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Rhetorical Theory

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A Rhetorical Analysis: Can language ever be neutral?

A wide variety of authors and philosophers sit around a dinner table. Some are philosophers from ancient Greece, wearing their best togas and pulling their papyrus scrolls out of their satchels in preparation for the main event of the night. Others in more modern attire open up textbooks to the chapters that contain their own works. The saint takes out his quill and ink and writes a few notes to himself while the food is being brought out. After introducing themselves and getting whatever meal they desire, they begin conversing. The topic of discussion? Rhetoric and the power of persuasion. They each come with their own beliefs about the topic, some more passionate than others. I came to this dinner party in order to ask an important question on the nature of persuasion. The four writers at this party that I plan on touching base with to answer this question are: Gorgias, Kenneth Burke, Gloria Anzaldua, and Saint Augustine.

Human persuasiveness is always an interesting topic to study. Many different philosophers and rhetoricians have written on the fact that persuasion has power. At the core of human persuasiveness is language. If language is the key means of human persuasiveness, is it ever possible for language to be neutral? And if not, what are the implications for individuals and societies?

Now in order to lay the framework for this question, I turn to Gorgias. One of the oldest members of the party, Gorgias of Leotini is an ancient Greek philosopher and rhetorician from Sicily. He is from the pre-Socratic era of philosophy, and was himself one of the first sophists. The sophists were itinerant teachers that traveled throughout Greece offering their services for money. They taught a wide variety of subjects, including mathematics, grammar, physics,

political philosophy, ancient history, music, and astronomy. They were very individualistic. While technically being a sophist was a profession, each sophist was very different from one another. There were no sophist founded schools or organizations. In fact, there was no common body of beliefs -that is to say- each individual sophist had their own beliefs and taught as such. If you paid for the service of one sophist and learned from them for a year, then hired a different sophist, you may very well learn vastly different belief systems and be taught various different questions about the world.

In Gorgias' work *The Encomium of Helen*, he examines the art of persuasion using the story of Helen of Troy. Helen was a woman of godlike beauty, married to the King of Sparta. Aphrodite– the goddess of love and beauty– promised her hand to another mortal: Paris of Troy. He whisked Helen away from Sparta and brought her back to his hometown of Troy to be his wife. This event marked the start of the Trojan war, as the Spartan king wanted his wife back and got his allies to fight against Troy to rescue her– and as such Helen is blamed for the war's beginning. Gorgias argues that Helen is innocent of wrongdoing in this story. He presents four ways in which the seducing of Helen could have gone down, and in each one points out why Helen is innocent.

Firstly, he presents the belief that it was the gods' will. The gods' will cannot be altered by that of humans. If a god wishes it it shall be so. If fate and the gods are to blame, Helen cannot be. The second theory that Gorgias presents is that she was taken by force. If it was so, of course she would not be held responsible. In fact, Gorgias states that if this is the case then we should pity Helen, blaming and hating Paris for the violent acts he committed against her. His fourth possibility is that Helen was blinded by love. He argues that love brings about madness, and is a compulsion of the soul and a "snare of fate" and as such how can a mere mortal refuse this love? Now the ancient Greek god of love Eros was known for striking mortals with arrows of love, by which those who are struck fall madly in love. It is in fact, a compulsion of fate that no mortal can avoid, and as such Helen should not be blamed for following fate.

Now what I want to focus on is Gorgias' third reasoning, which I shall explain further. His third option for why Helen should not be blamed is because the power of rhetoric and persuasion swayed her opinion:

> There have been discovered two arts of witchcraft and magic: one consists of errors of soul and the other of deceptions of opinion. Ir. All who have and do persuade people of things do so by molding a false argument. For if all men on all subjects had (both) memory of things past and (awareness) of things present and foreknowledge of the future, speech would not be similarly similar, since as things are now it is not easy for them to recall the past nor to consider the present nor to predict the future. So that on most subjects most men take opinion as counselor to their soul, but since opinion is slippery and insecure it casts those employing it into slippery and insecure successes. What cause then prevents the conclusion that Helen similarly, against her will, might have come under the influence of speech, just as if ravished by the force of the mighty? For it was possible to see how the force of persuasion prevails; persuasion has the form of necessity, but it does not have the same power. For speech constrained the soul, persuading it which it persuaded, both to believe the things said and to approve the things done. The persuader, like a constrainer, does the wrong and the persuaded, like the constrained, in speech is wrongly charged.
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> The effect of speech upon the condition of the soul is comparable to the power of drugs over the nature of bodies. For just as different drugs dispel different secretions from the body, and some bring an end to disease and others to life, so also in the case of speeches, some distress, others delight, some cause fear, Others make the hearers bold, and some drug and bewitch the soul with a kind of evil persuasion.

Gorgias clearly argues that speech is in and of itself persuasive, whether for good or for ill. But just because speech is often or is capable of being employed in either way, does that mean that it *must* be so? Can there ever be speech that is truly neutral in nature, even if it is uncommon or rare?

Now with the background of Gorgias' warnings on the danger of persuasive speech, we move on to Kenneth Burke. Burke is mostly credited with defining modern rhetoric. Burke's description of language itself is helpful in examining our question. Burke posits that there are filters in the world, and that every symbol is a filter. The language we use filters our reality. Language is thus dramatistic rather than scientific–in other words, it is always subjective. Language is also therefore an 'act,' in that when I speak, I am urging you to see reality the way that I see it, or alternatively, as a definition of reality as I see it. Human beings use symbols to participate in the world–we are born with the capacity for language, which we develop in community (with parents, families, caregivers, etc.).

This is one of the reasons why people will have different interpretations of how they see the world, because each person has their own filter of language. Burke calls these "terministic screens," which direct someone to see something in a particular way. For example, if my mother says to her friend, "My daughter Ashley is a Wheaton College student," she is directing her friend to see both me (as a student) and her (as my mother) in a certain way. But because language filters differently for each person, my mother cannot control how her speech is understood; but, that does not mean that she is not purposefully directing the listener to see her (and me) in a certain way.

According to Burke, language always has a rhetorical motive– all verbal and non-verbal symbols are intended to influence. Anything that we notice and attend to becomes meaningful to us. Another important author at the table with whom to have this conversation is Gloria Anzaldua. The American scholar of Chicana cultural theory, who died in 2004, spoke eight languages/dialects and lived at the "borderland" (a term that informed the title of her key book)

between Mexico and Texas. As a person who experienced marginalization, Anzaldua's theory was informed by her lived experience. Mestiza means a woman of mixed race, especially one having indigenous and Spanish descent. Mestiza rhetoric, which focuses on the concept of "nepantilism," meaning being torn between two ways. Mestiza rhetoric seeks to repair these tears, without erasing them, by making multiplicity into a positive discursive resource.

This is important because, relative to language, Anzaldua came to see language as shaping one's identity. She observed that some languages are seen as higher-status than others, this in turn affects the perceived value or worth of the individual speaker. As she explains, "So, if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is a twin skin to linguistic identity…" For those with lower-status languages, and in turn identities, they experience oppression, silence, and being torn between cultures.

What can we take from Anzaldua's theories to apply to our understanding of the question at hand–is it ever possible for language to be neutral? In some ways, Anzaldua has upped the ante of the question. For we are not talking just about language now, but about people's identities. If language creates hierarchies, which then leads to the oppression of individuals, this means that not only is language not neutral, but also it can confer value on people's lives.

Thus far we have learned from talking with Gorgias, Burke, and Anzaldua that language has power, always has meaning, and is linked to identity. We have likely answered the first part of our question–that indeed, language can never truly be "neutral." But what about the second part of the question that we have posed to our philosopher dinner guests: if language cannot be neutral, what are the implications for individuals and societies? Anzaldua does venture into this territory with her discussion of "peaceful plurality," where rather than a hierarchy of languages and therefore identities, people's voices are accepted, they experience holistic relations, and a greater and shared consciousness is developed among the human race. Anzaldua urges acceptance of the "mestiza consciousness" as a new model of humanity, which tolerates ambiguity and looks for new births and lives with tensions and contradictions. In a world of

difference, people need to generate a way of living that accepts internal division. This seems a bit utopian of a notion, as we can't even get our philosopher guests to make it through dinner without posturing and arguing! How can we get entire strata of societies, and societies themselves, to move toward language and identity pluralism that is peaceful and non-hierarchical?

For this final stage of inquiry, we turn to the last guest at our table, Saint Augustine. Augustine of Hippo was a philosopher and theologian who lived in North Africa during the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Part of his greatest contribution to philosophy was adapting classical thought to Christian teaching, with a resulting framework that helped to shape much of Christian thinking since then. Augustine's conversion experience from sinner to believer saved by grace influenced his thinking and writing, and his extensive awareness of the faults of humankind and their proclivity toward evil suffused his writing. At the same time, his belief in the goodness of God– that there is no evil in Him– pervades Augistine's thinking as well. In that in-between space of humanity's depravity and God's goodness is God's divine engagement with humanity, such as through His gifts of grace and wisdom.

Augustine recognizes the power of language, and encourages believers in Christ in particular to harness the power of language to do good:

> Since, therefore, there has been placed equally at our disposal the power of eloquence, which is so efficacious in pleading either for the erroneous cause or the right, why is it not zealously acquired by the good, so as to do service for the truth if the unrighteous put it to the uses of iniquity and of error for the winning of false and groundless causes?

In this way, Augustine recognizes the inherent power of language, and suggests that it is up to the individual to decide how to use it. Thus language can never be neutral, but individuals can choose whether it can be used for good or for evil.

In particular, Augustine's view of wisdom and its relationship to rhetoric is germane to our question of *how* language should be used, for example, in determining whether it can be used for good or evil. The way forward through this question is the concept of wisdom. In *On Christian Doctrine,* we learn that Augustine wrote:

> This view indeed did not escape even those who considered rhetorical training necessary, for they hold that wisdom without eloquence is of small avail to a country, but that eloquence without wisdom is generally a great hindrance, and never a help. If therefore, those who have given us the rules of oratory, in the very books in which they have treated this subject are forced through the urgency of truth to make this confession, ignorant as they are of the true, that is, of the supernal wisdom which comes down from the Father of lights, how much more are we, who are children and the ministers of this wisdom, under obligations to hold no other opinion.

Thus, Augustine makes the point that eloquence (or persuasive language) must be established through wisdom. According to Augustine, eloquence without wisdom is flattery, and wisdom without eloquence is ineffective. One needs both, but if one can only choose one or the other, then one must choose wisdom.

By some counts, it is estimated there are upwards of 222 passages in the Bible that speak about wisdom, so Augustine's emphasis is not unwarranted! These scriptures fall into a few different categories. For example, some specific scriptures that talk about the value of wisdom are:

- Proverbs 4:6-7: "Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it costs you all you have, get understanding."
- Proverbs 16:16: "How much better to get wisdom than gold, to get insight rather than silver!"

- Proverbs 19:8: “The one who gets wisdom loves life; the one who cherishes understanding will soon prosper.”
- Proverbs 24:14: “Know also that wisdom is sweet to your soul; if you find it, there is a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off.”

There are several verses that point to the source of wisdom, who is God:

- Proverbs 2: 6: “For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding.”
- Job 28:28: “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding.”
- Psalm 107:43: “Whoever is wise, let him heed these things and consider the great love of the LORD.”
- James 1:5: “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.”
- James 3:17: “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”

And finally, there are also verses that speak specifically to the relationship between wisdom and speech:

- Psalm 37:30: “The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks justice. The law of his God is in his heart; His steps do not slip.”
- Psalms 37:30: “The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom, and their tongues speak what is just.”
- Proverbs 10:13: “Wisdom is found on the lips of him who has understanding, but a rod is for the back of him who is devoid of understanding.”
- Proverbs 12:18: “Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

- Proverbs 18:4: “The words of a man’s mouth are deep waters, but the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook.”
- Colossians 4:5-6: “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

This last scripture in Colossians paints an almost perfect picture of the ways that Christians can harness the inherent power of language–and the fact that there is no such neutral speech. By being wise as Augustine urges, and letting our language be “full of grace, seasoned with salt,” we will “know how to answer everyone.” In ancient times, and still to some extent today, salt was both a way to add flavor and to preserve and keep food fresh; the believer’s speech, through the application of invaluable wisdom that only God can grant, can be life-giving to others.

The meal is winding down, and we have talked with Gorgias, Burke, Anzaldua, and Saint Augustine about our questions: If language is the key means of human persuasiveness, is it ever possible for language to be neutral? And if not, what are the implications for individuals and societies? It has been a lively conversation and we have covered much ground for one evening. There seems to be consensus that language can never be neutral. Gorgias describes the inherent power in language. Burke describes language as symbolic, as always imbued with meaning. Anzaldua makes it clear that not only is language not neutral, but it also shapes our identities.

Although Saint Augustine agrees with his tablemates that language is not neutral, and that persuasion can either be used for good or for evil, he is ultimately the one who offers us a promising path forward. He draws upon scripture to understand that wisdom is of great value, and something that comes from God and not from ourselves. Wisdom is also the key that iss inherently tied to the ability to live a prosperous life, one that is fruitful and that is full of goodness and good outcomes. But most applicable to our question, wisdom is what enables us to speak in a way that is effective and wins others to Christ and leads them in life-giving ways. If

we are going to use speech to be persuasive, and language can never be neutral, then the choice for the Christian is how to use speech well. Augustine points us to the scriptural view that wisdom is what will guide us in using our speech for good, and that God as the “giver” of all good gifts, will provide us with wisdom in our speech if we ask.

And as the dinner comes to a close, we join Augustine in a final figure of speech: “Amen!”