

Rhetorical Criticism

Perspectives in Action

Third Edition

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What Is Rhetoric?

Jim A. Kuypers and Andrew King

Rhetoric has been around for millennia; it has many meanings, some old, some new. To get at the heart of its definition, let us first consider how the term *rhetoric* is most commonly used today. When a politician calls for “action, not rhetoric,” the meaning seems clear; rhetoric denotes hollow words and flashy language, as exemplified in these contrasting headlines: “Obama Should ‘Reconcile the *Rhetoric* with *Action*’ to End Religious Intolerance, Says Rev. Samuel Rodriguez”¹ versus “On Energy and Climate, Obama *Action* Makes Up for Lack of *Rhetoric*.”² Contemporary usage also connotes associations with deceit and tricks that mask truth and forthrightness. For example, former President Richard M. Nixon used the term *rhetoric* in this way in his 1969 inaugural address: “The simple things are the ones most needed today if we are to surmount what divides us and cement what unites us. To lower our voices would be a simple thing. In these difficult years, America has suffered from a fever of words; from inflated rhetoric that promises more than it can deliver; from angry rhetoric that fans discontents into hatreds; from bombastic rhetoric that postures instead of persuading.” Although the type of rhetoric of which Nixon speaks is often worthy of study, it also leaves one thinking that it is certainly not the kind of language that an intelligent and civil person would willingly wish to use. Finally, sometimes rhetoric is simply used synonymously with communication, as exemplified in these two headlines about President Trump’s public discourse: “Trump Rhetoric Freshly Condemned After Mass Shootings”³ and “President Donald Trump’s Rhetoric Not to Blame for Mass Shootings: Mick Mulvaney.”⁴ Same “rhetoric,” different interpretations.

Rhetoric is also used to describe what some today consider fancy, embellished, or over-ornamental language. This contemporary perception of excess has its roots in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American oratorical practice. During these centuries before radio, television, and the internet, public speeches were opportunities for audiences to be both informed and entertained; a certain lushness of language was both expected and desired. It was not at all uncommon for speeches to last several hours and for speakers to use no notes. This style of American speaking was most evident in patriotic orations and is well represented in George Caleb Bingham’s painting, *Stump Speaking*. Albert Beveridge, in his 1898 speech “The March of the Flag,” provides a common example of what we might consider embellished speech today:

It is a noble land that God has given us; a land that can feed and clothe the world; a land whose coastlines would enclose half the countries in Europe; a land set like a sentinel between the two imperial oceans of the globe, a greater England with a nobler destiny.

It is a mighty people that he has planted on this soil; a people sprung from the most masterful blood of history; a people perpetually revitalized by the virile, man-producing working-folk of all the earth; a people imperial by virtue of their power, by right of their institutions, by authority of their heaven-directed purposes—the propagandists and not the misers of liberty.⁵

Although the above examples are certainly forms of rhetoric, they but scratch the surface of rhetoric's deeply rich meaning, leaving out those meanings representing rhetoric's most powerful and important qualities. The study of rhetoric is an invention of early Western civilization, and we can trace its roots back over 2,600 years to the fledgling democracies of ancient Greece.

A CONCISE SKETCH OF THE RHETORICAL TRADITION

The Greeks developed the original model of rhetoric, which for them was a systematic body of knowledge about the theory and practice of public speaking in the law courts, in the governing assemblies, and on ceremonial occasions. Rhetoric was codified by Aristotle in his famous treatise, *The Rhetoric*, written somewhere around 335 BC. He defined rhetoric as the "power of discovering the means of persuasion in any given situation," a much more comprehensive and intellectually respectable meaning than today's common attributions of empty words and deception. Rhetoric was viewed as a practical art and was studied, discussed, and debated by educated Greeks, who expected each other to speak well, eloquently, and persuasively. Citizens were even expected to defend themselves in court by their personal rhetorical prowess, thus making the study of rhetoric even more important. The sophists, wandering teachers in the ancient world, often taught rhetoric as popular courses designed to prepare ambitious youths for fame and success. The Greeks believed in the power of the spoken word and delighted in hotly contested debate; they even held oratorical contests as part of the Olympics. On the other hand, and exemplifying the Greek love of debate, philosophers such as Plato condemned rhetoric, finding it a serious rival to philosophy in the ancient educational system.

Later, the Roman republican government provided many opportunities for the practice of rhetoric in their popular assemblies, in provincial governing bodies, in their law courts, and in their huge civil service and military. The best-known Roman orator was Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC), who took over the Greek ideas of rhetoric and adapted them to the needs of a far-flung world empire. From modest origins he rose to the highest office in Rome, the consulship, and was considered by many to be the greatest lawyer, speaker, and writer of his day. Fifty-eight speeches and nine hundred letters have come down to us; they still read well today and stand as models of powerfully persuasive oratory, biting wit, and incredible verbal skill. Cicero argued for an ideal **rhetorician**, an orator-statesman who would use rhetoric as a means of serving the people. A century later, Cicero's rhetorical teaching was codified by the first imperial professor of rhetoric in Rome, Quintilian (AD 35–96), who was Rome's greatest teacher and codifier of rhetorical knowledge. Thus, the Greco-Roman world established a tradition of discourse that has been taught throughout Western history and continues to grow and to develop down to our own time in the early twenty-first century.

Saint Augustine (AD 354–430) was largely responsible for early Christian uses of rhetoric, and his writings were used extensively by churchmen and intellectuals throughout the Middle

Ages. Augustine reasoned that since the Devil had full access to all of the available resources of rhetoric, others ought to study it if only for their own protection. The Church eventually agreed, declaring that knowledge of rhetoric's great power was essential for everyone, and both "in theory and practice the Christians forever influenced the development of rhetorical thought."⁶ Likewise, the influence of rhetoric on the spread of Christianity should not be underestimated. During the Middle Ages, rhetoric was at the heart of education. It was taught in the cathedral schools. It inspired the great university debates and disputations, and it set rules for the composition of sermons and royal proclamations. It even extended its domain over poetry and letter writing, and rhetorical modes of expression guided government bureaucracies and discourses between kingdoms.

In the Renaissance, rhetoric became even more important, recapturing the high status it had enjoyed at the time of Cicero. Renaissance leaders revered Cicero as the ideal of the practicing rhetorician, the active agent in the service of the state and the people. Jean Dietz Moss notes that "a widening wave of literacy extended beyond the church and the court to include a secular public, merchants, bankers, lawyers, artisans and others of the middle class."⁷ In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, rhetoric dominated philosophy, literature, and politics. Early in the seventeenth century, the great Italian rhetorician Giambattista Vico took René Descartes head-on, writing that truth is discovered through the rhetorical process of invention (discussed in chapter 6), not only through scientific observation, as Descartes maintained.⁸ Vico's work extended the intellectual scope of rhetoric to include the study of language and the evolution of society, and it fit in well with other works of the period that were pushing back against a growing **scientism** that was advancing into all aspects of life at that time.⁹

During the late eighteenth century there was a vast expansion of the middle class in Britain and North America. The tremendous growth of literacy was aligned with the growth of the press and the publishing industry. Similar to the advent of the internet, the printing press was a dynamo for the circulation and expansion of knowledge. As a result, rhetoric expanded beyond matters of political and legal conflict to areas of reading, criticism, and judgment. Vast fortunes were being made via the Industrial Revolution, and upwardly mobile and newly rich individuals were eager to assimilate the speech, ideas, and manners of their higher-status counterparts in the aristocracy. The three greatest rhetorical theorists of the period were Hugh Blair, Richard Whately, and George Campbell. Each was a Christian minister, and each emphasized matters of ethics and of individual accountability in their rhetorical theory.

The nineteenth century was a time of huge industrial, political, and educational expansion in Europe and the United States. Parliamentary democracy penetrated to many points of the globe. Nineteenth-century practitioners of rhetoric cultivated the discipline as a form of individual intellectual training. They believed that knowledge of rhetoric would prepare any speaker or writer from age fifteen to age ninety to inform, persuade, or entertain any audience at any time on any occasion. The numerous and optimistic how-to-do-it rhetorical manuals of that day were an invitation to train in the privacy of one's own home for both self-improvement and social power. One example was the young Frederick Douglass studying his rhetoric book in secret in order to prepare for a career in public life that would lift him out of both slavery and poverty. Rhetorically based eloquence was seen as a means of gaining entry to the corridors of power. Books provided strategies for persuading others and provided models of great speeches for readers to imitate. A pantheon of great orators and their greatest speeches was established through books such as Chauncey A. Goodrich's *Select British Eloquence* in 1852. The book contained the speeches of the greatest British orators together with critical guides for study and tips on rhetorical emulation. Collections of great American orators soon

followed, and these became style models for ambitious youth who saw the acquisition of rhetorical skill as a path to influence and wealth.

Although rhetorical treatises had been written since before Aristotle's day, academic departments focusing on rhetoric did not come into being until the early twentieth century; beginning in America, many evolved into what we today call departments of communication.¹⁰ In these early departments, often known as departments of speech, scholars recovered the full range of the classical tradition and greatly expanded the study of rhetoric.¹¹ Rhetorical criticism became the major thrust of study, and theory was developed to explain the vast changes wrought by mass media, modern propaganda, and the immense social movements and revolutions of the first half of the century. In the latter half of the century and into the early twenty-first century, students of rhetoric moved far beyond the classical tradition. Traditionally scholars focused on how exemplar speakers—gifted and influential individuals—used rhetorical arts to shape their world and affect social change. More recently scholars have inverted this relationship and have begun to study the ways in which history and culture have shaped the practice of rhetoric itself. The very conditions in which rhetoric takes place are objects of study, and they include who is allowed to speak in a public place, whose speech will be taken seriously, and the range of ideas that are considered debatable at any given time. Scholars have also emphasized the role of language and symbols in the process by which social influence occurs, and they have broken down the walls between visual, verbal, and acoustic messages. Our understanding of rhetoric now includes far more than public speaking, as indispensable as that is; focusing on understanding symbolic action in many different forms and settings, it embraces discourse in print, radio, television, social media, and even our smartphones. Small wonder, then, that rhetoric is now being studied across a whole spectrum of academic subjects and is among the central disciplines of our time.¹²

THE MANY MEANINGS OF RHETORIC TODAY

Accordingly, approaching the quarter mark of the twenty-first century, we find a greatly expanded study of rhetoric, along with an ever-growing litany of definitions. We now move to sharing a pragmatic introduction to some of those meanings.

Rhetoric not only has a persuasive element; it has an informative one as well. For example, you might want to persuade someone to buy an Apple iPhone instead of a Google Pixel 4, or you might want to persuade your friends to have dinner with you at your favorite restaurant. Both instances would use rhetoric. However, in order to effectively persuade, you must first provide information in the form of supporting materials such as testimony, examples, stories, definitions, and the like. In short, you must use more than mere assertions as your arguments. In this sense, rhetoric involves the proper interpretation, construction, and use of supporting materials to back up assertions and gain audience acceptance.

With this in mind, let us begin with a working definition of *rhetoric*. When we use the term **rhetoric** in this chapter we mean *the strategic use of communication, oral or written, to achieve specifiable goals*. There are two main ideas expressed by this definition. One involves the strategic, or intentional, nature of the language we use; the second involves knowing what goals we wish to reach through the language we use. This is an intentionally narrow definition of *rhetoric*, but we think using such is justified for now. After all, we need someplace to begin the inquiry, and it seems to us that a definition rooted in the most practical examples of intentional persuasion is a good place from which to launch our discussion.

The Strategic Nature of Rhetoric

We use symbols to communicate. These symbols essentially are something we use to represent something else. Words, whether spoken or written, are such symbols. Musical notes are such symbols as well. Certain gestures are symbolic representations of meaning, too. Of importance to us here is that words, spoken or written, are symbols whose meanings are more readily agreed upon than the meanings of other symbols used in communication. That is to say, the lion's share of those hearing or reading a particular word can come to some consensus concerning its meaning, whereas this does not hold true with other types of symbols. For example, the symbols used in art, architecture, dance, and clothing are all vague in their meanings; thus a communicator would have less control over their precise interpretation by a given audience. Unfortunately, the further we travel from the *intentions* of the communicator, the closer to the *inferences* of the audience we find ourselves. Since rhetoric works using symbols, the more variation in the symbolic meaning (the meaning of a series of *words* versus the architectural meaning of a doorway, for example), the less precision in the communication in general.

Nonetheless, rhetoric viewed from this broader aspect should be considered. For example, Sonja K. Foss wrote that "*rhetoric* means the use of symbols to influence thought and action. Rhetoric is communication; it is simply an old term for what is now called *communication*."¹³ In a later work she refines this definition of rhetoric as "the human use of symbols to communicate."¹⁴ Rhetoric, from Foss's view, does involve action on the part of a communicator; it involves making conscious decisions about what to do. However, it also involves a larger conception in that it takes into consideration the impact symbols have on receivers, even if unintended. The range of potential rhetorical symbols according to Foss is vast: "Speeches, essays, conversations, poetry, novels, stories, comic books, websites, television programs, films, art, architecture, plays, music, dance, advertisements, furniture, automobiles, and dress are all forms of rhetoric."¹⁵

Foss presents an extremely broad definition, one that both includes and clashes with a more pragmatic conception of rhetoric. One could even argue that her definition is so broad as to claim that any form of human action or creation, when perceived by another, is a form of rhetoric. One can certainly argue what should or should not be considered as rhetoric, and Foss's conception does have merit. For the present, though, let us content ourselves with considering a narrower and pragmatic definition. As Marie Hochmuth Nichols wrote, "Rhetoric is an act of adapting discourse to an end outside itself. It serves many ends, from promoting decision to giving pleasure. It does not include ships, guns, an alluring sun, the dance, or the Cathedral of Chartres. It does not include rolling drums or the sound of marching feet; it does not include extralinguistic symbols of peace or the clenched fist of power. It does not deny that there are other symbolic forms for altering behavior, which often accompany or reinforce it."¹⁶ Conceptions of rhetoric similar to that given by Foss minimize the important fact that as one moves further away from the use of symbols with generally agreed-upon meanings (*words*) to the use of symbols with imprecise meanings (*furniture, dance*), one finds that the *intentions* of the **rhetor**, or communicator, play less a part in the rhetorical exchange and that the *impressions* of the receiver play a greater role.¹⁷ In this sense the meaning behind the rhetoric moves from the person crafting the message to the impressions of those receiving the message, irrespective of the intentions of the original communicator.

The concern with intentions was not lost on Hoyt Hopewell Hudson, an early twentieth-century rhetorical theorist, critic, and poet.¹⁸ In his landmark essay, "Rhetoric and Poetry,"

Hudson highlighted the differences between efforts aimed at rhetorical influence (rhetoric) and efforts aimed at symbolic expression (poetry). He began his comparison by citing numerous great poets in order to demonstrate the general focus of a poet: "The Poet . . . keeps his eye not on the audience or the occasion, but on his subject; his subject fills his mind and engrosses his imagination, so that he is compelled, by excess of admiration or other emotion, to tell of it; compelled, though no one hear or read his utterance."¹⁹ Hudson clearly marked where rhetoric begins and poetry ends to better discuss their differences: "For the moment, then, we shall say that poetry is for the sake of expression; the impression on others is incidental. Rhetoric is for the sake of impression; the expression is secondary—an indispensable means."²⁰

This distinction is subject to exceptions, and here Hudson showed a graceful and discerning grasp of the differences between rhetoric and poetry, providing examples of how a poet might stray into the field of rhetoric. For example, a poet envisioning a speaker attempting to persuade listeners must use rhetoric—Mark Antony in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and the speeches of the fallen angels in the first and second books of *Paradise Lost* are two such examples (as are the courtroom scenes in the various iterations of the hit TV series *Law & Order*). Hudson calls this imitative rhetoric, which may be studied for its own sake. A poet may at times consider the audience (a drama, for example), but there exist differences in the conception of the audience: "The poet thinks of a more general and more vaguely defined audience than the orator. The poet may even think of all mankind of the present and future as his audience."²¹ Hudson even provided a loose scale to depict the range from the most purely poetical—personal lyrics and rhapsodic poems; then idylls and pastoral poetry; then narrative poetry, romance, and the epic—to the more purely rhetorical, such as tragedy and comedy, and finally didactic poetry, satire, odes, and epigrams. Hudson also demonstrated how an orator might cross over into the field of poetry: "Though the orator's end is persuasion, it is not hard to believe that there are moments in his discourse when this end is forgotten in his delight or wonder before some image which fills his inner eye. In such moments he has his eye on the subject, not the audience."²²

Considering all of the above, we can clearly see the differences between the more personally *expressive* use of ambiguous symbols—poetry, painting, dance, and architecture—and the more publicly *impressive* use of symbols with generally agreed-upon meanings: words spoken and written for the sake of persuasion. It is the latter that is the focus of this chapter and many of the chapters beyond. This is not to say that other forms of more ambiguous rhetoric cannot be studied but rather that we will take our first step on the firmer soil of rhetoric understood as strategic and intentional. Later chapters in this book will expand this definition of rhetoric.

Rhetoric as Goal-Oriented Communication

Coming back to the definition of rhetoric we gave above, we find that rhetoric is strategic because it is intentional. Communicators who wish to control the manner in which their messages are understood plan ahead. They think about what they are going to say and what impact their words are likely to have on those listening to them. When they use rhetoric in this way, they provide reasons for their listeners to agree with them. Just as importantly, rhetoric is intentional in the sense that it is employed only when words can make a difference. That is to say, rhetoric is *persuasive*. It seeks to influence our personal and collective behaviors through having us voluntarily agree with the speaker that a certain action or policy is better than another action or policy. Rhetors often think about their goals so that they are better able to plan what to say for a desired effect. Since there is no scientific certainty to human affairs—

that is, we do not know with complete certainty which policy will produce the absolute best results—rhetoric attempts to persuade listeners that one policy will *probably* be better than another. It is in this sense, then, that rhetoric is based on probability—communicators try to convince us not so much that their proposed course of action is the only correct one, or that it will work with guaranteed certainty, but rather that it *probably* will reap greater success than competing solutions. The trick for the person trying to persuade is to make certain that the level of probability is high enough to convince the particular audience being addressed that a certain course of action will be the best course of action for them.

Rhetoric works toward a goal, then. It may involve simply trying to have your audience believe a certain way, or it could work toward the enacting of one course of action or policy over another. In suggesting that rhetoric is policy oriented, we mean to say that it seeks to influence how those receiving the rhetoric act at either a personal or a public level. Policy at the personal level involves decisions about our beliefs or actions completely within our control. For instance, almost twenty million college students found themselves asking in early spring 2020: “With the ongoing COVID-19 virus situation, should I return to campus after spring break or stay at home?” Beyond this, all of us also use rhetoric to influence those around us. For example, think of the last time you were together with a group of friends and you were trying to decide where to go for dinner. You most likely had several competing options and had to advance good reasons for choosing one venue over another. The policy option resulting in action is simple: where to go eat. Your attempt at persuasion here involves more than just your actions; it involves deciding what to do for a group: the outcome is not solely under your control. At a more public level, consider the November 20, 2014, words of President Barack Obama concerning his executive order on immigration. He asserted that it would fix the system “while giving undocumented immigrants a pathway to citizenship if they paid a fine, started paying their taxes, and went to the back of the line.”²³ The public policy here involves allowing up to ten million illegal immigrants to stay in the country with federal assistance should they meet certain requirements. Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama offered a competing policy option, one that would deny funding to the president’s executive order and add “enforcement-only measures like universal E-Verify, ending catch-and-release, mandatory repatriation for unaccompanied alien minors, ending asylum loopholes, and closing off welfare for illegal immigrants.”²⁴ The public policy here involves ending the president’s plan to provide the means of citizenship for illegal immigrants and tightening border security. Which option one prefers depends on many factors, including the evidence each politician presents to show how his plan would produce the best results for the greatest number of citizens, as well as the personal values of each citizen. And just because there are policy options available does not mean they will work or be acted upon. The public discussion about the policies both Obama and Sessions advanced are ongoing even today.

A more detailed yet quite common example of how rhetoric works shows that the good reasons rhetoric uses to persuade us very often incorporate the human qualities we use every day when communicating with a goal in mind. A friend of ours was president of her neighborhood’s homeowners’ association for several years. At one point during her tenure her neighborhood experienced a rash of mail thefts. The postal inspector and sheriff’s department could do little; this was a rural setting, wooded, with little likelihood of catching whoever was stealing unless someone was willing to keep watch twenty-four hours a day. Our friend decided that the post office could be prevailed upon to install lockboxes in place of the old stand-alone mailboxes. The post office agreed but decided to place the new boxes near the entrance to the neighborhood, in a wooded area alongside the road where there was no light during the

evening hours. Our friend asked that they be placed in a more central, lighted area, but the postal worker said no. Not to be swayed, our friend continued her use of rhetoric.

She used common examples in her efforts: Many of those who would be getting the mail would be women, driving alone or with their children. With daylight savings time soon to end, they would be driving home at night after a day at work. Where the postal service wanted to place the mailboxes would necessitate the women getting out of their cars and walking away from them in order to get the mail. Our friend pointed out that if even one woman were attacked, then that particular postal worker would feel terrible. She also pointed out the very real possibility of the postal service being held legally responsible for any attacks that were facilitated by poorly placed boxes. The next day she had a phone conversation with the regional director of the postal service, and by the next week the new boxes were in, and in a better location so that nobody driving at night would have to get out of his or her car in order to collect the mail.

The persuasive effort used by our friend tells us a great deal about the nature of rhetoric. She used no extravagant arguments; rather, she used everyday logic and reasoning (the community's common sense), evoked a little emotion within her listeners (feelings about someone getting hurt), and ended up getting what was best for those in her neighborhood. It was not that her arguments had no weakness or that they were scientifically reasoned out. Rather the arguments she used were constructed in order to convince the postal authorities that there was a high possibility that what she said would happen would indeed happen. And that possibility was just high enough to persuade them to agree with her. So, this example shows how rhetoric is used every day. Importantly, though, it also points out that rhetoric is concerned with *contingent* matters. Simply put, rhetoric addresses those problems that can be changed through the use of words. Stated another way, the outcome of the situation is contingent upon what is said. So, for example, it was only because the possibility existed for having the location of the mailboxes moved that rhetoric was able to effect a change.

As the above example shows, rhetoric is goal directed. Our friend knew she wanted those mailboxes in a different location. She then thought of ways of constructing her arguments so that they would work with her particular audience—in this case, the postal workers who could change the location of the boxes. As you think about the goals communicators have in mind, it is important to remember another important aspect of rhetoric. When rhetoric is used, it is concerned with *informed opinions*. Most of us are not a mathematician trying to prove an equation or a chemist following a formula. Instead we deal with human beings thinking on uncertain matters; we deal with their facts and their opinions. Humans act based on what appears probable to them, not always on what they know for certain.

When we deal with policy-oriented questions of what we should do in a particular situation, there is no way to demonstrate using the scientific method that a certain course of action will be the best. Although *we* might know with certainty, those with whom we communicate may feel just as certain about a different course of action—think of the Obama and Sessions examples above. What rhetors do, then, is try to persuade their listeners that their proposed course of action has the maximum probability of succeeding. Successful rhetors attempt to narrow the choices from which their audiences can choose. These audiences may have many choices for action; rhetoric helps them to decide which course is the best to take. Summing up such a position, Gerard Hauser wrote, "Rhetoric, as an area of study, is concerned with how humans use symbols, especially language, to reach agreement that permits coordinated effort of some sort. In its most basic form, rhetorical communication occurs whenever one person engages another in an exchange of symbols to accomplish some goal. It is not communication

for communication's sake; rhetorical communication, at least implicitly and often explicitly, attempts to coordinate social action."²⁵ As Donald C. Bryant so succinctly put it, rhetoric is not a body of knowledge but a means of applying knowledge: "It does rather than is."²⁶

The Moral Dimensions of Rhetoric

The foregoing example has illustrated the strategic and goal-oriented nature of rhetoric. Rhetoric always presupposes the existence of an audience. A person addresses a particular audience anchored in time, space, culture, and circumstance. Intellectuals who dismiss rhetoric and wish to present unvarnished truth are often people who do not understand the power of audiences. Like Plato, they believe that what they see as clear ideas, strong evidence, and a rational plan of reform are enough. They underestimate the influence of emotion, self-interest, fear of change, and the ways in which unequal power distorts communication.

The very practice of rhetoric has an impact on the practitioners. But persuading others is always a matter of negotiating between ever-changing local conditions and the enduring principles of political judgment. Deliberation helps nurture audiences by strengthening the norms of fairness. Consider for a moment that communities do not exist prior to talk. Neither do they exist simply because someone says that this or that grouping of people is a community. They are built over time through communal understanding, argument, negotiation, and common action. Rhetorical practice is ethical in nature because it is advisory, and this advice has consequences for which the advice giver is held accountable. As Richard Weaver wrote, "it has the office of advising men with reference to an independent order of goods and with reference to their particular situation as it relates to these. The honest rhetorician therefore has two things in mind: a vision of how things should go ideally and ethically and a consideration of the special circumstances of his auditors. Toward both of these he has a responsibility."²⁷ Rhetoric is not an ethically neutral act such as target shooting or throwing clay pots on a wheel. Participation in rhetorical discourse involves people in building citizenship and constructing community. And the decisions they make or the ideas they embrace can ruin or enrich their lives. Thus, rhetoric is an ethically significant practice that seeks to engage audiences in sound judgment; those judgments have consequences that we can judge to be good or bad.²⁸

Finally rhetoric sustains democratic culture. Rhetoric uses accepted beliefs to produce new beliefs and in so doing builds the stock of communal wisdom. It safeguards the stable beliefs that provide communal identity yet allows the community to manage change in ways that do not rend it apart and leave its people adrift.

A LARGER CONCEPTION OF RHETORIC

We mentioned earlier that the concept of rhetoric is expansive. In our discussion above we intentionally focus on a pragmatic and utilitarian conception of rhetoric. As will be reflected by some of the chapters in this book, rhetoric can be conceived in slightly larger ways. For instance, Charles Bazerman wrote that

[rhetoric is the study] of how people use language and other symbols to realize human goals and carry out human activities. Rhetoric is ultimately a practical study offering people greater control over their symbolic activity. Rhetoric has at times been associated with limited techniques appropriate to specific tasks of political and forensic persuasion. . . . Consequently, people concerned

with other tasks have considered rhetoric to offer inappropriate analyses and techniques. These people have then tended to believe mistakenly that their rejection of political and forensic rhetoric has removed their own activity from the larger realm of situated, purposeful, strategic symbolic activity. I make no such narrowing and use rhetoric (for want of a more comprehensive term) to refer to the study of all areas of symbolic activity.²⁹

"All areas of symbolic activity" certainly widens the scope of rhetoric's influence. Some have enlarged our understanding of rhetoric further by making the argument that it can also have unintentional, even unconscious elements in its persuasive effect. As Kenneth Burke noted in the mid-twentieth century, rhetoric can work toward the promotion of **identification**, "which can include a partially unconscious factor in appeal."³⁰ Burke explained his concept of identification this way: "A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so. You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your way with his."³¹ For example, a person might use symbols associated with wealth or class when writing a news story. Upon exposure to these symbols, a reader might identify with the nuances of wealth or class without being fully aware of doing so.³² Brooke Quigley explained that "the need to identify arises out of division; humans are born and exist as biologically separate beings and therefore seek to identify, through communication, in order to overcome separateness. We are aware of this biological separation, and we recognize additional types of separation based on social class or position. We experience the ambiguity of being separate yet being identified with others at the same time."³³ As Burke wrote, humans are "both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another."³⁴ Burke was interested in the "processes by which we build social cohesion through our use of language. His goal [was] that we learn to perceive at what points we are using and abusing language to cloud our vision, create confusion, or justify various and ever present inclinations toward conflict, war and destruction—or our equally-present inclinations toward cooperation, peace and survival."³⁵

Other ways that critics examine this notion of the unintentional aspects of rhetoric involve the study of **ideology** in the language we use. Ideology in this context is any system of ideas that directs our collective social and political action. We cannot escape some form of ideology since we are raised and educated within a society that is organized around a particular ideology. A more specific definition suggests that an "ideology is a set of opinions or beliefs of a group or an individual. Very often ideology refers to a set of political beliefs or a set of ideas that characterize a particular culture. Capitalism, communism, socialism, [fascism,] and Marxism are ideologies."³⁶ Thus a speaker using rhetoric would, intentionally or not, be grounding the ideas in his or her speech in a particular ideology. Critics looking at ideology generally do so from two broad perspectives. One involves looking at how ideology exists in society as systems of belief. Critics here simply want to know how ideology works in our society. In our speaker case above, how did ideology manifest itself in the speech? Most critics who study ideology go beyond this, however, and ground their understanding of ideology in the works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. According to Jim A. Kuypers,

One views ideology in this tradition as a false consciousness; it is a negative influence that distorts one's ability to think and perceive the world. In this perspective, ideologies contribute to the domination of the masses because they present a distorted picture of the world, thus debilitating one's ability to reason (think of an infection of the mind). For instance, consider religious and nationalist components to American ideology (America: land of the free, home of the brave; the American

dream). Following the ideology as distortion metaphor, these components act to dominate members of the working class because the ideology has these workers believing that they actually are working for God and country, when in reality, according to Marxists, they are working for the dominant power elite (and the Capitalist system that steals their labor from them).³⁷

In this case, then, a critic looking at our same speech mentioned above would be looking for how that speaker possessed a false consciousness imposed by a particular ideology, many times looking in particular at how it impacts race, gender, or class, and then make suggestions about how to break free from the constraints imposed by that ideology. James Jasinski offers insight into these two broad ideological trends of criticism, stating that "the difference between the traditions is primarily one of emphasis; the Marxist tradition considers ideology as an object of critique or something that needs to be overcome, whereas the belief system tradition views ideology as an object of disinterested analysis or something that needs to be studied."³⁸

WHAT FUTURE FOR RHETORIC?

But despite our friend's success in the matter of the postboxes, is there still an important future for rhetoric? Some persons worry that the places for public deliberation are becoming smaller and fewer. They remind us that beyond the scope of the town meeting and neighborhood conclave, significant issues are selected and framed by the mass media, not local citizens. These issues are debated by so-called experts while the citizenry watches, sometimes enjoying the "illusion" of participation, but often feeling like powerless spectators, even in this internet age of social media feedback. Scholars such as Jürgen Habermas argue that such civic voyeurism could undermine the legitimacy of our institutions. After all, most Americans have never discussed beyond the comfort of their own homes public education, free enterprise, the income tax, gun control, or our immigration laws, yet they are imposed upon us by the dead hand of the past. These systems were largely developed before we were born and are imposed upon us without our consent. Their direction is mostly in the hands of unaccountable public officials who enjoy lifetime tenure as unelected public servants. Policy details are complex, often known only to special-interest groups.

Since many of our problems of race, ethnicity, poverty, health, and aging have been placed in the hands of government and state bureaucracy, they are in many ways removed from the arena of public discussion. Further, the sheer number of issues and the volume of information concerning them are mind numbing and intimidating. Matters that were once seen to be the province of ordinary citizens are now the property of specialized technical elites. We may fear that although these "intellectuals" can organize data and design complex "solutions," they may understand very little about the fears, prejudices, and aspirations of ordinary people. Denied participation in civic debate, we become less skilled in managing discourse. Increasingly, we may view ourselves as mere masses manipulated by experts, not active citizens who are in charge of their own fate.

Finally, it can be argued that the ever-increasing elite focus on diversity and multiculturalism has destroyed the basic consensus that the practice of rhetoric requires. Rhetoric was born in the Greek polis, a small face-to-face homogenous community in which civic identity was girded by the premise that everyone shared a common destiny. Our society is becoming vast congeries of warring interest groups characterized by unbridgeable controversies and sedimented suspicion. Thus some critics argue that rhetoric is a method that only worked in the past and that it no longer has a place in twenty-first-century life.

We argue that these criticisms are nothing new and actually predate the rise of a multicultural, technologically advanced mega-state. In one form or another they have been made for the past century. Despite numerous pronouncements about the death of rhetoric and civil culture, persuasive discourse persists. The practice of rhetoric is alive and well. Audiences and speakers are still engaged in building practical wisdom. Common dilemmas are still being attacked and resolved. Can rhetoric still be powerful, useful, and moral? Roderick P. Hart and Courtney Dillard think so, writing in 2001:

Is deliberation still possible? Some say no, others find the question fatuous. In defense of deliberation they point to democracies in which women were given the vote by men and in which blacks were enfranchised by whites. They find wars being stopped by college students, environmental laws being passed by the children of corporation executives, and Nelson Mandela's cause assisted by a distant band of college professors. They point to an American president being driven out of office by free press, a Russian president honored for dismantling a mighty Communist machine, and an Iraqi dictator stopped in his tracks.³⁹

But what of today, approximately twenty years later? Is public deliberation still possible? One need only look at the rapid rise of the Second Amendment sanctuary movement across the nation or at public (and Congressional) discussions about social media giants such as Facebook and Twitter acting as a new, technological public sphere.

Circumstances may change, but as long as we live in a republic operating with democratic ideals, we simply cannot do without rhetoric. In fact, knowledge about the wise use of discourse has never been more necessary than it is today. Just as we begin to think that people are not communicating in the public sphere as much as they did in the past, we discover that social media such as Twitter, Pinterest, Tumblr, Instagram, VK, Vine, and Meetup are bringing them together in new and creative ways.⁴⁰ We also discover that blockbuster console video games such as *Grand Theft Auto*, *Call of Duty*, and *Halo* are dynamic productions using rhetoric to enhance game play, while others use rhetoric to make moral assertions.⁴¹ Little wonder the study of rhetoric is enjoying a vast revival throughout our system of higher education. And after a one-hundred-year hiatus, the study of rhetoric is also seeing a resurgence in Europe.⁴² The chapters that follow will give you a sense of the variety and artistry of rhetorical discourse and of the cultural and historical faces that have shaped it. As you move through each chapter, you will find that the conception of rhetoric it advances modifies or moves beyond the working definition we provided above. This is as it should be. Take note of *how* the conception changes. Rhetoric is nuanced and may be understood on many different levels. Each chapter that follows underscores this idea and will present a point of view that will add rich variety to the definition given above.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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- Hauser, Gerard A. *Introduction to Rhetorical Theory*. 2nd ed. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2002.
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. With which definition of rhetoric do you feel most comfortable? Why?
2. How is rhetorical reasoning different than scientific reasoning?
3. What is the moral dimension of rhetoric?
4. As rhetoric's definition is enlarged, does it become of more or less practical use to us?

ACTIVITIES

1. Share an example of when you used rhetoric to obtain a specific goal. Explain.
2. Either singly or in small groups, choose an opinion piece from a news source. Argue why or why not it is a successful use of rhetoric.
3. In a small group, envision what America would look like if rhetoric was not practiced? How would government, schools, and other institutions operate?

NOTES

1. Michael Gryboski, "Obama Should 'Reconcile the Rhetoric with Action' to End Religious Intolerance, Says Rev. Samuel Rodriguez," *Christian Post*, February 5, 2015, emphasis ours, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/obama-should-reconcile-the-rhetoric-with-action-to-end-religious-intolerance-says-rev-samuel-rodriguez-133642>.

2. Amy Harder, "On Energy and Climate, Obama Action Makes Up for Lack of Rhetoric," *Wall Street Journal: Washington Wire*, January 20, 2015, emphasis ours, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/01/20/on-energy-and-climate-obama-action-makes-up-for-lack-of-rhetoric>.

3. Caitlin Oprysko, "Trump Rhetoric Freshly Condemned After Mass Shootings," *Politico*, August 4, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/08/04/beto-orourke-trump-el-paso-white-nationalist-1445700>.

4. Ben Gittleson and Justin Doom, "President Donald Trump's Rhetoric Not to Blame for Mass Shootings: Mick Mulvaney," ABC News, August 5, 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/crazy-people-carry-shootings-guns-mulvaney/story?id=64744298>.

5. Speech contained in Ronald F. Reid, *American Rhetorical Discourse*, 2nd ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1995), 657.

6. James L. Golden, Goodwin F. Berquist, and William E. Coleman, *The Rhetoric of Western Thought*, 4th ed. (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1989), 128–129.

7. Jean Dietz Moss, "Renaissance Rhetoric: An Overview," in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 681.

8. Giambattista Vico, *De Italorum Sapientia*, 1710.

9. For a more detailed explanation of this growing scientism, see Craig R. Smith, *Rhetoric and Human Consciousness: A History*, 5th ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2017), 235–264.

10. Andrew King and Jim A. Kuypers, "Our Roots Are Strong and Deep," in *Twentieth-Century Roots of Rhetorical Studies*, ed. Jim A. Kuypers and Andrew King (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001).
11. For examples of such growth, see Theodore Otto Windt Jr., "Hoyt H. Hudson: Spokesman for the Cornell School of Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68, no. 2 (1982): 186–200; and Edward P. J. Corbett, "The Cornell School of Rhetoric," *Rhetoric Review* 4, no. 1 (September 1985): 4–14.
12. For overviews of the development of rhetorical theory, see the following: Hoyt Hopewell Hudson, "The Tradition of Our Subject," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 17, no. 3 (1931): 320–329; Smith, *Rhetoric and Human Consciousness*.
13. Sonja K. Foss, "The Nature of Rhetorical Criticism," in *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1989), 4.
14. Sonja K. Foss, "The Nature of Rhetorical Criticism," in *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, 5th ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2017), 3.
15. This and the immediately preceding quote, Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 4th ed., 5.
16. Marie Hochmuth Nichols, "Rhetoric and the Humane Tradition," in *Rhetoric: A Tradition in Transition*, ed. Walter R. Fisher (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1974), 180.
17. As will be seen in chapter 3, "What Is Rhetorical Criticism?," one "receiver" of the rhetoric is the critic who examines the instance of rhetorical discourse. The further removed from agreed-upon meaning the symbols under consideration are, the more power the critic has over deciding what they mean (over and above what the author of the rhetorical discourse intended them to mean). This can, and sometimes does, lead to abuses by the critic. For more on this see Jim A. Kuypers, "Doxa and a Critical Rhetoric: Accounting for the Rhetorical Agent through Prudence," *Communication Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1996): 452–462.
18. For the contributions of Hoyt Hopewell Hudson, see Jim A. Kuypers, "Hoyt Hopewell Hudson's Nuclear Rhetoric," in *Twentieth-Century Roots of Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Jim A. Kuypers and Andrew King (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001); Windt, "Hoyt H. Hudson."
19. Hoyt Hopewell Hudson, "Rhetoric and Poetry," *Quarterly Journal of Speech Education* 10, no. 2 (1924): 145.
20. *Ibid.*, 146.
21. *Ibid.*, 148.
22. *Ibid.*, 153.
23. Barack H. Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Immigration" (White House, Office of the Press Secretary, November 20, 2014), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/20/remarks-president-address-nation-immigration>.
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25. Gerard A. Hauser, *Introduction to Rhetorical Theory*, 2nd ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2002), 2–3.
26. Donald C. Bryant, "Rhetoric: Its Function and Its Scope," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 39 (1953): 401–424. In honor of the fiftieth anniversary of this landmark essay, *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* published a special collection of essays from noted rhetorical critics (see vol. 7, no. 1, 2004). See, too, Bryant's "Rhetoric: Its Function and Its Scope: *Rediviva*," in *Rhetorical Dimensions in Criticism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 3–23.
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29. Charles Bazerman, *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 6.
30. Kenneth Burke, "Rhetoric—Old and New," *Journal of General Education* 5 (1951): 203.
31. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 20, 55.
32. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*.
33. Brooke L. Quigley, "'Identification' as a Key Term in Kenneth Burke's Rhetorical Theory," *American Communication Journal* 1, no. 3 (1998), <http://ac-journal.org/journal/vol1/iss3/burke/quigley.html>.
34. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 21.
35. Quigley, "'Identification' as a Key Term."
36. Vocabulary.com, s.v. "Ideology," <http://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/ideology>. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ideology as "A systematic scheme of ideas, usually relating to politics, economics, or society and forming the basis of action or policy; a set of beliefs governing conduct," <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/view/Entry/91016?redirectedFrom=ideology&>.
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