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A STANDARD OF ETHICS FOR ARGUMENT

Don J. Stewart, Temple University

Donald K. Smith (1969) said that ethics is the study of:

value statements which identify the standards of conduct which an individual may acknowledge as constitutive of his person or personality, or which a group or society may acknowledge as constitutive of its character. We take it that men in societies universally acknowledge such system of values (p. 328).

Any system that focuses precisely on degrees of rightness and wrongness in human behavior has the potential to yield standards for ethical judgments. Richard Means (1969), a social critic, asserts that the "essence of man par excellence may be *Homo ethicus*, man the maker of ethical judgments" (p. 12). There are several perspectives, or systems, that *Homo ethicus* can use for judging human communication. Johannesen (1983) in his book, *Ethics in Human Communication*, lists at least seven perspectives for ethical assessment of rhetoric (pp. 9-10).

The purpose of this paper is to: (1) briefly identify several perspectives that can be used for the ethical assessment of argument; (2) describe a synthesized system of standards that could be used for assessing ethical argument; and, (3) show how an orientation to the principles of general semantics is useful in meeting those synthesized standards.

Perspectives for Evaluation

Most governmental systems con-

tain within their ideology a set of values. The political values of a governmental system can be used as standards of evaluation for rhetoric occurring within that system. The values of that are "fundamental" to a democratic form of government and are very different from those espoused by a Marxist oriented system. Each different system of government could embody differing values leading to different ethical judgments.

The prescriptive perspective approaches the problem of ethics in human communication much the same way as a judge might interpret the law (absolute in one sense but it should not be confused with a legal perspective where any communication that is not considered illegal can be thought of as ethical).¹ The advocates of this position offer certain "do's" and "don'ts" or a "list of commandments" that are designed to *honor* the values of the society as a whole (not necessarily the most "good for the most people").²

In a situational perspective, an ethical judgment is made in light of each different rhetorical context. The central focal point is on the elements of the specific communication situation at hand. Communications are judged as ethical or unethical according to relativistic viewpoint and absolutes are avoided.

In the human nature perspective, characteristics are identified that set humans apart from ani-

mals. The characteristics are then employed as standards for evaluating the ethics of argument. Any "uniquely human attribute" that is fostered in development by a communicator's appeals and techniques can be thought of as ethical.

Researchers in the field of communication say that human communication is a two-way dialogic transaction. In this transaction there are attitudes held for "each other" by the participants. These "attitudes" can be used to evaluate the level of ethics in a given argument. For the proponents of this perspective, dialogical communication can be thought of as more humane than monological.

A Synthesized System of Standards for Ethical Rhetoric

Contemporary conceptions of mature and responsible argument have been synthesized by Johannesen (1983) from the perspectives described above in his book (pp. 11-90). Johannesen (1983, pp. 61-62) states that ideas from such noted speech educators as Ehninger (1970), Fisher (1980), Brockriede (1872), Johnstone (1981), etc., can be used as standards for evaluating sound and ethical argument. For the purposes of this paper, I will characterize these standards of ethical argument and show how an orientation to the principles of general semantics can aid those involved in argument to meet the standards efficiently.

(1) *Ethical rhetoric serves the ends of self-discovery, social knowledge, or public action more than personal ambition.*

Irving J. Lee (1941) in his book, *Language Habits in Human Affairs*, cautions against rhetoric which serves the speaker's personal ambitions. He notes grave problems have occurred in society in the past when "spellbinders" have attempted to fulfill their personal ambitions through the power of rhetoric. Lee states that these men are "able to affect and unleash the forces of human beings in almost any direction by the hypnotism of their verbal rituals" (p. 68). The spellbinders, Lee maintains, sometimes put their personal ambitions ahead of the more important aspect of promoting social knowledge that is gained through what general semanticists call proper evaluation:

To the argument that spellbinders sometimes evoke action for "good by their words," this should be said: Whenever we toy with human beings, seeking to get them to respond to words only without regard to the fact that they represent something else, we shall be breeding people ever at the mercy of those who play with words—and with the people, too. Far better would it be to train men and women in proper evaluation, in the recognition of the quality of the words and what they represent (p. 172).

This training in proper evaluation ("How can I talk about the events of this world so that my talk evaluates them properly?") that Lee refers to is training in the principles of general semantics. To improve one's argument and

promote the ends of self-discovery and social knowledge, an ethical communicator, before he speaks should ask *not*, "what shall I call it" but put major emphasis on the question, "what is being so called?" and then speak.

(2) *Ethical rhetoric avoids intolerance and acknowledges audience freedom of choice and freedom of dissent.*

General semantics teaches that we have real choices as rhetors and challenges us to act responsibly; to become socially cohesive by functioning at an appropriate level of awareness to our abstractions. S. I. Hayakawa (1978) in his book, *Language in Thought and Action*, warns that we must not confuse descriptive with evaluative language (p. 172). When a speaker chooses not to confuse levels of abstraction, he promotes proper evaluation in relation to "facts" and an audience is offered "real" freedom of choice. Another important element to consider in evaluating ethical rhetoric and choice is whether the "speaking" is of the sort that produces automatic, signal reaction. An ethical speaker, according to the principles of general semantics, seeks to orient his audience to delay, deliberate, and investigate, before accepting proposals. This promotes the possibility of informed choice and allows the audience to choose to dissent in a given case on the basis of the "facts."

(3) *Ethical argument is reflexive, in including self-scrutiny of one's own evidence, reasoning, and mo-*

tives.

General semantics places a major emphasis on the examination of one's own evidence, reasoning, and motives. General semantics seeks to help speakers better represent "truth and reality." The main principle to be applied here is that of a speaker being extensionally oriented. The speaker who is extensionally oriented puts his main emphasis on detailed examples and specific facts of what he is talking about. Being extensionally oriented causes a speaker to become proficient in relating "word-maps" to his "fact-territory." When there is an added absorption in the "territory-facts" there are two effects upon the speaker: (1) his attitude toward the evidence becomes more discrete and cautious, he is aware that all cannot be known about the "facts" in a given case (knowledge is only partial—the result of abstracting and (2) statements become more qualified and circumspect—better reasoned. Without the use of general semantic principles a speaker may be quite fully convinced that what he is saying is the "truth." He adjusts to his own rhetoric as if it were "fact-territory" instead of a means of representation which was a deliberate slanting and distortion of the facts. General semantics provides a way of self-evaluation for examining our motives as we realize that speaking is a product of our own nervous system and these inner reactions (intensional orientation) must be consistently taken into consideration.

The speaker who evaluates properly doesn't confuse (identify) these inner reactions with the "objective" reality of "fact-territory" which is represented by "word-maps."

(4) *Ethical rhetoric attends to data through use of accurate, complete, and relevant evidence and reasoning and through use of appropriate field-dependent tests for soundness of evidence and reasoning.*

When comparing and analyzing arguments it is necessary to discuss if each argument is field-invariant or field-dependent, according to Toulmin (1958). Arguments from different fields must be carefully scrutinized, for comparisons are difficult to make. Toulmin states that the application of formal logical rules to field-dependent arguments is questionable at best, so his answer for the problem is the claim-data-warrant-reservation-backing qualifier model. Under Toulmin's system it is the quality of the evidence or argument at the speaker's disposal which determines which sort of qualifier he is entitled to include in his statements. Since this is a dynamic model which highlights the movement of the rhetorical reasoning, a speaker trained in the principles of general semantics would feel quite comfortable using it. Realizing that he/she could not know all, a speaker would not make claims as though he knew "all" about a subject (dogmatic). An awareness of the limitations of our language heighten the ability to be flexible and open and to

think the "etc." Whereas language tends to be static, the world is dynamic (the world changes much faster than words do). By dating our statements, we are reminded that no one thing is ever the same twice. The use of the dating device. (America 1776 is not America 1986) enables a speaker to not make generalizations without considering the time factors. Toulmin's use of the qualifier registers the degree of force with which the maker believes in his claim to possess. Lee's use of substitute language, ("seems to me," "appears") speaks to this issue of probability.

(5) *Ethical rhetoric is bilateral. Bilaterality includes mutuality of personal and intellectual risk, openness to the possibility of self-change, and openness to scrutiny by others.*

A speaker who is extensionally oriented focuses not only upon detailed examples, etc., but also upon the reaction of those to whom he is speaking. A speaker who is oriented to the principles of general semantics realizes that no two individuals in an audience will respond exactly the same and no two individuals will respond the same way twice. The speaker realizes and welcomes scrutiny by others. The speaker, trained in general semantic principles, also knows that concentration should be placed upon his "facts" and his auditors, not on his words and himself. Knowing that the "facts" he speaks about are in constant change leaves him open to the possibility of self-change and less dog-

matic. Instead of emphasizing competitive thinking, the general semanticist places great value upon group thinking and cooperative thinking. According to Lee (1940), the Korzybskian system is a "doctrine of adequate statements, and proper evaluation for both speaker and hearer" (p. 601).

(6) *Ethical rhetoric is self-perpetuating. Disagreement on a subject leaves open the possibility of deliberation on other subjects and of later deliberation on the disputed subject.*

Korzybski (1933) encouraged the use of what he called the "delayed reaction" (pp. 317-319). This entails taking time to deliberate on information after receiving it ("semantic reaction" stimulus-response) essentially a thinking-feeling response. According to the principle of mutuality, later deliberation and reaction is expected. The importance of mutuality and deliberation is stated by Hayakawa as the basic assumption of his important book:

... widespread intraspecific cooperation through the use of language is the fundamental mechanism of human survival . . . Human fitness to survive means the ability to talk and write and listen and read in ways that increase the chances for you and fellow members of your species to survive together (1978, p. 15).

This is best accomplished through a delayed reaction for further deliberation.

(7) *Ethical rhetoric embodies an attitude of reasonableness. Reasonableness includes willingness to*

present reasons in support of our views, tolerance of presentation of reasons by others, respect for the intrinsic worth of the other person as a human, and avoidance of personalizing the controversy.

The general semanticist, according to Lee, prides himself in his willingness to present good reasons in support of his view ("facts"). He then, without confusing his levels of abstraction, and also without confusing description with inferences, reaches his highest order generalization properly (reasonableness). The realization that any utterance must be dealt with as a mode of behavior (a living issue) makes the semanticist tolerant of presentation by others. The general semanticist feels that the human life is the ultimate standard against which all other values should be judged (See Korzybski's Theory of Timebinding³). Without a regard for other human beings, the cooperation that Hayakawa spoke of earlier would be impossible.

(8) *Ethical rhetoric manifests what Walter R. Fisher terms the "logic of good reasons"—"logic of values,"*

Richard Weaver (1970), in his book *Ethics of Rhetoric*, asserts, "The good soul, consequently, will not urge a perversion of justice as justice in order to impose upon the commonwealth. Insofar as the soul has its impulse in the right direction, its definitions will agree with the true nature of intelligible things" (p. 17). Weaver also equ-

ates ethics with "sermonic" language (the *ought* proposition, not religious guidelines in the strictest sense).⁴ "He states, "As rhetoric confronts us with choices involving values, the rhetorician is a preacher to us, noble if he tries to direct our passion toward noble ends and base if he uses our passion to confuse and degrade us" (1970b, p. 179). Weaver is emphasizing the basis of rhetoric as "choice," pointing out that the rhetor's "choices" lie in the domain of ethics. Since choice is dependent on the values of those engaged in the communicative act, ethics and argument are inseparable.

Weaver has questioned general semantics on philosophical and ethical grounds because its advocates see only empirical reality and that they attempt to semantically purify speech by "denuding language of all valences and tendencies," and, "perpetrating the greater sin of undermining the ultimate source of social cohesion" (1970a, p. 181). General Semantics, as understood by this author, stresses that discourse aimed at motivating action and stimulating or expressing feeling and value judgment is a necessary human language tool. As noted earlier, S. I. Hayakawa warns that we must not confuse levels of abstraction or confuse descriptive with evaluative language (1978, p. 172). When Weaver states, in his five points of potential ethical standards, that pseudo-neutrality in language usage is ethically suspect, he is

squarely in agreement with the principles of general semantics. When a person chooses not to confuse levels of abstraction, he promotes proper evaluations in relation to "facts."

A Value Perspective

If rhetoric is a device for proclaiming values, then what would be more "valuable" than the survival of the human race? As Weinberg (1973) said, "Human life is the standard against which all other values should ultimately be judged" (p. 156). Human communicators can be thought of as "good" to the degree they contribute to a humankind's survival and "bad" to the degree that they do not. The problem in judging a communication act is to determine whether or not it is likely to contribute to one's survival (and I personally believe a major emphasis should be placed on the "quality" of life).

Though animals may be able to learn nonoral languages (symbol-using capacity as a human nature perspective suggests), no evidence has yet been offered that they can transmit their "knowledge" from generation to generation. Humankind does not have to start each generation from "scratch." The human language capacity allows us to use the knowledge accumulated in the past, learn in the present, and transmit to the future. Because of this ability, Alfred Korzybski classified man as a "time-binder". The time-binding (accumulation and transmission of knowledge) potential is present through-

out the species. No one group of humankind, as a group, is inherently superior or inferior to any other. On a statistical basis we can expect to find relatively the same percentage of sub-average, average, and above-average people in each ethnic group (Weinberg, p. 157). This allows us to form a cross-cultural ethical standard for all human communications and eliminate problems inherent in several of the other perspectives examined.

The basic tenet for the ethical communicator could be to become a "better" time-binder and act and make choices so as to enable others to use their time-binding capacities more "effectively" (p. 158). Spreading "false knowledge" and possessing selfish motives would be examples of non-effective and unethical time-binding.

Conclusion

In the past, students of argumentation have been trained to stress those factors favorable to their own cause; not by presenting false evidence but by stressing only that which is favorable. Unfortunately, he sometimes seems to talk as if the details he abstracts constitute all the facts. He appears to select only those facts which suit his purpose. The general semanticist stresses a more complete or proper analysis that can be considered more ethical. He does not necessarily observe all the facts but he realizes that his abstractions do not make up all the facts and does not talk as though they do.

A speaker trained in the principles of general semantics realizes that his talk is often "abstraction of highest order." He knows he does not always talk about the "object" itself but often makes statements about statements. It becomes more apparent to the general semanticist when personal ambitions and feelings "inside-the-skin" are interfering with his "objectivity" so he can consciously attempt to be more ethical (per standards).

While inferential statements are necessary, in life situations they inject modification of the facts and should be distinguished from descriptions. This knowledge enables the speaker trained in general semantics to react more ethically in the presentation of evidence.

General Semantics in the past has been condemned by various scholars on several grounds: (1) intellectual imperialism; (2) cultism; and, (3) a "rehash" of nominalism. While it is true that "zealots" have attempted to popularize General Semantics in various unpopular ways, we should not "toss the baby out with the bath water." Many of the problems that are created or overlooked by the other ethical perspectives this paper has examined can be aided through the use of general semantic principles. It should also be noted that general semantics cannot solve *all* the problems of ethics in argument (general semantic principles recognize that it may even create a few of its own).

This paper calls for a re-examination of the problems of ethics in

argument by incorporating old ways of thinking in a "new" way. It is a beginning, not an end. The point is that one perspective is not inherently better than another, but when we disregard ideas we limit our possibilities for a synthesis that might actually help us.

Even though some scholars and writers have said that ethics is a thing which is impossible to teach, just the opposite may be the case. It is impossible not to teach ethics, for the teaching is carried on, consciously and unconsciously, from generation to generation. It is also true that our ethical stance is revealed through our discourse as we go about our everyday human affairs. Let us take responsibility and control of our talk and act in ways that might benefit the human race.

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COMPETING IN HOST SCHOOL TOURNAMENTS

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The decision to host or not host a tournament is a decision faced by most forensic program directors every academic year. Frequently, the decision is influenced by the past tradition of the school, the perceived need for a tournament in the local area, and past participation in one's tournament. Should a forensic director choose to host a tournament, one pervasive issue becomes whether the host school students should compete in the tournament. In an attempt to get a better sense of the forensic community's thinking on this issue, a survey was administered to a sample group of forensic directors. The results of that survey are reported below along with some suggested guidelines for the administration of a tournament.

A survey was mailed to 230 forensic directors with a Pi Kappa Delta affiliation in the fall of 1985. Responses to surveys were returned by 102 forensic directors, representing a 44 percent response rate. Among the schools responding to the survey, 76 schools indicated that they hosted one or more college tournaments each year; twenty schools indicated that they hosted no college tournament; and six schools gave no indication of whether or not their school hosted a college tournament.

Forensic directors were asked to indicate whether they permitted

host school students to compete in their respective tournaments. Seventy-three percent (56) of the schools hosting a college tournament indicated that they permitted host school students to compete in the host school tournament. However conditions attached to the participation of host school students were voiced by many tournament directors. The survey data indicated a variety of restrictions voiced by three-fourths of the fifty-six directors who permitted their students to enter their respective tournaments. The principal restrictions included:

1. Permitted competition to fill in schedule or increase national qualifying opportunities 25%
2. Not permitted to advance to elimination rounds 18%
3. Not permitted to enter if working tabulation 18%
4. Not permitted to receive an individual award 16%
5. Permitted only if it is a qualifying tournament for nationals 9%
6. Permitted to enter but school was ineligible for sweepstakes 9%

In expressing the conditions affecting participation, tournament directors frequently voiced more than one constraint. The data from the survey suggests that while it is not uncommon for host school students to compete in their respective school's tournament, par-

ticipation may be restricted or permitted for a variety of reasons.

The survey questionnaire also asked forensic directors to rank order their respective value objection to having a host school's students compete in the tournament. The questionnaire employed an open-ended response as a means of eliciting value objections. Respondent's numerical ordering of value objections was used to identify primacy among listed value objections. In instances where value objection statements reflected compound rather than discrete entities, the first item listed was designated as value objection one and the second entity was designated as value objection two. Respondents registered a total of 139 value objection statements with 72 of those statements reflecting a primary (1st order) value objection of the respondent. Following a procedure similar to Ajzen and Fishbein's methodology for determining modal salient beliefs (1980, 68-73), modal salient value objections to students competing in host school tournaments were identified.

Five principle categories of value objections emerged from the responses provided by survey participants. The most pronounced value objection to host school students competing in their own tournament was the perceived potential for unfair advantage to the home school participants. Thirty-five of the seventy-two primary value objections were voiced in this category. The percentage

equivalent suggests that 49 percent of the primary objections to competing in one's own tournament are related to the perceived possibility of an unfair advantage to home school participants. When put in the context of the 139 total value objections registered by respondents, 45 percent of all concerns evolve around the perceived home court advantage. Table one identifies frequencies—and subsets of value objections in the category of unfair advantage.

Table 1: Concern Over Home School Advantages

Item	Primary Objections	Total Objections
I. Unfair Advantage	35/72	62/139
A. Judge Bias	20/35	32/62
B. Schedule Manipulation	9/35	18/62
C. Knowledge of Extemp/ Impromptu Topics	1/35	5/62
D. Better Rested	2/35	2/62
E. Packing Entry	3/35	5/62

A second major category of value objections centered around the issue of graciousness in hosting a tournament. Seventeen of the seventy-two primary value objection statements reflected some concern over lack of graciousness in hosting when host school students participated in the tournament. The percentage equivalent suggests that 24 percent of the primary value objections to competing in one's own tournament reflected upon the issue of graciousness. In the context of the whole of the 139 value objections expressed by respondents, 20 percent of all objections related to the issue of graciousness. Table two