Analyzing and Conflating Aristotle’s Philosophy of Ethics—

And Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of Moving from a Story-centered to a Narrative-centered Communication Ethic.

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**Introduction**

In the world we occupy in the twentieth century, it is increasingly more difficult to determine right from wrong, and good from evil due to the flagrant false rhetoric used to discuss every situation. A structured framework of impartial and appropriate rhetorical methods needs to be developed to push the true reporting of facts, and more importantly, the understanding of the facts for public.

In the United States (U.S.), immigrant cultural groups have moved from being the so-called *melting pot* to a *salad bowl.* All Americans began as immigrants, but in the historical context, most cultures seeking refuge in the U.S. historically chose to assimilate into the mainstream culture. More recently, immigrants seeking refuge desire to maintain their cultural ethics, customs, and religions. Often, this reduces these persons to marginalized groups who receive unethical treatment from the dominant culture. In this article, an attempt is made to analyze ethical decisions as described by Aristotle and to merge Freire’s method of storytelling to narrative to promote understanding and communication for people on all sides of important ethical issues. Following the introduction, two case studies will be reviewed to recount the merging of the two philosophies.

With the advent of multiple cultural perspectives, conflicts arise between the ethics of right and wrong— good and evil. Without any common ground of ethical communication, conflicts between individuals or groups can heighten into conflict. Analyzing Aristotle’s Philosophy of Ethics and merging into Freire’s Ethics of Communication should encourage multicultural groups to recognize common ground when defining the most just course of action for disputes. Warning: Unless these perspectives, and others, are taught and discussed freely in schools, this writer is not optimistic about change at the current time.

According to Dombrowsky, “Aristotle’s systematic analysis is an ancient perspective. But though it is ancient, it is not irrelevant to us …” (p. 41). The Golden Rule is familiar to most individuals and is held close as a strategy of ethical behavior and peacekeeping. Aristotle’s ethical theory was grounded in practical day-to-day communication between individuals and not steeped in ideology. Aristotle espouses, “Reflective reasoning, prudent judgement, deliberate choice, conscious application of will, and practical action…” (p.41). The U.S. fails alarmingly in this respect. In twenty-twenty-four, there is little evidence of these thought processes in any situation. The media reports dialogue that is seemingly fabricated and thrown into the cloud with no reflection on the ethics of accuracy or the harm it might cause to marginalized groups.

Furthermore, Aristotle’s perception of ethics articulates, “…ethics is the study of what is involved in good actions” (Dombrowski, 41). He further explains, “Ethics is about what is sought for its own sake—goodness itself—and not for the sake of something else such as money or success” (41). The most important aspect of Aristotle’s perspective is his adherence to reasoning. He understood that ethical solutions can have no absolute rules, but must instead be determined through a deliberate, weighted, rational decision-making process. Aristotle believed that all available facts need to be considered and a balanced decision made for all parties (Dombrowski, 44).

Merging from Aristotelian practical ethics, Paulo Freire communication ethics offers an implicit understanding of right and wrong by employing storytelling—to narrative. Freire was a Brazilian educator who had experienced poverty, imprisonment, and exile, but these hardships never lessened his concern for who he called the *Other* (Arnett, 489). Freire’s personal struggles created in him a sense of empathy and affinity with the *Other,* individuals or groups who were not given fair or just consideration in comparison with the dominant culture. Freire’s communication ethic developed from his lifetime of teaching literacy to the *Other.*

According to Arnett in his article, “Paulo Freire’s revolutionary pedagogy: From a story-centered to a narrative-centered communication ethic:

Freire’s literacy project for the disadvantaged is a story-centered communication ethic with social-cultural-political significance. His implicit communication ethic is a story centered communication ethic that makes participation in institutional life. Freire’s twofold understanding of literacy is the means through which new characters enter the story of institutional influence. Freire’s communication has an ethical objective: to invite and to recruit people into literacy and into institutional influence. The first step toward power and influence begins in a classroom—learning a textured understanding of reading. He rejected as unethical any communication style that discourages learning and literacy. (491)

The primary focus of Arnett’s article is that Freire’s communication ethic invites learning for outsiders, those without power and influence.

Students often ask, “What is the difference between philosophical ethics and communication ethics?” (Arnett, 497)

Dissecting this question is important in understanding the confluence of Aristotle’s philosophical ethic as it merges into Freire’s story-centered communication ethic. Philosophical ethics like Aristotle’s offers a platform for recognizing a specific standard which makes human judgments possible, while identifying similarities and differences in the standard and a given action. When we add the Freire’s ethic of communication to the situation, the specific standard takes on concern for all communicators, the historical moment, and the situation at hand (497). Consequently, when situational rhetoric clouds the right or wrong of any incident, the onlookers can move from the false information to the truth of the incident. The blending of communication ethics with philosophical ethics can help the observers,” navigate among a conceptual standard, the players in a story, the historical moment, and the topic or information” (Arnett, 498). While Aristotle’s practical philosophical ethics may seem like theory, when communication ethics are applied, “they do not rest in abstract theory but in the give and take of persons living together. The necessary flexibility of communication ethics rests rhetorically within stories. (499).

The following case studies are meant to illustrate conflicts between individuals, the ethics of the media response, the effect of both Aristotle and Freire’s ethical viewpoints in clarifying the right or wrong of the conflict.

**Case Study One**

On May 3, 2024, an incident occurred on Dowd Road in Carthage, North Carolina. The initial report from the Moore County Sheriff’s Department (MCSD) stated that a trespasser had been shot and killed on a homeowner’s property. Updated reports from (MCSD) reported the victim had received multiple gunshot wounds.

In the ensuing days, rhetorical reporting of these simple events became incendiary and terrifying to the population of Moore County. On the days that followed, the news became even more disturbing as the Sheriff’s department began to release a great deal of questionable information gathered from the homeowner, the only living eyewitness. The homeowner was identified as a military special operations colonel from Fort Liberty, and the deceased trespasser was identified as a Chechen citizen from Chicago, Illinois, who was putting in fiber optics infrastructure for Utilities One, a company based in Ohio.

Reports said the deceased man was aggressive and was taking pictures of the colonel’s family. News reports stretched as far as to say the deceased was a Chechen spy, and implied he was sent to Carthage to harm the colonel. The Moore County sheriff’s department released the frantic 911 calls of the colonel’s wife in which she is heard asking someone to get the rifle, quickly, for her husband. The sheriff’s department reported they could not reach Utilities One to confirm the trespassers’ identity, and a rumor started that the company was a front for Russian spies to get into the United States. To date, no arrests have been made.

From Aristotelian ethics, we learn that ethical solutions can have no absolute rules, but must instead be determined through a deliberate, weighted, rational decision-making process. Aristotle believed that all available facts need to be considered and a balanced decision made for all parties (Dombrowski, 44).

When we look at the absolute facts, an unarmed man was shot four times by a homeowner, who felt threatened after a brief conversation. The unarmed man was shot once in the hand, twice in the back, and finally once in the face. The trespasser did not have any identification on him, nor was he wearing a company uniform.

In the introduction of this article, with the advent of multiple cultural perspectives, conflicts arise between the ethics of right and wrong, and good and bad. This is precisely what happened in the shooting on Dowd Road. There was no evidence of common grounds of ethical reflection between the two individuals during the incident. However, the deceased, declared trespasser surely held ethical values that would have precluded the thought of being shot four times while attempting to do his job. And a special forces colonel surely held ethical values to preclude him from shooting the trespasser in the back two times.

If we move from here to merge with Paulo Freire’s communication ethics, the incident becomes more coherent. Through storytelling, Freire could explain what happened from the simple beginning reports. The Chechen individual, Ramzan Daraev, was performing his job in Carthage as he had been contracted to do by his employer. It was 8:15 p.m., and he wanted to finish for the day, but became annoyed at the homeowners attempts to interrogate him. Ramzan was alleged to speak little English, so probably did not comprehend the homeowner’s increasing distress. The special operations colonel may have had experience with Chechen operatives during his service and had formed a bias. When a Chechen individual shows up on his property, speaking little English, the colonel jumped to the worst conclusion; the trespasser was a spy sent specifically to the colonel’s home with intentions to harm him and his family.

As move from the story to narrative requires, “an additional rhetorical dynamic—the peoples’ buy-in or agreement” (Arnet, p.501). Individuals or groups must accept the story as the truest form of the incident. “A narrative is a story that a people rhetorically accept as a guide and then apply appropriately and creatively to the historical moment. The storyteller controls a story. The people control (through participation and change) the story of a narrative” (Arnet). According to Freier, “For a story to have lasting power, the story must be accepted as a guiding standard and then altered to meet changing historical circumstances. Freire rejected an understanding of narrative that equates teaching with telling, failing to meet the needs of the *Other* on his or her own soil of concern (Freire, 1970/1974, p. 57).

A story-centered communication ethic acknowledges that one’s deepfelt bias also carry a political perspective. A narrative adds commercial agreement. Stories that guide ethical conduct do not offer guidance in purity but in the embedded political or situated world of the information, the agent, and the historical moment itself. When a story has community support, agreement, and participation, it becomes a narrative (Arnet, p. 508).

If the individual or group buys into the story and finds it to be a truthful account of the incident, then the subsequent narrative can result in a call to action to correct the errors involved in the original incident. The trespasser should have had some form of identification on his person, and he should have been wearing a company uniform. The homeowner should have waited for the police to arrive rather than shooting the trespasser four times. If any narrative going forward contained these errors, hopefully a similar incident could be avoided.

At the time of this writing, there have been no arrests. Investigative reports surrounding the incident have gone silent.

**Case Study Two**

In 1994, Jerry Sandusky, the defensive coordinator for Penn State's football program meets and takes a ten-year-old boy on the field at Penn State games and introduces him to players. Mr. Sandusky is reported to have inappropriately touched the boy and showered with him in the university's football facility.

In 1998, a Penn State vice president first heard allegations that assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky had touched, hugged, and showered with an 11-year-old boy in a Penn State locker room, and he is reported to have scribbled this note to himself: "Is this the opening of Pandora's box? Other children?" (Freeh, 2012).

In the fall of 2000, janitor James Calhoun witnessed Sandusky performing oral sex on a boy and reported the incident to his supervisors, but no one ever made a formal report (Medina, page 1).

In 2008, the mother of a high-school first-year male student reports to high-school officials that Mr. Sandusky had engaged in inappropriate sexual conduct with her son on multiple occasions. The officials contacted the police, and an investigation begins (Medina, page 2).

Years later, “Penn State's receiver's coach, Mike McQueary acknowledged that while a graduate assistant in 2001, he observed Jerry Sandusky having anal sex with a boy in the team's locker-room shower. He failed to rescue or to contact the police. Instead, he called his father seeking advice. McQueary's father advised his son to watch out for No. 1 and merely report the incident to Paterno the next day” (Rosenbaum, p. 2).

According to Freeh:

For years, accounts of other incidents were reported to Joe Paterno, Penn State’s head coach and athletic director, who was closest to Sandusky. “Paterno fully aware of the 1998 incident, yet in 2001 he failed to take direct action when an assistant coach told him he had seen Sandusky sexually abusing a boy in the locker room shower. Paterno didn't call police. He did not push for action (2).

The abuse went on for several years until the boys were old enough to press charges against Sandusky. A trial ensued, and in 2012, former Penn State football coach Jerry Sandusky was sentence to 30-60 years in prison for the sexual abuse of ten boys after tearful testimony from his victims (Medina 2011).

In this case, Aristotle’s ethical views can quickly assess this tragedy. His ethical theory always relates to the “study of what is involved in good actions” (Dombrowski, 41). He further explains, “Ethics is about what is sought for its own sake—goodness itself—and not for the sake of something else such as money or success” (42). The “good” thing to have done would have been to investigate Sandusky’s actions earlier. The Penn State leaders unethically held up money, reputation, and success above the abuse of children.

Once again, through the communication ethics of storytelling, Freire could have informed the public of the background of the incident.

Jerry Sandusky created a non-profit organization for underprivileged youth and at-risk children—our most vulnerable population. The organization was called the Second Mile and was based on the Penn State campus. Beginning in 1994, claims began to surface from eyewitness that Sandusky was sexually abusing some of these young people. Over the next ten years, Sandusky used this Second Mile organization as a cover to allow him to abuse young children. None of the abused young men came forward at that time, but important personnel from Penn State saw some of these incidents, reported them to superiors, but superiors involved did not push further investigation. In 2011, some of the boys were now old enough to begin pushing for an investigation.

The young men told the tragic story of being abused multiple times by Sandusky, but not knowing how to address it when they were younger. As this story merges into a narrative, the events of how this could happen could be analyzed and prevented from happening again. Policies and procedures could be put in place to protect young children from being involved in such a tragic incident.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the merging of Aristotelian ethics and Freire’s ethics of communication can help to analyze challenging situations and promote common ethical ground for making decisions. By merging Aristotle’s ethics of examining rational and logical facts with Freier’s storytelling to narrative could help the public and promote understanding and communication for people on all sides of the important ethical issues. The key is for people to recognize and understand the facts, and to learn to have empathy for the stories of the injustices done to underprivileged and marginalized communities.

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**Reflection:**

Analyzing and Conflating Aristotle’s Philosophy of Ethics—And Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of Moving from a Story-centered to a Narrative-centered Communication Ethic was an article I wrote for Dr. Mathew Cox’s course, English 7705: The Ethics of Technical Communication in the summer of 2024. The course explores the intersection of ethics philosophy, technical and professional writing, and their relationship to current conditions.

As I reread this article, I realize why the topic is so important. Every day Americans are constantly bombarded with false and salacious rhetoric that is confusing and makes it difficult to ascertain the truth from false news and to make decisions. Aristotle’s theories echo what I believe is the most ethical way to communicate truthfully and to live with others. I am not naïve, and I know we do not live in a perfect world. I know few will agree with my attitude towards solving ethical issues, but I strongly believe we need a common way to analyze whether a claim is true or false, good or evil.

To organize my thoughts, I look to Aristotle’s view of ethical communication theory and its connection to decision making. Aristotle believed that ethical decisions should be concerned with goodness itself and not with any gain that would be achieved such as money or success. I also respect Aristotle for his strong belief in and adherence to reasoning through a problem. He believed that all decisions about a conflicting issue should consider all available facts and make a balanced decision for all parties (Dombrowski, 44).

To elaborate on truth and reason, I look to Paulo Freire’s revolutionary pedagogy: From a story-centered to a narrative-centered communication ethic.” After the conflict or issue has been carefully analyzed to determine a reasonable decision, a narrative should be presented to further educate the public.

Freire was a Brazilian educator who had experienced poverty, imprisonment, and exile, but these hardships never lessened his concern for who he called the *Other* (Arnett, 489). Socrates was a student of Plato who enjoyed good standing with King Phillip and his son Alexandar the Great of Macedon for many years. “After the [death of Alexander the Great](https://www.worldhistory.org/article/2366/death-of-alexander-the-great/) in 323 BCE, when the tide of Athenian popular opinion turned against Macedon, Aristotle was charged with impiety owing to his earlier association with Alexander and the Macedonian Court. With the unjust execution of Socrates in mind, Aristotle chose to flee Athens, "lest the Athenians sin twice against philosophy", he explained. He died of natural causes a year later in 322 BCE” (World History Encyclopedia (2019).

In conclusion, making ethical decisions is difficult. If an individual has as many of the true facts as possible, making an ethical decision becomes easier. The facts can often come from story-centered communication as suggested by Freire, and resulting narratives can further move the truth of the situations.

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