’s theoretical episteme and Aristotle’s empirical ontology
while offering mostly uniform disparagement and derision for understanding that is based
in emotional and intuitive responses. Throughout the past two and a half millennia,
patriarchal authorities have often ruled society by controlling the political systems, the
religious institutions, and the academic establishments for their own benefit. Through
their control of political systems, pythonic authorities have regulated the restrictions on
who could participate in the public sphere and the extent to which those privileged
enough to participate could speak freely without fear of retribution. Through their
control of religious institutions, pythonic authorities were able to compel entire populations to adopt and follow the dogmatic moral restrictions fashioned by church leaders to limit how their subjects were allowed to think and behave. Furthermore, by dominating the academic establishments, the hegemonic elite were able to train the minds of their successors in all three arenas (the political, the religious, and the scholastic).

Through their dominance of these three spheres, patriarchal authorities conserved their dominance over society through a doxastic fiat by asserting that their right to command came from a combination of divine mandate and their own ability to master the intellectual complexities of both Platonic philosophical abstractions and Aristotelian scientific classifications. Throughout the Middle Ages and continuing into the Enlightenment, patriarchal authorities often justified their executive privilege to rule the less fortunate by claiming that the populations they dominated were intellectually incapable of handling the complexities of their exclusive theological, theoretical, and thematic educations (although this assertion was rarely if ever tested by granting anyone outside of their sphere of privilege the opportunity to attend their academies). The matriarchal knowledge left to the rest of humanity was spread primarily through an oral tradition among the vast majority of people who were excluded from formal patriarchal educational institutions because they were not fortunate enough to be born into the right combination of inherent circumstances (i.e., male, wealthy, and politically connected).13

13 Although the descriptive term “patriarchal knowledge” has been used regularly by feminist scholars since at least the early 1990’s (see, for example, Sprague and Zimmerman “Overcoming Dualisms: A Feminist Agenda for Sociological Methodology) to describe “the phallocentric concepts of universal reason and autonomy” (McNay 91), the converse term “matriarchal knowledge” is in infrequent usage by academicians. I use the term “matriarchal knowledge” as a juxtaposition (as McNay puts it) to the “male definition of reality which is based on the devaluation of femininity and everything which, by analogy, is associated with it: emotions, desires, materiality, etc” (91). Despite being in complete accord with feminist
Because matriarchal knowledge developed for the most part outside the doxastic assumptions of Platonic idealism and Aristotelian subjugation that were sponsored by the patriarchal institutions, ideas informed by intuition and emotional insight were not automatically filtered out by a rigid scientific dogmatism, and this allowed for an epistemic paradigm that valued individual experience instead of dismissing it as “mere anecdotal evidence” or even as Stephen North labeled such knowledge in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, “lore” (23). Unfortunately, because matriarchal knowledge lay outside the officially sanctioned knowledge of patriarchy, it was typically derided by the “educated” and sometimes even outlawed as heretical and subversive by the hegemonic authorities who sensed the danger in a source of power they could not control. Consider, for example, the thousands of women who were executed as witches in Europe throughout the Middle Ages for merely being herbalists or midwives. Also consider how even today expressions such as “that’s just an old wives’ tale” reflects this historical mistrust in the veracity of information that is based in the maternal rather than the masculine tradition. This mistrust informs our thinking in regards to how we have been culturally conditioned to devalue knowledge that is based in a qualitative/critical sensitivity rather than in a quantitative/empirically measured analysis.

Perhaps because Aristotle was right about this, that we respond to our gut feelings about who we can trust based on how we feel about people, or because Aristotle’s influence has been such that this distinction between what we think and what we feel has become over the centuries just another doxastic part of Western Civilization’s cultural principles, I hesitate to identify myself as “a feminist scholar” because I am sensitive to the real struggles of women in society, and I am concerned that my use of the feminist designation would be another act of patriarchal colonization.
paradigm, consideration for the topic of *goodwill* among scholars in general (and rhetorical academics in specific) has drawn very little attention when compared to the qualities of *virtue* and *wisdom*. Writing in “Goodwill: A Reexamination of the Construct and its Measurement,” James McCroskey and Jason Teven refer to goodwill as the “lost dimension” in empirical studies designed to measure “ethos/credibility” (90). In reviewing the literature of empirical studies (stretching from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s) designed to develop instruments to measure ethos/credibility, the authors could not find a single study that took the aspect of goodwill into consideration as a part of its research’s design. McCroskey and Teven write:

> In most of these studies, dimensions which could be labeled “competence” and “trustworthiness” (or similar titles) were observed, but in none was there a dimension observed which could be labeled appropriately as “goodwill” or “intent toward receiver.” (91)

In 1992, McCroskey designed a study to incorporate considerations of goodwill into the context of audience perception of credibility, and he referred to it as “the perceived caring construct.” In theorizing goodwill, McCroskey identified three elements that he asserted could be measured which cultivated the perception that the rhetor cares for her audience: *understanding, empathy, and responsiveness*. For McCroskey, understanding is the part of goodwill that communicates the recognition of the other’s concerns, empathy is the part that communicates validation for the other’s concerns (even when the rhetor may not share the same concerns), and responsiveness is the part that communicates a willingness to listen to what the other person has to say.
While I will have much to say about the importance of understanding, empathy, and responsiveness in the rest of this chapter (and later in Chapter Five where I discuss the ramifications of pro-agentic/pythonic theory upon composition pedagogy), what is most significant for me as a rhetorical theorist looking at McCroskey and Teven’s study of goodwill is the implicit argument the authors make that the importance of goodwill should be recognized and acknowledged by other rhetorical scholars only because the authors had finally created the right quantitative instruments to measure its impact. In their study’s conclusion, McCroskey and Teven write:

> We believe the best interpretation of these results is that goodwill is indeed a component of the ethos/source credibility construct, as argued by both Aristotle and the Yale Group, and that the measure employed in this study is a satisfactory measure of that component of the construct. . . . Hence, we conclude that goodwill is indeed a meaningful predictor of believability and likeableness and should take its place in the conceptual and operational future of communication research dealing with ethos and source credibility. (101)

It is encouraging that McCroskey and Teven found empirical evidence to support the belief that the concept of goodwill deserves its place (along with virtue and wisdom) in providing the foundation upon which audiences can place their trust and credibility in rhetors who are seeking to establish their ethos. However, as a theorist who is attempting to establish the salient factors of rhetorical credibility based upon the historic, philosophic, and culture forces that legitimate authority, I find it disturbing that the belief
in the value of goodwill among audiences during the process to establish trust and
credibility needs (at least for some rhetorical scholars) explicit experimental justification.

Earlier in their study, McCroskey and Teven assert:

There is no valid reason to discard the theory that there are three salient
dimensions of ethos/credibility. Our only problem is that contemporary
researchers have not yet been able to develop a measure of the goodwill
dimension which is distinct from the other dimensions of ethos/credibility.

(91)

What McCroskey and Teven are saying in effect is that more than two thousand years of
rhetorical tradition is not enough to establish the value of goodwill when speakers and
writers are attempting to be persuasive, and that such a belief needs empirical validation
as well. It strikes me as paradoxical that before we can accept the value of our own
intuitive perceptions regarding the degree we should be willing to trust those who seek
through their persuasive efforts to gain our consent and consensus that we must first
establish through scientific substantiation the value of such perceptions.

I am not arguing here that quantitative research is unimportant to a comprehensive
understanding of rhetorical and composition theory; clearly, empirical studies provide a
wealth of knowledge that informs how we think about what we do when we endeavor to
teach others how to be better writers and speakers. What I am arguing for, however, is
the recognition that the discursive paradigm that legitimates quantitative methodologies
arises from a historically patriarchal worldview that offers its own justification through
the supposed impersonality of Plato’s theoretical epistemology and Aristotle’s positivistic
ontology. This worldview routinely discounts the value of knowledge based in individual human experience and generates its own self-perpetuating discourse to discredit alternative epistemic models that offer substantiation in subjective and critical analysis rather than in the hypothetical sterility of an imagined objectivity. The overemphasis upon evidence from what is portrayed as universal objectivity and the negation of verification from methodical subjectivity has led to a cultural skepticism and mistrust within academic communities for scholarship that relies upon heuristic interpretations that are hermeneutical rather than experimental. Somehow the value of subjective experience that informs the “expert” authority (who has perhaps spent years in the field gaining a practical and nuanced understanding of her subject matter) has been subordinated to the conception of the “professional” authority that equates clinical detachment with academic competence. It is as though in the name of quantifiable objectivity, any feelings or emotional attachments that might inform the researcher’s perspective on the evidence at hand needs to be treated like a bacteria that could cause an infection if left unattended.

This worldview, one that routinely regards feelings and subjective experience as tangential from what it considers “real” knowledge, makes little sense when we are trying to grasp the significance of an affectively based concept such as “goodwill.” If, as I am trying to demonstrate in this dissertation, we are interested in understanding the fundamental differences between good rhetorical authority (the pro-agentic) and the bad coercive authority (the pythonic), I assert it is necessary to recognize that the perception of legitimate authority needs not be centered exclusively in “isomorphic constructs” (a
term McCroskey used in writing about goodwill) that may be plotted within bar graphs. Our consideration for the significance of goodwill upon audiences also needs to be mindful of critical and subjective perceptions as well.

The Greek Historical Foundations for Considering Goodwill

In keeping with the organization established in the previous two chapters, a return to Ancient Greece one last time reveals the theoretical foundations for *eunoia* as it was initially conceived by the most prominent philosophers of the Classical Age when they formulated their primary notions regarding the essential elements of the rhetorical context. According to Jacqueline de Romilly, “Eunoia, in Greek, is something more than good will: it means approval, sympathy, and readiness to help” (91). Given the explication of *virtue* and *wisdom* in the previous two chapters, we can now recognize three primary schools of thought regarding the role of *goodwill* as a rhetorical aspect of ethos: the Platonic, the Aristotelian, and the Sophistic. As with most technical and theoretical terms as they get translated from one language to another (especially when we bear in mind that more than two millennia has passed since the time of Plato, Aristotle, and their sophistic counterparts), the correspondence between the archaic Greek term, *eunoia*, and the modern English word, *goodwill* is only a close approximation given our best understanding of the idiomatic contexts in which the word was employed. A more comprehensive examination of how each of these schools of thought regarded the relationships between the rhetor and the audience facilitates our understanding of a more nuanced appreciation for the relative significance of the term; each philosophical
approach offers different shades in the ways we think about *goodwill* as a rhetorical factor.

The intensity with which the feeling of *goodwill* is experienced says much about how the different schools of thought regarded the extent its influence is allowed to inform judgment. William Fortenbaugh writes, “The Greek word *eunoia* is used ambiguously for both strong and weak emotions” (188). Just as we can consider the difference in modern English between the intensity in which an emotion such as anger can transverse the affective range from “minor annoyance” to “murderous rage,” the depth of feeling associated with *goodwill* depends upon the significance each particular philosophical orientation places upon the role of emotions in the rhetorical context and the extent to which rhetoricians need to be mindful of the emotional bonds that may be formed between the rhetor and the audience. As we shall see below, from the Platonic point of view, emotions had little or no place in a dialogic encounter (we will recall that Plato had a sincere prejudice against “rhetoric,” and he portrayed the dialogue as its ethical and superior counterpart). From the Aristotelian perspective, *eunoia* was better experienced as a weak emotion because stronger emotional responses tended to cloud the rhetor’s judgment. And from the Sophistic standpoint (which was never formalized into an integrated, singular philosophical perspective and thus represents a wide, divergent group of thinkers; the sophistic is characterized in the research below by focusing upon Isocrates – who despite his denial of being a sophist – provides what is perhaps the best example of the sophistic viewpoint on *eunoia*), the depth of feeling being demonstrated in regards to *goodwill* is a function of the contextual relationship the rhetor recognizes as
having with the audience; thus, the more deeply one experiences the friendship and camaraderie of the audience, the more appropriate it becomes to allow stronger and stronger feelings of goodwill to emerge in the rhetorical encounter.

Plato and Eunoia

As mentioned previously in earlier chapters of this dissertation, Plato took a dim view of rhetoric because as far as he was concerned, it dealt with matters of little significance when compared with the “Timeless and Eternal Truths” that comprised the study of philosophy. In his dialogues, Plato portrays the characters who refer to themselves as rhetoricians as pompous, small-minded, self-serving individuals whose egos overshadow their actual intellectual abilities. In Gorgias, for example, Plato presents the title character as the most celebrated rhetorician of the day and as someone who ultimately cannot define what he actually does when he claims to be teaching people “rhetoric.” Perhaps Plato’s derogatory assessment of rhetoric comes from his perception that since rhetoricians are disinterested in eternal truths, then they must not be concerned with any truths at all. By conflating the pursuit of any truth with the all encompassing search for Universal and Everlasting Truth, Plato fails to recognize how important contextual truths (such as those that are vital for making political or communal decisions) are in managing the business of everyday life, and he over-generalizes the inclination by rhetoricians to consider both sides of an argument as the willingness to actually do so anytime the rhetorician is given enough of the wrong motivation (such as obtaining money or sexual favors from victims who are easily manipulated). For Plato, an aversion for public manipulation gets rendered into a pathological distrust for all persuasive
speech that seeks to influence the thinking of others about anything except for those pure Timeless Truths that lie beyond both a) being sullied by mundane carnal concerns and b) the discernment of everyone but the rare few dedicated and properly enlightened philosophers. According to Plato, only analytical and objective discourse offers access into the true knowledge of philosophical insight otherwise conversation fails in its capacity to instruct accurately.

As we can see, then, there is no place for emotions (or any other temporal concerns for that matter) in Platonic philosophical idealism. Thus, from this perspective, eunoia as a concept based within an emotional impulse is entirely peripheral to the practice of informing (and by no means persuading) others of philosophical insights into Absolute Truth. In The Republic, Plato (through the character he creates from his mentor Socrates) offers “The Allegory of Cave” in which a philosopher once freed from “The Cave of Illusions” (that stands as a metaphor for the misapprehensions of this world) through the careful pursuit of philosophy, returns to the cave after reaching enlightenment with the intention of showing others how they too can be freed from the false impressions given off by the shadows on the cave walls that are typically mistaken by its inhabitants for reality. In this story after returning to the cave, the philosopher is beaten to death for his troubles by the residents of the cave because they prefer their own illusions to the intellectual freedom that awaits them outside their little world. Although Plato’s distaste for rhetoric was such that there is little chance that he would approve of the following interpretation of his story, I assert that when the hero initially leaves the cave through his acute mental abilities to see through the illusions of the cave, this person
is indeed a philosopher; however, when the hero later returns to the cave to try to help others see beyond their limited vision of reality, I would insist that this person is a rhetorician, and I would call his motivation for helping the others see the folly of their ways goodwill. Perhaps, if Plato had been willing to entertain the perspective that there are other vitally important aspects of life that coexist along with the objective and analytical understanding of eternal forms, then maybe instead of getting beaten to death by those who could not appreciate the message, Plato’s protagonist could have possibly been accepted and believed or, at the very least, been spared from a brutal execution by being recognized by the audience as someone who had good intentions for them.

As I asserted earlier in this chapter, I contend that the Platonic fixation with the concept of objectivity provides the original model for the Western hegemonic traditions that later conceived of subjective and intuitive substantiation as insignificant, misguided, or subversive. In having little tolerance for dissenting ideas (for according to patriarchal logic only people who are insignificant, misguided, or subversive would challenge the authority of knowledge based in Objective Universal Truth), Plato established the exemplar for the mechanical dismissal of anyone presenting ideas that contradict whatever The Powers That Be have already established (once and for all) as true. In A New History of Classical Rhetoric, G. A. Kennedy comments upon both Plato’s contempt for opposing viewpoints and the role he held in establishing the tradition of intolerance for dissent among subsequent intellectuals and the political leaders who fell under their patriarchal influence. Kennedy writes that Plato is “one of the most dangerous writers in human history, responsible for much of the dogmatism, intolerance, and ideological
oppression that has characterized Western History” (41). Other historical scholars have also located the origins of the rational/objective authoritarianism within the rigidity of Plato’s epistemic worldview; writing in “The Historical Roots of Totalitarianism,” V.V. Dame identifies Plato’s viewpoint that philosophically trained minds are better equipped and, thus, understand better what is good for people than anyone else as the one of the primary sources in subsequent political theories that justify the mass domination of the general public. Dame writes:

[A]s early as in Plato’s project, each member of the socium was to fulfill a strictly defined and necessary role assigned to him, and overall control was in the hands of sages and scholars able to foresee and direct the course of the events. The same features were characteristic of subsequent utopias of this kind, from openly absolutist and oligarchic to communist ones. The development of science and rational philosophy further strengthened the view of the state as a bearer of reason amidst the chaos of conflicting people, forces, and interests. (7)

In “Moral Leadership in a Postmodern World,” Lindsay Thompson also traces the historical confidence in patriarchal/hegemonic rationality back to its beginnings with Plato and Aristotle (28). Thompson argues that rationality alone is incapable of providing the moral substance from which authentic acceptance and reverence of others can emerge; she writes “[G]enuine tolerance and respect . . . are not a product of the intellect; they are a creation of the human spirit” (28). The essential point I am striving to express in this section on the Platonic relationship with goodwill is this: when rational
objectivity is held to be the only proper source for legitimate authority, all other human impulses that inform our judgments are either regarded as having dubious value or they are filtered out entirely. Thus, the single remaining avenue for taking goodwill into consideration within a purely rational/patriarchal worldview is to render eunoia as a sterile object of mental reflection rather than as an earnestly felt emotional impulse. I contend the transmogrification of goodwill from an affectively based inclination to help others into an intellectually based construct that hypothesizes universal rules for determining the “collective” common good is the patriarchal process that subordinates consideration for the agency of individuals beneath all-purpose policies that theoretically promote the general welfare of everyone. Public policy makers, especially for example those who set educational policy without any real classroom experience, are good examples of the type of people who believe in the rational/objective paradigm’s to provide clear cut, one-size-fits-all solutions to problems that actually require a compassionate understanding of individual circumstances. Frequently, the people who are quickest to seek or provide the “one right answer” to complex social problems are operating from the same Platonic paradigm that allows them to believe that they can (and do) know better what is best for other people than the people they claim to be intending to help. Recognizing how sometimes people who have authority can claim to have good intentions and, yet, simultaneously feel no personal responsibility for what happens to the population they are meant to serve or protect provides a key understanding into identifying the pythonic ethos. Whenever we find ourselves in situations in which we need personalized attention and we seek help from someone who has the power and
authority to help us (as can happen, for example, when dealing with large corporate insurance agencies or with distant federal bureaucracies), we typically can recognize almost immediately whether we are dealing with someone who maintains a pro-agentic understanding of goodwill or someone who operates from a pythonic understanding of goodwill; the pro-agentic authority will listen to our story and seek to understand the circumstances that are providing our specific troubles, and a pythonic authority will attempt to edit the information we want to give so that the official record of their interaction only reflects those details that have already been predetermined by some administrative policy as relevant and significant. Of course, the most considerable qualities that reveals for us whether we are dealing with someone who we would classify as either pro-agentic or pythonic usually comes in our intuitive reactions to the level of concern we feel that comes from a variety of subtle factors such as the tone of voice the other person uses to speak to us and the amount of time (and actual attention) the other person seems willing to devote to our individual circumstances. The next time we feel as though we have been processed rather than served by someone who holds the authority (but not the inclination) to help us resolve a problem, perhaps we will remember that the pythonic belief that blanket universal (and supposedly objective) policies trump the specific needs and contextual concerns of actual sentient human beings is a conviction that can be traced all the way back to Plato.

Aristotle and Eunoia

The thing to keep in mind as we approach the role of goodwill from the Aristotelian perspective is Aristotle’s compulsive need to systematize his experiences and
categorize the world as he experienced it into tidy, specific classifications. Thus, what is perhaps most significant in the role of goodwill from Aristotle’s point of view is not whether there is room when making an ethical appeal for an affectively-based quality, (obviously, there is room for emotion in Aristotle’s ethical appeal because he explicitly placed it there when he differentiated eunoia from aretē and phronēsis) but the degree to which the quality is actually evoked by the rhetor and, thus, experienced by the audience. To understand the role of eunoia in making a legitimate rhetorical appeal from the Aristotelian perspective is to understand that for Aristotle, the concept of goodwill itself can be analyzed and theorized based upon the depth of its ontological manifestation as determined by its emotional intensity.

If, as has been suggested, the ethos argument is at times a shortcut for the logos argument (which is to say the rhetor does not need to go to all the lengths of spelling out her reasoning because her audience is willing to trust that her reasoning is adequate and sound without hearing all the details), then perhaps we can consider the evocation of goodwill within a rhetorical encounter a suitable shortcut for the pathos argument; for instead of preying upon the audience’s sympathy regarding a set of misfortunate circumstances or arousing the reader to anger over a volatile issue, if the rhetor can establish a feeling of genuine regard for her audience within the hearts of those she is speaking to, then the need for stronger, more intensely felt emotions becomes superfluous. What is at issue here is the subtle, but significant, distinction Aristotle makes between an appropriate ethical appeal that relies at least in part upon the

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14 I have often wondered while pouring through all the texts by and on Aristotle how different civilization as we know it may have been if Aristotle’s mother had just postponed potty training the little guy by about six months.
perception of goodwill from the audience toward the rhetor and an improper pathetic appeal that relies primary on triggering a (too) strongly-felt emotional response.

From the Aristotelian perspective, we might imagine the difference between *eunoia* as an aspect of an ethical argument and a more strongly felt *eunoia* as an aspect of a pathetic argument as the difference between the following two statements: “Because I care about you, I want you to consider what I’m about to say” [ethical goodwill], and “Since we’ve been through a lot together, I expect a true friend to agree with me on what I’m about to say” [pathetic goodwill]. In regards, then, to understanding how for Aristotle *eunoia* functions as a subtle aspect of ethos rather than as a flagrant form of pathos, we need to remember that Aristotle insisted the perception of character that emerged in the ethos argument existed only during the rhetorical encounter; this is to say that while we may engender friendly feelings while trying to be persuasive, we cannot really establish (or call upon) friendship during this process. John Cooper notes this in “An Aristotelian Theory of the Emotions,” by writing:

> We must, then, guard carefully against the mistake of thinking that Aristotle’s advice to the orator is aimed at helping him to make his audience actually become his own or his client’s friends, rather than merely to make them have friendly and well-disposed feelings. The latter task is difficult enough: if taken seriously the former would actually be impossible in the time available! (244)

This is a key understanding when trying to comprehend how Aristotle gauges the difference between the legitimate, appropriate expression of *goodwill* for the audience
and the conceivably dishonest, unscrupulous exhibition of concern that is only intended to cloud an audience’s judgment. Unlike his mentor, Aristotle allows some space for subjective feelings in rhetorical situations, but only to the extent that such feelings do not interfere with the rational processes that will lead to the correct analytical conclusion. In Book 1 of *Rhetoric* (1354a), Aristotle writes, “[F]or it is wrong to warp the jury by leading them into anger or envy or pity: that is the same as if someone made a straightedge rule crooked before using it” (30). Thus, emotions are acceptable (and even encouraged) within the Aristotelian perspective as long as two stipulations are wholly understood and respected: first, that since rhetoric is the counterpart to dialectic (that is to say, not at all a part of the objective/rational discourse that provides scientific/philosophical Truth), emotions may have a role in helping us contextualize issues dealing with mere human (e.g. political) probabilities; and second, the utility of emotions in making sound rhetorical decisions terminates when the feelings introduced into the rhetorical encounter are experienced to the extent that they begin to impair the otherwise sober and dispassionate decision-making ability of the audience’s intellect.

The big difference, then, between Aristotle and Plato is that while Aristotle recognized that philosophy was nobler than rhetoric because it led to the comprehension of objective truths that in the long run were more important than the temporal understandings available through rhetoric, he was unwilling to dismiss rhetoric outright because he recognized its utility in dealing with the probable truths that must be contended with when conflicts arise from the messy course of everyday human affairs. Although he lacked Plato’s nearly pathological apprehension of being persuaded into
beliefs that could not be substantiated beyond a shadow of a doubt, Aristotle did share with Plato the belief that objective truth (especially for Aristotle as it manifests in empirical knowledge) did exist and was knowable. Aristotle’s compartmentalization of human understanding between what could be known as objectively true (from either scientific demonstration or rational analysis) and what could be known as only probably true (from rhetorical arguments based within reasons, feelings, and character) also (as with Plato’s rigid epistemological insistence on eternal forms) had a profound effect on how Western civilization came to dismiss the role of subjectivity and intuition in the canonization of “legitimate” knowledge.

By separating what can be “rationally” or “objectively” known from what can merely be “rhetorically” or “subjectively” known, Aristotle provided the patriarchal institutions that were to follow him a powerful and nefarious paradigm for dismissing opinions that conflicted with their established worldviews. After Aristotle, whenever the heads of state, the religious leaders, or the gatekeepers of academies wanted to dismiss opposition to their perspectives, they needed only to declare their opposition’s viewpoint was based “in opinion” or was “irrational.” Writing in “Making Discourse Ethical,” Eugene Garver notes some of the doxastic qualities that underlie the Aristotelian distinction between what we think we know through logical, analytical discourse and what we think we can believe through subjective, rhetorical persuasion. Garver writes:

Once logical and rhetorical argument starts to diverge, there can be conflict. Logical arguments cannot be too strong, but rhetorical arguments
can. Logical form is a form independent of purpose, and so is not a form of any particular matter; rhetorical form is tied to end and matter. (189)

In other words, because we have a definitive distinction in our heads between what we think we know as “objectively” based and what we think we know as “subjectively” based, we also maintain different standards of importance between them, and we preserve different mental habits for considering what factors we consider relevant to their substantiation. When we are reflecting on the legitimacy of authority, as I am here in this dissertation, the issue of how knowledge gets categorized and by whom becomes extremely important especially as we consider how much of what gets classified as “objective” or “subjective” is influenced by the doxastic cultural sensibilities that typically lie beyond our conscious awareness.

Simply put, as a force of the subconscious habit that comes from being reared in a Western patriarchal society, we tend not to question assertions that appear to come from sources for which credibility and trust are not introduced as rhetorical factors, but we often do consider the reliability of information that comes from sources that make trust a cognitive issue by drawing attention to matters of character. This is to say, for example, if we read on a label that has been stuck inside the window of a new car that this particular make of vehicle gets 28 miles per gallon, we are less likely to consider the credibility of that assertion because we are more habitually inclined to believe what appears to be a fact that has been nicely printed out and distributed by a large, faceless corporation. On the other hand, if while we are standing next to this new car, a sales agent for the dealership approaches and makes credibility a conscious factor by bringing
it up, we will question whether we can trust what we are hearing when this person says, “Look, you can trust me; I’ve been selling cars for the better part of my life, and I know that this car gets more than 28 miles per gallon.” Because of the doxastic traditions that have taught us to mentally classify what is supposed to be objective information from subjective opinion, as soon as someone says, “you can trust me,” the mere reference to the word “trust” gives us cause to question whether what we are being told is true or not.

The point I am trying to make here is that the difference between our likeliness to question what we read on the manufacturer’s window sticker and what we hear from the sales representative is a matter of doxastic Western conditioning that has socially inculcated us so that typically we are less likely to question the veracity of information provided to us from distant, faceless (and thus, superficially objective) sources and we are more apt to question instead the truthfulness of information that comes to us directly from encounters with people who deliberately bring the reliability of their character into the conversation. Thus, the distinction between what we commonly perceive as “objective information” and “subjective opinion” is for the most part a doxastic convention of Western patriarchal culture that has over the past two millennia sponsored the belief that only idiots, masochists, or subversives challenge the truth of “objective” knowledge once it has been endorsed by the hegemonic Powers That Be.

By casting aspersions upon people who challenge the authenticity of “objective” knowledge through doxastic decree, pythonic authority achieves two ends: first, they blur the distinction that can be made between an “authoritative” source and an “authoritarian” source, and second, whenever the need arises to quell dissenting ideas through coercion,
the use of force beyond what should be necessary to persuade the dissenter to concede (i.e., punishment) can be presented to others as a consequence of the dissenter’s obstruction to objective truth. This is to say, whenever pythonic authorities resort to coercion to compel acquiescence from dissidents, they can claim (to their own smug satisfaction) that the dissenters brought their misfortunes upon themselves through their willful defiance of established conventions. The fundamental argument of this dissertation is that a legitimate authority (which I refer to as pro-agentic) recognizes an essential difference between rhetoric and coercion, and an illegitimate authority (the pythonic) does not.

In his enthusiasm (some might say “mania”) for classification, Aristotle identifies three types of friendship of which he considered only one as an appropriate form for demonstrating goodwill in the rhetorical situation. Writing in “The Role of Friendship in Aristotle’s Political Theory,” Richard Mulgan explains that the three types of Aristotelian friendship (as classified in Aristotle’s Ethics) are those of virtue, pleasure, and advantage. Although all three types of friendship exhibit warm regards and welcoming feelings towards other people, the friendship based in virtue is for Aristotle the most genuine form of friendship because (unlike the friendships of pleasure and advantage) the friendship of virtue offers no extrinsic benefits beyond the friendship itself; Mulgan writes:

The friendship based on virtue, in which good people love each other for their virtuous characters, is ‘complete both in respect of duration and in all other respects’ (EN 1156b33) and is the first and defining sense of
friendship (EN 1157a30-31; EE 1236b 20-26, 1238a 30). Such friendship is found most fully among truly virtuous people who love the virtue in each other’s character. It can also occur, however, whenever people love each other for the sake of each other’s character. (17)

Mulligan explains that friendships based on pleasure and advantage are secondary types of friendships because they rely, at least to certain degree, upon what an individual has to gain from maintaining the friendship. Friendships based in pleasure, for example, arise from circumstances in which at least one person in the relationship is receiving sexual favors from the other, and friendships based in advantage occur when at least one person in the relationship stands to gain financially through maintaining feelings of goodwill with the other. According to Aristotle, then, friendships based entirely upon virtue, in which neither party stands to gain anything of substance from the relationship, are the only type of friendships that should have legitimate standing within the rhetorical context because whatever defines the external reward within these other derivative types of friendship could serve to compromise the audience’s otherwise impartial judgment.

What Aristotle is asserting by limiting friendship within the rhetorical context to those whose feelings of goodwill are not manipulated by the force of external rewards is that even when an advantage is mutual (such as can happen when both parties are desirous of the sexual relationship or both parties stand to gain economically through their relationship), the existence of the advantage is enough to corrupt the purity of the rhetorical environment and preclude the formation of authentic trust. Garver notes this when he writes:
When \( \text{ethos} \) disappears, so does trust. An audience can still assent, but there is nothing for it to trust without ethical argument. Aristotle notes that \( \text{eunoia} \) arises only from friendships of virtue, not of utility or pleasure (Ethics IX .5.1167a12-14); the latter kind of friendships might generate relationships that are perfectly predictable, but there is no trust in them.

(190)

What Garver is alluding to here is the idea that when friendly relationships are primarily dependent upon some external stimulus, then the internal factors that allow for the development of real trust is replaced with spurious motives that are far less conducive to the establishment of genuine concern for the other person. In other words, when in the process of deliberating on the correctness of a proposition that has been put forward by someone who has nothing to gain or lose by the audience whose role it is to decide upon the merits of the proposal, then the verdict that comes as a result of the audience’s deliberation is more clearly impartial and based upon the truly relevant issues of the case; on the other hand, when in the course of deliberation it becomes evident that there are sexual or financial considerations that exert influence beyond the boundaries of customary civic goodwill, then the question of the transparency of the \( \text{eunoia} \) becomes itself an issue in the decision making process and larger issues of justice and fairness become muddied by the specter of favoritism.

This understanding of the degree to which friendship becomes a legitimate and useful element within the rhetorical relationship between rhetor and audience helps establish the theorization of the \textit{pro-agentic conception of goodwill} that I am advocating
in the dissertation by delineating the boundaries in which the concern for the agency of
other begins with the recognition that the immediate and personal needs of individuals
must take priority over hypothetical standards of universal wellbeing; however, concerns
for fairness dictate that special favors should not be granted to people because they have
the financial wherewithal (or perhaps even the sexual prowess) to allow their appeals to
be determined by motivations that are unmistakably outside the reach of anyone else who
would find themselves disturbed by identical circumstances. This is an important
consideration in negotiating the difference between the pro-agentic and the pythonic
when we recognize that the pythonic authority primarily respects the application of all-
purpose rules that are intended to treat everyone the same regards of circumstance unless
there is an offer of an extrinsic reward to motivate a preferential treatment on behalf of
the rhetor seeking remedy while the pro-agentic authority begins with a fundamental
appreciation for human dignity and considers how the specific circumstances of those
seeking help should determine the extent to which universal rules apply while
maintaining a commitment to helping anyone under similar conditions without concern
for reward or privilege.

Isocrates and the Sophistic Eunoia

In this remaining section reviewing the legacy of ancient Greek philosophical
traditions upon our current rhetorical understanding of goodwill (especially as it informs
our understanding of the pro-agentic and pythonic ethos), I have opted to focus on
Isocrates as a representative of the sophistic tradition regarding the place of eunoia in the
rhetorical context. At first glance, Isocrates may seem an odd choice for representing the
sophistic philosophical orientation in this section since one of his most well-known extant compositions is essentially a declaration separating his rhetorical practice from other sophists (*Against the Sophists*). However, Isocrates makes an exemplary choice for representing the sophistic orientation in understanding their rhetorical ideas for several reasons including the following: first, although Isocrates writes against other sophists in *Against the Sophists*, in a subsequent work, *Antidosis*, he identifies himself as a sophist; and thus, his earlier work can be read as a likely attempt to spare his reputation from the public derision that other prominent Greeks had targeted at the sophistic movement than a disavowal of the central philosophical beliefs he shared with other sophists. Second, while the sophistic movement incorporated a wide variety of attitudes and opinions, Isocrates’ writings offer a careful and accessible consideration for the epistemic nature of rhetoric which can be argued as perhaps the most prominent common awareness shared collectively by the sophists of Ancient Greece. Third, Isocrates wrote specifically about the concept of *eunoia*, and he had much to say about the importance of the rhetor’s relationship to the audience that clearly differentiates him from the historically more-renowned views of Plato and Aristotle upon the same topics. And, finally, as we shall see below, Isocrates’ consideration for the traditional humanistic concern for agency offers a valuable means of reflecting again on the importance of giving due attention to special circumstances when theorizing a *pro-agentic conceptualization of goodwill*.

In “Isocrates and Plato on Rhetoric and Rhetorical Education,” William Benoit recounts some of the historical details concerning Isocrates’ life that has survived the more than two millennia that has passed since his time in ancient Athens. According to
Benoit, Isocrates was less than a decade older than Plato, and he opened his own school in Athens just a few years prior to the establishment of Plato’s Academy. Although Isocrates competed with Plato for students, the curricular focus of Isocrates’ school differed from Plato’s academy in its explicit attention to rhetoric; the core instruction at Plato’s Academy centered on philosophy and mathematics. According to Taylor, both Isocrates and Plato aimed their educational efforts in the direction each felt was best suited for training young men “for public life” (5). How best to achieve this goal, however, was deeply disputed between these two educational leaders of ancient Athens, and that eventually the patriarchal hegemony of Western Civilization would side with Plato had major ramifications upon the doxastic traditions that underwrite the core assumptions of modern academic institutions.

As I suggested in the preceding discussion of Plato, the instruction offered at Plato’s Academy asserted the primacy of philosophy over rhetoric because Plato valued the type of certain knowledge he believed was available to students in understanding the analytical relationships that could be determined to exist between abstractions (such as with numerical expressions in mathematics and eternal forms in philosophy). Aristotle, too (we will recall as Plato’s student), was trained to value the impersonal, objective type of understanding over the subjective, experientially based form of understanding, and he adapted this mode of thinking for his own purposes when he went about classifying and systematizing information from his empirical observations. The basic underlying idea that Plato and Aristotle share is their rigid dogmatism in the superiority of “objective” understanding over what can be known from “subjective” experience. Both of these
ancient Greek teachers held that regardless of whether the student is working to understand mathematical principles or biological classifications, the student’s personal experience should not impinge upon the student’s grasp of what is essential to their instruction; this is to say, according to Plato’s and Aristotle’s understanding of true knowledge (in the Greek, *episteme*), it should not matter who is observing the relationship between the numbers three and four or who is counting the number of teeth found in the mouth of a horse, the results should be uniformly the same. This privileging of the universal and abstract in the teachings of Plato (and later in the teachings of Aristotle) is diametrical to the instruction of Isocrates who, within his school, emphasized the situational and the pragmatic.

Although they may have shared similar intentions in training the young men of Athens, the essential difference between Isocrates’ approach to preparing students for public life and Plato’s approach could not be more pronounced. Benoit writes:

> The contrast, between Isocrates’ pragmatism and Plato’s idealism is quite sharp. In fact, one could say that for Isocrates, rhetoric constitutes knowledge, giving rhetoric primacy over knowledge; for Plato, knowledge (obtained through dialectic) precedes rhetoric, which is clearly secondary to and dependent upon knowledge. (65)

For Isocrates, who according to the historical reports derived his considerable fortune primarily from the huge fees he collected for writing speeches for others to use in court (an occupation the Greeks knew as “logography”), the importance of taking situational factors into consideration was not just the core of his instruction; it was the point of his
instruction. According to Schiappa, “rhetoric” (or in the Greek rhêtorikê) is not likely a term Isocrates would have used (and perhaps even recognized) as representative of what he believed he was teaching students to participate as citizens in public life, but was more likely a derogatory term Plato coined (by most scholarly accounts in Gorgias) “as part of an effort to limit the scope and popularity of sophistic teaching, particularly that of his rival Isocrates” (11). According to Papillion, the distinction Plato makes for his students between the knowledge to be gained through dialectical philosophy and the understandings gained through rhetorical endeavors is not a distinction that would have interested Isocrates (153). Instead, Isocrates placed both activities (dialectic and rhetoric) under the same heading of logos; furthermore, in his endeavors to prepare students to serve “in a public life,” Isocrates appears in the historical accounts of his instruction as primarily interested in teaching students to recognize the most salient factors as they rise in every distinctive case. Thus, Isocrates’ instruction is more concerned with the logic of synthesis rather than the logic of Platonic (and Aristotelian) analysis. In his lecture, Against the Sophists, Isocrates criticizes the type of general rhetorical instruction that students would find in the contemporary handbooks that were available to the wealthiest Greeks who could afford them because Isocrates did not believe universal rules of rhetorical practice were very useful in teaching students to recognize the specific circumstantial elements that he believed held the most potential for being persuasive within each particular rhetorical situation. Isocrates wrote, “I marvel when I observe these men setting themselves up as instructors of youth who cannot see that they are applying the analogy of an art with hard and fast rules to a creative process” (48).
Although Plato (and later Aristotle) did not appreciate Isocrates’ focus on the moral and tentative aspects of life in teaching what he believed best prepared students for Athenian citizenry, the most disparaging Platonic deprecations hurled at the sophists (that they were unconcerned with the “truth” and that they would take either side of an argument based upon the fees they could generate) do not apply to Isocrates. Clearly, from his overt focus on morality as an essential component of the instruction he offered, Isocrates believed in the “knowable” truths that could be discerned about the facts that applied to specific cases, but he did not believe in the human mind to know the “ultimate and universal truths” that Plato revered.

Perhaps the most significant difference between his conception of teaching students to be persuasive in a rhetorical context and Aristotle’s conception of instructing students in the art of rhetoric is in their different notions on the establishment of ethos within the rhetorical context. As has been previously discussed within this dissertation, Aristotle asserts that a rhetor’s ethos is entirely developed and sustained within the process of the speech itself. For Isocrates, ethos is a product of a lifetime of moral habits, and he considered the rhetor’s prior reputation coming into a rhetorical situation as an important rhetorical asset. Concerning this key difference between Aristotelian and Isocratic ideas about ethos, Blake Scott writes in “Sophistic Ethics in the Technical Writing Classroom”:

Isocrates’ concept of ethos was more comprehensive than that of Aristotle in, say, On Rhetoric (38). For Isocrates, ethos was the argument made by a person’s life and involved one’s past experiences and prior reputation in
addition to the character one creates in a particular discourse event 

(Antidosis 339). Isocrates believed that credibility with others was crucial to his students’ competence. This gave them an important reason to consider ethos in a communal as well as individual sense. (193)

Thus, in Isocrates’ instruction to his students, he emphasized to them that how they live their lives has a significant impact on the credibility they can sustain within subsequent rhetorical situations. From this, we can recognize two major departures from Plato’s and Aristotle’s conceptualization of rhetoric. First, with Isocrates’ emphasis to his students upon the importance of establishing a reputation for moral responsibility prior to (and external to) the rhetorical situation, we can recognize that Plato’s most serious aspersion that sophists were teaching their students to be unconcerned with relating the truth (and were, furthermore, willing to say whatever was necessary to win an argument) is contradicted by Isocrates insistence that an orator’s reputation for lying cannot be overcome within the context of a single speech. Furthermore, we can recognize within Isocrates’ insistence that a person’s prior reputation works to establish credibility that, for Isocrates, life experience is a reasonable and pragmatic means of providing substantiation to one’s claims in settling a dispute. If we recognize the distinction Plato and Aristotle make between “what can be objectively known” (i.e., the analytical for Plato and the empirical for Aristotle) from “what can be subjectively known” (what Plato and Aristotle both dismiss as the merely rhetorical), then we can also recognize that this distinction is no more than a philosophical epistemological prejudice against the legitimacy of personal experience. For Isocrates, who maintained the opposing view that the only “real”
knowledge people can possess comes as a product of human interaction (Isocrates discounts the possibility of knowing absolute truth in Antidosis), the distinction Plato and Aristotle insist upon between “rhetoric” and “dialectic” is unproductive and divisive. Benoit notes Isocrates willingness to recognize the importance of individual perspective to knowledge:

Isocrates explains that rhetoric can be used to alter perceptions of reality – in current parlance, this is related to the claim that rhetoric is epistemic: “it is possible to discourse on the same subject in many different ways – represent the great as lowly or invest the little with grandeur to recount the things of old in a new manner or set forth events of recent date in an old fashion.” (64, Benoit quotes from Isocrates’ Panegyricus, 8).

The point is that from the sophistic point of view there is a tremendous moral and an epistemological difference between recognizing the possibility of diverse perspectives and intentionally misrepresenting something as true that the speaker knows is untrue. The former acknowledges that one’s own perspective may not be representative of some permanent ontological understanding and respects alternative viewpoints that diverge from one’s own when deciding what to accept as true or when building a case to present to others, and the later represents the blatant attempt to misrepresent the facts in order to deceive one’s audience. Because of a foundational epistemological faith in the both the existence and accessibility of “objective” knowledge among those who were willing to go along with Plato’s epistemological distinction between “dialectic” and “rhetoric,” Western civilization has had to live with the historical and philosophical consequences of
Plato’s conflation of subjective experiences with experiences that he represents as being intentionally misleading. I contend that it was Aristotle’s ambivalence over his former mentor’s understanding of the nature of subjective truth that informs his decision to place the formation of credibility entirely within the rhetorical encounter and to discount (that is to say, factor out) the impact of one’s reputation upon entering into rhetorical context. Because Isocrates’ sophistic approach is an integrated synthesis of both objective and subjective considerations, Isocrates is able to promote the idea of a holistic morality to his students that gives equal consideration to both what they say within the rhetorical context and how they live beyond it. Because Aristotle creates a cognitive dissidence between having respect for Plato’s insistence on the primacy of dialectical understanding and recognizing the Isocratic value of personal experience in establishing rhetorical credibility, it makes sense that he choose to eliminate all considerations for the subjectively-based reputation from his analytical paradigm when reflecting upon the establishment of character before an audience.

The sophistic understanding of taking into account the subjective factors that impinge up the audience’s perception of fairness and accuracy is the doctrine of *kairos*. In *The Rhetorical Tradition*, Bizzell and Herzberg comment upon the importance of *kairos* to Isocratic instruction; they write:

> To Isocrates, all general principles must fail because they screen out the particulars of a given situation, which must be taken into account in all truly good moral and rhetorical decisions. “Fitness of the occasion” – *kairos* – is all, to Isocrates. (44)
Perhaps what may have confused Plato (and thus, his students) about the concept of *kairos* was his apparent inability to recognize the difference between what he considered the insignificance of temporal factors in discerning truth and the speciousness of such factors. For the students of Isocrates, identifying the salient and most influential factors within a set of circumstances does not mean discounting the truth of other factors. This is to say, that a subjective need for relevance requires rhetors and audiences to make decisions about the relative importance of a wide array of factors; however, it is a mistake to equate the process of judging observations for their relevance and potential impact upon an audience with the fabrication of assertions that are wholly untrue and intentionally brought into the communication for the purpose of misleading one’s audience.

Certainly considerations for *eunoia*, goodwill, are paramount to Isocratic rhetoric (and other sophistic rhetoric in general) given both its attention to the rhetor’s moral reputation in entering the rhetorical context and in its concern for generating an ethical outcome at the communication’s conclusion. Jacqueline de Romilly identifies *eunoia* as Isocrates’ greatest interest (92). I contend of the three Greek philosophers examined in this portion of the dissertation, Isocrates offers the most for informing my theorization of a *pro-agentic understanding of goodwill*. In “Tradition and Agency in Humanistic Rhetoric,” Michael Leff writes:

For Isocrates, the goal of a rhetorical education is deliberative excellence, and this goal cannot be reduced to mere success in pleasing or persuading an audience. Rather, it’s realization demands self-restraint, breadth of
knowledge, and a cultivated sense of the common good, and a result, it must reflect and manifest virtues intimately connected with moral character. (142)

Thus, for Isocrates, the goal of rhetoric is not merely to convince an audience of the “rightness” of one’s position, but to demonstrate a moral excellence that respects both the agency of the audience and one’s self. In theorizing the relationship between goodwill and legitimate authority, I believe Aristotle gets it completely backwards by asserting that emotions such as friendship have their place in the rhetorical context only to the extent that they do not cloud one’s ability to reason analytically; I would argue the converse, as perhaps Isocrates would have too, that if one wants to demonstrate a legitimate rhetorical authority, then one needs to make room for analysis only to the extent that it begins to cloud one’s concern for a communal and reciprocal goodwill. Unlike the Platonic and Aristotelian concept of rhetoric which begins with the adversarial notion that the primary purpose of authority is to defend one’s truth (which from their perspective is an objective truth, the only truth, and thus, any and all disagreement must be met with derision and hostility), the Isocratic conception of rhetoric assumes that what is known is a matter of communal understanding and circumstances informed by *kairos*, and thus, from this perspective, authority emerges as the ability to guide consensus rather than dictate reality.

In *Antidosis*, Isocrates declares that teachers can only instill in their students what they practice in their own lives. I read this as a warning and a reminder that if we are to be perceived as legitimate authorities within our classrooms, we need to pay close attention to the factors that substantiate our authoritative (and subjectively informed)
understandings rather than relying upon authoritarian (and objectively cloaked) pronouncements that expect to go unchallenged. If we are really more interested in teaching “students” than in teaching “English,” we cannot merely claim to be concerned with our students’ welfare while reducing their writing to a catalog of their mechanical errors and stylistic shortcomings, we must actually be concerned with their welfare and take the time to teach them how to recognize how their language choices work to either enhance or erode their credibility depending upon their understanding of the kairos of their message and intended audience. To do otherwise is merely to practice our own “empty” rhetoric.

Personal Interlude: Goodwill, Authority, and Pro-Agentic Application of the Rules

One day in late November in 1982 after a little more than four years as an undergraduate, I finished my bachelor’s degree in journalism, and I found myself standing outside the red brick building that housed the Ohio University College of Education. It was early enough in the morning that I could still see my breath in the cold, late autumn air, and I had arrived to complete (what I believed at the time) what was going to be my last official transaction with this school. When I had started college in the fall of 1978, I had been accepted into the university’s school of engineering, but fortunately, a single conversation with my freshman composition instructor persuaded me to change my major. “You should be a writer,” she said to me while conferencing over my final paper of my first quarter four years earlier. “Why are you studying engineering?”
Although I felt flattered that someone believed I wrote well enough to make a living at it, the occupation of professional writer did not strike me at the time as a very dependable way to earn one’s keep. “Engineering majors have the highest starting salaries of any program on campus,” I told her.

“But do you like it?” she asked.

“I hate it,” I told her. “I’m not really a numbers person, and the math homework takes me hours every night.”

“Then, why are you doing it?”

“Because engineers don’t have any trouble getting jobs, and I need to get a job when I finish college.”

“But you’ll just end up with a job you hate. If you hate it now, what makes you think you’re going to enjoy being an engineer for the rest of your life?”

“What does it matter if I enjoy it?” I asked her. I had sincerely never considered the idea that people should enjoy their work. I suspect my attitude toward work in those days was consistent with most people from my Appalachian background. According to this tradition, work is something you do to feed yourself; it is not something one does to find contentment. “I’ll be happy if I can just pay my own way.”

“No, you won’t. You’ll be miserable. And not only that, but you’re going to be miserable for the next four years of your life.”

“But I’ll have a job waiting on me when I get out.”
“If you live that long,” she said. “People who live their lives four years in the future are the ones who end up getting hit by a bus the day before they graduate. You need to learn to be happy now.”

As I write this now almost 30 years later, I’m ashamed to say that I can no longer remember the name of this teacher who literally changed my life for the better that afternoon. I have looked at my college transcripts to try to recall her name, but the transcript only says “staff” in the column where the instructor’s name is supposed to go. I have tried searching the internet to figure out her name, but so far, that search has been fruitless. Nonetheless, I would love to seek her out today and let her know what a blessing her advice has turned out to be. By the beginning of the next quarter, I had changed my major to journalism because being a reporter was the only way I could imagine someone making a steady income as a writer, and I had already gained a little experience in high school writing sports stories for the local newspaper. If worse came to worse, I figured I could always get a job with that same local newspaper when I finished my bachelor’s degree.

Over the course of the next four years, it gradually dawned on me that I did not want to be a reporter any more than I wanted to be an engineer. From what my journalism instructors had led me to believe, most news reporters spend the greater part of their lives forcing themselves upon people who do not want to talk with them about things they would just as soon keep to themselves. I decided what I truly wanted to do with my life was teach high school English (which is a bit ironic, of course, because it never occurred to me at the time that high school English teachers spend the greater part
of their lives forcing themselves upon people who do not want to talk with them about things they would just as soon keep to themselves), but by the time I came to this realization, I was too close to finishing up my journalism degree to change course. Fortunately, in those days it was not too difficult to add a teaching certificate to any bachelor’s degree; according to the university’s undergraduate catalog, all I had to do was take the listed required classes and pass an oral reading exam. With the exception of a few education classes (including a couple in field experience and student teaching) by the time I read over the list of required classes I would need to secure a teaching certificate, I was astonished to discover that I had already taken all but a few of them. Because I really enjoyed taking English classes, I had taken many more of them than required by my major in news reporting, and so it came as a nice surprise to find out that adding a teaching certificate would essentially turn out to be little more than spending one extra quarter in college in the fall and squeezing in a few additional classes in the summer before that.

The morning I stood outside of the education building waiting for the staff to show up, I felt a deep sense of relief that I had finally finished everything I needed to do to become a teacher, and I was excited about the prospect of getting on with my life. I knew that in November my prospects of finding a fulltime teaching position right away were practically nonexistent, but my dad (who was also a teacher) told me that if I spent the remainder of that school year as a substitute teacher in the local school districts, the area administrators would get a chance to get to know me, and I would find it much easier to find the job I wanted the following year. A few days before I finished my
classes of that concluding fall quarter, I received a letter in the mail stating that the State of Ohio had issued my teaching certificate, and I could pick it up anytime during normal business hours at the college of education. For good measure, I had the letter in my pocket while I waited for someone to show up. Even though I knew full well when the administrative offices opened, in my excitement to finally get my hands on my teaching certificate, I managed to arrive a good 45 minutes before I needed to be there. In order to work off some nervous energy, I walked around the block a few times until I noticed the lights were on in the office where I needed to go.

When I walked in, the principal secretary of the office was just hanging up her coat. “Can I help you?” she asked sounding pleasant enough as we commenced the conversation.

“Yes,” I answered while barely able to contain my enthusiasm. “I’m here to pick this up.” I tapped lightly on top of my teaching certificate; I spotted it sitting right on top of her desk.

“You got any ID on you?” she asked, and as I reached into my back pocket to produce my wallet where I kept both my driver’s license and my student ID, she quietly picked up my teaching certificate, slid it into her top desk drawer, and locked it up with a set of keys that had also been sitting on top of her desk.

“Why did you do that?” I asked. “I’ve got my ID with me.”

“Just putting it away for safe keeping,” she said. “Before I can give it to you, I need to look over your transcript one more time.”
“But, why?” I asked. “The state has already issued my certificate. I saw my name on it.”

“It’s just a formality,” she said coolly. “The state issues certificates, but it’s our responsibility to hand them out. I can’t give you your certificate until I’ve looked over your transcript to make sure you’ve taken everything you need to earn it.”

“But, don’t you folks do that before you order them from the state?”

“Of course we do,” she replied. Her voice was only slightly icier than the frost outside. “But I like to double check before I give them out.”

“All right,” I said. “Knock yourself out. I’m not in any hurry to be anywhere this morning. Picking up my teaching certificate is pretty much my entire to-do list today.”

“Good,” she said curtly, and she began doing a few other minor tasks unrelated to anything that had to do with me. It took her another five minutes to get to the filing cabinet and find the folder with my name on it that held my transcript. “You’ve been busy,” she said as started reading down the list of classes I had taken. In those days, a student needed 192 quarter hours to graduate; because I enjoyed taking classes and wanted to add the teaching certificate to my bachelor’s degree, I had taken 254 hours. “Okay,” she said sounding happy that she had actually found a reason to make me miserable. “Here’s a class you haven’t taken.”

“You’re kidding,” I replied. I could not believe that she could be serious. I had taken more classes as an undergraduate than anyone else I had known personally who I had gone to school with. “What class didn’t I take?” I’m certain the frustration and anxiety I began to feel was unmistakable in my tone of voice.
“You did not take ‘Introduction to High School Journalism,’” she said with grim satisfaction.

“‘Introduction to High School Journalism,’” I repeated. “Okay, now look here. You’ll notice that the certificate I’m getting says ‘Communications Comprehensive.’ This means that I should be able to teach other language arts classes besides just English. That’s why I had to take some classes in speech and theater and journalism, just so the State of Ohio could be certain I had some experience in those fields before I ever began to teach them. According to your list of classes, it says I only need two journalism classes totaling 8 hours to get my teaching certificate. You have my transcript right in front of you. I majored in journalism. My bachelor’s degree is in journalism. I have 48 hours in journalism. Are you telling me that you couldn’t substitute another one of my journalism classes, perhaps one of my advanced reporting classes, for this introductory class?”

“I could,” she said. “But, I’m not going to. The list says you need ‘Introduction to High School Journalism’ and I’m not going to give you your teaching certificate until you take that class.”

“I don’t understand why you would do that.” I said. I could feel the heat of the blood rushing to my face; I must have turned as red as a Valentine. “Look,” I said rather hotly. “Let me tell you about this class. It’s an introductory class. It’s about teaching the basics of reporting, editing, and layout. The state wants people to have an introductory class in journalism so it feels okay about certifying people ‘Communications Comprehensive.’ I’ve had other introductory classes. I’ve had other advanced classes.
I’ve had individual classes in reporting, editing, and layout. And furthermore, I would have taken this class if it had been offered in the past four and half years that I’ve gone to school here. This class has never been offered. You can look it up. How can you require me to take a class that’s never been offered in the entire time I’ve gone to school here?”

“Well,” she said flatly as if she were discussing the weather or some other mundane subject other than my life. “I guess that means you’ll just have to take it as an independent study.”

“As an independent study?” I said; the words held no meaning for me. “I don’t even know what that means. How am I supposed to take this class as an independent study?”

“You need to arrange for someone to teach this class to you through the mail. You’ll get all of your assignments in the mail and as you finish with them, you mail them back. You can work at your own pace. If you know as much as you say you do, this shouldn’t take you any time at all.”

“I don’t understand this,” I told her. I was nearly in tears – not that it mattered much. “I can’t believe you are going to do this to me. You have my teaching certificate right there in your desk, and you could just hand it to me and nobody would ever care. Why are you insisting on making me take a class that I don’t need and that has never been offered while I went to school here?”

“Because it says that one of the classes you need to take is “Introduction to High School Journalism’ and you’ve never taken it.”

“It’s not on the list,” she insisted. “The list specifically says ‘Introduction to High School Journalism’ and you’ve not taken that class.”

“Do you really believe there’s anything in that class that I haven’t already studied in one of my other classes?”

“I don’t care,” she said. “It’s not my problem. Come back when you’ve finished that class, and I will give you your teaching certificate. Until then, we’ve got nothing else to say to each other.”

“You don’t understand,” I pleaded. “I have been supporting myself by working at the golf course and the ice skating rink, but that job is only for fulltime students. My boss said I couldn’t work there anymore because I’ve graduated. I need a copy of my teaching certificate so I can substitute teach. Could you at least give me a copy of my teaching certificate so I can pay my rent and feed myself until I finish this stupid class you’re going to force me to take?”

“I’ve said all I’m going to say to you,” she said. “You’ve heard me. You can have your certificate when you show me the grade sheet for the class you’re missing. Now, you can either leave my office on your own or I can call campus security to escort you out of the building.”

“But my certificate is in your desk; I’ve seen it.”
“It’s not yours until I give it to you. Don’t make me call security. You best be on your way.”

“How do I arrange the independent study?”

“Go to the office of ‘Continuing Education’ at the top of the hill. They will tell you everything you need to know. Now, get going and don’t even think about coming back here until you’ve finished that class.”

I left. I was crushed. I didn’t know what else to do; I walked up the hill and after I reached the point where I felt fairly certain I could talk to the people who worked in the ‘Continuing Education’ office without breaking into tears, I went in and registered for the class. As a much older adult looking back on the experience, I know now that there were several people on campus I could have gone to seek help with this situation, but in those days, I was used to just doing what I was told. I had to borrow money from my parents to live off while I spent three weeks filling out and mailing in 26 separate lessons that required me to write stories, edit copy, and layout mock newspaper pages; the lessons were nothing more than busy work that I had done already countless times before in my earlier journalism classes. When I returned in early January with my grade sheet (I got an A in the class), I didn’t say much more than “Here you go” to the secretary who held my certificate. She said, “You’re welcome” to me as she handed me my teaching certificate although I’m pretty certain I had not said “thank you” to her.

In his book, *For the Sake of Argument: Practical Reasoning, Character and the Ethics of Belief*, Eugene Garver writes:
Narrative has recently become popular as an antidote or supplement to argument. Argument is sterile and inert, and at the same time, paradoxically, compelling and hence violent, while narrative establishes relationships of friendship and trust between the author and audience, rather than the more authoritarian sounds of a pure argument. . . . Narrative is a contemporary way of talking about what Aristotle calls example, the rhetorical equivalent of induction. (110) My intention in presenting both the ancient Greek philosophical conceptualizations of goodwill in the preceding section and the story I relate above concerning my encounter with the woman who refused to give me my teaching certificate is singular: I want to demonstrate that the rhetorical concern for the welfare of others cannot be regarded as an abstraction, but needs, rather, to be felt as an emotion that has a legitimate rhetorical place in resolving human conflict. As Garver implies in the quote above, the real problem with impersonal, abstract, and objective arguments is that it is difficult to locate ourselves within them when we eliminate our concern for others from them. As a writer and a scholar, I create my position in the Greek historical section arguing that there needs to be a place for genuine concern for others within rhetorical encounters; however, in the story I tell above, I cannot think of my humanity as an abstraction, I can only relive the sadness of being processed as an object rather than being treated as a person with genuine concerns and problems.

There are a few elements of the proceeding story that may need additional explication regarding my theorization of the pro-agentic ethos. The first is the
secretary’s admission that while she had the power to accept an alternative class to fulfill the requirement of the missing course, she did have not the inclination to do. This, at least from my perspective, is a patent indicator of pythonic authority. My teaching certificate was on her desk; the state had already approved my credentials; she had nothing to gain or lose by giving it over to me. As has been pointed out earlier in this chapter, however, pythonic authority is not interested in *kairos* and regards the application of universal rules to be of more importance that the welfare of individuals. The secretary made it clear to me that she did not care whether I had anything to gain by taking the class; while the purpose of the rule could be argued, a fundamental and literal interpretation of the rule’s existence could not. For the person who held my certificate, the existence of the rule held a deeper ontological reality than my physical presence before her. My contention throughout this chapter has been that factoring out goodwill from authority subsequently eliminates legitimacy as well because it allows those with power to treat fellow human beings as mere objects to be controlled.

The second element of this story that I would like to draw attention to is my resigned acceptance of the pythonic decision to withhold my teaching certificate without any awareness that there might be something wrong with the decision to do so. As a much older adult looking back from a perspective of more than a quarter century, I am impressed by my inability to question (at that time) the correctness of the decision that I needed to take one more class before I could have my teaching certificate. It simply never occurred to me back then that I might find someone who could help me challenge this decision. Looking back, I find it more than a little interesting that after four and half
years of college and with over 50 credit hours more than I needed to graduate with my bachelor’s degree, no one had ever instructed me to question the pronouncements of authorities who have direct, personal power over my life. As I finish this chapter on the topic of goodwill, I question the value of an education that trains people to accept without question the legitimacy of decisions that are clearly not in their own self-interest. It seems to me to teach students to respect the agency of others, we should perhaps begin with instruction that helps them recognize and understand the boundaries of their own agency.

While Plato would argue that there is no room for emotion in the search for truth, and Aristotle would argue that emotion has its place in discourse as long as it is not experienced with such intensity that it would cloud one’s judgment, I would argue (and I think Isocrates would agree with me here) that unless we situate our judgments in specific circumstances, kairos, the pledge to rhetorical impartiality becomes more likely an excuse to treat others like objects rather than human beings. This, then, is simply my argument regarding the legitimacy of goodwill in the rhetorical context: the pro-agentic conception of goodwill sees eunoia as an essential element of establishing and legitimizing authority; the pythonic conception of goodwill sees eunoia as superfluous to its authority because concern for others only serves to complicate the clear black and while lines of its impartial and analytical belief in its own objectivity.
CHAPTER FIVE: TAKING THE PRO-AGENTIC FROM THEORY TO PRAXIS

As a matter of physics, when a string vibrates at a certain frequency, other strings in its immediate vicinity that are tuned to the same frequency also begin to vibrate as well. This phenomenon is known as sympathetic vibration, and I believe a similar phenomenon happens rhetorically with people as well. On an affective level what various people might refer to as cognitive and many others would perhaps regard as spiritual, we occasionally respond to specific messages as though the truth of these ideas resonates physically in us. How the human heart (or perhaps the brain, depending upon where the reader locates emotional intelligence) becomes conditioned to respond to the words of others with a sympathetic reverberation that stirs the passions in us is a matter often disputed between those who would say our psyches are tuned (mostly or entirely) by genetic disposition and those who would say our characters are molded (primarily or entirely) by the cultural pressures introduced by our family and friends in the formative years of our childhood.

As a rhetorical theorist, I am not so much concerned with how attitudes and beliefs originate. There is only so much we can do at one time, and so I leave those ruminations to the sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists who are better equipped to investigate that issue than I am; nonetheless, I am deeply invested in understanding the legitimacy of the methods employed to change when and how people respond to the messages of others. This is to say that I am not so much concerned with how the string becomes tuned in the first place; whether a guitar is factory tuned by its manufacturer or whether its strings are subsequently conditioned to resonate by music
store proprietors, sales representative, or the random coalition of consumers who change the tunings to suit their own needs and styles of musical expression lies beyond the scope of my academic concentration and scholastic capacity. My interest lies rather in the efforts people make to retune an instrument once someone has established ownership. I argue there is an important and fundamental difference between the musician who seeks to refine the tensions upon the strings of her own instrument (whether she makes this attempt in order to establish a more refined internal harmony or whether the attempt is carried out to align the strings to harmonize better with other instruments) and the musician who has her strings tuned for her through either overt or subtle coercive tactics.

The issue is one of agency. People should have the right to organize their thoughts and beliefs based upon their own life experiences with the world in order to maximize their potential for self-actualization and to minimize the effects of caustic feedback from those with whom they would like to achieve peaceful coexistence. To extend my metaphor just a bit further then: the basis for my rhetorical theory begins with the belief that no one has the right to mess with the tunings of another person’s instrument without first gaining the owner’s consent. To some readers the difference between saying to a fellow musician, “Your instrument is out of tune with the rest of the band and so you have the choice to retune it or sit out,” and saying, “I’m taking your guitar from you to retune it whether you like it or not so that you will sound just like the rest of us” may seem like a subtle (or negligible) difference; however, from my perspective this is the important and essential difference that distinguishes rhetoric from coercion. When we are in conflict over matters of probability rather than certainty (or as
Aristotle put it: matters of *rhetoric* rather than *dialectic*), the fundamental aspect that separates legitimate argument from iniquitous compulsion is the ability to make a choice to affirm or deny matters of dispute. Without this choice, freewill succumbs to slavery, education reverts to propaganda, and humanity surrenders to heartlessness. Understanding the difference between choice and coercion is for me the essential question of rhetorical scholarship.

My primary contention in this dissertation is that rhetorical legitimacy is entirely contingent upon considerations of agency. As a means of exploring the rhetorical parameters of agency, I began with Aristotle’s initial explanation of the three factors of character he identified as establishing a good ethos within the dynamics of the rhetorical context. While the previous chapters explored the historical, philosophical, and theoretical dynamics that connect virtue (*areτē*), wisdom (*phronēsis*), and goodwill (*eunioa*) to both the legitimate form of rhetorical authority that respects agency (the *pro-agentic ethos*) and the mendacious form of coercive authority that disregards agency (the *pythonic ethos*), this chapter now seeks to place these abstract connections into the real-life contexts of writing instructors (and their students) to demonstrate how the theoretical considerations of the previous chapters might inform practicable composition pedagogy.

Teaching is never conducted in a vacuum, and on a daily basis, contemporary writing instructors must handle the messy, complicated challenges of coping with real world classrooms that are fraught with the complex political realities of dealing with students, administrators, and colleagues. It is my hope that by offering writing instructors a perspective that can be gained through consideration of the *pro-agentic* and *pythonic*
ethos that they may find a new vocabulary for articulating the reasons why some rhetorical choices are better than others for establishing a credible and trustworthy authority and will, thus, have perhaps a better means for helping their students and others recognize the crucial difference between arguments that persuade and dictates that command.

While history informs us that both Plato and Aristotle spent a great deal of their lives teaching students, it is primarily through their abstract and philosophical writings that we know them today. Thus, from exploring their texts, we recognize that Plato had the luxury of expending his considerable mental capital on the philosophical musings of ideal and abstract universal forms, and that similarly, Aristotle expended his intellectual resources seeking to catalog and classify the qualities he perceived as empirically objective. Undoubtedly it would be disingenuous to suppose, based exclusively upon their theoretical writings, that these two men did not face their share of difficult, taciturn, and obtuse students; however, given their prominence in Athenian culture, it is laughable to consider the challenges of authority they must have faced as instructors as comparable to the variety and depth of authoritative challenges that contemporary teachers face in confronting antagonistic administrators, unreceptive students, indifferent coworkers, and a political environment that increasingly regards instruction of critical thinking skills as subversive. Picture just how strange it is to imagine either Plato or Aristotle facing widespread contempt and disparagement from the ordinary Greek citizen for failing to
meet AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress)\textsuperscript{15} as reflected by their students’ scores on a standardized achievement test.

Despite the mounting social pressures to produce results that can be derived from achievement tests, I believe teachers can still manage the daily content of their classrooms with a commitment to respecting the agency of their students and the integrity of their own personal moral values. The intent of this chapter is to make explicit how a pro-agentic understanding of virtue, wisdom, and goodwill informs the decisions we make as writing instructors if we are truly committed to a teaching praxis that places respect for the agency of others at the center of our classroom instruction, our personal teaching philosophy, and our professional identity. To do this, this chapter is organized around three pivotal locations where the writing instructor is most apt to encounter stern or sustained pythonic resistance to the legitimate authority she develops through a commitment to the agency of those she encounters in the course of fulfilling her professional teaching obligations. Although, of course, there is plenty of overlap in the concerns for agency in these various locations, each point of contact has its specific and special rhetorical and pedagogical considerations. The three positions where I place pro-agentic rhetorical theory into the real classroom emerge from the authoritative differential that comes from dealing with others based upon our commonly held (i.e., doxastic) perceptions of relational power within our professional didactic spheres; thus, the three locations are organized around our relationships with students, colleagues, and the community at large.

\textsuperscript{15} Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is a term used by U.S. school administrators to demonstrate compliance with the mandates of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.
Students and the Pro-Agentic Ethos

Of the three positions under consideration in this chapter on how we develop and represent our professional ethos, the pedagogy that guides our relationship with students is perhaps the most important. After all, for writing teachers, instruction is most likely our primary rationale for employment and our central professional obligation. Teaching students to think critically about the messages they receive from society, to reply to others in ways that provoke thoughtful responses from their audiences, and to value their own active participation in the democratic process offers us the opportunity to make meaningful, positive changes in the lives of our pupils. When we contemplate how we present ourselves to our students, we facilitate a deeper understanding of our relationship with authority as both people who must lead in order to instruct and people who must follow in order to stay employed. For many teachers, authority is the tool they use to create an invisible buffer between their own lives and the lives of their students; for other teachers, authority is held as though it were a secret and precious commodity only to be expended on those occasions when something happens that makes the instructor feel vulnerable. Whether a writing instructor makes her authority conspicuous by speaking directly about it (when, for example, she declares how she is prepared to handle absenteeism while reviewing her syllabus with a new class,) or whether she chooses to express her authority in more subtle ways (such as using a silent gesture to quiet a loquacious student who is on the verge of interrupting another less effusive student), the key difference between establishing a good ethos and a poor one is not dependent upon any particular teaching strategy or instructive technique, but rather relies upon
maintaining a commitment to a mindful regard for student agency. By focusing on student agency, we have a window through which we can recognize how we allow our authority to emerge in the classroom; this is central to both how we establish our primary identity as teachers and the ground upon which we appraise our credibility with regards to the other relationships within our professional didactic spheres. Among the most essential concerns for how the *pro-agentic ethos* manifests in the writing class are the following:

- How we model our own authority for our students,
- How we teach students to respond to authority, and
- How we help our students recognize the rhetorical implications of the choices they make as they construct their own authority, credibility, and identities in their writing.

As we consider the place of agency and authority in the writing classroom, it may be useful to mull over how our pedagogical choices work to either reinforce the messages we give our students about the usefulness of taking audience into consideration or how our choices work to erode these messages to the detriment of our own professional credibility.

If our students came to us with an already keenly developed understanding of the qualities that indicate a trustworthy, credible authority and the qualities that signal a disingenuousness or dominating ethos, then the necessity for appraising our own modes for expressing authority would be diminished, but not eliminated. Contemplating how we convey our classroom ethos to our students is useful for remaining cognizant of our
intentions to develop into the authentic instructors we aspire to become even when (or especially when) we recognize that our students are not as devoted to their own interpersonal growth as we might want them to be. On the subject of agency in the writing classroom, Donna Qualley writes:

> It is difficult to be open and receptive toward others without a strong sense of our own agency. If we have too little sense of agency, we can be disempowered, subsumed by the other; with too much sense of our own agency, we may overpower or oppress the other. We also need to have enough autonomy, self-trust and self-esteem to withstand our own rigorous self-scrutiny. When we have no sense of our own agency – I’m thinking, for instance, of abused wives [and] children . . . we can’t, and probably shouldn’t, try to be reflexive about the oppressor’s position. In doing so, we might contribute to our own oppression, thereby further diminishing the possibility for agency.

*(Turns of Thought, 145)*

Qualley offers us much to consider when we are being self-reflexive regarding our own sense of classroom agency. A teacher’s authority before her students needs to maintain the difficult balance of challenging students to move beyond the safety of their ordinary worldviews to explore alternative perspectives while at the same time creating an instructive space that is not controlled by the instructor’s need for dominance. As writing instructors, we wield the power to compel students to write about issues they often would just as well avoid and to share their thinking on subjects they would just as soon keep to
themselves. If we are sincerely interested in demonstrating for our students a form of authority that respects their agency, then by what limits can we evoke our critical expertise and express our specialized influence without crossing the line into hypocrisy or autocracy? The answer, I believe, lies in our ability to communicate to our students a commitment to the same three qualities Aristotle first identified as essential to establishing a credible ethos: virtue, wisdom, and goodwill. In the quote above, Qualley makes an important point about the necessity of remaining mindful of agency when teaching students to think about the critical choices they make in producing writing for public consumption: unless we teach our students that they have the right to resist authority (even our own authority), then we risk teaching students to participate in (and, thus, as Qualley put it, “contribute to”) their own oppression. Students need to be told that although there are consequences to defying authority, defiance is always an option – especially when they feel they are being asked to write about issues that they feel require them to transgress boundaries of personal privacy.

I am not suggesting, by the way, that teaching students to challenge authority is either simple or risk free; obviously, just as there are significant liabilities that come with challenging authority, there are also gains to be had by being silently compliant to the requests of others who hold the power in asymmetrical relationships. Nonetheless, I contend that it is not enough to merely point out to our students that some authority is rhetorically more legitimate than others (the pro-agentic versus the pythonic), but that to actively engage in their own liberty, students will at various times in their lives need to calculate both the costs of complying with demands that run counter to their internal
sense of integrity and the price they may have to pay for resisting such demands. Just as we might teach students to recognize how to adjust their level of language usage to influence the effectiveness of their messages given different audiences and various rhetorical contexts, we also need to heighten our students’ awareness of the options they have in choosing either to obey or to defy authority. Without teaching students to make inferences about the quality of the authority that may be guiding their thinking or controlling their actions, we are not completely fulfilling our mission to teach them to think critically about how to create effective messages and how to respond effectively to the messages of others. Without teaching students to consider the ramifications of their choices in either submitting to authority or confronting it, we should not expect them to make good predictions about the consequences of their decisions.

Although (as the previous chapters of this dissertation have demonstrated) the scholastic discourse on what legitimates “good” authority from what disqualifies it as “bad” authority is enormously complex and enmeshed within doxastic traditions that may lie beyond the comprehension of many undergraduates, focusing upon the three aspects of *virtue*, *wisdom*, and *goodwill* as heuristics of agency may simplify our instruction in teaching students to recognize and distinguish “good” authority from “bad” authority. To put it as simply as possible, I recommend teaching students the following:

1. **Authority can be classified by whether it originates in expertise or power.**

Although most people with authority hold positions that grant them a complicated combination of power and expertise, when they exercise their authority in writing and speaking, we can often recognize whether their
pronouncements are based _primarily_ in an expertise (that can be validated by other people who share a similar expertise) or _primarily_ in a position of power (in which the authority is generated by their social role, such as “parent,” or their communal position, such as “police officer”).

2. The declarations of people in authority can be classified as either _primarily_ “pro-agentic” or _primarily_ “pythonic” depending upon the extent the authority appears to be willing to consider the qualities of _virtue, wisdom, and goodwill_ in formulating its judgments.

3. Both forms of authority (whether based in _expertise_ or _power_) can express either form of declaration (_pro-agentic_ or _pythonic_). An authority based in expertise is being “pro-agentic” when it takes _virtue, wisdom_, and _goodwill_ into account by taking context into consideration when sharing what it knows with others; this is to say, in shaping and constructing its message, the “pro-agentic” _ethos_ takes into account what the audience already knows, what it wants to know, and what it needs to know in order to make the content of the message as useful and meaningful as possible. Thus, an authority based in expertise that is willing to consider how the use or dissemination of information may affect her audience is being _pro-agentic_, and an expert who is indifferent as to how information may injuriously affect others (or is unconcerned with the relevancy of its message in regards to its audience’s needs) is being _pythonic_. An authority that is based in power who is willing to take into account the
agency of her audience is being pro-agentic; an authority who uses her power to control others without concern for their agency is being pythonic. The key question as to whether an authority with power is asserting a pythonic ethos or a pro-agentic ethos can often be settled by considering the degree to which the declaration is open to question or disputation. A pythonic ethos will use its authority to quell dissent and will oppose any questions that dispute its pronouncements. A pro-agentic ethos may use its power to compel others to act in certain ways, but will be subsequently willing to discuss the reasoning behind its judgments and will explain how its decisions have taken into account the agency of all involved.

4. The fundamental difference between a rhetorical argument and coercive demand is the amount of freedom a message recipient is offered in making a choice to accept or refuse the declarations at hand. Often, a threat is a good reason to do something; but as a general rule, a threat is a bad reason to believe something. In the course of an argument, rhetors often employ a combination of pro-agentic and pythonic pronouncements in order to achieve a rhetorical goal or end; however, the degree to which we would consider an argument pythonic or pro-agentic is proportional to the extent of the coercion that gets exerted upon the audience. The goal of rhetoric is to change the way others may think or feel about something by showing them perspectives that differ from their existing point of view; thus, with rhetoric, the decision to accept or deny alternative perspectives (and thus,
the choice to modify one’s thinking) is left up to the recipients of the message. The goal of coercion is to make others behave in specified ways; how the message recipients feel or think is usually irrelevant to coercion, and thus, the essential choice that comes with coercion is not whether or not audience members are willing to change their minds, but rather, whether or not they are willing to face the retribution that will follow from not complying in how they behave.

5. Another way of understanding the difference between rhetoric and coercion is to recognize the difference between reasons for belief and motives for behavior. A reason for belief is based upon some form of evidence (what Stephen Toulmin refers to as “data”\textsuperscript{16}) and offers a rational and relevant grounds of support for maintaining or modifying a belief, and a motive for behavior is based rather upon a stimulus for behaving in a certain way that does not need to be either rational or relevant. Suppose, for example, that the brakes on your car are going bad, but you won’t have enough money to get them fixed until your next payday two weeks from now\textsuperscript{17}. If you must drive your car because it is your only means of getting to work, then you clearly have a strong motive for hoping that your brakes continue to work suitably well until you have the money to get them fixed. Notice, however, that having a motive for wanting to believe that your

\textsuperscript{16} In The Uses of Argument, Toulmin writes, “We already have, therefore, one distinction to start with: between the claim or conclusion whose merits we are seeking to establish (C) and the facts we appeal to as a foundation for the claim – what I shall refer to as our data (D)” (1111).

\textsuperscript{17} A much longer and fuller explanation of this example of understanding the differences between “motive” for belief and “reason” for belief appears in Appendix A: The Logos and Ethos of Coercion.
brakes will last another two weeks is entirely different from having a reason to believe that your brakes will last another two weeks. How long your brakes actually last is a matter of physics and usage that is entirely independent of when you finally have the money to have them repaired. This is to say, how much money you have in the bank is completely relevant to when you have your brakes fixed, but is entirely irrelevant to how long the brakes will actually last. The underlying logic of differentiating between reasons and motives is to highlight the issue of relevancy; motives for behavior (whether they manifest as promises of rewards or threats of retribution) may offer a good impetus for responding in a particular way, but they lack pertinence as reasons for belief. If someone pulls a gun on you and demands that you hand over your wallet, the thief is offering you sufficient motive to give over your money. If, on the other hand, someone pulls a gun on you and demands that you believe she is more deserving of your money than you are, the existence of the gun (and the nature of the threat) is entirely irrelevant to the belief that someone else deserves your money more than you do. A pro-agentic ethos – as a rhetorical agent – is willing to provide reasons for belief; a pythonic ethos – as a coercive authoritarian – offers motives for behavior by focusing upon either threats or rewards that are typically irrelevant as reasons for belief, and she is generally indifferent to what the other person
thinks as long as she gets the physical response she was looking to provoke.

In teaching students to identify arguments as primarily rhetorical or coercive, we offer them the opportunity to gain the important critical ability to think reflexively about how their own life experiences have structured what they believe and why they believe it. Although they may not have given it much thought before being challenged to consider it in Freshmen Composition, everything our students know is based upon a combination of what they have experienced directly and what they have learned through being told by others. As we teach them to interpret texts and other messages from a variety of perspectives and to write effectively with the viewpoints of their audience members as an important contextual guide, we can also help our students think about how the choices they make in communicating with others demarcates their relationships to authority. By challenging our students to articulate how they recognize the qualities of virtue, wisdom, and goodwill, we promote the understanding of how these qualities affect perceptions of credibility and justice whether they are either consuming messages or composing them.

In “Inviting the Mother Tongue,” Elbow argues that in order to build confidence in their ability to work out their thinking on paper, students need to be provided a safe environment for writing that does not conform to the intimidating limitations of Standard Written English. Elbow writes:

Most people cannot really feel comfortable or at home writing, and cannot use writing as naturally as speaking, unless they are taught to write in their home voice – that is, in whatever language comes
naturally to hand and mouth. People can’t learn to write well unless they write a great deal and with some pleasure, and they can’t do that unless they feel writing to be as comfortable as an old shoe – something they can slip into naturally and without pinching. (325 – 26)

For Elbow, the student’s ability to produce prose that conforms to the dictates of mechanical correctness should not come at the cost of sacrificing verbal fluency. His argument is not that writing instructors should avoid teaching students how to produce Standard Written English, but that before writing instructors lower the boom on their students to get them to put sustained effort into editing their final drafts, students should be given plenty of opportunity to learn to write copiously and with confidence in their own ordinary vernacular. Elbow argues that by establishing a classroom environment that allows students to write in “nonmainstream language,” the students can feel safe to focus on what they want to say rather than divert their energies into the effort of translating their thoughts into the more difficult (and often intimidating) language of Standard Written English. Here, in my own rhetorical pedagogy, in teaching students to think about the qualities that legitimate authority, I am arguing on behalf of the need for an analogous environment of classroom safety in allowing students to experiment with how and when they challenge authority.

It seems to me that unless we make it safe for students to challenge our authority in the classroom (and to respond appropriately and effectively to the type of authority that emerges from other students) and to learn from us how to consider the aspects of virtue,
wisdom, and goodwill in constructing those challenges, then our students may not have the experience they need in constructing effective challenges to the authority of others outside of our classrooms. Teaching students to consider what makes some evidence or testimony more persuasive than others requires inviting some conflict into the classroom. Inevitably, when students are given the opportunity to share their thinking behind their beliefs, heated and passionate conflicts can emerge no matter how innocuous or benign the topic at hand may seem to be at the onset. Given the certainty of students arguing with each other, and from time to time, with the instructor as well, the important question becomes what is it we really end up teaching our students if we do not explicitly teach them to recognize the factors that sanction authority? If we do not teach our students to think about the factors that can discredit authority, how can we expect them to learn to judge whether a source of information is reliable or not? When we are challenged by our students in the classroom (either as a matter of our “expertise” when it regards the accuracy or interpretation of our content material or as a matter of an administrative function such as confronting a student who is failing for violating our attendance policy), we may benefit from considering from which source of authority (expertise or administrative) we are invoking before we decide how we want to respond to them. I contend that teachers have nothing to lose by acknowledging their own capacity for making mistakes. By communicating to students that we admit our own human fallibility, we can teach students to consider when and how to challenge what they perceive as an error on the part of people who hold power over them, and we can give them direction in considering the rhetorical elements that most sustain their chances for
being offered a fair hearing of their grievances. As a matter of practice, for example, I offer students bonus points for locating usage or mechanic flaws in handouts or tests I give in class. Not only have I found that this helps students feel more comfortable about questioning larger concerns when they feel I may be in error over a grade or something I said in class, it also increases my credibility when I explain why perhaps I think I am right when I fail to “see it their way.” By not only admitting mistakes, but offering token rewards for pointing them out, I hope to model for students how to respond *virtuously*, *wisely*, and with *goodwill* when someone finds fault, and I hope to discourage the type of rash or petty responses that reflect a failure to consider the rhetorical ramifications of needlessly losing one’s temper.

In teaching students about the qualities that demonstrate respect for human agency, we are also teaching them to consider and value their own agency as well. Often, as teachers, we encounter in our classes students who come to us whom we may regard as already “too full of themselves” or “too egocentric” to benefit from teaching them to value their own agency. However, as professionals, it would serve us well to remember there is an important difference between being blustery and self-assured and being aware of how the choices one makes in communicating with others impacts how others perceive one’s credibility as a writer or a speaker. It is possible that the students with the highest self-regard, the students who come to us believing that they have already learned all they need to know in order to succeed and we have nothing of any real value to teach them, are the students in greatest need of instruction in *virtue*, *wisdom*, and *goodwill*. In teaching students the value of respecting the agency of others and the importance of
considering virtue, wisdom, and respect when asserting their rights to their own agency, we provide a rhetorical framework for handling classroom conflict that offers safety to students who may otherwise be reluctant to share their thinking as well as provide a secure context for the overly confident students to recognize that real authority is established through thoughtful communicative transactions with others not through incessant self-promotion.

As writing instructors, we need to be willing to model the pro-agentic ethos as we offer instruction about it. In modeling this ethos, we need to be clear with our students that respecting the agency of others does not mean we need to relinquish any of the authority we have established through either our professional expertise or our institutional power; it means, instead, that we maintain our classroom authority while communicating a willingness to listen to student concerns when they feel they are being treated unfairly or when they feel they have legitimate reasons for contradicting whatever we have to say. Perhaps the most important lesson to be taught in instructing students about a pro-agentic ethos is that a sincere respect for the agency of others does not mean we will always end up agreeing with them.

For meaningful and productive dialogue to occur, it may be necessary to regard what each person has to say by considering how individual messages reflect virtue, wisdom, and goodwill; it does not mean that consensus in the form of universal agreement is the optimal (or even preferred) outcome. It is possible that the atmosphere created by a sustained empathic effort at considering virtue, wisdom, and goodwill may facilitate the cohesion of a group and the formation of agreements that privilege
compromise among classmates; however, students need to understand that respecting the agency of others means sometimes respecting the rights of others to experience life differently than they do themselves. This is to say, when we give people the right to make up their own minds and disagree with us, then it naturally follows that we reserve the right to disagree with them as well. Allowing disagreements to remain unresolved may not feel like the optimal outcome for a heated classroom discussion, but the willingness to leave things unsettled teaches students that not every controversy needs to be wrapped up in tidy 50-minute episodes. Students should be taught (and instructors should remember) that sometimes allowing disagreements to remain unsettled is infinitely better than forcing people into saying they agree with some points of view they don’t actually believe for the sake of moving on to other matters.

The credibility of a pro-agentic ethos is built upon the expectation that other people are capable of reaching a reasoned opinion on the matters at hand; this means that people are given the freedom to disagree, and thus, while the students should have every expectation of being heard when they vocalize their opposition to something the writing instructor has said, there should be no expectation by the students that the instructor is necessarily going to be moved or persuaded by her students’ rhetorical efforts to change her mind. The most a pro-agentic instructor should be willing to guarantee her students in the course of negotiating on a deadline or length of a reading assignment is that given a conscientious effort to construct their messages with earnest considerations for virtue, wisdom, and goodwill, the students should expect both a fair hearing for their thinking
and a rhetorical response from their instructor that offers the explanations that support her thinking.

Given a commitment to teaching from a position that values student agency, instructors need to articulate to their students their pledge not to respond to students in pythonic ways. Pythonic responses, which include instructor comments that threaten students rather than encourage them to reflect on what is being argued, tend to corrode student trust and poison the safety of the classroom environment where students deserve to feel secure in speaking openly and sincerely about the issues that concern them the most. Arguably, the most pythonic statement an instructor can say to a student is “You know there is absolutely nothing you could say that would ever change my mind about this, and, furthermore, any additional attempts to try to change my mind about this will be a complete waste of time.” The vital lesson students need to learn is that when they encounter such transparent and adamant pythonic opposition (“there is nothing you could say that would ever change my mind about this”), the only two responses are either to submit and perhaps seek remedy from someone higher up at a later time or to face the retribution that is going to come from continued non-compliance. The two important points I’m trying to make here are that

1. as instructors we should strive be to be mindful to avoid pythonic declarations or ultimatums because we have available to us alternative, pro-agentic ways of disagreeing with students that respect both our ability to make classroom decisions and their right to receive fair treatment, and
2. as students of rhetoric, we need to recognize that when we know we are dealing
with a resolute *pythonic ethos*, then the odds of changing that person’s mind with
a legitimate rhetorical argument are remote.¹⁸

Adopting a *pro-agentic ethos* may not always offer the easiest and quickest way to lead a
classroom, but I assert that the best learning environment for everyone concerned comes
from instructors who manage to run their classes without either being feared by students
or manipulated by their demands.

Through the course of the previous three chapters of this dissertation, I have
demonstrated how the three key terms *virtue*, *wisdom*, and *goodwill* have diverse
meanings for different people based upon how they relate to these terms on various
epistemic, ontological, and doxastic levels. Thus, clearly, what may exemplify *virtue* for
one person may be troublesome or problematic for another person (and, naturally, the
same holds true for *wisdom* and *goodwill* as well). If, as I have been asserting throughout
this section, consideration of these three terms is essential for establishing and sustaining
a legitimate rhetorical authority (*a pro-agentic ethos*), then how does the prospective
range of polysemic interpretation of these words impact their utility as signifiers of
authorial credibility? In other words, if ten people all have ten slightly (or even vastly)
different concepts of what it means to be *virtuous*, then how can consideration for the
concept of *virtue* be of any real use in appraising the trustworthiness of an authority?

¹⁸ I have a lingering hope that someday pointing out to people who are relying upon coercion to get their
way that they are being *pythonic* may evoke an awareness that they are behaving brutishly and a change of
heart will occur. I don’t, however, recommend ever trying this method out with a *pythonic ethos* when the
stakes are very high. Pointing out to a mugger that what he is doing is wicked and shameful is more apt to
get you shot than provoke a vow to turn over a new leaf.
My answer to this concern is that discussions of why and how different people define **virtue** (or **wisdom** or **goodwill**) in different circumstances are solid, rhetorically-productive classroom activities. Furthermore, I argue that these three terms are excellent heuristics for getting students to think rhetorically about the arguments they read and hear. Regardless of how students define **virtue**, **wisdom**, and **goodwill**, using these terms as heuristics offers students unique windows for looking into the sociological, ideological, and psychological contexts (perhaps the sophists would say “the kairos”) that legitimizes rhetorical authority under diverse conditions. As a classroom writing instructor, I am not as interested in imposing my own sense of what it means to demonstrate **virtue**, **wisdom**, and **goodwill** with my students, as I am interested in challenging them to think critically about what personal meanings these terms may hold and to investigate reflexively why others may understand these terms in ways that are different from their own. Thus, some questions that writing instructors may use to help their students appreciate how these three terms support rhetorical credibility could include the following:

1. Does the rhetor (whether a speaker or a writer) offer any indication that she is aware of any need for presenting herself as virtuous, wise, and good-willed? If so, what examples from the text (or when dealing with a speaker, from what was spoken) indicate this awareness for you as an audience member?

2. Are there ways in which the rhetor offers indications of concern for her audience that, as an audience member, you regard as disingenuous or artificial? Give
examples of statements that from your perspective caused you to question the rhetor’s credibility.

3. Are there statements in the text or speech that you view as indications that the rhetor is unconcerned with how her audience responds to her message? Can you give examples in which the rhetor seems to be more concerned with modifying her audience member’s behavior rather than working to change how their audience is thinking or feeling about the matters at hand?

4. When looking to revise a draft of your own writing, can you find places in the text where you feel you have demonstrated for your audience considerations for their agency? How do you (or how could you) give examples of your own concerns for virtue, wisdom, or goodwill? Can you underline any specific examples?

5. As you are contemplating how to revise a draft of your paper, can you identify any statements in your writing that might cause someone to question your sincerity? Are there statements or claims that you make that may cause others to wonder whether they should believe you or not? Underline any statements that you feel others may regard as patronizing or that might cast suspicion upon your credibility.

6. As you are considering your own authority in the draft you are working on, can you see places in your writing where you are more or less demanding that other people agree with you? Are there places in your text where you write as though you really don’t care how other people respond to what you are saying? Are there places in your text where you can see how others might regard your tone as more
indifferent than inviting? Underline any statements or passages where you can imagine others might take issue with what you have to say, and also those parts where you really don’t care if they believe you or not.

Obviously, there are many other questions we can use to encourage our students to consider how the credibility of others affects their willingness to accept what they say or write, and how their own credibility is often influenced by the consideration they give for their own authorial ethos.

Placing concerns for virtue, wisdom, and goodwill into the lexicon of terms we use to teach our students how to interpret texts and to consider the effectiveness of their own writing is a useful means for getting students to move beyond the type of habitual, unreflective, and inflexible thinking that we sometimes encounter in the classroom. Many of our students who have not been sufficiently challenged to consider the qualities that make people more or less believable are unprepared to deal with arguments that require them to recognize and discuss moral and ethical shades of gray. For the students who would rather see the world in rigid “right or wrong” terms and only under clear “black or white” conditions, teaching them to consider how other people from a wide spectrum of diverse cultural backgrounds may interpret virtue, wisdom, and goodwill in ways that are peripheral to their own customary ways of thinking is a excellent approach for getting these students to recognize that given the human propensity for fallibility, no one is right all the time (and is thus always deserving of unquestioning acceptance) and no one is wrong all the time (and is this always deserving of mechanical dismissal).
Sometimes without giving sufficient instruction and discussion to the issue of credibility, students will rely upon the veracity of information from sources (particularly from the internet) that utterly contradict conventional information without even being aware how such references may contravene common knowledge or even (when obtained from hate groups that use the internet to prey upon the naïve) promote distortions of historical fact in order to promote nefarious and odious social agendas. Discussions of how *virtue*, *wisdom*, and *goodwill* impact credibility are, thus, also useful for those occasions when the writing instructor feels the need to rhetorically challenge student discourse that promotes racism, class discrimination, heterosexism, and bigotry aimed at other groups who are frequently marginalized. While sometimes as writing instructors the temptation is great just to directly denounce prejudice and coerce students into either silence or a hypocritical renunciation of their pejorative speech (and then, perhaps, just move along as quickly as possible on to some other “safer” topic), doing so, I believe, demonstrates *the pythonic ethos* and is not particularly effective at defusing the vitriol that permeates student hate speech. Although it is time consuming and frequently uncomfortable for some of the other students who may feel trapped by being required to witness such confrontations in the classroom, I believe that a *pro-agentic approach* – that challenges those student who are promoting bigotry in either their writing or speaking to articulate how *virtue*, *wisdom*, and *goodwill* are demonstrated in their arguments – is more effective at breaking down the disturbing and irrational scaffolding from which their bigotry emerges.
In the course of challenging the students who would defend hate speech to demonstrate how their support for their positions reflects a concern for agency, the instructor has a golden opportunity to explain how in confronting their dogma of intolerance, she can do so while expressing her own concern for their goodwill as well. After all, she can point out to them, as the students move through the complexities of life, it is far more likely that they will continue to face serious liabilities for articulating prejudice rather then reap any benefit from espousing hatred. Even if the attempt to change some obnoxious mind-sets fails through the rhetorical approach, the instructor can always maintain the hope that eventually the students will relinquish their bigotry; furthermore, the teacher can feel positive about modeling a form of authority that values agency over coercion. If at some point the teacher feels it is necessary to use her institutional power to compel some of the students into not intimidating others with their hate-filled speech or mordant remarks, she should make a point of reminding students that the use of power can be considered pro-agentic as long as the use of such authority follows these guidelines:

1. The authority is willing to explain the rationale for invoking power and can demonstrate how using the power reflects a consideration of virtue, wisdom, and goodwill.

2. The invocation of power is open to further rhetorical challenge.

3. The students are shown how their right to communicate openly in the classroom ends when it infringes upon the rights of fellow classmates to
come to class and participate in class discussions without fear of intimidation or harassment from other students.

The underlying principle of the pro-agentic ethos is to demonstrate how the power of bullies is neither ethical nor moral; it is not a principle based upon the acceptance and tolerance of antisocial behavior. By discussing in class with students what they think it means to demonstrate virtue, wisdom, and goodwill, teachers can draw upon rhetorical history (using an example such as Quintilian’s assertion that “a good man can sometimes mislead a judge for the right reason”) to place issues of cultural relevancy square in the middle of discussions of normalcy, power and the privilege’s of hegemony.

In summary, teaching students to write well means not only teaching them to consider how to adjust their language usage to match the verbal expectations according to the level of formality that best suits the requirements of the audience and atmosphere for the message, but also teaching them that writing is – in and of itself – a practical means of asserting their agency, exercising their autonomy, and manifesting their individuality.

A focus on the issues of ethos can help students understand how every time they negotiate conflict with others, they are also in the process of establishing the limits that separate who they are from who they are not.

Colleagues and the Pro-Agentic Ethos

There are lots of interesting ways to group writing instructors into particular categories depending upon how we want to discuss what it is we do (or make an argument for what we should do) when we teach students to write. James Berlin, for example, in Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900–
1985, separates writing instructors into three groups based upon how they imagine what student writing is meant to do: instructors who subscribe to objective notions about reality emphasize the type of writing that conveys meaning about what can be empirically known and demonstrated; instructors who favor a subjective ontology focus their instruction upon helping their students articulate their own vision of reality to others; and those who come from a transactional outlook and who conceive of understanding life as it is filtered through both personal experience and the interpretations others place upon their own experiences, emphasize student writing that works persuasively to negotiate the differences between personal understandings and the perspectives of others. In “Personal Writing Assignments,” Robert Connors separates writing instructors into two groups: those who emphasize “objective” modes of writing that restrict students to writing from third person points of view that reflect “impersonal” knowledge and those who emphasize “personal” modes of writing that reflect firsthand experience from a personal point of view. Because the viability of grammar instruction has had such a tremendous influence in popular perceptions of what is we are supposed to do when we are teaching students how to write, we can group instructors by those who emphasize mechanical correctness as the standard for “good writing” and those who stress other considerations instead (such as depth of thought or organization of the content). In “So Happy a Skill,” Robert Scholes declares, “I do not think we can actually ‘teach writing’ though I do indeed believe we can help people improve as writers if they desire such improvement” (230); so, apparently, another way to group writing instructors simply might be to put
teachers into the two groups of those who believe writing can be taught and those who do not believe writing can be taught.\textsuperscript{19}

In “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing,” Maxine Hairston separates writing instructors into those who put “dogma before diversity, politics before craft, ideology before critical thinking, and the social goals of the teacher before the educational needs of the student” (180). In the same paragraph, Hairston goes on to suggest that writing instructors who “put ideology and radical politics at the center of their teaching” are lacking in common sense. Overlooking, for the moment, Hairston’s concerns with their lack of common sense, we can, thus, also assign writing instructors into two groups based upon their willingness (and, perhaps, their ability) to recognize how their pedagogical choices situate them politically, and those who apparently believe, by not acknowledging the nature of their political choices, they are not making any political choices at all.

Although “lacking sufficient common sense” is a label I have most certainly been charged with during the last twenty five years I have spent in the classroom teaching students how to write, it is not for that reason alone I find myself aligned with the former group that recognizes how politics and ideology guide pedagogical choices rather than the latter group that struggles to avoid that connection. Apparently by the sheer volume of responses Hairston’s essay generated when it was first published (according to Richard Gebhardt who was, at the time, editor of \textit{CCC}, Hairston’s piece generated more counterstatement submissions than any other article that year), I find myself in alliance

\textsuperscript{19} I must admit to being a little perplexed over the difference between “teaching writing” and “helping people improve as writers.” I’m also a bit confused by writing teachers who believe “writing cannot be taught” and who happily cash their paychecks anyway.
with a substantial number of colleagues in the field who believe, as I do, that every choice we make in the classroom is inherently integrated in the politics that supports it.

In their introduction to *Pedagogy in the Age of Politics: Writing and Reading (in) the Academy*, Patricia Sullivan and Donna Qualley comment upon how often writing instructors, (such as Hairston) proceed as though they can somehow avoid political attachments when they feel they are representing the status quo because they contend that doing what they perceive as traditional is somehow “apolitical” or even, perhaps, “prepolitical.” Sullivan and Qualley note that in the way Hairston pairs terms from the quote above, she writes as though the first term of each pair is politically charged, but the second term in each pair is void of any particular political ramifications. They write:

> “Diversity,” “craft,” “critical thinking,” and “the educational needs of the student” are cast into a politically neutral space, or more accurately, into a prepoliticized time in composition’s history when it was possible for us to teach writing untainted by the social values and institutional conditions in which our practices and theories were forged. (x)

Here, in the introduction to their collection of essays that examine many of the ways politics informs writing pedagogy, Sullivan and Qualley point out that from its very beginnings, writing instruction has been politicized by its relationship to the hegemonic forces that have used its power to define the meaning of literacy in ways that enhanced and sustained its authority (xi).
Later in the book, Karen Fitts and Alan France argue that writing instructors who envision writing instruction as a “politically neutral process” teach classes that do their students a disservice by not raising their conscious awareness of the social inequalities that surround them (13). They write:

Our politics are materialist-feminist, and they are central to our pedagogical and professional ethos. It is important to us, for example, that our teaching practices actively challenge the white, middle-class consensus that Americans can afford to ignore the poverty strangling inner-city life, the general erosion of women’s reproductive rights, and the growing ecological threat of Western technologies. (13 – 14)

Although I find myself in agreement with Fitts and France in the substance of their “pedagogical and professional ethos,” I veer slightly from their primary contention in their chapter on the role of politics in the writing classes by seeing political consciousness on the part of the instructor and her students as more fruitfully regarded as a continuum rather than as a strict binary. This is to say rather than suggesting that writing classrooms either “are or are not” overtly political, I feel is more useful to discuss the broader spectrum of how instructors and students reveal and hide their political affiliations. I contend that all writing classrooms are informed and directed by politics; however, some instructors (and their students) are more outspoken and direct about the political forces that guide their instructional practices than others.

I also contend that no matter where one teaches in the political spectrum, from an overtly political stance or from a covertly political apathy, instruction in “pro-agentic
theory” is appropriate for helping students to understand the importance of credibility in what they read and write. Teaching students to distinguish between “good authorities” who derive their influence from legitimate rhetorical practices and “bad authorities” who exploit the power they wield in relationships through coercive manipulations can be used constructively in classrooms regardless of which end of the political spectrum the writing teacher inhabits. Writing instructors who make their political loyalties the center of their teaching can use “pro-agentic theory” to generate discussions of how considerations of virtue, wisdom, and goodwill are either manifest or lacking in the language of both those who support and those who disparage their primary causes. Writing instructors who either feel uncomfortable challenging their students to think reflexively about their political subject positioning (or who may feel their jobs are at out at risk by being too “opinionated” or “controversial”) can use “pro-agentic theory” to examine with students how both “coercive” and “rhetorical” messages appear in contemporary advertising, historical propaganda, and the writing generated within the classroom through non-graded assignments.

Whether or not “pro-agentic” considerations are used to promote specific political agendas, the primary purpose of teaching students to distinguish a pro-agentic ethos from a pythonic ethos is to improve student writing. By discussing authorial credibility, students are guided to consider how the circumstances of their audiences affect both what they say and how it gets written. Writing instructors should be able to see the value in getting their students to consider more thoroughly the “kairos” that informs the purpose, tone, and voice that emerges in student writing. I contend that consideration of the
factors that enhance credibility facilitates the use of language that more effectively reaches the student writer’s rhetorical goals. I also believe that teaching students to consider the qualities of *virtue*, *wisdom*, and *goodwill* can offer them three accessible heuristic windows to consider the ways other writers impact their own thinking, and this too is a useful device for helping students to consider the ways they often either promote or sabotage their own credibility in the writing they produce for others.

The Community at Large and the Pro-Agentic Ethos

Although, as I have repeated a few times within this dissertation, it seems likely that the average person on the street believes the primary responsibility of writing instructors should be to teach people where to put commas and other such mechanical trifles, I believe writing teachers need to answer to a much higher responsibility: teaching students how to think. Writing and thinking are inseparable cognitive activities. In his book, *On Writing Well: the Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, William Zinsser declares, “Writing is thinking on paper” (147).

If I were forced to nail down the single most essential idea from the work I put into researching and writing this text, it would be that the difference between teaching students how *to think* and *what to think* is the most important concern we have in the teaching profession, and nothing is better suited for expressing this difference to our students than instruction in rhetoric and composition. Teaching people to think rhetorically is a way of teaching people to exist in the world. It is a way of saying to students, “You have choices in how you conduct your life. You can choose to speak and write in ways that will enhance your integrity and your ability to look at yourself in the
mirror. You can make decisions in the ways you communicate to others that can sustain your credibility with them. How you live your life is in your hands, but how others will come to regard you is in your words and deeds.”

As a society, we are willing to expend a great deal of time, energy, and money to provide students with an education. The reason we are willing to put so much of our available resources into education is that we recognize what would become of us if we didn’t. The root word of “civilization” is “civil,” and perhaps we can measure the quality of our civilization by how civilly its citizenry behaves toward one another. As a writer, a teacher, and a rhetorician, I hold no conviction more dear than the expectation that in the long run, the power of words that have been put together out of a sincere respect for the agency of others is ultimately more authoritative, commanding, and influential than the power of bullets and bombs that have been put together out of greed, hatred, and the idea that the ability to hurt others confers the moral right to do so.

Whenever we teach people how to write, we also teach the principle that there is more value in responding to others slowly with thoughtful consideration than there is in responding immediately with our fists. If there has been a long term benefit from developing as a species our brain’s unique cognitive abilities to communicate with each other on paper, it has come in our capacity to work together to achieve mutual assistance and subsistence from each other. In moving from animal-like savagery to measured civility, we have come to realize that our need for one another requires us to treat others as we expect to be treated in return. In the fifth century BCE, Buddha said, “One should

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20 Perhaps some readers would argue that we are already seeing the consequences of not putting enough resources into educating our youth and too much of our resources into incarcerating them later.
seek for others the happiness one desires for himself.” In the first century CE, Jesus said, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” In 18th century CE, Kant wrote, “Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” No matter who is saying it or when they are saying it, the message all comes down to the same rhetorical principle I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this dissertation: legitimate rhetorical authority is based upon the concern for the agency of all involved, writer and audience alike. The best way to understand agency is through the triangulation of considerations for virtue, wisdom, and goodwill.

Perhaps if we are to ever convince the public at large that the value of writing instruction comes primarily in the cognitive gains to be had in learning to think more reflexively about the concerns we should have for each other, then it might do us well to remember that although Aristotle gave us the words to connect aretē, phronēsis, and eunoia to a “good” ethos, he did a wretched job of making the mental connections for himself. We cannot resolve the disjunction between Aristotle’s instruction that credibility is established through demonstrating one’s virtue, wisdom, and goodwill before one’s audience and his other writings that reveal a patent obliviousness to the misery of many of the people he encountered every day: the people he considered mere women, slaves, and foreigners. We should, however, take Aristotle’s disjunction as both a reminder that we, too, (even two and a half millennia later) are culturally blind to the doxastic ways that our everyday thinking renders us insensitive to the agency of others, and as an obligation to commit ourselves to doing the best we can in promoting the
educational practices that result in the highest standards of fairness and equality for everyone.

However unlikely it may be that as a species we will ever be able to eradicate the natural misfortunes our planet regularly bestows upon us in the form of earthquakes, hurricanes, and floods, it seems to me that we do have a much better chance of someday (perhaps in another two and a half millennia hence) ridding ourselves forever of the needless human pestilences of bigotry that inflicts suffering upon the victims of indifference by those who wield coercive, hegemonic power. If the day is ever to come in which the use of irrational, coercive authority is universally recognized and discredited, then it must begin now by teaching our students, today, to write credibly through with respect for the agency of those with whom they disagree.
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APPENDIX A: THE LOGOS AND ETHOS OF COERCION

Putting aside the ethics of coercion for a moment (the topic that will engage most of the space in this dissertation as the explication of ethos), let us examine the fallacious nature of its logic. Suppose a neighbor came to visit you one afternoon and said, “As I was going to work this morning, I saw a unicorn in the road in front your house. I just thought I would warn you so you could be on the lookout for it.” Depending on how well you knew your neighbor, you could respond in a variety of ways. If you believed your neighbor was delusional, you might politely thank him and hope he never brought it up again or you might suggest he seek help from a mental health professional. If you suspected that perhaps your neighbor had seen something that he mistook for a unicorn or that he might be using the term “unicorn” for something other than a mythical horse with a horn protruding from its forehead, you might begin a discussion with him to determine his beliefs about the existence of unicorns and the particular details concerning what this one looked liked, how it behaved, and the direction it may have been heading.

If a belief in unicorns does not fit the template for reality that you have fashioned from your life experiences, it seems unlikely that your neighbor could convince you that he actually saw one without offering you some substantial evidence. Even if your neighbor offered you some evidence that he had actually seen a unicorn (such as some digital photos or home video), the belief in unicorns falls so outside the mainstream of 21st century experience (and, thus, most likely outside your own model of reality), that it...

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21 I use the example of unicorns because they are commonly accepted by most adults as mythical beings and because author James Thurber used unicorns to make a similar point about belief and rationality in his short story, “The Unicorn in the Garden.” If you happened to be someone who believes in unicorns, then feel free to substitute in your reading any other mythical entity that you do not personally believe in (e.g. leprechauns, pink elephants, space aliens, etc.)
would probably be easier to accept that your neighbor was either behind some elaborate
gag (or the victim of some elaborate gag) than it would be to admit into your conception
of reality the possibility that unicorns had begun to manifest locally within your realm of
existence. Belief is a function of experience both personal and public. Although not all
of our beliefs are products of first-hand experience (we can, for instance, with little effort
believe in the existence of Mars without either visiting the place or even viewing it
through a telescope), most of what we believe comes through what we have experienced
first-hand or through reasoned explanations for phenomena that does not conflict with
what we have experienced first-hand. Philosopher David Hume, in his essay “Of
Miracles,” argues that belief in extraordinary occurrences requires extraordinary
evidence, and that testimony alone is inadequate for providing such evidence. Hume
writes, “A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable
experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of
the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined” (par.12).
Thus, whenever we consider the credibility of what we hear from others, there seems to
be a ratio between what we accept without questioning the information too much and the
degree to which it strikes us as likely. If your neighbor says, “I saw a rabbit in front of
your house today,” you may not give the truthfulness of his statement a second thought if
rabbits are fairly common to the region where you live. If you neighbor says, “I saw a
rabbit riding a unicorn in front of your house today,” the degree to which you question
the reality of your neighbor’s assertion is directly proportional to the degree of
strangeness you assign to the statement.
The question, then, is how does coercion fit into the mechanics of belief? And the answer is that, logically, there is no place for it. If your neighbor was convinced that he had seen a unicorn (and assuming that unicorns are outside the paradigm of your conception of reality), it is possible that with enough second-hand evidence (you might have other neighbors report seeing the unicorn or perhaps you begin to hear stories on the local news about unicorn sightings) or upon your own first-hand encounter (you step outside one morning and there is a unicorn standing in your driveway), you could alter your psychic record of reality to include the existence of unicorns. Renovating one’s essential and rational depiction of reality, however, is not like remodeling one’s kitchen. It is not a simple matter to yank out an old belief to replace it with a new one in the same manner one might replace cabinets. Beliefs are outgrowths of experience, and before they can be modified, reason demands a legitimate and relevant basis for doing so that (first and foremost) does not conflict with the already established psychic blueprint that supplied the original need for belief in the first place.

If your neighbor was truly desirous of convincing you of the local existence of unicorns, he would have to offer you some significant empirical evidence to expect you to believe him. Even then, given the strangeness of the belief when compared to the map of reality you have established for yourself through your own, seemingly ordinary, life experience (in writing this, I am gambling that my readers have never seen a unicorn nor have ever before heard of anyone actually seeing one), it would be difficult to accept his version of reality no matter how sincere and adamant he seemed about it. While you might believe that he believed that he saw a unicorn, without an enormous and substantial
amount of second-hand evidence (or a shocking first-hand encounter), it would be nearly impossible to suddenly accept the existence of unicorns when you had spent your entire adult life believing them to be mythical. Now, imagine in the course of your conversation with your neighbor regarding the existence of unicorns he says, “I would give just about anything for you to believe in unicorns along with me. How much money do you need to believe in unicorns?” The problem with a monetary offer to believe in unicorns is that, logically, a financial incentive is simply not relevant to the existence of unicorns. While digital photographs and home movies of the unicorn might offer some questionable evidence for the unicorn’s existence, the offer of money offers no relevant evidence at all. This is an essential and critical distinction. While a nice windfall of money might offer a good motive to believe in unicorns (or at the very least, say you believe in unicorns), the reward does not offer any form of proof toward the local existence of unicorns. Even if your neighbor produced a suitcase full of money, the actual existence of the reward money would bear no relationship to the actual existence of the unicorn; they would be mutually exclusive phenomena.

This point is especially important in regards to the practice of critical thinking, a skill that is highly esteemed and frequently touted by language instructors as the mental ability to form sound judgments based upon a reasoned consideration of relevant information: There is a logical gap between having a good motive to believe something and a good reason to believe something. For example, you might have a good motive to believe that you can hold off until payday getting the brakes on your car fixed; you just do not have the money at the moment to pay to have the car repaired. However, the
motivation to wait to have the car fixed is not the same as having a good reason to believe that the brakes on your car will last until you have the money to get them fixed. The decision as to when to take your car into the mechanic to have the brakes repaired might have everything to do with your ability to pay for the repairs; however, how much money you have in the bank is entirely independent to the operation and usefulness of your car’s brakes. Having a need for the brakes on your car to last another couple of weeks before they fail completely is entirely irrelevant as to whether they might last two days, two weeks, or two months. Thus, having a motive to believe something is not the same as having a reason to believe something.

As with the offer of a cash incentive to begin believing in unicorns, the emergence of a threat also does not give any reason to believe in unicorns. Suppose your neighbor were to say, “This particular unicorn does not tolerate disbelief in its existence. You need to start believing in it to protect yourself from its wrath.” From this, you could recognize that the threat of an imaginary beast does not make it any less imaginary. Furthermore, if your neighbor grew disturbed and began to threaten you with a serious beating unless you said you did believe in unicorns, then you could recognize that while a threat may be a good motive to say something (“Calm down, I do believe in unicorns”) or do something (i.e., lock yourself in a safe room while you phoned the police), it offers no reason at all to believe something. Once again, whether or not your neighbor had the physical wherewithal to follow through with his threat to inflict significant corporeal damage to your well being, the actual existence of the threat is irrelevant to the actual existence of the unicorn. As with the offer of a reward, because it represents mutually
exclusive phenomena, the existence of a threat is *entirely irrelevant* to the existence of the unicorn.

Since the beginning of human history, people have used violence to get others to do their bidding. Both the oral histories of ancient cultures and the oldest textual records of human existence relate stories of people who held power over others merely because they were physically capable of killing those who opposed them. The desire to live unmolested offers a strong motivation to do whatever is commanded by the people who are willing to hurt others to get what they want. Abraham Maslow, a noted 20th century psychologist and perhaps the most frequently cited theorist of psychological motivation, places physiological and safety needs as the primary foundation of human motivation, and he argues that people seek out food, shelter, and safety before attempting to satisfy such higher level needs as belonging to groups, self-esteem, and self-actualization (Sheehy 366).

The existence of a threat is an entirely relevant motive for behavior; however, the employment of a threat as a reason to believe is only relevant to the self-referential belief that the person making the threat is willing and capable of hurting others if his commands are not obeyed. If you were accosted by a thug with a gun and the bandit said, “Give me your money or believe me, I will shoot you,” then the threat of violence is relative to the belief that the thief is willing to hurt you if you do not surrender the contents of your wallet or purse. The essential logic of the concept of coercion as a motive for either belief or behavior is the relevancy of the threat. If the person threatening you with a gun were to say, “Believe that I deserve to take your possessions or I will shoot you,” then the
threat is not at all relevant to the belief because there is no casual relationship between the ability to produce a gun and the idea that someone else deserves your money. Furthermore, if a mugger were to say, “Give me your money, I have a potato in my pocket,” then the threat would not be relevant to the thief’s desire to compel you to hand over your money. Even if the intended thief actually wields a potato, most people would not find the existence of the potato a relevant motivation for surrendering their belongings. Again, the point I’m trying to demonstrate is that in terms of the logic of a threat, a threat is only relevant to a belief in the existence of the threat; otherwise, threats are irrelevant to other ideas because they do not offer any germane support for their belief.

I would not argue that the use of threats to motivate behavior is inevitably immoral or unethical. Although I would say in general the principle that the power to hurt others does not offer a sufficient moral or ethical justification for doing so, the use (or threat) of force to compel others to comply with established social conventions can be under many circumstances a legitimate use of authority. The concept of civilization is built upon the principle that mutual cooperation is paramount to developing resources that benefit the community as a whole, and the security of the community’s welfare is perhaps the most fundamental benefit of civilization. Sometimes the use (or threat) of violence is necessary to induce community members to behave in ways that do not threaten the health, safety, or property rights of others. From time to time representatives of the government must use violence to coerce people into abandoning conduct that undermines the security of its citizenry. While the potential to misuse or abuse the
legitimate use of force always accompanies the agents of government who have been authorized to employ it, without a justifiable provision for violence, the officials charged with the responsibility of law enforcement would be left with no recourse for compelling others to comply with their orders when they meet with aggressive or irrational opposition. Thus, swords as emblems of civilization are two sided blades: in the hands of criminals who operate in defiance of the laws that institute and maintain civilization, swords are devices that disrupt the accepted authority and threaten the citizenry with chaotic barbarity; in the hands of the lawful agents of government, swords are the means for the preservation of peaceful coexistence through the suppression of dangerous and prohibited behavior.

Given the legitimacy (and perhaps the inevitability) of the use of force as a means to compel behavior, what can be said about the legitimacy of the use of force to coerce belief? I assert that while a wide variety of circumstances can sanction the use of force to coerce behavior, the use of a threat to coerce belief is manifestly unethical and immoral. Here is what I propose: if a reason for belief can be demonstrated to be unequivocally irrelevant to the truth of the belief, then the disregard of the irrelevancy of the reason is tantamount to a disregard for the truth of the belief. Regardless whether the use of power to coerce behavior can be demonstrated to be legitimate or not, whenever anyone with the power to coerce behavior furthermore attempts to coerce belief as well, then the authority welding the power to coerce is acting unethically and immorally because the only belief that is relevant to the use of coercion is the self-referential belief that this particular authority is willing and able to use force to command obedience. Because the existence
of threats are mutually exclusive phenomena to any other beliefs that are not self-
referential (that is to say the existence of one is irrelevant to the existence of the other),
all other attempts to induce belief through coercion are virtually equivalent to asserting
an allegiance to irrelevancy and irrationality. While violence is capable of teaching the
belief that it is necessary to avoid the consequences of defying the people who have made
it painfully clear that they will hurt others to get what they want, violence is not capable
of justifying its ethical agency as a catalyst of belief.
APPENDIX B: ON THE ONTOLOGY OF GOOD ENGLISH TEACHERS

Although questions regarding the appropriate designation of the qualities “good” and “bad” are complex and most likely beyond universal consensus, for writing instructors the avoidance of these issues has profound professional and pedagogical implications. Do good English teachers exist? Of course, they do. Regardless of the line of work, whenever we consider a massive pool of trained professionals, it is inevitable that some people (either by talent, training, or some fortunate combination of both) will be better at what they do than others. With many other professions and occupations, the distinction between a good practitioner and a bad one can be manifestly apparent; a good lawyer wins a lot of cases, a good doctor saves a lot of lives, and a good baker consistently creates delicious pastries. However, when we are trying to distinguish “good writing instructors” from “bad writing instructors,” who gets to determine the particular measurements by which such assessment is quantified and attributed? Who ultimately should get to define for society the qualities that determine the ontological presence of a “good English teacher”? Administrators? Other English teachers? Their students? Journalists? Lobbyists? Governors and State Legislators? The Departments of Education who supposedly work for the governors and state legislators? How about the CEO’s of the private commercial companies who generate their huge profits by constructing and scoring the standardized tests at the behest of the Departments of Education since quite often judgments regarding teacher competence is made entirely dependent upon the scores on these tests?
Furthermore, with a high-tech society that relies upon effective communication nearly as much as it relies on fossil fuels, who should society grant the authority to answer these following questions as well?

- Should English teachers be judged upon their own abilities to pass standardized achievement tests (supposedly designed with the intention of demonstrating the teacher’s proficiency in both subject area knowledge and general educational theory) or should they be rated by their students’ abilities to pass standardized achievement tests (supposedly designed for the students to demonstrate the degree to which specific content has been memorized and certain disciplinary skills have been attained)?

- If writing instructors are to be rated by their students’ scores on “standardized written tests,” should a “good” designation be reserved for teachers whose students all score above a predetermined, norm-based “passing” score or should the evaluators who are using student test scores to determine teacher proficiency take into consideration measurement of student growth (as reflected in the gains demonstrated by comparing the students’ previous standardized test results with their most current standardized test results)? This is to say, as often happens with public school teachers who teach the same grade or subject as others across a hallway, should “Teacher A” be considered a “good English teacher” if all of her students score above the pre-established passing score (even if all of these students by virtue of their school system’s tracking have entered her class with the cognitive and verbal abilities to pass the test even before meeting “Teacher A”)?
while “Teacher B” is subject to being labeled a “bad” or “inadequate” English teacher because none of her students are able to pass the test at the standardized grade level (despite “Teacher B” having a group of academically challenged students who through the instruction of “Teacher B” have gained more than a year’s worth of verbal ability as reflected by previous testing).

Perhaps the most significant question in regards to evaluating writing instructors is the question of whether or not it is even possible to measure empirically the most essential qualities of “good” English instruction. Can anyone really quantify the qualities that distinguish a good English teacher from a bad one? Typically, the context of the stakeholder who answers this question determines its response. For the wealthy executives who operate the testing companies and whose financial interests rely upon the assumption that good teaching can be quantified, the answer is an emphatic “yes.” For the governors and legislators who feel pressured by their constituents to produce some evidence that taxpayers are getting their money’s worth in the operation of public schools, the need for some answer usually provides the basis for a provisional “yes.” For administrators who are required to evaluate their teachers in order to provide documentation regarding dismissal, retention, and tenure, the answer is likely to try to balance the “yes” in regards to the measurable, experiential qualities (i.e., absence records, discipline referrals, paperwork submissions, etc.) with a “but also” to important subjective qualities that are resistant to quantification (such as “has an excellent attitude,” “is a good listener,” or “establishes a pleasant classroom environment”). Teachers, parents, and students are probably the stakeholders most likely to recognize that the
qualities that are their own greatest concerns – such as honesty, fairness, concern for student wellbeing, articulation of academic expectations, the pace and depth at which material is taught – are beyond the measurement of small bubbles on a Scantron® score sheet.

Often the qualities society values most in our teachers and their students are the qualities that are the most difficult (if not downright impossible) to measure empirically with any validity or reliability. However, the need by certain factions of society (including journalists, policy makers, entrepreneurs, educational consultants, and college registrars) for quantifiable data to measure the success of one group of students (and their teachers) against the success of another group of students (and their teachers) compel them to turn to the empirical measurements offered by standardized tests because often this empirical evidence is the only information available. Sometimes, people who feel the need to point to some data to justify their decisions rely upon quantified test results merely because this is the easiest evidence to generate without being accused of bias against any specific individual (or group of individuals). Sometimes administrators rely upon standardized testing to make decisions about “who is a good student” or “who is a bad teacher” because they have never been challenged to consider the rationality of doing so. The use of standardized testing to distinguish a “good” teacher from a “bad” teacher is perhaps analogous to the driver who searches for his lost car keys under a nearby street light because it’s too dark to see next to his car where he dropped them. Because many of the important qualities we value in teachers (and students) may be the most difficult to quantify, the people who need to quantify “good instruction” from “bad instruction”
merely simplify the process by sticking to the data that can be generated through what

The question as to whether or not the information produced through standardized
testing provides data relevant to identifying good writing instructors becomes
unimportant when the ethical and moral concerns of what needs to be measured gets
buried beneath the pragmatic realities of what can be measured. Whenever the
manufacturers of standardized tests can not quantify the qualities that many stakeholders
consider important, then the qualities that are quantifiable become the only ones that
matter – even if doing so is patently irrational or ethically untenable. Because testing
companies are only able to market a certain type of experiential information, and,
furthermore, because their clients often feel pressured to demonstrate that their policy
decisions are based upon some “neutral” (perhaps they would even argue “objective”)
results, then the only results available become the only results that matter. Relevant or
not, reliable or not, valid or not, the results justify their usage.

This leaves us, then, with a central pair of important ethical questions:

1) Who gets to decide which qualities define good English instruction? and

2) How do we validate and respect the important qualities that are the most
resistant to empirical and standardized testing?