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# Critical Thinking Activities and the Enhancement of Ethical Awareness: An application of a ‘Rhetoric of Disruption’ to the undergraduate general education classroom

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## Abstract

*This article explores how critical thinking activities and assignments can function to enhance students’ ethical awareness and sense of civic responsibility. Employing Levinas’s Other-centered theory of ethics, Burke’s notion of ‘the paradox of substance’, and Murray’s concept of ‘a rhetoric of disruption’, this article explores the nature of critical thinking activities designed to have students question their (often taken-for-granted) moral assumptions and interrogate their (often unexamined) moral identities. This article argues that such critical thinking activities can trigger a metacognitive destabilization of subjectivity, understood as a dialectical prerequisite (along with exposure to otherness) for increased ethical awareness. This theoretical model is illustrated through a discussion of three sample classroom activities designed to destabilize moral assumptions and identity, thereby clearing the way for a heightened acknowledgment of otherness. In so doing, this article provides an alternative (and dialectically inverted) strategy for addressing one of the central goals of many General Education curricula: the development of ethical awareness and civic responsibility. Rather than introducing students to alternative perspectives and divergent cultures with the expectation that heightened moral awareness will follow, this article suggests classroom activities and course assignments aimed at disrupting moral subjectivity and creating an opening in which otherness can be more fully acknowledged and the diversity of our world more fully appreciated.*

**Keywords:** critical thinking, ethical awareness, civic responsibility, rhetoric, disruption

## **Introduction**

Within an increasingly global environment, institutions of higher education increasingly seek to develop students' knowledge, appreciation, and respect for diversity and their sense of civic responsibility. Two common avenues for this development are (1) traditional liberal arts courses, in which students are exposed in the classroom to a variety of cultures, belief-systems, and perspectives, and (2) the relatively new focus on service learning at many institutions of higher education, in which students are directly exposed to diversity through community engagement and community partnerships. Regarding the first approach, a primary mission of traditional liberal arts education has long been the expanding of the student's moral 'horizon' through exposure to otherness and diversity—see the discussion of Dewey later. Regarding the second approach, service learning courses often seek to serve this same moral goal (alongside other curricular objectives), though they seek to do it through the supplementation of readings, lectures, and classroom discussions with real-world interactions within the community—see further discussion of service learning courses later. Despite their many potential differences, the foundational notion in both approaches is that exposure to otherness and diversity—whether through literature, history, etc. or through community engagement—will expand a student's moral horizon and facilitate the development of ethical awareness.

This article seeks to explicate an alternative, dialectically-inverted strategy for the development of students' ethical awareness. This alternative approach is the strategic destabilization and disruption of the student's own moral horizon—i.e., their own constructed (and often unquestioned) moral assumptions and their own constructed (and often unexamined) moral identity—as a catalyst for transformative encounters with otherness and diversity. To be sure, such a critical questioning of moral assumptions and identity often follows exposure to otherness, in both traditional liberal arts or service learning courses. So this alternative strategy differs not in that it offers something radically new or presently deficient. Rather, it differs by starting with critical questioning rather than with exposure to otherness. This article contends that this dialectically-inverted approach to increasing students' ethical awareness is an equally viable pedagogical strategy. Instead of starting with exposure to otherness, with the expectation that critical questioning of one's own moral assumptions and identity will follow—or, better, with intentional course design seeking to guarantee subsequent critical questioning—this alternative approach begins with the critical questioning, intended to trigger subsequently meaningful or even transformative acknowledgment of otherness and diversity. Hence, this article does not claim that this alternative strategy is superior; rather, this article seeks only to offer an alternative framework and set of possibilities for thinking about the pedagogy of enhancing students' ethical awareness and civic responsibility.

According to this alternative framework, which is built upon the foundation provided by the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, and then supplemented by Kenneth Burke's notion of 'the paradox of substance' and extended by my own model of a 'rhetoric of disruption' (Murray, 2003), one can assert that the disruption of subjectivity is a necessary precondition for ethics to flourish. In other words, while it is true that a student may begin to question their moral assumptions and moral identity upon exposure to difference in the classroom or in the community, it is also true—which is the argument here—that the

intentional disruption of their moral assumptions and moral identity can provide a clearing in which meaningful acknowledgment of otherness and diversity can occur. In this alternative approach, openness to, and acknowledgment of, a new moral horizon is conditional upon and triggered by rejection of the old moral horizon.

### **Expanding Horizons versus Disrupting Horizons: A Rhetoric of Disruption**

In his article ‘Dewey’s book on the moral self’, David T. Hansen (2006) discusses one common framework for understanding the traditional ethical imperative of higher education for its students and the manner in which it can be cultivated. Drawing on the influence of John Dewey, Hansen writes that ‘if persons are to realize their full humanity, and if they are to support others in that process, they must be in close contact with the world. They must be willing to address “all the contacts of life” whether these be pleasant or painful, happy or sad, fulfilling or frustrating, joyful or tragic’ (p. 165). Continuing, Hansen points out, with regard to the ‘contacts of life’, that ‘people must be willing to learn from all of them, which means engaging all of them, which means not withdrawing or fleeing from any of them’ (p. 165). In other words, one develops as a moral being by being exposed to more of the world around one. Writing for *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Marc E. Jonas (2011) reiterates that this Deweyan philosophy of moral education is founded upon the view that ‘to become a moral self requires the cultivation of interest across the spectrum of life’ (p. 112). Indeed, Dewey ‘refers to learning from others as a “moral” interest’ (Hansen, 2006, p. 166). Citing John Dewey directly, Hansen reminds us of Dewey’s statement, which closes *Democracy and education*, that ‘Interest in learning from all the contacts of life is the essential moral interest’ (cited in Hansen, 2006, p. 165). This sentence as a whole summarizes Dewey’s vision of the finest outcome of education, namely, ‘a human being willing and able to engage intellectually and ethically with a changing world’ (Hansen, 2006, p. 165).

The difficulty, however, is that ‘[u]nfortunately, students are not always encouraged to take interest in objects, people, and ideas outside of their immediate surroundings’ (Jonas, 2011, p. 112). Engaging with the work of Hansen, Jonas discusses how Dewey sought to rectify this problem by ‘assisting teachers in discovering how to cultivate myriad interests in their students’ (2011, p. 112). Jonas continues:

Hansen argues that Dewey’s method for doing this ‘is not to recommend philosophy in-service courses for educators so that they can acquire the proper understanding of the idea of interest’. Rather, Dewey seeks to inculcate a habit of study in which teachers observe the specific situations in which learning and growth happen and then translate these into ‘a movement of engagement and experiment, of reaction and response’. ... This will ultimately encourage students to become interested in other contacts of life. (Jonas, 2011, pp. 112–113)

According to this view, then, students develop their moral self—which includes respect for diversity and civic responsibility—by, as the cliché goes, ‘expanding their horizons’.

As stated in the Introduction, this is the ‘tried and true’ approach of traditional liberal arts education, in which undergraduate students develop moral sophistication and

greater empathy for others through exposure to otherness and diversity, whether that be through the study of great works of literature or cinema, the study of other cultures throughout history, anthropological study of divergent cultures and traditions, and so on. Indeed, the expansion of the student's moral worldview has long been a pillar of liberal arts education. According to Paul Hernadi (1987), 'Interpretation in general and literary interpretation in particular are concerned with profoundly situated acts of comprehension' (p. 267), by which he meant that 'the literary work's present appeal to us ... emerges from the imaginative interaction between text and reader' (p. 267). Hernadi (1987) investigated how 'works like the *Odyssey*, *Hamlet*, or *Madame Bovary* [act upon the reader] as versions of the imperative *Du must dein Leben ändern* ("You must change your life")' (pp. 266–267). The exposure to otherness—i.e., the expansion of one's horizon, in Dewey's terms—which occurs through literary (or other liberal arts) study is not merely an intellectual endeavor, but one with moral implications in so far as it calls one's own moral existence into question.

The relatively new emphasis on experiential education and service learning similarly reflects this commitment. As Janet Eyler (2009) pointed out, 'since the 1980s, there has been renewed interest in the civic role of colleges and universities and a call for increased civic literacy for students; this has fueled much of the interest in service learning as a way of achieving the goals of liberal arts education so central to citizenship' (p. 26). Similarly, Rebecca Carver (1996) articulated a framework for experiential education which emphasizes not only *competence*, but also *agency* and *belonging*, both of which foreground ethical awareness and civic responsibility as central learning objectives. The student's personal *agency* refers to 'allowing students to become more powerful change agents in their lives and communities' (Carver, 1996, p. 11) and a sense of *belonging* refers to how students come to 'see themselves as members [of a community] with rights and responsibilities ... [and] learn to act responsibly, considering the best interests of themselves, other individuals, and the group as a whole' (Carver, 1996, p. 11).

Alternatively, this article suggests not an expansion of the student's existing horizon but the dismantling of the student's existing horizon, which is constitutive of subjectivity and (at least potentially) constrains openness to otherness and difference. In terms of thinking about classroom strategies designed to facilitate such a dismantling, the technique is essentially that of a 'rhetoric of disruption'. In pursuing the implications of the philosophy of ethics of Emmanuel Levinas (for the discipline of Communication Studies), I developed the notion of a rhetoric of disruption and discussed how:

a rhetoric of disruption is designed to challenge, disrupt, and traverse ideological assumptions that may suffocate or silence the call [of the Other]. By strategically targeting its audience's ideological filter, [one] can work rhetorically to reconstitute the worldview that hinders his or her acknowledgment. ... Undoubtedly, rhetoric can function to overwrite the call of the Other and to efface its humanity. The propagandistic techniques of Hitler and the Nazis are an all too familiar example of the masking, effacing, and dehumanizing potential of rhetoric. But rhetoric may also function to recover the call of the Other and to reclaim its humanity. When cultural assumptions and stereotypes are strong enough to suffocate the Other's primordial word at the very instant of

its appearance, a rhetoric of disruption can work to disrupt and reconstruct those assumptions and stereotypes. (Murray, 2003, pp. 259–260)

I then illustrated this rhetoric through a discussion of Martha Courtot's essay 'A spoiled identity' (1983) which 'discusses the difficulties of being a fat woman in a culture that devalues and discriminates against fat people' (Murray, 2003, p. 260). Courtot (1983) began:

I wish that you could see me as I truly am. Instead, when you look at me what you see ... is a catalog of assumptions about fat women which manages to erase me from the situation. ... Have I let myself go? Am I lazy and stupid? Do I sit at home all day eating chocolates and hating myself? ... All of these assumptions come directly from your head to surround the real person I am. (p. 199)

In my analysis, I argued that Courtot's own rhetoric constitutes a 'rhetoric of disruption' by seeking to destabilize and dismantle those very assumptions:

Courtot's essay demonstrates the way in which rhetoric can serve the ethical goal of acknowledging the Others around us by helping to recover the faces of those Others ... to reclaim ... the humanity of fat women by unsettling the attitudes that deny it. She accomplishes this by calling into question the ideological assumptions and cultural stereotypes that obstruct [the Other]. (Murray, 2003, p. 260)

Translated into the context of higher education pedagogy, a rhetoric of disruption would be a classroom activity or homework assignment that strategically seeks to invite students to confront and critically interrogate their own taken-for-granted beliefs, commitments, and values. Precisely because our factual beliefs, political commitments, and moral values are often taken-for-granted, the very acknowledgment of difference is difficult. We too easily assume that our beliefs are true, our commitments justified, and our values right—or more to the point, we do not even recognize our beliefs, commitments, and values as being subject to the tests of true or false, justified or unjustified, right or wrong. Hence, engaging in an exercise which destabilizes or even dismantles any of our unquestioned beliefs, commitments, or values—or even just being confronted with their ultimate contingency—constitutes the very disruption of subjectivity which is a necessary precondition for fuller openness to the call of otherness.

However, before turning to illustrations of this 'rhetoric of disruption' in the classroom, it may prove useful to provide more of the theoretical underpinning for the 'rhetoric of disruption' model being applied here to first-year classroom pedagogy. Most fundamentally, my notion of a 'rhetoric of disruption' is grounded upon the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, to which the article now turns its attention.

### **Emmanuel Levinas and 'The Call of the Other'**

Throughout his many philosophical and theological writings, Emmanuel Levinas<sup>1</sup> developed a unique theory of ethics. In *Totality and Infinity* (1969), the first of his two magnum opuses, Levinas argued that the Western philosophical tradition has been too focused on *ontology*—the study of the nature of subjectivity and being—and offered instead a

*metaphysics*—defined by Levinas as reflection upon what lies beyond being, i.e., otherness. For Levinas, ontology results in a kind of thinking that totalizes the world by circumscribing everything within the horizon of subjective consciousness and reducing it to its meaning for an ‘I’. By contrast, metaphysics attempts to ‘think’ or encounter the infinite. ‘Metaphysics ... is turned toward the “elsewhere” and the “otherwise” and the “other.” ... The metaphysical desire tends toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*’ (Levinas, 1969, p. 33, original emphasis).<sup>2</sup>

So Levinas asked us to concentrate not on what we can know or contain of the Other—the move toward totality—but instead to contemplate that which always exceeds our grasp—the move toward infinity. He argued that the Other is experienced as an ethical obligation. And rather than seeking to define or characterize that which is other within our own conceptual scheme, Levinas asked us to reflect upon the Other as that which disrupts our world and as that which calls us to ethical responsibility. Quite simply, Levinas’s (1969) claim is that the encounter with another person *is* the experience of ethical obligation: ‘The fact that in existing for another I exist otherwise than in existing for me is morality itself’ (p. 261). According to Peperzak (1996), ‘To encounter another is to discover that I am under a basic obligation: the human other’s infinity reveals itself as a command’ (p. xi).

Most important for the purposes of this article is Levinas’s insight that the experience of ethical obligation is an unsettling of the self. ‘The Other becomes my neighbor precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 83). This means that ethics is not an attribute of the self. Rather, what we think of as ‘moral conscience’ is not an innate human property, but the product of the summons from without. ‘Responsibility is elicited, brought about by the face of the Other person’ (Levinas, 1994, p. 43). Indeed, Levinas (1985) defines the face precisely as that ‘whose *meaning* consists in saying: “thou shalt not kill”’ (p. 87). ‘There is a commandment in the appearance of the face’ (p. 89).

Therefore, in defining ethics as the call of the Other, Levinas did not reinscribe ethics as a predetermined set of rules to govern behavior, but reconceived it as an unsettling of the self. Ethics is ‘an encounter with the Other which puts the self into question’ (Davis, 1996, p. 5). For Levinas (1969), ‘We name this calling into question ... by the presence of the Other ethics’ (p. 43). It is ‘an uprooting of the I’ and ‘calls in question my freedom’ (pp. 83–84). The call of the Other unsettles the self and questions its freedom precisely through the imposition of a primordial imperative. The first word of the face, which announces the ‘thou shalt not kill’, is for Levinas (1985) a summons that ‘orders and ordains me’ (p. 97). It is not a moral imperative (in the sense of being an ethical principle or rule), but instead the very appearance of otherness to the self, which is at once an unsettling of the self. I am not the center of it all; I am not all that there is. The Other disrupts and conditions my ‘world’.

Now, the primary implication of Levinas’s philosophy for classroom pedagogy is that the learning objective of enhancing undergraduate students’ ethical awareness and sense of civic responsibility needs, at some point, to disrupt their assumptions and values in order for the voices of others to be heard. In terms of a traditional liberal arts class, it means that a student’s exposure to otherness (through a lecture or assigned reading, for



example) must at some point trigger a moment of introspection. If that never occurs (in any meaningful way), that student's study of literature or history has been a purely 'academic' exercise, in the most negative sense. Rather, moral growth is occasioned when the student's exposure to the larger world, be it in the classroom or through the textbook, facilitates deeper understanding (and self-understanding). Hernadi's (1987) distinction between under-standing, over-standing, and standing-in-for as three levels of engagement with a text is instructive here. According to Hernadi (1987):

[W]e 'explicate' the work by *standing under* the linguistic code governing it as symbolically conveyed message; we 'explain' the work by *standing over*, and looking with the bird's eye view of historical hindsight at the circumstances that have conditioned it ... ; and we 'explore' the work by *standing in for* the 'mode of being in the world' that it iconically projects as a an image of our own potential existence. (p. 268, original emphasis)

In other words, a student must move from 'understanding' through 'over-standing' to 'standing in for' if he or she is to experience the unsettling of identity necessary for moral insight and growth to occur. And, as was quoted earlier, the act of 'standing in for' occasions an unsettling of the self, experienced as the moral imperative 'You must change your life' (Hernadi, 1987, pp. 266–267).

However, before turning to a fuller discussion of how such a 'rhetoric of disruption' can be implemented in the undergraduate classroom, a brief elaboration on the dialectical relationship between the acknowledgment of otherness and the disruption of subjectivity may also prove helpful. The work of literary theorist Kenneth Burke sheds light on the nature of this relationship and further lays the foundation for a 'rhetoric of disruption' pedagogy.

### **Kenneth Burke and 'The Paradox of Substance'**

One of the most foundational concepts in the philosophy of literary theorist and critic Kenneth Burke is his notion of dialectic, which is introduced early in his treatise *A Grammar of Motives*. Burke (1969) observed that language is dialectical in nature, which means that all symbols contain within themselves a duality due to 'the fact that we necessarily define a thing in terms of something else' (p. 33). Indeed, Burke argued that language is fundamentally an act of negation, since the name for a thing is not the thing itself. This means that the very nature of language necessitates that 'we see something in terms of some other. In a more restricted sense, however, the dialectic considers things in terms not of *some* other, but of *the* other' (Burke, 1969, p. 33), i.e., its linguistic counterpart. This counterpart term for every term is generated out of a primordial 'ambiguity' (Burke, 1969, p. xix). Burke (1969) offered the following metaphorical explanation:

Distinctions, we might say, arise out of a great central moltenness, where all is merged. They have been thrown from a liquid center to the surface, where they have congealed. ... From the central moltenness, where all the elements are fused into one togetherness, there are thrown forth, in separate crusts, such distinctions as those between freedom and necessity, activity and passiveness,

cooperation and competition, cause and effect, mechanism and teleology. (p. xix)

Burke's point is that a word always bears an opposite, which is implied within the word itself. To name a thing is necessarily and simultaneously to name what it is not. And as Burke (1969) insisted, 'every terminology is dialectical by sheer reason of the fact that it is a terminology' (p. 57).

This dialectical principle, which undergirds Burke's entire dramatic philosophy, stems from what Burke (1969) called the 'paradox of substance' (pp. 21–23). Arguing against traditional philosophical conceptions of substance as 'the real essence of a thing' (Angeles, 1992, p. 298), Burke (1969) noted that 'etymologically "substance" is a scenic word. Literally, a person's or a thing's sub-stance would be something that stands beneath or supports the person or thing' (p. 22). Burke (1969) continued:

the word 'substance', used to designate what a thing *is*, derives from a word designating something that a thing *is not*. That is, though used to designate something *within* the thing, *intrinsic* to it, the word etymologically refers to something *outside* the thing, *extrinsic* to it. (p. 23, original emphasis)

The inception of language is the creation of a dialectic. In the first instance, language creates a dialectic between a thing and its sub-stancial counterpart. To name a thing a 'tree', for example, requires that one distinguish it from the ground and from the sky. But later, language creates a dialectic between a concept and its conceptual counterpart. To have a concept of liberty, for example, requires that one have a concept of oppression.<sup>3</sup>

Now, what does all this mean for our current discussion of the development of respect for diversity and civic responsibility as a goal of higher education? Burke's notion of the 'paradox of substance' claims that any classroom activity in which students are exposed to otherness—i.e., other cultures, other perspectives, and so on—is at once a tacit examination of identity—i.e., one's own culture, one's own perspective, and so on. And conversely, any classroom activity in which students are invited or compelled to critically question their own cultural assumptions, beliefs, and values is at once an invitation to acknowledge the otherness that lies beyond the boundaries of those socio-linguistic constructions. Burke's dialectical principle means that the pedagogy of increasing ethical awareness is not an either/or—i.e., *either* heightened ethical awareness results from exposure to otherness *or* heightened ethical awareness results from an unsettling of the self—but a both/and. [Recall that for Levinas, the appearance of the face *is* (phenomenologically) an unsettling of the self.] Pedagogically, therefore, it is not a matter of choosing—i.e., Should I expose my students to diversity or should I get them to interrogate their own moral assumptions?—but a matter of emphasis and timing. Both of these things need to happen for meaningful moral growth and transformation to occur. They are two (dialectical) sides of the same (phenomenological) coin. The question is not which to do, but which to do first.

In a service learning course or community engagement activity, for example, a student might volunteer at a homeless shelter and work with people who are homeless. This experience would of dialectical necessity entail (for almost any thoughtful student) some degree of introspection about his or her pre-existing beliefs and attitudes about the homeless. Indeed, in a well-designed service learning course, such exposure would be followed by

a relatively systematic interrogation of those beliefs and attitudes—which would occur in the classroom or through self-reflective assignments. Eyler (2009), for example, has discussed the need for ‘the use of structured reflection to help students link experience with theory and, thereby, deepen their understanding and ability to use what they know’ (p. 26). Similarly—but in dialectical inversion—an instructor could begin in the classroom with a strategic unsettling or dismantling of those beliefs and attitudes, which could then act as a catalyst for subsequent exposure to people who are homeless, perhaps through a course assignment, a community engagement activity, or just walking down the street. And of course there is nothing to prohibit an instructor from deploying both of these approaches in a spiral curricular design:

exposure → critical questioning → exposure → critical questioning →

Finally, as was stated already in the Introduction, this article is not arguing that one approach—either emphasizing exposure or emphasizing critical questioning—is superior to the other. It is only claiming that both are viable pedagogical strategies for the purpose of enhancing students’ ethical awareness and sense of civic responsibility, while suggesting that perhaps the rhetoric of disruption strategy has been under-utilized as a pedagogy for serving the moral goal of ethical and civic responsibility (as opposed to being thought of in more limited terms as serving the intellectual goal of critical thinking).

### **The Pedagogy of a ‘Rhetoric of Disruption’**

This article will now attempt to illustrate more fully an alternative, inverted strategy for the cultivation of respect for diversity and civic responsibility through discussion of three classroom activities strategically designed to disrupt students’ often unquestioned (and therefore comfortable) assumptions about their values, themselves, and their communities. All three of these classroom activities combine individual reflection and small group deliberation, followed by whole class discussion. In other words, all three employ some variation of the basic ‘think/pair/share’ technique to maximize student engagement in the classroom — i.e., giving students time to first think (and write) on their own and to discuss their ideas with a fellow student (or small group) before opening up a whole-class discussion. And all three of these critical thinking activities function as a ‘rhetoric of disruption’ to destabilize students’ own moral assumptions or moral identity and thereby—of necessity, as per the principle of ‘the paradox of substance’—to invite reflection upon and openness to difference. As examples of a rhetoric of disruption, each activity ‘explicitly targets, challenges, and disrupts ideological elements that can silence the voice of the Other’ and each is premised on the ‘need to disrupt those cultural stereotypes and prejudices that can suffocate [the voice of the Other]’ (Murray, 2004, p. 340). They are referred to here as the (i) ‘Who can I Eat?’, (ii) ‘Am I Empathetic or Not?’ and (iii) ‘Who is to Blame?’ classroom activities.

#### *Who Can I Eat?*

The ‘Who Can I Eat?’ activity is an exercise in critical thinking in which students are forced to confront (in almost all cases) the illogic of their views regarding the ethical treatment and moral status of animals. The activity begins by providing students with a list of 20

plants and animals, provided about four at a time, and asking them to classify each into one of three categories: (1) life-forms you can kill for want/desire, (2) life-forms you can only kill for need, and (3) life-forms you cannot kill under any circumstance—with the possible exception of self-defense in response to an imminent threat. Once students have placed each life-form into one of the three columns, they are then asked to articulate the moral criteria that distinguished each column from the one adjacent. Figure 1 shows a sample of a completed form.

Typically, students are quickly forced to confront the internal contradictions and (often) blatant illogic of their classifications. For example, students may classify turtles in protected category 3 (because they had one as a pet) and rats in unprotected category 1 (because ‘they carry disease’), and be thoroughly incapable of explaining why it is then

<b>Life-forms you may Kill for Want</b> (e.g. food, clothing, cosmetics, sports, entertainment, whimsy)	<b>Life-forms you may Kill for Need</b> (e.g. food, clothing, shelter, medical research, agricultural need)	<b>Life-forms you may NOT Kill</b> (exception: self-defense against an imminent threat)
mushrooms  snakes  mosquitoes  rats  cauliflower	cows  turtles  mussels  chickens  salmon  penguins	dogs  monkeys  cats  endangered species (animals)  butterflies  endangered species (plants)  horses

↑

*Things not pertinent to survival versus things we need to kill to live.*

↑

*Things more important to keep alive than to kill. No reason to kill them.*

**Figure 1:** An illustration of a relatively typical student response to the classification and principle of demarcation exercise.

morally acceptable to eat salmon, trout, tuna, and McFish sandwiches and why murder is wrong when humans transmit at least as many diseases as rats. The sorts of illogical and downright crazy ways in which students will classify various life-forms can be nothing less than astounding. There would seem to be no moral basis, for example, for classifying butterflies in category 3 and mosquitoes in category 1, unless the general/implied premise is that either (a) things/people that are beautiful are morally superior to things/people that are ugly, or (b) things/people that annoy me can be killed. Similarly: students often put cows and chickens in different columns despite being the two most common animals that they eat daily; students often put cows in unprotected category 1 and horses in category 3 even though they are quite similar animals, both in terms of domesticated use and in so far as horses are eaten in many cultures; students occasionally put mushrooms and/or cauliflower in category 2, with some animals in unprotected category 1; students often put both endangered animals and endangered plants in protected category 3, without being able to then justify putting any type of plant above an animal; and students often put rats one or two categories below chickens, or even cats, with whom they are quite similar in terms of intelligence, ability to feel pain, and so on.

Indeed, the illogic of our attitudes about animals can be revealed in numerous ways, all of them destabilizing. One of my colleagues, Jason Corner, presents a case study to his students about a man arrested for having sex with an animal. He asks students to discuss whether this is wrong and why. Somewhat predictably, students agree unanimously that it is wrong (except for the occasional student who just wants to play devil's advocate) and settle on the arguments that it harms the animal and that the animal did not consent. He then asks them to discuss whether it is wrong to eat meat. Of course, all the non-vegetarians in the room quickly see that their arguments about harm and consent have wedged them pretty tightly into a corner of illogic, and they must either go into defense mode and reject the activity as unfair or a 'trick' or acknowledge the crumbling foundation and begin to reassemble their moral beliefs. This activity is of course, as described in this article, a 'rhetoric of disruption' and can trigger a transformative moment of metacognitive reflection.

### *Am I Empathetic or Not?*

The 'Am I Empathetic or Not?' activity is another exercise in critical thinking in which students are brought to question their own self-conception. Basically, the activity 'begins' with students being asked to generate a list of the 20 people who they know the best/spend the most time with—see Figure 2. This is typically done in a previous class, before any discussion of the topic of empathy (as it might skew their list if they glean where the exercise is headed)—i.e., Figure 3. The activity then begins (for real) with a discussion of empathy, usually in the context of an assigned reading and/or writing assignment. Within that discussion, students are asked to consider (and quantify) how empathic they are. [First-year students typically consider themselves to be very or extremely empathic—as well as very idealistic, optimistic, and endowed with a hunger for social justice. In addition, they also tend to think of themselves (at least at an urban campus like that of Virginia Commonwealth University) as being quite worldly, in terms of their exposure to and experience with diversity.]

Make a list of the twenty people you spend the most time with / know the best.

<i>mom</i>	<i>Mohammad</i>
<i>dad</i>	<i>Jeremy</i>
<i>Nick</i>	<i>Sheila</i>
<i>Karin</i>	<i>Shamika</i>
<i>Evan</i>	<i>Lawrence</i>
<i>Stephanie</i>	<i>Toni</i>
<i>Megan</i>	<i>Valeria</i>
<i>Christine</i>	<i>Gretchen</i>
<i>Lisa</i>	<i>Preston</i>
<i>Ryan</i>	<i>Maria</i>

**Figure 2:** List of 20 people.

Now, having already generated their list, students are then instructed to calculate the percentage of people on their list who are different from them in each of several categories, including age, race, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation, religious faith, and socio-economic class—see Figure 3. To do this, they simply count the number of people in each category who are different from them—either categorically, as with gender, or by some criterion, such as more than 10 years difference, as with age. This

Now, using your **List of 20 People**, calculate your **Exposure Index** for each of the seven demographic categories below. For each category, count the number of people in your list that are of a **different** race, age, gender, etc. than you. [For age, count anyone more than 10 years older or younger than you. And so on.] Then **multiply that number by 5** to arrive at a percentage – this is your Exposure Index for that demographic category.

RACE	AGE (>10)	GENDER	SEX. ORIENT.	RELIGION	POLITICS	SOCIO-ECONOMICS
4	2	8	3	1	2	4
20%	10%	40%	15%	55%	10%	20%

Finally, **average** your seven percentages above to generate an **Overall Exposure Index**. This should, in theory, be a rough measure of your **empathic capacity** for humanity. Compare your Overall Exposure Index to others in your class. Do you think this offers an accurate measure of your relative empathic capacity? Why or why not?

**17.1%**

**Figure 3:** Empathy exercise calculation sheet.

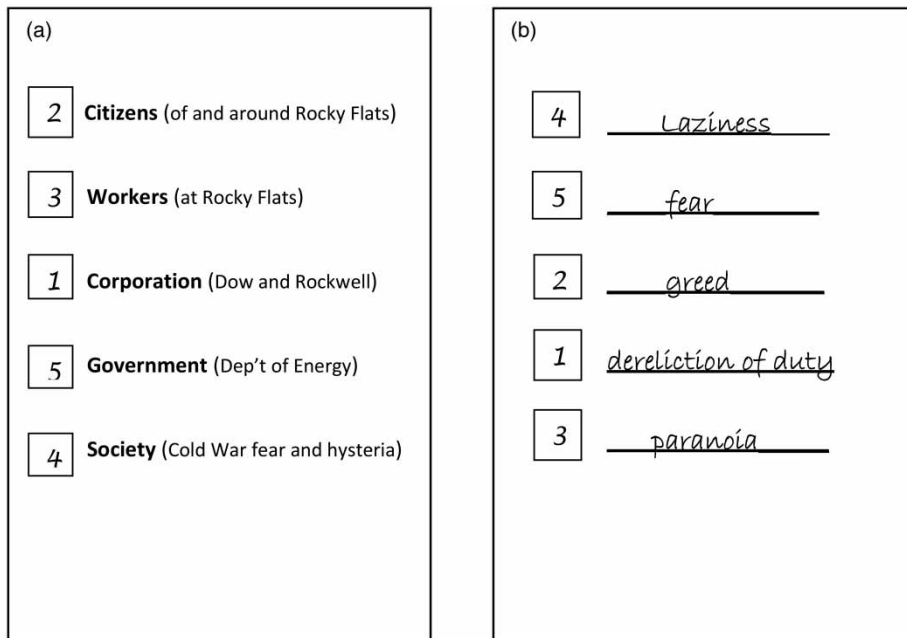
number, multiplied by five, yields a percentage, and this ‘exposure index’ is a theoretical measure of their empathic capacity for people of difference within that category. Furthermore, averaging the percentages of the seven categories yields an overall ‘exposure index’ as an indication of their overall empathic capacity. [This is all premised on the idea that one must have exposure to (the experiences and difficulties of) other people to fully empathize with them. For example, I cannot fully empathize with a homeless person if I’ve never been homeless, have never known someone who was homeless, have never bothered to talk to a homeless person, or have never even seen a homeless person.]

Again, many students (even at the age of 18) consider themselves to be extremely worldly, to socialize within a rich and diverse cultural mix, and to be extremely empathic of everyone. Consequently, the numbers that students generate for themselves are often surprising or even shocking to them. In a typical class, when students compare their numbers with one another, an overall empathy index below 10% is very low and any index above 30% is very high. The ensuing discussion of questions such as (i) why their numbers are what they are—particularly in comparison to other students and to a general average, (ii) why certain students got such high or such low numbers, (iii) whether the measurement is ‘accurate’ or not, and (iv) whether the index is a reliable measure of one’s ability to empathize all spark high levels of critical thinking and self-reflection. As with the first activity, this is certainly a very good exercise in critical thinking (and an opportunity for instruction in quantitative reasoning), but it too goes further as an incipient ethical activity in that students are confronted with the reality that there is considerable diversity to which they have little or no substantive exposure and with the idea that authentic civic engagement requires greater exposure to people of different cultures, backgrounds, and life experiences.

### *Who is to Blame?*

Finally, the ‘Who is to Blame?’ activity is an exercise in critical thinking in which students are brought to confront contradictions within their own beliefs. Basically, the activity begins with students ranking the culpability of various parties in a prevalent social problem, such as obesity or homelessness or poverty. In two recent iterations, based on two of Virginia Commonwealth University’s recent Summer Reading Program selections, Kristen Iversen’s *Full body burden: Growing up in the nuclear shadow of Rocky Flats* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012) and Michael Moss’s *Salt, sugar, fat: How the food giants hooked us* (New York: Random House, 2013), students ranked the culpability of various parties in the nuclear contamination of the area surrounding Rocky Flats, Colorado and in the growing obesity epidemic in America, respectively.

In the first case, students were asked to consider the relative moral culpabilities of the citizens of Rocky Flats, the nuclear facility’s administrators, workers at the facility, government officials, and the general public; in the second case, students were asked to consider the relative moral culpabilities of food company executives, food researchers, government agencies, the general consumer, and parents. In each case, students are given a folded handout, and the initial step is for students to quickly rank the relative moral culpability of each party from one (most responsible/guilty) to five (least responsible/culpable)—see



**Figure 4:** (a) Front flap of handout. Students rank the culpability of various parties. (b) Back flap of handout. Students rank the moral infractions committed.

Figure 4(a). Then, students are asked to open the handout, where the five parties are again listed, but this time accompanied by blank space in which to write down comments. Students are given ample time for individual reflection and small group discussion, after which they are asked to name the ‘crime’ of which each party is guilty and to write that label down next to their notes. These labels might include ignorance, cowardice, greed, stupidity, betrayal, and so on. Then, after students transcribe those labels to the back page of the folded handout, the penultimate task is to consider those crimes in the abstract and rank them from most heinous (one) to least heinous (five)—see Figure 4(b). Finally, students are asked to flip the handout back on itself to compare that final ranking with the initial ranking of who was most to blame—see Figure 4a beside Figure 4b (the figures show the front and back of the folded handout, but in the activity these two ‘pages’ are in fact on one side of the folded sheet of paper).

The result is that students typically have a significant disjunction, sometimes even a complete inversion, between the two rankings. In the case of Iversen’s *Full body burden: Growing up in the nuclear shadow of Rocky Flats*, it was not uncommon for students to become much more critical of the federal government’s abrogation of its duty to protect citizens from harm and for students to be far less critical of the citizens of Rocky Flats and of the facility’s workers, seeing their culpability as far more passive than that of the facility’s administrators and of government agencies as well as seeing fear or laziness as more excusable or even understandable than the greed or failure of duty of other parties. Overall, this is certainly a very good critical thinking activity, but it may go further as an incipient ethical activity



in that students need to consider more carefully the circumstances (and voices) of the parties they initially condemned. Often times, once they have named the ‘crime’ of the group they most blamed as something they are often guilty of, they immediately have greater empathy for that group and are at least more open to consider their extenuating circumstances and the practical challenges they face.

## **Conclusion**

This article has attempted to elucidate one of the ways in which critical thinking strategies can function to enhance the ethical awareness and develop the civic responsibility of students in the undergraduate classroom. Specifically, this article has explored the ethical nature of critical thinking activities and assignments designed to have students question their own (often taken-for-granted) moral assumptions and interrogate their own (often unexamined) moral identities. Using the philosophy of ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, Kenneth Burke’s concept of ‘the paradox of substance’, and my own model of ‘a rhetoric of disruption’, this article has attempted to sketch out a ‘rhetoric of disruption’ pedagogy aimed at triggering a metacognitive destabilization of subjectivity, which can be understood as one of the dialectical prerequisites for increased ethical awareness—i.e., an expanded openness to the acknowledgment of otherness. As a pedagogical strategy aimed at developing a student’s ethical and civic responsibility, this article suggests that critical thinking activities and assignments aimed at disrupting subjectivity are proto-ethical and offer an alternative and equally viable strategy by which to develop this important professional and civic skill. This strategy, as outlined and illustrated in this article, is in dialectical counterpart to more familiar methods of fostering ethical responsibility, including traditional liberal arts courses as well as community service projects and service learning courses.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the strategic ordering or scaffolding of such critical thinking activities may be of added and significant benefit. Although the activities discussed earlier have not necessarily been done in that order—contingencies of scheduling and other course objectives often dictate when and how certain activities are completed—the sequence presented earlier moves students from inward self-questioning outward. The ‘Who Can I Eat?’ activity focuses critical attention on the student’s implicit moral choices and values. Hence, the scope of the self-examination is fairly limited. The ‘Am I Empathetic or Not?’ activity focuses critical attention on the student’s (typically unexamined) moral identity. It can thereby trigger a more comprehensive self-reflection. And the ‘Who is to Blame?’ asks students to consider multiple perspectives as they try to appreciate the needs, desires, and values of different stake-holders on a given issue. So they are now looking at their place—and the place of their own moral assumptions—within a larger community. As is common in spiral or iterative curriculum design, the formula for teaching any professional or academic skill is to (i) introduce, (ii) reinforce, and (iii) develop. Consequently, the strategic scaffolding of such activities throughout a course (or sequence of courses) may be critical to their success: begin by introducing issue-specific moral questioning, reinforce that practice of questioning through a broader unsettling of moral identity, and nurture that unsettling through the negotiation of larger moral terrain.

Unfortunately, in terms of learning outcomes I can only offer anecdotal evidence at this stage of this on-going project. In assigning students these sorts of critical thinking activities, all of which are strategically designed to unsettle moral assumptions and moral identity, I have noticed three distinct positive indications of enhanced moral awareness and civic responsibility. [These three indications are in addition to the localized signs of learning already discussed with each activity earlier. In other words, these indications extend beyond the insights or revelations that occur on the day of a particular activity.] First, I have seen more students questioning their own beliefs and assumptions in subsequent writing assignments without specific prompting to do so by assignment requirements. Whether they are writing about global warming or sexual assault on college campuses, students seem less rigidly bound to whatever they initially thought about a particular issue after doing these sorts of activities and more likely to self-interrogate their beliefs and assumptions. Second, students have exhibited greater empathy for others in subsequent assignments. For example, when asked to rewrite a passage of an assigned reading from a different perspective, students have been more likely to spontaneously adopt a first person perspective and to write (what I would characterize as) a more authentically empathic and less ‘objective’ account. In Hernadi’s (1987) framework, they move more quickly (and again, often without specific prompting) from understanding and over-standing the assigned text to standing-in-for the assigned text. Third, in final course evaluations—which are performed both through traditional course evaluations and less formally through in-class group discussions during the last week of the semester—I have observed less reporting of having ‘learned about’ other cultures or of having ‘been introduced to’ different perspectives, and more reporting of having developed a ‘deeper understanding of’ or ‘greater appreciation’ for others. These are, I believe, subtle but promising indicators that students have moved beyond mere exposure to otherness and diversity to the unsettling of the self that accompanies more significant moral growth and transformation.

Of course, more than anecdotal evidence and general impressions are ultimately needed, which suggests the first of two avenues for further research. The first avenue is, of course, to more systematically gather evidence to support the efficacy of this pedagogical technique. This could be accomplished through the development of a ‘moral awareness’ scoring rubric, which could then be used to evaluate written assignments in test and control sections of the course.

The second opportunity for further research is to pair this ‘rhetoric of disruption’ pedagogy with a robust pedagogy of exposure, perhaps by co-teaching with an experienced service learning instructor. In discussing the more familiar pedagogy of exposure to otherness in contrast to this article’s ‘rhetoric of disruption’ pedagogy, I noted that there is nothing to prohibit an instructor from deploying both of these approaches in a spiral curricular design. Indeed, a strategic pedagogy of disruption, working in conjunction with an experienced community engagement pedagogy, may promise the most effective avenue for fostering and nurturing students’ appreciation and respect for diversity and sense of civic responsibility by bringing together the strengths of both (dialectically related) approaches.<sup>4</sup>

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## Notes

1. Emmanuel Levinas was a survivor of the Holocaust. He was born in Lithuania in 1906, and was, like his parents, a practicing Jew (Critchley, 1996, p. 54). In World War II, the Nazis killed most members of his family, and Levinas himself became a prisoner of war in 1940 (Critchley, 1996, p. 54). But Levinas's involvement with the Nazis was not only personal. It was intellectual as well. A significant feature of Levinas's ethical philosophy is its critique of the 'fundamental ontology' of Martin Heidegger. After moving to France in 1923 to study at the University of Strasbourg, Levinas studied under Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger at the University of Freiburg in 1928 and 1929 (Steinfels, 1995). Despite the influence of Heidegger's work on his own thought, Levinas would eventually offer a sustained philosophical critique of the work of Heidegger. Indeed, Levinas's influence on ethical philosophy can be likened to Nietzsche's impact on Western thought. Much as Nietzsche's pronouncement that 'God is dead' announced the end of metaphysics, Levinas's devastating critique of Heidegger and of Western ontology ushered in a radical reconception of ethics.
2. Similarly, Levinas was critical of the epistemological impulse. Indeed, Levinas (1969) claimed that all attempts to know the Other result in a reduction of genuine otherness: 'To know amounts to grasping being out of nothing or reducing it to nothing, removing from it its alterity' (p. 44). Western epistemology has been 'not a relation with the other as such but the reduction of the other to the same' (Levinas, 1969, p. 46). As an alternative, Levinas insisted that one's relation with an Other always exceeds one's ability to know or contain the Other. There is more to the encounter with an Other than that of perception or comprehension. There is an ethical dimension that cannot be contained within the confines of understanding. Consequently, Levinas sought to reveal the nature of one's relation to the Other through a phenomenological examination of the way in which the Other presents itself. He argued that the self's experience of the Other is not that of knowing, but of ethical obligation. Prior to 'ethics', traditionally conceived as a person's set of values and value hierarchies, lies a more primordial ethics, reconceived as a summons to responsibility.
3. Later in *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke (1969) argued more specifically that the nature of language, as the naming of a thing in terms of other things, yields a dialectic of 'merger and division' (pp. 402–406). Any grammatical description of the world creates its own opposite, its own 'enemy'. To illustrate his point, Burke (1969) recalled the 'grim pleasantry' that runs, 'Of course we're Christians—but what are we being Christians *against*?' (pp. 33–34). Hence, there is an opposite term for every term, and an opposite motive for every motive. Indeed, Burke's (1969) primary concern seemed to be to understand better the symbolic interaction of these 'paired motives' (p. 49). For example:

Whenever a person has his mind set upon the interpreting of human motivation in a calculus that features an innate 'combative instinct' or 'natural urge to kill' ... [he] can be asked to round out his dialectic by postulating a contrary 'instinct not to kill'. For there is certainly as much empirical evidence that men let one another live as there is evidence that they kill one another. Hence, whenever such words designate motives that may or

may not prevail, we can at least insist that they be balanced with their dialectical counterpart. (p. 49)

For Burke (1969), this dialectic of 'unity and division' serves as 'the over-all category for everything, and certainly for human relations' (p. 338; see also Kenny, 2000).

4. A spiral curriculum designed to strategically deploy both a pedagogy of disruption and a pedagogy of exposure suggests parallels to my own corollary model of a 'rhetoric of supplication' (see Murray, 2003, 2004) in so far as it would gradually (and step-wise) bring students into a position of supplication toward the Others with whom and for whom they are working in the community. By incrementally unsettling the self, students' encounters with Others might shift from the awkwardness of confrontation to the openness of supplication, leading to more genuine and meaningful encounters. '[M]aking oneself open and malleable to the call of the Other is ... a perpetual requirement to suspend one's judgment and to hold one's preconceptions up to dialogical scrutiny' (Murray, 2004, p. 342). This posture of supplication is not easily adopted and the role of the instructor would be to facilitate the students' movement toward it. In this regard, the instructor would emulate the role of Sister Helen Prejean (from the film *Dead Man Walking*) (see Murray, 2003) or Anne Mansfield Sullivan (see Murray, 2004), as they work diligently to bring, respectively, death-row inmate Matthew Poncelet and Helen Keller into a position of supplication, where they can finally hear the voice of the Other.

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