

Leading with the Good: The Role of Rhetorical Commonplaces in Communication Ethics

Justin N. Bonanno

Abstract: This article investigates the relationship between classical rhetoric, dialectic, and communication ethics. In particular, I argue that the commonplace tradition provides us with viable resources for keeping the conversation going in postmodernity. I relate Walter J. Ong’s analytic, cumulative, and special commonplaces to the work of Ronald C. Arnett. Ultimately, commonplaces can serve as rhetorical and dialectical means for contending with the cult of expertise, which tends to drown out other voices in contemporary discourse. Commonplaces can be utilized to sort through the relative goodness of competing goods. I conclude the article by gesturing at the significance of Plato’s and Aristotle’s work for contemporary communication ethics scholarship.

Keywords: communication ethics; Arnett, Ronald C.; commonplaces; rhetoric; dialectic

Let us begin with a reflection on the problem of the *tertium quid*. I use the term *tertium quid* here to refer to that third thing which adjudicates between competing goods in any given dispute. You can think of the *tertium quid* as a faculty of judgment. In the opening of his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle (1984) explains how rhetoric is the “faculty” for observing the available means of persuasion (1355b25–30). The word “faculty” in this context comes from the Greek *dunamis*, which also translates to “power” or “might” (Perseus Digital Library n.d.). Whenever you decide to pursue *this good* instead of *that one*, you utilize the *tertium quid*, which is a faculty other than whatever is under consideration.

You can think of “reason” as the *tertium quid* that allows you to decide between competing goods. However, modernity has individualized “reason,” obscuring its relational ties to larger communities of meaning. For the Counter-Enlightenment rhetorician Giambattista Vico (1968), common sense was the unreflective judgment that influenced your choice between competing goods (63). Indeed, Vico’s “common sense,” or *sensus communis*, was the *tertium quid*, a communal faculty as opposed to a psychological one. The genius of Vico’s (1990)

work is that it emphasized the significance of the rhetorical tradition over and above the isolated Cartesian individual coming to conclusions outside of any given community. At bottom, the question is whether the *tertium quid*, the faculty of judgment in the case of competing goods, is individual, communal, or both. Ronald C. Arnett, proponent of the “both/and,” would probably say that the faculty is both individual and communal in nature.

Now let’s bracket this question of the *tertium quid* and focus on its objects, those things that the *tertium quid* relates to when trying to decide between competing goods. Where can the *tertium quid* go to resolve the question of competing goods? Commonplaces. In the ancient rhetorical tradition, a commonplace was where you went to find arguments. Commonplaces have *copia*, or copiousness, as their end goal (Ong 1967, 62–63). A good communicator can speak copiously in any given circumstance. Importantly, commonplaces link rhetoric with hermeneutics. Commonplaces provide templates for interpreting situations and for sorting through a stock of material. Having sorted through the material, these commonplaces can help generate things to say. The *tertium quid*, whatever it is (psychological “reason,” communal “common sense,” or a mixture of both), can have recourse to these commonplaces to perceive the possibilities of persuasion and action in any given situation.

Modernity has a particularly adversarial relationship toward commonplaces, and it does two things that frustrate people across the political spectrum. First, modernity emphasizes argument by authority. The expert reigns supreme. The most we can do as lay spectators in the contemporary sport of politics is to quibble with one another like fans of their favorite teams. Today, we consume politics, and we let others, the experts, play the game for us. If we participate at all, it is vicariously, through our favorite politicians, political parties, or corporations. We pick our favorite experts and then watch them duke it out. Second, modernity exalts the special commonplaces at the expense of the other cumulative and analytic commonplaces, about which I will have more to say in a moment.

By failing to appreciate the full range of the commonplace tradition, modernity robs lay individuals of valuable tools for critiquing experts and for holding them accountable. As tools for sorting the wheat from the chaff, commonplaces play an indispensable role in the constructive critique of any narrative, institution, or individual in postmodernity. Submerged in a sea of information and robbed of the time to sort through it all, we need the commonplaces, the original algorithms and sorting devices for the citizen orator.

In this article, I review some types of commonplaces and then consider how they relate to and extend Ronald C. Arnett’s work. Arnett offered rhetorical commonplaces for enduring problematic situations in which different people want different things, perhaps for an indefinite amount of time. Commonplaces help us to “keep the conversation going” (Rorty 1979), an ideal that Arnett would frequently praise (Arnett 1986, 126; Arnett 2016, 5; Arnett and Arneson 1999, 54). The speaker who has mastered the commonplaces can speak copiously and therefore attain this ideal. The true postmodernist goes forward, beyond

modernity, by going back to the rhetorical tradition to retrieve the significance of the commonplaces.

Commonplaces and Narratives: The Good as Publicly Available

In *The Presence of the Word*, Father Walter J. Ong differentiates analytic, special, and cumulative (or synthetic) commonplaces. The analytic breaks something down into parts, whereas the synthetic constructs parts into a larger whole (Merriam-Webster n.d.-a; Merriam-Webster n.d.-b). I want to briefly define these three types of commonplaces and then relate each to Arnett's work.

To begin, the analytic commonplaces are "analytic" because they "analyze a subject in terms of various headings" (Ong 1967, 81). Some examples of analytic commonplaces include "causes, effects, contraries, comparable things, related things, and so on" (81). Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and his *Topics* both contain a number of analytic commonplaces useful in rhetoric and dialectic. In "Language is Sermonic," Richard Weaver ([1963] 2001) considers the analytic commonplaces of definition, comparison/contrast, consequence, and authority. Arnett frequently argued by consequence (what he called "implications" [see Arnett, Fritz, and Bell 2010, 116]). He also liked to argue by contrast; if you knew him, you also knew "this is not that."

Special commonplaces concern specific subjects (Ong 1967, 82). Law or medicine, for example, each have their own special branches of study and lines of argument unique to the subject matter. Medicine studies the etiology of a disease, cell metabolism, the effects of pharmacological substances, and so on. Cinematography includes special topics such as camera angles, continuity, editing, composition, and close-ups (Mascelli 1965). These special commonplaces pertain to the subject matter itself, which dictates the topics under consideration. According to Aristotle (1984), the closer you get to a special commonplace, the further you get away from rhetoric and dialectic (1358a5–10). Experts can claim privileged dominion over special topics, and thus these topics frequently exclude lay participation or discovery.

Ong (1967) refers to cumulative commonplaces as "an accumulated store of readied material" (82). In ages past, individuals carried around a commonplace book with quotes, proverbs, anecdotes, and so on that they could return to when speaking. Such cumulative commonplaces consist of prefabricated examples that can be readily adapted to new circumstances. One example of a cumulative commonplace is the "we live in a degenerate age" spiel, which was operative even in Cicero's time (Ong 1967, 56–57, 81). Ong explains how cumulative commonplaces made heavy use of virtue and vice schemes (83). Undoubtedly, cumulative commonplaces relate to Arnett's concept of narrative, which shapes our sense of right and wrong, virtue and vice.

A narrative consists of shared yet tacit background meaning that gives human action significance and foregrounds the importance of certain goods (Arnett and Arneson 1999, 52–61; Arnett, Fritz, and Bell 2009, 37–41). The

significance of narrative is that it places the notion of the good into a public domain. For Plato (2005), the Forms went beyond the individual mind (247a). In like manner, Arnett's narratives exist linguistically and discursively as well as in embodied practices beyond individual selves. The key with the Arnettian approach is to dislodge the good from an inaccessible realm hidden in an individual's psyche; the goal is to make the good somehow communicable and therefore shared. Both narratives and commonplaces draw upon publicly accessible sources of the good in order to continue the conversation outside of expert control. That the good can exist outside the individual mind, especially that of the individual expert mind, is essential to the critique of modernity. That goods should exist in public narratives is crucial to combating absolute relativism and subjectivism.

We can understand modernity in terms of the commonplaces that it utilizes most often: the analytic commonplace of authority as well as the special commonplaces. The medical doctor stands as an exemplar of these two totalizing ways of resolving disputes. The doctor as expert insists that you take this or that drug. As a doctor, she has acquired a legitimacy capable of being challenged only by other doctors, and her capacity to draw upon special lines of argument (e.g., pathology, neurology, psychiatry) has the ability to stop lay criticism dead in its tracks (cf. Aristotle 1984, 1358a10–1358a35). Expertise crowds out lay participation from the public sphere. Arguably, expertise annihilates the public sphere. Arnett would likely suggest that sometimes it is better to have multiple goods in dynamic tension rather than arbitrary resolution by bureaucratic experts.

Arnett's work aligns with the commonplace tradition insofar as he stressed the importance of communal and public sources of meaning from which we can draw arguments. Whether we like it or not, these public sources of meaning inform how we speak and act. In particular, Arnett was more of a proponent of the cumulative than the analytic or special commonplaces. Insofar as modernity takes the full range of commonplaces off the table, it discourages the practice of rhetoric and dialectic. By considering the significance of the commonplace tradition, we can continue to build upon Arnett's work, which invites a constructive critique of modernity.

Protecting and Promoting Goodness

As someone sympathetic to postmodernity, Arnett may have shied away from the word "truth," but he never neglected the significance of competing goods. He would have likely insisted upon there being multiple goods instead of *the* good. Nevertheless, for multiple things to be good, there must logically be something that these multiple things share in common that makes them good: in other words, *goodness* as such. All of the options Arnett offers for sorting through issues between different narratives have the notion of *goodness* at the root of them. Indeed, one way of thinking about communication ethics is by considering it as the study of *good* commonplaces. Conceived of in this light, communication ethics becomes the protection and promotion of *goodness* as such. Like deliberative rhetoric,

communication ethics takes the relative goodness of goods into consideration (Aristotle 1984, 1362a15–1365b20). The more communication ethics takes rhetoric and dialectic into consideration, the more communication ethics can utilize what the commonplaces have to offer for this historical moment.

The primary postmodern problem is that of authority. Prior to modernity, traditional authority might otherwise have helped to adjudicate between competing goods (e.g., the church or the state). But what happens when the legitimacy of this authority wanes? We must then have recourse to various psychological traits (e.g., individualized reason or sympathy). The problem with unduly focusing on the psychological is that it can obscure us from seeing how the good *qua* the good transcends the individual self. Arnett's emphasis on the importance of narrative attempted to do precisely this: to get people to think outside of themselves and to recognize the sources of goodness in larger reservoirs of meaning.

Both Plato and Aristotle understood how the good transcends the individual person. In his *Republic*, Plato reflects not only upon justice but also upon goodness. Adeimantus demands that Socrates praise justice as something that is good in itself (Plato 1997, 368d–e). Socrates eventually argues that the good is like the sun. With vision, you have the faculty of sight and the thing seen. But you cannot see without some third thing, the sun (think here of the *tertium quid* mentioned above), which allows you see things. Socrates likens the sun to the good, for it is by the good that we know all things. Indeed, for Socrates even the truth takes its being from the good. Socrates says:

So that what gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower is the form of the good. And though it is the cause of knowledge and truth, it is also an object of knowledge. Both knowledge and truth are beautiful things, but the good is other and more beautiful than they. In the visible realm, light and sight are rightly considered sunlike, but it is wrong to think that they are the sun, so here it is right to think of knowledge and truth as goodlike but wrong to think that either of them is the good—for the good is yet more prized. (Plato 1997, 508d–509a)

Here, Socrates advances the idea that the good is higher than the true. Goodness turns out to be the *tertium quid*, the third thing by which we can consider all others. By reflecting first upon goodness as such, we can then go on to consider the significance of “competing goods.”

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle enumerates a number of “good things” like fame, happiness, health of body, and so on, each of which may serve as a “source” of persuasion (Aristotle 1984, 1362a15–1365b20). Further, the good itself can serve as a source of persuasion. Once we know what a good thing is, we can deliberate based upon the relative goodness of things (1363b5–1363b15). Consider, for example, the trivial example of a steak. Steak is good. But Aristotle teaches us what we already know: that the best part of a good thing is better than the lesser part of a good thing (1365a30–35). Filet mignon is a greater good than flank steak. With his analytic commonplaces, Aristotle provides us with a way of thinking through the relative goodness of goods. By reflecting upon how Plato and Aristotle

conceived of the good and the relative goodness of goods, we can further see how the ancient rhetorical tradition can augment postmodern communication ethics.

From a rhetorical perspective, we would do well to emphasize the significance of goodness—not at the expense of the truth—but perhaps as a more relatable commonplace and source of commonplaces that those we disagree with can more readily perceive. Focusing more on the good than on the true gives us more leverage to balance out the excesses of modernity and postmodernity. One reason for emphasizing goodness is that people often conflate the “true” with the scientific, and they take for granted that the scientific is the positivistic and strictly empirical; people often confuse science with scientism. The expert, authoritative master of the special topics, drowns out other voices in the sea of competing narratives. I would not deny that the truth is absolutely essential and cannot be eschewed at the expense of the good. I am presupposing here that what I am telling you about the importance of the good itself is true. I mean only to suggest that, the art of rhetoric being the art of emphasis, we ought to emphasize the good and underline the significance of goodness wherever it appears (Weaver [1963] 2001, 1355).

Above all, the *tertium quid*, the faculty of judgment (whether individual or communal), must itself be good. It is good because it allows us to discern the relative goodness of goods. How could something that both allows us to perceive *the good* as well as the relative goodness of goods not itself be good? By beginning with goodness and practicing charity, we can build, in the words of Dan Burke (2023), “a bridge that Truth can pass over.” Communication ethics can continue to stress the significance of competing goods. However, without recovering the significance of *the good*, we cannot hope to aspire to the common good, which any appeals to justice and communication ethics must presuppose.

Justin N. Bonanno, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communications and Literature at Ave Maria University. He recently published a book on the philosophy of communication entitled Walker Percy and the Crisis of Meaning (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023). He writes regularly about culture, communication, and media at www.teachdelightmove.com.

References

- Aristotle. 1984. *The Rhetoric and the Poetics of Aristotle*. Translated by W. Rhys Roberts and Ingram Bywater. New York: Modern Library.
- Arnett, Ronald C. 1986. *Communication and Community: Implications of Martin Buber's Dialogue*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Arnett, Ronald C. 2016. “Philosophy of Communication: Qualitative Research, Questions in Action.” *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication* 17 (1): 1–6.

- Arnett, Ronald C., and Pat Arneson. 1999. *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Arnett, Ronald C., Janie M. Harden Fritz, and Leeanne M. Bell. 2009. *Communication Ethics Literacy: Dialogue and Difference*. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Arnett, Ronald C., Janie M. Harden Fritz, and Leeanne M. Bell. 2010. "Dialogic Learning as First Principle in Communication Ethics." *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 18 (3): 111–26.
- Burke, Dan. 2023. "From the Occult to Catholic: Love Builds a Bridge for Truth." YouTube, April 22, 2023.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHuouyFQ2GQ>.
- Maselli, Joseph V. 1965. *The Five C's of Cinematography: Motion Picture Filming Techniques*. Los Angeles: Silman-James Press.
- Merriam-Webster. n.d.-a. "Analysis." <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/analysis>.
- Merriam-Webster. n.d.-b. "Synthesis." <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/synthesis>.
- Ong, Walter J. 1967. *The Presence of the Word*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Perseus Digital Library. n.d. "Dunamis." Greek Word Study Tool.
<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=Dunamis&la=greek>.
- Plato. 1997. *Republic*. Translated by G. M. A. Grube. Revised by C. D. C. Reeve. In *Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, 971–1123. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Plato. 2005. *Phaedrus*. Translated by Christopher Rowe. London: Penguin Books.
- Rorty, Richard. 1979. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Vico, Giambattista. 1968. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*. Translated by Thomas G. Bergin and Max H. Fisch. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Vico, Giambattista. 1990. *On the Study Methods of Our Time*. Translated by Elio Gianturco. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Weaver, Richard. (1963) 2001. "Language is Sermonic." In *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, edited by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, 1351–60. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's.