Rhetorical Ethics and the Language of Virtue: Problems of Agency and Action

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Links between ethical education and rhetorical education run deep, and discussions of ethical pedagogy have been both common and crucial to rhetoric and composition's development since the field's inception. This association between ethics and rhetorical education is deeply embedded within the ethos of the field, given the classical emphasis on rhetoric as the exercise of good citizenship and the central role writing plays in general education curricula. Historically poised at the portal to higher education, composition courses have played an outsized role in the formation of good academic citizens. In particular, as observed by Lynn Bloom two decades ago, first-year composition serves as a mechanism to inculcate in students "the middle-class values that are thought to be essential to the proper functioning of students in the academy" (656), among them responsibility (658–9), respectability (659–60), propriety (660–1), and order (663–4). If, as Barbara Grant argues, our professional ethics call upon us to reflect on "what kind of people we want our students to become and how our practices are contributing to this formation" (101), composition studies has much to answer for.

This motivation to explore the ethical implications of our practice has become, according to Anne Wysocki, "[t]he murmuring background soundtrack to all our work" (282). Within our recent playlist, however, John Duffy has emerged as perhaps the most prominent theorist of the ethical current in composition. In two recent articles—"Ethical Dispositions: A Discourse for Rhetoric and Composition" ("Ethical") and "The Good Writer: Virtue Ethics and the Teaching

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of Writing" ("Writer")—Duffy illuminates extensive historical and pedagogical linkages between rhetoric and ethics, making the case for writing as the practice of virtue ("Writer" 231). In the former, Duffy argues that "to teach writing is by definition to teach ethics; more specifically it is to teach what I will call 'ethical dispositions,' or the communicative practices of honesty, accountability, compassion, intellectual courage, and others" ("Ethical" 213). In his more recent piece, Duffy expands his model of ethical dispositions by situating them in the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics and recasting them as "rhetorical virtues," or "the discursive practices of virtue, the expression in speech and writing of honesty, accountability, generosity, and other qualities" ("Writer" 235). According to Duffy, such virtues are inherently linked to actions through speech, as "the rhetorical virtues reflect the traits, attitudes, and dispositions we associate with a good person, speaking or writing well" ("Writer" 235). Surely, a mark of good writing instruction is to develop writers capable of honesty, accountability, generosity, and the like, yet the parallels between Bloom's "middle-class values" and Duffy's vision of "rhetorical virtues"—between honesty and propriety, accountability and responsibility, generosity and respectability, and so forth—are cause for reflection.

Duffy's work illustrates a common thread in scholarship exploring the intersections between rhetorical and ethical theories in that it grounds the aims of writing instruction in the rhetorical tradition, connecting our disciplinary aspirations with those of rhetorical history and positioning composition firmly within the conventions of liberal education. Ethics thus becomes closely aligned with pedagogies designed to foster learning in service to the common good. So, for example, Duffy and scholars like Kathleen Welch highlight classically rooted connections between rhetoric and ethical education by referencing shared values communicated through writing practices: "to make difficult material understandable to a wide range of decoders," according to Welch (144); and "to demonstrate integrity by delivering the testimonies, documents, or other forms of proof through which one's claims may be measured, tested, and evaluated," according to Duffy ("Ethical" 220). In this way, relationships between ethics and the rhetorical tradition become integral to our institutional roles and cast in terms that complement current classroom practices.

Yet in "Teaching Rhetorical Values and the Question of Student Autonomy," Dennis Lynch cautions us to consider the ends served by appeals to tradition, calling attention to the circularity of arguments commonly used in discussions of such values:

> 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 function at any given 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; emphasis added)

The field has proudly placed the construction of good citizens—good writers, good students, good subjects—at its ethical center, informing our discourse, our theories, and our professional roles. Yet Lynch's words remind us that this construction takes place within rhetorical and institutional contexts that are not without their own ideological function.

As noted in Sheryl Fontaine and Susan Hunter's "Ethical Awareness: A Process of Inquiry," in moments when "context and situation has stimulated the foregrounding of ethical awareness," (6) our disciplinary scholarship has often turned to critical self-examination. In particular, such introspection is evident and necessary when "[t]he situations of a contemporary world—including academia and the classroom—can no longer be accounted for within the confines of previously accepted ethical systems" (7). In this sense, the field's recent scholarly interest in ethics is necessary and timely: necessary given that vast changes in technology, student populations, and writing research should cause us to revisit the values and functions of the rhetorical tradition in the contemporary discipline; timely in that within our current cultural moment, notions of rhetorical ethics are in flux, our perceptions of good citizenship increasingly fragmented. Duffy's work reminds us that reflection on disciplinary ethics provides a means to intervene in these larger currents, a vehicle "through which we may tell the story of our discipline and effectively intervene in the conduct of public argument" ("Ethical" 213). His efforts to revisit the role of ethics in disciplinary work offer a starting point for intervention, a place to "begin a conversation; to open a line of thinking; to invite a reconsideration of what we say we do, why we say we do it, and why our work matters" (214).

This article attempts to take up Duffy's challenge to reconsider "what we say we do" by examining a limitation in the field's vision of ethical pedagogy with ethical implications of its own. Namely, discussions of the relationships between ethics and writing instruction reveal a reliance on what ethicist Maria Merritt defines as *characterological* measures of ethical behaviors: idealized expressions of personal integrity or public morality we use to frame "ethical commitments that anchor self-regulation primarily as ideals of personal character" (47). In developing models for ethics instruction in composition, much disciplinary scholarship demonstrates an inclination to weigh ethical outcomes in characterological terms, thereby perpetuating a framework described by Marguerite Helmers in her work *Writing Students: Composition Testimonials and Representations of Students*, where "[t]he writing comes to represent a person, a set of traits ascribed to an

individual" (9). Helmers highlights this pattern in composition testimonials, where perceived faults in student writing are often framed as deficiencies in students' moral codes, integrity, or principles. While composition research has sought to illuminate the natural complexity of processes that contribute to the mastery of academic discourse and conventions, thereby attempting to disassociate perceptions of error from perceptions of character, our frequent reference to attitudinal and affective measures of learning can perpetuate this pattern. So, for example, much has been said about the value of attributes like persistence and grit in the practice of writing. Certainly these qualities can help students succeed in school and in life: to learn from mistakes, to engage in productive reflection, and to refine their writing through practice. But what of the students who resist revision, who lack engagement, who continue to fail? When we focus on such qualities of self-regulation as measures of success, it is difficult to avoid assigning praise or blame based on assumptions about character aligned with those qualities.

Reconsideration of this characterological orientation at the heart of ethical pedagogy is of particular urgency because, despite disciplinary progress in recognizing the power of systemic and cultural influences on conceptions of the self, social interaction, and written expression, the field's ethical discourse remains dependent on virtue-based models of ethics that fix our vision on elements of a student's character—on perceptions of the "goodness" of the self behind the writing. This article demonstrates how this inclination is perpetuated through our disciplinary vocabulary, pedagogy, and policy, restricting the ways in which ethical rhetorical choices are examined and realized in our classrooms. Most significantly, I argue, our emphasis on characterological approaches to teaching the ethics of composing limits our capacity to help students consider rhetoric as a tool for action guidance: as a means, to paraphrase James Porter's *Rhetorical Ethics and Internetworked Writing*, to help students determine not just *who* "one is to be . . . [but] what one is to *do*" in particular discursive contexts (150, emphasis added). Ethical theory and problems of moral philosophy can be instructive in illuminating how characterological approaches to instruction can limit the scope of students' agency in rhetorical decision-making and consequentially perpetuate patterns of exclusion that limit our capacity to "speak to the values of connections, reciprocities, and interdependencies among peoples of diverse and often conflicting ideologies" advocated in Duffy's work ("Ethical" 217). In place of characterological models for understanding and teaching ethics in writing courses, I advocate for an expansion of our ethical vision in proposing a dialogic model of ethical writing pedagogy—one that places multiple ethical models (virtue-based, consequentialist, and deontological) in conversation—as a means for focusing attention on action guidance in composing practice.

Ethical Language in the Discipline: Writing, Virtue, and Action Guidance in Composition Pedagogy

Because Duffy's articles are prominent and recent explorations of the intersection of ethical and rhetorical theories in composition, they serve as an appropriate starting point for understanding how the language we use for describing the role of character, principled choices, and virtues plays out in writing pedagogy. Duffy consistently foregrounds the centrality of language in articulating disciplinary ideals and practices, calling for "an expanded ethical vocabulary" ("Ethical" 217) and "a language that will maintain our critical commitments but emphasize equally an ethics of affinity, solidarity, and empathy" (218). Such calls for the development of a more robust ethical language in the wake of both critical theory and current public contexts—a language adequate for building alliances across ideological differences, promoting reflective action in the face of oppression, revealing structural inequities that limit ethical choice—are necessary, given the struggle to articulate a more flexible ethical vision for composition studies now.

Duffy's recent discussion of ethical frameworks in composition is grounded in virtue ethics in that it links "discursive practices of virtue" ("Writer 235") to contemplation, thereby locating foundations for ethically informed pedagogy in individual self-reflection. In "Aristotelian Virtue and the Interpersonal Aspect of Ethical Character," Merritt indicates that this orientation is a hallmark of virtue ethics, which reflect: "A common, well-intentioned inflection of the first-person perspective on ethical life" (46–7). Merritt goes on to distinguish virtue-oriented philosophical models from other frameworks, stating,

> Orthodox virtue ethics, unlike moral theories in the consequentialist or Kantian families, grounds the criterion of right action in some conception of what an idealized yet fully human agent would do. This builds into first-person ethical practice, as fundamental and indispensable, a characterological orientation. (47)

Duffy's work, which anchors his vision of ethical pedagogy in contemporary virtue ethics, reflects this foundation. For example, Duffy draws from the work of philosopher Rosalind Hursthouse in initially situating his ethical framework, citing her definition of virtue as "the concept of something that makes *its possessor* good" (13; emphasis added) to ground his contention that virtues are manifested in personal dispositions (Duffy, "Ethical" 228).

Given such definitions and Merritt's observations that virtue ethics is contingent on "ideals of personal character" (47), what, exactly, does it mean to build our pedagogy on characterological assessments of ethical behaviors? Duffy's most recent article, "The Good Writer: Virtue Ethics and the Teaching of Writing" advocates for the concept of virtue as a guideline for ethical

rhetorical practice while deliberately attempting to sever its association with character, as understood within the associated discourses of Christian traditions and neo-Conservative politics (236–7). Specifically, he attempts to recast the scope of virtue ethics in advocating for a return to virtue as a basis for pedagogical practice, noting,

> Common to conceptions of contemporary virtue ethics is the idea that virtues are the traits, attitudes, and dispositions of character that we associate with a good person . . . we can observe that virtues are not thought by moral philosophers to be innate, but developed through instruction, practice, and habit. ("Writer" 235)

Duffy thus sees the development of ethical practices as an outcome of writing instruction rather than as an expression of innate attributes.

Despite these adjustments, Duffy's framework for teaching ethical forms of composing remains grounded in what philosophers would call an agent-focused orientation. According to Eric Silverman, "All virtue theories are at least agent-focused. An ethical theory is agent-focused if there is an emphasis in it on the moral importance of the virtuous individual and her character qualities over the importance of the rightness or wrongness of particular actions" (507–8). Virtue theorists, as characterized by Duffy, reject deontic (rules-based) or consequentialist forms of ethical action and instead turn to qualities of individual character as a determinant in classifications of "right" actions ("Writer" 232–3). As such, his model also seeks to build a vision of writing pedagogy based in not only the embodiment of virtue, but also the practice of "the *discursive* practices of virtue" (235; emphasis added). Rhetorical virtues thus serve as an ethical nexus connecting rhetorical reflection, disciplinary discourse, and ethical choice. According to Duffy, "[I]t is in the language of the virtues, in what I will call 'rhetorical virtues' . . . that students and teachers of writing can find 'principles for action,' or rationales for making ethical decisions in the writing class" ("Writer" 231).[1] In this framework, the deliberation we enact through classroom practices—the series of ethical choices about audience, sources, and claims that are the hallmark of academic writing—is the very stuff of virtue. So, for example, when we speak with students about proper attribution and citation as conveying a writer's respect for the ideas of others—rather than as rigid, decontextualized rules to be followed by students—we associate rhetorical gestures with characterological values. Rhetorical deliberation is therefore transformed through ethical instruction, according to Duffy, since

> when we discuss these choices with students, when we engage students in conversations about why they make some choices over others, we are in effect teaching ethics; more accurately, we are exploring with our students what it means to be, in an ethical sense, a "good writer." ("Writer" 230)

While Duffy acknowledges the slippery and at times troubling associations between the language of virtue and the vocabulary of character development, he finds promise in the practice of rhetorical virtue as "an alternative to ethical traditions grounded in rules and consequences, and offers, as well, a way of thinking beyond the critical ethics of postmodernism" (231).

Drawing parallels between the demonstration of virtuous attributes and the practice of rhetorical deliberation, however, is not sufficient to overcome key problems of virtue-based ethical theories recognized by philosophers and ethicists. Inherently, the prevailing logic supporting virtue-based rhetorical frameworks hinges upon the demonstration of characterological traits we wish to see reflected not just in their writing but in students themselves. Our disciplinary language for talking about the actions of students in writing classrooms reflects the limits of this logic, and central terms frequently used to observe and weigh the aims of ethical development in composition—terms such as *dispositions* and *habits of mind*—reinforce this tendency by framing "good writing" in terms of students' perceived individual attributes: for example, qualities such as "fair-mindedness, tolerance, judgment, intellectual courage that speak to the character of an individual" (Duffy, "Ethical" 219). As Duffy attests, the language of virtue and the practice of rhetorical reflection, when paired, can provide a means for instructors to position rhetorical actions within dynamic interpersonal contexts rather than casting rhetorical choice as a reflexive response to a deontic system of rules and regulations (e.g., those frequently invoked in current-traditional models). Viewed through the lens of ethical theory, however, such links between virtue, reflection, and ethical action are not entirely clear. Fittingly, the question of action guidance—of how one determines how to act in accordance with ethical codes—is a matter of much interest in contemporary accounts of ethical decision-making.

Psychological and philosophical approaches to virtue-based ethics commonly raise questions about whether links between traditional models of virtue and ethical action can be readily or easily drawn. At the heart of such critiques is an observation that virtue-based models define ethics in a circular fashion: as the demonstration of "dispositions of character that we associate with a good person" ("Writer" 235). Virtue-based models can therefore become problematic in providing action guidance—in helping writers to identify the most "virtuous" strategy or best rhetorical response, in this case—because they provide an insufficient framework for defining virtue (van Zyl 69). Even contemporary accounts of virtuous action (like those found in Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics*) begin to unravel, according to such critiques, in defining

> right action in terms of the virtuous person, which in turn is specified in terms of the virtues. The virtues are then defined as the character traits required for *eudaimonia*. It is unclear, however, whether it is possible to explain *eudaimonia* in a non-circular way, that is, without making reference to right action.[2] (van Zyl 69)

This logical dilemma underscored in philosophical critiques of virtue ethics has significant implications for the translation of ethical models into writing pedagogy, as it raises questions about what our understanding of good writing actually entails.

In determining how best to teach ethical frameworks for composition, according to virtue-based models, we need to begin by defining virtuous writing practices, as they form a practical foundation for articulating how ethical ideals, rhetorical decisions, and academic conventions interrelate. Duffy provides one model for defining these relationships by citing Alisdair MacIntyre, who observes in *After Virtue* that "goods internal to practices, including the goods internal to the practice of making and sustaining forms of community" (188) illustrate how virtues can be realized within practices. Still, MacIntyre continues, such "internal" goods "need to be ordered and evaluated in some way" (188). Duffy applies this conception of virtuous practice to writing pedagogy, where the good can be determined through disciplinary practice: "following MacIntyre, we find an answer to the question of whose virtues we should teach in the writing course: our own" ("Writer" 239).

This adaptation, while useful in highlighting the role of ethical practice in writing pedagogy, remains incomplete, according to Don Kraemer. In "The Good, the Right, and the Decent: Ethical Dispositions, the Moral Viewpoint, and Just Pedagogy," Kraemer calls attention to this disciplinary tendency to use circular reasoning in defining ethical practice in the field, noting that such definitions often conflate the moral and the ethical. Considering a passage from James Porter's *Rhetorical Ethics and Internetworked Writing*, Kraemer notes, "[I]t is exemplary of the conflation I see in comp studies to invoke 'to the good' and then list 'what is good' as one of the items 'to the good' entails" (607).

If instruction bases students' writing practice on a characterological model produced by our particular traditions for defining "good" writing (and therefore "good" writers), what does that mean for developing students' sense of rhetorical agency or self-efficacy as writers? For assessing students' work fairly, effectively, and ethically? These questions get to the heart of our own professional ethics, revealing the challenge of building a pedagogy adequate for linking ethical deliberation, ethical discourse, and rhetorical action. Duffy illustrates how this problem has resonated in the discipline by revisiting Richard Lanham's invocation of the "Q" Question in *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and*

the Arts. Lanham's challenge to English studies is to reflect on a fundamental question underlying disciplinary practice: does humanistic education offered in our classrooms actually produce more humane or virtuous individuals (155)? Duffy echoes Lanham's challenge in developing his argument for rhetorical virtues, asking whether "good writing and speaking skills helps us, as Quintilian assumed, become good people?" ("Ethical" 227). Duffy's framework is a hopeful response to this challenge. Yet, while few would disagree that cultivating reflection and emulation of virtuous behavior among writers is a valuable motivating factor for work in composition, pedagogical models reliant on characterological or virtue-based orientations arguably present only a partial response to such fundamental questions.

Because virtue-based models are incomplete, our translation of ethical theory into teaching practice requires us to balance two often-conflicting professional imperatives: namely, the desire to tell our own story about the links between writing instruction and ethical action; and the moral imperative to honor, respect, and engage students' desire to write their own stories about ethics and education. If, as Duffy indicates, our own virtues should serve as a basis for ethical instruction, it would seem that our story, our traditional definition of the good writer, wins out. On the other hand, an alternative model—one that establishes a more comprehensive basis for determining what it means to write ethically in context—might focus its efforts on practices that shape composing not as a practice of virtue, but composing as a process of action guidance. In other words, an alternative model could foreground composing as a means for ethical decision-making—to situate writing practice in ways that encourage students to not only emulate virtue, but to forge it when the good is contested, in dispute, or seemingly out of reach.

Problems of Ethical Engagement: Characterological Orientation and Student Representation

Duffy begins this project of shoring up links between thought and action by highlighting the kairotic potential of rhetorical virtues, where "a virtue, then, is the disposition to act in the right way, at the right time, and in the right manner" ("Writer" 234). Because he defines rhetorical ethics as shaped by circumstance and notions of appropriate action, they provide a first step in developing pedagogies that shift away from the deontic, static ethical models characteristic of more traditional writing pedagogies. Additionally, if we agree that "[t]o write is to make choices, and to teach writing is to teach rationales for making such choices" (229), we can see that such scholarship on ethics in composition as that

of Duffy is committed to creating pedagogical contexts in which action guidance is an important goal.[3]

As noted previously, though, the problem inherent in characterological models is that they too often reflect assumptions about how the "virtues" or "dispositions" required to make ethical decisions—rationales based on understanding and modeling how good writers act—are reflected in student learning. We tend to assume students will internalize processes for virtuous deliberation, identify with them, and become better writers (and people) as a result. Yet, as Kristine Hansen observes, "[I]f students enrolled in a college writing course, we might cultivate more curiosity, openness, engagement, and creativity in them yet still not improve their writing and reading a great deal" (541). Here, again, the questions posed by ethical theorists regarding virtue ethics and action guidance can be instructive. According to Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove, ethicists often raise challenges to virtue-based models based on the adequacy objection, which states that "it is possible to perform a right action without being virtuous and a virtuous person can occasionally perform the wrong action without that calling her virtue into question." In other words, virtuousness does not equate with rightness. We can see elements of this objection recast in Kraemer's response to Duffy's description of ethical dispositions as "those tendencies, habits, and practices, such as fair-mindedness, tolerance, judgement, intellectual courage, that speak to the character of the individual" which "are enacted in the course of reading and composing texts" (Duffy, "Virtue" 219). Kraemer highlights the ways in which virtue and ethical action may not necessarily coincide, particularly in contexts where different values or expectations come into play, since "what is ethical for any student to do may or may not solicit these [Duffy's] dispositions" (616). Additionally, though Duffy casts ethical dispositions as a reflection of "the norms of the community or multiple communities in which the writer lives and works" ("Virtue" 219), Kraemer observes that students and faculty may adhere to value systems that are not reflected in the norms of this larger community (616). In this way, Kraemer demonstrates how virtue-based representations of decision-making are subject to the limitations raised by the adequacy objection and complicated by student agency, experiences, and sense of community identity.

Disciplinary research into the nature of how writing works within communities helps us to understand that meaningful rhetorical action requires more than a principled disposition and emulation of virtuous composing practices. Instead, according to Ellen Barton, ethical choices are

> interactional and therefore rhetorical. In other words, such decision-making takes place between real people, in real time, in (semi-)ordinary language that is typically more indirect than direct, within complex situations that are institu-

> tional and asymmetrical, and thus within a rhetorical context that always involves persuasion and, sometimes, resistance. (599)

When considering ethical disciplinary practice, we must reflect on how our pedagogies invite students to identify with/against discursive decision-making, knowing that academic contexts are so frequently, as Barton notes, "complex . . . and asymmetrical." Our disciplinary project of building ethical models of composing is complicated by the asymmetrical nature of our enterprise. In particular, as a range of scholarship in composition (see Helmers, Bloom, Grant, and Johnson, for example) illuminates, our language about students, their dispositions, and their habits reflects our vision of their goodness, their appropriateness, or their potential for success. Thus, while Barbara Grant's "question of what kind of people we want our students to become" (101) is of great importance to our work as teachers, our norms too often reflect "a particular cultural construction of studenthood which for some students is almost impossible to become" (102).

Ethical pedagogy—including models designed to foreground rhetorical decision-making as a dynamic and discursive process—must be carefully constructed to honor student autonomy in attempting to meet collective aims. As Dennis Lynch reminds us,

> [O]nce we accept . . . that values not only inform what and how we teach but also condition the very activities we hope to prepare our students to engage in, then the question of autonomy—the concern for student autonomy—begins to change its shape and significance. (367)

At a fundamental level, any attempts to recalibrate "the very activities we hope to prepare" for our classrooms must, first and foremost, ask whether "the discursive practices of virtue, the expression in speech and writing of honesty, accountability, generosity, and other qualities" are a reflection of "the traits, attitudes, and dispositions" of the "good" student (Duffy, "Writer" 235), or merely one who is obedient, reflecting the traits and habits of academic discourse that we value and affirm in our definition of good writing.

By promoting a framework in which students' dispositions and virtuous attributes determine their goodness as writers and individuals, we risk reifying traditional power relations in the classroom. Our disciplinary tendency to focus on characterological measures of ethical rhetorical practice amplifies this effect. Such measures reinscribe the ethically problematic tendency observed by Helmers in which "students are what they write" (9). Because associations between student dispositions and virtue are shaped through a disciplinary lens and embedded within the policies, pedagogies, and language we promote, our practices can become ideologically loaded in ways that, while ethically trouble-

some, become less evident to practitioners as we become more engrained in disciplinary norms.

"Stacking the Deck": Disciplinary Habits of Mind and the Limits of Ethical Pedagogy

This ethical dilemma becomes more problematic when we consider that much of the language we employ in describing ethical pedagogies tends to create a reflection of students made in our own disciplinary image. Kraemer highlights these problems in his discussion of Duffy's vision of ethical composing practices in "Ethical Dispositions: A Discourse for Rhetoric and Composition":

> These habits comprise what Duffy calls "transformative practice," but the description of this practice seems unnecessarily unilateral: "We are teaching students to expose themselves to the doubts and contradictions that adhere to difficult questions and that call for reflection and self-examination. In teaching students to listen to others, we are teaching the dispositions of tolerance, generosity, and self-awareness." As I've (de)contextualized these words (having yanked them away from the question of what to tell the public we do), they stack the deck in our favor and against our students: that is, we can teach students these transformative practices because we embody these practices, having been transformed by them. (Kraemer 616)

While Kraemer notes that he "yanks" Duffy's words from their full context, he reveals a consequential undercurrent in our disciplinary ethos—one, which Helmers and others have noted, tells a particular story about our work—our discipline transforms students into not just successful writers, but also good people.

An examination of disciplinary language for discussing ethical pedagogy reinforces Duffy's assertion that our vocabulary has not yet fostered an ethic capable of "speak[ing] to the values of connections, reciprocities, and interdependencies among peoples of diverse and often conflicting ideologies" ("Ethical" 217) at the heart of contemporary writing policy. While Duffy attempts to build this vocabulary using the language of the virtues, it is possible to see how virtue-based orientations continue to reflect "a discursive history of familiar storytelling patterns that reiterate dominant professional concerns and locate practitioners in a matrix of imperial control that has transcended composition's paradigm shifts" (Helmers 2). And what we're attempting to control, in this disciplinary story, is not just student writing, but students' dispositions: the inclinations of temperament, attitude, and deportment that shape student subjectivity.

Before we can begin to construct an ethical model for composing that is driven by action guidance rather than character, we must begin to deconstruct this disciplinary narrative that limits student control over their own ethical

decision-making in composition. To do so, it is important to consider how the field's policy documents—those we use to set classroom standards and determine the activities of composing with which students will engage—contribute to this discursive history. Let us take as an example the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, endorsed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Writing Project (NWP). Built around eight habits of mind, or "ways of approaching learning that are both intellectual and practical," the *Framework* promotes characteristics associated with what Duffy might call "ethical dispositions," including "openness," "responsibility," and "engagement" (CWPA 1). In "Beyond Standards: Disciplinary and National Perspectives on Habits of Mind," Kristine Johnson writes, "[T]he *Framework* focuses attention on the civic and ethical agency of student writers" (523). Specifically, the document's framing language attempts to bridge the theoretical gaps between ethical deliberation and ethical action by associating these characteristics with a set of activities. The *Framework* thus speaks to ethical concerns in representing the habits of mind less as static or school-based attributes than as a set of ethical heuristics "cultivated both inside and outside school" (CWPA 4) and used for inquiry, decision-making, and negotiation. In building the *Framework* around deliberative practices that foster reflective relationships between students and their audiences, the habits of mind establish ethical foundations for writers and position writing as a way of acting in/on the world.

Arguably, however, the foundational habits outlined in the document can, translated into teaching practice, "stack the deck" in our favor by establishing a portrait of the good student and shaping the trajectory of ethical action in the composition classroom. As Johnson notes, "Habits of mind inherently focus attention on the nature of the writer" (526). Further, she contends that

> the *Framework* asks writing teachers to address the person behind writing products and processes—to consider intellectual agency and the ethical aims of writing instruction in an increasingly technocratic educational landscape. Teaching habits of mind asks *who* writers should become and *why* they should become that way, which in turn revives difficult, enduring questions associated with the rhetorical tradition and the liberal arts: can virtue be taught, must a good speaker also be a good man, should writing instruction presume to cultivate taste and civic virtue? (527; emphasis in original)

Despite her questions, Johnson highlights that the document "does not position these habits in a specific ethical or philosophical agenda" (527); yet is hard to deny how a characterological inflection shapes the *Framework*, thereby informing the pedagogies and outcomes shaped by it.

The implications of this orientation on pedagogical practice are clarified by Judith Summerfield and Phillip Anderson in "A Framework Adrift," a contribution to the 2012 *College English* symposium on the *Framework* document. The article calls attention to the ways in which the *Framework*, in adapting language from "The 16 Habits of Mind" by Costa and Kallick, shifts the focus from habits as activities to habits as indicators of character or measures of good student behavior:

> [W]here Costa and Kallick use verbals or verbal phrases to describe the sixteen habits (persisting, thinking flexibly, questioning and posing problems, and so on), the *Framework* uses single nouns (persistence, flexibility, responsibility, and so on). This nominalized list is static, even reified, leaving us with what appears to be a set of personal values, states of being, or possibly innate character traits. In this characterological, commonsense formula, student "failure" could be explained away as personal failings of students: they are "lazy," they are *not* "creative," they are *not* "curious," or they are "not responsible for their own learning." (545; emphasis in original)

This passage is worth citing at length, as it illuminates the implications of ethical theory on teaching practice. Summerfield and Anderson, in their analysis, recognize how a simple shift in the language of this policy document matters. In this case, it can divert attention away from a dynamic model for ethical action guidance and instead emphasize more fixed, descriptive traits associated with the assessment of character. Such critiques of the *Framework*'s language demonstrate how disciplinary vocabulary has been used in ways that deflect our vision from what, exactly, we measure when we measure habits of mind: the sanctioned behaviors or characters of our students.[4]

Further, as a document positioned to establish aims for writing instruction across grade levels, the document's equation of habits of mind and student success is both logically troublesome and ethically vexing, limiting its capacity to speak to practices that position rhetorical ethics as a form of action guidance. The introduction to the document measures successful writers in terms of college readiness and career preparation, stating, "Students who come to college writing with these habits of mind and these experiences will be well positioned to meet the writing challenges in the full spectrum of academic courses and later in their careers" (CWPA 2). The logic implied is that being ready for college-level courses involves displaying the habits of mind deemed virtuous for writers and undertaking experiences required to enroll in such courses, reflecting an educational environment that is self-perpetuating and circular, where "all it takes to be 'successful' is to have the 'right' habits" (Summerfield and Anderson 545). This logic reduces the meaning of what it is for students to be "well positioned"

to meet challenges across courses and in their careers and does little to guide students toward greater intellectual or ethical autonomy.

Most troublesome, this framing of habits of mind as a mechanism of success works against students' capacity to act as mindful ethical agents, contributing to a larger pattern observed by Grant, who argues

> The culture of autonomy and individualism at the university constructs students who believe that success or failure lies with them. Thus, solely responsible for their academic success, they seek to take care of themselves, and in this way the institution takes care of itself. (110)

If we hope to engage students in writing informed by careful ethical deliberation—as a tool for action guidance—documents like the *Framework* place limits on our capacity to translate policy into more critical, other-oriented approaches to understanding writing. As critical responses to the *Framework* attest, despite our commitment to pedagogical ethics, many of the norms we valorize as a field remain inherently connected to the business of educational consumerism and the entrenchment of middle-class models of success, therefore providing little disciplinary space in which students' ethical autonomy can take shape.

ETHICS AS HEURISTIC: GENERATING SOCIAL AND STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORKS FOR ACTION

There is, however, hope that efforts to redirect the field's ethical vocabulary toward ethical pedagogies—those responsive to social conditions and respectful of cultural and material contexts—is bearing fruit. In Duffy's terms, this effort is an extension of our evolving sense of what it means to write ethically: to engage in composition as an activity "committed to the health of the reader-writer connection" ("Writer" 241). By teaching in ways that recognize how ethical norms, virtues, and actions are situated in local rhetorical contexts, and by working to honor the diversity of perspectives that shape students' and teachers' understanding of ethical behaviors, we begin to build new kinds of ethical commitments that extend beyond a sense of individual virtue or a static set of values.

Despite this progress, however, the ethics of individual character are hard to shake, remaining dominant in discourse about the ethics of composing. So, for example, though Duffy's work defines ethical pedagogy as a means to facilitate productive reader-writer relationships, the questions he encourages in practice are self-directed, not other-directed: "What kind of person do *I* want to be? How should *I* live my life? What does it mean to be a good person?" ("Writer" 230, emphasis added). The problem with this stance for instructional practice is that it retains a focus on the individual student as the center of ethical scrutiny

in the classroom, emphasizing responsibility on students for "taking care of themselves" as writers. Additionally, it places the instructor in the position of measuring the degree of responsibility students demonstrate in being a good person, as indicated through the character of their language or the virtuousness of their writing habits.

While Duffy's stance in advocating virtue ethics as a basis for such action is grounded in the knowledge that "[a] framework for rhetorical ethics . . . should account for more than outcomes" ("Writer" 241), pedagogical frameworks based on virtue cannot stand alone in guiding ethical rhetorical action. Because virtues themselves are enmeshed in a network of cultural assumptions, discursive values, conventional expectations, and material consequences, ethical frameworks for composition must provide a means by which students can engage actively in rhetorical decision-making. Therefore, what is needed is an ethic that shifts away from virtue as a basis for observation, evaluation, and enactment in the classroom: an ethic built, in philosopher Elizabeth Foreman's terms, "not in terms of virtuous engagement, but appropriate engagement, which means de-emphasizing traits and virtuous activities, and emphasizing ways of *seeing* others" (952n13; emphasis in original). We need what James Kinneavy, in "Ethics and Rhetoric: Forging a Moral Language for the English Classroom," calls "a need for a social, rather than an individual, ethic and the language to talk about it" (1).

To work toward this end, we need not just a social ethic, but a dialogical one: an ethic that calls upon instructors to facilitate conversations with and among students about how rhetorical actions not only reflect the character of the writer, but also the discursive negotiation of differing ethical systems. Within this framework, I propose, we can shape a definition of composing on measured action guidance: foregrounding writing as an activity that involves critical navigation of multiple and competing ethical standards (deontological, consequentialist, and virtue-based, if not others). By putting these systems in dialogue, this model redefines the ethical work of composing while actively fore-grounding the complexity of ethics that often underlie conventions for thinking, arguing, and acting in both academic and public life. This negotiation would require students to position themselves as rhetorical agents operating within communities whose boundaries are demarcated by various conventions for ethical action. In this way, our disciplinary role as writing instructors becomes one of support for students as they come to understand and position themselves within the systems that constitute "the very activities we hope to prepare our students to engage in" (Lynch 367).

To enact this model, classroom conversation and activities should be designed to create conceptual bridges connecting thought, language, and action by using the three primary ethical frameworks as heuristics: ways of guiding

students through rhetorical options in light of overlapping systems of value. Paul Connolly, in "The Poet(h)ical Art of Teaching," offers a valuable heuristic for developing pedagogies appropriate for a dialogic model, asking, "What can we learn together that we cannot learn alone?" (21). Instead of positioning individual traits at the center of a framework for rhetorical action in writing classrooms, Connolly positions deliberative talk and collaborative reflection as activities that reposition the traditional role of students and teachers in determining and assessing classroom ethics, observing that

> the authority of *teachers* comes from our ability to negotiate boundary conversations between those outside a community of discourse and those who seek admission to it. A teacher is a translator, reconciling the natural language and native concepts that students bring into the classroom with the acquired language and concepts that various "communities of discourse" have evolved to articulate their interpretations of life . . . a teacher's task is to mediate the work of students, not determine what must be done. (23; emphasis in original)

Connolly's metaphor of the teacher as a translator for students who natu-rally speak a (single) language whose influence ends at the classroom door is not well aligned with the field's current understandings of teachers, students, and the discursive practices of authority in academic communities. Still, his vision of the ethical classroom provides a foundation for seeing beyond virtue-based or characterological measures of the good writer. In shifting the act of ethical deliberation from the question, "How should *I* live my life?" to the question of how "'communities of discourse' . . . articulate their interpretations of life" (and particularly the "good" life), Connolly demonstrates how we can frame writing instruction in ways that equip students to understand rhetorical ethics as dynamic, social, and mutable—the product of overlapping systems of value, not just stable notions of virtue.

Instead of positioning the instructor as a translator or lead negotiator in a clash between student values and academic virtues, a dialogic model of ethics allows instructors to create a structure in which consideration of various ethical obligations gives shape to students' rhetorical choices in context. Specifically, the proposed model would ask students to engage the three primary ethical frameworks as rhetorical heuristics: as ways of guiding writing practice through shifting and overlapping systems of value that determine what good writing entails in various contexts. By creating classroom environments that foreground composing as an act of negotiation among the rhetorical constraints embedded in particular ethical choices, we invite students to engage in the process of rhetorical action guidance. Such an approach would help us achieve three primary disciplinary aims:

First, it would help writing teachers to demonstrate the ways in which ethics (especially those attributes Duffy classifies as rhetorical virtues) are systemic, linguistic, and enacted not only by individuals, but also institutions. This provides a means for interrogating the ideology and formation of academic conventions, as well as the traditional role of ethical education in rhetorical instruction.

Second, placing multiple systems for determining ethical value in dialogue would model how rhetorical deliberation is guided situationally and simultaneously by notions of character (virtue-based ethics), correctness (deontological ethics), and desired results (consequentialist ethics). In this way, we might begin to address the adequacy objection, since the activities of the writing classroom can be made to engage writers in rhetorical decision-making with equal attention to both deliberation (choosing among the ethical paths enacted through different rhetorical choices) and execution (creating written work that consciously enacts the community values for which it is produced).

Third, it provides a means for students to better understand, reveal, resist, or revise traditional assumptions about the good student, the good writer, or the good person by highlighting the very real ethical conflicts that inform their positions as academic subjects and ethical actors. According to Kraemer:

> We belong to multiple communities, communities whose values (even if sometimes overlapping) can conflict. Sometimes such conflict may settle itself, yet at other times it may unsettle us: that question, that is, of which has priority, *which* of our communities or *which* particular community value. Such moments concern conflicts of ethical perspectives—conflicts that constitute conflicts that are moral. Moral conflicts are how we reason about (ethical) values . . . That we *can* reason about something as seemingly personal and private as values is important to our disciplinary enterprise. (605–6; emphasis in original)

Kraemer casts this deliberative relationship between community values and individual values as the product of a productive tension between ethical and moral imperatives. This tension can serve as a foundation for instruction that helps students to understand writing as more than a set of conventions, but as a tool for decision-making. In this way, ethical tensions can also be brought to bear on the very language of the writing classroom in references to competing obligations we're called to consider when we write: not just considerations like "What kind of [writer] do I wish to be?" (Duffy, "Writer" 230) or "What effects will my words have upon my community?" (Kraemer 615), but also, What are the differences between my goals as a writer and the expectations of my community? and What are the consequences of appealing to my value of *x*, when my audience valorizes appeals that *y*?

How might such an ethical framework operate, in terms of pedagogy? One valuable starting point is to work from the discipline itself: specifically, the

ways in which our discipline positions ethics or ethical dispositions in defining "the traditions, narratives, and histories that express our collective knowledge about what it [is] to be a good writer, making good choices" (Duffy, "Writer" 239). To do so, we might ask students to look at documents like the *Framework*, asking them to consider how the habits of mind draw a picture of the good or ethical writer. What can writers do—in terms of their choices—to demonstrate "responsibility" or "flexibility" in their writing? How are such attributes—and their associated experiences—shaped consciously or unconsciously by rules, by consequences, and by representations of the good student? And why might these be valued *differently* by teachers, students, or other audiences? In asking students to consider: 1). why these terms, values, and activities may have been selected; and 2). how these values and activities are enacted, in their experience, through English education, we invite students to begin the work of articulating their connection to ethical rhetorical practice and to understand their position as subjects in the field. Once students have identified the ethical language inherent in documents like the *Framework* or other disciplinary documents (e.g., the WPA Outcomes Statement, the "Students' Right to Their Own Language" position statement), they can begin the work of reflection and revision, writing about the activities that define their orientation to responsibility or flexibility as writers. Such documents can help students to more overtly and self-consciously negotiate differences in values about writing that they've grappled with. They can also help a class negotiate sets of ground rules for ethical writing behaviors and expectations, inviting alternative frameworks or terms for understanding the good or ethical writer.

A primary criticism of virtue-based rhetorical ethics deals with the logical gap between the activities of the writing classroom and the logical end of character development. Confronting disciplinary norms regarding ethical values provides a way of bridging the gap. Duffy also attempts to address this gap by equating common rhetorical conventions with specific virtues. So, for example, he states, "If we define arguments as the teaching of claims, proofs, and counterarguments, we are necessarily and inevitably engaged, as I have written previously ('Virtuous'), in practices of ethical deliberation" ("Writer" 238). Duffy continues, "When we teach students how to make claims, then, we are inviting them to practice the rhetorical virtues of honesty and mutual respect" (238). Yet it is worth repeating that the *action* does not necessarily ensure the *ethic*. Teaching students to make claims does not always foster understanding of how particular claims come to be valued in particular communities. Further, viewed through different ethical lenses, not all claims are equal: they compete; they overlap; they change over time. Understanding claims as more than conventions, as Kraemer reminds us, requires writers to grapple with moral choices and "reason about

(ethical) values" (605). So we must engage students in dialogue and activities that can assist them in considering how rules, consequences, and habits shape their own claims, as well as the ethical grounds shaping the authority to make them. In doing so, they begin forming an ethical language required to speak to their rhetorical choices and actions across disciplines and contexts. If we agree, with Porter, that "'[e]thics is not a set of answers but a mode of questioning and a manner of positioning'" (qtd. in Duffy, "Writer" 243), we must help students to not only understand the nature of the questioning, but also the language necessary to positioning themselves within the complex of ethical tensions that defines writing activities in context.

This matter of positioning is of great importance to Duffy, Connolly, and others who work in pursuit of more ethical classrooms. For example, according to Duffy, we can use reading as an ethical tool for helping students position themselves in ethical discourse. By providing exemplars of activist writing, Duffy demonstrates, we can model how rhetorical virtues are represented or renewed through language. In this model, instructors can provide examples of texts and facilitate conversations to help students "see how they embody rhetorical virtues, whether candor, courage, empathy, or others" ("Writer" 246). When students have the opportunity to examine the ways in which texts can demonstrate ethical choices, they can become more informed ethical actors, writers equipped to "provide their own exemplars and . . . collaborate on defining the ethical writer for themselves" (246).

Yet, let us consider how this type of activity models the ethical work involved in action guidance or rhetorical choice. While Duffy advocates for the use of texts to demonstrate how, for example, resistant arguments operate ethically and rhetorically, the assumptions about *how* to position students for ethical action remain grounded in modeling virtue as displayed by good writers. The virtue is "embodied" in the text: a fairly static model for formulating behaviors about how good people act (or write, in this case). There is value in using exemplars to engage students in acts of critical reading that precede or recur in the writing process, but such instruction-through-exemplars is just a first step in facilitating the experience of "open-ended practical struggle" (Connolly 17) that makes ethics an activity of questioning and positioning—a guide for rhetorical action.

How, then, might Duffy's model be supplemented by a dialogic ethical vision? The key is inherent in Connolly's invocation of the question, What can we learn together that we cannot learn alone?—and, I would add, a second set of questions: How do various ethics operate together to shape texts in ways not explained by virtue alone? How do texts demonstrate not just a vision of rhetorical virtue, but also a glimpse of a larger context involving tensions between adherence/resistance to rules and acknowledgment/manipulation of consequences?

To establish classroom models that invite students to engage such questions, we might begin by asking groups of students to read a text rhetorically, considering a particular ethical stance (deontological, consequential, or virtue-based). Then, we could put those groups in dialogue about which decisions speak to those various ethical orientations. Which decisions contribute to/resist notions of good writing, and how do the features of the text reflect different ends (consequences), expectations (rules), and ideals (virtues)? Students might then consider the weight and wisdom of such choices. Or, to extend an exercise from Duffy's work ("Writer" 245), we might ask students to consider tensions in texts like "A Latina Judge's Voice," juxtaposing the ways in which Justice Sonia Sotomayor's speech models adherence to the rules for good citizenship but also challenges the definitions of what good citizenship entails. What are the consequences of that tension in determining what is "good" about Sotomayor's account of citizenship? How do her choices challenge (or reinscribe) notions of virtuous action we normally associate with American citizenship? We could then invite students to rewrite the definitions of ethical action or good citizenship grounding the speech in light of more recent circumstances: in light of the backlash against immigration; in light of "America first" rhetoric; in light of criticisms of Sotomayor herself. How might the choices represented in the text have different consequences or require different rhetorical rules, given the change in context? What virtues need greater emphasis/de-emphasis in light of such changes in cultural tone?

Considering the range of ethical frames negotiated in rhetorical deliberation provides students with options for developing critical strategies in referencing and potentially resolving diverse ethical imperatives through rhetorical action. It also allows students collaborative practice, through conversation with peers and a facilitator/instructor, to construct and reconstruct ethical representations of "the good" in dialogue, engaging in the practices necessary to "finding affinities, acknowledging interdependencies," and recognizing the contingency and complexity of ethical decision-making in language (Duffy, "Writer" 244).

Introducing a dialogic, deliberative model of ethics shifts the classroom's ethical focus away from characterological virtue, potentially helping students to better understand the complexity tied up in ethical action (and in rhetorical decision-making). Ultimately, this shift represents one step toward an aim clarified by Connolly:

> In thinking about the ethics of relations that occur in a classroom, emphasis often falls on . . . the ethical responsibility of the teacher or on the ethical power of texts, as agents of change. Equally important to notice, however, in the varied and complex subject-object relations of a classroom, is what enhances the responsibility and potency of students. What internal disciplines do students acquire as they

> interact with teachers, texts, and other students? What ecology of the classroom nurtures "the good" of each of its members? (14–15)

The key to our ethical aims as a discipline is not ultimately to recreate students in our own image by reaffirming instructors' role as arbiters of rhetorical virtues. Yet the language we have developed in order to discuss the ethics of our enterprise—particularly language that valorizes our role in shaping students' ethical dispositions and habits of mind—places the utmost responsibility for embodying our collective virtues on the student. As a discipline, we must continue to shape a new ethical vision that acknowledges our responsibilities and our students' responsibilities for rhetorical deliberation by asking Connolly's question of ourselves: What can we learn together—with students, about ethical action—that we have not yet learned alone?

Notes

1. Duffy credits John Gage and Norbert Elliot for developing this terminology ("Writer" 246n4).

2. Duffy defines *eudaimonia* in both its classical Aristotelian sense of "'happiness,' 'well-being,' or 'flourishing.'" as well as in Hursthouse's sense of "the sort of happiness worth having." He ultimately defines *eudaimonia* as "the activity of living well throughout the course of a lifetime" ("Writer" 233).

3. For more extensive accounts of ethical approaches to writing instruction, see also Fontaine and Hunter's collection *Foregrounding Ethical Awareness in Composition*, Porter's *Rhetorical Ethics and Internetworked Writing*, and Gale, Sipiora, and Kinneavy's *Ethical Issues in College Writing*.

4. For additional critiques of the *Framework*'s focus on habits of mind and other attitudinal qualities, see Gross and Alexander's "Frameworks for Failure" and Kristine Hansen's "The *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*: Better Than the Competition, Still Not All We Need."

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