

“Telling the Truth:” Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Rhetorical Discourse Ethic

Ned O’Gorman

This essay claims that Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s discourse ethic, developed most fully in his prison essay “What is Meant by ‘Telling the Truth’?,” reveals rhetoric as a rich ethical approach to communication. Although Bonhoeffer never directly engaged texts belonging to a traditional rhetorical corpus, his theological ontology produced a view of communication that is political, plural, ordered, and democratic, mirroring the broad view of communication found in ancient thinkers like Isocrates, Aristotle, and Cicero. I argue that unlike most contemporary accounts of discourse ethics, Bonhoeffer’s concept of ethical communication is dependent upon a model or method only in a secondary sense. It is primarily derived from a vision of the good. Bonhoeffer’s dependence upon this vision not only distinguishes his work from most contemporary theory in discourse ethics, but challenges such theories to probe the visions of the good that underlie the various methods and models of ethical communication they offer.

Key words: speech ethics, rhetoric, being, time, Bonhoeffer, Heidegger.

“Indeed here already it becomes apparent how very difficult it is to say what actually constitutes a lie.”— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “What is Meant By ‘Telling the Truth’?”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a scandalous thinker. He was a devout Christian who ransacked in Nietzsche-like fashion traditional notions of truth and lies. He was a critical scholar of the Bible who believed it was the unique Word of God. He was a cosmopolitan and sophisticated twentieth-century intellectual who thought in a radically Christocentric way. He was intensely politically engaged, but spoke often of

eternal life and a world beyond. Inspired by Bonhoeffer's unusual synthesis of normally polarized positions, I offer a thesis that is sure to sound peculiar, if not scandalous. The thesis is this: Bonhoeffer's work on discourse ethics—specifically on truth telling—entails a revelation of *rhetoric*, so often and infamously considered amoral or immoral, as the ethical approach to communication. Bonhoeffer sees truth telling as an act that is strongly contingent and situation dependent, in the way that rhetoric is predominantly conceived of as context-dependent communication. Moreover, rhetoric encompasses the normative vision of human sociality Bonhoeffer casts, such that his understanding of communication shares with rhetoric not only an emphasis on context-dependent communication, but emphases on politics, plurality, order, and dignity. Bonhoeffer's revelation of rhetoric, however, happens quite independently from the rhetorical tradition as it is variously recognized. In fact, as far as we know, traditions of rhetoric had no direct influence on his thinking. Rather, his discourse ethic is shaped by his theological ontology, developed early in his career, and his reflections on "the feeling of time," engaged while in prison near the end of his life. These underlie his vision of communication and make up his revelation of rhetoric as a rich ethical vision.

This vision is expressed most clearly in his fragmentary essay "What is Meant By 'Telling the Truth'?", published in his volume *Ethics*. The short treatise was written from a Tegel prison cell as Bonhoeffer was subjected to ongoing interrogations about his role in the resistance to National Socialist rule in Germany. In the essay, which argues that deceit and silence can be forms of truth telling, Bonhoeffer reinscribes the thought of such figures in the history of rhetoric as Isocrates, Aristotle, and Cicero to develop a more humane vision of sociality and communication for the crises of the modern world. Such key thinkers of rhetoric in antiquity derive their view of communication from a larger and more basic view of human sociality. Rhetoric ultimately represents for them what has historically been called a *good*, a vision of human wellbeing in society. This vision is translatable into a *technē*, an art or skill of communication, but is not therein

limited to mere technique.¹ Bonhoeffer mirrors ancient thought about rhetoric as he begins from a vision of human wellbeing, and works from this vision toward an ethic of communication. His vision, like that of key ancient thinkers of rhetoric, is strongly *social*, and his concept of communication is intensely situational. Likewise, he argues that his normative vision of human sociality is translatable into an art that can be learned through experience, practice, and principle.

The translatability of a normative vision of human sociality into an art is the concern of both the best of ancient rhetorical thought and of Bonhoeffer's thought. However, the question of "the good" has been very problematic for modern communication theory, in part due to the success of supposedly value-neutral science in establishing frameworks for theory and in part due to a long-term and quite severe critique of the normativity of norms. Instead of the good, the primary focus of communication theory and even discourse ethics has been on models or methods of communication, where the question of the good is at best implied and more often ignored. In his elegant and compelling work *Speaking Into the Air*, John Durham Peters takes up the two opposing giants of contemporary thought about the idea of communication: dialogue and dissemination. Both models implicitly or explicitly lead to ethical claims about communication. Dialogue involves give and take and works toward the communion of interlocutors. It is cautious in nature, where the "receiver is carefully selected by the speaker in advance and carefully brought to understand" (Peters 53). We find in contemporary ethics of dialogue the fruit of an aspect of Immanuel Kant's thought, which emphasized formal categories and procedure when addressing the subject of ethics.² Dialogue emphasizes proceeding through communication correctly. Dissemination, the main alternative to dialogue, involves the dispersion of words and images uniformly. It is, in Peters' words, a "receiver-oriented model in which the sender has no control over the harvest" (35). Dissemination puts the ethical burden on audiences, and hence has spurred an interest in another aspect of Kantian thought, aesthetic judgment where

the spectator makes semi-intuitive judgments about the ethical character of a received object of communication for example, as in the work of Jean-François Lyotard.³

Peters offers a slightly left-of-center assessment of the dialogue versus dissemination debate: "dissemination without dialogue can become stray scatter, and dialogue without dissemination can be interminable tyranny" (57). Still, he concludes, "Dissemination is far friendlier to the weirdly diverse practices we signifying animals engage in and to our bumbling attempts to meet others with fairness and kindness. Open scatter is more fundamental than coupled sharing; it is the stuff from which, on rare, splendid occasions, dialogue may arise. Dissemination is not wreckage; it is our lot" (62). Thus, Peters implies that dissemination is the better of the two models. However, for all the brilliant basic soundness of Peter's essay, his conclusion falls short of being completely satisfying in the context of a discussion of discourse ethics; for it draws too straight a line from *models* of communication like dialogue and dissemination to *visions* of communication. It starts with models and works toward visions of the good. And models and visions do indeed meet; however, they meet irregularly, especially if we work backwards from models to visions. Socrates and Habermas, as Peters notes, have each invoked the model of dialogue, but they possess drastically different visions of the good society. Similarly, Jesus and Hitler, whose visions of the good society I need not contrast, have both invoked models of dissemination. Like models, but drastically different goods.

In our modern method-mad epoch, the enticement to draw a straight line from model back to vision is profound. Nevertheless, it should be resisted, for the theorist who does it (and here Peters is barely culpable) almost always is involved in incomplete thinking. Especially in the field of discourse ethics, to begin with models is to implicitly equate the moral with method (e.g., of reasoning and/or of practice) and to thereby elide the substantive, often unarticulated, moral backdrop which gives the method its distinctness and urgency. As Charles Taylor has repeatedly argued, the modern habit of making the primary moral question what is right (procedure), rather than what is

good (vision), is untenable (*Sources* 53-90, see also "Motivation"). It assumes that the "moral" can be narrowed to an issue of procedure or method and still retain its denotations and connotations of obligation, responsibility, devotion, and care, when theoretically and practically no model or method can carry this weight on its own. Models and methods are not therefore value neutral; rather, they are value morphic, able to be reshaped to fit multiple and often incommensurate visions of the good. Yet, the attraction of communication theory to models and methods is profound for theoretical and social reasons. Theoretically, we are still deeply modern creatures, convinced that method may possess the key to human flourishing. Socially, we are critically aware of the incommensurate visions of the good about in our world and of the need for procedures that enable us to still get along. Nevertheless, the question of the good polity, or more complexly of goods as they relate to polities, cannot reasonably or honestly be deferred. For even the instinct to get along that catalyzes the invention of discourse procedures, fertilized by thought, will bud into a vision of the good polity.

Thus I want to take up Bonhoeffer's theory of good communication as basically a vision of a good polity, and to align his vision with the rhetorical visions of antiquity. He offers not so much a procedure or model, but an ethical art that emerges from a theory of sociality. That art and its attendant theory are quite rhetorical. The vision of rhetoric I am interested in is rooted in and grows out of the soil of a good that is *political*, respecting human freedom in speech and action, *plural*, accounting for human otherness, and *ordered*, characterized by substantive boundaries with respect to human freedom, human otherness, and human organizations. This social vision that is rhetorical might finally be called *democratic*, in that it is in principle, though not necessarily in practice, not only political, plural, and ordered, but also egalitarian, as it assumes there is such a thing as basic dignity and some set of fundamental and universal rights that should be accorded either to the human qua human or citizen qua citizen.

Two factors bring Bonhoeffer to embrace this rhetorical vision. First, his philosophical critique of the transcendental

subject leads him to an ontology that is social. Through a sustained theological engagement with the thought of Martin Heidegger, Bonhoeffer develops a theory of the human subject that sees human being as fundamentally dependant on the other. Second, Bonhoeffer embraces a rhetorical vision of human sociality through his intense engagement with the political crises of his time and place, especially as it is mediated through his incarceration. He describes his own thought as oriented toward concrete, practical, and "worldly" affairs.⁴ He recognizes that communicative acts have immediate and long-term consequences not just for the immediate speaker and his or her audience but especially for a broader community.

Bonhoeffer's theoretical critiques and his practical concerns are of one piece. His thought is insufficiently grasped, and perhaps incomprehensible, apart from his abstract theory of social ontology. His ethics, likewise, cannot be understood adequately apart from understanding his experiences as a political prisoner. More than anywhere else, the practical and theoretical meet in Bonhoeffer's vision of "telling the truth." The basic conception that emerges in his writing on truth telling is the idea of the communication situation, which possesses two main axes: sociality and time. The former takes shape in Bonhoeffer's displacement of the transcendental subject with a social ontology. The latter takes shape in Bonhoeffer's thought in relation to his social ontology and as he experiences political imprisonment. The first section of this essay will take up being and time as immanently situated and social phenomena in Bonhoeffer's thought. I aim to show in this section the basis for Bonhoeffer's rehabilitation of the "situation" for discourse ethics, and hence the genesis of his ultimate, albeit unintentional, act of revealing rhetoric as an ethical vision. The second section of the essay shows just how rhetoric is revealed as a robust ethical vision in Bonhoeffer's thought by looking at his essay "What is Meant By 'Telling the Truth'?", which was composed as Bonhoeffer was undergoing regular interrogation in prison. I then conclude by returning to the question of the good with respect to rhetoric and discourse ethics.

Situating Being and Time in Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer's thought begins with and from ontology. The question of being precedes the question of ethics. His ontology is grounded in theology and fueled by a sustained engagement with philosophy. From the perspective of theology, Bonhoeffer asks about the immanent being of God in the world which is posited by the incarnation. From the perspective of philosophy, he sharply questions the status of the transcendental subject. In both cases, Bonhoeffer's main interest is showing the priority of the divine Other, and derivatively of the human other, with respect to human being.

According to Bonhoeffer in his *Creation and Fall*, the Creator is absolutely Other. God does not enter creation in substance or identity with it, but creates in total freedom through the Word. The concept of the "Word of God" in Bonhoeffer is complex: it means God's creative and sustaining power, God's free self-disclosure, and the person of Christ. In any given reference to the Word within Bonhoeffer's corpus, one referent may be emphasized over the others. However, all three referents will be at work at some level of meaning. Ultimately, it is the incarnate person of Christ who has theological priority for Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer's thought is Christocentric in that he refuses to theorize and theologize from any starting point other than Christ. For example, in *Creation and Fall* he argues that the creation story must be read *from* Christ, not merely as leading to Christ. He writes, "We can read towards Christ only if we know that Christ is the beginning, the new and the end of our world" (8). Christ is the mediator between God and humans; Christ is the God-human; hence, Christology profoundly shapes Bonhoeffer's idea of God and the human. In the Word who is ultimately Christ he finds God's creative power and self-disclosure, together with the source of an ontology that gives priority to the other.

The Word delimits the knower and the known prior to any act of creaturely knowing. The Word "moves out forming, and limiting the individual, the real, the whole" (21). The Word thus delimits being, and only in this pre-given ontological grounding is any knowledge of self, Other, or others possible. The person,

Bonhoeffer writes in *Act and Being*, comes “as one who has to find his whereabouts by asking, thinking and doing, one who has to relate to himself the position pre-given to him and at the same time define himself ‘in reference to it’” (qtd. in Marsh p. 117). The self-reflective subject emerges from a source prior to and external to itself. Hence, as Charles Marsh writes, “If *Sein* [being] is always located in a network of relations peculiar to the *da* [there], then it must be the case that an analysis of location will illuminate the meaning of being” (114). In this way, Bonhoeffer’s ontology represents an explicitly theological revision of Heidegger’s thought. Heidegger’s *Dasein*, or “there-being,” is always involved in the “projective” enterprise of becoming; time—past, present, future—envelopes being. *Dasein* is always already extended over and into time as that which is pre-given. Thus Michael Hyde characterizes Heidegger’s notion of human being as such: “A human being is not a ‘thing’ that merely lives ‘in’ time; a human does not exist just ‘now’ and ‘then’ as does a coin in a pocket. Rather, a human being exists as time, as a being who is presently living its ‘having been’ that was once its future, and who, at the same time, is presently living out the possibilities that are yet to come” (31-32). Consequently, the temporal and local determination and circumscription of human existence represents both the possibilities and impossibilities of human existence. One way of understanding Bonhoeffer’s thought is to see it as a basically Heideggerian ontology which displaces “time” with the Word.

Yet, this displacement does not represent a mere theological preference. Rather, it results from a critique of Heidegger’s thought. Bonhoeffer believes that Heidegger does not establish the priority of the other (not only of God, but any other). As I have shown, the “other” for Bonhoeffer is first and foremost the Word. The Word as Other sets a limit for the self from beyond the self, establishing an impassable ontological threshold. This limit-setting includes the self’s relation to other human selves; the Other sets a limit on each and every “I” that cannot be crossed. This makes the idea of transcendental subjectivity an impossibility for Bonhoeffer, for a subjectivity that is wholly

dependent upon the Other/ others for being is radically heteronomos. Bonhoeffer is indebted to Heidegger for his strong impulse to critique the notion of the transcendental subject. However, he finds Heidegger's critique inadequate and would take it further through the Word. The fundamental problem he sees in Heidegger's thought is that it ultimately affirms the transcendental subject, the autonomous "I." Despite Heidegger's insistence on the temporal determination and circumscription of human existence, Bonhoeffer concludes that in Heidegger, "the comprehension of the being of beings is possible according to the structure of human being's finite understanding" (Marsh 122). No Other or other is needed to comprehend being in Heidegger, whose *Dasein* can achieve such comprehension, authenticity, and self-certainty by resolutely confronting its own future possibilities, especially that of death. Bonhoeffer argues that Heidegger's *Dasein*, in the quest for authenticity and self-certainty, "overleaps the constraints of human finitude." Marsh continues,

Bonhoeffer says, "[Human being in Heidegger's thought] does not come to the end, but to the fulfillment, the totality of *Dasein*." In seizing its authentic possibilities for being, *Dasein* is made master of the world and soars above itself "to tragic solitude." In grasping its existence entirely in this world, *Dasein* is finally able to overpower the world. In this manner, falling into the world becomes a vehicle for spirit discovering itself. Bonhoeffer concludes, "Certainly Heidegger fully understands the man questioning himself to be the basic problem, but in the end, the question becomes the answer, man in fact has knowledge of himself, the question has no ultimate seriousness." (122-23)

Hence, Heidegger ends up strangely echoing Kantian assertions of the autonomous transcendental subject. The subject, in achieving authentic being-in-the-world, goes beyond its local network of concerns and comprehends itself apart from others.

Conversely, Bonhoeffer argues that to declare an internal or inherent limit to human being is to necessarily move beyond the limit. Thus it is impossible for the subject to make such a declaration with respect to itself. Only the Other/ other can truly establish a limit for human being. Hence in Bonhoeffer's theology, "[I]n the divine confrontation with the living God of Jesus Christ, the person is 'taken out of himself' and turned outward before God so that now in the recentering of self, 'the question [of being] becomes serious because it no longer itself includes its answer, but instead the answer is given completely freely and completely afresh to the person by God'" (Marsh 123). Bonhoeffer finds in Christ something like Levinas' irreducible otherness. This absolute Other sets limits; it engages in the act of revelation to demonstrate the limits and (limited) potential of human being and to mediate as Other between self and others. However, as we will see, whereas Levinas' Other appears to defy both content (predication) and context (particularity), Bonhoeffer's conception of Christ as Other preserves both.

In this way Bonhoeffer develops an ontology that is radically social. Sociality is the essence of human being in his thought. Others are always prior to the self; the self is dependent upon others for selfhood. Thus the ground of being is simultaneously transcendent and immanent. It is transcendent because the ground of being resides outside the self in the Other and others. It is immanent because the Other and others is discovered in the particular stories of Christ and in one's concrete neighbors, respectively. The incarnation of the Word (revealed in gospel narratives) made the metaphysical Other immanent in the concrete world, and even turned the neighbor into a locus of the Other. As Jesus says in the gospel of *Matthew*, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to me" (25:40, NASB). Hence, Bonhoeffer can claim that the transcendent is "the neighbor who is within reach in any given situation" (*Letters* 381). We will soon see how this emphasis on the concrete, immanent other as the transcendent which is within reach shapes Bonhoeffer's discourse ethics. Meanwhile, we need to turn to the other aspect of the

situation, *time*, for Bonhoeffer's emphasis on sociality extends to his notion of time.

That the Word in Bonhoeffer ultimately refers to the person of Christ, the incarnate Word, means that time for him can neither be radically objectified nor radically subjectified. Time is insufficiently understood as either a product of mechanism or as category of the mind. Rather, just as the self is understood as constituted by the Other and others, so time is the manifest product of a network of social relations. Time originates from without the self to have its effects within and upon the self. In fact, this idea of time closely resembles the ancient rhetorical concept of *kairos*. In early Greek sophistic rhetoric, *kairos* meant loosely the opportune rhetorical moment and it accounted for rhetorical power. According to Dale Sullivan, *kairos* in this context referred to "fittingness, timing, and the opportune moment of decision," and is "linked with words like *dynamis* and *logos* and was, therefore, understood to be a part of a world where magical powers had real effects" (320). The central idea here is that time is a power which comes upon the self from the outside, and which presents an obligation of some sort to the subject. Time acts; the self reacts. For Bonhoeffer, time acts upon the self through a network of others; temporality is constituted through a network of immanent social relations. We can see the degree to which Bonhoeffer understands time as kairotic in his letters from prison. In these letters the temporal aspects of speech are also evident.

On May 15, 1943 Bonhoeffer wrote his parents from the Tegel prison stating, "I'm now trying my hand at a little study on 'The feeling of time,' a thing that is specially relevant to anyone who is being held for examination. One of my predecessors here has scribbled over the cell door, 'In 100 years it will all be over.' That was his way of trying to counter the feeling that life spent here is a blank" (*Letters* 39). Consistent with the notion of *kairos*, this rumination addresses the subject of communication as an aspect of time. In prison, the social aspect of temporality becomes conspicuous and speech acts take on the acute pressure of holding on to time. Bonhoeffer writes of his own poetry writ-

ing while in prison, "This dialogue with the past, the attempt to hold on to it and recover it, and above all, the fear of losing it, is the almost daily accompaniment of my life here" (*Letters* 319). Importantly, Bonhoeffer suggests that it is the *social* isolation that comes with prison life that drives existence toward blankness and thus makes communication infeasible. In being isolated from others one's hold on speech, time, and the Other/ others slips. This is, of course, the instrumental aim of an oppressor that takes political prisoners. Bonhoeffer is not only aware of the effort of his oppressors to render time blank through the technique of isolation, but also profoundly aware of the communicational and political implications of this effort.

Charles Bazerman's contemporary notion of *kairos* is a helpful complement to ancient sophistic notions of *kairos* and to Bonhoeffer's concern with the notion of "the feeling of time." Bazerman's *kairos* takes account of sociality and intersubjectivity to critique the prevalent assumption that *kairos* is primarily about an individual rhetor's perception or construction of opportune time. Bazerman argues that *kairos* must be understood as an intensive social phenomenon, as part of "the ordered social relations that bring individuals together in a coherent social space and make meaningful social actions possible."

All are users of language, alternately as receivers and producers. The mutual interplay of all their actions creates the evanescent yet compelling atmosphere of society. Within such a complex world of linguistic multiplicity, where each person is a separate nexus of meaning and activity bound with each other person's nexus of language use, the simple vision of the single rhetor acting against a coherent socially ordered audience lulls us into attributing too great a fixity to the shifting sands of society out of which we construct moments and our perception of them. (174-75)

From the perspective of Bonhoeffer's social ontology, a dynamic socially-constructed conception of opportune time is the only coherent conception. In one sense, Bonhoeffer follows Heidegger

in conceiving of time as prior to and constitutive of human existence; a human being exists as time. However, Bonhoeffer's social ontology places time in the same sphere as the locus of the self—in the Other and others. Time is an immanent social construction. Prison is a genuine threat to the experience of *kairos* because isolation strips away at the ground of being itself.

Thus, Bonhoeffer rehabilitates the notion of the "situation" in discourse ethics through an ontology that sees the self and the self's moment as situated by the Other and others. His ontology is radically social, thus as we will see next, his ethics are immanent and situational. However, it is not enough to describe the immanent and social character of being and time in Bonhoeffer's thought and then simply assume certain ethical implications. The Christocentric nature of his thought is the key to its ethical implications. The Other is Christ and Christ is in the other. Christ is thus the ultimate ground of being and time. Christ is also the ground of ethics. Bonhoeffer's Christological formulation of social ontology means that to fail to address the moment in communication is for him not only a practical failure or a failure to meet Law, but one of a distinctive personal and ethical character. His ethics are rooted in the particular kerygma of Christ, and thus, as Bonhoeffer puts the matter, require learning to think and see from "below" with respect to the crises of worldly existence. Bonhoeffer concludes his essay "After Ten Years," composed just before his imprisonment, with,

There remains an experience of incomparable value. We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, and reviled—in short, from the perspective of those who suffer. . . . We have to learn that personal suffering is a more effective key, a more rewarding principle for exploring the world in thought and action than personal good fortune."
(*Letters* 17)

The Christocentric ground of Bonhoeffer's thought gives shape to its moral aspect—the shape of moral action is derived from a basic identification with the weak and the oppressed. Attunement to being and time and to responsible speech and action depends upon seeing things from below. Bonhoeffer's Christological social ontology is the basis for his discourse ethics and for what I will now put forth as his rhetorical vision of communication.

A Rhetorical Vision: Bonhoeffer on "Telling the Truth"

Bonhoeffer drafted in Tegel prison an essay on discourse ethics known as "What is Meant By, 'Telling the Truth'?" The study was written as he was deliberately deceiving prison examiners and writing elaborate and dissembling letters to Manfred Roeder, the war court interrogator prosecuting Bonhoeffer and his co-conspirators for their plot against Hitler. Thus, although Bonhoeffer brought all of his intellectual acumen to the question of truth telling, writing about it was no mere academic exercise (Bethge 813). The central concept of the essay is what Bonhoeffer calls "living truth." He writes, "The truthful word is not in itself constant; it is as much alive as life itself. If it detached from life and from its reference to the concrete other man, if 'the truth is told' without taking into account to whom it is addressed, then this truth has only the appearance of truth, but lacks its essential character" (*Ethics* 365). The notion of living truth follows directly from Bonhoeffer's concept of being and time. If being and time are fundamentally social realities, then so must be "truth" if it is to have any meaning for human discourse practices. Truth emerges from the real in its ontological and temporal aspects. "The real is to be expressed in words. That is what constitutes truthful speech" (*Ethics* 365). The single overarching normative reality for Bonhoeffer is "the real exists in God and through God and for God." He writes, "If one is to say how a thing really is, i.e., if one is to speak truthfully, one's gaze and one's thought must be directed towards the way in which the real exists in God and through God and for God" (*Ethics* 365). Bonhoeffer's Christological social ontology thus leads to an insistence on a dynamic and complex concept of the real; and if truth telling is

expressing the real in words, then the exact character of truth telling is as dynamic and complex as the real itself.

Truth telling is foremost situational, relative to where one stands. For example, social structures shape truthfulness. Bonhoeffer writes, "The truthfulness of a child toward his parents is essentially different from that of the parents toward their child" (*Ethics* 363). The structure of any social situation shapes the real and thus the truth. "Speech between parents and children is, in the nature of the case, different from speech between man and wife, between friends, between teacher and pupil, government and subject, friend and foe, and in each case the truth which this speech conveys is also different" (*Ethics* 363). Thus Bonhoeffer concludes, "From this it emerges already that 'telling the truth' means something different according to the particular situation in which one stands. Account must be taken of one's relationships at each particular time" (*Ethics* 363). This preliminary conclusion in "What is Meant By 'Telling the Truth'?" has critical significance. The statement "Account must be taken of one's relationships at each particular time" exposes not only the importance of social structures, but also the kairotic nature of truth telling. Bonhoeffer, in fact, grounds the "situation" not in the static social structures themselves but in their enunciation in "each particular time." Time as a socially produced kairotic conception is the essence of Bonhoeffer's ethical situation. Furthermore, his appeal to "relationships" in the plural suggests that the ethical account the speaker is to take is not merely a question of who is being addressed at the time but begins from a broader question, *where do I socially stand at this particular moment?* Bonhoeffer's social ontology does not come in the form of I-You, or self-other, but self-others. The self emerges out of a network of others; the self is therefore responsible to and for a plurality of others. "Living truth" is that word which leads to the flourishing of others, not only or even necessarily the livelihood of the particular other one is addressing. Truth has meaning only within community.

Consequently, one might describe Bonhoeffer's discourse ethic as communitarian, and there are clear communitarian

strains in Bonhoeffer's thought. He has a high view of the importance of national, regional, and class identities. His ethic tends toward the local and is sometimes suspicious of the "mass," especially mass media. However, the communitarian label will not do, for Bonhoeffer's conception of nationhood and/or community is relative to his ultimate Christocentric ontology and ethic. "Any order," he argued, "can be dissolved" (qtd in Clements 164). Social orders are not ultimate because the Word precedes them, and thus governs and relativizes them. Keith Clements writes, "We do not find in Bonhoeffer universalist abstractions about the 'brotherhood of man' or even 'our common humanity.' We remain in the world of very concrete communities, the nation included. *They are given their space—enough and no more*" (165, emphasis added). So, while Bonhoeffer had a high view of given worldly orders, they do not form the ultimate basis of his ethic. Furthermore, communitarian ethics are often pitted against a more cosmopolitan ethos; thus to describe Bonhoeffer's ethic as communitarian might suggest that he is not concerned with more global issues and communities. Bonhoeffer's international activism and associations show that he was profoundly concerned with the "cosmopolis," not merely his own local polis. Bonhoeffer's thought and action is fundamentally catholic, that is, trans-local. Though Bonhoeffer will speak of the God of Germany, he never once speaks of a German God.

It is therefore better to shun the communitarian label and to find another way to refer to Bonhoeffer's discourse ethic. Within the history of the idea of communication, the label most appropriate is *rhetorical*. Rhetoric offers a model of communication that is situated in the context of community—in contradistinction to a model based on the dialogic I-You interaction or the impersonal mass mediated dissemination model. In the rhetorical model speaker, audience, subject matter, context, culture, language, and time dynamically interact to produce the event of communication. Furthermore, the event of communication in turn reproduces and reconstitutes the community. And though the origins of the rhetorical model are associated with the ancient Greek polis, it is not therefore essentially a provincial

model. The rhetorical model, at least as I understand it, is not defined by size, but by an end: the flourishing of the community as a political entity, whatever the size of the community.

The rhetorical model of communication ethics I see in Bonhoeffer's "What is Meant By 'Telling the Truth?'" needs to be contrasted with the Kantian legacies that are presently so influential in discourse ethics. Kant has been taken up in discourse ethics in three enormously influential but distinct ways.

- 1) The formal legacy, where discourse ethics are grounded in formal definitions. Kant himself offers the supreme example of this in his absolute prohibition against lying. In "On a Supposed Right to Lie because of Philanthropic Concerns," Kant made one of his most definitive statements about discourse ethics with respect to telling the truth. When challenged to consider the possibility that in certain situations lying might be ethically justified for what he calls philanthropic concerns, Kant sharply rebutted, "To be truthful in all declarations is . . . a sacred and unconditionally commanding law of reason that admits of no expediency whatsoever" (65). For Kant, not only what constitutes a lie but also what one's position toward the lie should be is equally clear.
- 2) The procedural legacy, where discourse ethics are made a matter of procedure or method and in principle the good is subordinated to the right. As I addressed in the introduction to this essay, the procedural approach is related to the emphasis on models of communication we see often in communication studies.
- 3) The aesthetic or reflective legacy, where discourse ethics are grounded in a kind of intuitive judgment. Thinkers as diverse as Hannah Arendt and Jean François Lyotard have invoked Kant's notion of "reflective judgment" to address the problem of ethics. Reflective judgment, as described in the *Critique of Judgment*, begins with a particular rather than a universal—it works from the local toward a more global conception, but not necessarily

toward a final and absolute concept. The importance of reflective judgment for Arendt and Lyotard is that it allows us to get to particulars in their particularity. Formal definitions of the "true" or the "good" or the "beautiful" do not suffice when it comes to judging particulars. Both thinkers argue that we need a way to make judgments without categories. Both thinkers also rely on aesthetic spectatorship as the paradigm for ethical judgment.

From one perspective, these legacies function quite independently of one another. Lyotard, for example, consciously sets out to present an alternative to the Habermasian procedural approach. From another perspective, however, they share the same basic rejection of a discourse ethic that starts from a strong vision of the good; each depends rather upon formality or method.⁵

Bonhoeffer's statement, "it becomes apparent how very difficult it is to say what actually constitutes a lie," amounts to a strong critique of formal definitions of the "lie" and the "truth" in discourse ethics (*Ethics* 368). However, in the context of "What is Meant By 'Telling the Truth?'" it also suggests a rejection of the procedural and aesthetic approaches. The example Bonhoeffer employs is rather innocent in appearance. He writes of a child who is asked by a teacher in front of the class whether it is true that his father often comes home drunk. In fact, the father does often come home drunk, but the child says to the teacher "no." Bonhoeffer concludes, "The child's answer can indeed be called a lie; yet this lie contains more truth, that is to say, it is more in accordance with reality than would have been the case if the child had betrayed his father's weakness in front of the class" (*Ethics* 368). The child's "lie" contains a basic truth because the teacher had no right to interfere in this public manner with the affairs of the child's family. The child, Bonhoeffer says, intuitively recognizes this and thus tells a "lie" in order to fend off the teacher's assault on his family. The child recognizes in a limited way that his words address and affect not just an immediate audience (the teacher and his classmates) but the

whole of the social network in which he lives and has his being, and his answer is justified based on the broader integrity of his social network. Bonhoeffer says that a more mature individual in a similar situation, "would have been able to correct his questioner's error while at the same time avoiding a formal untruth in his answer, and he would thus have found the 'right word'" (*Ethics* 368). This relatively innocent example becomes more profound and political when we recall that "What is Meant By 'Telling the Truth?'" was subjected to the censorship of the Tegel prison hierarchy. The child before the schoolteacher is in fact the conspirator before the interrogator; the social network in question extends well beyond family and schoolroom to the political resistance and the nation of Germany.

This example then leads to a set of principles for truth telling. "How can I speak the truth?," Bonhoeffer asks, and then answers with three points:

- a) By perceiving who causes me to speak and what entails me to speak.
- b) By perceiving the place at which I stand.
- c) By relating to this context the object about which I am making some assertion. (*Ethics* 370)

Despite the appearance of a "procedure," these principles together with Bonhoeffer's example of the child in the classroom reveal much more than a procedure. Bonhoeffer's approach in fact undermines an ethics that turns principally or practically on method or procedure. The ability to tell the truth rests on faculties of perception and relation, the ability to judge where one stands in relation to audience, context, subject matter, and ultimately a social and political network. Importantly, the social and political network within which one makes a judgment is in a sense ideal. The child denies his father's weakness in order to preserve the integrity of his family, even as his father's own actions already have significantly eroded his family's well being. Similarly, the political prisoner "lies" on behalf of the integrity of a Germany that empirically can hardly be said to exist. The "context" in which one stands is thus an admixture of the em-

pirical and the ideal. But, for Bonhoeffer, it is just this admixture that amounts to reality: "the real exists in God and through God and for God." In Christ, the preeminent Word, the ideal is manifest in the real. The empirical world therefore takes on a distinct normative meaning.

Similarly, Bonhoeffer's approach entails a critique of the aesthetic approach to ethics inherited from Kant. Bonhoeffer's ideas about judging a situation and how one should speak in it shun "criteria" in a manner like Arendt's and Lyotard's use of reflective judgment. However, unlike these thinkers, Bonhoeffer's approach does not fit the paradigm of aesthetic spectatorship presented in the *Critique of Judgment*, and this is a crucial difference with respect to ethical practice. Arendt and Lyotard explicitly or implicitly place value on distanced perspective and judgments that are more intuitive than learned. Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the social nature of being and time, combined with an attendant imperative to see things from below, means that judgment must be embedded *within* a given situation, not without. And this form of immanent judgment means that judgment is not in principle something that is intuitive but something that must be learned. He writes, "Telling the truth is, therefore, something which must be learnt. This will sound very shocking to anyone who thinks that it must all depend on moral character and that if this is blameless the rest is child's play. But the simple fact is the ethical cannot be detached from reality, and consequently continual progress in learning to appreciate reality is a necessary ingredient in ethical action" (*Ethics* 364-65). Ethical judgment, for Bonhoeffer, is much like a *technê*, a skill or art that can be developed and applied to particular, contingent situations. "Finding the right word is a matter of long, earnest and ever more advanced effort on the basis of experience and knowledge of the real" (*Ethics* 365). Bonhoeffer thus presents us with an ethical vision rooted in practical knowledge.

This then brings me back to my claim that Bonhoeffer's discourse ethics should be seen as basically rhetorical. I have meant by this a view of communication that is predicated upon the idea of the situation, which I have argued depends upon the

two axes of sociality and time. Rhetorical judgment takes place within rather than without the situation; it is not dependant upon distance but rather upon immanent involvement with others and within the moment. Rhetorical judgment is thus a *technê*, a skill or art that is developed through experience and knowledge. However, the rhetorical *technê* is derivative, not fundamental to rhetoric. The skills of rhetoric are derived from a vision of the social good. In the introduction to this essay, I described this vision as *political*, respecting human freedom in speech and action; *plural*, accounting for human otherness; *ordered*, characterized by substantive boundaries with respect to human freedom, human otherness, and human organizations; and *democratic*, in that it is in principle egalitarian with respect to the social network it addresses and includes. Rhetoric's principles and practices—articulated in antiquity in varying but not wholly inconsistent ways by Isocrates, Aristotle, and Cicero—make sense and have substantive meaning only against this backdrop of such a social good. Rhetoric is thus not first a model or a method but rather an articulation of a social good. As I said earlier, rhetoric is a normative vision of human corporate being which is translatable into an art, a *technê*, a skill. Likewise, Bonhoeffer's discourse ethic is an articulation of a social good that is political, plural, ordered, and democratic in the senses given above. It is explicitly grounded in a social ontology. Bonhoeffer thus reinvigorates an idea of communication and discourse ethics that begins from a strong social theory of being and time and works toward an art. As such, he echoes the ancients and presents a challenge to contemporary theorists, teachers, and practitioners of rhetoric. I will conclude this essay by elaborating on that challenge.

Conclusion

Crises are dramatic and definitive turning points. They entail a break with what has gone before and significantly determine what lies ahead. Yet, crises are not therefore anomalous. Rather, they manifest *nomoi* by providing an unusual frame through which what is usual is remembered, recalled, and revalued. What

is seen as extra-ordinary in fact gives shape to what is "ordinary" and reveals what is basic, essential, and most normative. This is true for social norms, and for the theories, systems of thought, and conceptual frameworks that people hold.

In the case of Bonhoeffer I think we see a normative vision of communication emerge from a profound crisis that is congruent with that vision in the history of the idea of communication which is "rhetoric"—this despite the fact that Bonhoeffer apparently had neither extensive knowledge of rhetoric as an idea of communication nor any appreciation for its tradition. He developed quite independently of a corpus of texts on the art of rhetoric a basically rhetorical vision of communication. It was out of a social ontology and a social crisis that his vision emerged—a social ontology that included a basic theory of self, otherness, plurality, order, and dignity, and a social crisis that threatened to crush these forms of being with others. The resemblance between Bonhoeffer's vision of communication and that rhetorical vision we see in antiquity is due, I would argue, to a similar social ontology. Isocrates, Aristotle, and Cicero each express in varying degrees and ways basic ideas of self, otherness, plurality, order, and dignity that turned upon sociality. The striking similarities between Bonhoeffer's thought and rhetorical thought are also due in part to similar social crises—rhetorical thought most often has been accompanied by a consciousness of the threat of tyranny, absolute rule, unfreedom.

The emergence of Bonhoeffer's idea of communication in the 1940s challenges contemporary theorists, teachers, and practitioners of rhetoric and discourse ethics to consider again the importance of the question of the good, a concept most often seen as irrelevant, impossible, or tyrannical. If rhetoric does indeed offer a model of communication that revolves around ideas of sociality and situated communication, that model cannot remain merely a model and still have a meaning that exceeds the blandest form of instrumentalism. I have suggested here that rhetoric is a vision of the good predicated upon notions of politics, plurality, order, and democracy, and thus rhetoric assumes status as a distinct ethical approach to

communication. Bonhoeffer's work on truth telling provides a strong example of this approach, even though many of us would be uncomfortable with its theological bases. Regardless, Bonhoeffer's thought presents us with this problem: If we elide the question of the good or goods, how can we coherently think of rhetoric, let alone theorize, teach, and practice it? And this then raises the question, why rhetoric? Rather than venturing a full answer to this tantalizing question, for now I will leave it open. Instead, I will conclude with a remark, a question, and an answer Taylor makes in his *Sources of the Self*. At the end of his chapter "Ethics of Inarticulacy," in which he argues at length that despite claims to the contrary, procedural approaches to ethics (e.g. Habermas) do indeed rest upon a thick but unarticulated theory of the good and strong qualitative distinctions, Taylor writes, "All this in answer to the question why it is necessary to belabour the obvious fact that qualitative distinctions have an inexpugnable place in our moral life and thinking. We have to fight uphill to rediscover the obvious, to counteract the layers of suppression of modern moral consciousness. It's a difficult thing to do. But what's the point of doing it?" (90). Taylor's answer, in short, is this: "articulation can bring us closer to the good as a moral source, can give it power" (92). Rhetorical theorists can rediscover the power of rhetoric by articulating visions of the good rhetoric offers.

Ned O'Gorman is an Assistant Professor of Speech Communication at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Endnotes

¹ I realize that appeals to a rhetorical tradition derived from Aristotle, Isocrates, and Cicero have been problematized in contemporary rhetorical scholarship (for example, see Graff, Walzer, and Atwill's *The Viability of the Rhetorical Tradition*). The argument I make in this essay neither depends upon the conflation of the theories and ideas of Aristotle, Isocrates, and Cicero into a single whole, nor upon a unified rhetorical tradition. Instead, it acknowledges the vital role these thinkers have played in a great variety of historical discourses about rhetoric, and it claims that their texts share a minimalist vision of a

"good," despite the oppositions, contradictions, and tensions among these thinkers and their interpreters. I indicate why I am interested in this minimalist vision in the conclusion to this essay.

² Exemplary is Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols.

³ See Lyotard's *Just Gaming* for a rather clear articulation of how discourse ethics and Kantian aesthetic judgment might be fused.

⁴ This is why Bonhoeffer's thought turned so vigorously toward ethics as he matured as a thinker. See his *Ethics*.

⁵ This claim is most difficult to support when discussing Arendt and Lyotard. In fact, in a work like *The Human Condition* Arendt demonstrates a very strong conception of the good with respect to human polity. However, her "Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy" seem to want to operate in a different manner and start with a model or method for political judgment rather than the normative vision of sociality she advocates in other works. With respect to Lyotard, his anarchic method in a work like *Just Gaming* suggests a normative vision of a good. However, since the work explicitly rejects the idea of normative visions, it is dominated by what amounts to a method for the production of radical indeterminacy in political discourse and judgment. It is thus very much a proceduralist's work.

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