# Persuasion and Pragmatism:
# A Higher Goal for Christian Instructors

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**ABSTRACT: This article examines the current trend of a pragmatic approach to teaching persuasion in business education and recommends the use of classical and Christian sources to teach persuasion to business students. This discussion of the combined merits of Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine's insights on rhetoric and ethics also provides four practical pedagogical suggestions for helping students to persuade in business ethically.**

## INTRODUCTION

Business instructors regularly help students to learn persuasive techniques from the classical discipline of rhetoric. Teaching about marketing, managing, selling, or communicating often involves helping students learn rhetorical strategies to win others to their points of view. As business instructors teach persuasion, they must consider how to help students to persuade responsibly, carefully, soberly, and ethically. Indeed, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) lists ethical understanding and reasoning as an important objective of business courses (AACSB, 2017). Some evidence suggests, however, that students might need to cultivate further their application of ethics.

A 2015 study conducted by Hart Research Associates on behalf of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) shows this need. The study surveyed 613 college students and 400 employers, asking both groups about their perception of recent college graduates' various soft skills (critical thinking, oral communication, etc.). Among the skills included in the survey was "ethical judgment and decision-making," and whereas 62% of the college students saw themselves as well-prepared in that area, only 30% of employers saw recent college graduates as well-prepared in that same area (Hart Research Associates, 2015).

Similarly, research conducted by Giacalone and Promislo (2013) affirms that students need help cultivating their application of ethics. While businesses and business schools have been placing an increased emphasis on ethics and are combatting the notion that business ethics is an oxymoron, unethical decision-making still plagues organizational life (Giacalone & Promislo, 2013). They argue that part of the problem is that students carry "baggage" about ethics into the classroom. Our culture sometimes fosters a mindset that associates compassion with "less desirable attributes, such as being a 'pushover,' 'softie,' or 'gullible'" (Giacalone & Promislo, 2013, p. 89). The result is that students may know what an ethical course of action entails and yet fail to follow it.

Baker (2014) likewise contends that students struggle to use their ethical training when they enter the workforce. She argues that both the persistent ethical scandals of major companies and research into the effectiveness of ethics education suggest that while business schools may be effective at helping students to understand ethics, they struggle to equip students to apply ethics (Baker, 2014). Ethics education does not account for the difficulties of social pressure. "Unfortunately, moral awareness and moral judgment do not necessarily lead to moral action; organizational variables and social influences frequently trigger emotions such as fear, anxiety or desire, motivating employees to act in ways that they know are wrong" (Baker, 2014, p. 511).

Fredricks (2019) conducted a study to examine whether students' ability to act as ethical communication agents has improved due to ethics education in universities. When comparing students' responses to different ethical situations in survey data from 2009 and 2016, Fredricks found "minimal, but noticeable, change" in students' choices that suggested that education in communication ethics might be improving students' thinking, but the results were not conclusive (Fredricks, 2019, p. 33). Fredricks acknowledged that while the study suggests that education in ethical communication is having an impact on students, further research into its effectiveness and best practices is necessary because additional research suggests that students view ethics in pragmatic terms, resulting in a view that "education and answering the scenarios are just a means to an end" (Fredricks, 2019, p. 34).

In short, though innovation and cultural change have taken leaps forward in recent years, college graduates are not taking similar leaps forward in their ethical reasoning and instead continue to struggle in this area. As instructors of business communications, we are particularly concerned with how to teach persuasion ethics and how to assist in students' moral formation as they learn how to persuade others. We suggest that an application of classical ethics in business classrooms can assist in developing students' understanding of persuasion. To show why this type of instruction might be helpful to students, we first turn to an examination of current trends in persuasion ethics.

### PRAGMATISM IN PERSUASION ETHICS

The philosophical underpinnings of ethical business communication often appear to manifest as a form of pragmatism, a type of consequentialism that makes moral decisions based on outcomes. Indeed, as Visser (2019) noted, in recent years, pragmatism has "entered the field of business ethics" (p. 45), and according to Arnett (2009), "The whole area of applied communication, including public relations and advertising, has been infused with a pragmatic and market-driven ethic" (p. 47). Business communication ethics is often expressed as what is right equates with what works.

Similarly, in business communication textbooks, business students are often taught to communicate in a way that conforms to accepted standards of conduct in order that they can obtain, maintain, and succeed at their jobs. In other words, ethical conduct and communication is valued as a *means*, not as an *end*. For example, in Guffey and Loewy's (2015) *Business Communication: Process and Product*, they assert, "Persuasion becomes unethical when

facts are distorted, overlooked, or manipulated with an intent to deceive" and then warn that customers will not trust companies that practice this kind of unethical persuasion (p. 338). Textbooks do give space to ethical concerns, but often, textbooks appeal to pragmatic issues most strongly. For example, an "Ethical Insights" section on sales messages in Guffey and Loewy (2015) focuses on issues of legality, asking the question, "How far can you go in praising and selling your product?" (p. 352). Another "Ethical Insights" section on résumés observes, "Distorting facts on a résumé is unethical; lying may be illegal. Most important, either practice can destroy a career" (Guffey & Loewy, 2015, p. 569).

In Thill and Bovée's (2017) textbook, *Excellence in Business Communication*, ethical discussions are helpfully present but they pivot quickly to the pragmatic appeal, as demonstrated by comments such as the following: "Aside from ethical concerns, trying to fool the public is simply bad for business" (p. 24). Moreover, in Thill and Bovée's (2017) discussions of ethics, a section on "Ensuring Ethical Communication" is immediately followed by a section on "Ensuring Legal Communication" (pp. 26-27). And in the context of sales messages, a section devoted to "Maintaining High Standards of Ethics, Legal Compliance, and Etiquette" spends much of its time detailing legal considerations for sales messages.

This pragmatic view is what Baker (2014) called the "Enlightened Self-Interest Model," an ethic of considering long-term consequences when making business decisions. Baker (2014) noted that being ethical for the sake of self-interest is on only a moderate "moral ground" instead of a high one (pp. 69-70). Thill and Bovée (2017) emphasize legal ramifications for deceit in persuasive tactics, but they also emphasize demonstrating the "'you' attitude by showing honest concern for your audience's needs and interests" (p. 304). This latter concern is a helpful starting point for considering the ethics of persuasion beyond avoiding lawsuits and other pragmatic concerns. However, one might ask if "showing" honest concern for the audience and "having" honest concern for the audience are the same.

Indeed, Giacalone and Promislo (2013) argued that the pragmatic approach is not helping students in their application of ethics, and they suggested that part of the problem is that ethics is framed in terms of a materialistic worldview even in scholarly discussions. Essentially, business ethics is reduced to a consequentialism in which ethical action is valuable insofar as it promotes the financial success of the company. As they put it, "Students exposed to studies focusing on the 'payoff' of ethical actions learn to reframe the justification for ethics within the financial considerations that

business schools emphasize. This leaves some to conclude that such actions are worthwhile only when they help companies or individuals to be more profitable" (Giacalone & Promislo, 2013, p. 88). Such a perspective ultimately results in a stigmatization of goodness in which ethical action is viewed as a threat to a company's bottom line (Giacalone & Promislo, 2013).

With pragmatism as the overriding concern in ethics education, it is not surprising that research indicates that ethics education has room for improvement. Employees struggle to make ethical decisions, in part because ethics education focuses on the "payoff" of ethics. And even when ethics education is successful at producing a strong sense of ethics, that sense does not translate into ethical action. How can Christian business instructors help deepen students' ethical reasoning, particularly in persuasion?

## CHRISTIAN AND CLASSICAL ETHICS

A more robust concept of ethics is helpful to combat the slide toward pragmatism. First, business instructors should familiarize their students with the skepticism that has historically, in pagan and in Christian society, critiqued rhetorical study and practice. This skepticism of rhetoric on an ethical basis can helpfully inform the concerns that Christian business faculty and students should have regarding the ways they use persuasion in business. Next, business instructors could teach rhetorical implications and prescriptions from Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine to equip students to use persuasive techniques with a careful consideration about the weightiness of persuasion and the necessity of considering what is good for the audience.

Christians throughout church history, particularly following the Protestant Reformation, have debated the role of rhetorical practices in Christians' speech and writing. The qualities evident in post-Reformation Puritan prose were "clarity, simplicity and plainness," a repudiation of "rhetorical excess" (Keeble, 1987, p. 240). Puritans tended to avoid rhetorical flourishes because they recognized a dangerous capacity to deceive and manipulate an audience through persuasive techniques. Puritans revived Platonic attacks on rhetoric (Vickers, 1970). Centuries prior, Plato had serious ethical concerns regarding the academic discipline of persuasion.

### Pursuing the Good in Rhetoric: Lessons from Plato

In Plato's dialogues, he showed a deep distrust of rhetoric because of its lack of a basis in what is good. In book six of *The Republic*, Plato critiqued sophists, teachers of rhetoric, by comparing them to animal-keepers. They learn what

an animal, his metaphor for a group of people, likes and dislikes, what brings it pleasure and pain, and, as a result, animal-keepers can motivate the animal to cooperate with its human caregivers. However, the animal-keepers conflate wisdom and the good with pleasure. They lead their animals using what is pleasurable, just as sophists lead crowds by appealing to their pleasure but not necessarily to what is good for them (Plato, 375 BCE/2000). This metaphor shows a dehumanizing of the rhetor's audience as mere animals coming to feed or responding to an external stimulus. What is missing in this common rhetorical scenario is the rhetor's understanding of the good.

Similarly, in *Gorgias*, Plato spoke through Socrates, who shows that oratory really has no knowledge of right and wrong; instead, oratory mostly "requires a shrewd and bold spirit naturally clever at dealing with people" (Plato, 380 BCE/1987, p. 30). Socrates calls persuasive speech "pandering" (Plato, 380 BCE/1987, p. 30), and he claims that it "pays no regard to the best interests of its object, but catches fools with the bait of ephemeral pleasure and tricks them into holding it in the highest esteem" (p. 32). Plato rejected the philosophy that would become utilitarianism, which emphasized that pleasure or happiness is the good. So, a Platonic notion of rhetorical ethics contrasts with Messina's (2007) recommendation of utilitarianism, which he takes from Jeremy Bentham, that action should be judged "according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish happiness of the party whose interest is in question" (p. 39). The reason why Platonic rhetorical ethics is in contrast with this view is because happiness is not always the same as the good. For Plato, rhetoric that appeals solely to people's sense of pleasure is ethically problematic.

In *Phaedrus*, Plato had Socrates note that rightly used rhetoric would be "a kind of skillful leading of the soul by means of words" (Plato, ca 370 BCE/2003, p. 48). This helpful definition of persuasion implies that people are more than just animals; they are beings with souls, and this description implies the weighty responsibility of the rhetor in leading another person's soul for good or ill. For Plato, ethically leading the soul, or essence of a person, involves knowledge and a desire for the audience's good. For Plato, if rhetoric were to be ethical, it would be grounded, first, in a deep knowledge of what is true (Plato, 375 BCE/2000).

Some critics have voiced skepticism over Plato's model of ethical rhetoric because they contend that truth and the transcendent forms are difficult at best or impossible at worst to ascertain. For example, Jaeger (1944) commented that Plato's insistence upon knowing truth was "repulsive to ordinary common sense" (p. 57). In this philosophical

quandary, Christian reliance upon divine revelation on the Scriptures and church tradition is helpful. Secular knowledge can helpfully indicate what is but not always what ought to be. Because of the Christian tradition and the Scriptures upon which Christians rely for an understanding of truth and goodness, Christian instructors could use Plato's model well in detailing the notions of truth and goodness as, for example, the attributes of God and the moral imperatives revealed in the Bible. In fact, Christian business faculty members can make the teaching and discussion of what is true and good distinct and specific, such as the importance of promoting peace instead of dissension, showing mercy to the poor, and fighting the sin of pride.

An implication of the "truth" criterion that non-Christians could also embrace is that Plato's notion of truth and goodness was also related to knowledge of reality. In *The Republic*, Socrates asserts that the philosopher, the highest type of person who should rule his metaphorical city, "is always in love with any learning which helps to reveal that reality which always is" (Plato, 375 BCE/2000, p. 187). In addition to leading audiences toward transcendent truth, Plato would also endorse the rhetor's having a rich understanding of his or her subject. Therefore, if applying this model, Christian business faculty should hold students responsible for knowing their subjects well.

The second part of Plato's model for ethical rhetoric is that the rhetor must argue for the good of his or her audience—not for mere personal gain. The rhetor should seek to know his or her subject well and convey fair and complete knowledge of the subject to the audience to seek the audience's good. And the rhetor must remember that pleasure is not necessarily good. One obvious example of this principle is tobacco advertisements in the late twentieth century, after the Surgeon General had begun warning about the health ramifications of smoking, which show a clear appeal to pleasure but not to the audience's good. In contrast to these self-serving attempts at persuasion, Socrates admits that ethical rhetoric involves "making the souls of [the audience] as good as possible and…always striving to say what is best, whether it is pleasing or not to the ears of the audience" (Plato, 380 BCE/1987, p. 98). For Plato, the communication of truth with the aim to educate and the intention of leading the audience to good with the aim to better themselves are the two essential, and—as Plato believed—uncommon, components of ethical rhetoric.

This notion of ethics in rhetoric is like Baker's (1999) model of the highest moral ground in persuasion, which is a "Kingdom of Ends Model." She takes this categorical title from Kant: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end" (Baker, 1999, p. 77). In a kingdom of ends, people make decisions and act toward people as if they are all valuable ends in themselves. Martin (2013) notes that Kant comes to this conclusion because of rationality: "It is irrational to treat ourselves as worthy ends while denying such worthiness to others who possess the relevant attributes for worthiness" (p. 142). Christianity would come to this conclusion not by rationality but by the knowledge that all people are made in God's image and by the second greatest commandment in the Bible: to love others. Plato would agree that we should treat people as if they have souls, and we should move their souls carefully toward what is good and true.

### Cultivating the Virtues: Lessons from Aristotle

In addition to Plato's cautions and prescriptions about rhetoric, Aristotle's holistic and teleological approach is helpful for combatting pragmatism. For Aristotle, ethics and rhetoric work together as disciplines that strive to move an individual toward human flourishing, which is not just about an individual's success but about a higher notion of human good.

Aristotle defined rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (ca 322 BCE/1984, 1355b). These available means of persuasion are three-fold: 1) an appeal to *ethos* relies on the speaker's personal character to provide credibility, 2) an appeal to *pathos* relies on the speaker's ability to move the audience's emotions, and 3) an appeal to *logos* relies on the speaker's construction of logical arguments (Aristotle, ca 322 BCE/ 1984). Aristotle's rhetorical framework of *ethos, pathos,* and *logos* as the three components of persuasion has long been used to teach students how to argue effectively. Although the Aristotelian rhetorical framework is sometimes taught in a manner that supports a more pragmatic approach to persuasion (e.g., one can use "the available means of persuasion" without considering the ethics of the persuasive goal), Aristotle held that rhetoric blends logic and ethics (Aristotle, ca 322 BCE/1984). The goal of rhetoric varies slightly based on the type of rhetoric the orator engages in, but the overall aim is to persuade toward the good (Aristotle, ca 322 BCE/1984). As Duska (2014) has observed, the goal of the business ethicist and Aristotle's orator is really the same: to persuade people to do what is right.

The good and right aims for the orator, and human beings in general, become clearer in *Nicomachean Ethics.* Here Aristotle explained that all things have a purpose in his teleological worldview. He used the analogy of people in various professions to explain this concept: just as a

sculptor strives to produce excellent sculptures or a flute player strives to create excellent music, so also ought people to strive toward an excellent purpose (Aristotle, ca 340 BCE/2011). For a person, the *telos* is achieving a state of *eudaimonia*, defined in English as "flourishing." MacIntyre (2007) explained that *eudaimonia* is "the state of being well and doing well in being well, of a man's being well-favored himself and in relation to the divine" (p. 148). The concept of a *telos* for human life is central to Aristotle's understanding of the virtues because the *telos* of human flourishing is "an activity of soul in accord with virtue, and if there are several virtues, then in accord with the best and most complete one" (Aristotle, ca 340 BCE/2011, 1098a). In other words, the *telos* of a human being is flourishing through the cultivation of the virtues (courage, temperance, justice, prudence, honesty, magnanimity, etc.). The cultivation of the virtues is integral to human happiness and flourishing. And while the cultivation of the virtues is an individual pursuit, it can be accomplished only in a social setting and with regard for the good of others. Cultivation of the virtues naturally leads to virtuous action.

Aristotle's virtue ethics are teleological rather than consequentialist; that is, while the goal of human life may be *eudaimonia*, the cultivation of the virtues is integral to a life of human flourishing and not merely a means to the end. As MacIntyre (2007) explained, "For what constitutes the good for man is a complete human life lived at its best, and the exercise of the virtues is a necessary and central part of such a life, not a mere preparatory exercise to secure such a life" (p. 149). In an Aristotelian framework, the notion that one could achieve one's good without being virtuous simply does not make sense. To apply for business students, Aristotle would say that it is impossible for a businessperson to achieve any true success (in the sense of *eudaimonia*) without also being ethical.

McPherson (2013) has also argued that Aristotle's ethics can help counter the prevailing consequentialist approach to business ethics. In an Aristotelian ethical framework, the calculation about the consequences of virtue does not determine whether to act virtuously; instead, virtuous action flows from the cultivation of virtues that are essential to flourishing. As McPherson (2013) points out, an Aristotelian perspective views work as a vocation or calling in the sense of living up to our human potential: "[T]he ideal of work as a calling allows us to understand how through our work the virtues can be exercised for the sake of the good of our lives as a whole as well as for the sake of the common good of the communities of which we are a part and the individual good of their members" (p. 289). The idea of vocation certainly fits well with a Christian worldview. Christian business instructors can take the teaching and practice of the virtues a step further and encourage students to see the cultivation of the virtues in view of their calling to be and make disciples of Christ. In Christian terms, the virtues can be considered as fruit of the Spirit and should be present in all activities of the life of the Christian, including persuasion. A Christian who adapted and taught Plato and Aristotle's ideas can help us to further apply these concepts within a biblical context.

### Augustine's Christian Approach to Persuasion

The early Church father, Augustine, laying the groundwork for homiletics, believed that people, Christian teachers specifically, could use rhetoric responsibly for good. Augustine asserted, "Since, therefore, there has been placed equally at our disposal the power of eloquence, which is so efficacious in pleading either for the erroneous cause or the right, why is it not zealously acquired by the good, so as to do service for the truth, if the unrighteous put it to the uses of iniquity and of error for the winning of false and groundless causes?" (Augustine, 2008, p. 39). Much less skeptical of rhetoric than Plato, Augustine saw rhetorical strategies as neutral tools that can be used for good or evil, but he always assumed that when rhetoric is used for good, it is benefitting the audience in the service of truth. For Augustine, of course, truth and goodness are not forms; they are embodied in the transcendent God, which humans learn about through creation, the written revelation, and Church tradition.

As a Christian, Augustine provided more specific applications than Plato and Aristotle of what it might look like to use rhetoric ethically. For example, Augustine explained that Christians should use rhetorical strategies to encourage Christian virtue in their listeners:

> [L]et us turn…to aim…to make good morals esteemed or evil morals avoided….Thus it is that we use [rhetoric] not ostentatiously, but wisely, not content with its own purpose, namely, merely to please the audience, but rather striving for this, to help them even thereby to the good toward which our persuasion aims. (Augustine, 2008, p. 165)

Augustine assumed that rhetoric can be positive if it is used for the audience's good—not to help them avoid pain and pursue pleasure but to help them avoid vice and pursue virtue, defined in Christian terms. For Augustine, classical rhetoric should be rightly used for noble, protreptic purposes. Candler (2006) emphasized that the Augustinian aim of persuasion is ultimately "synonymous with the movement of the will toward its proper object" (p. 58). Even more than just intellectual or moral edification, Augustine, following Aristotle, believed that effective use of persuasion

can rearrange human affections. As MacIntyre (2007) noted of the Aristotelian tradition of the virtues, "Virtues are dispositions not only to act in particular ways, but also to feel in particular ways…. Moral education is an 'éducation sentimentale'" (p. 149). Augustine echoed Aristotle's desire to educate the passions, and he specifically wanted persuasion to stir audiences' affections for God. When students engage in persuasion, they would benefit from considering what they are making their audiences love.

What the pagans Aristotle and Plato would call "the good" or "the true," the Christian Augustine might simply call "love" toward the audience. Deepening what this ethic might mean for students could help them to cultivate and practice ethical reasoning. How might business instructors teach their students truly to know their subjects, to want the best for their audiences, and to move their audience's affections wisely and soberly toward their good for human flourishing and virtue? Four practical pedagogical applications follow.

## PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS

First, as business instructors teach their students to engage in ethical persuasion, they can begin by teaching them about the virtues and how they should be pursued while persuading. One way to do this might be to incorporate into the classroom a text such as Kolp and Rea's (2006) *Leading with Integrity*, which calls for character-based leadership rooted in the seven classical virtues. To encourage students to then cultivate the virtues that they learn, instructors can incorporate the virtues into classroom activities and projects, such as an exercise in creating a sales message that not only avoids deception but also encourages a virtue rather than a vice (Neubert, 2017).

Second, instructors can challenge students to use human flourishing as a lens through which they see persuasion. For example, as they work on writing resumes and cover letters, they might evaluate their prospective employers in terms of how they contribute to human flourishing and how students might add to that mission. Also, as students learn to write application documents and interview for jobs, they could be challenged to think in terms of truthful communication of their best qualities to contribute to the purpose of the hiring organization.

In considering other written business persuasion, students could choose their topics after considering the result for their audience. Instead of selecting a product or service that they like, to practice marketing or selling, students could choose a product or service that would really benefit their audience—not just to increase their pleasure but to attain a good from God's character or from a scriptural moral imperative. They could then try to move their audience's affections toward what might biblically be a right order. Instructors might also require students to reflect upon the way that the audience might be moved positively because of their persuasion.

Third, the knowledge of the truth of one's subject could change the kind of assignments instructors give. Assignments might require research as an essential element of persuasive assignments, for example. Sometimes, instructors assign students to identify a service or product and to describe that service or product in terms of its benefit to an audience—to sell a pen, for example, that they know nothing about. This kind of assignment requires students to use persuasive techniques without real knowledge of the product and/or the audience's good. These assignments could unintentionally reinforce an unethical perspective, according to Plato, that persuasion can be separated from truth.

Finally, it might be helpful to students to learn some history about the controversy of rhetoric. Most students have probably never considered that giants of Western culture, such as Plato, have thought that rhetoric could be a dangerous enterprise. Having students read and discuss a short Platonic dialogue (such as *Gorgias* or *Phaedrus*) about rhetoric might help them to wrestle with the unethical possibilities inherent within persuasion. Students might also read the rhetorical treatises of persons with a malicious intent (such as Hitler's *Mein Kompf*) or examine advertisements for damaging products or services to investigate the ways in which persuasive techniques have not been used for good. An assignment asking students to create their own philosophy of persuasion ethics might also be helpful.

These ideas could contribute to students' ethical formation as they understand knowledge and persuasion as inextricably linked, comprehend the dangerous potentiality in persuasion, and consider how they might move away from using persuasion for mere self-interest and move toward using persuasion for their audience's good. Such an approach could apply to a variety of vocations. The Christian teacher of persuasion can contribute to students' moral formation in encouraging them to consider their audience, not for mere pragmatism but for human flourishing and ultimately for love.

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