

Rhetoric is its Effects: On Pragmatism and Rhetoric

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What might a rhetorical theory based on philosophical pragmatism look like? What might be some of its advantages, issues, consequences? Pragmatism, particularly the “new pragmatism” most often associated with Richard Rorty, has played an important role in critical theory over the last couple of decades, from interventions into “high theory” by Walter Benn Michaels and others to the “science wars” and investigations into legal philosophy, epistemology, and other fields by scholars such as Barbara Herrnstein Smith. Here I’m going to see what I can do to rhetoric using some pragmatist ideas.

C. S. Peirce, one of the founding figures of pragmatism, arrived at this often-quoted formulation in his 1878 essay “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”: “Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole conception of the object” (quoted in West 49).

This seems simple enough on the surface: things are just the sum of their effects. A pencil is a pencil because it leaves a mark when drawn across the page; because it fits in the hand; because it is used to write with. But what Peirce’s dictum amounts to is a rejection of all metaphysics—a pure, agnostic rejection, since Peirce doesn’t affirm or deny extra-material attributes but simply leaves them out of consideration. For Peirce it doesn’t matter whether a pencil is the form of a transcendent pencil essence, or the trace of an ideal pencil. No problems arise when considering liminal objects that may or may not be pencils (automatic pencils? grease pencils? giant novelty pencils?), because they too are simply the sums of their effects, and whether we include them in the category “pencil” is our decision at any particular moment. Nor is a pencil good or bad, except insofar as it has good or bad effects; and since those emerge from its use, they’re clearly contingent in the event and not attributes of the thing in itself.

A pragmatic theory of rhetoric, then, might be understood as a theory that defined rhetoric as no more than its practical effects. Of course this isn’t a disciplinary definition; we still have to decide what rhetoric studies. But it eliminates questions that have no bearing on rhetorical effect. For a pragmatic theory, it doesn’t matter, for example, whether an argument is “essentially” good or evil (or whether such attributes exist), because that does not affect the results of the argument. (Whether the argument is perceived by the audience as good or evil is another story, of course, but that’s an effect.)

How do human agents fit into this conception of things—or, if it’s extended to rhetoric, this conception of rhetoric and the production and consumption of language? Peirce, a practicing experimental scientist, was deeply wedded to science; consequently, he was perhaps not overly concerned with human agency, or more specifically with questions of the motivations of the effects of things. But with William James and John Dewey, the philosophers who next took up pragmatism (in James’s case, while Peirce was still writing on the subject), pragmatism became deeply engaged with questions of motives, practices, and politics. In essence, the idea that effects define things, which for Peirce already included causality (effects causing other effects), was extended to incorporate human agency as among the effects of human subjects on other things. In pragmatic fashion, James and Dewey did not get tied up in metaphysical questions about the source of that agency (unlike, say, Kant), though they did investigate practical ones, such as the psychological motivation of subjects and ways in which to motivate subjects for the greater good.

I believe that pragmatism has some interesting consequences for rhetoric, and—equally interesting—rhetoric appears to have some for pragmatism as well. To explore those, it's necessary to take a quick look at some of the key ideas developed in pragmatist thought.

Pragmatism in Philosophy and Critical Theory

Pragmatism, in philosophy, is a loose school (whose members often hold conflicting opinions) of thought that emerged as a US intellectual tradition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, more or less beginning with Charles Saunders Peirce. In his pragmatism Peirce—a practicing scientist—was primarily concerned with rejecting metaphysics, and in general the philosophical investigation of intangibles, as demonstrated in the quotation above. Peirce was also something of a constructivist, believing that even scientific knowledge was the product of social processes. Though Peirce believed that scientific method was the best way of arriving at valid beliefs, he also believed that method was governed by habits and social constraints and would change over time (West 43). Peirce also realized the philosophical break with Europe that Emerson had called for (described at length in West, 9-41), by publishing a groundbreaking and thorough critique of Cartesian epistemology (West 44-45).

Not long after Peirce introduced “pragmatism” as an explicit concept in American thought, William James incorporated it into his work, particularly his cultural critique. For James, pragmatism was a neutral mediator of conflicting ideas that opened space for public debate: “She has in fact no prejudices whatever, no obstructive dogmas, no rigid canons of what shall count as proof. She is completely genial. She will entertain any hypothesis, she will consider any evidence” (quoted in West, 57). While some of the hard-line “New Pragmatists” of recent decades, particularly Walter Benn Michaels and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, take rather dogmatic positions (and cannot, in fairness, be called “genial”), their positions are often actually counter-exclusionary, in something like the spirit of Jamesian pragmatism.¹ Thus whereas realism, for example, seeks to limit true statements to those that can be verified by comparison with a knowable and unchanging reality, pragmatism simply holds that true statements are the ones that follow the contingent, socially-constructed truth conditions of the language in which they're formulated.

The most prominent pragmatist after Peirce and James was John Dewey, who is often regarded as the preeminent proponent of pragmatism. (West calls him “the American Hegel *and* Marx” [69], and Rorty has several times described him as a major influence.) Dewey made a number of important innovations in pragmatism. First, he replaced the pervasive, heroic individualism of Emerson and James with a grounding in historical change, and a concomitant understanding of the roles played by institutions and systems. In a way, Dewey's work prefigures the New Pragmatist interest in Latourian actor-network theory and similar conceptions of distributed agency, with his interest in systems of power rather than a naive valorization of individual effort. Moreover, this attention to history led Dewey to conclude that historical consciousness itself played an important role in modern subjectivity. “Like Hegel, Dewey views modern historical consciousness—awareness of the radical contingency and variability of human societies, cultures, and communities—as the watershed event in contemporary thought” (West 70). That is, the pervasive awareness that human culture had been different, and would again be different in the future, is (for Dewey) what distinguishes modern thought. This vision of the inevitability of change, and freedom from the idea that previous cultures were either lost heights or primitive forebears, opens the way for recognizing the contingency of cultural constructs, and supports the constructivism that Peirce attached to his initial formulation of pragmatism.

Dewey also sought, far more than Peirce or James, to turn his pragmatism into a political program. However, since he was highly suspicious of political parties and other organizations, and reluctant to risk his academic position in an era of severe political backlash (between World War I and the Korean War), he turned to pedagogy as the channel for promoting his ideas. This effort proved largely unsuccessful, and

¹This is more true of Smith than of Michaels, who seeks to develop something like a foundation out of intentionality in his idiosyncratic version of pragmatism. Smith, on the other hand, is uncompromising in her position, but it's a position which makes few positive demands; mostly she insists on not adopting foundational positions which rule out other ideas.

while the reasons for that are debatable, West offers the provocative thesis that it failed mostly because Dewey tried to rely on dialogic methods (106). It is interesting to speculate—and I return to this idea below—that Dewey’s failure might be seen as the failure to employ rhetoric in the service of his philosophy and its associated politics.

After Dewey pragmatism fell into something of a decline. Various mid-century intellectuals made some use of it or presented positions more or less compatible with it, but no major new contributions appeared until W. V. Quine turned to a variety of pragmatism in his attack on the prevailing philosophical school of the post-war period, logical positivism. Quine too sided with a form of social constructivism, in a manner I’ll describe later, but was not primarily a pragmatist. However, he helped set the stage for the recovery, in the 1960s and 1970s, of pragmatism by Richard Rorty, the boldest pragmatist and founder, in effect, of the contemporary school of “New Pragmatism”.

Rorty applies pragmatism to such an extent that philosophy itself begins to unravel, a fact Rorty himself recognizes. As he remarks in “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids”, “the fact that ideas have consequences does not mean that we philosophers, we specialists in ideas, are in a key position. We are not here to provide principles or foundations or deep theoretical diagnoses, or a synoptic vision” (49). For him, pragmatism means recognizing that all truths are constructed, contingent, and transient, and so neither philosophers nor anyone else has any access to universal truth. Instead, he believes in the power of human imagination to develop the sort of subject who can respond appropriately (that is, justly) to contingent events, rather than turning to some myth of universal truth; thus he calls for “a general turn against theory and toward narrative” (*Contingency* xvi).² He is firm in his anti-realism, though he distinguishes it from solipsism: “We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that the truth is out there. . . . The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false” (*Contingency* 4-5).

Even more interesting, perhaps, is his view of language. Building on the work of Donald Davidson, he argues that contrary to common belief, language is not a medium. That is, it does not transmit ideas from one place (the external world, or the internal self, etc) to another (a listener, the sphere of discourse). It is a tool, and it functions by letting one agent make noises or gestures or marks which may enable another agent to make more-or-less accurate guesses about what the first one means. This means (for reasons that Rorty explains well, but I lack the room to describe here) that there are no “nonlinguistic things called ‘meanings’” or “nonlinguistic things called ‘facts’” (*Contingency* 13). Those meanings and facts are the effects of language use; they are not things that exist in themselves to be transported from one person to another over the medium of language, because there is no such medium. And he proffers another fascinating result. When someone uses language in a new manner—creates a new metaphor, in Rorty’s description—they are not attempting to convey an intended meaning to the audience. Conventional language is used to convey intended meanings. To use a new metaphor, on the other hand, is to express a sentence that cannot be true or false. Instead it attempts to inaugurate a new vocabulary, to invite new ideas which may in time become true or false (*Contingency* 18). And so it is through this—very rhetorical—process that intellectual history develops, for Rorty.

Following Rorty, pragmatism has been taken up by a number of prominent thinkers who are usually described professionally as literary or cultural theorists rather than philosophers. Prominent among these are Walter Benn Michaels, Stanley Fish, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, all of whom have repeatedly engaged with pragmatism, though in quite different (and often explicitly conflicting) ways. Michaels, in a series of pieces beginning with the infamous essay “Against Theory” (written with Steven Knapp), has employed an idiosyncratic version of pragmatism to argue that there is a “correct” meaning to a text, but it is simply the meaning that the author intends. Fish has taken a variety of pragmatist positions, and has gone so far as to out-Rorty Rorty on the question of the importance of philosophy—declaring outright that it has none. But it is Smith, working at various times in conjunction with other scholars such as

²Rorty often makes reference to narrative and poetry as sources of wisdom, and it would be interesting to explore the traditional connections between rhetoric and poetics in light of his belief in their ameliorative power. That project will have to wait for another day.

Arkady Plotnitsky, who has most fully realized pragmatism in critical theory and developed a complex and ambitious critical project from it. That project, which she calls “postclassical theory” or “postclassicism”, has an interesting potential relationship with rhetoric, as I’ll describe below.

Thus we have in pragmatism a handful of distinctive and related features. First, it wishes to attend to *what matters in practice*, and disregards questions that do not appear to have any bearing on results. From that follows a rejection of metaphysics, which by definition are not connected to effects in the real world. Having given up metaphysics, pragmatism must also give up at least some possible epistemological foundations, such as Platonic essence, divine inspiration, or realism’s appeal to a real world outside human perception; in practice, pragmatists since Peirce have gone completely antifoundational and seen all knowledge as produced through changeable social processes (though they recognize differences among these processes).

Rhetoric and Metaphysics

In the European-derived tradition (insofar as such a thing exists), rhetoric has often been connected to intangibles, such as ethics. This is a metaphysical proposition: if rhetoric *necessarily* has some ethical weight, or if ethics *necessarily* has some effect on rhetoric, then there must be some sort of rhetorical essence beyond the material form of the spoken or written words. Of course, a particular employment of rhetoric often has *contingent* ethical “valences”; that is, how rhetoric is employed and to what ends in a given situation may be ethical or unethical behavior. But this is a very different thing from the claim that there is always and inevitably some linkage between rhetoric in the abstract and ethics (or any other intangible) in the abstract, as I hope to show in what follows.

Nor is that the only way in which metaphysics has been forced upon rhetoric. More subtly, rhetoric’s place in epistemology often implies and follows from a metaphysics of truth and/or knowledge. When Aristotle subordinates rhetoric to dialectic in the production of true statements, for example, he’s arguing for a privileged epistemological method that’s superior to rhetoric, and he’s doing so not on empirical grounds but because he believes that rhetoric’s facility with counterintuitive theses (as demonstrated by the Sophists) indicates a weaker essential connection to truth. If anything has any sort of essential connection to truth—if we have any basis by which we can say “this method is inherently less associated with truth than that method”—then we are presupposing some metaphysics of truth. Contrast Aristotle’s position with Rorty’s, in which “truth” describes how well a description of the world matches the social consensus of the reality of the world. For Rorty, rhetoric and dialectic are language tools, and they may have different utility in various applications of language; but neither has any special relationship to truth, because there is no outside truth for them to relate to.

So the major theoretical intervention into rhetoric that I see coming from pragmatism is a rejection of metaphysics, and I’d like to suggest that removing metaphysics from rhetorical theory might be useful in practice.

Toward a Pragmatic Rhetoric

West on Dewey: “[P]hilosophy is neither a form of knowledge nor a means to acquire knowledge. Rather philosophy is a mode of cultural critical action that focuses on the ways and means by which human beings have, do, and can overcome obstacles, dispose of predicaments, and settle problematic situations” (86). Substitute “rhetoric” for “philosophy” in the above, and you have one abstract pragmatist definition of rhetoric. And it is a stirring definition, to see rhetoric as a mode of action, and a mode that investigates key aspects of being human. But what does this mean in practice?

As my title suggests, one aspect of a possible pragmatic rhetoric is a rhetorical theory that focuses exclusively on rhetoric’s effects, and disregards purely theoretical abstractions. Those would include traditional questions such as the place of rhetoric in a hierarchy of language arts or intellectual methods, or

the general ethical implications of arguing a position you do not believe in.³ It would also disregard more contemporary questions such as whether it is “valid” to apply the concepts of European-derived rhetoric to the language acts of non-European-derived cultures—a position that might be more uncomfortable for many rhetors today. But a strictly pragmatist rhetoric would, I believe, take a Rortian position: contentious language acts are what create the possibility for new ideas, and so foreclosing any given type of language act is simply counterproductive. Thus a pragmatist rhetoric would: ignore metaphysics, concentrate on effects, acknowledge that knowledge is constructed using language as a tool, and recognize innovative use of language (Rorty’s new metaphors) as the means whereby intellectual change happens. It would also, I hope, remain aware of how pragmatism has always been yoked to some vision of progressive politics.

Pragmatic Rhetoric’s Effects

What are some of the possible consequences of such a rhetoric? One advantage of pragmatism for rhetoric is that it answers, or sidesteps, two accusations that have dogged rhetoric since ancient Greece.

The first, which goes back at least as far as Aristotle’s schematization of intellectual methods, is that rhetoric is epistemologically *weak*. This is the claim that rhetoric is a deficient tool for arriving at truth, compared to some other, preferred method: dialectic for Aristotle, divine inspiration and holy writ for the Medieval theologians, the scientific method for the Enlightenment rationalists. As I described above, New Pragmatist thought resists privileging any intellectual method, and even Peirce, who did believe the scientific method was the best for arriving at truth, felt that truth was socially constructed and could only be evaluated based on social norms and practices. Since those norms and practices in turn have to be established through interaction, prominently including discourse, rhetoric will always play a key role. Thus under pragmatism we can discard all questions of the hierarchy of epistemological devices as reductive and unproductive.

The other, developed by Socrates and Plato against the Sophists, is that rhetoric is epistemologically *bad*, because it is not governed by moral order and so can be used to argue for and from evil claims. But under pragmatism—particularly the strong pragmatism of Rorty and Smith—there is no external moral order, so no epistemological method has access to or is mediated by it. The only moral order that can exist is a social, constructed, contingent one. Indeed, for pragmatism all epistemological modes themselves are socially constructed and contingent, so none can have any connection to any essence outside the interactions of language agents. With this the familiar claims of the danger of rhetoric lose their footing.

This leads, in a curious fashion, to another possible consequence of a pragmatic rhetoric. For James, truth claims are valuable specifically because they provoke investigation, which improves human character (West 65). What is important in his scheme is not whether rhetoric is used to argue a position that is true, but that it’s used at all, thus invigorating both rhetor and audience. Similarly, Rorty’s belief in the power of new metaphor argues for the bold use of rhetoric to introduce new vocabulary that may help realize a more just society. For some pragmatists, then, rhetoric is morally useful to human beings precisely because of the slipperiness that offended Socrates and Plato.

Pragmatism may find more in rhetoric than just the means for introducing new ideas. As West’s analysis makes clear, pragmatism rejects the two major classes of theories of ideas in European epistemological philosophy: correspondence theories and coherence theories. Correspondence theories hold that ideas are true when they have some relationship to the real world—which of course has to be sufficiently knowable that it can be used to put ideas to the test. Coherence theories, on the other hand, only require that ideas hold together in agreement with one another. Pragmatists find both of these deficient for various reasons and so turned, beginning with Dewey, to social practice as the ground on which ideas are validated. “[I]deas are neither copies of the world nor representations linked principally to one another, but rather ingredients for rules and for plans of action” (99). This conception of ideas would suggest a robust and active rhetoric,

³A pragmatic rhetoric would still allow consideration of the contingent ethical implications of a given argument, of course, since that would be among the effects of rhetoric. What it would avoid is creating a general ethical theory of rhetoric: whether it is *always* wrong to argue X given Y.

aiming toward the inspiration and guidance of action, rather than airy debate; a rhetoric inextricably linked to praxis.

Moreover, this conception of idea is inherently rhetorical, because it depends on argumentative structure in the constitution of ideas themselves. As West says, for early pragmatists like James and Dewey (and this is also true for some later ones, particularly Rorty), “truth has simply little to do; all the work [of validating ideas] is loaded on warranted assertibility” (99). That is, pragmatists largely discard the notion of truth *as a tool*, however important it might be in some abstract conception of the world. Ideas are to be tested by examining how they can be described (assertibility) and what chain of thought supports them (warranted). And this is nothing more or less than saying that, under pragmatism, an idea is nothing more or less than an argument.

West has a powerful vision of pragmatism as a call to action. “The goal of a sophisticated neopragmatism is to think genealogically about specific practices in light of the best available social theories, cultural critiques, and historiographical insights and to act politically to achieve certain moral consequences in light of effective strategies and tactics” (209). Certainly the first part—examining practices using the best available theories—and the last part—employing effective strategies and tactics—are common aspects of contemporary work in rhetoric. When West joins them with the call to moral political action, he echoes the progressivist, interventionist view of rhetoric espoused by contemporary rhetors such as Keith Gilyard and many others. West’s personal program to realize this goal is shaped by his powerful religious affiliations, as a religion scholar and lay preacher. It takes the form of what he calls “prophetic pragmatism”, and it forms the ultimate thesis of his history of pragmatist thinking. The prophet is a rhetor, and traditionally a more popular and interventionist one than the philosopher. The combination of rhetoric as the ground and origin of ideas, on the one hand, and this call to action on the other, creates a vision of pragmatic rhetoric as a powerful tool for political agency.

I suggested above, in reference to Dewey’s educational program, that perhaps Dewey’s failure was due in part to a lack of rhetoric. It is not out of the question to suggest that pragmatism could in general make use of a more sophisticated understanding of rhetoric. I cannot help but note, for example, how Smith—a formidable thinker who excels at demolishing her opponents’ arguments—has had to make essentially the same argument many times over the years, particularly in support of relativism. Clearly there are aspects of pragmatism which are difficult to argue for. And, even more broadly, I would suggest that philosophy itself needs rhetoric. Of Quine, West notes: “His main point is that competing theories, versions, or descriptions of the world, not isolated statements, are ‘the basic units of empirical significance,’ especially since the truth-value of such statements can change relative to one’s theories, versions, or descriptions of the world” (185). In other words, for Quine (in one of his more pragmatist positions), empirical truth exists only “in bulk”, so to speak. It doesn’t exist in simple statements, but in more complex accumulations of language-use. And rhetoric always plays a role in the complex use of language. Indeed, this was the complaint of Locke and the other Enlightenment rhetors who sought to strip rhetoric from scientific discourse in the first place. Quine’s insight was that their project was not simply doomed but counterproductive, since in removing rhetoric they would have actually removed access to empirical truth.

A Pragmatic View of Pragmatic Rhetoric

Some of the claims above may be overstated, of course, or at the very least not as consequential as they might at first appear. Even if rhetoric is the locus of truth, how much (as Fish might ask) does that affect us in our daily lives, or even in the extraordinary pursuit of some political goal? And while West’s call for a prophetic rhetoric is stirring, it doesn’t seem to have been significantly realized, even by West himself (though some of his subsequent works, such as *Race Matters*, did get relatively wide exposure for academic books). Perhaps Dewey’s failure to change society goes deeper than merely the misrecognition of the best tools for the job. And while Rorty’s faith in metaphor is enticing, West points out that Rorty makes language so transitory that it’s hard to see how it could be used to describe a coherent platform for action over any significant span of time (209).

Other questions arise in the context of this essay itself. Is contemporary rhetoric still largely, or even significantly, bound up in metaphysics? Does pragmatism really have that much to say to the dominant rhetorical theories of today—or, for that matter, to the radical ones? To what extent have pragmatic rhetorics already been formulated? I hope I've suggested, even in this brief way, some of the possibilities I see for a rhetoric based in pragmatism, but whether those can be realized is still an open question.

Author's Note

In its present form, this is definitely more of a “paper” than the draft you saw a couple of weeks ago, which was really just an outline with some fragments thrown in.⁴ But while this is officially the “final” draft for the class, and though it has (more or less) the form of a finished paper, I still think of it as very much a work in progress. Though I don't, at least for now, feel the need to turn this project into a book—I think it's quite useful at the article or conference-presentation length—I do think it's not yet ready for public consumption.

As you can see, I had to chop a lot from the original plan and outline. I just found myself with far too much material, and not enough space or time to develop it. Thus the survey of the rhetorical tradition is gone entirely, for example, and I miss it; but it just wasn't close to being finished and the paper was already too long.

What's also missing is a better sense of what else has been done along these lines, particularly within the discipline of rhetoric. Thanks to West's *American Evasion of Philosophy* I think I have a pretty good idea of the history of pragmatism in US philosophical thought, and through Rorty, Fish, Michaels, Smith, and various other writers I have a fairly broad view of contemporary pragmatism in critical theory and literary theory. But I have a number of references to pragmatism in rhetoric that I lacked the time to chase down. Guiseppe found a reference to a book by Walter H. Beale called *A Pragmatic Theory of Rhetoric*, for example, which certainly sounds like it might be relevant, but I have yet to look it up. Consequently, I'd be reluctant to present this in its current form without doing more research to see more clearly how it fits into existing work in the field.

That said, I think it's likely that this *could* become a conference presentation or an article at some future point. It's definitely a good candidate when an interesting conference comes up. And that's my intended audience: rhetoric scholars, in the conference setting.

What this draft does well, I think, is lay out some of the reasons why I find pragmatism interesting, both in the philosophical abstract and for practical reasons, on its own and in relation to rhetoric. It's also helped me to explore the history of pragmatism and see more of the nuances, conflicts, and disjunctions among various thinkers' formulations, though I'm not sure how much of that comes through here—for reasons of space, I had to omit a lot of possible asides and comparisons. I've tried to stay focused on the inquiry nature of this project, and that's been productive and refreshing. While I've always seen seminar papers as essays—as trials, attempts to develop new ideas—foregrounding the question rather than the thesis helped me think in a more open-ended and plural manner while reading and writing.

More than I would have liked of this draft was done close to the deadline, but that's hard to avoid even under the best of circumstances. At least with the draft, the conference, and the multimedia project I had to do significant work on the project as a whole over the past few weeks, which certainly helped.

Here's what I'd like a reader to take from this piece. First, a sense of what pragmatism is, at least as I've sketched it out, as an intellectual movement and philosophical school. Second, an understanding of some of the ways in which I see pragmatism opposing some ideas that have been attached to rhetoric by various thinkers. Third, an appreciation of the possible consequences pragmatism might have for rhetoric that I speculate on, and why I find them exciting. If I've been rhetorically effective, maybe the reader will share in some of that excitement, too. But I also hope (and if I haven't accomplished this, then it's a weakness in the paper that needs to be corrected) that I've left it clear, in the end, that pragmatist thought can go in many directions, and its possible contributions to rhetoric are much more than what I can enumerate. My real hope for this project is that some readers would be inspired to develop other pragmatist-inflected

⁴I found working that way, using Freemind, was quite productive. It also let me save snapshots of my progress along the way, by saving copies of the Freemind file at various points. I used the same change-management software that I use for source code at work to preserve a handful of versions of the outline as it developed. That's quite liberating—I know that I can always go back, see what I changed, recover older versions, etc. It's given me a vague, pie-in-the-sky idea for a writing tool that would build on Freemind and keep track of all changes, so that you could always move back and forth in the history of the writing process. Something to think about, perhaps.

rhetorics.

One final note. As I was working on the reflective note that accompanies this paper, I kept thinking of new things I wanted to say, to the point where it has become something of a followup to the paper proper. Perhaps that's not inappropriate, but I imagine that in reading it you'll have some sense that some of the material should have been moved into the paper. In the next revision, perhaps.

Once again, thank you so much for this semester. It was a terrific experience—one of two or three best graduate classes (or classes of any sort, really) that I've ever had.

Reflection

As befits an inquiry, this project has taken me to some places I did not anticipate.

Thanks to various pieces I'd already read by Rorty, Smith, Fish, Michaels, Haraway, and others, I thought I had a reasonably good (if not particularly deep or historical) understanding of pragmatism, at least in its major contemporary forms. That was the understanding that inspired my first response paper, on Isocrates seen in light of the New Pragmatists. While I don't disavow that understanding now, I do feel this project has given me, on the one hand, a much richer understanding of the contemporary pragmatists, and on the other an invaluable perspective on early pragmatism and how it developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

At the same time, my new knowledge (however partial and occasionally confused, after a survey at breathtaking speed) of the European rhetorical tradition has led me to think at length about how that intellectual history informs pragmatism (particularly when the latter is viewed as a distinctly or primarily US endeavor), and how that history looks in the light of pragmatism. The early, simplistic equivalences I suggested—Sophists as one sort of pragmatist (Rortian or Smithian, roughly speaking), Isocrates as another sort (Michaelsian), Socrates and Plato as anti-pragmatist—are not unreasonable, as far as they go. But other insights can come from reflecting on the connections between Plato and Emerson, for example, or considering the difference between reading Gorgias as closer to Fish (taking Gorgias more or less at face value) or as closer to Rorty (hypothesizing that Gorgias is being at least somewhat ironic). And moving on in the tradition, all sorts of other fascinating partial connections appear. Vico's *sensus communis* is clearly allied to pragmatic theories of the social construction of truth, but the historical determinism of his "three ages" flies in the face of the pragmatic insistence on the contingency of cultural forms.

The project has also led to some specific writers I want to investigate further. I mentioned in the Author's Note that I had not had time to look at all (or even most!) of the sources people in class recommended—that's a tremendous list for the next phase. On the other hand, the books I did read brought some new key figures to my attention. Cornel West makes a strong case for Dewey's importance in pragmatic thought; my previous exposure to Dewey had been only a few comments here and there about his pedagogical innovations, but after reading West's chapter on him I can see that there's much more in Dewey's work that deserves review. (West calls for a renaissance of Deweyism, and he may be right, though I'm afraid that it's been nearly twenty years since he wrote *American Evasion* and it doesn't look like the Dewey train has yet left the station.) Rorty, in the first chapter of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, makes much use of Donald Davidson's theories of language. Again, I had only the most passing familiarity with Davidson (I hadn't even realized he was an American), but after reading a couple of online articles about him I'm eager to learn more. (Years ago at an MLA book sale I picked up a collection titled *Literary Theory Since Davidson*, just because it looked interesting, but like so many other books I never got around to reading it. Now it has a new lease on my attention...)

A major problem with the project as it stands today is that I became captivated by the philosophy, and consequently robbed the rhetoric research to pay the philosophical. That's quite noticeable in the paper, I think, where the discussion of thinkers who are usually identified as rhetoricians is pretty thin. I'm a bit disappointed with myself for this, particularly since my background in critical theory tends to lead me toward the philosophy and critical-theory aspects, and I meant to correct for that by focusing more on the rhetoric, particularly the contemporary rhetors (which obviously remain an area I know little about). I think this doesn't hurt the paper as much as it might because my intended audience has a strong background in rhetorical theory already, so I need to provide less of it; but it would still be improved if I were able to make more of those connections explicitly. When I revisit this project, connections to the rhetorical tradition and especially to contemporary rhetoric will be a major area of effort.

Freeing rhetoric from metaphysics and transcendental epistemology could, I believe, have significant consequences, in ways that I'm only starting to see. I believe it can lay rhetoric bare, so to speak, stripping

away what I cannot help but feel are distractions (interesting though they might be as intellectual exercises⁵), such as the question of rhetoric’s epistemological priority relative to dialectic or the scientific method. And that, in turn, might enable some new theories of rhetoric that deal more concretely with how to do things with rhetoric, rather than, say, what constitutes rhetoric (as an object, practice, or discipline)—a concern that we saw rhetors take up time and time again.

I believe freeing rhetoric from metaphysics can let us acknowledge the true scope of rhetorical effects. If, like Quine, Rorty, and Smith, we see language not as a medium (carrying ideas from some special source, such as the world or the self, to the sphere of discourse) but a tool, and specifically as the basic tool of knowledge, then all knowledge-production is rhetorical. This is constructivism writ large: all knowledge is produced through the motivated use of the affordances presented by signifying systems. If rhetoric is defined as the study of the conscious employment of signifying systems to achieve a goal—a definition I’d like to advance, if only tentatively—then it becomes a kind of epistemology itself, but not the hypothetical epistemology (“how do we know things?”) of analytic philosophy. Instead, it’s an applied epistemology: how to make things known.

Finally, I believe freeing rhetoric from metaphysics can bring rhetoric fully into the postclassical project described by Smith and Plotnitsky, a project I unabashedly subscribe to.⁶ Why postclassicism? First, because I agree that European-derived thought has tended to assume certain classical theses as axioms, and I believe that all ideas should be continually up for review, even though we need to assume many of them at any given time in order to come to (transient, contingent, partial) agreements for action. Second, because I agree that some of those ideas, such as the paranoid rejection of relativism, are specifically counterproductive, and that reconsidering them is necessary to formulate a more sophisticated understanding of such crucial areas as ethics and law. And third, I think the postclassical project looks like a plausible way to address some of the key failings of the Enlightenment project, such as its Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism. And that, in turn, may help us on the one hand become the “ironic liberals” Rorty wishes us to be, with strong facilities for recognizing the suffering of those unlike us; and on the other to arrive at more sophisticated models of power and agency that help us do something about that suffering.

In short, I see pragmatism and postclassicism as deeply aligned, a view which is probably not controversial, but worth exploring nonetheless. And I see postclassicism as something desirable intellectually and politically, so it’s not surprising that I’d like to see rhetoric brought into the postclassical fold. What, in turn, does rhetoric bring to postclassicism?

I’ve already suggested that philosophy in general, including pragmatism and postclassicism, can make more use of rhetoric. Rorty and Fish have both suggested, in their own way, that philosophers and philosophy are of little importance in our everyday lives—and they’re two of the most readable contemporary philosophers. Philosophers need to work on their rhetorical skills if they’re going to achieve the outreach that would make their ideas broadly effective—or as West proposes, re-situate their rhetorical effects in a popular context such as preaching, which amounts to the same thing (attending to audience and *kairos*). That’s one purely practical application of rhetoric to postclassicism.

On a theoretical level, rhetoric can perform at least two other favors for postclassicism. Having posited broad constructivism, actor-network theory, and other anti-foundational theories of knowledge and action, postclassicism is always in danger of appearing to “level” interactions among actors, so it’s not clear where differences in power or effectivity lie or how they’re achieved or used. Rhetoric is essentially a study of contestation, so it is already somewhat equipped to deal with those questions. In other words, it can help answer questions like “how does an idea get constructed in a way that favors a particular interest?” and “why can some actors in the network pull harder?”. The other favor is historical. Of all disciplines that are still vigorous in the US academy today, rhetoric has the most widespread and thorough-going interest in classical thought—the very intellectual ground that postclassical thinking explicitly sets itself against. If postclassicists want to undermine the classical foundation, rhetoricians can best show them where to dig.

⁵It’s interesting to note that West suggests many pragmatists may need to indulge in non-pragmatic philosophy from time to time merely to satisfy a personal need—to scratch an itch, as he puts it (96).

⁶Today, anyway. Maybe I’ll change my mind about that in a year. Nothing is certain!

Reading List

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