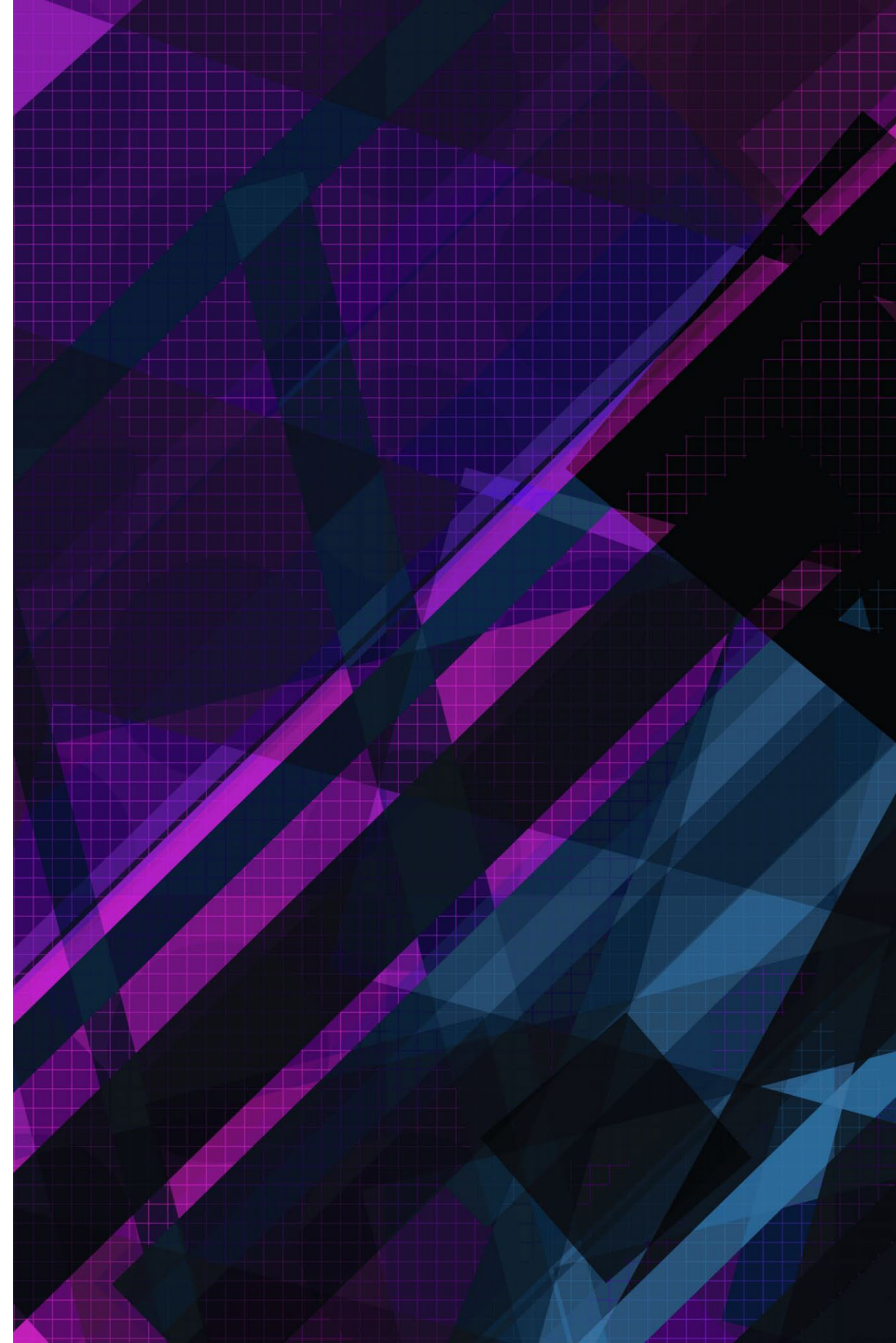# Week 4: A Humanistic Approach

Ethics in Technical Communication
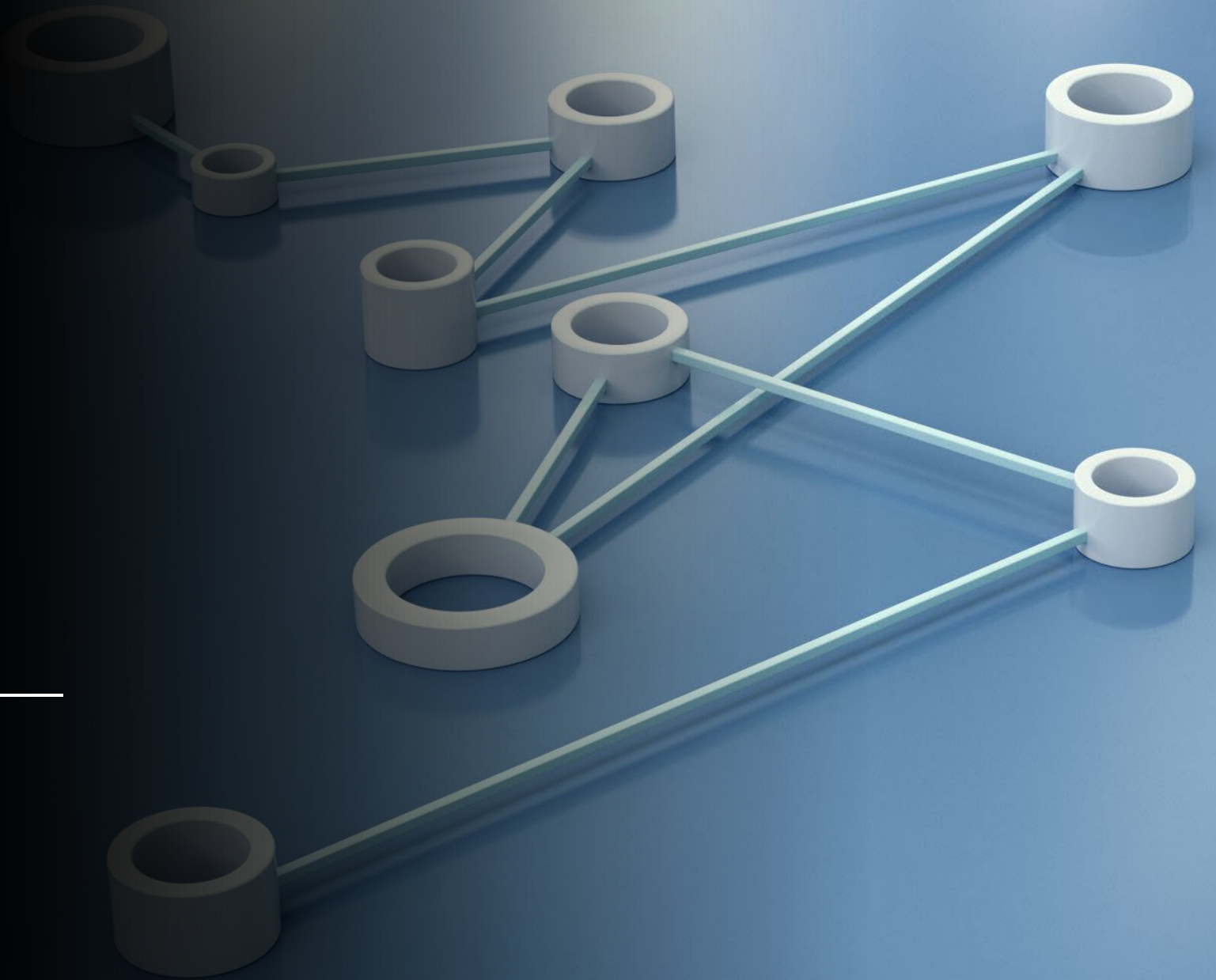
ENGL-535-001, Spring 2025

Student-Led Discussion by Krista Rundiks

Professor: Dr. Tiffany Bourelle

Ethical and Unethical Communication

21st Century Communication: A Reference Handbook

Josina M. Makau

Ethical and Unethical Communication Overview

- **Ethics and Communication:**
    - Communication is inherently ethical, involving choices, values, and consequences.
    - Aims to inform, persuade, inspire, and connect, all of which have ethical dimensions.

- **Ethics Defined:**
    - Ethics studies values, "good," and behavioral norms.
    - Provides frameworks for recognizing and assessing options based on moral considerations.

- **Key Elements of Communication Ethics:**
    - **Choice:** Every decision has moral implications.
    - **Values:** Communication reflects underlying values.
    - **Consequences:** Actions lead to ethical outcomes.

Historical Links Between Communication and Ethics

- **Unethical Communication:**
    - Used to harm, support greed, corruption, tyranny, and justify violence, war, and oppression.

- **Ethical Communication:**
    - Contributes to truth, justice, peace, compassion, and understanding.

- **Power of Communication:**
    - Can both wound and heal, deceive and enlighten, repress and inspire.

- **Ethics in Communication:**
    - Vital for fulfilling communication's constructive potential and addressing ethical challenges.

Key Elements of Ethical Communication

- **Context:**
  - Communication occurs within specific goals, means, and occasions.

- **Ethical Communication:**
  - Requires understanding and responsiveness to:
    - **Ends** (goals),
    - **Means** (methods),
    - **Consequences** (outcomes).

Choice, Moral Agency, and Responsibility in Communication

Moral Agency:

- Communication ethics centers on choice and responsibility.
- Individuals and groups can choose their path, even with constraints.

Influence of Goals and Perceptions:

- Ethical decisions are shaped by goals, values, emotions, perceptions, and potential consequences.

Means and Ends:

- Ethical means (methods) support respectful communication, alongside intended outcomes (ends).

Consequences:

- Even noble intentions can have harmful outcomes.
- Ethical communication requires considering the impact on all involved.

General Guidelines for Ethical Communication

• **Uncertainty in Ethical Choices:**

> • No guaranteed ethical pathway; uncertainty is inevitable, but informed choices can be made.

• **Principle of Veracity:**

> • Guides decision-making on truthfulness, determining when and how to use deception.

• **Truth vs. Truthfulness:**

> •**Truth:** Pursuit of verifiable knowledge.
>
> •**Truthfulness:** Integrity in honestly representing beliefs.

• **Ethical Discernment:**

> • Consult conscience, explore alternatives, seek peer input, and consider public perception.
>
> • Example: Shift away from paternalistic lies in medicine, highlighting transparency and informed consent.

A Question of Ethics: Lessons from Technical Communicators on the Job

Sam Dragga
Texas Tech University

Ethical Implications in Technical Communication

- **Historical Context**
  - Earlier textbooks focused on technical efficiency, ignoring ethics.
  - Ethics was often overlooked in favor of technical effectiveness.

- **Shift Post-1992**
  - Steven Katz's critique, *The Ethics of Expediency*, highlighted the need for ethics in technical communication.
  - Led to increased attention to ethics in education.

- **Current Trends**
  - Modern textbooks and courses now include ethics alongside technical topics like audience analysis and web design.
  - Some textbooks are dedicated entirely to ethics in technical communication.

Emphasizing Ethics in Technical Communication

- **Key Question**
    - Is the focus on ethics enough to prepare students for real-world ethical challenges?
- **Two Perspectives on Ethics**
- **Developing Good Character** vs. **Determining Right Behavior** (analyzing dilemmas).
- **Research Focus**
    - Most research leans toward analyzing moral dilemmas.
- **Bergson's Theory**
    - Suggests integrating both character development and decision-making.
- **Interview Findings**
    - Technical communicators prefer the narrative approach.
- **Recommendations**
    - Balance teaching both character development and analytical decision-making.

Recommendations for Teaching Ethics in Technical Communication

Shift Focus to Character Development

Emphasize professional identity over just analytical frameworks.

Promote Professional Codes of Conduct

Present codes as identity-defining rather than lists of rules.

Use Ethical Case Studies

Encourage exploration of real-world dilemmas for deeper understanding.

Incorporate Professional Insights

Invite experienced communicators to share ethical experiences.

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

Steven B. Katz

Ethics of Technical Communication: Cicero's Warning & Historical Application

• Cicero's warning about speech and its power.

• 1942 document on vehicle modifications for mass killings at Chelmno.

    • Technical modifications for efficiency.

    • Ethical implications of using technical communication for immoral purposes.

An Ethical Problem in Rhetoric

- Memo analysis from 1942 on modifications to gassing vans.

- **Rhetorical structure:** Problem statement, logical argumentation.

- **Ethical concern:** Technical perfection but lack of moral consideration.

- Expediency and objectivity in the memo.

The Ethical Problem in Rhetoric (Continued)

- **Stylistic features:** Complex language, passive voice, technical jargon.

- **Ethic of expediency:** Prioritizing efficiency over ethics.

- **Broader implications:** Expediency in Western culture, enabling the Holocaust.

- **Critique of expediency:** The danger in rhetoric, technical communication, and writing pedagogy.

Ethics in Deliberative Discourse: Expediency

• Objectivity in technical writing vs. ethical implications.

• **Rhetorical theory:** Aristotle's mix of logos and ethos.

• **Impact of expediency:** Prioritizing utility over ethics in technical writing.

• **Ethics of expediency in praxis:** Practical wisdom vs. ethical ends.
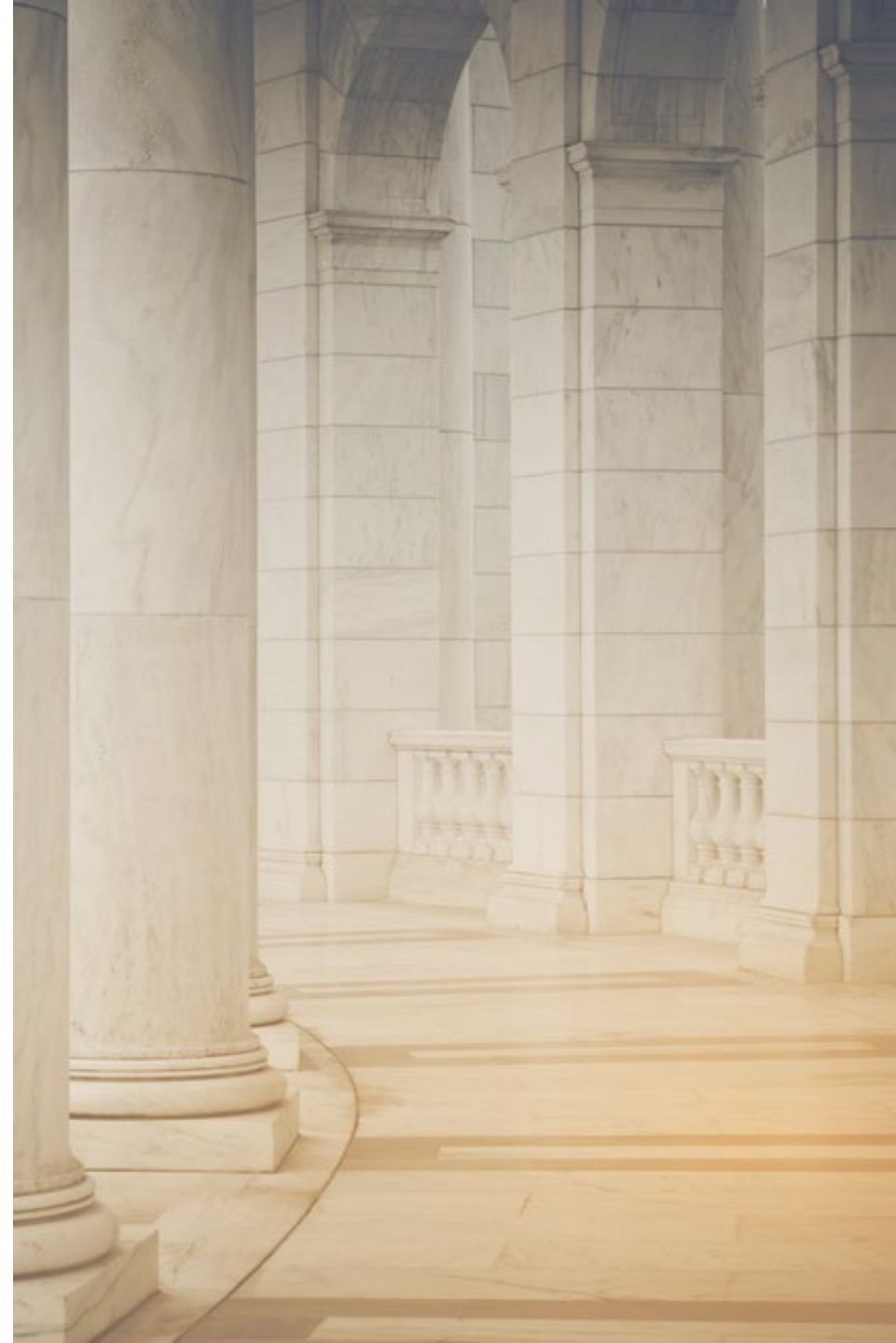
Hitler's "Ethical" Program

- Hitler's moral justification for violence, linked to Aristotle's practical wisdom.

- **Technology and expediency:** Technological advancements used as moral justifications.

- **Political vs. technological expediency:** Using both to justify mass extermination.

- Technological expediency overshadowing politics.

Expediency in Technological Capitalism: The "Final Problem" for Us

- Comparison of Nazi Germany, Ancient Greece, and Modern U.S.

- **Ethics in a capitalistic society:** Individualism vs. utilitarianism.

- **Technological and economic expediency:** Replacing traditional ethics.

- **Ethical dangers:** Prioritizing expediency over human welfare in bureaucratic societies

Resources

- Dragga, S. (2009). *A question of ethics: Lessons from technical communicators on the job*. Texas Tech University.

- Katz, S. B. (1992). The ethic of expediency: Classical rhetoric, technology, and the Holocaust. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*. (Course PDF).

- Makau, J. M. (2009). *Ethical and unethical communication*. In *21st century communication: A reference handbook* (pp. 11-22). SAGE Publications.