

THE ETHICS OF THE RHETORIC OF TEACHER PROFESSIONALIZATION

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Abstract—The question of rhetorical grounding is ethical and ecological: rhetoric involves choice, affirmation or denial of relationships, and a re-realization of central community values. If you define yourself (or let others define you) in ways that are limiting, your actions will become limited. You will see yourself, you will ask others to see you, and you will encourage others to see you, as you speak. By ignoring the moral dimensions of teaching in favor of subject matter knowledge and pedagogical technique as rhetorical grounding for claims to be a "profession," teachers in effect choose to present themselves as lackeys.

I should like to make three claims: Teaching is at base an ethical activity; that if one wishes to talk about teaching as a profession (whatever that might mean), then the ethical base had best be acknowledged and attended to; and that the means by which one talks—the rhetorical claims and grounding—are in themselves choices that are part of the ethical base. Let me begin with some comments on the last.

Rhetoric has been denigrated by many people, starting, it might be said, with Plato and continuing into our own time with notions of "mere rhetoric" and "rhetoric versus reality." So if I want to talk about rhetoric in a more edifying and instructive sense, I had best try to clear the air and try to situate myself in better company than PR spin doctors or presidential logographers. Most of what I have to say in situating myself will be seen as just that: situating myself, as opposed to advancing new claims. Most of this is old, familiar terrain.

Rhetoric, despite all its transmutations over the centuries, deals with the probability of propositions, not the certainty of propositions—at least not certainty in the accepted scientific sense. Thus, when we talk about rhetoric in general, or the rhetoric of, say, politics or sociology or the rhetoric of professionalization, or even the rhetoric of teacher professionalization, we are talking about choice, because rhetoric deals with weighing and selecting in a

world of probabilities. And rhetoric, again despite all of its transmutations, deals with persuasion; in Aristotle's view (1954), rhetoric deals with "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion." (p. 24). The rhetorician intends to persuade an audience to come to judgment about past events (forensic or legal rhetoric, according to Aristotle) or judgment about what should be done now or in the future (political rhetoric). Aristotle talks, too, of ceremonial rhetoric, the epideictic, involving judgments about present praise or blame. We might argue that there is some overlap between the political and the ceremonial. In any event, what we might agree about is the notion that rhetoric involves probabilities, thus choices, and thus persuasion about choices.

If rhetoric involves choices, then it also involves choices as to the available means of persuasion. How one decides to talk about what topics under what circumstances to what ends involves choice, surely as much as the making of judgments on the part of the audience involves choice. Our understanding here is enlarged by many ancients as well as more current authors, three I find extraordinarily useful. First, the very instructive work of Campbell on Darwin as rhetorician of science. As Campbell (1987) argues, "Even scientific discourse must be persuasive to rescue insight from indif-

ference, misunderstanding, contempt, or rejection" (p. 69, see also Campbell, 1989). In a similar vein, we note Gay's *Style in History* and how Gibbon, Burckhardt, and other historians necessarily engaged at the center of rhetoric— invention, discovery, proof (Gay, 1974). And, finally, Geertz (1988) in which we learn of the difficulties ethnographers have in securing solid rhetorical ground:

Finding somewhere to stand in a text that is supposed to be at one and the same time an intimate view and a cool assessment is almost as much of a challenge as gaining the view and making the assessment in the first place. (p. 10)

We have choices to make, as speakers, as well as judgments to make, as auditors. How we speak is what I am concerned about here. How we speak, and what we speak of tells us about ourselves: as Jonson puts it, "Speak, that I may see thee" (Jonson, 1875, p. 201).

To talk of choices and judgments is to move hard upon talk of ethics. Choices and judgments, unless made randomly, in turn involve some sort of standards, some sort of values perspective, in short, some sort of ethics of right and wrong.

This perspective is of course, an ancient one, going back to Plato's quarrel with rhetoric as reflected in the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*.¹ White (1984) puts it this way in framing his discussion of the *Gorgias*:

[Plato's] central concern is in a literal sense ethical, for the main issue to which he returns again and again [in the *Gorgias*] is the kind of character a person defines for himself and offers to others—the kind of life and community he makes—when he chooses to think and talk one way rather than another. This is Plato's concern from the very beginning, when Socrates gives Chaerephon the seemingly innocuous but in fact deeply threatening direction to "ask Gorgias who he is". . . . (p. 93)

In any rhetorical occasion, as White tells us, we define ourselves, our audience, and our culture. In selecting what I want to say, how I want to say it, and what values I wish to appeal to, I say a great deal not only about me, but about my intended audience. The concern here is not with the success of the intended occasion, that is, whether or not I do indeed persuade you. The concern is with the inputed set of values. If

I appeal on the basis of revenge as opposed to say, mercy, surely that says a great deal about me and what I think about you. All told, the rhetorical occasion is more than "mere rhetoric," as the saying goes. It involves choice, ethics, persuasion, and it involves a reenactment of culture, a valuing, a re-realization of what is central to a community. And, finally, the rhetorical occasion involves ecological relationships, as we are reminded by Bateson (1972), "The means by which one man influences another are part of the ecology of ideas in their relationship, and part of the larger ecological system within which that relationship exists" (p. 504).

It is the perspective of the intertwining of rhetoric and ethics in an ecological context that informs my consideration of the rhetoric of teacher professionalization, a consideration found most recently in Soder (1990).

My focus is on the kinds of arguments teachers and their leaders tend to use in making claims to professional status. I am not concerned with whether teachers are or are not professionals, however that glorious term is defined. We have to deal with the notion of profession and professionalization, however, if only because the teachers and that vague group of people called policy makers continually advert to the term. The Holmes Group (1986) makes much of profession and related terms—although their initial report, *Tomorrow's Teachers*, avoids the sticky problem of definition. Likewise, the Carnegie (1986) effort spawning the National Board for something called Professional Teaching Standards invokes the magic word profession. Michael Dukakis made much of teaching-is-a-profession, for all the good it did him. It is a common strategy. When occupational leaders get ambitious and want to move their occupation up the status ladder, they advert, almost without thinking, it would seem, to profession and related terms.

As for the kind of arguments teachers use to stake their claim to a place in the profession pantheon, I would like to talk about three in particular. The first and perhaps most common, is the argument from similitude, of essential correspondences between classes. And the class teachers tend to claim essential correspondences with is that of doctors. "Just as the doctor does thus and so, so does the teacher do thus and

so." What are we to make of this "We're just like doctors (and thus we should be given the same kind of deference—and money—as doctors)" argument? The argument is ineffective, I think, because it shifts the focus from a consideration of what it is teachers actually *are* as teachers to considerations of correspondence. The outward manifestations of correspondence simply are not there. The teachers say "We're just like doctors," evoking a response from the audience of "So where's *your* Mercedes or BMW?" The argument is particularly ineffective in recent years. Medicine might have been a good bet for comparison, say, in the 1940s or 1950s or 1960s, when the omniscient and white male doctor was at the apotheosis (with the exception, perhaps, of Supreme Court justices). But nothing is permanent, including professional status. The prestige value of medical stock soared higher and higher in the 1940–1960 bull market, slowed down in the 1970s, and in the 1980s went into a slump. Today, half of the doctors in this country are salaried employees in health maintenance organizations (HMOs). Doctors have to ask permission of insurance company auditors before performing practically any procedures. The stock is down and the bear market probably will continue.² My chief indicator here is the decline in the number of white male applicants to medical schools—down 50% in the last 10 years. Medicine these days is becoming attractive to increasing numbers of women and ethnic minorities. Now, in a country continuing to exhibit considerable sexism and racism, when the privileged group of white males turns its back on medicine, abandoning the field to women and minorities, we can be reasonably certain that medicine's prestige situation is definitely downside. In arguing that "We're just like doctors," teachers are now in the somewhat ironic position of asking a legitimating public to compare teachers to an occupational group currently plagued with downside prestige, a group plagued with images of Medicare and other insurance abuse, accusations of unnecessary surgery, government attempts to evaluate medicine on the basis of patient health (just as teachers have been evaluated on the basis of student performance), and a medical research effort that cannot seem to find cures for much of anything like they

could in the good old days (diphtheria, polio, that sort of dramatic success), a research effort that cannot seem to get settled on what the public might seem fairly straightforward, such as whether oat bran is good for you or not.

So medicine is not a good bet. The argument from similitude does not make sense; it is simply not a persuasive argument. Moreover, as I shall get to shortly, the argument from similitude tends to divert attention from just what teachers are when they say they are teachers, from a consideration of the nature of teaching, if you will.

The second of the arguments I wish to consider is currently being put forth by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. The argument is straightforward: "Pass our test, we'll certify you as a professional." There are many difficulties here. We cannot assume, as the National Board apparently does, that a legitimating public makes decisions as to which occupations to bless with the magic word "profession" on the basis of passing tests. Beauticians have to pass tests before they can practice, but test-passing does not give them much purchase. Historically, passing tests does not seem to be a causal factor in the elevation of, say, our old friend, medicine. True, one can become Board-certified in medicine, and perhaps the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards has something similar in mind—a "board-certified" teacher. But the implied analogy breaks down. To become board-certified in ophthalmology requires at least a year of general medical post-graduate work, followed by 3 years of specialized medical and surgical training, before sitting for the exams. To become board-certified on otolaryngology requires 5 years of intensive post-graduate work before sitting for the exams. The current proposed prerequisites for sitting for the teachers' National Board exam are 3 years of teaching experience plus a bachelor's degree. The asymmetry is obvious, as is the response of the legitimating public to the argument of "We have to take tests, just like the doctors do, so we should have the same status as doctors." The argument makes no sense because of the facts of the matter; it also makes no sense, as we shall see, because of the diversion from a consideration of what the nature of teaching is.

The third argument used in laying claims to

profession I heard relatively recently. The occasion was a speech by a leader of a national education organization. Exhorting the audience to be professionals, asking them to behave as professionals behave (however that is), the speaker laid the claim in this way: "We're not plumbers—we're professionals." The argument can be dismissed as a bit of fluff, a little bit of hype not to be taken seriously. But attention must be paid. The argument was not a throwaway line heard in an elevator or a cocktail lounge; it was part of a formal address by the leader of a national organization. What can we say of this claim in terms of its efficacy and ethical appeal? In terms of ethics, the argument is not appealing. The argument is formulated in terms of an us versus them, we as opposed to the Other. Professionals are defined, by implication, as Non-Plumbers, whatever that means. Whereas the argument from similitude (we are just like doctors) implies a sense of admiration and respect, the "We're not plumbers argument contains an inherent insult to an occupational group. This argument is an example of the sort of bumper-sticker reasoning that has so often been applied by ethnic groups asserting superiority over other ethnic groups. It is a dangerous argument, because it defines—in this case—profession solely in terms of an imaginary opposition, an opposition to the apparently unpure, venal, distasteful as exemplified by one group, Plumbers, the apotheosis of the non-professionals.³

There are other arguments one might find, but the three I have identified here will serve for illustrative purposes. The three arguments here share common features. They are wrong historically, wrong logically, wrong factually. Beyond these features, they have a common deficiency, relating to matters of ethics and ecology. The arguments have no core. They do not touch the heart of teaching. The "We're just like doctors" argument focuses our attention on whatever it is doctors supposedly do. The "We can pass a test" argument focuses our attention on isolated aspects of something that might go on in an attempt to "teach" something about fractions or the Declaration of Independence or whatever. The "We're not plumbers" argument leads us to applaud a wholesale attack on an entire occupational group, leaving us with

nothing to say about teaching other than that it is the opposite of something reprehensible.

If we sense a hollowness in these arguments, it is because of the silence. What is a teacher? Silence. Teacher is the name of . . . of what? Silence. These arguments refuse to define, to name, the central core of teacher. And that central core must deal, I believe, with some sort of affirmation, some sort of choice. If we simply talk of teaching as subject matter, or even if we talk of teaching as pedagogy, or even a combination of these two plus sort of foundations, we will miss the point.⁴

Now, the affirmation, the choice, has to come from the teacher. It cannot come from the student. If the teacher has nothing more to do in all this than respond to your wishes as a student, and come up with the appropriate pedagogical approach, then the teacher is no different than, say, an Arthur Murray dance instructor. The Arthur Murray dance instructor does nothing more than teach you what you want to know. You want to learn how to do the tango? The Arthur Murray teacher will teach you to tango. He will not teach you anything about the relationship of dance to other issues of society. He will not insist on discussing the ethics of dance, or the ethics of teaching dance, unless you ask for talk on these matters. But surely the teacher will not query you as to why you want to learn that particular dance, nor will he tell you that you would be better off, more virtuous, as it were, if you were to spend your time reading Dostoevsky. No. He will simply teach you to dance the tango. It is *your* decision, he will say. You want to learn to tango? Pay up, and I will teach you. If you want it, here it is, come and get it, as the song goes. Rather than a metaphor of the teacher as guide, or the teacher as discoverer, or the teacher as doctor, or some of those delightful images, we end up with teacher as . . . as what? As purveyor? As panderer? As prostitute? Perhaps these are a bit harsh. "Prostitute" suggests an unworthy cause. "Pander" suggests low tastes or exploitation of weaknesses. "Purveyor" is more value neutral, with suggestions of distribution without regard to worthiness or taste. Surely none of these images is appropriate, teachers will say. But on the other hand, do not such images share some common ground? Is it all that far-fetched to

associate teachers with such generally perjorative images? I believe it is reasonable to at least countenance the possibility that in the absence of any consideration of one's actions as a teacher in terms of a value structure, teachers, purveyors, panderers, and prostitutes are all members of a common occupational group—service providers who give you what you pay for, more or less. Perhaps these images of the teacher seem artificial or strained. Let us consider another image from literature (and thus, perhaps a real image): the teacher as lackey. In *The Would-Be Gentleman*, Moliere lets us know what he thinks of teachers who let the student say what is important or unimportant, and have nothing to say for themselves and certainly nothing to say about the conduct and character of others. We are shown the music master, the dancing master, the fencing master, the philosophy master. In each case, the would-be gentleman affirms importance, and it is hard to tell the teacher from the other lackeys standing around. The dancing master might privately wish that Jourdain had just a bit of good taste for all his money, and although he thinks that enlightened praise is the best reward, money is money, and he is willing to engage in nonsense to preserve his advantage. "All men's misfortunes," he tells his master, "and the appalling disasters of history, the blunders of statesmen and the errors of great generals, they have all occurred for lack of knowledge of dancing." (Act I.) Even more damning is the approach of the philosophy master. He asks M. Jourdain what he would like to learn. "Everything," says Jourdain. "Well," says the master, "would you like me to teach you logic?" After some further discussion, Jourdain asks for something prettier. "How about ethics?" says the master. "Ethics will teach you to moderate your passions." "No," says Jourdain, "I want to get mad when I want to." "Physics?" "Too much rowdydow." "Well then," says the master, "What do you want me to teach you." "Spelling," Jourdain says. "Gladly," replies the master.

All this is done with a broad brush, of course, but the point is clear. Of lackeys there are many kinds, and maybe there is not really much of a distinction between lackeys who are hired as lackeys and teachers who behave like lackeys.

It is reasonable to think that Moliere wants us to feel some contempt for the philosophy teacher and the other teachers as well. As long as teachers present themselves, talk about themselves, like Moliere's philosophy teacher, they will get the kind of response Moliere intended.

Moliere was not the first to make distinctions (at least implied distinctions) between fee-for-service teachers and another kind of teaching. We can consult Plato's accounts of fee-for-service Sophists as compared with his portrait of that teacher who was among the most brave, wise, and upright. And 300 years after Moliere, in our own time, we have our own Sophists, if you will, offering services for money. As an example, Stanley Kaplan centers offer a service; they are purveyors of a certain kind of knowledge. They teach you how to do better on standardized tests so you have a better change of getting further in the formal education structure. There is nothing particularly *wrong* with that service, but there is nothing about it that elevates the teaching to that of "profession," nothing that legitimates for me any claim to special preference as a professional teacher. There is no particular difference between providing uncritical means to score higher on the LSAT or the MCAT and providing two Big Macs and an order of fries. The Stanley Kaplan people, bless them, might very well help you avoid the reefs in the mathematics portion of the GRE, but of other reefs, they have nothing to say. Again, the silence. What graduate schools are you thinking of applying to? For what reasons? What about other relationships in your life? Why are you doing all this? The Kaplan teacher is not going to ask you all these things; it is not part of the job description, and certainly not part of the contract. You want college counseling? For that, you pay somebody else, a specialist in how to choose the schools that are right for you. You want to figure out the rest of your life? For that, you pay still another person, of your choosing, someone from Esalen, or a Jungian, or some other specialist, perhaps a minister, rabbi, or priest.

There must be some way out of here, as Dylan's joker would say: "Too much confusion, I must get some relief." Surely there are ways to talk about teachers other than with images of lackeys, panderers, and prostitutes.

The curious thing is that, by and large, these other ways of talking seem often overlooked.

The primary way of talking that I have in mind brings us back to the basis of teaching. We must take some things unto ourselves as teachers. The teacher must see the importance of what he or she is teaching. The teacher must have a strong sense of self-worth, of importance, or self-affirmation. In one way or another, the teacher must say clearly, "There are some things of importance that I know about that you need to know about; I care about you and I am going to see to it that you learn these things of importance."

That is to say, teachers must find a better source of rhetorical grounding. As it happens, the source is not far away. It is to be found in the very nature of teaching, in the moral relationship between the teacher and the student, in the relationship, at least in the K-12 system, between the teacher, the student, the parent, and the state.

The notion of teaching as a moral endeavor has begun to claim more attention (Goodlad et al., 1990; Dill, 1990; Strike & Soltis, 1985; Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 1988). But this notion does not yet seem to be part of the general rhetorical ground, and it is this that I find curious. Consider two of the recent major efforts in teacher education reform, generated by the Holmes Group and the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy. If one examines the Holmes Group document, *Tomorrow's Teachers*, one will find much talk of professions and professionalism, but little consideration of the moral aspects of the endeavor (Holmes Group, 1986). Similarly, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*—the Carnegie document leading to what is now the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards—invokes three major lines of reasoning in talking about teachers and, again, that nebulous word, "profession." The primary argument advanced provides images of a bankrupt, servile America destroyed by Japan; the secondary argument speaks to the apparent threat of the underclass, with the strong implication that those of us in the Winter Place had best be careful; the tertiary argument, given but scant attention, a paragraph or two, gives us the obligatory obeisance to American democracy and all that is sacred in the National Archives. But one will look here in

vain for any consideration of the moral dimensions of teaching (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986).

And the moral aspects do not seem to be treated much at all in current teacher education programs (see Sirotnik, 1990; Edmundson, 1990; Soder, 1989). In the course of the Study of the Education of Educators an interview question we asked—and asked in any number of ways to try to obtain some sort of response—dealt with whether there were any moral imperatives involved in teaching. For me, the most telling response from a student, a student just completing student teaching and ready to join her professional colleagues, was "Yes, but you don't want them creeping into your classroom." I pluck this one from the hundreds of student responses quite similar in meaning, if not in sharpness of imagery, and I should note that many faculty members responsible for the preparation of teachers responded in much the same way.

If teachers (including those who teach teachers) overlook or ignore the foundation of what it is they do—that is to say, the moral dimensions of the relationships between teachers, students, parents, and the larger legal framework of the state, then the consequences involve something more than not quite making it into the camp of the "real" professionals. If teachers do not attempt to advance claims to the moral praiseworthiness of the endeavors, what are they left with? Technique? Hardly a strong enough reed on which to hang too much. Knowledge base? Likewise, rather weak, despite repeated claims. And even if technique and knowledge base were advanced, sophisticated, and widely acknowledged, what would we have? Without some sort of recourse to a moral dimension, to the nature of a just world, we would have advanced technique and knowledge, disembodied, cut off from the world. One ends up rather like 5th Century imperial Athens, with no sense of identity, no way of talking about who one is, capable only of talking of self-interest, incapable of talking about meeting one's interests and the interests of others in a just world. And thus when the Athenians threaten to take over Melians, who would have preferred neutrality, the only justification Athens can put forth, the only rhetorical ground claimed, is "Because we are stronger than

you." To lose sight of who you are, to forget that who you are is a matter of who you are in relationship to others, is to lose a great deal.⁵

We are talking about losing more than just some foolish battle over claims to be a real profession just like doctors and lawyers. We are talking about how teachers define themselves and thus to a great extent how teachers act in relation to others. Whether in the presentation of self in everyday life or the presentation of self in public and professional life, it is really quite difficult to speak of yourself as a lackey, to present yourself as a lackey, to ask others to see you and value you as a lackey, while trying to behave as though you were part of a nobler breed, closer to, say, Socrates. The contradictions are simply too great.

Are teachers lackeys? Or do they see themselves with Socrates? Do teachers cringe when presented with Moliere's philosophy master? Or do they think that the school board or the superintendent or the dean or some nebulous General Will knows best? Surely Socrates would respond to the demands of the would-be gentleman in a way quite different from the philosophy master in that play. And we might rightly surmise that, at the very least, Socrates would soon be unemployed, and would probably suffer much more serious consequences as a result of daring to think that teachers could and should ask people to think critically about the social order.

I would argue that teachers can act as lackeys or they can act in line with he who I have juxtaposed to the lackeys. If teachers act as lackeys, then they are probably getting what they deserve in the way of status, respect, money. Certainly we can say that for teachers who act as lackeys, the several rhetorical means outlined here, the several (but surely not exclusive) means by which they advance their claims for status and respect and money are entirely consonant with their actions.

Not all teachers act as lackeys, of course. For those teachers who do not, who, rather, act as Socrates or some approximation thereof, they had best ask those who speak in the name of teachers to alter the nature of their rhetorical claims. I recognize that some of these claims scattered about are indeed consonant with the notion of teaching as a moral endeavor. One will find, at least from time to time, some

corporation doing a bit of image advertising, showing us great teachers throughout the ages, with the usual Jamesian quote about teachers and eternities. But taken by the large, the rhetorical claims, the proofs advanced, the values cited, tend to ignore the central notion of teaching as a moral endeavor. More will have to be demanded of those who speak in the name of teachers if there is to be some sensible congruence between what teachers are or ought to be and how they are spoken of.

Again, my concern here is not so much for the efficacy or persuasiveness of the claims to be a profession. Rather, my concern is for how teachers act—or, if you will, how I think they ought to act. And, as I have suggested, if you define yourself (or let others define you) in ways that are limiting, the chances are greatly increased that your actions will become limited. You will see yourself, you will ask others to see you, and you will encourage others to see you, as you speak. Or, as Ben Jonson so rightly says it, "Speak, that I may see thee."

Notes

¹The perspective, for me, is greatly informed by the works of Richard M. Weaver, especially *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (1953); *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948); and "To Write the Truth" (1948).

²For recent developments on the downside, see McKinlay & Arches (1985) and Reed & Evans (1987). More recent reportage includes Altman with Rosenthal (1990); Belkin (1990); Kolata (1990).

³Useful here is Wilden (1972). See especially Chapters 7 and 8.

⁴See, for example, the collection of articles in *Teachers College Record* 91 (Spring 1990), subsumed under the general theme of "Foundational Studies in Teacher Education: A Reexamination."

⁵White (1984) gives us extraordinary insight into the incoherence that obtains when we try to define ourselves as self-interested outside of a just world. See also White (1985). The notion of the relationship between self-interest and the world is treated very usefully, too, by Bateson (1972). See especially Part VI, "Crisis in the ecology of mind."

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