

Having "A Whole Battery of Concepts": Thinking Rhetorically About the Norms of Reason
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The first part of this paper's title alludes to the view of Wilfrid Sellars that having a concept requires having "a whole battery of concepts." This has recently been described by Chauncey Maher (2012) as one of the shared assumptions of the "Pittsburgh School," an important aspect of which is its commitment to "normative functionalism." The second part alludes to the view that rhetoric works within cultural norms, as well as within the norms of reason, and that these have a complicated relationship to one another. The relationship between those two halves of the title are what I want to examine in this paper. I do so from the vantage of being physically located one floor up from the Pittsburgh Department of Philosophy, in the Department of Communication, and intellectually located somewhere at the very porous border between the norms of cultural expression and the norms of reason. However far my sensibilities may diverge from those of my philosophical colleagues, I take comfort in the fact that we all share the same elevators.

The rhetorician's view of the battery of concepts, and of normative functioning as well, is one that presupposes fluidity rather than fixity. Broadly speaking, it shares with inferentialism a pragmatic framework. The rhetorical perspective is one that places emphasis on latitude and repertoire, including stories, lines of argument, and "scripts" for common types of interaction. On this view, to understand the way that concepts and norms bear upon judgment, one must consider how these are invoked and interpreted in variable ways, according to context, purpose, and audience. Rhetorical discourse is one of the inducements to navigating through the normative world. The academic student of rhetoric (hereafter "rhetorician") is inclined by occupation to see judgments as something potentially and perpetually up for grabs, capable of veering one way or another, and subject to the influence of what Aristotle called "the available means of persuasion." In what follows I want to lay out what I see as the implications of these starting points for thinking about what it means to be rhetorically situated within a field of norms, with a battery of concepts, and rendering judgments.

I will begin with the observation that anyone's battery of concepts will overlap with that of anyone else, but that no one is likely to have exactly the same stock as anyone else. How one reads this generalization might depend on how one defines concepts, of course. I am assuming that what we call concepts range from the highly specified, such as one might find in philosophy or law, to those that are quite vague. In everyday reasoning, I would venture to say, most concepts dwell somewhere near the latter end of the continuum. And this is not to suggest that this is a deficiency of everyday reasoning. I follow C. S. Peirce in accounting vagueness an underappreciated property of thought and reality. And I follow Wittgenstein in valuing the terrain of the rough ground, where clarity and precision can become irrelevant or even dysfunctional.

I will not push my luck by pursuing these themes onto the well-tended turf of formal epistemology, but I do think there is some common space to be explored. I have in mind those contexts where people are engaged in practical reasoning, even aspiring to refine and improve their pragmatic judgments by engaging in reflective thought, and by gleaning insight from others. This process may work by invoking either "common knowledge" and/or drawing on the

knowledge of experts. What I am calling common knowledge is akin to the Greek notion of *endoxa*, described in Aristotle's *Topics* as those opinions that are not certain (as would be the case with *episteme*) but are accepted by the majority or by the wise, but here I am adding the proviso that scientific findings accessible to the public are included in the repertoire.¹ Maybe we could describe this attention to deployment of *endoxa* as social epistemology in order to signal the dual interest in the norms of reason in the territory of knowledge that is usually not tended by philosophy. That would of course fit comfortably in this venue where our present thoughts have been invited. I will be a little bit provocative by referring to "rhetorical reasoning," while making the point that all manner of everyday reasoning, both good and bad, can be facilitated by rhetoric.²

So the question here is what it would mean to think rhetorically about how concepts and the norms of reason function in practical reasoning and linguistic action, and toward that end I want to advance and briefly sketch ten points for consideration:

(1) Although we are by no means limited to thinking of rhetoric in the ways the ancient Greeks did, it is useful to point out that Aristotle conceived of rhetoric as a matter of discovering within different situations "the available means of persuasion" in contingent matters. This meant that the tracks along which reasoning could be guided by a purposeful speaker were defined less by what was inferentially necessary than by what was available as a plausible influence on thinking, and by what was arguable. In this sense, the conceptual landscape as well as the applicable modes of inference, and even the emotional tenor of a discourse, functioned as a kind of deployment of norms for practical purposes. This insight can be generalized beyond formal speaking situations of the sort Aristotle had in mind (courts, assemblies, and public gatherings), in so far as any discourse framed for the consideration of others will attempt to guide the deployment of relevant norms, selecting from available possibilities. We act, not just upon our own inferential processes, but in reference to the inferential processes of those we seek to influence by what we say, how we say it, with what affective and reputational resonances.

(2) While asserting might be the definitive speech act for philosophical analyses of language, and explicitness the desideratum, the rhetorical use of language works both by what is said and by what is evoked. *Thus it draws not just upon explicit assertions but upon the relationship between what is explicit and what is tacit.* The Aristotelian term for this was the "enthymeme," a rhetorical action that draws upon unstated beliefs and opinions in order to produce further inferences. The unstated portion of the inferential operation need not be propositional in nature in order to enter the reasoning process. Audiences may be expected to "get the picture" based on depictions, examples, narratives, figurative language, visual displays, and so on; and from this picture they may reasonably draw further conclusions. In the Aristotelian conception of rhetoric, it is not by the logic of an argument alone that people are persuaded, for in addition to the logic of a case, the audience often draws conclusions about the speaker himself, such as "he seems shifty," or "the speaker is a courageous man." (Aristotle called this *ethos*.) Likewise, the logic of an argument is complemented by affectivity. So, for instance, an emotional reaction to the vivid

¹ I have elsewhere advocated for the concept of a "third culture," that cultivates and encourages the building of a pooled repertoire of public and expert knowledge. (Lyne 2010).

² See James Crosswhite, *The Rhetoric of Reason* (Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1996)

description of a ghastly crime would be appropriate (Aristotle called this *pathos*), and this too would enter into the inferential process. If put forward as part of an argument these "thoughts" would function as assertions, which might be supported or contested. Up until then, their status as propositions would be latent.

(3) Considered rhetorically, practical reasoning is underdetermined by either logical or normative strictures. By this I mean that the type of reasoning that is at work in practical engagements between people — reasoning that is in the rhetorician's sense *addressed* — does not necessarily lend itself to a regime of strict entailments. Inferences inspired or led along by rhetoric may be associative, for instance, rather than logically entailed, or the result of figurative rather than literal claims. To say that these inferences can be made explicit in the form of clearly articulated propositions is to beg the question in favor of the philosopher's mission, which, as Brandom argues, is to make things explicit. Inferences and assumptions are often made explicit for rhetorical purposes in practical situations — say, as a response to a challenge, or because a speaker wishes to make them explicit. On the other hand, they sometimes remain at work beneath the surface, shaping the range of what is considered plausible or assertable. What is "below the surface" might be thought of as variously sized and shaped tectonic plates (e.g., cultural assumptions, relevant histories) that shape the contours of our thought. In that sense, the inferential impact of rhetorical utterances on practical reasoning can be seen as *a joint production of what is explicit and what is tacit, and made effective by the relationship between the two*.

(4) The sort of judgments that support assertions and affirmations in pragmatic circumstances can be both contingent and tendentious, which is to say that judgments can be *suggested* by the specific way in which rhetoric directs attention. In most settings the very reason to assert something reflecting a judgment is that things are not so obvious as to make it a waste of breath, and that there is some *motivation* that arises in addressing particular persons in particular circumstances. "This book is mine," for instance, not only presupposes that the object in question is situationally judged by the relevant norms and concepts (subject to questions as to gray areas, such as e-books or booklets), it also situates the speaker in social space. The point of asserting may be to clarify, to put down a marker, or to take a contentious position, on the matter of who it belongs to; and this in turn would implicate a network of concepts such as that of ownership, possession, and the entitlements thereof. And, depending on context, one might draw inferences about why someone is making such an assertion. By the rules of Gricean implicature, the maxim of relevance could come to the fore, and this would point toward motivations for things said (Is the speaker implying that I might be confused about whose book it is?). And when we open the door to speech acts, things start to look more complex still ("Is he accusing me of trying to take his book?"). The construing of motive is something symbolically complex and much broader than a specific intent (Burke 1969). So, for instance, not only can the list of motivationally relevant concepts expand under scrutiny (e.g., property rights), the norms inferentially linking them can be located in different matrices or registers (e.g., logical entailment, probabilistic calculation, commonplace or local inferential patterns). When we proffer our inferences by playing them out by utterance, we act upon other persons, who in turn act inferentially, whether silent or uttered, in ways that involve us.

(5) As social beings we all need to live within the constraint of norms of conduct and reasoning. But the rhetorical attitude toward these norms is to take them more as directional "vectors" than as precise coordinates. Rhetoric plays upon the leeway thereby afforded, and helps to contour the influence of norms by choices of language, choices of arguments, and choices of presentation. The social space in which practical reasoning may occur is often populated by multiple regions and tiers of conceptual order, the interplay of which is a contingent matter that invites creativity, or what rhetoricians call "invention." The more repertoire one has available, which might include an arsenal of concepts, strategies of reasoning, or modes of association, the more space and latitude one has for normative functioning. Whether the claim that "this is my book" becomes inferentially linked to the context of, say, interpersonal rivalry, or to that of legal standing cannot necessarily be foreseen, but whatever comes out in utterance can be engaged by argument or discussion, or at least responded to. Rhetoric is in that sense and in principle *accountable*.

The contextual limits of what inferences are permissible and plausible may usefully be viewed as subject to what Brandom characterizes as "scorekeeping" (2000). That is, interactants may constantly update the commitments and authorizations made by either party in order to grasp the purport of any utterance. In the hurly-burly world in which rhetoric bids for our attention as well as our assent, and where discourse often moves us by indirection, the *ways of keeping and calibrating score may be exactly what is at stake*. How far should we go in accounting for the history, character, and personality of another person with whom we are interacting? What things are to be taken at face value rather than discounted? Such considerations in pragmatic communicative interactions can signal that we do not always know what another means — or, indeed, what *we* mean.

(6) Shared norms and beliefs do not necessarily predict a shared pattern of inference. Although it is often assumed that people who share the same beliefs and values will most likely draw the same conclusions given the same evidence, there is reason to believe that argumentative divergences can and do occur quite readily among groups who share common creeds, texts, and orientations. Michel Billig (1996) has provided extensive analysis of this phenomenon, including discussion of religious communities who argue endlessly over the meaning and implications of their shared texts, norms, and histories. Ironically, the plenitude of their shared beliefs and norms provides easy fodder for more, not fewer, arguments. Quite simply, in communities who share many beliefs and norms, there is more on the table to argue about, and more fine points to consider. Thus the possibilities for contestable assertion do not seem, necessarily, to be reduced by the sharing of concepts and norms of reasoning. The feature that Billig emphasizes in such cases is the implicit two-sidedness of any argument, and the lack of guarantee that there will ever be a bottom line in sorting out disputed claims.

(7) Rhetorical argument does not use figurative language merely for embellishment. Rather, it reflects a kind of convergence of the reasonable and the aesthetic. Carefully chosen metaphors or other figures can propel inferences. Irony can reverse the semantic import of statements. Synecdoche can productively or misleadingly skew representation, such that a "part" referred to may generate conclusions about matters of larger entities and categories. Stories can function as powerful analogies. The philosophical analysis of language has tended so much to favor literal propositional assertion as the default speech act that there is a tendency to underestimate the functions of non-literal language. A rhetorical perspective on normative function would need to

be alert to these common figurative features of language use and the role they play in inducing judgments. Rhetoric brings the complication of the "think of it this way" inducement to inference. In that sense it serves as an inducement to or reinforcement of attitudes or sensibilities. In so far as these attitudes and sensibilities may influence inference and action, the rhetorical engagement of them can be seen as both *forward-looking and aspirational*.

(8) Within the transactional reasoning of speakers and audiences, judgments are negotiable, criteria are vague, the range of relevant concepts is variable, and the occurrence of counter-considerations can keep things up for grabs. In this sense, the norms of reason, whether internally employed or deployed under the influence of other voices, are more akin to "rules of thumb" than to logical necessity. And here we might consider Wittgenstein's analysis of what it means to "follow a rule." One's assurance that one understands the game lies in the ability to show that "one can go on." Yet while the Wittgensteinian metaphor of the language game proves useful in calling attention to the contours of normative expectation, if it is taken too literally, it overestimates the boundedness of communicative interactions. Isolating a game in the midst of the plenitude of the psycho-social and historical landscape can be difficult. Different games are often competing for our engagement within the same discursive space.

(9) The process of justifying and sustaining judgments in the face of doubt and challenge begins to foreground the rhetorical process of finding and using the available means of persuasion. Reasoning that does not "satisfy" will be rejected as unpersuasive. Acts of justification need not be mirror images of the chain of thought that may have produced a belief in the first place, as the variable contexts of justification may require different modes of articulation and proof, according to what will be deemed appropriate for the purposes at hand. Whatever battery of concepts and relevant norms may be used in the production of a judgment (and the model of argument presumed here leans toward a "balance of considerations" approach), there is still the question of what concepts and relevant norms may *sustain* a judgment that may be called into question.

(10) Rhetoric works to *configure* thoughts, images, and relations among concepts, depending on the context of utterance and the position and beliefs of variable audiences. In that sense it performs a kind of mapping function, putting concepts in relation to each other and foregrounding relevant normative considerations. This is a dynamic process that arrays evidence and lines of reasoning within some configuration; but this is rarely the only possible configuration. Just as the neurons in the brain develop new connections as they are repeatedly deployed — there is an adage that "neurons that fire together wire together" — new patterns of language and thought can be created and routinized. Thus the "mapping" function is never a completed project or a closed book. New connectives can be created (rhetoricians call this "invention"), new associations can be made, and old ones recovered.

In summary, rhetoric is not an optional accessory in the discursive space of practical reasoning. The rhetorical shaping of judgment is omnipresent, and it has logical, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions. Although I have not said much about the ethical implications of rhetorical choices, this is in a sense the elephant in the room — and one not easily tamed. Reasoning may be disciplined and corrected by attention to logic, but this does not suffice to constrain ethical choices. Despite my advocacy of a rhetorical turn in thinking about normative functionalism, and my belief that there are rhetorical choices to be made in even the most refined reasoning, I do not

suppose that rhetoric is always on the side of the angels. Established norms and values can all too easily be bent in ominous directions — the same knife that may be used by a surgeon to save a life can also be used to commit murder. It is startling, for example, to see that the Nazi doctors, trained in science and logical thinking, who carried out aggressive euthanasia procedures in Germany could speak of their actions as being in accordance with the Hippocratic Oath, just as it is disconcerting to consider how the concept of “a life unworthy of life” came to function normatively within a set of historical circumstances (Lifton 2000). But this is testament to the fact that the norms of reason and the application of concepts can go down unexpected paths, not always with a good result. On the other hand, the possibility for reasoning and normative development to grow in productive and ethically sustainable paths is what makes the relative openness and inventiveness implied by the term “rhetoric” worth pursuing.

In closing, let me say that I appreciate the opportunity to talk about rhetoric and reason in a context that could put the rhetorical perspective in conversation with that of philosophers who come to the subject of reason from another vantage. In that sense, ruminating on the “Pittsburgh School” has opened up opportunities to expand the conversation about how language, concepts, and norms function. Given the historical divergence of rhetoric and philosophy, there are inevitable differences in what is attended to in the processes of reasoning; but (in addition to other locations) this makes for good elevator conversation.

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