
58 Rhetoric

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Rhetoric is an ancient discipline. It lost interest over the past century but has more recently made a comeback. This chapter explores the discipline of rhetoric as it is currently understood, in connection with the ethical life. The objective is to show how conventional wisdom on both rhetorical and ethical practices can be turned on its head by connecting rhetoric and ethics. The conclusions are twofold. First, if rhetoric is understood as sophistry, as the art of finding the right words to convince people of anything, rhetoric would lend itself to any purpose, ethical and unethical. If rhetoric is defined as the art of persuading others of the right thing or the right idea, rhetoric could be understood as the midwife of ethical ideas and practice. Second, if ethics is believed to be a subject of rational thought leading to principles to which any reasonable person would adhere, ethical reasoning would be non-rhetorical. If we follow Alasdair MacIntyre, Stuart Hampshire and, for that matter, Aristotle and Adam Smith, we would quickly acknowledge the rhetorical characteristics of ethical reasoning and practice.

On rhetoric

In order to connect rhetoric with ethics in an economic context we do well to first address the implications of perceiving rhetorical practices in all communication, including the communication of ethical ideas and values.

Aristotle wrote *On Rhetoric* with a sharp rejection of rhetoric by his teacher Plato in mind. He had to carve out a role for rhetoric avoiding the reasons for which Socrates and Plato dismissed rhetoric as unethical. In his dialogue *Gorgias*, Plato has the main protagonist Gorgias, a rhetorician himself, define the rhetorician as follows:

The rhetorician is competent to speak against anybody on any subject, and to prove himself more convincing before a crowd on practically every topic he wishes, but he should not any the more rob the doctors – or any craftsmen either – of their reputation, merely because he has his power. (1991, section 457)

Gorgias portrays the rhetorician as we would now the contemporary public relations person, communication specialist and arguably lawyer, all of whom would make a convincing case for any claim or position, for or against the death penalty, for or against smoking, for or against any. Socrates argues that people should strive to speak the truth and only those who know the truth can do so honestly. Rhetoricians like Gorgias may have no inkling of the truth but just connect the proper words to any position. That makes them unethical by the logic of Plato and Socrates.

Aristotle, therefore, limits rhetoric as pertinent to just three types of speech: that in the political arena (deliberative), that in the court of law (forensic) and that at special occasions like weddings and funerals (epideictic). In all of these cases, so he argues, the speaker must convey a message that is only probable, and therefore has to rely on an

arsenal of rhetorical figures, like enthymemes (incomplete syllogisms), metaphors and all kinds of *topoi* (commonplaces).

Interest in rhetoric subsided and all but disappeared in the middle of the nineteenth century, when science took over and the endless possibilities of scientific reasoning captured the collective imagination. The subject was revived by the failure of logic and science to live up to the high expectations, as awareness grew that science has serious shortcomings and that uncertainty remains a fact of life. Philosophers achieved the insight that we humans not only have to deal with the divide between our mind and the world out there, but also with the divide that separates us from others (see Klamer 2007, Ch. 5). Even when I think I know something, I still face the challenge of persuading others that I do. How do I get you, the reader, to understand of this topic what I understand of it? This is the question all of us face all of the time, in some form or another, as teachers, as colleagues, as employees, as customers, as traders, as friends, as spouses and as parents. Accordingly, contemporary rhetoricians see cause to be attentive to rhetorical practices in all of human communication, including communication in scientific communities. This would mean science is rhetorical, as is economics (Nelson et al. 1986; McCloskey [1984] 1998).

To argue that economics is rhetorical implies arguing that economists use various rhetorical strategies and rhetorical figures to make their case. It also implies an awareness that the persuasiveness of an economic argument depends on the three major means of persuasion that Aristotle distinguished in his *Rhetorica*: (i) the *ethos* or reputation of the speaker or writer, (ii) the *pathos* or emotions of the audience and (iii) the *logos* or the arguments.

Ethos stands for the quality of the person making the case. It matters whether this person is a freshman at university or a full professor. The *ethos* of a Nobel prize winner is such that almost anything they say demands attention. *Ethos* is something people who want to persuade can work on. *Pathos* concerns the audience. The emotions of an academic audience are unlike those of the members of a family. When academic economists are not challenged by a paper or talk, they tend to get bored and sometimes even angry. When family members are challenged with the latest development in cooperative games, they may get bored and perhaps angry as well. The emotions of students are again of another order. *Logos* comprises the invention and composition of a range of arguments, and includes the choice of appropriate metaphors, *topoi* (commonplaces), anecdotes, narratives and arguments.

Arguments can be theoretical and empirical. In accordance with the terminology of Toulmin ([1958] 1994), they include claims (what the argument is about), grounds (first indications), warrants (theories), backings (empirical tests), modals (qualifications), rebuttals (refutation of possible criticisms) and conclusions (with the possible consequences of the argument). The warrants generally include the application of *metaphors*. Economists use metaphors whenever they draw elements from a domain that is more or less known and apply them to a phenomenon they want to account for. So when economists call education an 'investment' they draw from the domain of finance the concept investment and apply this to the domain of education. Such a metaphor has a heuristic purpose, as it gets listeners to think of education in terms of capital, and the returns it will yield. 'Education is a market' is another metaphor that gets economists thinking in terms of demand, supply, price and product (see also Klamer 2007, Ch. 6).

People who are skilled in the rhetoric of economics know the appropriate *topoi*, or commonplaces. That means in conversation or in writing they can draw on all kinds of topics. When a student complains that the rationality assumption is unrealistic, they may reach for the *topos* ‘the realism of assumptions does not matter’. When a student exclaims that trade is unfair for developing countries, they may appeal to the *topos* ‘positive statements versus normative statements’. They may not know the ins and outs of these *topoi*, but that is unnecessary; they are commonly understood and accepted (until someone is able to persuade economists to the contrary). The *narrative* in scientific arguments is usually somewhat hidden. Even so, in seminars the presenter of an essay will often begin by telling the basic story that drives the argument. In everyday discourse narratives tend to be dramatic; they have heroes and villains who win or lose. An academic paper usually narrates the experience of the researcher who faces a problem and in the quest for truth overcomes various obstacles in order to reach a surprising answer (result) with some ingenuity. Academic economics is about academic economists and is for that reason usually not all that persuasive for non-academic audiences: they do not share the academic pathos and do not identify with the narrative.

The conclusion is that a science like economics is rhetorical for the simple reason that arguments that rely on mere logic and facts do not suffice to bridge the divide between people. Science depends on the ability to communicate and communication relies on the use of rhetorical means. Ethical discourse is no different.

Ethics

If ethics is believed to be a subject of rational thought leading to principles that any reasonable person would adhere to, ethical reasoning would be non-rhetorical. At least, that is what one might believe. The reasoning that establishes an ethical principle, however, is inevitably rhetorical itself even where it denies or ignores the rhetorical aspects of ethical life. When economists take up the subject of ethics they usually do so in the terms of rational decision-making. In the light of the preceding we can say that the metaphor of choice is the heuristic. The metaphor borrows from the domain of physics and engineering (Mirowski 1989); it poses an objective function, one or more equations that express the constraints, and it calls for a maximization calculation.

This metaphor directs the exploration of ethics into two directions. Norms could be considered constraints that need to be taken into account in the maximization calculation; alternatively the theorists can postulate ethical preferences as elements of the objective function. Exemplary is the approach that economist Amartya Sen took in order to include ethics in economic reasoning (for example, Sen 1982). Sen argued that there are metapreferences that somehow limit or influence the preferences in the utility function of an individual. Another possibility he explores is that the utility function of an individual is partly dependent upon the welfare of others. There is an extensive literature that investigates all possible variations on this theme. (Later Sen would abandon this approach and proposed to focus on capabilities instead.)

All of this work is in no need of rhetoric in the sense that it does not address the communicative gap between the agent and others. (As we already established, the articulation of the argument is rhetorical, as each presentation of scientific ideas inevitably is.) Agents presumably make up their mind as they form their (meta)preferences, they make the appropriate calculations using the right algorithm, maybe do some risk analysis in

case of uncertainty, and there they are, ready to make a rational choice. If they adhere to norms and values then these are parameters in the decision process. In such an analysis the theorist abstracts, for example, from all the talk that decision taking involves. The rhetorical perspective calls attention to the deliberation that usually accompanies decision processes.

A reason to focus on the talking is the instability of the ethical categories. When agents value honesty, they find themselves deliberating on what honesty means, what they have to do in order to be honest, whether they can be too honest, and when they are being dishonest. Values are subject to interpretation, and their enactment usually depends on the circumstances. Would we even consider being honest to an intruder and revealing our daughter's hiding place? Are we to go around and tell everybody exactly what we think? If we do not reflect on all of these options, others may compel us to do so. They would bring in arguments, tell anecdotes, appeal to certain values and discuss the effects of our honesty. We would defend ourselves, trying to neutralize the arguments, appealing to some of our heroes, telling different anecdotes and calling upon other values. Such talk inevitably involves more than logic and facts; no one sorts out all of the variables, draws up a formula or two and does the calculation. Everyone makes assertions that are plausible at best and often merely suggestive ('Her honesty only got your mother in trouble'; 'Where did your mother's honesty take her? Eh?'). The deliberation is all about persuasion, saying the things that may change other people's minds. Since such a deliberation is rhetorical, we can say that ethics is rhetorical.

Such a rhetorical process also characterizes moral discussions in economic settings. When diamond traders identify honesty as an important value in their business, new participants in the trade have to find out what exactly that means. How much do you need to tell in order to qualify as honest? Do you have to go around telling who you like and don't like? That would be honest, but it is probably not what the other traders want to hear. Is it dishonest to forget to mention something? If you are expected to adhere to oral agreements, how far are you to go? What if the situation changes dramatically – war breaks out, whatever? Accordingly, knowing what is the right thing to do, requires what Clifford Geertz calls a thick description of particular situations in order to know the meaning of a value like honesty (Geertz 1973).

Virtue ethics is about deliberation

Contemporary moral philosophy pays plenty of attention to the contingent and deliberative character of moral reasoning. An important strand in this line of research is virtue ethics.

Virtue ethics harks back to an ancient tradition with sources such as the *Nicomachean Ethics* by Aristotle – yes, the same philosopher who defined the subject of rhetoric for us. According to this philosopher, moral behaviour is mainly a matter of attitude (*a habitus* Foucault would say). If I am a soldier, to use an often cited example, the attitude I should strive for is that of courage. Courage is the primary virtue that befits a soldier, and not, for example, a nun, who we expect to have 'piety' as her primary virtue. What courage means concretely, what I am supposed to do in battle, cannot be determined from the outside, and certainly not from an armchair. When I run alone towards the enemy I am probably being reckless, too courageous, in the assessment of other soldiers. I would have done better to seek cover. In another situation, seeking cover signals cowardice, a lack

of courage. A good soldier, according to Aristotle, knows how to negotiate the middle ground between cowardice and recklessness. That ability constitutes the excellence of the soldier. The emotion that comes with that he calls *eudaimonia*, which is often translated as happiness but is rather the emotion of someone who knows they are doing good, being courageous in the case of the soldier.

The example highlights three characteristics of virtue ethics. One is that virtue is a value that someone has internalized and enacts. The second is that virtuous action aims at the middle ground between two extremes, and the third is that judging virtuous behaviour requires situational knowledge.

Although Aristotle presumed that the good is somehow known to the agent, contemporary virtue ethicists stress the uncertainties involved. Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) emphasizes the practice of acting in accordance with virtues. We negotiate our way trying to act in accordance with the appropriate virtues, being often confused about what those virtues are or what they mean. The quest for the good life, which characterizes all human life, relates to the circumstances, to what others do and say.

An economic example is the discussion about remuneration. Although economists may evoke the forces of the market that determine remuneration and would like to settle the issue with a formal analysis, in daily practice people argue about what amount is deserved or not. What is an appropriate earning or compensation for services rendered? Note the moral language in which the discussion is couched: 'earnings', 'compensation', 'reward'. Is the pay I receive for a lecture deserved? A great variety of *topoi* is available such as the *topos* 'what others get paid', or the *topoi* 'hard work' and 'responsibility'. Discussants may evoke notions of greed or suggest that the money distracts me from the good towards which I should be striving. The example could be Socrates, who refused payment for his quest for the truth and who condemned the sophists for demanding pay for their services. I could reply by pointing out my needs. How am I to live if I do not ask any compensation? Or the changing times calling for different responses. What then makes remuneration just right? An executive may see a multimillion bonus as evidence of doing well. Others may perceive it as a manifestation of greed. The argument may include a family or tribal metaphor invoking the notion of solidarity and suggesting that such a payment is anti-social and hence immoral. The CEO's self-defence may bring in the *topos* of the market – this is apparently the going market price for the kind of services rendered. The argument would thicken with more detail and particulars. The discussion is a sign of the unsettledness of what is appropriate pay, of disagreements as to what constitutes the good. Nobody knows for sure. That is why people argue, deliberate, evoke values, give examples and anecdotes; in other words, they practice rhetoric.

This deliberative character of moral reasoning is also stressed by Stuart Hampshire (1983). 'Our everyday and raw experience', so he writes, 'is of a conflict between contrary requirements at every stage of almost anyone's life; why then should moral theorists – Kantians, utilitarians, deontologists, contractarians – look for an underlying harmony and unity behind the facts of moral experience?' (1983, p. 151). In daily life we have to negotiate between the various values to which we adhere, not all of them point in the same direction, as we are to find out; we must live with competing demands and conflicting interests. Take the case of my friend who faced a great offer for his firm. His wife was very much in favour of taking the offer, as she saw the advantage of the money and the free time; but he worried about his associate, who preferred remaining independent, and his

employees, who faced a less generous employer. I offered him a heuristic device of Stuart Hampshire and suggested he convene a council with all values and interests at the table. He would hear them all out, have a good night's sleep and see how he felt when he awoke. The moral quality of his decision was not so much determined by a reasoned justification (which would be nothing more than a rationalization anyway), but by the quality of the deliberative process that preceded it. Did he invite all important values, interests and needs to the table. Did he allow the devil's advocate to speak out? Had he heard out everyone at the table? Did he allow sufficient time to process everything he heard? (He decided to sell the company and retired a few years later; the employees and his associate did lose from the deal and his wife was pleased, as was he in the end.)

As the examples indicate, as soon as we acknowledge the rhetorical character of ethical life, our investigation has to turn to a study of discursive practices. Mere blackboard reasoning does not suffice if we want to understand and cope with conflicting values and interests. The first instances of such work by economists are Irene van Staveren (2001), Benjamin Friedman (2005) and Deirdre McCloskey (2006).

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See also the entries on: Aristotle; Code of ethics for economists; Teaching economics; Virtue ethics.