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Truth and Rhetorical Effectiveness

A speaker has two fundamental objectives. The first is to get an intended message across to an audience. Using the art of rhetoric, a speaker aims to achieve “clarity through the structured use of symbols.”¹ Speeches use the symbols of language and words. The second aim of the speaker after clarifying his message is to persuade the audience to its acceptance. The success of the speaker in attaining his goals depends greatly on the validity behind his message; its reception and rejection may not hinge merely on the skills of the speaker. Is a speaker is more effective with or without truth to back his rhetoric?

While truth influences the accomplishment of a speaker’s objectives, truth’s inherent, vague nature adds a dimension of uncertainty to its effect. There are a few different types of truths, including quantitative and moral truths. Each has a different influence on a speaker’s rhetorical successes. Quantitative truths deal with those aspects of nature that can be measured. On the other hand, moral truths are more abstract and subject to broad interpretation. In his The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction, James Herrick conveniently categorizes the symbols and strategies used in persuasive argument into four categories – argument, appeals,

arrangement, and aesthetics.² Different combinations of these four simple, yet very prevalent methods of persuasion can open new dimensions to looking at truth's influence on a speaker's rhetoric.

The seemingly uncomplicated nature of quantitative truths would suggest that its relationship with rhetorical effectiveness is the most straightforward of the ones aforementioned. A quantitative truth's "measurable" aspect implies that some form of experimentation was done to obtain the results the truth claims. How certain chemicals react is found through extensive laboratory work, while a mathematical expression is found through careful deduction and proofs. A chemistry professor will seek to clarify his work to his students through visual means. She can take them to the lab, combust magnesium with oxygen, and show students the extremely bright light that results. Here, a scientific truth does not allow much room for personal interpretation.

In another case, mathematical proofs are based on a series of carefully constructed basic truths. A lecturer at a symposium introducing a new theory cannot just ignore previously found proofs or leave out logical, proven theorems in the verification of his work without the risk of discrediting himself. When dealing with quantitative truths, one is hard pressed to find an example of successful false indoctrination, short of complete brainwashing.

Moral truths, however, have a much less visible sway over a rhetor's effects. The concept of morality is debated in many circles and illustrations of what is or is not moral varies greatly. With the specific intent of simplification, issues that touch upon the religious realm will not be examined. Moral truths, in its general form, can be understood to refer to those principles that

are ethical and right; principles that are accepted by a society who seeks to treat all its citizens with respect and fairness. A morality issue that has repeatedly been challenged in the past 100 years is human rights and justice. Has history given us advocates and opponents of human rights and justice who were equally successful in spreading their message?

The greatest war ever fought between nations produced two of the greatest orators, Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler. Churchill advocated principles that are ethical and right; he endeavored to expand a society that sought to treat all its citizens with respect and fairness. By these standards, Hitler did the exact opposite. He schemed to spread wealth to only a small minute portion of the German people, and pushed forward institutionalized genocide. However, throughout the development of World War II, both used their skills of rhetoric to rally their people behind them and advance their agendas.

In one of history's most moving and passionate speeches, Winston Churchill addressed the House of Commons to rally the British people in anticipation of the Battle of Britain,

“We shall not flag nor fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France and on the seas and oceans; we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be; we shall fight on beaches, landing grounds, in fields, in streets and on the hills. We shall never surrender...”³

Aesthetically, he arranges this passage at the end of his speech after giving the country's status update to sum up his clear intention to never give up. Churchill also lines it with repetition and displays his resolve. In this particular speech, he argues for the strength of the British Fleet and

people. He appeals to their patriotism to brace them for the oncoming Nazi assault, and in the end, he is successful in every way.

In his lifetime, Adolf Hitler rose to power in Nazi Germany by appealing to the hatred and bitterness harbored by the suppressed Germans. His skillful rhetoric argued and placed the blame for their defeat in World War I onto the Jewish population, first in Germany, then the world. His blatant manipulation of language to promote genocide is perhaps a good example of the reason for much of the criticism towards rhetoric and the bad connotations that come with the subject today.

In this case of morality, both the supporter and adversary of the truth (as accepted by a civilized society), were successful in clarifying their objectives and then persuading their audience. In the case of a quantitative truth, great lengths must be taken to convince another that two hydrogen molecules will not combine with an oxygen molecule to produce water. The type of truth affects the efficiency of the rhetoric. A speaker's effectiveness is determined by the truth when that truth can be measured and shown. A speaker's skill, however, is the deciding factor in his range and victory in matters of moral concern.

¹ Herrick, James A. The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction, 2nd Ed.. Needham Heights, MA: Ally & Bacon, 2001.

² Herrick, James A. The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction, 2nd Ed.. Needham Heights, MA: Ally & Bacon, 2001.

³ Department of History, Hanover College. Available: <http://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/111chur.html>.

Kevin,

Your draft argues that rhetoric may be decisive in determining moral truth, but that in quantitative matters, rhetoric holds little sway. This is a provocative and worthy thesis, and helps to get at the natures of both rhetoric and truth. Your basic distinction makes sense in the context of your essay, and you wisely provide significant and telling examples to illustrate your claim.

Though the basic thrust of this draft is strong, and there is some good material here, it will require significant revision to turn this into a successful essay. The main problem as it stands is that the essay is too generic, as you rehearse easily understood ideas and non-arguable claims for much of your presentation. How, for instance, does your discussion in two paragraphs on page 2 of quantitative truth shed light on this subject? What do you tell us that we didn't already know? Do you help us to recognize when we are dealing with a properly quantitative truth? Do you show what it is about quantitative truth that resists rhetorical manipulation? Your discussion of moral truth is more substantive, as your comparison of Hitler and Churchill begins to add some content to your generalities, but, even there, there is a sense of wandering, as though you are dabbling in your question but not addressing it head on. The bottom line is that you need to develop a much greater *critical intensity*. Don't include something in your essay if you don't believe that it is of crucial importance to progressing human understanding. This is a heavy criterion, but it is the real criterion for good academic writing.

So the main thing for you to do is to have something more to say about your topic. There are many ways to go about this, but no magic solutions. I recommend that you consider more carefully some potential counterargument. How might someone take an opposing perspective? If you can think of no reasonable opponent, then you haven't chosen an arguable topic and you should choose a different topic. If you can think of a reasonable objection, then raise it and respond to it in your essay. For example, who might claim that moral truths are just as absolute as quantitative ones, and how would they defend this idea? Or, someone might argue that rhetoric has more sway in moral domains, but that this doesn't mean that moral questions have a variable truth since people can believe lots of things that aren't true. Or, someone might argue that given the history of science, the notion of a fact has changed dramatically over time, so that even quantitative truths are not so absolute as you seem to think. These sorts of questions not only force you to examine your own argument, raising the stakes of your essay, but they also start to dig into the essential natures of truth and rhetoric. Your current draft is making some interesting scratches on the surface of these questions, but not yet probing their depths.

When you find something pressing to say, one other shortcoming of your current draft will likely disappear: extraneous thoughts. Too much of your draft is only marginal to the central argument. Strip out anything that isn't crucial, leaving only the most intense, concentrated argument to grip your reader.