
REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU**Ethics in Technical Communication**

By Bill Bunn

Paul Dombrowski's book, Ethics in Technical Communication, is moving in a useful and healthy direction on its subject matter. Too often, undergraduate technical communication texts use a "feel good" approach to ethics: good upstanding communicators must act in good upstanding ways — end of story. Dombrowski shuns this kind of approach in favour of a brief tour of ethics and ethical traditions and some interesting ethical case studies.

This slim, 255-page, Eight-chapter volume, attempts to do a lot. It begins with a short definition of ethics and a tour of the assumptions of the book and other obligatory openers. Chapter Two traces a historical lineage of rhetoric and ethics, trying to demonstrate to readers that ethics are an important part of communication. The mere presence of this chapter suggests that the book anticipates a doubting reader, or at least a reader who needs a substantial reminder that communications always carry a world-view with them. Chapter Three is a short history of the philosophical ethical tradition from Aristotle to Feminist Ethics. When I say short, I mean that in this 2500 year trip, Dombrowski makes four main stops: Aristotle, Kant, Utilitarianism, and Feminist ethics and ethics of care. The next four chapters take these four main perspectives and apply them to some fairly interesting situations: Nazi records (Chapter 5), the Challenger Disaster (Chapter 6), Tobacco Companies (Chapter 7), and the Strategic Defence Initiative (Chapter 7). Chapter 8 offers readers 6 case studies that are intended as exercises.

Dombrowski does several good things for ethics in technical writing. Perhaps the best thing he does, for undergraduates, is he situates the ethical discussion in the philosophy of ethics. This is a wonderful move and a lovely change from texts I've seen in the past. This book is also very aware of the rhetorical nature of technical writing, and moves readers away from the naïve stance that many introductory texts suggest. Dombrowski's work is well researched, too, and each chapter includes a hefty list of references to back up what he says. Dombrowski has done his reading and presents concepts quite clearly and fairly well, too.

Though I am not very knowledgeable on the philosophical area of ethics I could see a few things in this text that needed some work. For instance, I have a little trouble with his historical treatment of subject matter. Chapter two is a "Survey of Ethics in Rhetoric as Communication." In this chapter, Dombrowski blasts through some important thinkers Plato, Aristotle, Sophists and then leaps forward into modern times. The segue between the ancients and the moderns reads this way: "Let us jump ahead about twenty centuries to more recent times, after briefly reviewing the intervening years" (p. 24). Twenty centuries covered in a couple of paragraphs. Though he touches on some important moments and figures, there's a lot left out.

Dombrowski is aware of his own brevity and broad brush strokes, and in Chapter Three, "The Ethics Tradition," he offers this brief explanation as to why he chose four main schools of ethical thinking:

The four principal perspectives represent the most highly regarded ethical approaches throughout European-American history, giving us the concepts and vocabulary we commonly use today. They were chosen not only because of this representativeness of common notions, but also because they provide their own unique contribution to an overall, complex picture of ethics. Though other perspectives have their unique strengths, too, a survey of them all is beyond the scope of this short book and might result in more confusion than clarity. (p. 38)

I tend to think that too brief of a survey will also result in confusion, the only problem is the reader won't be aware of the confusion in what he or she knows.

Of the four positions he's chosen, the small space he devotes to each of them is a problem, too. The "Feminist Perspective and Ethics of Care" position is a little troublesome: the portion of the chapter he devotes to it is small, and the discussion is broad and sweeping. It seems, after a little reading into the book, that the Feminists hold a single ethical position. He does use important names and key articles to identify the position, but in the end I think the reader comes away with an over simplified view of the approach.

His list of four main schools of philosophical thought is this: Aristotle, Kant, Utilitarianism, and Feminist and Care Ethics. Chapter Three introduces each of the four positions and then chapters Four through Seven examine cases and toward the end of each chapter each of the four main positions responds to the particular case. Why these four ethical approaches? He asks us to trust him, and I do to a point, but he does leave out some fairly interesting schools of ethics. Psychological Egoism, for instance, could be said to capture some of the spirit of our age. E.J. Bond sums up the

spirit of this view point this way: “you don’t give a damn for anyone else; no one else gives a damn for you either or for anything else besides himself [sic]” (p. 7). The four schools Dombrowski identifies are fairly conservative philosophies and they are all fairly “caring” philosophies, none of which come very close to the way students and I think. In other words, these four main positions aren’t going to challenge student thinking very well unless a student has done quite a bit of thinking on the subject already. Of course, I haven’t used this book in the classroom, so I have yet to see if I’m right on this score.

I think the book has a little difficulty with the subject of the cases it examines. Most of the cases I read have a clear goodness or badness about them, so I’m not left wondering where I might stand on the issue of Nazi communication, for instance. I know it’s bad already, so when I read the chapter I don’t really feel any ethical pulls one way or another: I’ve already made up my mind. Mind you, I found the discussion of Nazi technical writing fascinating on its own, and I think many students would enjoy it, too. At the end of the chapter when Dombrowski reveals what each of the four positions would say about the Nazi case: it’s really a study in how many ways there are to be ethically wrong. Some of these four ethical positions get interesting and mildly complex when they speak to the cases under investigation, but for the most part, they agree in condemning the typical badness of the situations presented. The only case that I thought could provide some interesting thinking was Chapter Seven on the Strategic Defence Initiative. Students may be pro, con or ambivalent to the subject, and so they might get a chance to solo in an interesting situation. However, I knew how I was supposed to feel toward the subject matter after I finished reading the chapter’s title: “Star Wars: Hope vs. Reality.” Again, the four major positions, enumerated at the end of the chapter, agreed in their condemnation of the initiative, more or less. Each of the four major positions in each of the four case studies responded predictably like Russian judges evaluating an American performance. I’d have like to have seen at least one radical approach thrown into the pot (like the Egoist approach I mentioned earlier) to help students see how a different ethical stance could take them to the opposite, and unpopular side of a given debate.

The final chapter, Chapter 8, offers the reader a set of six case studies to work through. This kind of territory is still quite black and white, like the case studies; however, the student will need to think through the situation for him or herself. At the end of the chapter, each of the four major positions — Aristotle, Kant, Utilitarianism, and Feminist Ethics — speak briefly to each case. On the whole, the cases are reasonable except they are “big” ethical moments. They’re large pivotal moments

that call for fairly clear action. So a reader could get the impression that ethics don't have much to do with the little wormy moments that pop up every day or with the real actions he or she takes to respond to the small ethical moments.

In short, I think Dombrowski has a good start on a larger text. He needs more of everything for it. He needs to expand his histories, add a few more perspectives to the four he's chosen here, alter his cases or at least add more cases, and help students see that ethics happen every day, not just in the big Boisjoly-sized moments.

Bond, E.J. (1996). *Ethics and Human Well-Being*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Dombrowski, Paul (2000). *Ethics in Technical Communication*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.