

Three Meanings of Epistemic Rhetoric

Barry Brummett

SCA Convention, November, 1979

The proposition that “rhetoric is epistemic” asserts a relationship between knowledge and discourse, between how people know and how they communicate. The proposition also asserts a relationship between reality, or what there is to know, and discourse. That statement implies what the world is like such that we can know it through communication. Therefore, “rhetoric is epistemic” has metaphysical implications it allows. This essay suggests three possible meanings of “rhetoric is epistemic,” meanings that entail different conceptions of reality, knowledge, discourse, and the relationships among them.¹ I shall show that each of the three meanings leads to different notions: (1) of what one means by ‘truth,’ 2) of the relationship between rhetoric and other human activity, and 3) of the status of rhetoric as a discipline.

My purpose is to show three possible meanings of “rhetoric is epistemic” and some implications for those meanings. To illustrate some uses of the three meanings, I will rely on published writings. In none of my examples can I know what the author(s) intended to mean; rather, I shall show what the arguments do seem to entail whether those implications are intended or not. I shall sometimes refer to authors (J. Bronowski, for instance) who would never explicitly place themselves in any “epistemic rhetoric” school; in these cases my argument is that their writings illustrate a meaning of “rhetoric is epistemic” as a discipline.

If “rhetoric is epistemic” entails three distinct sets of metaphysical implications, the interests of clarity alone demand that scholars understand which meaning their own work is based upon. Clear understanding of the difference in meanings is also needed for disputes among scholars. Scholars are mistaken if they assume that everyone who analyzes epistemic rhetoric is using the same meaning. I shall argue later that such a mistaken assumption leads proponents of one meaning to attach arguments generated by another meaning as inconsistent or contradictory. Using one’s own metaphysical underpinnings to attack the fine points of another philosophical system may not be as fruitful as comparing systems at the level of metaphysical assumptions alone. Therefore, I hope this paper will help to focus and clarify discussions of how rhetoric can be epistemic.

FIRST MEANING: METHODOLOGICAL

One way in which “rhetoric is epistemic” is in a methodological sense. Rhetoric is a means to the discovery of truth, a conduit to knowledge.² (2) Rhetoric leads people to knowledge in two ways: 1) Agonistically, rhetoric provides a contest between competing versions of truth. The clash of ideas is a crucible in which the truth is refined; people are better able to see reality and gain true knowledge by hearing what can be said on all sides of a question.

2) Pedagogically, rhetoric can be used to make truth effective by someone who already has knowledge. Because the defects of the hoi polloi prevent them from seeing truth presented unvarnished before them, rhetoric is used as a method of getting people to see truth. These two “methodological” senses are different sides of the same coin: sense #1 describes epistemic rhetoric from the audience’s viewpoint, and sense #2 is from the rhetor’s viewpoint.

Rhetoric, in this sense, leads people to realize the truth about an objective and unitary reality. The word discovery is key here; rhetoric discovers a world waiting to be found. The idea of reality as unitary bears examining; that notion means two things: 1) There is only one reality and only one truth can describe the way things are. It is possible for people who do not understand that reality to be absolutely mistaken. 2) There is no disjunction between “social” and “material” reality. Questions of ethics, politics, morals, have “one right answer” as surely as do questions of physics or arithmetic.³

Let us observe another distinction within the methodological view. In leading people to truth, rhetoric might be 1) involved always in the apprehension of reality. People being what they are, one might argue that competing views of truth or strategic ornamentations of truth are always needed to get people to see the truth. A more common, alternative view is that rhetoric is 2) one way of discovering truth. Instruction or more objective means of proof are other ways of discovering truth for more reasonable or unbiased observers.

The view that agonistic or pedagogical discourse can lead one to see objective reality also entails a view concerning the relationship between the practice of rhetoric and other kinds of human activity. Rhetoric is a distinctive type of activity that people engage in at some times but not at others. Its value is determined by the other activities whose goals it serves: law, politics, religion, etc.

The methodological meaning of epistemic rhetoric has two implications for rhetoric as a theoretical discipline: 1) Rhetoric as a discipline has no real subject matter of its own, it is only concerned with making clear the subject matter of other disciplines. Rhetorical theory, like rhetorical practice, is thus a handmaiden to other human activity. 2) Rhetoric as a discipline has not changed much since classical times, at least in a formal sense. Those who intend the methodological meaning of epistemic rhetoric are apt to call epistemic rhetoric “dialogical,” focusing on its agonistic or pedagogical form. That position leads one to a view of the discipline of rhetoric as largely continuous from classical times to the present because of the enduring agonistic form of rhetoric that serves as a means to the discovery of truth through competing voices.⁴

Assigning published works to one meaning or another is difficult. One problem in doing so is that assignments are made on the basis of metaphysical implications which are not always made clear in publications. For instance, J. Bronowski argues a view of science which seems to qualify it as rhetorically epistemic in a methodological sense.⁵ Bronowski argues for the value of conflict of competing voices, in the conduct of science. But he makes his metaphysics fairly clear. The scientist is bound by an objective reality, he/she

“must conform to the facts.”⁶ The “habit of truth” requires the “testing” of a concept, often in discourse, to discover objective truth.⁷ While Bronowski is clear about 1) the status of discourse in discovering reality, and 2) the status of reality as objective, other philosophers of science are not so lucid. Articles by Weimer, Overington, and Finocchiaro all refer to the role of rhetoric in science. But while they argue that science cannot proceed except by agonistically testing conclusions in discourse, these authors do not make clear whether the discourse of science discovers an objective reality or creates reality through the manipulation of meaning.⁸

Two other authors seem to imply the methodological sense of epistemic rhetoric from time to time, although the bulk of their argument implies the second sense, to be described later. McKeon speaks of the role of communication in discovering truth, which implies an absolute truth that awaits discovery.⁹ Cherwitz argues that “truth is that towards which man strives,”¹⁰ a methodological usage. Only a truth apart from humans, a truth that is “over there,” can be striven towards. Cherwitz also gives signs of methodological leanings in arguing that the give-and-take of rhetoric can lead to certainty in conclusions,¹¹ and that rhetoric is a way of eliminating differences of opinion even on contingent issues.¹² Such arguments imply a view of one objective reality about which there can be only one truth.

An essay that takes a more consistently methodological stand, oddly so in light of the first author’s other work, is Cherwitz and Hikins’ paper. Cherwitz and Hikins describe (and endorse) Mill’s view of communication as a search for truth,¹³ a term which implies that truth is not created by discourse but is discovered. Mill is referring to truth in contingent matters, so one might assume that this is the second view of epistemic rhetoric, which I shall explain shortly. But then we are told that one can never know the whole truth, even of contingent matters.¹⁴ The sociological or ontological views would hold that what a group knows about contingent matters is the truth for them. For a group to embrace some moral proposition and be absolutely wrong in doing so implies an absolute truth somewhere about even contingent matters; hence, the implication is methodological. Cherwitz and Hikins bolster their methodological stance in speaking of intersubjectivity as a search for perfection in knowledge,¹⁵ in arguing for rhetoric as “corrective” of beliefs¹⁶ and in urging that communication test positions which are “in fact” erroneous.¹⁷

One essay which seems unambiguously to embrace the methodological perspective is Orr’s recent article on social reality.¹⁸ In defending his version of critical rationalism, Orr clearly posits an objective reality and argues that it cannot be denied.¹⁹ He sees difficulties in knowing about that reality, perhaps even insurmountable barriers. But the role of discourse in science or elsewhere is to test conclusions that purport to be true, so that the real or correct view may someday be discovered.

SECOND MEANING: SOCIOLOGICAL

A second way in which “rhetoric is epistemic” is in a sociological sense. This meaning straddles the first and third meanings argued in this paper and is therefore somewhat more complicated and subtle. In this view, whether rhetoric properly leads to the

discovery of all truth is problematic. This position avoids knotty problems of the role of rhetoric in science, mathematics, etc., by focusing on the role of rhetoric in social issues. In this view, whatever the role of rhetoric in hard science, rhetoric not only discovers but creates reality and knowledge about reality in the social sphere of ethics, politics, morals, religion, etc.²⁰

The key to this meaning of epistemic rhetoric is a bifurcation of reality into material and social realms. Rhetoric has limited or no action in the material realm; a rock is a rock, and observation of it need not be shaped by discourse. Knowledge of material reality is knowledge one can be absolutely sure of. Material reality is unitary and objective. But much of life involves a reality that people cannot be sure of, the contingent realm of social reality. The reality of ethical, social, political questions is not merely discovered, it is created in rhetoric. Rhetoric leads to knowledge of social questions because it creates what there is to know in the social realm. Social reality is thus plural and relative; there are many truths on social issues, and each of them may be true for the groups that espouse them.²¹

The view of truth and reality implied by the sociological meaning has already been shown. Material reality and truth about it are absolute, but social reality is created in discourse. The sociological meaning also has implications for the practice of rhetoric as it relates to other human action. Rhetoric is no longer subordinate to other realms, serving them by making their truths effective. Rhetoric is granted sovereignty in the social realm. But rhetoric is still a distinct type of activity.

Similarly, the sociological view has implications for the status of rhetoric as a discipline. Rhetoric has a subject matter of its own insofar as it explains how social reality is created and shared. But the sociological meaning of epistemic rhetoric does contain at least one “danger” for professional rhetorical theorists. Although the bifurcation of reality into the social and the material is clear enough in principle, the assignment of a given problem or interest to one realm or another is difficult. Those who abhor ambiguity are likely to prefer dealing with issues that allow unitary and absolute knowledge. Therefore, problems and interests tend to slide between the social and material, the realms of rhetoric and science. For that reason, the discipline of rhetoric is not seen as continuous between ancient times and the present. To illustrate, let me briefly (but grossly) oversimplify hundreds of years of rhetorical theory: Aristotle assigned the realm of the contingent (social) to rhetoric.²² Later on, the Ramists moved areas of knowledge out of the social realm into logic or philosophy, where those issues could be decided with more certainty and rigor. Eighteenth century rhetoric’s stress on psychology “slid” more issues back into rhetoric.²³ Nineteenth and twentieth century logical positivists tried to identify more and more social and political questions as material, arising from neurological or physical conditions and admitting of certain, scientific’s solutions, thus beggaring rhetoric again. Today, scholars seem to be assigning more issues to the contingent, social sphere again.

Despite the methodological leanings in his work as cited earlier, Cherwitz seems to embrace the sociological meaning of “rhetoric is epistemic.” One consistent feature of his

work is the sociological bifurcation of social and material reality. Cherwitz divides the realm of human knowledge and experience into contingent and noncontingent areas.²⁴ This bifurcation aligns the contingent/noncontingent with the social/material realms, for Cherwitz also separates the social realm of rhetorical discourse from the material realm of scientific discourse.²⁵ In the realm of the contingent are typical “social” concerns such as politics, morals, religion, etc.²⁶ Only in these areas does rhetoric act epistemically, he argues, for not all discourse is epistemic.²⁷ Another sociological component of Cherwitz’s thinking is his claim that within the contingent, social realm, rhetoric is not merely truth-revealing but truth-creating.²⁸

Farrell’s work seems clearly and consistently to take the sociological position. In his 1976 article, Farrell separated social and technical knowledge²⁹ to focus attention on the epistemic role of discourse in social conduct.³⁰ The social realm was further defined as those issues on which human action can be brought to bear.³¹ Social knowledge, as Carleton pointed out,³² is quite apart from the technical realm in Farrell’s article. The latter contains factual knowledge³³ of a seemingly objective reality. In his 1978 rejoinder to Carleton, Farrell clearly separated the social realm in which rhetoric is epistemic from the material realm, or realm of nature in which “we look and see” what the truth is rather than creating that truth in discourse.³⁴

Two more authors deserve mention as apparent proponents of the sociological position. Bevilacqua interprets Vico’s philosophy as based upon a separation between humane and natural reality.³⁵ Discourse in the humane realm is epistemic because humans can more readily know what humans have made; that is, we can better know about laws, since we make them than we can know about rocks that we haven’t made. Bitzer also seems sociological. He argues that the “public” is the source of some truths.³⁶ But those truths are separated from factual knowledge,³⁷ in which rhetoric apparently has no epistemic role.

THIRD MEANING: ONTOLOGICAL

The third way in which “rhetoric is epistemic” is the most radical of the three; rhetoric is epistemic in an ontological sense. By that I mean that rhetoric creates all of what there is to know. Discourse does not merely discover truth or make it effective. Discourse creates realities rather than truths about realities. Furthermore, no reality that humans experience exists apart from human values, perceptions, and meanings.³⁸

A key concept for understanding the ontological view is meaning. Proponents of the ontological position do not deny the existence of a physical reality, but they do insist that for humans, that reality is always apprehended through the constructs of meanings. Reality is in every particular a blend of the physical and the meaningful. People never have and never will have anything to do with a reality unalloyed by meaning; indeed, people have no way of knowing whether such a reality exists or not. But meaning is a thing created and shared in discourse, particularly rhetoric; so reality is a thing created and shared in discourse. Reality is multiple, polymorphous, diverse. Realities differ as social groups assign different meanings to experience. So the view of truth implied by the

ontological view is a relative one. There may exist different, even contradictory truths because there may exist contradictory realities.

The ontological view has implications for the relationship between rhetoric and other human activities. The ontological view posits rhetoric as a dimension of all activity rather than as an activity in its own right. Rhetoric as a dimension of action follows from the argument that meaning is a dimension of reality, for meanings are created and urged upon others rhetorically. The ontological view thus holds that all of what people do is in some way rhetorically shaped and, in its turn, rhetorically influential on others.

The ontological view implies that rhetoric as a discipline has a co-equal status with any other discipline in that it studies a dimension of all action. On this view, all the disciplines study dimensions of experience. The discipline of physics studies one dimension of all human experience, musicology studies another dimension, rhetoric a third, etc. Any of these disciplines is relevant to studying atomic explosions, Beethoven quartets, or inaugural addresses. But physics tells us the most about atomic explosions (although musical and rhetorical dimension are involved), musicology is best suited as a focus in studying Beethoven, and rhetoric seems to do best in studying explicitly communicative events, although it could in principle be applied to any human activity.

I believe my own work arguing that rhetoric is epistemic takes the ontological position.³⁹ Obviously, I prefer that view as most sensible and consistent. Scott's seminal article in 1967 argues that one does not have the choice of whether to act on prior truth or to create truth; discourse always does the latter.⁴⁰ The idea that truth is something created and not fixed recurs in Scott's argument.⁴¹ That view of rhetorically created truth does not seem limited to a social realm. Scott's later article is somewhat ambiguous, however, for he argues that rhetoric is only one of a plurality of ways of knowing.⁴² That implies that there may be other ways of knowing that admit of certainty or objectivity. Scott does seem to contradict that position within the same article, though, for he argues that rhetoric may be a dimension of all acts of knowing.⁴³ That is a more truly ontological implication, and it expresses the view of rhetoric as a dimension of activity rather than an activity in and of itself.

Carleton's response to Farrell seems to take the ontological position. Carleton asserts the "unanimity of human knowledge" rather than a bifurcation into social or material realms.⁴⁴ Furthermore, all knowledge is collapsed into social knowledge which is rhetorically created and shared. Therefore, Carleton equates science and rhetoric as generative of the same sort of knowledge.⁴⁵

Two works outside of communication deserve mention. Thomas Kuhn's book does seem not only to emphasize the role of communication in science but to assign a reality-creating function to discourse.⁴⁶ Berger and Luckmann, on the other hand, deal with the "phenomenology" of social reality and thus flirt with the ontological position. However, they explicitly reject discussion of the ontological status of social reality, and so their affinity for this perspective is unclear.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, misplaced disagreements arise between proponents of the three different meanings. These disagreements are misplaced because they fail to understand the different meanings of “rhetoric is epistemic.” Thus, one might criticize positions generated from premises that are different from one’s own by insisting on one’s own assumptions.

For instance, Carleton accuses Farrell of inconsistency⁴⁸ in treating social and technical knowledge as different. Farrell’s position is at odds with Carleton’s assumption of unitary-but-rhetorical reality. However, Farrell is not inconsistent given his own assumption of a bifurcated reality. On the other hand, Cherwitz and Hikins⁴⁹ and Orr,⁵⁰ from their respective positions, accuse ontological proponents of a “sociological”⁵¹ error in arguing that reality is thoroughly rhetorical. These critics accuse ontological writers of forgetting that there is a difference between saying that people’s beliefs about reality are real for them and saying that those beliefs are all the reality that there is, or real in a “philosophical” sense. But those criticism stem from either the assumption that all reality exists apart from belief (methodological) or the assumption that grants the ontological proponents their assumption that the only realities are what people believe through discourse, then sociological and philosophical statements about reality become the same statements.

To conclude, then, I should like to observe that scholarly arguments about epistemic rhetoric proceed on at least two levels. At level one, people argue about which of the three meanings of “rhetoric is epistemic” are most useful, true, insightful, consistent, etc. At level two, one can discuss within the metaphysics implied by one meaning of epistemic rhetoric what the implications of that meaning are. Confusion is likely to result when adherents of one meaning assume that second-level arguments of a scholar using a different meaning flow from one’s own first level assumptions.

¹ I do not mean to say that “rhetoric is epistemic” has only three meanings. Michael C.

² This is similar to Leff’s first meaning, 78.

³ The notion that contingent issues allow more than one truth falls under the second, “sociological” meaning.

⁴ Focusing on the dialogical form of classical rhetoric and modern epistemic rhetoric, Floyd Douglas Anderson sees little conceptual difference between the two schools in “The Classical Conception of Communication as Dialogue,” Eastern States Speech Association Convention, 1978.

⁵ Science and Human Values (New York: Harper and Row, 1956, 1965).

⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 44-6.

⁸ All three essays are found in Volume 10 (1977) of Philosophy and Rhetoric: Walter B. Weimer, "Science as a Rhetorical Transaction: Toward a Nonjustificational Conception of Rhetoric," 1-29; Maurice Finocchiaro, "Logic and Rhetoric in Lavoisier's Sealed Note: Toward a Rhetoric of Science," 111-122; Michael Overington, "The Scientific Community as Audience: Toward a Rhetorical Analysis of Science," 143-163.

⁹ "Character and the Arts and Disciplines," Ethics. 78 (1968), 115-6.

¹⁰ Richard Cherwitz, "Rhetoric as 'A Way of Knowing': An Attenuation of the Epistemological Claims of the 'New Rhetoric,'" Southern Speech Communication Journal. 42 (1977), 209.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 211

¹³ Richard Cherwitz and James W. , 65 (1979), 18.

¹⁴ Ibid., 19.

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶ Ibid., 22-3.

¹⁷ Ibid., 24.

¹⁸ C. Jack Orr, "How Shall We Say: 'Reality is Socially Constructed Through Communication?'" Central States Speech Journal, 29 (1978), 263-274.

¹⁹ Ibid., 271

²⁰ This resembles Leff's second meaning, 78.

²¹ If rhetoric creates truth then truth must be multiple, since a hallmark of rhetoric is that it establishes and supports different, varied, even contradictory conclusions.

²² For instance, in Rhetoric, 1357a.

²³ An interesting survey of the history of rhetoric that illustrates these points is found in Robert L. Scott and Douglas Ehninger's "Colloquy," Quarterly Journal of Speech. 61 (1975), 439-453.

²⁴ op cit., 209.

²⁵ Ibid., 212-3.

²⁶ Ibid., 216-7.

²⁷ Ibid., 216-7.

²⁸ Ibid., 212-3.

²⁹ Thomas B. Farrell, "Knowledge, Consensus, and Rhetorical Theory," Quarterly Journal of Speech. 62 (1976), 4.

³⁰ Ibid., 5.

³¹ Ibid., 8.

³² Walter W. Carleton, "What is Rhetorical Knowledge? A Response to Farrell—And More," Quarterly Journal of Speech. 54 (1978), 315.

³³ Farrell (1968), 10-11.

³⁴ Thomas B. Farrell, "Social Knowledge II," Quarterly Journal of Speech. 54 (1973), 330-01.

³⁵ Vicent Bevilacqua, "Vico, 'Process,' and the Nature of Rhetorical Investigation: An Epistemological Perspective," Philosophy and Rhetoric. 3 (1974), 166-174.

³⁶ Lloyd F. Bitzer, "Rhetoric and Public Knowledge," in Don Burks, Rhetoric, Philosophy, and Literature: An Exploration (West Lafayette: Purdue, 1978), p. 69.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 83.

³⁸ This resembles Leff's fourth meaning, 78.

³⁹ "Some Implications of 'Process' or 'Intersubjectivity': Postmodern Rhetoric," Philosophy and Rhetoric. 9 (1976), 21-51.

⁴⁰ Robert L. Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," Central States Speech Journal. 18 (1967), 15.

⁴¹ Ibid., 16-7.

⁴² “On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic: Ten Years Later,” Central States Speech Journal. 27 (1976), esp. 259-60.

⁴³ Ibid., 260.

⁴⁴ Carleton, 318.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 314.

⁴⁶ Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970). I discuss the rhetorical relevance of Kuhn in my work cited above.

⁴⁷ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), Chapter 1, esp. pgs. 20-1.

⁴⁸ Carleton, 313.

⁴⁹ esp. 21

⁵⁰ esp. 268

⁵¹ We must be careful not to confuse labels. Both works refer to a sociological fallacy, but I do not mean to say that these authors place anyone within what I am calling the sociological viewpoint as defined in this essay.