

Rhetoric & Media Studies

Sample Comprehensive Examination Question

Ethics

A system for evaluating the ethical dimensions of rhetoric must encompass a selection of concepts from different communicative fields. Limiting ethics to the constructs of Dramatism, for example, would prejudice our understandings of narratives, metaphors, argumentation, and other modes of discourse. With that said, I will endeavor to flesh out key concepts within my scope of theoretical and critical training that relate to ethical judgments of rhetoric. My aim here is not to encompass every necessary vantage point, but rather to provide a personal basis from which to weigh the moral dilemmas inherent to rhetorical tactics.

The questions that plagued the minds of the classicists with regard to rhetorical influences are worth exploring as an evaluative starting point. In *Gorgias*, Plato's Socrates voices concern over rhetoric's similarities to "false arts," or shams, which mimic true arts. Only true arts can legitimately seek truth and virtue, says Socrates, while shams such as cooking, tiring, sophistry, and rhetoric attempt to mimic medicine, gymnastics, legislation, and politics. Socrates' worry here is that rhetoricians may rise to power through their persuasive abilities and outsmart those with expert knowledge, having little wisdom or natural ability regarding the particulars of curing the body or ruling a city. Such tyrants could amass wealth and endanger others through their actions, says Socrates, thus sophist teachers who purport to teach rhetoric to anyone for a price must be silenced.

For Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and other classical thinkers, rhetoric divorced from ethics amounts to coercion.

Thus we may take from Socrates the precept of critically judging those who would use rhetoric to gain power. This may sound like a rather broad principle since virtually every modern politician fit this category, yet we must remember to evaluate the character, credentials and reputation, the ethos, of those seeking to persuade. It's also worth noting Gorgias' retort to Socrates: teachers can't be blamed for creating powerful rhetoricians—it's up to the individual to guide his or her own rhetorical action in a just manner. Furthermore, we must be cognizant of what Socrates fails to acknowledge: upstanding, just and "expert" leaders may also qualify as master rhetoricians, as is the case, I would argue, with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Next we might consider narrative theorists offering critical insights on the ethical dimensions of rhetoric. Lucaites and Condit, for example, breakdown discourse according to poetic, dialectical, and rhetorical functions. Acknowledging some controversy in this framework, the goal of each function, respectively, is to transmit beauty, discover truth, and confer power. Transmitting beauty does not solely involve the honey-puff paste stylistic devices of orators in the late Roman Empire, however. Poetic texts often include substantive works such as music, dance, literature, art, and other modes of expression. Some of the ethical dilemmas involved in conferring power have already been addressed in the previous section, and thus the specific ethical issue to illuminate here is the modern notion of news reports and eyewitness testimony as serving a dialectical function.

While evening news accounts would purport to “discover truth” in an empirical and objective fashion, they are in reality chock full of emotionally-charged narratives and persuasive language masking biases, stereotypes, and outright arguments (content ideally relegated to the poetic and dialectical functions of discourse). Thus we must glean an awareness of messages (whether they be journalistic, cinematographic, historical, or otherwise) claiming to assume an “objective” or “balanced” stance. Reporters and directors and biographers can and should strive to shed biases and maintain objectivism, yet their textual works will undoubtedly contain implicitly persuasive content—material critics must be keenly attentive to.

Bennett and Edelman are another pair of narrative theorists with much to say about the ethics of rhetoric. Specifically, their tripartite guide to evaluating the ways in which stories achieve realism provides a welcome contribution to my analysis.

1. Selective Documentation – in choosing to convey only certain portions of actual stories, narratives limit and frame our understanding of truth
2. Fragmentary Plotlines – by providing certain familiar details, subplots, and characters in developing accounts of reality, narratives act as enthymematic arguments by allowing audiences to project conclusions cued by particular story forms
3. Morals and Beliefs – when plot fragments and certain evidentiary details validate an audience’s valued systems and stereotypes, the issue at hand comes to be viewed in terms of preconceived notions

As with our exploration of *Lucaites* and *Condits*’ functional structure, this guide comes to be most useful when evaluating the ethical constraints of messages that purport

to be journalistic or at least based on a series of events that have already transpired.

Bennett and Edelman urge the critic to consider why particular texts seem to cohere and “ring true” with such force that reality may be confused with fiction. The ethical concern here is whether the discourse comes to supplant original, more authentic understandings of history, geography, biography, or other referential subjects that exist apart from books and movies and other media that seek to mimic reality.

My guide for evaluating the ethical dimensions of rhetoric would not be complete without some discussion of Kenneth Burke’s views, many of which relate to moral dilemmas. Chief among these is his notion of language as a symbolic code having unintended rhetorical effects. We commonly think of rhetors controlling persuasive messages, when in fact, says Burke, the very words they attempt to control may illicit motivational and associational factors unknown to the orator. As we seek to bridge division and achieve identity and consubstantiality with others, we may engage in symbolic action that works against our aims. Likewise, it is worth asking whether powerfully motivational leaders such as Hitler or Mussolini are utterly and completely responsible for their success in wreaking havoc on humanity. Certainly foreknowledge of the aims behind Nazi propaganda makes the “sources” and “encoders” of these messages somewhat culpable, yet the unpredictability of language as symbolic code raises serious questions. What of the power of frames? In choosing one entelechial order above another, were the German people of the early twentieth century powerless to avoid the perennial temptation to scapegoat another race? Certainly not, but Burke’s concepts do explicate the communicative forces at work during the Holocaust.

Finally, a contemporary example. In formulating my evaluative guide to the ethical dimensions of rhetoric, I have chosen theoretical precepts from several theorists spanning many centuries, including Plato's Socrates, narrative theorists Lucaites and Condit and Bennett and Edelman, and of course, dramatist Kenneth Burke. The ideas expressed by these theorists are not necessarily relevant all discourse, but I believe an application to ABC's World News Tonight with Peter Jennings will lend some insight.

Jenning's program presents an interesting ethical dilemma in that for many Americans, the news he has been providing every weeknight for years constitutes their one and only daily window into affairs outside of what Burke would characterize as their narrow, symbolically-constructed place in the universe. Indeed, "More Americans get their news from ABC News than from any other network," is the tagline for Jennings' show. First and foremost, Socrates would be concerned with the persuasive influence of Jennings as a news anchor. With smile, smirk, furrowed brow, or editorial sound bite Jennings actively contextualizes the limited amount of information conveyed in each half-hour program. As a journalist, Socrates would point out, Jennings is "no expert" on all of the affairs World News Tonight covers. Yet his polished style and knowing glances would suggest that he could negotiate a hostage crisis or perform open-heart surgery, should the need arise.

The application of the narrative theorists is readily evident; Jennings' show purports to assume an objective, balanced perspective on news yet in reality most of the health updates and "Up Close" features on government waste wield a poetic or rhetorical function, not a dialectical one. Finally, in each and every finite news piece, the reporters

and editors at ABC News consciously document only certain detail, fragment their accounts according to familiar plots, and evoke familiar morals and beliefs.