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Steven B. Katz

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# The Ethic of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust

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“[T]he stronger this faculty is, the more necessary it is for it to be combined with integrity and supreme wisdom, and if we bestow fluency of speech on persons devoid of those virtues, we shall not have made orators of them, but shall have put weapons into the hands of madmen”—Cicero, *De Oratore* III: xiv. 55.

\* \* \*

*Geheime Reichssache* (Secret Reich Business)  
Berlin, June 5, 1942

Changes for special vehicles now in service at Kulmhof (Chelmno) and for those now being built

Since December 1941, ninety-seven thousand have been processed [*verarbeitet* in German] by the three vehicles in service, with no major incidents. In the light of observations made so far, however, the following technical changes are needed:

[1.] The vans' normal load is usually nine per square yard. In Saurer vehicles, which are very spacious, maximum use of space is impossible, not because of any possible overload, but because loading to full capacity would affect the vehicle's stability. So reduction of the load space seems necessary. It must absolutely be reduced by a yard, instead of trying to solve the problem, as hitherto, by reducing the number of pieces loaded. Besides, this extends the operating time, as the empty void must also be filled with carbon monoxide. On the other hand, if the load space is reduced, and the vehicle is packed solid, the operating time can be considerably shortened. The manufacturers told us during a discussion that reducing the size of the van's rear would throw it badly off balance. The front axle, they claim, would be overloaded. In fact, the balance is automatically restored, because the merchandise aboard displays during the operation a natural tendency to rush to the rear doors, and is mainly found lying there at the end of the operation. So the front axle is not overloaded.

2. The lighting must be better protected than now. The lamps must be enclosed in a steel grid to prevent their being damaged. Lights could be

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eliminated, since they apparently are never used. However, it has been observed that when the doors are shut, the load always presses hard against them as soon as darkness sets in. This is because the load naturally rushes toward the light when darkness sets in, which makes closing the doors difficult. Also, because of the alarming nature of darkness, screaming always occurs when the doors are closed. It would therefore be useful to light the lamp before and during the first moments of the operation.

3. For easy cleaning of the vehicle, there must be a sealed drain in the middle of the floor. The drainage hole's cover, eight to twelve inches in diameter, would be equipped with a slanting trap, so that fluid liquids can drain off during the operation. During cleaning, the drain can be used to evacuate large pieces of dirt.

The aforementioned technical changes are to be made to vehicles in service only when they come in for repairs. As for the ten vehicles ordered from Saurer, they must be equipped with all innovations and changes shown by use and experience to be necessary.

Submitted for decision to *Gruppenleiter* II D,  
*SS-Obersturmbannführer* Walter Rauff.

Signed: Just

### **The Final Solution: An Ethical Problem in Rhetoric**

This is a real memo, taken verbatim from the published transcript of *Shoah*, a 9-hour documentary film on the holocaust directed by Claude Lanzmann (103–05). In this memo, the writer, Just, attempts to persuade his superior, Walter Rauff, of the necessity for technical improvements to the vans being used in the early Nazi program of exterminating the Jews and other “undesirables,” just months before the Final Solution of gas chambers and death camps was fully operationalized. In this earlier stage of the Final Solution, four *Einsatzgruppen*, or “Special Action Groups,” A, B, C, and D, had been organized by Himmler to carry out executions by firing squads (Shirer 1248–49). Group D, whose field of operations included the southern Ukraine, was from June 1941–June 1942 headed by Otto Ohlendorf, in the R.S.H.A., Himmler’s Central Security Office (Shirer 1249). In 1942, Himmler ordered gassing vans to be used for executing women and children, because it was more efficient, “humane” (see Shirer 1250–51, 1254n.). The Wannsee Conference, in which the details of the Final Solution were worked out, had been held on January 20, 1942.

To begin to get at the ethical problem in rhetoric here, let’s do a brief rhetorical analysis of this memo from the standpoint of technical communication, argumentation, and style. By any formal criteria in technical communication, it is an almost perfect document. It begins with what, in recent composition theories and technical writing practices, is known as the problem or “purpose statement.” According to J. C. Mathes and D. W. Stevenson, this statement should invoke an assumption or goal shared by the audience—here the statistic that 97,000 have been processed without incident—and then introduce a fact that conflicts with that assumption or goal—technical changes are needed—thereby effectively setting up the problem to be solved (29–38; see also Olsen and

Huckin, *Principles* 94–104). In keeping with some of what today are recognized as the rules of good document design, the memo is also divided into three numbered sections that are clearly demarcated by white space for easy reading. And most importantly from the standpoint of technical writing, this recommendation for modifying the vehicles is technically accurate and logically argued.

Indeed, in this memo one can find many of the *topoi* first defined by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* (II. xxiii. 1397a6–xxiv. 1402a29) that are used to investigate any situation or problem and provide the material for enthymemic arguments. For example, in the first section the writer uses the common topic of relationship: cause/effect arguments, in conjunction with the topic of comparison (difference) and the topic of circumstance (the impossible), are used to investigate the problem of maximizing the use of space, to refute the manufacturer's claims that the problem is one of overloading, and to conclude in an enthymeme that a reduction in the load space is necessary. Just further supports his conclusion by cause/effect arguments embedded in the topic of contraries that reducing the number of "pieces" loaded would extend operating time because the empty space would have to be filled with carbon monoxide, while reducing the load space would actually shorten the operating time. Finally, Just argues by cause/effect and contraries to refute the manufacturer's claim that reducing the load space would overload the front axle by arguing from precedent (example) that "the merchandise . . . displays during the operation a natural tendency to rush to the rear doors, and is mainly found lying there at the end of the operation. So the front axle is not overloaded." Thus, in a series of enthymemes that make use of the *topoi*, Just investigates and proves his case for a reduction in load space.

But of course, this is not the problem with this memo. In fact, given the subject matter, we might wish to claim that this memo is *too* technical, *too* logical. The writer shows no concern that the purpose of his memo is the modification of vehicles not only to improve efficiency, but also to exterminate people. This is the ethical problem in rhetoric I wish to discuss. Here, as in most technical writing and, I will argue, in most deliberative rhetoric, the focus is on expediency, on technical criteria as a means to an end. But here expediency and the resulting *ethos* of objectivity, logic, and narrow focus that characterize most technical writing, are taken to extremes and applied to the mass destruction of human beings. Here, expediency is an ethical end as well.

This "*ethos* of expediency" can be seen in the style of Just's memo, particularly the euphemisms and metaphors used to denote, objectify, and conceal process and people—"observations," "load," "pieces," "operating time," "merchandise," "packed solid," "fluid liquid," "large pieces of dirt"—as well as use of figures of speech such as ellipsis ("97,000 have been processed") and litotes ("alarming nature of the darkness," "displays a natural tendency to rush to the rear doors"). What concerns me most here is how, based on an ethic of expediency, rhetoric was made to serve the holocaust.

It is well known that to perform well in a professional organization, writers must adopt the *ethos* of that organization. Barring errors in translation or differences in language structure between German and English, the *ethos* of Just's memo is created and supported by a grammatical style that Walker Gibson has

labelled “stuffy” (90–101): the heavy use of polysyllabic words, modified nouns (“natural tendency,” “full capacity,” “sealed drain,” “fluid liquid,” “technical changes”), of a passive voice that obscures the role of the agent, and of subordinate clauses that separate subject from verb. As Gibson points out, in this style responsibility is shifted from the writer (and reader) to the organization they represent, the organization whose voice they now speak with, in whose interest they act, whose *ethos* they have totally adopted as their own. All the stylistic features I have pointed out communicate and reveal a “group think,” an officially sanctioned *ethos* grounded in expediency.

Indeed, this brief analysis reflects the rhetorical problem with Just’s memo: it is based *purely* on an ethic of expediency. This claim at once corroborates and goes beyond Hannah Arendt’s controversial conclusion that Eichmann, the inventor of “the final solution,” was not a psychopath but a bureaucrat simply doing his duty. For Just is not merely performing his function; in order to perform it effectively, he has adopted the *ethos* of the Nazi bureaucracy he works for as well. But in Nazi Germany, that *ethos* also involved an entire nation of people, a whole culture. Thus, I believe the ethical problem is even deeper and more widespread than the *ethos* of a single bureaucracy. In this paper I will attempt to show that what I have called an ethic of expediency underlies technical writing and deliberative rhetoric (see Olsen and Huckin, *Principles* 70), and that this ethic, which is so predominant in Western culture, was at least partially responsible for the holocaust.

Thus it will be my contention that the ethical problem represented in Just’s memo to his superior, while an extreme case, is not an anomaly nor a problem in technical writing only, but a problem of deliberative rhetoric—defined by Aristotle as that genre of rhetoric concerned with deliberating future courses of action. I will argue that the ethic of expediency in Western culture which Aristotle first treated systematically in the *Rhetoric*, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and especially the *Politics*, was rhetorically embraced by the Nazi regime and combined with science and technology to form the “moral basis” of the holocaust. While there is a concern for ethics in the field of technical communication, and while few in our society believe expediency is an adequate moral basis for making decisions, I will suggest that it is the ethic of expediency that enables deliberative rhetoric and gives impulse to most of our actions in technological capitalism as well, and I will explore some of the implications and dangers of a rhetoric grounded exclusively in an ethic of expediency. In doing so, I hope to mount a critique of the ethic of expediency that underlies technical communication and deliberative rhetoric, and by extension writing pedagogy and practice based on it.

In “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” Kenneth Burke has already demonstrated the importance of rhetorical analysis for understanding the source of Hitler’s power, and the significance of his misuse of the rhetoric of religion. However, despite Burke’s warning, we have tended to understand the holocaust from a nonrhetorical, Platonic standpoint, which amounts to a refusal to understand it at all. Sometimes this standpoint is justified. Elie Wiesel, for example, eloquently argues for the sacredness of the memory of the holocaust against the attempts to absorb it into popular culture and so trivialize it. But for Wiesel, and

I would suggest, most people, the holocaust appears as a breach in the Platonic wall of Virtue, an aberration in Western civilization, and so lies outside human culture: "Auschwitz is something else, always something else. It is a universe outside the universe, a creation that exists parallel to creation" (Wiesel 1). In this Platonic realm of anti-Forms, the holocaust lies beyond rhetorical analysis. For Wiesel and many other survivors and scholars, the holocaust can best be comprehended by the reverence of silence that surrounds a mystery.

However, as George Steiner intimates throughout *In Bluebeard's Castle*, the holocaust may not be so much a breach of the Platonic wall of Virtue, an aberration of Western culture, as an outgrowth of it, the final development and manifestation of something deeper and more problematic in Western civilization itself. In this view, the holocaust falls under the purview of rhetoric. Although Steiner points to the Platonic utopianism inherent in Western culture rather than to expediency as the root of the holocaust, I will show that much of Hitler's ethical and political program is also directly or indirectly based on the ethic of expediency first treated by Aristotle, and is thus amenable to analysis from an Aristotelian point of view. While I agree with Wiesel's argument against the trivialization of the holocaust through popularizations and respect him immensely, an exclusively Platonic stance toward the holocaust prevents us from fully understanding how it happened, and from understanding the relationship it reveals between rhetoric and ethics.

### **Ethics in Deliberative Discourse: Expediency**

Let's start with the issue of objectivity in technical writing. While the fallacy of the objective stance in technical writing has been discussed extensively from an epistemological standpoint (see Miller, "Humanistic Rational"; Dobrin), it has not been discussed enough from an ethical one. The concept of *ethos* in rhetoric might help us here. In rhetorical theory, the role of *ethos* ("the moral element in character") in enthymemic arguments has been demonstrated by William Grimaldi, for example, who, interpreting Aristotle, argues that it is an essential link between deliberation and action (144–51). Virtue for Aristotle involves choice informed and led by both intellect *and* natural disposition or appetite (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI. xii. 1143b16–xiii. 1145a14). Thus Grimaldi argues that while *logos*, or reason "considers the means necessary" to reach some end in deliberative rhetoric, it is *pathos* and *ethos* that provide the impetus to act.

In this sense, ethics, defined as human character manifested in behavior, is an important consideration in deliberative rhetoric. All deliberative rhetoric is concerned with decision and action. Technical writing, perhaps even more than other kinds of rhetorical discourse, always leads to action, and thus always impacts on human life; in technical writing, epistemology necessarily leads to ethics. The problem in technical communication and deliberative rhetoric generally, then, is not only one of epistemology, the relationship of argument, organization, and style to thought, but also one of ethics, of how that relationship affects and reveals itself in human behavior.

It is easy to see how the epistemology of objectivity would lead to an ethic of expediency (or how the ethic of expediency would lead to an epistemology of objectivity) in so far as the viewing subject and the viewed object are technical means to some “higher” end—that is, “truth.” But even discussions based on the principles of problem statements, audience adaptation, and rhetorical argumentation—upon which the more sophisticated teaching (and practice) in technical writing as well as rhetoric are based—only begin to get at the fundamental issue that thrusts itself upon our attention in Just’s memo. As we will see, based on the ethic of expediency that underlies not only technical writing and rhetoric but also most behavior in Western civilization (see Olsen and Huckin, *Principles* 70), those same principles were used to form the “moral” basis of Nazi society, to create the *ethos* of that entire culture, and to provide the necessary warrant for the holocaust. As Olsen and Huckin suggest in the second edition of their textbook (*Technical Writing* 40–41; 91–94), we need to consider technical writing based on deliberative rhetoric from the standpoint of both rhetoric *and* ethics.

From the debates between the sophists and Plato to present-day criticism of advertising and political propaganda, there has always been an uneasy relationship between rhetoric and ethics. Perhaps nowhere is that relationship more clearly treated—and the strain more evident—than in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle states that “rhetoric is a combination of the science of logic and of the ethical branch of politics” (I. iv. 1359b10)—of logic *and* ethics. According to Aristotle, then, ethics in political discourse is a matter of Goodness as well as Utility. However, in his discussion of deliberative discourse in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle elides Goodness and Utility: “the political or deliberative orator’s aim,” he says, “is utility: deliberation seeks to determine not ends, but means to ends, i.e., what it is most useful to do” (I. vi. 1362a17–20).

In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle thus seems to collapse all ethical questions in deliberative discourse into a question of expediency. As he says, “all other points, such as whether the proposal is just or unjust, honourable or dishonourable, he [the political orator] brings in as subsidiary and relative to this main consideration” (I. iii. 1358b23–25). Nan Johnson argues that it did not seem to matter much to Aristotle whether the ends of deliberative rhetoric were ultimately just or unjust, true or false, as long as the means were expedient. However, several scholars have argued that Aristotle’s conception of rhetoric as *praxis* (social action) is not amoral, but rather ethical insofar as *praxis* involves *phronesis* (practical wisdom or prudence) as an end in itself (see Sullivan 377–78; Kallendorf and Kallendorf 55–57; Rowland and Womack). But it is precisely because rhetoric is a practical art rather than a theoretical science, one located in *praxis*, in the contingent realm of action, that deliberative rhetoric can be understood to be primarily based on an ethic of expediency. If *praxis* depends on *phronesis*, on the practical wisdom or prudence of the speaker to reason about “the good,” that wisdom, that prudence, is itself a means to an end, that end being *praxis*.

Further, as Dale L. Sullivan points out, “the good,” and thus what counts as practical wisdom or prudence, is defined by society (378). Thus *phronesis*, like ethical appeal for Aristotle (*Rhetoric* I. ix, esp. 1367b10), can also be considered an expedient, a means to an end of rhetoric as *praxis*—determining the “right”

course of action in the first case, finding the available means of persuasion in the second. (Eugene Garver, however, argues that this understanding of *phronesis* depends on whether one defines it as “prudence,” which is rooted in character as an end in itself, or as “practical reason,” which is detached from character in modern political thought and thus more “technical” [xi]. But as I will show, prudence, like virtue itself, can be redefined by society, become a means to another end, as was the case in Nazi Germany.) In Aristotle’s treatment of deliberative rhetoric, then, expediency seems to become an ethical end in itself. Expediency is always the good—“utility is a good thing” Aristotle says (I. vi. 1362a20), concluding: “any end is a good” (I. vi. 1363a5). This is a conclusion which, in light of the holocaust, we may want to reconsider. For following Aristotle, in deliberative discourse, including technical communication, we are in the habit of giving expediency too much free reign.

In fact, most technical communication is deliberative. (Indeed, in a scientific and technological society, much deliberative discourse is technical.) As Olsen and Huckin teach, technical writing is concerned both with arguments of fact and arguments of policy—with what should or should not be done (*Principles* 67). But as they also point out, since most technical communication is deliberative, it is based primarily on arguments of expediency rather than worth or goodness (*Principles* 70). What Aristotle gives us in the *Rhetoric*, then, is a practical ethic for technical writing and deliberative discourse, an ethic based almost exclusively on expediency. Most arguments of worth and goodness, if they are present at all, are subsumed under expediency, becoming another means to a desired end, becoming expedient in themselves (like appeals to give to charity based on the advantage of a tax break).

However, Aristotle’s treatment of ethics is not as simple as that. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* the relationship between means and ends is ambiguous (148). On the one hand, it does seem that for Aristotle virtue is a means to an end, that end being happiness. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle says that “Happiness . . . is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action” (I. vii. 1097b21; see also X. vi. 1176a30–viii. 1179a34). It is not erroneous, says MacIntyre, to see that in positing “the good” as the *telos* or goal of human life and defining that *telos* as happiness or pleasure, Aristotle renders happiness the ideal object of all virtue (148). In fact, G. E. R. Lloyd suggests that Aristotle waxes positively Platonic in his discussion of happiness (239).

On the other hand, according to MacIntyre, Aristotle does not clearly separate means and ends as we do. MacIntyre argues that in Aristotle’s teleological philosophy, happiness as “the good” is not only an end of virtue but a part of virtue, the result of virtue as an activity of the soul: “The enjoyment which Aristotle identifies is that which characteristically accompanies the achievement of excellence in activity” (160). Lloyd too points out that there is no ideal form of the Good as such, but rather individual goods associated with particular activities or subjects (208–13). Thus, says MacIntyre, “the enjoyment of itself provides us with no good reason for embarking upon one type of activity rather than another” (160).

Further, if there is no ideal form of the Good, virtue (like knowledge without the ideal form of Truth) is communal in nature, and is at least partially determined by the society in which one lives. That is, virtue, like knowledge, is socially constructed, culturally relative, an awareness of a condition of our civilization from which, as Steiner laments, there is no turning after the holocaust (59–93). In fact, according to MacIntyre, virtue was not a matter of individual moral authority for Aristotle, as it is for us, but was always directed toward and made possible by the *polis* (148–64). Thus, MacIntyre suggests, it is probably incorrect to consider happiness or pleasure the *telos* of human life for Aristotle; rather, it was the excellence of activity (160).

And of course, the highest activity resulting in supreme happiness was philosophical contemplation. For Aristotle, the reason for the *polis* to exist is to make possible the pursuit of excellence and the happiness that is concomitant with it (*Ethics* I. ii. 1094a20–1094b10; *Politics* VII). Indeed, to reduce MacIntyre's thesis to its simplest terms, the decline of both the philosophy of ethics and of virtue itself is marked by the breakdown in Western culture of a communal teleology and the shift to an individual moral authority and utilitarianism that can be seen, for instance, in the philosophies of Nietzsche and Bentham (MacIntyre 62–78; 256–63). This last point may be important when we consider some of the implications for rhetoric of the ethic of expediency in a capitalistic culture.

Thus, although the roots of totalitarianism have been perceived in Aristotle's conception of the *polis* as well as in Plato's conception of the republic (see Popper 1–26), and the darker side of the Greek *polis* itself has come under some scrutiny from rhetorical quarters (Miller, "Polis"), we may wish to locate the ethic of expediency that culminated in the holocaust not in Aristotle's corpus, but rather in the trace of subsequent history. For if MacIntyre is correct, not only Aristotle's concept of ethics but virtue itself has "deteriorated" under the pressure of individualism and the utilitarianism that individualism gives rise to. In any case, it is important to understand how the ethic of expediency that evolved in Western culture and underlies most deliberative discourse also at least partly formed the moral basis of the holocaust. And Aristotle's treatises can provide a clear point of reference.

It is not my purpose in this article to establish a direct connection between Aristotle and Hitler. There is little evidence in *Mein Kampf* to suggest that Hitler actually read Aristotle either when he "studied" in Vienna or while he was an inmate at Landsberg Prison, where he wrote *Mein Kampf*, although he almost certainly read or had secondhand knowledge of the work of Plato, as well as Fichte, Nietzsche (see *Mein Kampf* 579–81n.), and other German philosophers and historians (see Shirer 142–64). Indeed, in his early days in Vienna, Hitler "was a voracious reader" (Shirer 40), and throughout his life possessed a keen if selective passion for political writing and biographies of powerful leaders (see Shirer 1439). But it is my belief that Hitler, like those around him (see Speer 246), was at least familiar with Aristotle's work, especially the *Politics*. Machiavelli, Renaissance statesman, student of politics, and author of Hitler's "bedtime reading" (Gauss 8), almost certainly was (cf. Garver).

But it is crucial that we examine Hitler in conjunction with Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and *Politics* to see how Hitler used the ethic of expediency rhetorically to create a "moral" warrant for Nazi action. To do so, it will be necessary to turn to Hitler's writings, speeches and conversations (as collected, edited, and in some cases translated for the first time in the short but incisive *Hitler* by George H. Stein). For it is in his writings, speeches, and conversations that Hitler lays bare not only his political program, but the ethic of expediency that guided it.

### Hitler's "Ethical" Program?

Although the characterization seems hard to swallow, Hitler's *was* an "ethical" program in the broadest sense of that term. As Stein writes in a prefatory remark, "In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler set down clearly and systematically his principles for political action" (45). Indeed, in *Mein Kampf* Hitler asks: "Can spiritual ideas be exterminated by the sword? Can 'philosophies' be combated by the use of brute force?" (51).<sup>\*</sup> If Aristotle maintains in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (VI. xii. 1143b16–xiii. 1145a14) that "practical wisdom" must be accompanied by "moral virtue" to supply the right end, that "it is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, nor practically wise without being good" (VI. xiii. 1144b30), Hitler maintains that the application of technique and power must be based on a "spiritual idea," a philosophy, to be successful. Hitler understood—all too well—that his political program for world war and mass extermination would not be accepted without a moral foundation. While "the continuous and steady application of the methods for repressing a doctrine, etc., makes it possible for a plan to succeed," Hitler proclaims, "this persistence . . . can always and only arise from a definite spiritual conviction. Any violence which does not spring from a firm, spiritual base, will be wavering and uncertain. It lacks the stability which can only rest in a fanatical outlook" (52).

For Hitler, as for Aristotle—at least in his discussion of deliberative rhetoric—there seems to be no distinction between "practical wisdom" and "moral virtue," between expediency and the good, as long as rhetoric serves its end, that is, the State. Thus Hitler asserts: "Conceptions or ideas, as well as movements with a definite spiritual foundation, regardless of whether the latter is false or true, can, after a certain point in their development, only be broken with technical instruments of power if these physical weapons are at the same time the support of a new kindling thought, idea, or philosophy" (51). In Hitler's rhetoric, expediency is the necessary good that subsumes all other goods, and becomes the basis of virtue itself.

And depending on how one interprets the word "support" in the previous quotation, there were two possible ways in which expediency might become the basis of virtue for Hitler: politically and technologically. In the first interpretation, "support" can be read to mean that the technical instruments of power

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<sup>\*</sup>All page numbers following Hitler quotations are from *Hitler* by George H. Stein.

must be used in the service of (must implement and enforce) a new political philosophy. In the second interpretation, “support” can be read to mean that the technical instruments of power must themselves become the basis of (must embody and engender) a new “technological philosophy.” In other words, for Hitler there seem to be two kinds of expediency that can be used to supplant an existing morality: political expediency, motivated by a “concern” for the State (at least ostensibly), and technological expediency, motivated by technology itself.

Thus, to see how Hitler “takes” the Aristotelian notion of expediency and combines it with technology to create a new moral order, it is useful to make a distinction here between expediency based on politics and expediency based on technology. I have already mentioned that for Aristotle, if the end or “good” in deliberative discourse is political expediency, the function of the “ideal” state is to supply the material means necessary to secure “happiness” and the “good life” for *its* citizens—their moral and intellectual development. These material means included enough people and land to be self-sufficient (*Politics* VII. iv. 1326a5–v. 1327a10), a defense against enemies, both external and internal, both in the present and in the future (V; VII. vi. 1327 a11–1327b15; xi. 1330b35–1331a17), and a large slave class (I. v. 1254a18–vi. 1255b15; VII. ix. 1328b25–x. 1330a34). (Based on the ethic of expediency, it also included killing deformed children or mandatory abortion to control the population of the state! [*Politics* VII. xvi. 1335b20–28].)

Hitler almost seems to put Aristotle’s observations into practice. In his political speeches and writing, Hitler continually proclaimed the political (i.e., “ethical”) need and practical utility of conquering Europe and enslaving its farmer peasants, turning Russia into “Germany’s India” (63), and exterminating the Jews and other “inferior, subhuman species” in order to eradicate “social disease” and facilitate the moral, material, and intellectual development of the German people. In Hitler’s oratory and mind run amok, the Final Solution was necessary because neither exile nor quarantine of the Jews could guarantee the purity, safety, and well-being of the Aryan race.

But Hitler unfortunately also understood that the moral grounds for war and mass extermination could be rhetorically founded on science and technology themselves. Science and technology as moral expedients could be used to generate a “new philosophy,” a “spiritual foundation,” a “fanatical outlook.” There was the belief in genetic hygiene and Germanic superiority grounded in racial biology as well as natural selection (see Proctor). But in addition, grounded in the ethic of expediency, “the technical instruments of power” themselves, “the physical weapons” as well as the political program they served, also could be the rhetorical basis of the spiritual element.

In Nazi Germany (and I will suggest, in our own culture) science and technology become the basis of a powerful ethical argument for carrying out any program. Science and technology embody the *ethos* of objective detachment and truth, of power and capability, and thus the logical and ethical necessity (what Winner has called the “technological imperative” [*Autonomous* 100–06]) for their own existence and use. Sullivan arrives at a similar conclusion (379). But in

Just's argument for technical improvements to the gassing vans, we see the technological imperative at its worst. Technological expediency actually subsumes political expediency and becomes an end in itself. Progress becomes a virtue at any cost.

Thus, the theoretical distinction I just made between technological and political expediency breaks down in practice. Technology is political (see Winner, "Artifacts"; *Autonomous*). Both technology and politics can become the basis of ethics; both lead to power. But technology can become the basis of politics as well. Based on what we now know about the holocaust, there can be no doubt that Hitler believed in the efficacy of science and technology, no matter how perverted, as the basis of ethics and politics. "A movement like ours mustn't let itself be drawn into metaphysical digressions," Hitler states; "It must stick to the spirit of exact science" (69).

The result: Just's memo. Mass extermination. Horrible biological and technological experiments on those considered subhuman. A cold-blooded methodology the standard for dealing with the Jews, as well as with the conquered. A cold-blooded method the *ethos* of an entire country. Gas chambers replacing vans, systematically "processing" hundreds of thousands of "pieces" a day. New and improved methods for administering pain and eliminating people. The whole society organized into a death machine for the efficient extirpation of millions, lauded by the Nazis as a hallmark of organization, elegance, efficiency, speed, all of which became ends in themselves for those planning and those executing the procedures.

For Hitler, technological expediency served to make mass extermination seem not only necessary, but just and honorable: "every persecution which occurs without a spiritual base seems morally unjustified," says Hitler (51-52). It is the ethic of technological expediency that we sense in the memo by Just to the SS—if we sense any ethic at all. Underlying the objectivity, detachment, and narrow focus of this memo (and of Nazi rhetoric in general) is an assurance that the writer's "action" is *technically* justified and correct, and thus morally right, an assurance that is grounded not in the arrogance of a personal belief in one's superiority, but rather in a cultural and ethical norm of technology as well as Party. The ethic of technological expediency that underlies this memo and constitutes its *ethos* at least in part provided the warrant that propelled Nazi Germany into the forefront of war and of infamy. Perhaps this ethic can explain the cold logic with which Just addresses the gassing of innocent people. Perhaps the ethic—as well as apathy, and fear, and hatred—can explain the complicity of millions.

### **The Technological Ethos and Nazi Rhetoric**

To further understand how the ethic of expediency based on technology partially formed the moral basis of the holocaust, and to begin to realize the implications of this for rhetoric, it would be useful to understand the *ethos* of technology a little more, how rhetoric was used to create it, and what its effect on rhetoric was. While I don't mean to suggest this is the "final answer" to that question

murmured so many times before—how could the holocaust have happened?—the imperatives of science and technology as moral expedients create a powerful *ethos* that may partly explain what occurred. As Jacques Ellul discusses at length in *The Technological Society*, technology, the embodiment in techniques and procedures as well as machines of scientific method, becomes its own *raison d’etre* and driving force in culture. Technology becomes both a means and an end in itself.

In addition, Jurgen Habermas argues that in late industrial capitalism, technological values do indeed subsume political/economic ones, and that this “purposive-rational subsystem” of industrial capitalism quietly usurps the “traditional-institutional framework” of social customs, values, and beliefs (90–107). That is, a “technological rationality” that calculates the value of everything in terms of its own technical criteria and use (and that drives postmodern economics, for example), supplants and replaces the traditional values of the society. In Just’s memo, we see that technical improvements to the vans become the only criteria necessary to consider.

Obviously, “technological rationality” is based on expediency. Unlike honor or justice, which are based on higher, more abstract moral principles, expediency is the only “technical” ethic, perhaps the only ethic that “pure rationality” knows. (Stein even calls Hitler a “religious rationalist” [67].) With expediency, the only ethical criterion necessary is the perceptible movement toward the technical goal to be achieved—including expediency itself. Indeed, expediency is the only ethic that can be “measured,” whether that measure be a cost-benefit analysis employed by an industrial engineer to argue for the automation of a plant, or the number of people exterminated in one day—“pure” expediency (undiluted and uninhibited by other ethics) recognizes no boundaries, no degrees of morality or other ethical limits. While expediency can be the basis of desire and emotion (like greed or the lust for power), the ethic of expediency is an exclusively logical, systematic, even quantifiable one, can lead to a rationality grounded in no other ethic but its own, and is symptomatic of a highly scientific, technological age.

And of course, technology is the embodiment of pure expediency. Thus, “the spiritual element,” the *ethos* of technology, is expediency: rationality, efficiency, speed, productivity, power. It is in this way that technology creates the “ethical appeal” I mentioned earlier. Both science and technology are “a good” not only because they are a rational means for accomplishing a task and/or achieving leisure and thus happiness (the virtues heard most in regard to scientific and technological progress), but because they are ethical ends in themselves as well. As Carolyn Miller points out, the *ethos* of technology can even become a form of consciousness (see “Technology”). And as Heidegger expounds, the essence of science and technology is “enframing,” a manifestation and mode of perception and of being that arrests, objectifies, turns everything into a “standing-reserve” for use (14–49).

In Nazi Germany, where gold fillings were extracted from the teeth of the victims of the gas chambers and melted down and the hair of victims was used “in the war effort,” we see the ethic of expediency taken to extremes. Germans

under Nazi rule were an efficient people of an industrious nation who totally lost themselves in the *ethos* of technology. The holocaust reminds us not only of the potential brutality and inhumanity of the ethic of expediency, but of a rationality taken to such extremes that it becomes madness.

How did this *ethos* come about? If Hitler used the ethic of expediency as first treated in Aristotle's *Politics* as part of the moral basis of his political program (significantly, his fervent appeals to the "Platonic" right of the Third Reich were the other part), he used the ethic of expediency first treated in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to create the technological *ethos* of Nazi consciousness and culture. Based on that ethic of expediency, Hitler can be understood to have turned Aristotle's concept of deliberative rhetoric inside out, exploiting the ethic of expediency that underlies and enables it and essentially turning deliberative rhetoric against itself. To understand how Hitler perverted Aristotle's concept of deliberative rhetoric to create the *ethos* of Nazi Germany, we must look more closely at Hitler's conception of rhetoric.

We have seen that Just's memo is based purely on expediency; the memo itself is a technical instrument (like the vans themselves) for carrying out the organizational "task." I have also already pointed out how in Aristotle's conception of deliberative rhetoric, expediency seems to be the primary virtue. Deliberative rhetoric is expedient when it serves its end, that is, political persuasion. The test of success in Aristotelian rhetoric is in the persuasion of the audience (the so-called "audience criterion"). As "the art or faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (*Rhetoric* I. ii. 1355b26), then, rhetoric could be considered a means to an end, an expedient, a *techne* (although as Grimaldi and others have shown, for Aristotle it was much more than this; for Aristotle rhetoric was also an *episteme* or faculty for discovering social knowledge).

Hitler takes the ethic of expediency underlying deliberative rhetoric to its logical extreme. For Hitler, propaganda, the truest form of "technical rhetoric," replaced deliberative discourse as the preferred mode of communicating with the masses:

The function of propaganda does not lie in the scientific training of the individual, but in calling the masses' attention to certain facts, processes, necessities, etc., whose significance is thus for the first time placed within their field of vision.

The whole art consists in doing this so skillfully that everyone will be convinced that the fact is real, the process necessary, the necessity correct, etc. (46)

Based on the ethic of expediency, rhetoric for Hitler was pure technique, designed not to encourage debate, but rather to indoctrinate: "all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan"; the reason, Hitler adds, is that "As soon as you sacrifice this slogan and try to be many-sided, the effect will piddle away, for the crowd can neither digest nor retain the material offered. In this way the result is weakened and the end entirely cancelled out" (47). Even in these abbreviated quotations we see not only a greater (political?) distrust of the masses than we find in Aristotle (*Rhetoric* I. ii. 1357a5), but also a greater "technical" preoccupation with the

end to be achieved, both of which tend to work against free discussion, true deliberation.

In fact, founded on the ethic of expediency and taken to extremes, rhetoric itself becomes a kind of technology, an instrument *and an embodiment* of the end that it serves. In *Mein Kampf* Hitler asks, "Is propaganda a means or an end? It is a means, and must therefore be judged with regard to its end. It must consequently take a form calculated to support the aim which it serves" (45). In Nazi Germany, propaganda served the function of creating the technological/political basis for the new order, which, given the ethic of expediency, becomes the moral basis for it as well. As Hitler states, "The first task of propaganda is to win people for subsequent organization; the first task of organization is to win men for the continuation of propaganda. The second task of propaganda is the disruption of the existing state of affairs and the permeation of this state of affairs with the new doctrine" (49).

Propaganda thus served to create the technological *ethos* of Nazi consciousness and culture: rationality, efficiency, speed, productivity, power. In fact, as a technology, propaganda itself embodies this *ethos*, actually becomes personified in Hitler's rhetoric as existing for those ends only. If Aristotle observes that deliberative discourse is based on questions of expediency rather than justice or honor, Hitler declares that "The function of propaganda is . . . not to weigh and ponder the rights of different people, but exclusively to emphasize the one right which it has set out to argue for. Its task is not to make an objective study of the truth, in so far as it favors the enemy, and then set it before the masses with academic fairness; its task is to serve our own right, always and unflinchingly" (47).

For Hitler, this technological *ethos* was necessary to create the rhetorical/moral basis for the violence and brutality to which he incited the German masses. If Aristotle observes that for political orators "all other points, such as whether the proposal is just or unjust, honourable or dishonourable, are subsidiary and relative and have little place in deliberative discourse. . . . [W]hether it is not *unjust* for a city to enslave its innocent neighbors often does not trouble them at all" (*Rhetoric* I. iii. 1358b25; 1358b35), Hitler insists that in questions of political struggle, "all considerations of humanitarianism or aesthetics crumble to nothingness. . ." (45).

Finally, if the purpose of Hitler's propaganda was to instill in the German people an *ethos* of detachment and power by which the Aryan race would build the Third Reich, as leader of this race Hitler sought to embody this *ethos* himself: "the masses love a commander more than a petitioner and feel inwardly more satisfied by a doctrine, tolerating no other beside itself. . ." (42-44). If ethical appeal, the most important of the three appeals for Aristotle (*Rhetoric* I. ii. 1356a4), is created when the speaker convinces the audience that he or she possesses sound sense, high moral character, and good will (II. i. 1378a9), Hitler redefines these ethical categories based on the ethic of expediency, reducing them to their basest, "technical" level. In the ethical system Hitler rhetorically created for "the master race," sound sense is reduced to expediency, high moral character is reduced to courage to use brutal force, and good will is reduced to

“benevolent violence” against those considered inferior: “When I think about it, I realize that I’m extraordinarily humane. . . . I restrict myself to telling them they must go away. If they break their pipes on the journey, I can’t do anything about it. But if they refuse to go voluntarily, I see no other solution but extermination” (72).

In word and act, Hitler created an *ethos* of expediency in order to carry out his pogrom for the greater good of Germany: “The people at all times see the proof of their own right in ruthless attack on a foe, and to them renouncing the destruction of the adversary seems like uncertainty with regard to their own right if not a sign of their own unright” (50). It was an *ethos* that Hitler thought necessary for the German people to embrace and adopt as well: “Close your hearts to pity. Act brutally. Eighty million people must obtain what is their right. Their existence must be made secure . . .” (76).

It is clear that Hitler combined the ethic of expediency embedded in rhetoric with technology to create the *ethos* of Nazi Germany. That is, Hitler used technological expediency to create the *polis* necessary to carry out world war and mass extermination. In addition, the ethic of expediency then served as the *telos*—“the will to power”—of that *polis*. It is therefore also clear that the *telos* within a *polis* is not universal but socially constructed and relative, and renders ethics that are based on and serve them relative as well. MacIntyre too recognizes this (159). In fact, if we understand Aristotle’s acceptance of slavery as a reflection of “the blindness” of his culture (MacIntyre 159), then perhaps we can also understand the holocaust as a reflection of “the blindness” of Nazi culture as well—a political and technological blindness deliberately created in and through rhetoric.

This is in no way meant to diminish or forgive the profound tragedy of the holocaust. Nor is it meant to devalue rhetoric. Rather, it is to bring home the significance of the holocaust for our understanding of the essential relationship between rhetoric and ethics. In considering that relationship, we must always look at rhetoric in the context of historical, political, social, and economic conditions which govern the nature and use of rhetoric in culture. In Just’s memo to the SS we clearly see the view of human beings that can result when technology becomes an *ethos*, when a *polis* embraces a “pure” ethic of expediency as its *telos*. To understand the holocaust from a rhetorical point of view is to understand the *extreme* limits and inherent dangers of the prevailing ethic of expediency as ideology in a highly scientific and technological society, and how deliberative rhetoric can be subverted and made to serve it.

### **Expediency in Technological Capitalism: The “Final Problem” for Us**

Having said this, I think it is important in the conclusion of this paper to briefly explore the implications of the ethic of expediency manifested in Nazi Germany for rhetoric in our capitalistic culture. Certainly, our *polis* is as different from Nazi Germany’s as Nazi Germany’s was from ancient Greece’s. While the *telos* of the ancient Greek *polis* was the intellectual development of the mind (for its few “citizens” anyway), the *telos* of the Nazi *polis* was the development of the

power of the State itself, as embodied in technology, Party, and Führer. And while the *polis* in both ancient Greece and Nazi Germany can be understood to have had a communal *telos*—the development of the State (though for different ends)—the *telos* of our *polis* is understood to be the individual. Individualism is the basis of both democracy and capitalism.

I said earlier that MacIntyre believes that Aristotle's concept of ethics and virtue itself have "deteriorated" under the pressure of individualism and the utilitarian ethic that individualism spawned. As MacIntyre suggests, we probably can't understand happiness as Aristotle did. We may not understand Aristotle's concept of expediency either. Whether ethics have actually "deteriorated" or not, with the shift in moral authority from the State to the individual, *personal* happiness has become the goal of life in the United States. And that happiness has come to be defined primarily in economic terms. I think it can be asserted without too much argument that the *telos* of life in the United States is economic progress. In the United States, success and happiness, both personal and communal, are measured in monetary terms. In a capitalistic culture, it is "economic expediency" that drives most behavior.

Further, that expediency is both political *and* technological. I have already mentioned how Habermas believes that in postindustrial societies technological and political values unite and subjugate the traditional values of those societies with a technological rationality that calculates the worth of everything in terms of its own "technical" aims. In our capitalistic society, economic rationality, facilitated by and dedicated to the development of new technologies, is one manifestation of this. The danger, then, is that technological expediency in the guise of free enterprise can become de facto both a means and an end. That is, in our culture, the danger is that technological expediency (unlike happiness for Aristotle, which appears to be only a part and result of virtue) can become the only basis of happiness, can become a virtue itself, and so subsume all ethics under it, making all ethics expedients and thus replacing them. According to Habermas, this has already occurred.

The ethic of expediency *in extremis* and combined with technology underlies the rhetoric of Just's memo to the SS and the holocaust in general. But *to some extent*, technological (i.e., economic) expediency is the "moral" basis of many decisions/actions in our society that sometimes harm human welfare or imperil human life. A recent example would be the decision not to notify the public of the bomb threat to Pan Am Airlines to keep the airlines operating; in December 1988, Pan Am Flight 103 from London to New York exploded over Locherbee, Scotland, killing all two hundred and seventy people on board. Ethically speaking, the difference is only one of degree, not kind. The decision not to notify the public was a "systems decision," concerned more with the "efficient" operation of the transportation system than with the people the system is supposed to serve. In any highly bureaucratic, technological, capitalistic society, it is often the human being who must adapt to the system which has been developed to perform a specific function, and which is thus always necessarily geared toward the continuance of its own efficient operation (see Winner, *Autonomous*, espe-

cially 238–48). In a capitalistic society, technological expediency often takes precedence over human convenience, and sometimes even human life.

Now, I am not saying that science and technology are inherently fascist, or that we are becoming like the Nazis. Nor am I saying that expediency is all bad. It can be and is used to argue for increased safety or to otherwise enhance human welfare. What I am saying, however, is that expediency as we understand it in our culture in the twentieth century, as a technological end in itself, is problematic. The ethic of expediency that provides the moral base of deliberative discourse used to make decisions, weigh consequences, and argue results in every department of society, also resulted in the holocaust—a result that raises serious and fundamental questions for rhetoric. (This is especially important when so many of our decisions, so much of our discourse, both public and professional, is technical in nature, and is therefore most likely to be dominated by the ethic of expediency.)

If technology can become a form of consciousness, as Miller suggests, and technological expediency in the guise of economic rationality can become our *telos*, then deliberative rhetoric—devoted to the use of reasoned debate to arrive at informed consensus and decisions in a democracy—could become nearly impossible, at least as far as technological/political issues are concerned. Although in “Rhetoric of Decision Science” Miller holds up deliberative rhetoric as a form of reasoning that is opposed to decision science—a technique based on technological rationality that is used to make managerial decisions by quantifying all the variables—we have seen that based on the ethic of expediency that underlies and enables it, deliberative rhetoric can be made to serve exclusively the technological interests of “the State.” Although not a decision “science,” deliberative rhetoric could become technological, replacing the democratic decision-making process with *techniques* of persuasion and audience adaptation calculated to serve their own end only. Some would argue it already has.

Although I can’t explore it here, there are many parallels between Hitler’s propaganda techniques and contemporary political campaigns and commercial advertising in the United States. Rhetoric, especially the “rhetoric of science and technology,” is increasingly being called upon and used to make or justify decisions based on technological expediency—to create the necessary technological *ethos* for accepting actions or events, especially in military procurement and operations, and in the management of risky technologies such as hazardous waste disposal facilities or nuclear power plants.

The question for us is: do we, as teachers and writers and scholars, contribute to this *ethos* by our writing theory, pedagogy, and practice when we consider techniques of document design, audience adaptation, argumentation, and style without also considering ethics? Do our methods, for the sake of expediency, themselves embody and impart the ethic of expediency? If *telos* is politically constructed and ethics are culturally relative, we must realize the role our rhetoric plays in continually creating, recreating, and maintaining not only knowledge, but values as well—including the value of technological expediency—through how we teach rhetoric, and how we use it.

And if we do contribute to this *ethos*, what can we do to counter it? We can begin by recognizing the essentially ethical character of all rhetoric, including our writing theory, pedagogy, and practice, and the role that expediency plays in rhetoric. We no longer have the luxury of considering ethics outside the realm of rhetoric, as in the Platonic model of knowledge, for the holocaust casts serious doubt upon this model. And Aristotle's division of ethics in rhetoric according to audience and function (deliberative, forensic, epideictic), is appealingly *useful* but problematic and ultimately limited. For based on that division, and the ethic of expediency in deliberative rhetoric under which we have operated, Aristotle does not seem to consider other ethics, such as honor and justice (or kindness and humility) important in deliberative discourse—at least not for their own sake.

In the gruesome light of the holocaust, then, we should question whether expediency should be the primary ethical standard in deliberative discourse, including scientific and technical communication, and whether, based on Cicero's advocacy of a rhetoric grounded in a knowledge of everything and Quintilian's definition of the orator as "a good 'man' skilled in speaking," we can and should teach the whole panoply of ethics in deliberative discourse in our rhetoric and writing courses. We could start with Just's memo. Perhaps we should even begin to question whether "happiness"—as we understand it in our individualistic and utilitarian culture, as personal or corporate gain grounded in economic progress—should be the only basis of virtue and the primary goal of human life. For when expediency becomes an end in itself or is coupled with personal or political or corporate or scientific or technological goals that are not also and ultimately rooted in humanitarian concerns, as is often the case, ethical problems arise. (Of course, this presumes that we can define and agree upon what these "humanitarian concerns" are—a presumption which is not at all certain, given the "true" relativity of values, the multiplicity of needs, and the current climate of personal and corporate greed.)

But I trust we can agree that Hitler's rhetoric, politics, and ethics are not based on "humanitarian concerns." I also hope we can agree that Hitler's rhetoric, politics, and ethics are not only based on insane hatred and racial prejudice, but also on the ethic of expediency carried to extremes and unchecked by any other ethical concerns, on science, technology, and reason gone awry. For in an age when it is sometimes considered "economically rational" to accept high insurance costs on plane crashes rather than improve the safety of planes; when Ford Motor company decided that it would be more cost-effective to incur the law suits (and loss of life) caused by the placement of the gas tank on the Pintos rather than fix the problem, and only changed its mind when an equally expedient solution was found; when *personnel* are now referred to as Human Resources, like shale or oil, with the metaphorical implications that they (we) can be used up and disposed of or replaced when need be; when launch dates are more important than the safety of astronauts and production quotas more important than the safety of workers and residents alike; when expediency outweighs compassion in government and cost/benefit analyses are applied to human welfare and technical considerations outweigh human considerations in

almost every field of endeavor, even in the social sciences and humanities—when every field strives to be scientific and technical and decisions are made and consequences weighed and value argued on the ethic of expediency only—the holocaust may have something to teach those of us in technical communication, composition, and rhetoric.

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