The Ontological Foundations of Rhetorical Theory

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In an article delineating the ways in which rhetoric and philosophy are mutually relevant, Henry W. Johnstone, Jr. asserted that conclusions regarding the nature of language and of rational decision-making which follow logically from philosophies assuming that man is, by nature, a rhetorical being differ significantly from those which follow logically from philosophies which do not make that assumption. This distinction is one which arises in human ontology, the branch of philosophy which is concerned with the study of the nature and the essential characteristics of man. Although philosophies which deny that rhetoric is an indispensable part of human experience have stimulated rhetorical scholars, all rhetorical theories make the ontological assumption that man is, by nature, subject to and capable of persuasion. In spite of this common philosophical ground, explanations of how and why persuasion occurs have produced rhetorical theories which differ from each other in important ways.

Three interpretations of this common ontological presumption have become dominant. Traditional theory explains that man is rhetorical because he is rational; behavioristic theory explains that he is rhetorical because he has certain basic, unlearned drives; theories of symbolic behavior explain that he is rhetorical because he is the symbol-using or signifying animal. In this paper I shall argue that the last interpretation is the most productive and viable basis for a complete and coherent theory of rhetoric.

TRADITIONAL THEORY

The fundamental assumption underlying traditional theory is that man is capable of and subject to persuasion because he is, by nature,
a rational being, and that, as a consequence, rhetoric is the art of reasoned discourse or argumentation. This explanation of human persuadability is developed from the Aristotelian view that man's unique attribute is the capacity to exercise his rational faculty. Because Aristotelian ontology defines man in terms of his purpose or telos, it necessarily leads to the ethical principle that man is most human, most fulfilled, when he is acting in obedience to reason. Consequently, "true" or "genuine" rhetoric becomes the art by which men are induced to act in obedience to reason in contrast to "false" or "sophistic" rhetoric which uses any and all means to produce acquiescence. Traditional theory follows the Aristotelian dictum that "no rhetoric is genuine which is not based upon dialectics or the art of logical demonstration."2

Traditional theorists do not deny that nonrational (i.e., emotional, psychological, and physiological) factors affect persuasion, but insist that such appeals are subsidiary to or contingent upon judgments resulting from rational means of persuasion.3 In effect, they argue that if man had no rational capacities, he would still act to satisfy his needs and be subject to certain forms of influence, but he would not be capable of persuasion. True persuasion or genuine rhetoric depends on the capacity to conceptualize alternatives and to make judgments regarding which is most consistent and valid. As judgments must be made and as men must choose whether or not to act in obedience to reason, rhetoric is necessary because it induces judgments and actions consistent with rational deliberation; and it is desirable because, when men act in obedience to reason, their acts are morally preferable.

A primary objection to the rationalistic interpretation of human persuadability is that, by its very nature, it cannot provide a basis from which to scrutinize all persuasive uses of language; it cannot generate a complete theory of the rhetorical dimensions of language usage. "False" persuasion and "sham" or "sophistic" rhetoric, however evil and undesirable, are still instances of the persuasive use of language which may provide insight into the rhetorical process, yet the critic is enjoined from examining them or constrained to dismiss them with a general, and perhaps superficial, condemnation. Critics and theorists who adopt the rationalistic perspective are led invariably to denigrate or ignore those genres of discourse seeking acquiescence primarily through means other than appeals to reason. Moreover, these critics and theorists are tempted to fit all possible discourses into a sometimes Procrustean logical form
ill-suited to the associational or convoluted structure of many discourses and to focus undue attention upon distinguishing between rational and nonrational appeals, a distinction which is dubious to say the least. Finally, because traditional theory contrasts persuasion, or all uses of language which influence, and rhetoric, the true art by which men are induced to act in obedience to reason, even the most conscientious theorist or critic is placed in a dilemma between effects and ethics. He cannot deny that nonrational appeals are often effective. At the same time he must condemn these effective uses of language as unethical and propound instead a form of rhetorical appeal which is widely believed to be less efficacious. Such a dilemma leads to self-contradiction and ridicule. A viable and productive ontological interpretation of human persuadability must allow for theorizing about all persuasive uses of language and must generate an intrinsic ethic by which they may be evaluated.

A second objection to traditional rationalistic theory is that it places a disproportionate emphasis upon the effects of the discourse on the immediate audience. Such an emphasis is, however, a logical outcome of its presuppositions. If a discourse is an instance of genuine rhetoric it will be, of necessity, directed toward inducing a rational judgment, a major step toward fulfilling traditional truth criteria. It will be ethical or socially worthy because it seeks to induce men to act in obedience to reason, a process productive of individual and social virtue. It will be of some artistic merit because, if it proceeds logically, it is likely to meet minimal criteria for arrangement and for stylistic clarity, correctness and appropriateness. Consequently, the preeminent concern of the rhetorical critic will be whether or not the discourse actually induced men to judge and act rationally, and the traditional criticism of oratory in the last three decades has been focused primarily on the effects of discourses on immediate audiences. Such a narrowing of the critical vista inhibits rather than enhances much-needed creative criticism. It also should be noted that an emphasis upon effects tends to diminish the reliability and validity of critical judgments. It is difficult to measure the effects of a speech. It is difficult to distinguish the effects of a speech from the effects of other symbolic stimuli. A decision must be made regarding the relative emphasis to be given to immediate and long-range effects. Such problems tend to discredit evaluations made primarily on the basis of the effects criterion.

Finally, it may be objected that the rationalistic interpretation of human persuadability is a threat to the integrity of the very disci-
pline for which it attempts to provide a philosophical basis. Although Aristotle described rhetoric as a combination of reasoning or the science of analysis and the ethical branch of politics\(^5\) and as a special use of practical reason which urges one of the alternatives delineated in a dialectic,\(^6\) traditional theory seems to imply that the means by which the alternative to be urged is selected and advocated are, fundamentally and predominantly, means which properly fall within the province of theoretic reason or philosophy. In other words, the rationalistic interpretation of the ontological presumption that man is rhetorical implies that the means and ends of rhetorical discourse ought to be determined by procedures which properly belong to the office of the philosopher. The problem is vividly illustrated in the following statement of the relationship of philosophy to rhetoric made by a contemporary rationalistic theorist:

Philosophy provides a method by which rhetoric (communication oral and written) selects subject and subject-matter of importance; defines terms; develops ideas and their supports with full regard for their logical and psychological validity and significance to an audience; generalizes with due account of the details and then moves from the concrete to the abstract, always with due regard for logical consistency in the successive steps; views the subject in relation to related areas of knowledge; sets up goals that follow through the approaches from the simple to the complex, and that indicate a direction consistent with value judgments.\(^7\)

If these are the services that philosophy is to render rhetoric, then the province of rhetoric appears to be indistinct and severely limited.

**BEHAVIORISTIC THEORY**

A second major group of rhetorical theorists and critics explain that man is subject to and capable of persuasion because he is a psycho-physiological being. This interpretation of human persuadability reverses the priorities of the rationalists and gives motivational primacy to man's needs, drives, and desires. It turns to the field of psychology for an explanation of the persuasive dimension of human ontology and concludes that there are "basic, unlearned drives universally present in all human beings,"\(^8\) and that these are the
"headspring" of a persuasion which occurs "not on an intellectual, but rather on a motor level."9 In other words, man is rhetorical because he is an organism with certain innate needs, and persuasion is a process by which these are activated and directed. Rhetoric is defined as all discourse designed to induce belief and action by any means whatever, and persuasion is viewed as the manipulation of innate drives and desires.

An important element in behavioristic theory is the scientific approach that it takes to the study of human behavior, an approach which rejects the concept of choice as an unpredictable force capable of interfering with stimulus-response relationships and substitutes for it the concept of behavioral variability: in a given situation various behaviors are possible although determined by and predictable from causal factors. The individual's belief that he can make free choices is considered an illusion, but one which contributes to psychological health. Consequently, persuasion is necessary and desirable because, in the words of one theorist, "the perception of choice, illusionary or real, becomes an important internal determiner of behavior. It generates harmony between one's feelings, beliefs, and actions."10 In other words, behavioristic theory views rhetoric as a process which uses predominantly verbal stimuli to activate, direct, and manipulate men's needs, drives, and desires so that they will be satisfied in one way rather than another. Persuasion is possible because men have fundamental drives and because they believe, whether accurately or erroneously, that they can make "free" choices. Persuasion is desirable because it contributes to psychological health by reinforcing the individual's illusion of choice, an illusion which integrates his feelings, beliefs and actions.

The behavioristic explanation of human persuadability overcomes some of the limitations implicit in traditional rationalistic theory. It is concerned with and theorizes about all persuasive uses of language. By so doing, it encourages the critic to exercise all his critical options and creative abilities in analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating the epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of discursive acts. However, because of its behavioristic focus, it is likely to ignore discourses which do not produce measurable or observable effects, a criterion for recognition which is problematic, as already indicated. Traditional critics do scrutinize discourses which were "ineffective," and abortive attempts at persuasion may provide valuable research data. In addition, unlike traditional theo-
ry, there are no ethical principles inherent in this interpretation of human persuadability. If discourses are to be evaluated as undesirable because unethical, criteria will have to be drawn from areas distinct from the ontological interpretation on which this form of rhetorical theory rests. Because this is the case, the dilemma between effects and ethics remains, as behavioristic theory cannot aid us in distinguishing between effects which are socially desirable and those which are not.

A primary objection to behavioristic rhetorical theory is that it generates a manipulative view of the persuasive act which views the speaker and auditor as separated, alienated, even in conflict. The persuader is "hidden," suggesting, often indirectly, that he can skillfully move his listener into acquiescence, or that he is the active principal injecting a stimulus into a passive receiver, a clever switchboard operator who can plug in an appropriate message to produce the relatively predictable response he desires. Both speaker and auditor are dehumanized, and the notion of persuasion as an interpersonal, humane, cooperative process is lost. As a consequence, such theory tends to ignore an element implicit in the very idea of rhetoric — that men tend to speak to other men, to urge their action in the face of problems which they cannot solve alone and which require concerted, group action for their solution. Although skilled manipulators may induce mass action, such theorizing leaves no place for cooperative action in which individuals deliberate, understand the implications of their action, and subordinate immediate individual needs to long-term goals for groups, sometimes groups which do not include themselves. Quite simply, behavioristic theory confronts rhetorical theorists with the question whether or not persuasion, among the various means of influencing others, is to be distinguished as that means characterized by the exercise of choice or by the deliberate cooperation of the persuadee.

Finally, it may be objected that behavioristic theory also jeopardizes the integrity of the discipline for which it forms a basis. If man is as these theorists describe him, rhetoric becomes that form of applied psychology which employs predominantly verbal messages, and it would seem that the criteria for the selection, formulation, and evaluation of these messages should be drawn primarily, if not exclusively, from the field of psychology. Once again, rhetoric, as a distinct area of inquiry with peculiar capacities and functions, seems to disappear.
THEORIES OF SYMBOLIC BEHAVIOR

A third interpretation of human persuadability explains that man is a rhetorical being because he is a symbol-using or signifying creature capable of influencing and being influenced because of his capacity for linguistic and semantic responses. Wallace Fotheringham has termed this explanation of human behavior the "meaning arousal theory" and explains that "this mode rests on the principle that humans, particularly, assign meaning to impinging stimuli and that the meaning given is a major determinant of the subsequent behavior."12 In such a view the receiver is an active contributor to the persuasive process who detects, identifies, and interprets the symbolic stimuli which are the message, participating in and creating its meanings which, in turn, become the most significant element in his future behavior. Persuasion becomes a consequence of the interaction between men and their language. When used symbolically, a stimulus represents the user's conception of an object, event, condition, relationship, etc., and indicates an attitude or meaning which can be detected, identified, and interpreted by the receiver which, in turn, can influence his attitude toward the object, event, condition, relationship, etc. From the point of view of these theorists, the discipline of rhetoric is generally the study of the ways in which symbols influence human behavior and specifically the study of the ways in which one man's symbolic behavior influences that of another man. In the words of Kenneth Burke, "wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is 'meaning,' there is persuasion."13

Quite obviously, meaning-arousal theory presumes the uniqueness of the human individual because it views him as an acting, contributing element in the persuasive process. Because unique men are necessarily separate, distinct and divided from one another, conflict, misunderstanding and misinterpretation arise which require rhetorical statements proclaiming common interests and calling for common action. For meaning-arousal theorists, the rationale for persuasion is the need to create unity, to overcome the division to which man is, by nature, heir. Rhetoric "is rooted in an essential function of language itself, ... the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols."14 From this rationale a set of intrinsic ethical principles may be developed by which to distinguish socially desirable and undesirable persuasive uses of language and persuasive effects.15
Finally, these theorists and critics take an original view of human motivation. They contend that human motivation is distinct from that of other beings because the nature and structure of language are themselves motivating forces and because the interaction between man and his language profoundly transforms his physical, biological, and animal needs, drives and desires. The motive forces within language arise from its nature as an instrument of transcendence, as in naming, man not only draws arbitrary boundaries about an event or object, but goes beyond it to speak of the event or object in terms of what it is not, a word, by which he codifies his experience into meanings which reflect his and his group's perspectives and attitudes. Any such term goes beyond particular objects to abstract a category, and the structure of language is such that each category can, in turn, become a part of an ever more abstract category. Man surpasses the particular, experienced and concrete, when he uses language. He makes an inductive leap from sensation to inference. Language urges man toward ever higher moments of symbolic transcendence, a motive mythically represented in the story of the tower of Babel. In addition, the interaction between man and language is viewed as a process which destroys all purely "animal" or "biological" motives. While it is true that man is an animal with basic biological needs who must "live his body," the process of becoming human, of becoming socialized and acculturated, is essentially a symbolic one in which basic, unlearned needs are linguistically transformed into socially and culturally acceptable motives which can never be divorced from their symbolic origins. The human individual, as he engages in the rhetorical process, is an inseparable compound of animality and symbolicity.

From the point of view of theories of symbolic behavior, persuasion is a process in which the individual creates his meaning through detecting, identifying, and interpreting the stimuli he receives and which is integrated into and hence influences his perceptual framework. Persuasion is necessary because men are alienated, requiring persuasive uses of language to induce identification and cooperation in order to overcome the conflicts natural to the human condition — a purpose which generates an intrinsic ethic. Persuasion is possible because men create meaning, because language itself is a motivating force, and because language may be used both to modify man's basic needs and to influence his symbolically created social and cultural motives. Man is also persuadable because the very
notion of language presumes a community of users in which, of necessity, the usage of each influences the usage and hence the meanings, attitudes, and behavior, of others.

A major advantage of the symbolic interpretation of human persuadability is that it provides a basis from which to scrutinize all persuasive uses of language. In fact, it encourages theorists and critics to extend their interest from rhetorical discourses as a theoretically distinct genre to include the rhetorical dimension present in all language usage. Such a perspective avoids the constraints of a too precise discrimination between rhetorical discourse and other literary forms and provides a basis for developing techniques for critical analysis which will heighten our appreciation of discourses as works of art and will increase our insight into the symbolic strategies and linguistic transactions out of which they are formed. In other words, meaning arousal theory provides a framework more amenable to the re-creative or aesthetic dimensions of criticism, and it allows theorists and critics to avoid the problems which result from a preeminent concern with effects and a too narrow interpretation of the process of criticism as a method for judging rather than for understanding the internal workings of the discourse.16

A second advantage of the symbolic interpretation of the ontological presumption of human persuadability is that it can encompass the most significant insights of rationalistic and behavioristic theory without incurring their limitations. For instance, meaning-arousal theorists consider man's ability to reason as one facet of his symbol-using capacity and view reasoning as one type of symbolic strategy. Yet they can scrutinize all persuasive uses of language; they are not tempted to force discourses into a logical mode, nor to make questionable distinctions between logical and emotional appeals. At the same time, this theory sustains the notion that choice is an integral part of persuasion and generates an intrinsic ethic by which to judge persuasive uses of language. Similarly, meaning-arousal theory can account for the role of human needs, drives and desires without generating a dehumanizing, manipulative theory of persuasion. It can avoid much of the deterministic dilemma by positing a concept of choice as functioning in the process of detecting, identifying, and interpreting stimuli. It can also avoid the ethics-effects dilemma which develops when ethical principles must be derived from extrinsic sources. For these reasons the meaning-arousal interpretation of the ontological presumption of human
persuadability seems the most productive and viable basis for developing complete and coherent theories of rhetoric.

What objections, if any, can be raised to the symbolic approach to the rhetorical facet of human ontology? First, although it avoids the problems which arise when distinctions between rhetoric and psychology or philosophy are blurred, it can be objected that the discipline of rhetoric which it posits has no distinguishable limits, that it is in effect the study of all language. The objection is, to me, an irrefutable one, as I believe that indistinct boundaries and wider horizons are precisely the price we shall have to pay in order to have the latitude needed to theorize about and examine the many language acts which do not fall easily into neat classifications of purpose or genre. In fact, it seems to me a small price for restoring rhetoric to its ancient and rightful place as one of the essential facets of language study and for expanding its role contemporaneously to the study of all persuasive uses of language.

A second related objection is that it is more difficult to develop coherent theories and systems of criticism from the symbolic approach to human behavior. If neatness and order are the criteria, analytical and empirical perspectives are clearly preferable, but they are, as I hope I have demonstrated, constraining and incomplete when adopted as exclusive bases for theorizing. This objection is not, however, irrefutable. It is quite true that symbolic approaches to human behavior do not lead to the precise analytic structures of rationalistic or behavioristic theory, but the fact that these are incomplete or dubious bases for rhetorical theory and criticism makes illegitimate the demand that they be duplicated, particularly when approaches of this sort have made the criticism of so many persuasive uses of language so difficult. In this respect, I would agree with Edwin Black that what we need is imaginative criticism rather than attempts to generate new critical systems.\textsuperscript{17} In addition, there have been numerous attempts to suggest the outlines of theoretical and critical frameworks consistent with the presumptions underlying symbolic approaches to human behavior which might profitably be re-examined and expanded.\textsuperscript{18} Rhetorical theorizing from a symbolic perspective may be more difficult, but difficulty surely is not a valid basis for rejecting a critical approach, particularly when that approach would seem to provide the most productive and viable ontological basis from which to develop a complete and coherent theory of rhetoric.
NOTES

4 Black, 33.
5 Aristotle, i.4.1359b.10.
6 Ibid., i.1.1354a.1.
9 William N. Brigance, "Can We Re-Define the James-Winans Theory of Persuasion?" The Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXI, 1 (February 1935), 21. This is reiterated in Eisenson, Auer, and Irwin, 245.
10 Wallace C. Fotheringham, Perspectives on Persuasion (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1966), 12.

Kenneth Kenniston, summarizing available evidence on contemporary student dissent says that "in rare cases are demonstrations directed at improving the lot of the protesters themselves; identification with the oppressed is a more important motivating factor than an actual sense of immediate personal oppression," in "The Sources of Student Dissent," Black Power and Student Rebellion: Conflict on the American Campus, ed. James McEvoy and Abraham Miller (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1969), 312.

11 Fotheringham, 158.
13 Ibid., 567.
16 Black, 177.
17 Rathbun outlines and illustrates an alternative system using the three properties of formal technique: point of view, diction and imagery, 153–159. The framework for a critical system developed from the works of Kenneth Burke has been outlined by Marie Hochmuth, "Burkeian Criticism," Western Speech, XXI, 2 (Spring 1957), 89–95, and "Kenneth Burke and the 'New Rhetoric,'" The Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXVIII, 2 (April 1952), 133–144; Virginia Holland, "Kenneth Burke's Dramatistic Approach in Speech Criticism," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, XII, 4 (December 1955), 352–358, and "Rhetorical Criticism: A Burkeian Method," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXIX, (December 1953), 444–450; and John W. Kirk, "Kenneth Burke's Dramatistic Criticism Applied to the Theatre," The Southern Speech Journal, XXXIII, 3 (Spring 1968), 161–177 among others. See also Richard Gregg, "A Phenomeno-
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