

# 1 Introduction: Why Argument Matters

Anyone who remains skeptical about the important role argument plays in college writing curricula across the country today need only look to the sheer abundance of textbooks devoted to the subject. Every major textbook publisher features at least three or four competing argument texts. Moreover the quality of the current generation of argument texts certainly exceeds the standard—though it was not, truth be told, a particularly high standard—set by generations of argument texts prior to the mid-1980s. While a number of thoughtful critical thinking textbooks written by philosophers were successfully adapted to writing courses in argument during the seventies, the standard argument texts comprised a pretty rum lot.

In fact argument was seldom taught as a stand-alone subject in writing curricula prior to the 1980s. Typically, argument was taught as part of some taxonomic scheme such as the so-called “current-traditional” curriculum. The current-traditional, or “modes-based” writing courses that dominated college curricula for decades were organized around supposedly functional categories of writing such as narration, description, process and so forth, each of which came complete with a prescribed format. The most striking feature of these modes in retrospect was how arhetorical they were. Students were given little sense of why an audience might wish a description of a family pet or favorite teacher or an excruciatingly detailed account of how to make a peanut butter sandwich; and the main thing they were told about audiences generally was to assume they were a bit thick and needed things spelled out for them in, well, excruciating detail. Students progressed over the course of the semester from simple to complex tasks in a manner prescribed by a loosely behaviorist learning theory. Because it was considered the most complex of the modes, argument was typically accorded pride of place at the end of the syllabus. But being placed in

the final position also ensured that it frequently got short shrift, even total neglect, at the end of the term.

Many teachers were in fact relieved not to teach argument given the difficulties their students had with it in the context of current-traditional instruction. In retrospect, those difficulties were hardly surprising. While the relationship between arrangement and aim remains pretty much self explanatory when one's task is to describe the process of making a sandwich, that same relationship is complicated by several orders of magnitude when one sets out to persuade an audience that a constitutional ban on same sex marriage may or may not be a grand idea. Whatever transference might have occurred among earlier assignments, it appeared to stop abruptly when it came to argument. As we've since learned, when the cognitive demands of an assignment fall outside our students' "zone of proximal development," all sorts of other problems—with spelling, with grammar, with syntax, with style—erupt like a pox. Argument, many writing teachers reluctantly concluded based on their sad experience in such courses, should either be taught later in the curriculum or elsewhere in the university.

Clearly, thus, many of the problems students had learning how to construct arguments in a current-traditional writing course could be laid at the feet of the approach. It was as if we tried to prepare students for calculus by assigning them a series of arithmetic problems, pretending that solving addition, subtraction, multiplication and division problems prepared one to solve quadratic equations. Not every composition course was of course organized around current-traditional principles. But few of the texts apparently intended for use in stand-alone argument courses were any more promising. They mostly consisted of anthologies of canonical arguments interlarded with unhelpful advice and potted assignments. The usually brief—and one rarely wished them longer—prefaces and introductions rehearsed some classical terms, informal fallacies and model syllogisms and invited students to apply the material, some way some how, to the essays that followed. Needless to say the complexities of the essays handily eluded the dubious pieties of the opening chapter, leaving students and teachers alike to wonder if perhaps, indeed, argument was not beyond the ken of mere mortals.

What caused all this to change over the past twenty years or so? Here we run up against a confusion of the chicken and egg variety—Did our approaches to argument gain in sophistication and usefulness

because of a growing recognition of how much argument mattered in the world, or did the growing sophistication and usefulness of our approaches make us progressively more aware of the capacity for argument to matter in the world? In all likelihood, the two phenomena occurred more or less simultaneously and mutually reinforced each other. Or more accurately, our belated awareness of the many fine tools available to students of argument, tools that were in many cases adapted from tools a couple of thousand years old, rendered the study of argument more fruitful and the transmission of argument skills more reliable. For whatever reasons, thus, we find ourselves today in the midst of a sort of golden age in the history of argument instruction. Later on we will look further back into the past to see just how this came about and where the present era might fit in the history of argument instruction. For now we want to concentrate on our current understanding of argument and our motivation for teaching it.

### COMING TO AN UNDERSTANDING OF ARGUMENT

In our classes, we like to make an initial approach to argument directly and inductively by examining two or more arguments on an issue, working out with our students which features of our examples are most likely to be shared with other arguments. This approach is illustrative of a more general approach to teaching that we favor: bottom-up, problem-based learning, grounded in application and ascending toward principles as opposed to the more traditional top-down, “presentational” mode of knowledge transmission (i.e., lecturing). There are to be sure costs as well as benefits to our inductive approach to learning. In exchange for actively learning important elements of argument we have foregone thoroughgoing, albeit passive, “coverage” of our topic. The best we can hope for from our initial examination of argument is a better understanding of some of its more prominent features and a better sense of how to think critically about the subject. That is one of the points of the exercise and of our course—the meaning of complex terms like “argument” is always contested because they are in effect inexhaustible.

Whatever the danger that students might mistake our selected parts for the whole, the benefits of our approach in our view significantly outweigh the potential costs. While we could transmit a good deal more declarative knowledge about argument through lecture,

there is no guarantee that the knowledge we transmit would arrive at its intended destination, or that if it did arrive it would be sufficiently free of noise not to garble our signal or that students would have a clear notion of what to “do” with whatever knowledge survived the transmission. Our experience of lecturing on the definition of argument suggests that the most common question we manage to provoke about the material we present is the following: “Which of this will be on the test?” We do not take that to be a positive sign. Defining matters on which there is general agreement is, among other things, boring. Defining matters that are uncertain and contested is considerably more engaging. In our initial discussions on argument, we want our students to get a sense that the definition of any complex notion like argument is contestable, that the values and beliefs we bring to the exercise of defining the term influence our choice of its meaning, and that in turn how we define it determines how we practice it.

Every semester, at the end of our inductive exercise in definition, we are left not with the same tidy set of conclusions about the meaning of argument that we have rehearsed in our lectures, but with different, oftentimes unexpected, conclusions that arose out of freewheeling conversations. To be sure, we steer that conversation enough to ensure that at least a handful of points about argument are made, and not every point offered up in our classes survives the interrogation to which we submit it. (Like the ancient master of dialectic, Socrates, we are not above putting in the fix occasionally.) But each semester produces new insights into the meaning of argument. The important point to remember is that there will be plenty of time later to address the most crucial issues of definition left unanswered at the outset. In the meantime, students are more likely to be engaged by and ready to apply ideas that they have hand in producing.

The arguments that follow are not ones that we would use in a typical undergraduate class. The issues they raise are appropriate to a more theoretical discussion of argument than the one we seek to promote at the outset of an undergraduate class. Certainly we make no claims for them as argument exemplars. But neither are they randomly selected. They are “meta-arguments” of a sort that raise questions about the nature of argument central to our approach and preview issues that recur in the pages that follow. The two arguments and the ensuing discussion obviously cannot replicate an open-ended classroom encounter with the material. In order for you to at least get a feel for that experi-

ence, we invite you to read them the way we ask our students to read them. Before looking at our discussion, ask yourself how the two essays are different and how they are similar in both the way they argue and the conclusions they reach. The conclusions you reach can then be used to interrogate our own conclusions about the two arguments.

JOHN LEO, "CULTURAL RELATIVISM LEAVES SOME BLIND TO EVIL" (2001, UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE), 10/15/01

The House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church put out a disgraceful statement on the terrorist attacks. After urging believers to "wage reconciliation" (i.e., not war), the bishops said: "The affluence of nations such as our own stands in stark contrast to other parts of the world wracked by crushing poverty which causes the death of 6,000 children in the course of a morning." The number 6,000 and the reference to a single morning, of course, are meant to evoke Sept. 11 in a spirit of moral equivalence.

In plain English, the bishops seem to think that Americans are in no position to complain about the Manhattan massacre since 6,000 children around the world can die in a single day. The good bishops are apparently willing to tolerate 6,000 murders in New York\* because the West has failed to eliminate world poverty, and perhaps should be blamed for causing it. But the terrorist attack has nothing to do with world hunger or disease. And the bishops' statement is a moral mess. How many murders can Episcopalians now overlook because of the existence of crushing poverty? If 6,000, why not 60,000?

This is a minor example of what could be a major problem over the long haul. A large number of our cultural and moral leaders are unable to say plainly that evil exists in the world and that it must be confronted. Instead they are content to babble about "cycles of violence" and how "an eye for an eye makes the world blind," as if the cop who stops the violent criminal is somehow guilty of the crime, too.

Part of this philosophy arises from the therapeutic culture. Accusing someone of being evil is bad thinking. There is no evil, no right and wrong, only misunderstandings that can fade if we withhold judgment and reach out emotionally to others. Everything can be mediated and talked out.

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\* The number of casualties of the 9/11 attacks had not yet been fixed, at slightly fewer than 3,000, at the time of Leo's writing.

More of it comes from the moral relativism at the heart of the multicultural philosophy that has dominated our schools for a generation. Multiculturalism goes way beyond tolerance and appreciation of other cultures and nations. It teaches that all cultures and all cultural expressions are equally valid. This sweeps away moral standards. Every culture (except America, of course) is correct by its own standards and unjudgeable by others.

Teachers at all levels have been warning us for years about where this is headed. We are seeing large numbers of the young unable or unwilling to make the simplest distinctions between right and wrong. Even horrific acts—mass human sacrifice by the Aztecs and genocide by the Nazis—are declared undjudgeable. “Of course I dislike the Nazis,” one upstate New York student told his professor. “But who is to say they are morally wrong?” The same argument, or non-argument, can apply to the terrorists of September as well.

Only a minority of students think this way, but multiculturalism, with its radical cultural relativism, is becoming a serious problem. It leaves a great many students dubious about traditional American values and cynical about any sense of common purpose or solidarity. This is particularly so when the mantra of the cultural left that America is “racist-sexist-homophobic” is added to the mix.

This hybrid philosophy—no judgment of other cultures, but severe judgment of our own—is already beginning to color many responses to the terrorist attacks. It peeks out from behind the “root causes” argument and the need to “understand” the terrorists and to see their acts “in context.” Often what is meant by the root-cause people is that reckless and imperial America brought the attacks on itself.

The philosophy also shines through many statements of concern about bias against Muslim Americans. Of course Muslims must not be singled out for attack or scorn. But a good many official statements about Sept. 11 made only brief reference to the horror of the attacks before launching long and lopsided attention to the possibility of anti-Muslim bias.

Terrorism is the worst threat the nation has ever faced, and at the moment Americans are solidly united to confront it. The multicultural-therapeutic left is small but concentrated in businesses that do most of the preaching to America—the universities, the press, the mainline churches and the entertainment industry. They will have to be pushed

to move away from sloppy multiculturalism and all-purpose relativism. Let the pushing begin.

STANLEY FISH, "CONDEMNATION WITHOUT ABSOLUTES"

During the interval between the terrorist attacks and the United States response, a reporter called to ask me if the events of Sept. 11 meant the end of postmodernist relativism. It seemed bizarre that events so serious would be linked causally with a rarefied form of academic talk. But in the days that followed, a growing number of commentators played serious variations on the same theme: that the ideas foisted upon us by postmodern intellectuals have weakened the country's resolve. The problem, according to the critics, is that since postmodernists deny the possibility of describing matters of fact objectively, they leave us with no firm basis for either condemning the terrorist attacks or fighting back.

Not so. Postmodernism maintains only that there can be no independent standard for determining which of many rival interpretations of an event is the true one. The only thing postmodern thought argues against is the hope of justifying our response to the attacks in universal terms that would be persuasive to everyone, including our enemies. Invoking the abstract notions of justice and truth to support our cause wouldn't be effective anyway because our adversaries lay claim to the same language. (No one declares himself to be an apostle of injustice.)

Instead, we can and should invoke the particular lived values that unite us and inform the institutions we cherish and wish to defend.

At times like these, the nation rightly falls back on the record of aspiration and accomplishment that makes up our collective understanding of what we live for. That understanding is sufficient, and far from undermining its sufficiency, postmodern thought tells us that we have grounds enough for action and justified condemnation in the democratic ideals we embrace, without grasping for the empty rhetoric of universal absolutes to which all subscribe but which all define differently.

But of course it's not really postmodernism that people are bothered by. It's the idea that our adversaries have emerged not from some primordial darkness, but from a history that has equipped them with reasons and motives and even with a perverted version of some vir-

tues. Bill Maher, Dinesh D'Souza and Susan Sontag have gotten into trouble by pointing out that 'cowardly' is not the word to describe men who sacrifice themselves for a cause they believe in. Ms Sontag grants them courage, which she is careful to say is a 'morally neutral' term, a quality someone can display in the performance of a bad act. (Milton's Satan is the best literary example.) You don't condone that act because you describe it accurately. In fact, you put yourself in a better position to respond to it by taking its true measure. Making the enemy smaller than he is blinds us to the danger he presents and gives him the advantage that comes along with having been underestimated.

That is why what Edward Said has called 'false universals' should be rejected: they stand in the way of useful thinking. How many times have we heard these new mantras: "We have seen the face of evil"; "these are irrational madmen"; "we are at war against international terrorism." Each is at once inaccurate and unhelpful. We have not seen the face of evil; we have seen the face of an enemy who comes at us with a full roster of grievances, goals and strategies. If we reduce that enemy to "evil," we conjure up a shape-shifting demon, a wild-card moral anarchist beyond our comprehension and therefore beyond the reach of any counterstrategies.

The same reduction occurs when we imagine the enemy as "irrational." Irrational actors are by definition without rhyme or reason, and there's no point in reasoning about them on the way to fighting them. The better course is to think of these men as bearers of a rationality we reject because its goal is our destruction. If we take the trouble to understand that rationality, we might have a better chance of figuring out what its adherents will do next and preventing it.

And "international terrorism" does not adequately describe what we are up against. Terrorism is the name of a style of warfare in service of a cause. It is the cause, and the passions informing it, that confront us. Focusing on something called international terrorism—detached from any specific purposeful agenda—only confuses matters. This should have been evident when President Vladimir Putin of Russia insisted that any war against international terrorism must have as one of its objectives victory against the rebels in Chechnya.

When Reuters decided to be careful about using the word "terrorism" because, according to its news director, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, Martin Kaplan, associate dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern



California, castigated what he saw as one more instance of cultural relativism. But Reuters is simply recognizing how unhelpful the word is, because it prevents us from making distinctions that would allow us to get a better picture of where we are and what we might do. If you think of yourself as the target of terrorism with a capital *T*, your opponent is everywhere and nowhere. But if you think of yourself as the target of a terrorist who comes from somewhere, even if he operates internationally, you can at least try to anticipate his future assaults.

Is this the end of relativism? If by relativism one means a cast of mind that renders you unable to prefer your own convictions to those of your adversary, then relativism could hardly end because it never began. Our convictions are by definition preferred; that's what makes them *our* convictions. Relativizing them is neither an option nor a danger.

But if by relativism one means the practice of putting yourself in your adversary's shoes, not in order to wear them as your own but in order to have some understanding (far short of approval) of why someone else might want to wear them, then relativism will not and should not end, because it is simply another name for serious thought.

#### DISCUSSION OF LEO AND FISH PART I: SOME THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

We begin with the most controversial element of our discussion: our belief that Fish's argument is the stronger one and that our grounds for preferring it are not just ideological but professional and technical as well. The first part of this confession is probably less surprising to most than the second part of it. Many readers of this book will find Leo's argument less persuasive, just as many readers of, say, the conservative newspaper *The Washington Times* would probably find Fish's argument less persuasive. The basis for this division is congruent with the different assumptions about argument held by our two authors. Leo would surely claim that our readers have misread his essay and been hoodwinked by Fish because they—that is to say “you”—are in thrall to “moral relativism.” By the same token, Leo would doubtless find the readers of *The Washington Times* a more perspicacious lot largely because they have somehow managed to elude indoctrination by a “therapeutic culture” overseen by the intellectual elite—that is, once again, “you.” That is to say, for Leo, the differences between our

two hypothetical readings are not so much differences in *interpretation* as they are differences in *meaning*. Competent, uncorrupted readers will find the correct meaning in each of the texts, incompetent, corrupted readers will not. There is no room in Leo's world for Fish's "rival interpretations" of texts or events because in the end there is only one correct reading.

Fish, meanwhile, would find the differences in the two readings unremarkable, and certainly no matter for scandal. While he would be prepared to argue against a reading of the two essays that deems his argument inferior to Leo's—indeed one imagines he would be greatly exercised by such a judgment—he would not interpret an unwillingness to acknowledge the superiority of his position as a sign of moral corruption. The *Washington Times* readers simply constitute a community of readers who share different beliefs and assign different meanings to terms like truth and justice than would an audience of Fish-sympathizers. He would be prepared to present arguments showing why they are wrong and he is right—in effect he does so in his essay—but he would accept at the outset that in his arguments he could not appeal to any set of universal standards adhered to by both his supporters and Leo's supporters that would underwrite his conclusions and put paid to Leo's in the eyes of all parties to the dispute. (Because Fish sees the boundaries between communities as far less permeable than we do, he is less optimistic about the prospects for inter-community dialogue than we are.) Leo, meanwhile, assumes that such universals, known to all and perversely ignored by some, do exist, though he is careful not to name them or elaborate on their entailments. Leo's absolutes to-be-named-later, like religious deities whose names are never to be spoken, are more impressive in absentia than in the flesh.

Our own view inclines us less toward Leo and more toward Fish for several reasons. For one thing, Leo's assumptions about the nature of truth and meaning are incompatible with a number of assumptions shared by most members our own community. The most important of those assumptions is the belief that argument has heuristic power, that through the dialogues we carry on with ourselves or with other people, doing what Aristotle called "proving opposites," we do not just defend truth and vanquish error, we actually modify accepted truths and discover new ones. Implicit in this view is the belief that truth cannot be, as Leo appears to assume it is, independent of human judgment or the language we use in forming those judgments. If truth truly is absolute,

independent of us and incorrigible by us, and if language is merely a transparent medium of expression not what Burke calls a “terministic screen” that shapes what it reveals, rhetoric is a trivial business deserving of the sort of scorn that the early absolutist Plato heaped on the first of our breed, the Sophists.

While our position here, a position consistent with if not identical to that held by most members of our community, may look suspiciously like the position Leo characterizes as “moral relativism,” we do not believe it is. Describing us or Fish as moral relativists is more a caricature of our position than a representation of same. Just because we accept the inevitability of multiple positions on any given issue of significance is not to say we accept—like Leo’s hapless student who “dislikes” Nazis but cannot bring himself to denounce them—the moral or cognitive equivalence of all positions on an issue. As rhetoricians we cannot claim membership in the “I’m Ok, You’re OK,” school of human relations; indeed if such a view prevailed, rhetoricians would be out of work. Rhetoric and argument have no place in either of the two worlds that for Leo represent the sum of all possibilities: his world of One Truth, or the world he imagines us inhabiting where there are countless equivalent truths. In the world of One Truth, rhetoric and argument might serve either to propagandize for the one true faith or to seduce people away from that faith, but it could have no legitimate effect on the truths that form the faith’s foundation. In a world of multiple equivalent truths, not only would we be powerless to alter each other’s position, there would be no reason to try absent good reasons to prefer one position over another.

Our position, thus, is neither absolutist nor relativist; we prefer to think of it as “realist” in the sense that Kenneth Burke uses that term. In a realist world, rhetoric and argument are essential activities precisely because it is a world that recognizes the significant, though not limitless, role that human agency plays in resolving the world’s problems and the important part that language plays in enabling human agency to realize its ends. In particular, language has the realistic capacity to “induce cooperation” among human beings even while it lacks the magical power to “induce motion in things” (*Grammar* 42). While Burke recognizes the enormous power of language to effect change, his realism also requires belief in a world independent of language’s shaping power. Our knowledge of this extra-verbal realm comes to us negatively, through the power of things, events and bodies to resist our

assertions and claims and thwart our designs. This power of “recalcitrance” in the world encourages an attitude of humility like that which Burke finds in the pragmatist William James, whom he refers to admiringly as “an expert in the *comparative degree* of adjectives of value.” James rejected “absolutism (which is really the *superlative*, identifying the One as the Best)” and preferred to think “in terms of *more* rather *all*. . . . To optimism or pessimism, he preferred ‘meliorism’” (*Attitudes* 12). While absolutists like Leo sometimes allow the perfect to become the enemy of the good, deeming anything less than *all* insufficient and corrupt, realists look to make things better by degree by inducing cooperation among people and working *toward* collectively defined ends that are themselves constantly being redefined. In such a world, rhetoric and the arts of persuasion are not trifling tools for distracting the masses, they are “equipment for living.”

In the world we describe, justice and truth are important, albeit lower case, terms in our vocabulary. What the words mean to a given group of people at one moment in time may not be precisely the same as the meaning they possess at a different time under different circumstances, or to a different group of people in the same time and place. But every group in every circumstance imagines itself pursuing justice and truth. Or as Fish puts it more strikingly: “No one declares himself to be an apostle of injustice,” even those whose methods may strike us as heinous. Different groups may use different means to arrive at different meanings for important terms like truth and justice, but these differences are not “subjective” any more than Leo’s meanings are “objective.” Only Leo’s failure to articulate a specific meaning for his notion of truth can preserve its aura of universality. Leo’s community, like Fish’s, has worked out a definition of the term that is consistent with the principles of that community. But unlike Fish, Leo and the members of his community appear to disown the process that produced their version of truth in the first place. Upon arrival in the realm of Absolutes, they pull up their ladders after them and denounce ladder-users. Like the Platonic world of Pure Forms, Leo’s Truth appears to exist apart from the world, unaffected by the interactions of mortals. Exceptional souls may occasionally glimpse an essence amid the accidents of life, and after experiencing such epiphanies may attempt to share them with others, but beyond this, humans have no role in constructing truth. The difference between the two positions has been neatly captured by philosopher Richard Rorty:

If we see knowing not as having an essence, to be described by scientists or philosophers, but rather as a right, by our current standards, to believe, then we are well on the way to seeing *conversation* as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood. Our focus shifts from the relation between human beings and the objects of their inquiry to the relation between alternative standards of justification, and from there to the actual changes in those standards which make up intellectual history. (*Philosophy* 389-90)

In Rorty's terms, the debate between Leo and Fish may be framed as a debate between those who represent knowledge as an accurate description of essences versus those who understand it as "a right by our current standards to believe." Those who subscribe to the first position relegate rhetoric and persuasion to a decidedly secondary status. The discovery of knowledge is to be left to scientists and philosophers expert in "the relation between human beings and the objects of their inquiry." Those who subscribe to the second position place rhetoric and persuasion at the center of knowledge-making. Through "conversation" they work out "the relation between alternative standards of justification." Which is, more or less, what rhetoricians have been doing for more than two millennia.

## DISCUSSION OF LEO AND FISH PART II: GETTING FROM DUALITY TO COMMITMENT

In this second part of our discussion of the Fish and Leo essays, we want to return our focus to the classroom and how as teachers we might use these essays to work out a tentative definition of argument for ourselves and apply the lessons of the debate to our teaching. From a teaching perspective, what is especially interesting about Leo's argument is how neatly his position and the position he assigns his opposition mimic the mindsets of two problematic groups of students we encounter frequently in our classes. Borrowing from William Perry's schema of cognitive and moral development, we term these two positions "duality and multiplicity." They represent two of the earliest stages in Perry's developmental schema and pose markedly different challenges in the classroom. A student in duality assumes there are

clear cut right and wrong answers to every question and that the job of the teacher is to present those answers clearly and then test students on their recall of the correct answer. Problems arise when: a) we challenge them to come up with their own answers and/or, b) they believe we are offering them answers that conflict with answers they have previously assimilated from other authorities. If we are doing our jobs, we will do both of these things, which in turn will cause them either to retreat into their old truisms or to risk placing their faith—religious, political, or ideological—into doubt. Students in duality may well see us as threats to their very identity, as shadowy an unknowable as Leo’s terrorists in our attempts to unsettle their world view. It is important, thus, to keep in mind how high the stakes and great the risks may be for such students when we ask them to “prove opposites” and truly listen to opposing arguments.

Those in multiplicity, meanwhile, adopt a *laissez faire*, live-and-let-live approach to intellectual differences very much like the one Leo attributes to “multiculturalists.” Like those in duality, they too subvert the dialectic process, but by different means. Those in duality subvert the dialectic process by pronouncing One True Thesis and dismissing all alternatives as pretenders. Those in multiplicity, meanwhile, pronounce all alternative theses equally valid and imagine them leading parallel existences that never intersect. In neither case can a thesis engage an antithesis to produce any sort of synthesis. Those in multiplicity are open to new ideas, but they are incapable of critically engaging those ideas, of choosing from among those ideas the ones that make best sense in a given set of circumstances, or of combining elements of various ideas to construct a better one. Insofar as college is a place where students forsake duality for multiplicity—though few students appear to enter college deep in the throes of duality—Leo is half right in claiming that colleges encourage students to adopt something like “fuzzy ethics” as a world view. Probably at one time or another, most college students—including some of us—have embraced the sort of flaccid tolerance of alien ideas that Leo sneeringly refers to as “moral relativism,” as an alternative to the more toxic forms of intellectual intolerance bred by dualism. But contrary to Leo, most of us see our task as moving students beyond both stages toward a stage of higher order moral reasoning that embraces complexity and contrariety without lapsing into indifference.

Perry calls this ultimate stage of development “commitment in relativism.” It is a position not unlike the one that Stanley Fish represents in “Condemnation without Absolutes.” While it remains an ideal more than a realistic possibility for most people, it is a worthwhile aspiration for teachers of argument to hold out for their students. Those who achieve commitment in relativism acknowledge the impossibility of perfect certitude balanced by their need to act on imperfect knowledge. They are at once strongly committed to their principles and aware that no set of principles is infallible or incorrigible. Knowledge, they have come to understand, is a never-ending process not an ultimate possession, and the price one pays for that knowledge is doubt and self-questioning. Having weaned themselves from absolutes, having accepted the necessity of choosing the best from among imperfect alternatives and having taken responsibility for those choices by advancing them in the world, those committed in relativism are perfectly capable of not only condemning positions hostile to their own, but of putting themselves in the shoes of their adversaries and achieving some level of identification with them.

Of course there is no readily apparent way of getting students who are mired in relativism (where most entry-level college students find themselves according to Perry) all the way to commitments in relativism in a single class. Few students will get close to this last stage by the conclusion of their college careers. But so long as the goal is clear, and our methods of teaching and our manner of interacting with our students are congruent with that goal, we have a better chance of nudging students along toward something more satisfying to them and to us than if we operate in a vacuum.<sup>1</sup> If we prefer Fish’s argument to Leo’s, so long as our preferences are grounded in the imperatives of our discipline and of our pedagogical model, we should feel free to share that preference with our students along with the reasons for our preference.

### LEO AND FISH PART III: THE ELEMENTS OF ARGUMENT

One of the first challenges we face when introducing our notion of argument to students is dispelling the faulty assumptions about argument they bring with them into our classrooms. They have, after all, acquired their own notions of argument long before they began formal study of the matter. They have seen arguments conducted in their

homes and schools, read about them in books and newspapers, viewed them on television, listened to them on radio and watched them in movies countless times by the time they walk into classrooms where we presume to teach them how to write arguments. Given the random way in which students acquire early knowledge of argument, it is not surprising that they may need to be “untaught” some assumptions before the teaching can begin. In the case of the Leo-Fish essays, the first thing that may strike students as odd is the fact that the two essays do not speak directly to each other in a clash of ideas. While the Leo and Fish essays appeared on the same day, October 15, 2001, dealt with the same phenomenon, and arrive at strikingly different conclusions via strikingly different routes, they appear to have been written in ignorance of each other. Neither offers a point-by-point refutation of the other, and when they contradict each other, it is more a case of a random intersection of contrary ideas than an intentional posing of opposites.

When we claim that most important arguments of the day are carried on in a similarly indirect fashion, many students are, not surprisingly, puzzled. Their personal experience with argument is likely to incline them toward a “debaters’ model” of argument, as a direct contest of opposing ideas carried out between two (or a few) people bent on winning. One attends to such arguments for their entertainment value—the possibility that they might end violently gives them an edge—or to figure out on which side one might throw in one’s lot. One would neither engage in nor attend to such arguments—or the faux versions of same featured on TV news shows and talk radio—in order to evaluate the arguments carefully, winnow out the least persuasive ones, and fashion new arguments from opposing arguments. The dominant model of argument is not, in brief, a dialectical model so much as it is a zero-sum game model, veering toward a contact sport, that does not invite active participation of those who attend to it or a search for higher truths of those who engage in it.<sup>2</sup>

Our preferred model of argument elevates the search for better ideas over what Burke calls “advantage-seeking.” But like Burke, we acknowledge that at least some element of advantage-seeking is to be found in every argument, no matter how civil the arguers’ tone, no matter how accommodating they may be of opposing views. No one argues *purely* to discover better ideas, and it is important early in the semester when weaning students from their overly agonistic models of



argument, not to overstate the high-mindedness of our own enterprise and thereby to set them up for further disillusionment. Argument, after all, typically involves some investment of one's ego and one's heart as well as one's mind and one's judgment. Most of us undertake the risks of argument—the risk of alienating people, of arousing opposition, of missing the point and having that fact pointed out, not always kindly, in a public setting—only if our fondest beliefs or self-interests are at stake. Even the most selfless of arguers wishes, if not to win an argument, to at least “get it right.” To lose an argument, or even to have one's argument called into question, may well require one to go back and reexamine beliefs that anchor one's identity. So argument is risky, in part because we are seeking advantage for our interests and beliefs or are striving to prevent others from winning an advantage for their interests and beliefs. But that said, most of us—even, or perhaps especially, terrorists—truly believe that in serving our interests larger interests are served and that in forwarding our beliefs we are working toward truth and justice for others. To be sure, all of us find ourselves sometimes serving as apostles of, if not injustice, ideas that are, at best, the least unjust of a bad lot. But there is a certain nobility in even this pursuit and students should be reminded of this fact early in the semester.

What provokes the arguments of Fish and Leo is an event, 9/11, that caused many Americans to alter their perceptions of and assumptions about the world. Until September 11, 2001, no foreign power had managed to invade the country or kill significant numbers of American citizens on American soil in centuries. After 9/11, our sense of invulnerability and of our role in the world required reexamination while our beliefs about the rest of the world's attitude toward us had to be radically revised. In sum, the events of 9/11 represent a classic instance of what in rhetoric is referred to as an “exigence.” According to Lloyd Bitzer, who coined the term forty years ago as part of his revisionist look at the rhetorical situation, “Any exigence is an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (304). An exigence cannot be, in the language of debate, an “inherent” problem, some unchangeable aspect of the human condition, say, that defies solution; and it cannot be a problem that can be solved directly by extra-verbal means. “An exigence is rhetorical when it is capable of positive modification and when positive modification requires dis-

course or can be assisted by discourse” (304). The terrorist of attack of 9/11 demanded “discourse” of every one of us, whether we mulled over our responses in silent soliloquies or submitted them aloud or in print for public scrutiny. What did we make of the attack? How should we respond, as a nation and as individuals? Most Americans tried to articulate their feelings about the attack and to find some way of forming an ethical judgment of it. We often looked to trusted pundits like Leo, and academics like Fish who shared their thoughts in the media, to help us find expression for thoughts that eluded us and ideals that might guide us.

Both Fish and Leo share the requisite sense of urgency about what needs to be done in response to the exigence. For Leo, the lesson of 9/11 is that time has come to begin pushing the “multicultural-therapeutic left” away from its sloppy relativism and to offer a united, presumably “monocultural,” front in opposition to the terrorist threat. It is a line of thinking that appears to anticipate some lines of thought pursued subsequently by our political leadership: the world changed on 9/11 calling for an overhaul of our political priorities and our value system (or a return to our core values), including the sacrifice of some liberties in exchange for better security; our enemy is “terrorism” or some variation thereof (“Islamic fascism,” “international terrorist movement” “Muslim extremists”) that is monolithic, shadowy, and nihilistic in nature; in opposing this enemy we must be uncompromising and go it alone if other members of the international community do not share our vision. By the same token, Fish’s essay appears to anticipate many of the arguments put forth by eventual critics of the Iraq war, after Iraq became in effect a testing ground for ideas very much like those supported by Leo. What resulted is a textbook example of what has happened throughout history when absolutist ideas are tested on reality. The monolithic model of evil ran afoul of the heterogeneous nature of a deeply divided society. While terrorist groups did enter the fray after the American occupation, most of the violence after 2003 was sectarian violence, inflicted by specific groups, each “with a full roster of grievances, goals and strategies” seeking advantage for their interests.

One of the interesting questions raised by the notion of exigence is the degree to which the “defect” or “obstacle” it names is in the world versus in the eye of the beholder. Our own “realist” reading of the two essays would place exigence in both places. That is, Fish and Leo’s essays are at once responses to an event in the world independent of the

power of language to change or reverse it, and continuations of the two writers' lifelong working out of their belief systems. While Leo may imply that 9/11 changed the world, the world he describes in the wake of 9/11 is a world that has much in common with the dystopia he has been decrying for many years, and his prescription for dealing with the post-9/11 world is consistent with proposals for reform he has been making since the 1960s.

Likewise Fish's liberal response (though Fish typically eludes labels like liberal/conservative, his position on this particular issue lines up with the position that many liberals ultimately took on the issue) to the exigence of 9/11 echoes ideas that he has been articulating for over thirty years in the realms of literary and legal theory. His insistence that we attend to the particulars of our enemies' complaints in order to understand their motivations and what we are up against is of a piece with his insistence that we attend to the details of texts and work out their meaning in the context of their authors' intentions. His contention that in justifying our responses to 9/11 we can only appeal to those contingent truths that we hold to in common with other members of a community who shares our beliefs—"the record of aspiration and accomplishment that makes up our collective understanding of what we live for"—is of a piece with his belief in communities of readers who work out standards for meaning and interpretation among themselves.

Our interest in connecting Leo and Fish's arguments about 9/11 to their larger world view goes beyond any interest we might have in correctly labeling their political positions. Understanding the source of their claims is, we would argue, key to understanding the tone the two writers take in expressing those claims. Establishing a reasonably clear way of talking about matters of tone early on in an argument course is critical. It is critical because of the difficulties so many students face in finding an appropriate voice in their arguments. Part of this difficulty can be traced back to the different stages of development students occupy when they arrive in our classes. Students leaning toward dualism, for example, may adopt an overly aggressive tone in their arguments. (While few full-fledged dualists show up on day one in our classes, it is a position to which some, particularly first year college students, retreat when they feel threatened intellectually.) Remember, much is at stake for a dualist placed in the position of justifying ideas that they assume should require no justification. One symptom of this anxiety

will be a tone of aggressive, if unearned, certitude. Claims, no matter how shaky, will be delivered with little support, no qualification and absolute conviction. Controversial categorical judgments, particularly moral judgments, will be handed down as if by fiat. Opposing arguments will be dismissed out of hand no matter how strong they may appear to a third party. Any reader not in complete agreement with the author of such an argument may well feel more bullied than persuaded.

Their counterparts in multiplicity, meanwhile, tend also to see their claims and judgments as self-evident, not because they are the One True Thing but because, hey, everyone gets to believe whatever they want. The tone favored by those in multiplicity will be considerably less belligerent than the tone adopted by their peers in dualism. They are not threatened by disagreement—after all, people inevitably see things differently; an argument for them is just a way to let people know “where they are coming from.” In truth, their claims are often difficult to disagree with. The more abstract the position they take, after all, the more difficult it is to dispute their basic premise that there is no real need to discriminate among positions. If the dualist tends toward an excessively belligerent tone, the multiplist tends toward an excessively bland one.

By way of helping students recognize the intellectual origins of tone and the limitations they face if they are unable to moderate their tone, it is helpful to analyze matters of tone in essays like those of Fish and Leo. Because these writers are considerably more sophisticated than most student writers, their tonal differences, though significant, are less stark than those we see in our classes. Underlying differences in tone between Fish and Leo’s essays are differences in outlook that we’ve already touched on. In particular, Fish’s tone can be traced back to his belief that truth must be rediscovered and renegotiated as contexts change, and that truth consists not of a correspondence between one’s vocabulary and a state of affairs in the world, but of the most persuasive justification among competing versions of the truth. Leo’s tone, meanwhile derives from his belief that there is one universal truth that is not altered by circumstances. Those who think straight, like Leo, possess absolute truth and good. Those, like the bishops, who think sloppily obscure our vision of truth and good and allow error and evil into the world. At the risk of overstating those differences, we would describe Fish’s tone as being closer to that of a mentor or

guide, someone concerned simultaneously to clear up confusions and to complicate his readers' understanding of things. It is an asymmetrical relationship to be sure, Fish is the teacher and we are his pupils, but insofar as he seems to believe we are capable of following a complex line of reasoning, it is not condescending. Leo's tone, meanwhile seems closer to that of a gadfly or scold, brisk and judgmental. His concern is to clarify matters by simplifying them in order to facilitate sound moral judgment.

Leo's tone is established in early his first sentence when, before telling us what the bishops' statement actually says, he pronounces it "disgraceful;" and then, after offering two snippets from the statement, he proceeds to tell his readers what the bishops *really* mean, "[i]n plain English," before concluding that it is "a moral mess." Moral and linguistic clarity are of a piece for Leo. He gives short shrift, thus, to those who natter on about "root causes" and understanding acts "in context." To set the record straight, he offers a "plain English" translation of this morally and linguistically sloppy talk, avowing that what the bishops really mean to say is that "reckless and imperial America brought the attacks on itself." Throughout his critique, Leo offers scant evidence in support of his generalizations and few details that might help his audience identify the multiculturalists, moral relativists, and denizens of therapeutic culture in their midst. A single quote from "one upstate New York student" supports a broad generalization about lamentable educational practices common throughout American higher education, while the bishops' statement is presented as "a minor example of what could be a major problem"—the inability of moral leaders "to say plainly that evil exists."

If Leo's characterization of the bishops' statement is in fact accurate and fair-minded, the tonal aspects of his essay might be attributed more to legitimate moral outrage than to habits of mind congruent with his belief system. But even one sympathetic to Leo's view would have problems squaring his summary of the bishops' statement with the full text of that statement. It begins in fact by announcing "a new solidarity with those in other parts of the world for whom the evil forces of terrorism are a continuing fear and reality" (Bishops). To be sure Leo and the bishops do not appear to define evil in the same way, nor do the bishops seem content to let the epithet "evil" serve as their full explanation of the motivation for the terrorists' act. But they do

“say plainly that evil exists” and that terrorist acts like 9/11 qualify as evil acts.

Our concern here is not to debunk Leo’s critique of the bishops. Our concern is to emphasize the extent to which the tone of Leo’s essay derives not from an “objective” awareness of a world independent of his perceptions of it, so much as it derives from the belief system through which he perceives that world. While Leo would doubtless find such a contention scandalous, a relativist canard, Fish would not. The differences in tone between the two writers, we would argue, is not a function of one being less objective than the other, but of one being more aware than the other that total objectivity is a will-o-the-wisp. In lieu of absolute truth and objectivity, Fish embraces something on the order of intersubjectivity. We are, in his view, united by “particular lived values” and share “the record of aspiration and accomplishment that makes up our collective understanding of what we live for.” Fish’s pragmatic view of truth as fallible and particular is reflected in his tone, a tone that rivals Leo’s in its briskness but is less judgmental, more cautious about the naming of things. At the heart of his essay, in fact, lies his rejection of reductive labeling, his concern to complicate soundbite versions of postmodernism, of relativism, and of terrorism. While Fish says he finds the reporter’s question about “the end of postmodern relativism” that begins his essay “bizarre,” he goes on to offer a thoughtful response to it, attributing the reporter’s misunderstanding of the term not to some moral lapse, but to the fact that it is part of “a rarefied form of academic talk” to which the reporter is not normally privy.

In announcing our own preference for Fish’s style, we are of course mostly reaffirming our general sympathy with his world view. But that preference in turn, is not merely “subjective” in the way that someone like Leo would use that term. Our sympathies with Fish’s point of view and his manner of expression are professional as well as personal. The ideas that he expresses and the way he expresses them are in greater harmony with our disciplinary imperatives than are Leo’s ideas and the manner of expression that his ideas give rise to. Fish’s thoughts and tone are, in our view, more likely to result in better thinking about the issue at hand than are Leo’s thoughts and tone. Whether one argument fares better than the other in the marketplace of ideas is another matter altogether. Such judgments are harder to make and more audience-specific than the judgment about the effects of the arguments on

understanding of the issues. In order to better understand this complex, often misunderstood relationship between arguments that win the day with audiences and arguments that lead audiences to reexamine issues we turn now to a continuum of argument practices and the metric used to arrange arguments along that continuum.

*Argument and “the purification of war”*

The subheading for this section is taken from the Latin epigraph to Burke’s *A Grammar of Motives*—“*Ad bellum purificandum*.” It is at once a most modest sentiment—one would, after all, sooner see war ended altogether—and a most ambitious one—as war grows exponentially more savage in the new century, we long for anything that might mitigate its gruesome effects. It’s also an epigraph that could serve to introduce Burke’s entire oeuvre, as it captures neatly the primary goal of rhetoric as he imagines it—the transformation of destructive urges into creative and cooperative acts, enmity into identification, war into argument. As we noted earlier, Burke is enough of a realist to hold that this transformation can never be complete—in every argument there will remain a residual element of aggression and advantage-seeking no matter how noble the cause in whose name the argument is made. But Burke is also enough of an idealist to believe that interests other than those of the arguer are always served by argument. The only case in which the needs and beliefs of an audience may be ignored is when the arguer is confident that their cooperation will be secured by force if their argument fails and they deign to argue for pretty much the same reasons that dictators hold elections. Joseph Heller neatly captures the spirit of “might makes right” disguised as argument, a hegemonic practice all too familiar to twenty-first century audiences, in an exchange from the novel *Catch-22*. The exchange features the novel’s protagonist, Yossarian, confronting his nemesis, Milo Minderbinder, after Milo has pretended to offer an Italian thief some dates for a bedsheet and then refused to hand over the dates after the thief has given him his bedsheet.

“Why didn’t you just hit him over the head and take the bedsheet away from him?” Yossarian asked.

Pressing his lips together with dignity, Milo shook his head. “that would have been most unjust,” he scolded firmly. “Force is wrong and two wrongs never make a right. It was much better my way. When

I held the dates out to him and reached for the bed-sheet, he probably thought I was offering a trade.”

“What were you doing?”

“Actually, I was offering to trade, but since he doesn’t understand English, I can always deny it.”

“Suppose he gets angry and wants the dates?”

“Why, We’ll just hit him over the head and take them away from him,” Milo answered without hesitation. (68)

This then is what argument looks like at the far left end of the continuum where force looms menacingly behind every persuasive gambit. What sorts of argument practices does one find at this end of the continuum? Propaganda and advertising come immediately to mind. Parental arguments that end with that time-honored phrase that simultaneously announces victory and admits defeat—“Because I said so!”—surely falls somewhere toward the left end of things. Then as one moves to the right toward more “purified” forms of combat, one encounters the practice of law, labor negotiation and education. Finally, at the furthest remove from might makes right, we have those purest of persuasive practices that seem not to be persuasive at all; the example Burke uses is that of writing a book. We will take a closer look at the characteristics of these different practices shortly, but before we do, we need to articulate the principle used to distinguish among these various forms of persuasion, a principle that Burke refers to variously as “standoffishness” or “self interference.”

To understand this principle it is helpful to keep in mind one of Burke’s favorite metaphors for responsible persuasion, the practice of courtship, which is itself a “purified” version of considerably less seemly practices. If courtship reigns at the far right end of the continuum, one would expect to find the persuasive equivalent to something like sexual harassment at the left end of the continuum. Sexual harassment is a predatory relationship based on asymmetry whereby one party uses their power over the other to coerce affection. In the middle, the arts of seduction come into play, as the seducer pretends to be whatever their prey wishes them to be and tells their prey whatever they wish to hear in order to achieve their own gratification. At the right end of the continuum, meanwhile, a couple engages in courtship, a respectful relationship based on mutuality whose ends inevitably include sex along with a great many other aspirations. To be sure, each of the people



in a courtship relationship will do what they can to make themselves desirable to the other person, to persuade them of their viability as a partner. Certainly sexual attraction will play a role in the relationship. But each is willing for the time being to delay gratification in the name of increasing their sense of identification with the other person, overcoming the estrangements of class, gender, nationality, religion or whatever categories of difference we might use to sort out the human race. Whereas in the earlier cases relationships were little more than a means to the end of sexual gratification by one of the two parties (in Martin Buber's formulation, a classic "I-it" relationship), the courtship relationship is an end in itself ("I-Thou") for both partners. If one were to extend the courtship metaphor beyond the left end of the continuum, one would find oneself in the murky realm of rape and sexual assault, while off the right end of the continuum, one would find oneself in the luminous realm of celibacy, as when a nun declares herself a bride of Christ. All practices that fall along the continuum, meanwhile, are some combination of self-interest and physical desire, and a willingness to interfere with one's natural urges in the name of other ends.

To return now to actual persuasive practices as they fall along the self-interference continuum, we begin with propaganda and advertising. These practices are, Burke maintains, very much "addressed" insofar as they are obsessively focused on audience. It is an asymmetric relationship with the advertiser or propagandist having at least some control, in the case of some propagandists, a virtual monopoly, over their audience's access to information and understanding. While both propagandists and advertisers are quick in their public pronouncements to lavish praise on their audiences, particularly their intelligence, their own advice to each other about how to win over audiences manifests scant regard for the people they are pitching, particularly for their intelligence. Both groups spend a lot of time and extraordinary amounts of money exploring the psyches and emotional soft spots of their audiences. No other group among those who practice the arts of persuasion comes close to spending as much time as advertisers and propagandists figuring out ways to exploit their audience's vulnerabilities. Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, for example, is both a classic of propaganda theory and a thoroughgoing analysis of audience psychology. Noting Hitler's skill at manipulation of his audience, Burke calls attention to the very calculated way "he gauges resistances and opportunities with

the ‘rationality’ of a skilled advertising man planning a new sales campaign. Politics, he says, must be sold like soap—and soap is not sold in a trance” (*Philosophy of Literary Form* 216). Contemporary advertisers, meanwhile, are relentless in the pursuit of connections between demographic and psychographic information—there are sixty-four distinct groups of consumers arranged in a psychographic grid used by advertisers—and consumer buying habits. While old style behaviorist theories are out of favor with most academic psychologists these days, advertisers and propagandists are still in the business of manipulating stimuli to get the desired response. Like engineers who still rely on the old Newtonian paradigm to build bridges and skyscrapers, the propagandists and behaviorists seem to find that their outmoded mechanistic paradigm works just fine when it comes to selling soap and politics.

While all propaganda is by definition predatory in ways suggested above—we will consider recent uses of propaganda more extensively later in the book—advertising embraces a wider range of practices, some of which are fairly benign. Advertising is, for example, used to promote charitable contributions as well as soap. Indeed, within every category of persuasive practices one will find a range of practices that are to varying degrees advantage-seeking on the one hand or “stand-offish” on the other. Some advertisements may do little more than feature positive references to their product by disinterested third parties. At times, even propaganda may serve an altruistic public policy goal; and instead of telling “the Big Lie” as Goebbels famously recommends, it may simply withhold information that would complicate its argument. But taken as a whole, these practices do not promote self interference in any serious way. Only to the extent that one alters one’s script in recognition that a different script is more likely to find favor with one’s audience does one interfere with one’s impulses. But this is more a matter of subordinating one form of gratification to another; in the end, one’s audience is always a means to one’s ends.

As one moves toward the center of the continuum, legal persuasive practices serve as our model. While there are many who would place lawyers’ arts farther to the left on our continuum, legal argument is considerably more constrained in its ability to seduce or dupe its audience than are propaganda and advertising. There is, moreover, considerably more parity between arguer and audience in the legal arena than there is in the political and consumer arenas. Withholding infor-

mation, for example, which might be applauded as part of a virtuoso campaign to spin things in the realms of politics and advertising, can be a punishable offense in the realm of the law. Because of the adversarial nature of the legal system, the various lapses in one's arguments are vulnerable to disclosure and exploitation. (Our political system is also nominally adversarial, but there are few rules or judges to control political discourse, and the public tolerance for fallacious reasoning and even outright mendacity does little to encourage self interference among politicians.) The law offers all sorts of formal constraints on the desire of lawyers to manipulate their audience. The closest lawyers can come to the use of demographic and psychographic information to gain some advantage for their point of view is restricted to the use of jury consultants who use elaborate schemes to select sympathetic juries. For all its flaws, legal reasoning imposes various forms of interference on participants in the legal system all the way to the top of the system where Supreme Court Justices hope to write opinions for posterity.

Burke uses the curious metaphor of writing a book to explain his "purest" form of persuasion, the equivalent of a great courtship. Here, the principle of self-interference is neither imposed by concerns about audience nor by rules, conventions and fears of punishment or disclosure. The restraint required of pure persuasion is entirely self-imposed. An author's self-interference is in response to the demands of book he is creating, "demands conditioned by the parts already written, so that the book becomes to an extent something not foreseen by its author, and requires him to interfere with his original intentions" (*Rhetoric* 269). This interference is not so much ethical as aesthetic, and the purity of pure persuasion is the formal purity of "art for art's sake" more than it is the moral purity of saintliness. That said, Burke attributes to pure persuasion "a high ethical value" (271) insofar as it imposes a different order of obligations on those who experience it, something like "truth for truth's sake." The purest forms of argument are dialectic in nature, a working out of ideas that have a momentum and integrity of their own, heedless of the needs and desires of an audience. Just as an art for art's sake movement often produces art that strikes its audience as indifferent or hostile to its expectations, argument at the far right end of the continuum may enjoy scant success in the marketplace. But like the best works that emerge from an art for art's sake movement, purely persuasive arguments may eventually enjoy a belated acceptance

by audiences, in part because they have changed the way people think about the issue at hand.

In the end, of course, pure persuasion of this sort is not a goal for students of argument so much as it is a tendency within argument, a counter-balance to opposing tendencies toward an exclusive—and all too often predatory—focus on audience. In introducing students to the concept of pure persuasion, we like to remind them of an alternate meaning of the term argument—the “gist” or “essence” of an extended piece of discourse. Looking for the argument, the central point, of any piece of discourse is a habit of mind common to all critical readers. The more complex the piece of discourse we are reading, the more likely it is that the argument we tease out of the prose will be the product of opposing ideas, not an unambiguous thesis or major claim always appearing—where so many of our students have been taught to look—in the last sentence of the first paragraph. A gist is a synthesis of disparate ideas and a joint product of the reader/viewer/listener’s interpretive powers and the properties of the discourse they are interpreting. It is not what remains after one idea trumps another, a trophy or laurel leaf that goes to the victor, it is a creative act, a rhetorical version of the ontologist’s essence. In the end, it is why we teach argument: To complicate our students’ thinking about the world, to help them learn how to withhold judgment (to cultivate the art of “standoffishness”) of their own ideas as well as others,’ long enough to test them against opposing ideas and to respect what emerges from that combination.

### WHY STUDENTS NEED ARGUMENT

Up to this point, we have offered a definition of argument congruent with our disciplinary imperatives and personal beliefs. In this next section we shift our focus to what students might hope to get out of a writing course concentrating on argument. What unique role does the study of argument serve in the curriculum and in their lives? As we design our courses and our assignments we need to keep that role in mind and to shape our pedagogy around it. In what follows, we will focus on three particularly crucial functions of argument: as a vehicle for teaching the most readily transferable set of skills one might learn in a writing course; as a vehicle for constructing and defending identity; and as a vehicle for ethical reasoning.

## ARGUMENT AND CRITICAL LITERACY

While there is no single name for the highly mobile cluster of skills students might learn in a writing course focused on argument, we will refer to them here as “critical literacy.” Critical literacy remains a somewhat amorphous concept, and for reasons we will soon cite, a somewhat controversial one. We will try to stipulate a definition of the term that clarifies our usage of it and minimizes some of its more controversial aspects. In setting out to define critical literacy it seems fair to say that we know more about what it is not than we do about what it is. What it most assuredly is not is whatever was being done in the name of the current-traditional writing curriculum with its emphasis on pre-fabricated forms and dumb readers. The current-traditional curriculum not only did not encourage students to think *outside* the box, it actively encouraged them to think of everything *as* a box, even the inherently chaotic, idiosyncratic business of writing. Its apparent goal was literacy in its older sense of minimal competency, albeit ratcheted up to the college level. It did not encourage personal engagement or reflection. It certainly did not offer students much in the way of skills and understandings that might travel with them elsewhere in the curriculum. Few philosophy courses in the university required “process” papers and fewer sociology courses stressed the “description” paper. (Some in our profession in fact favor the abolition of first year writing requirements precisely because they believe that the current-traditional model or some variant thereof remains the dominant model of writing in the profession. If one agrees that they are right about the currency of that model, they have a point.)

Perhaps the key distinguishing characteristic of critical literacy as we understand that term and the one that most clearly distinguishes it from its older, minimalist version, is its emphasis on reflective knowledge, the capacity Coleridge referred to as “knowing your knowledge” versus merely possessing it. In contrast to the demands placed on students writing a sound process paper, consider the challenges facing students setting out to construct a sound argument. They must be able to imagine counter-arguments, anticipate audience response, particularly skepticism and ignorance, and move deftly between claims of truth, reasons that warrant those claims, and evidence that supports the reasons. They must assess the adequacy of the support for their claim and qualify it accordingly. They must learn how to evaluate evidence

and how to fairly summarize and question authorities with differing points of view. Perhaps most importantly, students must be prepared to risk their beliefs and assumptions about the world. It is not possible in the arena of argument simply to “plug [in a formula] and chug [out an answer].” Students have to understand issues in the context of an ongoing conversation about those issues, accepting at the outset that, as Stanley Fish suggests above, not all parties to that conversation will accept their beliefs and assumptions at face value.

In the interest of further clarifying critical literacy it might be helpful to contrast it to yet another approach to the teaching of composition that succeeds the current-traditional model. The critical thinking movement in composition was led by people like psychologist Dick Hayes and composition theorist Linda Flower who teamed up to show how problem solving methods could be imported into the writing classroom. They were among the first in the field of composition who, in Janet Emig’s famous phrase, treated writing in a fully developed way as a “mode of thinking” and helped people see how the acquisition of writing ability entails higher order reasoning. But while the critical thinking movement was useful in helping the discipline move past current-traditional approaches, it did not cultivate reflective understanding in the same way that critical literacy sets out to do. Moreover, the problem-solving skills it focused attention on were taught as if they were value free, a set of skills not unlike those required to solve puzzles. Their value-free assumptions limited their applicability to argument, a genre that often takes us far afield into issues that are value laden and emotionally charged.

One of the easiest ways to distinguish a critical thinking approach to teaching writing from a critical literacy approach is to focus on the notion of problem-solving. Simply put, critical thinking proponents focus on how to solve problems, while critical literacy proponents focus on how to discover problems. One of the most important figures in the critical literacy movement in the 1980s, Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire, coined the term “problematize” to describe what he set out to do with his educational program in South America. Freire’s work with peasant populations proved to be so controversial that the government felt compelled to shut it down eventually. In the process of teaching basic literacy, Freire was teaching revolutionary politics by causing pre-literate “mythic” thinking to give way to critical literacy. The power of naming situations, as Freire’s peasants soon discovered,

contains the seeds for challenging and redefining those situations. At one level, Freire's pedagogical experiments confirmed one of Kenneth Burke's most important insights: that proverbs, which comprise a sort of linguistic shorthand for naming recurrent situations, constitute "*strategies for dealing with situations*" (*Philosophy* 296). For Burke as for Freire, names are never neutral. Before we can name anything, we must first size it up, "discern 'the general behind the particular' (301), and the name that we choose in turn implies an attitude toward it. Insofar as an attitude is an incipient act, language and politics are inextricably linked.

Educators have been reluctant to embrace the political dimension of critical literacy for obvious reasons. As witnessed by John Leo's antipathy toward the "therapeutic," "multiculturalist" political sympathies of college faculty, there is already a great deal of fear about the possibility that schools are indoctrinating instead of educating students. The fact that critical literacy belongs to an ancient tradition of education stressing that "the unexamined life is not worth living," and that it encourages such non-partisan virtues as self-reflection and self-questioning has not dissuaded some conservative critics from denouncing it as little more than a propaganda tool. While some of the more ardent proponents of critical literacy, like the truest believers in any cause, appear sometimes to believe that theirs is the one true faith and that non-believers are in league with the John Leo's of the world, many of our most thoughtful practitioners and innovative teachers profess allegiance to critical literacy on largely pedagogical grounds.

Moreover, those who may be tempted to believe that by teaching students to challenge the status quo, question tradition and authority and think dialectically about the world they ensure a generation of students committed to progressive politics flatter themselves. Critical literacy is simply too complex an instrument to serve as a reliable tool of indoctrination. Its emphasis on *how* to think, on foregrounding processes and tacit understanding, combined with its skeptical attitude toward content and coverage, leaves entirely open the question of what students might *do* with their education. The very qualities of critical literacy that allow it to transfer so readily to other courses, that make it so adaptable to history, economics and sociology courses, are the very qualities that render it a flawed vessel of indoctrination. As Michael Berube reminds us, citing what he calls the principle of "reversibility," there is no way to ensure that training students in advanced

literacy can be “a unidirectional vehicle for political change” (145 *Employment*). Our most reflective thinkers may turn out to be hedge fund wizards as surely as they turn out to be political revolutionaries.

But beyond the fear of appearing partisan in our approach to teaching writing, there is a deeper animus toward the teaching of reflection that is not on the surface political. Philosopher Hans Blumenberg, for example, takes note of the increasing pressure on educators to set aside the goal of the examined life and to “abandon the idea . . . that is governed by the norm that man must know what he is doing” (446) in the name of finding ever more parsimonious means for solving problems. In response, Blumenberg calls for a turn to rhetoric, on the grounds that it represents “a consummate embodiment of retardation [of time]. Circumstantiality, procedural inventiveness, ritualization imply a doubt as to whether the shortest way of connecting two points is also the humane route from one to another” (446).

Blumenberg’s motive for turning to rhetoric here resonates with a theme that runs throughout Burke, who frequently expresses a skeptical attitude toward the Law of Parsimony and the “Occamite nonsense” (e.g., behaviorism and monetarism) that may arise from it: “For if much of service has been got by following Occam’s law to the effect that ‘entities should not be *multiplied* beyond necessity,’ equally much of disservice has arisen through ignoring a contrary law, which we could phrase correspondingly: ‘entities should not be *reduced* beyond necessity” (*Grammar* 324). For Burke, the modern age is characterized far more by crimes against the second law than against the first. If critical thinking implies an ability to solve problems efficiently through simplification, critical literacy implies an ability to generate complexity through reflection. Moreover, it also entails an ability not only to write clearly when one can, but complexly when one must, to defer to an audience’s limitations when it serves one’s aims and to challenge and expand those limitations when deference would defeat those aims. While the ends we seek in critical literacy are lofty indeed, and while we have reached no consensus about how best to achieve them, it’s clear that teaching students how to write arguments is among the surest means of reaching them. In the process, the lessons students learn in an argument course undergirded by the principles of critical literacy are the surest to travel to other courses in the curriculum.

This last contention is borne out for many of us by our experience working in the area of writing across the curriculum. What many of us



discovered when we spread out across the curriculum to help teachers in other disciplines improve their students' writing was that we were actually in the business of helping their students write better arguments. Or to put the matter more precisely, we were helping faculty in other disciplines teach their students how to *argue* like members of a discipline as much as teaching them how to *write* like members of a discipline. Teaching the formats for essays in psychology or physics proved to be relatively simple. But making students aware of the assumptions embedded in those formats, assumptions about the relative evidentiary weight different formats accorded to primary and secondary sources, experimental data, theory, anomaly, etc., proved to be a considerably more challenging task.

We, the agents of WAC, were in effect reprising the role of our Sophist ancestors; we were the *metics*, the foreigners passing through a territory, simultaneously handicapped by our outsider status and empowered by it. What may have struck a member of a disciplinary community as a demonstration of truth looked to many of us, with our new eyes, like a persuasive gambit. Like Moliere's Monsieur Jourdain who is surprised to learn that he has been speaking prose his whole life, many of our colleagues in other disciplines were surprised to learn that they had been using and teaching rhetoric the whole time. Once they achieved this awareness, many of these same colleagues became major proponents of a focus on argument not only in their own courses but in the writing courses we taught to prepare students for their disciplines. As we shall demonstrate in chapter two, the approaches used in contemporary argument courses, are eminently adaptable to other disciplines.

## ARGUMENT AND IDENTITY

One of the more controversial aspects of critical literacy concerns the connections it draws between critical thought and identity. In urging students to become more reflective thinkers, proponents of critical literacy call attention to various forces in the world that undermine people's sense of agency and entice them to pursue ends inimical to a healthy sense of self and community. They call attention to ways in which the decisions we make on a daily basis, as consumers, workers and citizens, decisions about what to eat, how to advance ourselves in the workplace and who to vote for, both reveal who we are and rein-

force, for good or ill, our self-understanding. Sellers of soap, management gurus and political consultants all have an interest not just in understanding who we are, but in shaping a self congruent with their ends, not ours. Students need thus to be reflective about these choices, made aware of the implications of some of their choices, and alert to the persuasive gambits common to those who encourage them to assume these identities.

This can prove to be a challenging task. Students are often strongly resistant to an emphasis on the relationship between who they are the everyday choices they make. They do not like the implicit suggestion that they might be the dupes of some shadowy group of “hidden persuaders,” and they do not like the idea of having to pay so much attention to choices and decisions that heretofore have been effortlessly made. Aren’t we making a mountain out of a molehill, they suggest, to shower so much critical attention on a lowly ad or a selection from a pop business book? Anyone who has taught a literature course will recognize the response. They are skeptical that anything so simple on the surface could have all this depth of meaning. The various concerns that students express about applying the lessons of critical literacy to their everyday life need to be taken into account. On the one hand, they are right to insist on their own resourcefulness and their own ability to keep their distance from the identities being proffered them by so many different interest groups. Many of them have thought critically about at least some of these choices and we always find a few students in every class who are in fact militantly on guard against external assaults on their identities. But on the other hand, many students underestimate how skillfully those who fashion off-the-rack identities for them manage to ingratiate themselves through the use of humor, irony, self deprecation and self-revelation, and numerous other devices designed to disarm them. In approaching the relationship between argument and identity, thus, it is important to respect students’ position and experience in this area and to take it slowly at the outset. We like to begin the discussion of identity with a look at some of the most prevalent techniques used by those with prefabricated identities to sell, techniques to which none of us are invulnerable.

Consider, for example, one of most effective devices used by advertisers, political consultants and management gurus to disarm American audiences: the appeal to rugged individualism. Whether it is the politician who professes to ignore the polls and follow his gut, the

manager who scoffs at conventional wisdom and dares to be great, or the male model dressed in cowboy garb who lights up a cigarette and laughs at death, Americans have long been susceptible to the charms of the rugged individual in all his many guises. Indeed, the easiest way to sell a mass American audience on behaviors or choices that have questionable consequences is to present that choice as an expression of rugged individualism. Rugged individualism constitutes what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca call a *loci*, “premises of a general nature that can serve as the bases for values and hierarchies” (84). The premise represented by the model of the rugged individual is perhaps most economically summed up by the categorical imperative of the code hero: “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.” One listens to one’s inner manhood to intuit the best course of action and follows that guidance in the face of convention, popularity, lawfulness and personal risk. Like all *loci*, the model of the rugged individual draws its life from many streams, in particular, American history and American popular culture. A country born of revolution and nurtured on the “conquest” of a receding frontier, a country whose economic system is based on risk taking and competition, a country whose entertainment industry has provided a steady stream of cowboys, private dicks, rags to riches entrepreneurs and gang bangers in every medium—this is a country with rugged individualism buried deep in its DNA. Which is why the simple act of associating a brand, a product, a choice, a person, a candidate, or a proposal with rugged individualism has been so effective down through the years in forwarding the interests of its sponsor. But in the act of choosing whatever it is that the sponsor wishes us to choose, we further the hold of that identity on the national imagination, ensure its continued repetition and reinforce the rugged individual’s status as a behavioral model.

But those who use the rugged individual understand that the ur-vision of the rugged individual—call it the John Wayne version—has limited appeal for denizens of various boxes on the psychographic grid and so they craft variations on the central model that speak most saliently to those to whom they are pitching their product. For some, the macho version of non-conformity is a turnoff and so they require a kinder, gentler version. Consider for example the charming, mildly amusing ad campaign for Apple Computing featuring personifications of the “MAC” and “PC” computer lines. Whereas the PC is personified as a plump, stuffy suit, with an exceedingly narrow view of his

job description and a tendency to whine about his users' need to demand too much of him, MAC is personified as a skinny, hip, stylishly rumpled younger guy open to new possibilities, puzzled by PC's complaints about his users' demands and bemused by the PC persona. It is a classic conflict, albeit a soothingly muted one, between the staid "company man" and the edgy rebel, the bureaucrat and the innovator.

The current ad is a far tamer version of the classic Apple Super Bowl ad of 1984 introducing the Mac line of computers, featuring a woman eluding storm troopers to shatter a huge television screen where Big Brother is pontificating before an auditorium full of bowed figures. (While it might be tempting to see the advertisers' choice of a female figure for the role of rugged individual as a sign of advanced social awareness, it is more likely a reflection of their concern to hit a particular demographic.) The earlier version of the "rebel v suits" advertisement suggests that a good deal more is at stake in the choice between conformity and individualism and, by implication, between the choice of Apple and the unnamed establishment brand of computers. One's choice of computer is a political, not merely a practical or lifestyle choice. Given the outsider status of the Apple brand in 1984 when IBM dominated the market, the difference in tone is understandable. The ideological implications of the rugged individual stereotype in advertising tend to be ever more foregrounded the riskier the choice consumers are being asked to make (hence the Marlboro Man).

There is nothing inherently evil about Apple's imaginative use of stock characters from the American imagination to sell their product. Like all mythic simplification, it undoubtedly overstates the differences between the two products, not to mention the differences between two very large American corporations, but all advertising is understood to be delivered with a wink, and overstatement is hardly a sin. The mischief lies in the elevation of a questionable premise to an unquestioned assumption, and of a role that all of us are occasionally asked to play to an essentialist ideal that all should aspire to be. The mischief also lies in the constant reinforcement of individualist over communitarian values. If the values represented by "MAC" seem innocuous in the context of the ad, they may seem less so when extended to the realm of civic virtues. Rugged individuals, after all, do not play well with others. Their questioning of authority seldom appears to extend to questioning the authority of their own core values.

However much good they may do heeding the words of the bumper sticker, “Question Authority,” they are ill-prepared by their credo for actually assuming authority themselves, for questioning the ends to which authority is best put, and for promoting collective action that secures a common good. Yet the ability or inability of politicians to sell themselves plausibly as rugged individualists has been an important predictor of political success in this country throughout much of the last three decades.

In the above analysis of the ad, we ourselves are making an assumption about identity that not everyone, certainly not all our students, may find agreeable. We assume that identity is what Burke calls “parliamentary” and variable as opposed to being unitary, essential, and fixed. In this view of identity, we play many roles and authenticity is not so much a matter of remaining true to a central self as it is a matter of consciously selecting the roles we play and being fully engaged in those roles. Rhetoricians’ assumptions about human identity are as basic to the way they practice their art as the neo-classical economists’ assumptions about identity—personified in neo-classical economists’ default model of identity, *homo economicus*—are basic to their own practice. The literal truth of either discipline’s assumption is always open to conjecture, though contemporary rhetoric’s assumptions about identity appear to square better with those currently dominant in the fields of psychology, philosophy and psychology. The economists’ assumption that human agents make decisions solely on the basis of rational self-interest, comports well with nineteenth century utilitarian assumptions about human nature, but appears often to be at odds with actual human behavior. Still, for all its admitted flaws, the model continues to work well enough to serve as a starting point for micro-economic analysis and continues to be used even by skeptics, albeit with increasing amendment and modification. While we are prepared to defend the validity of rhetoric’s regnant model of human identity, we should not feel that we have to prove it beyond a doubt to our students or to colleagues in other disciplines. Like the economists’ far more simplified model, it serves to explain a number of behaviors observed in rhetorical analysis and to provide a clear framework for rhetorical theory.

So just what are some of the implications of the “parliamentary,” non-essentialist model of identity? First and foremost, the model implies a strong sense of agency on the part of every rhetorical actor.

The model assumes that people have the freedom to make choices, not just choices of behavior, but of identity, and that rhetoric is a primary means by which those choices can be systematically examined, made, and defended. The freedom assumed by rhetoric, can be seen from an essentialist standpoint as a curse, insofar as one is never quite “finished” and safe; like Sartre’s existential hero, *homo rhetoricus* is “condemned to freedom.” Hans Blumenberg contrasts human agents to other animals in this regard, noting that unlike other members of the animal kingdom, we are bereft of instincts that allow us to know or be anything *im-mediately*. Even self-knowledge or “self understanding has the structure of ‘self-externality.’” A “detour” is required to acquire this knowledge, an act of mediation through the other—the phoros of an analogy, the vehicle of a metaphor, the second term of a ratio, the relationships we maintain with other human beings. In some cases we initiate this process of identity construction; in other cases we find ourselves selecting or resisting choices offered to or foisted off on us. In the latter case, rhetoric plays a particularly crucial role insofar as it “is not only the technique of producing . . . an effect, it is always also a means of keeping the effect transparent” (Blumenberg 435-36). This second capacity, the ability to interpret effects on ourselves as well as to produce effects on others, that makes mastery of rhetoric particularly crucial for our students at this moment in history when so many forces are at work conjuring up dysfunctional identities for them and marginalizing perfectly functional ones in the process.

### ETHICS AND ARGUMENT

The model of identity that prevails in rhetoric, insofar as it stresses human agency and choice, ensures the centrality of ethics to our enterprise as well. As philosopher Charles Taylor has noted “selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes” (3). We have failed to take proper account of this connection, he goes on to argue, mostly because of moral philosophy’s fascination with “defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good life” (3). The good life, as that concept is understood by Taylor, is fundamentally social insofar as the self is fundamentally a social construct. I am who I am by virtue of my relationships with other humans and happiness cannot be understood apart from those relationships. It is a vision that flies in the face

of those visions equating happiness with pleasure or maximization of utility, or, in the case of the rugged individualist, with complete self sufficiency. Unlike the neo-classical economists' model of the good life, a model that dominates the American popular imagination, social benefit is not an accidental byproduct of individual greed. For a social benefit to have ethical or rhetorical significance, it must be a product of intention. The good life is, in Kenneth Burke's homely phrase, "a project for 'getting along with people'" (*Attitudes* 256). Getting along with each other entails the collective identification of those "particular lived values that unite us and inform the institutions we cherish and wish to defend" cited by Stanley Fish. There is no universal standard that will dictate those values and institutions—or, more precisely, none of the various standards claimed by their adherents to be universal are universally subscribed to—hence the need to articulate them and work out the differences among them through the only means short of force we have to achieve this end—argument, or as some philosophers prefer, "conversation."

So long as one sees ethics not just in terms of individuals making the right choices, but also in terms of a society determining what options individuals have to choose among, and institutionalizing those choices through collective action, the study of rhetoric is tantamount to the study of ethics. That said, anyone who has taught argument will recognize the fundamental linkage between the two pursuits. Ethical questions arise out of all sorts of arguments, even some that seem at first glance far removed from sphere of ethical thought. The question is not whether we should attend to the ethical dimension of argument, the question is how best to go about teaching ethics in an argument class. Later on we will talk about ethical arguments per se when we discuss a theory of argument types known as stasis theory. We will talk about ethical arguments, that is those whose major claim constitutes an ethical judgment, as a special sort of evaluation argument and utilize some of the language traditionally used by philosophers when determining the "content of obligation" in a given circumstance and laying out systematic means for reaching ethical decisions. But at this point, we are talking much more broadly about the relationship between ethics and rhetoric. In what follows we will be concerned about the common features of ethical and rhetorical reasoning and about the ethics of arguing.

One way of underscoring just how much rhetoric and ethics have in common is to consider the question of where ethics might best be taught in a curriculum. The process of making a case for teaching ethics in a writing course focused on argument, makes eminently clear just how closely related the two pursuits are. Traditionally of course, ethics has been taught at the college level either in philosophy courses devoted to the consideration of ethical theories, their history and application, or in the case of some religious institutions in religion classes focused on practical application of religious principles and beliefs. Charles Taylor has pointed out some of the limitations of ethics as it is taught in philosophy courses insofar as it focuses on the “content of obligation” rather than the figuring out what a good life might entail. In pursuing various “thought experiments” built around moral problems, philosophers tend to help students understand the limitations of extant moral theories more clearly than they help them define for themselves a life worth living. Because writing courses in argument have no obligation to “cover” any particular set of moral theories, we are free to offer students the opportunity to pursue their own definitions. One of the most effective ways to start a conversation among students about their own notion of the good life—as opposed to the way that various philosophers have defined that notion—is to have them discuss Ursula LeGuin’s wonderful short story, “Those Who Walk Away from Omelas.” LeGuin’s Omelas is an imagined utopian realm where it would seem the good life, by all the traditional measures, has been achieved. The only problem is that the continued bliss of the entire community is dependent on the continued suffering of one child who is kept in a basement and must never be shown any kindness. Every child in Omelas is told about the suffering child sometime between the ages of eight and twelve. Those who subsequently “walk away”—much to the puzzlement of the narrator—have apparently decided that the enormous quantity of bliss enjoyed by the society does not justify the suffering of one child. Their choice in turn reflects a belief in the parliamentary nature of identity, the belief that it is relational rather than essential, and that hence all who live in Omelas and know of the child’s plight are implicated in its suffering and their ostensible good life is as flawed as their selfhood.

These days, of course, philosophy courses are far from the only place where the growing demand for ethics instruction is being met. As an alternative to philosophy courses, many disciplines today offer



their own ethics courses emphasizing recurring ethical issues in the field and canons of behavior derived from the standards of the profession. However well intentioned such courses and however clearly they constitute an acknowledgment of the need for ethics instruction within the academy, they are, we would argue, problematic sites of ethics instruction precisely because there is no fundamental connection between the imperatives of the discipline and ethical imperatives. Moreover, whatever overt instruction in ethics students might receive in such courses must be balanced against tacit forms of ethical instruction they are likely to receive in other courses in their major. Like the obligatory “chapel” attendance that students at many church-affiliated liberal arts colleges chafed against throughout the last century, such courses have an unfortunate tendency to strike students as at best a quaint nod to moral correctness and at worst a distraction from their “real” courses of study.

Take the field of business, for example, a field that has most publicly taken it upon itself to emphasize ethics in recent years, thanks to a number of highly publicized business scandals. Given the regnant economic theories in America today, students are quite likely to be taught, directly and indirectly, in many different courses overseen by many different people, that markets are wiser than human agents. If one wishes to make a prudent decision about the possible consequences of a policy, one is advised to study the performance of the market in similar situations in the past. If one wants to know what has worked and is working, the only verdict that really counts is the one delivered by the market. A “fair” price, thus, is whatever the market will bear, while a “fair” wage is the least the market will allow one to pay. If one is in a position to fiddle the market a bit, allowing one to charge higher prices and pay lower wages, so be it, those sorts of adjustments are built into the market system, and as such are no more blameworthy than holding penalties in professional football. Against the backdrop of this near providential regard for the omniscience of markets, a single course in ethics introducing criteria foreign to the market dynamic into the decision-making process will likely have little effect on students’ priorities or behaviors.

What is lacking in the one-off, business ethics course is the clear connection between “selfhood and morality.” Any course starting with a hyphenated sense of selfhood, self-as-businessperson, inevitably leads to a truncated view of ethical obligation. Burke touches on the nature

of the relationship between identity and ethical obligation in the process of defining his central notion of “identification.”

The human agent, *qua* human agent, is not motivated solely by the principles of a specialized activity however strongly this specialized power, in its suggestive role as imagery, may affect his character. Any specialized activity participates in a larger unit of action. ‘Identification’ is a word for the autonomous activity’s place in this wider context, a place with which the agent may be unconcerned. The shepherd, *qua* shepherd, acts for the good of the sheep, to protect them from discomfiture and harm. But he may be “identified” with a project that is raising the sheep for market. (*Rhetoric* 27)

By the same token, corporate management may be consciously acting in interest of its stockholders to increase the return on their investment by performing acts that simultaneously “identify” them with the degradation of the environment their stockholders require to sustain themselves.

Even brief consideration of the connections between the modes of thought promoted by both ethics and rhetoric underscores the advantages of incorporating the teaching of ethics into an argument class. One of the most important traits shared by ethics and rhetoric is their focus on process and procedural understanding—“how to”—over declarative knowledge—“what is.” It is this concern with process that allows the two to involve themselves with “specialized activities” of every sort and to move easily between the personal and professional realms. In either case, the processes that ethics and rhetoric are both concerned with involve two stages: a process of *selection*—identifying the best argument/the most defensible choice—and a process of *communication*—formulating a justification for the argument or choice and/or promoting its wider adoption. According to most popular views of rhetoric, the first process ending in the choice, is all that is required. There is no further obligation to articulate one’s reasons for making the choice or for sharing the process by which one arrived at the choice. But just as there are arguments for given ethical choices, there is an ethics of argument that requires one to make a case for one’s choices. The difference here between ethical arguments and

other sorts of arguments is one of degree rather than kind. While it's always useful to articulate reasons for one's choices and while it is prudent to do so whenever one is soliciting others' support of one's choice, one is compelled to do so when one's choice is ethical. The source of this compulsion lies in the nature of ethical choices. In evaluating, say, a college to people who are in the process of choosing a college, we would articulate our criteria in order to help them decide if the college is for them. But if we are making an ethical choice, about, say, justifications for torture, we are saying something much stronger. In making ethical choices we are choosing not just for ourselves in the here and now, but for others and for ourselves in future similar situations. When we term an act ethical, we are not simply saying "I did this," we are saying, "This ought to be done." If one, for example, claims that the American government is justified in using torture on enemy combatants, one is opening the way for a shift of the burden of proof from those who pronounce torture unjustifiable to those who support its use, and for the possibility that torture will be tolerated in a variety of other situations, including those situations involving the torture of American troops.

If one is first obliged under an ethic of argument to articulate a rationale for one's ethical choices, the second obligation one incurs is to ensure that one's rationale is candid. That is, for the rationale to be helpful, for it to guide further ethical acts, it must not only be truthful but extensive. One must be prepared to acknowledge the full range of choices—not necessarily every one, but all that might seem plausible or probable to those whom one addresses—that one considered prior to making one's selection. One's reasons for dismissing or subordinating likely alternatives and for selecting one's final course of action should be clearly indicated. The principles that guided one in evaluating those choices and the evidence in support of that evaluation should be clearly enumerated. The degree to which one is certain that one has made the best choice should be explicitly registered. (These caveats, along with the term "candor," are derived from Stephen Toulmin's treatment of argument to be more fully discussed in the next chapter.) While there is no formal code of rhetorical behavior under which one is obliged to offer a rationale that is both truthful and candid *in* one's argument, it is assumed that one could offer such a rationale if challenged to do so. Moreover, the failure to be candid *in* an argument may potentially render one's argument less efficacious. A competing

argument that revealed what one had left unsaid or that called attention to alternative points one had glossed over could weaken audience adherence to one's own as readily as if it had shown a falsehood.

The process of selection in ethics is homologous with what rhetoricians sometimes call the invention stage. The process of discovering and evaluating choices comprises much of the *techne* of rhetoric and ethics alike. As we saw earlier, Hans Blumenberg has associated this process with the "retardation" of time, including a concern to account for "circumstantiality," the particular differences between one's given situation and others to which one looks for guidance. While we previously emphasized the cognitive rewards associated with this rejection of parsimonious means of understanding, we would here emphasize the ethical compulsions for such a move. Where automaticity prevails, there is no place for either ethics or rhetoric. One can only do or say "what a person's gotta do or say." Without hesitation. Ethics and rhetoric require choice and choice implies deliberation. In reaching this conclusion we do not reject the notion that the proper end of ethical instruction is to render virtue a habit. Ethical habits of mind, as opposed to mere knowledge of ethical theory and history, are certainly proper ends of ethical instruction. But that is not to say that such habits are best exhibited by the alacrity with which people make their ethical choices. One can construe the notion of habit more broadly, rejecting a behaviorist emphasis on habit as immediate response to a familiar stimulus; one can include under ethical habits of mind the inclination to seek out the ethical dimension of one's choices, the consideration of as many plausible alternatives as possible, and the thoughtful evaluation of those choices. By combining ethical instruction and rhetorical instruction with the latter's emphasis on "procedural inventiveness" and disciplined examination of alternatives we can hope to improve ethical choices by complicating and increasing the number of choices our students have to select from. Instead of focusing on the rightness of one's final choice, a rhetorically influenced ethic would emphasize the alternatives invented or discovered in the selection process and the unique responsiveness of the final choice to the particulars of one's ethical dilemma. It's here that the controversial nature of rhetoric is most obviously apparent.

For some, the test of ethical instruction lies precisely in helping students arrive in the most parsimonious manner possible at the Right Choice which is there and waiting for them; whatever detains one from

recognizing and making that choice results from deficiencies in one's character. Only if one believes that the best choice may be a product of the deliberations rather than an *a priori* that pre-exists those deliberations can a "retardation" of time, a refusal to "*reduce* entities beyond necessity," be justified. At which point those who equate virtue with an unerring, quick twitch rejection of temptation will accuse one of relativism. For the moral absolutists—and certainly moral absolutism is an ethical position that significant numbers of people can and do take, however different their absolutes may be—the tests posed by Satan are true/false tests, not essay exams. One prepares for such a test by familiarizing oneself with the right answers, repeating them, memorizing them and then recalling them instantly when challenges present themselves. Only dullards have to deliberate and only infidels imagine that they might, by their own power of reason, come up with a better choice than the one prescribed by absolutes transmitted by some high priest's literal reading of holy writ.

The failure of absolutism from the perspective of ethics qua rhetoric is a failure of the imagination.<sup>3</sup> It's the failure to imagine a reading of holy writ other than the one offered by whatever authority happens to control the pulpit. It's the failure to imagine a ground of identification between oneself and whatever embodiment otherness has taken on. The failure of absolutism also involves a simple failure to notice things: The failure to notice that the answers derived from holy writ over the centuries change from time to time and from place to place, and the failure to notice that there is no court of appeal with binding authority to adjudicate differences among competing absolutes or to overturn the appeals of relativists. The major problem arising from the failure of ethical absolutisms is that they ultimately come full circle and return us to the place from whence ethics and rhetoric alike arise, the place where might makes right. Above all else, ethics and rhetoric share in their rejection of force as a means of resolving difference.

Rhetoric begins, as Burke argues, in acts of courtship, in the creation of a sense of identification between entities belonging to different classes—gender, socio-economic, political, etc. The obligations of ethics arise from the recognition of the self in others, the "thou-ness" of strangers toward whom one must act as one would wish to be acted upon. Absolutism creates a world of binaries—Us/Them, Good/Evil, Right Reading/Wrong Reading—and then offers no civilized means of overcoming those binaries. In fact absolutism counsels against par-

leying with, let alone identifying with, the Other. To maintain one's faith in an absolutist view of the world, one must remain always within the borders governed by those absolutes. To leave the kingdom of one's absolutes is to be challenged at every turn by strange ideas and customs and to have few resources for negotiating those differences. But we learned long ago from our Sophist forebears how to traverse multiple kingdoms and in the process multiple realities while hanging on to our sanity and our safety. If that most benign forebear of the absolutists, Plato, vanquished the Sophists in his dialogues, they in fact survived to argue another day and teach us how to do likewise. In a world beset by too much certainty about too many irreconcilable notions and too little willingness to set force aside and try courtship our students would be well served by ethical instruction infused by the spirit of the Sophists.

## NOTES

1. In using Perry's framework for this discussion of student development, we do not mean to imply an uncritical acceptance of his theory. A number of trenchant critiques of Perry's schema were mounted in the seventies and eighties, particularly by feminist scholars (e.g., Gilligan, Belenky, et al.) who noted the strong male bias of Perry's research and its failure to account for gender differences. Women's ways of knowing, we would acknowledge, are indeed different from men's ways, particularly when it comes to ethical matters. That said, the reactions of college students, particularly entry-level students, male and female alike, to the challenges posed by classes focused on argument, appear to track those anticipated by Perry's schema sufficiently well to use as a loose framework for the present discussion.

2. In the case of Fish v. Leo, we appear to be contradicting ourselves by declaring our preference for Fish's argument. But keep in mind, the nature of their disagreement is more in the nature of a "meta-argument" than a regular argument, and as such the reason for our preference goes back to the fact that Leo offers no reason to "listen" to opposing arguments, while Fish specifically calls for a dialectic approach to disagreement like the one we are supporting here.

3. Absolutism as we use the term here is a mindset rather than an ideology or belief system. Within any religion, thus, there are absolutists who pretty much act as advertised. There are also imaginative folk who manage to reconcile their religious beliefs with a concern for the well being of even those who fail to share their beliefs.