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Commentary on Goodwin

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I try to keep things simple. This is probably the combined result of having taught technical writing for too long.

So I will start with the most important point. I like what Dr. Goodwin has done here and I think she has made some useful and interesting points. And, since my understanding of my job is to take her paper and use it as a springboard for further discussion, that is what I will now do.

When I first started reading "Cicero’s Authority," my initial feeling was "But isn’t all this just ethos?" Why doesn’t Dr. Goodwin just say something like "It is significant that much of the legal rhetoric from the Roman period focuses on the ethos of the person defending the accused?" In fact, I do not recall seeing the word "ethos" in the draft version of the paper. Having read through the paper more carefully, I think there are reasons why Dr. Goodwin did this, although she does not put it in the terms I would use. And her reasons may be different than the ones I would have had in this situation. This is not an accusation; it is simply an observation.

One of the points in Dr. Goodwin’s paper that I see worth examining is the implied relationships between the three types of Aristotelian appeals. It is easy to see ethos, logos, and pathos as discreet types of argument, incapable of being blended. However, as most of us know, if we examine real arguments we find almost immediately cases where the appeal only works because of a combination of multiple appeals or because other appeals are part of the context within which the appeal we are presently examining exists. Or, to put the latter point more simply, many logical appeals succeed only because of an ethical appeal that has been made earlier, even though it is not part of the logical appeal itself.

The distinction between the three kinds of appeals is often unclear. The boundary between logos and pathos is very fuzzy. Is duty a logical appeal or an emotional one? Taking a cue from James Kinneavy, my solution to the problem is to treat "logic" and "emotion" as "subject" and "audience." Logos now covers arguments that are either specific to the subject or somehow universal (virtually all audiences have a rational aversion to inefficiency, although for some it is also a matter of passion as well) while pathos covers arguments that are specific to the audience. This, I think, makes it easier to classify and understand the arguments, although one could argue that ultimately all rational arguments are based in ideological assumptions about reality, making all logos a branch of pathos.

What is significant about Dr. Goodwin’s paper is that is examines a rhetorical appeal where ethos and logos become intertwined. Ethos has, of course, been limited to the speaker rather than the subject, but when the speaker is the
subject, is ethos actually ethos or is it logos? (Or pathos?) Perhaps this is where some of the confusion about appeals to dignity or authority come from—the fact that the subject of the logos is actually ethos. And, of course, the fact that this is an appeal to behavior rather than belief, an appeal that implies the audience should in some cases surrender its integrity and jump through a hoop being offered by authority rather than face the possible consequences.

I would now like to talk about the actual rhetorical transactions involved in cases of dignity. First, we can think of dignity originating with either office, symbol, or reputation. That is, a person may be dignified because of an official position that they hold, like the Presidency. They may be dignified because they have used various culturally appropriate symbols, perhaps as simple as $1,000 Italian suit, which shouts a certain kind of authority in our faces. Finally, a person may be dignified because of their reputation for knowledge, experience, and so on. In all three cases, the social blackmail-and-bond logic seems quite plausible.

To shed what I hope will be some additional light on this point, I will view the transaction through another lens. I tend to think of persuasion in terms of costs and benefits. The cost of deferring to the dignified is, of course, agreeing with them, although this may mean downplaying your own position in public. The cost is not to belief but to behavior. The benefit is that one avoids risk. It is risky to challenge an authority figure. Social costs may include damage to your own reputation and payback later on if the person you have attacked has powerful friends. You can be seen as a no-nothing jerk. You can also become a pariah. In any situation where social bonds are very important—such as an academic community—this is a very important factor.

The bond aspect is another benefit. Because the bond is offered, one also in effect avoids risk of embarrassment. If I agree with the expert, this argument says, I will avoid looking rude or looking like a fool, and I can be pretty sure that I will not look like a fool later on because this expert would not support this point so strongly if she did not believe it. And, if she is proved wrong later on, I can always lay blame on her, pleading that it was her strong conviction and her reputation as an expert that won me over.

When dignity comes not only from reputation or symbol but also from office, we have a similar situation, although the issue of coercion becomes more evident. I think if we going to discuss dignity, we need to clearly distinguish it from authority. Dignity is, after all, a matter of respect, of what Kenneth Burke would call the rhetorical magic of social hierarchy, while authority need not be based in respect; it may only need power. As an example, whether or not you respect William Jefferson Clinton, he does have the legal and constitutional authority to tell the cruiser Philippine Sea to fire a volley of missiles at Yugoslavia.

Power makes a difference in our transactions. Telling James Kinneavy or Wayne Booth that he’s a moron about something when he is making a presentation might make you less popular at some of the conference parties, and there may be other consequences, but perhaps there will not be any at all.
These elder statesmen of our field do not, after all, have any legal power over us. Telling the police officer who has just pulled you over for speeding that he’s a moron might have more immediate and less pleasant effects.

Now we move to a different subject. I always look for practical applications. All this chit chat about Cicero and dignity is very nice, but how does it help me? I am going to list a few possible future directions for this topic.

First, as a teacher, the whole concept of dignity in communications is worth some attention. What is "dignity" or a postmodern version of it? Are there, perhaps, different flavors of dignity created by the dignitary’s position, office, standing, or profession? Is a doctor more dignified than an engineer? Is a surgeon more dignified than a dermatologist? Can dignity be earned or must it be granted by the discourse communities in which we find ourselves? How do we know if we have dignity? How do we know if we are on our way? How do we know if we have lost it? What new strategies does the concept of dignity imply for communication? How can we use our understanding of dignity and our understanding of whether certain people have it in our communications? Do variations of dignity create variations for these strategies?

You can spend an entire course on dignity.

And not all teaching goes on in the classroom. We can do consulting and continuing education. Dignity workshops? Can we bottle this? Maybe. If we can, the money’s gonna roll in. Because dignity is like heroin. Once you have a little taste, you always want more and you always want a steady supply.

I will close with how this might be applied to scholarship. Hmmm....let’s see. Working title: The Rhetoric and Dignity of...oh, I'll figure out who later. The name does not really matter. You can apply the lens to anyone. They all had some kind of dignity, waiting to be discussed. The trope, and the readiness, is all.