

Oct 2nd, 10:30 AM - 12:00 PM

Contemporary Rhetoric, Ethics, and Human Rights Advocacy (abstract)

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Ghere, Richard K. and Watters, Kathleen Brittamart, "Contemporary Rhetoric, Ethics, and Human Rights Advocacy (abstract)" (2015). *The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy*. 2. http://ecommons.udayton.edu/human_rights/2015/framinghumanrights/2

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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

2015 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

Oct. 2-3, 2015, Dayton, Ohio

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Research Panel: Framing Human Rights

Presenters: Richard K. Ghere and Kathleen Watters, University of Dayton

Title: Contemporary Rhetoric, Ethics, and Human Rights Advocacy

Abstract: This paper will discuss how rhetorical analysis might interpret current ethics conversation related to governance and re-position some of its touchstone rationales. Specifically, efforts in this paper will apply the ideas of preeminent rhetorician Gerald Hauser (the current editor of *Philosophy and Rhetoric*) about human rights discourses and of a reticulate (variegated) public sphere to intersection of governance and human rights advocacy.

Specifically, our paper will examine the rhetoric of various “exemplars” who advocate for causes and actions pertaining to human rights in particular contexts. In particular, we will incorporate case studies reviewing the public actions of the Russian rock group “Pussy Riot” and the Dutch ultra-right parliamentarian Geert Wilders as rhetors whose discourses serve as grist for comparative analysis. Our comparison of these rhetors is premised on the assertion that concern for how particular individuals *advocate* for human rights causes –as well as how *antagonists* obstruct such initiatives –adds significant value to understanding the successes and failures of human rights efforts in particular cultural and national contexts. On one hand, we can grasp how specific international organizations and actors function to *develop* norms (for example, the rights of the child) and how rights are subsequently articulated in universal declarations and formal codes. But on the other, it becomes apparent that the *actual meaning* of those rights mutate when “accepted” within particular cultures.

A final section of our paper will discuss how contemporary rhetorical analysis might inform the ethics of human rights discourse and advocacy in praxis. In this regard, Gerald Hauser elaborates upon thick and thin moral vernaculars in the context of human rights advocacy; specifically, he takes exponents of thin regime principles (e.g. those codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) to task, emphasizing the importance of discourse that is constructed in the context of rights and “moral empowerment.”

Biographies:

Richard K. Ghere is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Dayton.

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