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Why Didn't I Pick a Fight About X?: An Inquisitive Response to Harris

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My review of *Landmark Essays on Rhetoric of Science* commended Randy Allen Harris for not shying away from disciplinary controversy. Particularly, I complimented his decision to organize *Case Studies* (2018) and *Issues and Methods* (2020) around the numerous conceptual debates among rhetoricians of science that have occurred since the 1970s. I also emphasized how these collections offer guidance to anyone interested in learning more about this field, serving “as roadmaps depicting the intellectual landmines hidden under the debris of nearly fifty years’ worth of disciplinary controversies” (Morales 2021, 21).

In his response to my review, Harris (2021) further demonstrates his keen awareness of the demands and quarrels within the rhetoric of science. When reflecting on his experiences curating these scholarly collections, Harris discusses how he navigated several conceptual disputes and the logistical issues of charting a disciplinary history with limited pages and monetary resources. Harris also reflects—with honesty and compassion—on his polemical review of Alan Gross’s groundbreaking *The Rhetoric of Science* (1990), a part of his response that I especially enjoyed. As Harris explains, his early review attacked Gross’s title by condemning half of the words as “either ill-suited to the field or to his book” (2021, 65). *The* was too definitive for Harris because it ignored the blooming pluralism within the field, and *rhetoric* seemed inconsistent with the methodology of the book since it pulled mostly from disciplines adjacent to rhetorical studies (i.e., literary studies, sociology, and philosophy). The charge was bold, and the gauntlet thrown. “I had baited the hook and thought he would bite,” Harris confesses. But Gross didn’t take the bait and humbly declined Harris’s invitation to fight. Regardless, it seems that Harris’s enthusiasm and Gross’s graciousness led to a fruitful career-length discussion about the nature and direction of the field.

This left me wondering: Why *didn’t* I decide to pick a fight with Harris? Surely there was something in these two volumes worth my scorn. Aside from being provocative, I propose this question because it seems that disciplinary controversy serves an important role in Harris’s depiction of the field. By and large, Harris’s response emphasizes the importance of documenting the conceptual and social dimensions of disciplinary controversies by reflecting (both personally and professionally) on the collective benefits of public disagreement. So, maybe there’s something to a good academic fight. And it is for this reason that I wish to better understand the depiction of controversy within Harris’s description of the field.

With gratitude to Harris and to the SERRC for the opportunity for further engagement, I wish to explore several questions prompted by Harris’s response regarding disciplinary controversy as well as address some of the new contextual information that is provided regarding these collections. This new information further reveals what I interpret as Harris’s commitment to free speech, scholarly debate, and intellectual transparency. And since my original review emphasized the utility of these collections for emerging scholars, I find it fitting to highlight Harris’s continued efforts to chart the bumpy rhetoric of science terrain for my fellow graduate students and early career scholars.

What Issue Does *Case Studies* Address?

The utility of Harris's first collection, *Case Studies*, goes beyond its survey of seemingly dispersed critical essays. Of course, this is because case studies, especially the ones included in this volume, offer profound theoretical insights about rhetorical discourse beyond the individual cases they examine. As I discussed in my review, the collections' topology offers theoretical categories that segregate the subsequent essays in ways that allow readers to see patterns in the development of the field. Each critical essay, Harris maintains, thus "participate[s] in a field of issues" while simultaneously "exemplifying a set of methods" (2020, 4). As a result, *Case Studies* tells a story about the field by guiding readers through a disciplinary history of the various theoretical and practical issues that twentieth century rhetoricians were attempting to overcome.

Since Harris's disciplinary narrative makes its own theoretical intervention within the broader context of rhetorical studies, I wonder: What larger conceptual and/or practical issue was *Case Studies* attempting to resolve beyond documenting numerous landmark rhetoric of science essays? Though there are admittedly many possible answers to this question, Harris seems especially concerned with rearticulating the empirical and pragmatic roots of the discipline. For instance, Harris writes that his decision to release *Case Studies* before its more theoretically focused sequel, *Issues and Methods*, was influenced by Alan Gross. In his response to Harris, Gross expressed his concern that the increasing critical essays in rhetoric of science were "piling up rather than adding up" (1991, 35). Harris disagreed, and so *Case Studies* endeavored to show how each of its subsequent essays were specifically designed to address theoretical problems and offered solutions to those problems utilizing the tools of rhetorical criticism.

Additionally, *Case Studies* reminds readers of rhetoric's empirical roots by showcasing scholars who perform microscopic readings of individual cases. *Case Studies* thus provides a specific template for doing rhetorical studies of scientific texts, one that ushers in a larger theoretical understanding of Aristotle's discipline. As Harris himself explains, "[his] intention was to draw an X on the rhetorical treasure map so that people entering the field would know where to dig and, once they had unearthed the jewels and doubloons, how to invest them in their own work, further enriching the field" (2021, 62).

So, it seems that *Case Studies* was, at least in part, an attempt to address the conceptual need to reinforce rhetoric's empirical and pragmatic roots. But I remain curious: Was this a need or issue burdening only rhetoricians of science? Or was the broader discipline of rhetorical studies also losing sight of its ancestry?

Why Has Attention to Giants Receded?

That rhetoric's empirical foundation is less obvious nowadays is also evidenced elsewhere in Harris's response. As noted, Harris and I agree that the structure established in *Case Studies* remains productive as a guide of the critical landscape in rhetoric of science. However, Harris suggests that certain landmark categories have unfortunately fallen out of fashion in

recent years. For example, Harris writes that “attention to giants has receded somewhat” while “attention to inscription (and indigitization) practices [have] correspondingly grown” (2021, 62). Of course, Harris is referring to the category “Giants of Science,” which represents one of the earliest strains of rhetoric of science scholarship; namely, “investigations of the suasive (in)achievement of scientific giants, individuals whose accomplishments have stamped their respective sciences in epoch-defining ways” (2018, 23). Such work—including research by John Angus Campbell, Alan Gross, S. Michael Halloran, and James Wynn—investigates the interplay between the rhetorical choices of scientific giants and their social milieus.

Harris doesn’t explain this decline, though an answer might be found if we briefly return to his introductions and to the essays housed under the “Giants” category. In *Case Studies*, Harris argues that the various close textual readings of scientific giants were essential to the larger transition in rhetorical studies “from the agent-centered traditions of rhetorical criticism to more social, material, and genre-oriented approaches” (2018, 23). In other words, these early essays increased the attention given to the conditions that made rhetorical discourse possible, those external stimuli that were not always recognized in the agent-centered approaches that were commonplace during the late twentieth century. Yet, these rhetoricians—especially Campbell and Gross—remained adamant that the power over textual signification and the means of overcoming situational constraints remained with scientific rhetors whose creative choices were paramount to an understanding of how revolutionary scientific ideas are accommodated for public audiences.

Campbell (1970), for example, demonstrates the value of rhetoric for investigating science in his pioneering work on Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*. More specifically, Campbell’s work merges the speaker-centered, neo-Aristotelian perspective (i.e., rhetoric as effective expression) with a conception of rhetoric as a social-level theory that, as Celeste Condit writes, “focuses on ideology, ethics, or various versions of place” (2019, 181). In other words, Campbell’s analysis hinges on an understanding of Darwin’s creative artistry as a response to the social forces acting upon him. For this reason, Campbell’s work affirmed, albeit cautiously, the propriety of contrasting rhetoric and science, a choice that also contrasts artistic expression and social context. Indeed, Campbell’s initial goal was to explain Darwin’s means of persuasion, an objective that recognized technical scientific language as only one of those means. As persuasion, then, Darwin’s *Origin of Species* made the theory of evolution by natural selection palatable by satisfying the social expectations of his nineteenth-century audience. “To claim that Darwin was a rhetorician,” Campbell argues, “is not to dismiss his science, but to draw attention to his accommodation of his message to the professional and lay audience whose support was necessary for its acceptance” (2018, 45). Harris further specifies that Campbell interprets accommodation in Darwin’s rhetoric as denoting how he “marshaled his evidence, managed his ethos, and molded his argument to the scientific and religious expectations of the day” (2018, 22).

Campbell’s work also reveals Darwin’s ability to mask his rhetorical artistry and downplay the purely speculative aspects of his scientific observations. “Commonly overlooked,” Campbell writes, “is that [Darwin] persuaded his peers and the wider community by using

plain English words and plain English thoughts” (2018, 45). Darwin’s perspicuous style points to one aspect of his accommodation: the ability to temper or conceal features of his theory under the guise of plain language. Darwin realized that detection of his artistry could serve as the reason for rejecting his ideas. To this point, Campbell writes: “Darwin minimized his literary gifts. He also minimized his formidable theoretical power. Darwin’s dismissal of his own colorful language and deemphasizing of the hard, sustained theoretical work behind his theory are connected” (2018, 47). Darwin’s suasive achievements can thus be attributed to the sophisticated ways in which his rhetoric accommodated his revolutionary science by guising it under the social conventions and perspicuous style of Victorian culture. Similarly, Gross’s examination of *Opticks* demonstrates the discursive ways in which Isaac Newton adapted his optical theory to satisfy prevailing Enlightenment understandings of science and philosophy advanced in Rene Descartes’s *Discourse on Method*. Prior to Newton, scientific explanations of optics typically assumed a Cartesian theory of knowledge (i.e., that reason, not experience, was epistemologically prior). Gross argues that Newton’s earlier attempts to challenge Cartesian optics failed because he overtly gave “epistemological priority to experiment over rational intuition,” (2018, 60) upending a central presupposition of traditional (i.e., Cartesian) science. In other words, Newton’s earlier scientific papers failed to overturn the Cartesian view partly because he plainly emphasized the stark differences between his theory and Descartes’s by writing in a perspicuous style that was common during the seventeenth century. Though Newton’s scientific ideas were indeed revolutionary, his persuasive efforts were largely ineffective, as Gross later argues:

Newton’s explanation of light did not give a full account of its origin, an account that included the operation of its material cause. A startling claim, a new method, a different, more restrictive, style of explanation—seemingly, Newton needed to discharge a strong burden of proof. But in this early paper on light and color, in a rhetoric as transparent as that of Descartes, Newton did not discharge this burden; instead, he emphasized his conflict with traditional views and methods (2018, 60).

Gross concludes that *Opticks*, Newton’s second persuasive attempt, was successful “solely by means of its rhetoric, by means of its strict Euclidean form, its striking experimental presence, its provocative speculations” (2018, 72). By replacing the rhetoric of discontinuity that emphasized Newton’s epistemological differences with a rhetoric of continuity that built from traditional assumptions, Newton was able to mask his radical departure using language familiar to his audience.

In both cases, Campbell and Gross embody a rather traditional view of rhetoric as accommodation or effective expression. But as I reread Harris’s introductions, I recognize how these essays also expanded (and in some ways challenged) the once pervasive neo-Aristotelian approach by illuminating various other features of rhetoric. By emphasizing this important conceptual development in rhetoric of science, those who read Harris’s collections are also able to better understand how these essays contributed to a wider theoretical understanding of scientific progress, the nature of scientific revolutions, and the significance of recognizing the interplay between speaker and situation.

Even so, I remain inquisitive: Why has this approach noticeably receded over the years? Perhaps the obvious answer is that this decline in attention is due to shifting allegiances within rhetorical theory. Put differently, maybe rhetoricians became too concerned with the aforementioned theoretical shift away from agent-centered approaches to rhetorical criticism. Maybe their efforts to prioritize the more social, material, and genre-oriented approaches became totalizing in the sense that they endeavored (consciously or unconsciously) to displace or nullify traditional commitments to creative agency. Surely Campbell and Gross sought to enrich our understanding of rhetoric in ways that didn't discard traditional commitments to a speaker's creativity. So, could the topology offered in *Case Studies* be an attempt to *correct* certain misunderstandings about these foundational texts?

What Does Alan Gross Teach Us About Controversy?

As Harris makes evident, the legacy of Alan Gross can teach us a lot about disciplinary controversy. It seems appropriate, then, to follow Harris's lead and close with a few comments about Gross's influence on these collections. Late in his response, Harris makes the following confession: "I have not disagreed with any scholar for as long as I disagreed with Alan, and I can't imagine missing a scholar more—he was so productive, so engaged, so inspiring, and so infuriating" (2021, 65). The impact that Gross had on Harris is quite clear, and so it is not surprising that "[Gross] is all over these two volumes, in three essays and in the citations of most of the others" (2021, 65). Yet, I remain curious: What about Gross made him controversial yet productive? What qualities led him to be so inspiring while simultaneously infuriating?

Interestingly, Gross's legacy is portrayed rather paradoxically in Harris's response. For instance, Harris suggests that early in Gross's professional career he was notorious for promoting an extremist view of rhetoric, advancing a "radical rhetoric of science ... a rhetoric that penetrated science 'without remainder'" (2021, 65). In this regard, Gross could be accused of ushering in a dogmatism of sorts as "he was easily the most forceful early prophet of a rhetoric whose epistemological and ontological reach was so pervasive that science could not avoid its sweeping gaze" (65). But in other cases, Gross exercises restraint by tempering his claims about rhetoric's conceptual reach by returning "to the modest shores of textual surfaces" (65). Gross's modesty is clearly exemplified in his aforementioned response to Dilip Gaonkar. In fact, Harris writes that "while virtually all the major rhetoricians of science rejected Gaonkar's arguments, countering them cogently, Gross lowered his sails, renounced his own earlier claims as rash, and shifted the remainder of his career to textual surfaces" (65). So, how might we explain this change? Harris's response leaves me in suspense.

Based on my own work, I can see strong similarities between Gross's controversial tendencies and those exhibited by the Scottish philosopher David Hume. For example, those who are familiar with Hume's earlier work—such as *A Treatise of Human Nature*—often regard him as a radical skeptic, a "destroyer of traditional beliefs rather than the founder of a new system" as Mary Calkins puts it (1925, 150). Hume's explicit rejection of church authority and belief as well as his aggressive campaigns against metaphysics makes this

accusation seem sensible. In fact, some critics even accused Hume of harboring a totalizing skepticism that denied the possibility of real or certain knowledge. Yet, Hume's later writings—such as *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*—exercised a more moderate and restrained form of skepticism. As a moderate skeptic, Hume refused all forms of supernatural speculation and instead claimed that knowledge came only from the study of history (i.e., social customs) and by observing human behavior. This was Hume's philosophical empiricism, a system grounded in the messiness of human experience and developed as an alternative to an *a priori* metaphysics.

Unfortunately, limited space prevents me from further fleshing out this comparison here. Instead, I'd like to simply (and provocatively) suggest that we should think about Alan Gross as the contemporary David Hume. More specifically, both Hume and Gross recognized the benefits of intellectual controversy as a necessary aspect of scholarship. Both were brilliant wordsmiths with an unrivalled grasp over the ideas of their times. They were both hungry for scholarly deliberation, and yet they both practiced modesty and humility when faced with disagreement. They both knew how to get a rise out of their opponent in subtle ways, which highlights the sophistication of their argumentative abilities. And finally, they were both intellectual giants whose contributions many scholars today remain indebted to.

I realize that this comparison requires much more explanation and perhaps, following the completion of my dissertation on Hume's rhetoric, I will offer such an explanation. But for now, I wish to end this response provocatively, while restating my appreciation to Harris for his gracious response and to the SERRC for the opportunity to be controversial.

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