

Rhetoric Is Not Bullshit

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I begin my discussion of the role of rhetoric in modern society with an aphorism: Rhetoric isn't devious and untrustworthy; those are features reserved for language itself. This is a distinction, however, that is lost on the public at large, whose perception of the word 'rhetoric' renders it synonymous with 'bullshit'.

Several years ago, I conducted an admittedly unscientific, journalistic experiment for a course in rhetorical theory I was teaching at the time. Over the course of three-and-one-half months (the length of a typical university semester), I encountered some 156 occasions via print, radio, and television where the term 'rhetoric' occurred. Of these, only once did the user of the word seem to understand what rhetoric really was. In all other instances, the person employing the word used it only in the most unfavorable sense, for example, "John Kerry is attempting to use rhetoric to disguise his true agenda," or "The rhetoric in the Senate was thick regarding the proposal of the new bill."

The one case in which the user understood the meaning of 'rhetoric' was an interview of the comedian, George Carlin, conducted by Jon Stewart. Stewart had asked Carlin why his comedy routines so often centered on language (a very good interview question, in my opinion), to which Carlin responded that he was, in essence, a rhetorician; it was his job to unpack the meaning behind words, and this process often had comic results. He said he was a performer, and as such, a focus on language was imperative to his success or failure. By reflecting on this practice, he had also demonstrated that he was equally cognizant of the theoretical process that drove his craft.

[230] The decline of rhetoric as a central humanist discipline in both public and academic circles has been one of the great intellectual tragedies of the last couple of centuries. The common perception of rhetoric as a mode of discourse lacking substance, of being the epitome of empty embellishment, is prevalent in popular and political representations of it, as evidenced in its frequent appearance in phrases like "once one gets past the rhetoric" or "all rhetoric aside."¹ In the twentieth century, the privileged status of rhetoric in the Trivium of the Seven Liberal Arts came to be regarded as ancient history, to be supplanted by "purer," more material intellectual pursuits in the sciences. Rhetoric, like its close disciplinary cousin, philosophy, has been relegated in the public mind to the ever-growing realm of "bullshit," reflecting an error in understanding of what scholars do when they practice rhetoric, and even more profoundly, what they do when they use rhetoric as a tool for critically decoding discourse. At the same time, members within academe regularly challenge modern rhetorical studies as too broad and interdisciplinary—lacking the prestige of specialization. Academicians outside of rhetoric usually see rhetoric only as an archaic study of how to persuade through the instructional lenses of Aristotle or Cicero. Taken together, it is surprising that the popular and the academic perceptions of rhetoric have not managed to bury it altogether.

¹ A salient example of this attitude is a review of Frankfurt's *On Bullshit* on Amazon.com that complains it "is filled with obvious rhetoric that makes the book sound scientific, when it is actually drivel."

In fact, the opposite seems to be the case. Rather than fading quietly into the past as some academic anachronism like philology, rhetoric is fast becoming one of the more popular humanistic studies in many major American universities today. How can it be that, while the public at large claims to distrust rhetoric and academics outside of fields like English or Communication see it only in reductionistic or archaic terms, rhetoric is thriving as a field of study, especially at the graduate level?² One answer may be that initiating students into the scholarly and professional activities that rhetoric enhances—just as they are exposed to its breadth of scope—reveals to them how unfair and inaccurate these popular impressions are. Many come to realize that rhetoric enables a command of language, and that if one controls language, one has power—that is, they come to realize that “bullshit” is a marketable talent, and an understanding of rhetoric allows one to more carefully cultivate one’s skills in this timeless human ability.

We live, it would appear, in something like a societal paradox. Rhetoric—taken to be expertise in “bullshit”—is ethically suspect, yet we value it in practice. Judging from the salaries and prestige of lawyers, politicians, university presidents, and advertising executives, we value it quite highly. One must wonder, then, why rhetoric has inherited such a poor reputation. I will attempt to sort this out by explaining the value of and use of rhetoric in popular culture and society; and show that our own intellectual history and rhetorical activity supports a place for rhetoric in education, the professional world, and our daily lives. This two-pronged approach will help dispel a popular “truth-falsity” dichotomy, according to which we think of statements or beliefs as either true or false, regardless of the complexity and gray areas that rhetoric shows us are always involved.

The Problem (and Politics) of Rhetoric

This may seem to fall outside the purview of rhetoric as it is traditionally understood by most academics, what is known as *rhetorica utens*. But the contemporary study of rhetoric is more than what most academics understand as the Aristotelian “art of persuasion”; it is *rhetorica docens*, the theoretical treatment of words used to discover how language means among different agents’ motives, cultural and social idiosyncrasies, and external events. While some might argue that Aristotle was as philosophically interested in the nature of language as he was in instructing how it could best be used, his most influential work on the subject, *On Rhetoric*, is ultimately a “how-to” primer on the use of rhetoric as a civic tool. He identifies many principles and constructs many definitions, but there is no real effort to view rhetoric as anything but a practical mechanism for effective speaking. Aristotle himself coined the distinction [232] between *utens* and *docens*, but he was far more concerned with the former. Aristotle’s prejudice has survived him. We are mostly ignorant of rhetoric as a tool for communication and entirely ignorant of it as a set of methods for textual analysis. The most

² Rhetoric and writing topped the list of programs experiencing growth during the late 1980s, besting programs in creative writing, technical writing, and literature and interdisciplinary studies. See Bettina J. Huber, “Recent and Anticipated Growth in English Doctoral Programs: Findings from the MLA’s 1990 Survey,” *ADE Bulletin* 106 (Winter 1993), pp. 45-60.

likely explanation for this cites the mass media and the political pundits who carelessly toss around the word in only its most uncomplimentary form. The pundits who display their contempt for rhetoric may in fact be using the word ‘rhetoric’ in a rhetorical way. That is, they may well understand that the public’s erroneous understanding of the word is occasion to use it to reinforce the associations the public already has for it. Rather than correct this error, it is easier to perpetuate it, taking advantage of the fashionable preference for “plain” language. In this regard politicians are among the most adroit insofar as they criticize rhetoric while relying upon it heavily for their own advancement. Everyone else uses “mere rhetoric,” the pundit of the moment tells us, as if effective use and understanding of language were something to “get beyond” or “overcome.”

For a good example of how one can both disdain rhetoric and utilize it for political gain, consider a statement by George W. Bush regarding Supreme Court nominee Samuel Alito: “My hope of course is that the Senate bring dignity to the process and give this man a fair hearing and an up-or-down vote on the Senate floor.”³ Bush, long a proponent of what he considers “plain speech,” would perhaps not recognize the rhetorical layers of this statement, but they exist. The first is his “hope” that the Senate will “bring dignity to the process,” the suggestion being that any attempt to extend debate (by filibuster, for instance) would be *undignified*. The statement is odd for it implies that democracy itself, which relies on open discussion of important decisions, is undignified. Such an unpatriotic sentiment cannot be what Bush intended his listeners to hear, so we have to consider more layers to figure out what’s going on.

Bush also appeals to the notion of a “fair hearing.” But this is a subjective term, depending upon individual beliefs and tolerances. Edward Kennedy’s and Samuel Alito’s definitions of [233] fair, for instance, surely differ considerably depending on who may be getting the criticism at the moment. What about this “up-or-down vote”? It’s an interesting requirement and is no doubt related to the issue of “fairness” as well as to the public image that helped bring Bush two presidential elections. Bush is widely seen, that is, as a man of few words—a man of action who does not wish to waste time sallying the pros and cons back and forth all day. Either vote with the confirmation or against it, the statement suggests, but do not, above all, be indecisive or contemplative about it. For careful, thorough debate, after all, would effectively delay and possibly derail his nomination. The real thrust of Bush’s statement, then, is something more like the reading of it suggested by the *faux* newspaper, *The Onion*, which headlined “Bush Urges Senate to Give Alito Fair, Quick, Unanimous Confirmation,” as if any outcome besides the one Bush hoped for would be unfortunate and undignified.⁴

In this way, rhetorical scrutiny of language allows us to see past the glittering generalities in language and get to an authentic meaning, both in regard to what is being analyzed and to the analyst in question. It should be clear, for example, that I do not like Bush and do not agree with his politics. I assure you that I deliberately made no attempt to obscure this (much less with “mere rhetoric”), because I want to emphasize that subjectivity need not compromise the integrity of the reading. Subjectivity is part of language, especially language that reflects beliefs and strongly guarded convictions. All language reflects both personal and collective

³ Jesse Holland, “Senate to Open Alito Nomination Hearings.” Associated Press. Online. 9th January, 2006.

⁴ “Bush Urges Senate to Give Alito Fair, Quick, Unanimous Confirmation.” *The Onion* (17th January 2006). [http://www.theonion.com/content/node/44467]

orientations—some are just more obvious than others. In the case of science, the ethos of scientific objectivity can, in fact, aid the rhetor in achieving the necessary persuasion or identification, since people are less likely to question the integrity of a system of knowledge with a reputation for objectivity. Yet even science, like every discursive instrument, relies on words that are imprecise and ambiguous.

The Truth about Postmodernism

One issue that helps obscure the universality of rhetoric, and thus promotes the pejorative use of “rhetoric,” is the popular [234] tendency to oversimplify the “truth-lie” dichotomy. In *The Liar's Tale: A History of Falsehood*, Jeremy Campbell reminds us that the reductionistic binary that separates truth from falsity is not only in error, but also that the thoroughly unclear and inconsistent distinction between the true and the false has a long, rich cultural history.⁵ Those doing much of the speaking in our own era, however, assume that the dividing line between truth and untruth is clear and, more significantly, internalized by the average human. Truth, however, is an elusive concept. While we can cite many examples of truths (that the sky is blue today, that the spoon will fall if dropped, and so forth), these depend on definitions of the words used. The sky is blue because “blue” is the word we use to describe the hue that we have collectively agreed is bluish. We may, however, disagree about what shade of blue the sky is. Is it powder blue? Blue-green? Royal Blue? Interpretive responses to external realities that rely on definition (and language generally) always complicate the true-false binary, especially when we begin to discuss the nature of abstractions involved in, say, religion or metaphysics. The truth of “God is good” depends very heavily upon the speaker’s understanding of God and the nature of goodness, both of which depend upon the speaker’s conceptualization, which may be unique to him, his group, or his cultural environment, and thus neither clear nor truthful to other parties.

Is this rampant relativism? Some might think so, but it is perhaps more useful to suggest that the Absolute Truths that we usually embrace are unattainable because of these complexities of language. Some cultures have seen the linguistic limitations of specifying the Truth. Hinduism has long recognized that language is incapable of revealing Truth; to utter the Truth, it holds, is simultaneously to make it no longer the Truth. Note here the distinction between capital “T” truth and lower-case

“t” truth. Lower-case truths are situational, even personal. They often reflect more the state of mind of the agent making the utterance than the immutable nature of the truth. They are also temporally situated; what may be true now may not be in the future. Truth in this sense is predicated on both perception and stability, and, pragmatically speaking, such truths are tran- [235] sitional and, often, relative. Capital “T” Truths can be traced back at least as far as Plato, and are immutable, pure, and incorruptible. They do not exist in our worldly realm, at least so far as Plato was concerned. This is why Plato was so scornful of rhetoric: he felt that rhetoricians (in particular, the Sophists) were opportunists who taught people how to disguise the Truth with language and persuasion. Whereas Plato imagined a realm in which the worldly flaws and corruption of a physical existence were supplanted by perfect forms, the corporeal domain of human activity was saturated with language, and therefore, could not be trusted to reveal Truth with any certainty.

⁵ Jeremy Campbell, *The Liar's Tale: A History of Falsehood* (New York: Norton, 2001).

Contemporary, postmodern interest in truth and meaning turns the tables on Plato and studies meaning and truth in this shifting, less certain domain of human activity. Campbell cites many thinkers from our philosophical past who helped inaugurate this development, but none is more important than Friedrich Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, humans have no “organ” for discerning Truth, but we do have a natural instinct for falsehood. “Truth,” as an abstraction taken from the subjectivity of normal human activities, was a manufactured fiction that we are not equipped to actually find. On the other hand, a natural aptitude for falsehood is an important survival mechanism for many species. Human beings have simply cultivated it in innovative, sophisticated, ways. As the rhetorician George A. Kennedy has noted, “in daily life, many human speech acts are not consciously intentional; they are automatic reactions to situations, culturally (rather than genetically) imprinted in the brain or rising from the subconscious.”⁶ Our propensity for appropriate (if not truthful) responses to situations is something nourished by an instinct to survive, interact, protect, and socialize. Civilization gives us as many new ways to do this as there are situations that require response.

This is why Nietzsche carefully distinguished Truth from a belief system that only professed to contain the Truth. Ken Gemes notes that Nietzsche co-ordinated the question of Truth around the pragmatics of survival,⁷ an observation echoed by [236] Kennedy, who provides examples of animals that deceive for self-preservation. Camouflage, for example, can be seen in plants and animals. Many birds imitate the calls of rival species to fool them to distraction and away from their nests or food sources. Deception, it seems, is common in nature. But Nietzsche took doctrinal Truth (note the “T”) to be one of the most insidious deceptions to occur in human culture, especially as it is articulated in religions. It is not a basic lie that is being promulgated, but rather a lie masquerading as the Truth and, according to Nietzsche, performing certain functions. Truth, that is, is a ritualized fiction, a condition manufactured for institutions and the individuals who control them to maintain their power.

Rhetoric and Bullshit

Truth, deception, control over others. This survey of rhetoric thus brings us close to the territory that Harry Frankfurt explores in *On Bullshit*. For Frankfurt, however, bullshit has little to do with these complexities about truth and Truth that rhetoric helps us identify. Indeed bullshit, for Frankfurt, has little to do with truth at all, insofar as it requires an indifference to truth. Does this mean, then, that language that is *not* bullshit has settled the matter of truth and has access to truth (or Truth)? Does this lead us to a dichotomy between truth and bullshit that is similar to the dichotomy between truth and falsity that postmodernism criticizes? It may seem that postmodernism has little place in Frankfurt’s view, insofar as he rejects “various forms of skepticism which deny that we have any reliable access to objective reality, and which therefore reject the possibility of knowing how things truly are” (p. 64). Indeed, postmodernism is often vilified as the poster child of relativism and skepticism.

Yet postmodernism is far subtler than a mere denial of “objective reality.” Postmodernism claims, rather, that reality is as much a construct of language as it is objective and unchanging.

⁶ George A. Kennedy. *Comparative Rhetoric: An Historical and Cross-cultural Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 25.

⁷ Ken Gemes. “Nietzsche’s Critique of Truth.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52, pp. 47-65.

Postmodernism is less about rejecting beliefs about objective reality than about the *intersection* between material reality and the human interpretations of it that change, mutate, and shift that reality to our own purposes—the kind of small-t truths that Nietzsche addressed. The common complaint about postmodernism, for example, that it denies “natural laws,” forgets [237] that humans noticed and formulated those laws. Postmodernism attempts to supply a vocabulary to describe this kind of process. It is not just “jargon,” as is so often charged; it is an effort to construct a metalinguistic lexicon for dealing with some very difficult and important epistemological questions.

And, not surprisingly, so is rhetoric. Constructing language that deals with the nature of language is a unique human problem. It is meta-cognition at its most complicated because it requires us to use the same apparatus to decode human texts that is contained in the texts themselves—that is, using words to talk about words, what Kenneth Burke referred to in *The Rhetoric of Religion* as “logology.”⁸ In no other area of human thinking is this really the case. Most forms of intellectual exploration involve an extraneous phenomenon, event, agent, or object that requires us to bring language to bear upon it in order to observe, describe, classify, and draw conclusions about its nature, its behavior, or its effect. For example, scientific inquiry usually involves an event or a process in the material world that is separate from the instruments we use to describe it. Historical analysis deals with texts as a matter of disciplinary course, yet most historians rarely question the efficacy or the reliability of the language used to convey an event of the remote (or, for that matter, recent) past. Even linguistics, which uses a scientific model to describe language structure, deals little with meaning or textual analysis.

Law is one of the closest cousins of rhetoric. Words are very much a part of the ebb and flow of legal wrangling, and the attention given to meaning and interpretation is central. Yet, even here, there is little *theoretical* discussion about *how* words have meaning or how, based on such theory, that meaning can be variously interpreted. Law is more concerned with the fact that words can be interpreted differently and how different agents might interpret language in different ways. This is why legal documents are often so unreadable; in an attempt to control ambiguity, more words (and more words with specific, technical meanings) must be used so that multiple interpretations can be avoided. If theoretical discussions about how language [238] generates meaning were entered into the equation, the law would be impossible to apply in any practical way. Yet, to understand legal intricacies, every law student should be exposed to rhetoric—not so they can better learn how to manipulate a jury or falsify an important document, but so they understand how tenuous and limited language actually is for dealing with ordinary situations. Moreover, nearly every disciplinary area of inquiry uses language, but only rhetoric (and its associated disciplines, especially philosophy of language and literary/cultural criticism, which have influenced the development of modern rhetoric considerably) analyzes language using a hermeneutical instrument designed to penetrate the words to examine their effects—desired or not—on the people who use them.

What, then, qualifies as “bullshit”? Certainly, as I hope I have shown, rhetoric and bullshit are hardly the same thing. They are not even distant cousins. When a student begins a paper with the sentence, “In today's society, there are many things that people have different and similar

⁸ Kenneth Burke. *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961.)

opinions about,” it’s a pretty good guess that there is little of rhetorical value there. About the only conclusion a reader can draw is that the student is neither inspired nor able to hide this fact. This is the extent of the subtext, and it could conceivably qualify as bullshit. In this sense, Frankfurt’s characterization of bullshit as “unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about” (p. 63) is a useful differentiation.

But aside from these rather artificial instances, if bullshit does occur at the rate Frankfurt suggests, we have an arduous task in separating the bullshit from more interesting and worthy rhetorical situations. We have all met people whom we know, almost from the moment of acquaintance, are full of bullshit. It is the salesman syndrome that some people just (naturally, it seems) possess. In one sense, then, poor rhetoric—a rhetoric of transparency or obviousness—can be construed as bullshit. For the person with salesman syndrome is certainly attempting to achieve identification with his audience; he may even be attempting to persuade others that he is upright or trustworthy. But he fails because his bullshit is apparent. He is a bad rhetorician in the sense that he fails to convince others that he should be taken seriously, that his words are worthy of attention and, possibly, action.

[239] Bullshit is something we can all recognize. Rhetoric is not. My remedy for this situation is simple: learn rhetoric. While students are required to take first-year composition at most colleges and universities, the extent of their training in rhetoric is usually limited to the rhetorical “modes”—yet another curricular misnomer which forces students to write preordained themes that reflect “skills” like definition, comparison and contrast, process, analysis, and narrative.⁹ This is a far cry from teaching the extent of rhetorical analysis. At best, this method creates an artificial environment in which to generate predetermined papers and ideas. At worst, it perpetuates the illusion that this is how real writers really write. A better approach is to offer hypothetical situations that require a rhetorical response (for example, ask students to imagine that they are the principal of a high school with low test scores and are required to explain the problem to the parents). Having students read models and deconstruct, edit, critique, or imitate these essays is also good. Yet another approach is to have students watch for occurrences of interesting rhetorical situations—to produce a “commonplace hook” of rhetoric. No matter how students learn to think about the language they use and the language that dominates their lives, as long as they are thinking about language, they have a better chance of not falling victim to bullshit. In this age of the Internet, this is an important skill. However, since not everyone is a teacher or a student, the common citizen must be diligent on her own.

If the trend in graduate humanities programs favoring rhetoric is an indication, interest in a theoretical knowledge of language is on the rise. Likewise, since Frankfurt has opened the door for considering an issue that we can only conclude by its sheer popularity has some cultural currency in American society, we can also conclude that people have some genuine interest in the topic of language. His is not the last word on the subject, however. Nor is it the first. Thinkers have been discussing and writing about bullshit for millennia, and the service [240] that Frankfurt has supplied is an opportunity for the general public to think about bullshit on more

⁹ There are some important exceptions. At both the University of Iowa and the University of Minnesota, for example, students are required to take Rhetoric (offered by a Rhetoric, not English, department) in *lieu* of the usual required Composition courses. It would be interesting to document the contribution to an education through a comparison of these different models.

than just a casual, colloquial level. However, it is equally important to bring rhetoric to the table, if only because there is a remarkably vast gray area between what passes for Truth, truth, and what can be dismissed as bullshit, and this is the domain in which rhetoric thrives. Without some ability to navigate this area, without some understanding of how language works, we can only hope to avoid the pitfalls of bullshit by sheer chance.