

RHETORIC OF COMMUNICATION AND PERSUASION ... OR SERMONIC LANGUAGE

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Introduction

“... The has seldom been so much obvious nonsense, distortion of fact, evasion, illusion, and so many flights from reality. Fallacies are stated as fact and become conventional wisdom by endless repetition. Reality is simply described the way officials would like it to be. And honest and clear thinking has a hard time surviving in this woozy climate of rhetoric and artifice. ... The language that fills government cables, memorandums, and reports has become language that avoids acknowledging its meaning clearly, and that leads those who speak it to avoid acknowledging that meaning themselves. ... Rhetoric and image manipulation, jargon drained of meaning, artifice and technicalities that mislead, analogy and euphemism — all add up to a chilling totality that goes a long way to explaining how decent and honorable people can so persistently engage in folly ... Nor is this confined to government. One has only to ponder the level of current political campaigning, the prose of advertising and corporate business, the “think tank” briefs and ideological advocacy that masquerade as objective analysis, the mental shortcuts and mind-stopping labels of the information media.”

(Viron P. Vaky, December 12, 1986, p.24) ’

Vaky’s reference to rhetoric may seem rather indiscreet but he would not have used the derogatory insinuation if he had known that the denotative meaning of the word rhetoric, is “a search for all the available means of persuasion.” In fact, there’s a lot of rhetoric in Vaky’s cogently expressed article! The underlying theme in the above quote is paradoxically what Richard Weaver, a contemporary rhetorician, had been concerned about in his lifetime.

Weaver was a humanist who believed in high integrity, honesty and responsibility, particularly in verbal communication with others. He recognised the power of “words” and appealed to the users of language to search for the truth and to use honest and responsible language. Being effective and eloquent were not sufficient to Weaver. Rather, the basic element in speech should be “the creation of an appetite for the good.”

This article will address Weaver’s theory of language, particularly the sermonic nature and the ultimate terms in language.

The Advisory Role of Rhetoric

Weaver, an American, was really addressing his thoughts and ideas to the English-speaking Americans when he advocated the advisory role of rhetoric but it seems just as

relevant if Weaver had been addressing to the universal audience. His principles of ethics and values are certainly applicable even beyond the borders of the United States.

Life is but a journey and the world, a transit; that the journey in this world is to move the individual to the ideal. Hence, Weaver's contention that the role of the honest rhetorician is to advise, so that the spiritual and moral values in public consciousness can set the tone of the true meaning of civilization.

In many ways, values are the determinant of social behavior. They form a coherent system to be shared by members of society, and constitute the core of culture (Ackermann, 1981, p. 447). On a microscopic level, cultural values are made manifest in certain social groups to reflect their collective interests. However, there may also be internal contradictions within a given set of values. A typical example will be a society's attempts at cultural, political, economic or even religious innovation. Within that same society, there is bound to be conflict within certain quarters of society that have differing value interpretations. On a global level, the contradictions will be magnified tremendously. However, the values referred to in this context are the universal values that can be easily understood by the "universal audience."

Weaver shared Plato's ideals for working toward the good and, even though his ideas and convictions were not always popular. Weaver believed that "The rhetorician is a preacher to us, noble if he tries to direct our passion toward noble ends and base if he uses our passion to confuse and degrade us" (Weaver, 1970, p. 200). Since a "preacher" is almost always associated with religion, be it Christian, Islam or Judaism, there is the tendency among "modern" society to regard moralists as naive, quaint and hard to follow. The very use of the word "preach" and "sermon" conjures an image of someone trying to "indoctrinate" or to oversee an individual's virtue and character. In fact, the American Heritage Dictionary defines "sermon" as "a lengthy and tedious reproof or exhortation," but, then, the rhetorician always has "the choice of means in appealing to those whom he can prevail upon to listen to him" (Weaver, 1970, p. 209).

Sadly, the root of the problem in the world today is our conflicting values in life. Even leaders who have been given the mandate to lead nations often contradict the very principles of moral and ethics that they are supposed to adhere to, as leaders.

As Norman Cousins posits (Kidder, 1986, pp.28-29):

The purpose of the nation was to protect the lives, values and cultures of its citizens. Today, however, no nation is able any longer to meet these purposes ... for example, no longer capable of protecting its people from war or in war. And yet the nation still regards war as its ultimate challenge and function. And in the very act of war, paradoxically, we get closer to it, because the instruments of war reach a point where you don't want to be hit first.

Perhaps, the world is in urgent need of leaders with the calibre of the prophets whose rhetoric were able to instil courage in their followers and resisted the social, political and economic injustices of their epoch.

In this century, the Indians had Mahatma Ghandhi, whose rhetoric, in Weaver's sense of the word, was able to lead the fight for India's independence. To the Indians, Gandhi

epitomized the integral man who taught them to:

.. be actively loving toward an adversary, wear him down with patience, (do) not identify others with the evil they perpetuate, and be prepared to suffer rather than inflict suffering on adversaries, "matching" as Martin Luther King Jr. said, "their capacity to inflict suffering with your capacity to endure it."

(Easwaran, December 10, 1986, p. 19)

Apart from those ideals, Gandhi also spearheaded the resistance against both technology and science because they were considered alien to the Indian tradition.

They were, in addition, considered instruments of European domination and exploitation (A. Rahman, 1981, p. 517). Technological innovations thrived nevertheless but their utilization created a major schism within India's social structure. In most colonized countries, similar repercussions were experienced. Oftentimes, rapid economic development is accompanied by a new social order that revolutionizes traditional systems and cultural values and traditions.

Relationship Between Science, Technology, Ethics & Values

Francis Bacon had envisioned the way that science and technology should be organized "to achieve maximum results" and how "men of science" should develop an outlook to make them effective (A. Rahman, 1981, p. 508). Science and technology then came to be considered as an independent force in society, a catalyst in modernization, and the solution of social and political conflicts. But can science and technology be relied upon solely to solve mankind's problems?

Weaver's axiological form of rhetoric provides a pragmatic way of blurring the distinction between knowledge of science and technology and ethics, values or moral reasoning. No one doubts the fact that science and philosophy have contributed immensely toward our understanding of the Universe, but both fields cannot be applied independently of each other.

Weaver's theory of rhetoric strives to highlight the importance of using dialectic or logical inferences to ascertain truth and understand the nature of reality. Weaver's indictment of scientists and technologists was primarily because of their inclination to believe that the solution of material problems will suffice for all the other problems — spiritual, psychological, social or cultural. However, it may not be fair to generalize that a scientist or a technologist has abandoned his/her human values for the sake of epistemology.

Gibbin's use of his specialized knowledge in quantum physics and cosmology in relations to the "ultimate nature of reality, the origin of life, and existence of life and the Universe," may exemplify the axiological form of rhetoric that Weaver envisioned. To Gibbin, the distinction between science and philosophy "is far less than most scientist or philosophers themselves acknowledge today" (p.xiii). He referred to Aristotle's *Physica* which dealt with the "nature of the world as we perceive it" and *Metaphysical* which was an inquiry into "the underlying truths responsible for the world being as we perceive it" (p.xiv) and contended that:

The metaphysician who wonders whether a tree, or a house, has any real existence when nobody is looking at it, is seen by most of us lesser mortals as something of a joke. But the joke is on us, for the twentieth century of physics, the most hard-nosed and objective of sciences, have led inexorably to the conclusion that at the fundamental level of subatomic particles such as electrons and protons, things really don't have any "real" existence when they are not being monitored. ... Our senses respond to impressions they receive from the world outside. (p. xv).

How then could a scientist or a logical positivist be persuaded to have an interest in both the epistemology and understanding of human values? Weaver's answer would have been simple enough. Like Plato, he would have said that it is grounded on the knowledge of the truth and understanding the nature of the human soul. Truth is a universal concept but values are the important ingredient embedded in culture. In other words, ethical principles cannot be understood unless they are inculcated within the cultural environment. While cognitive aptitudes may be a gift of Nature, moral virtues, ethics, and values are not implanted in us by the Creator. Rather, they have to be "nurtured," "nourished" and "habituated" in the course of life.

A healthy balance between epistemology and moral reasoning is what the world needs in this potentially destructive nuclear age. However, the mass media has also "helped" to create false images of the many wonders of "modernisation" as a result of science and technology. These images create social schisms between the rich and the poor, between the industrial and non-industrial countries and between the "developed and "advanced" with "underdeveloped" and "primitive" societies.

Use of Ultimate Terms

The coining of "perverse shibboleths" may have begun, as Weaver contended, out of sheer pleasure. However, the problem begins when the mind and the emotion reconstruct new meanings and expressions to "lure us down the roads of hatred and tragedy ... (which is) the tendency of all words of false or 'engineered' charisma (Weaver, 1970, p. iii).

Meanings of words conveniently change over time and space owing to misrepresentations by certain quarters such as media producers, writers, people in academe, and politicians, especially people with "charismatic authority." These words become accepted and repeated as though they were absolute terms — words that sometimes produce different impacts and conjure different images to different people.

Weaver highlighted the presence of "god terms" and "devil terms" in contemporary rhetoric. According to Weaver, a "god term" is "the expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate and serving dominations and powers" (Weaver, 1970, p. 88). Its counterpart — the "devil term," is thus referred to words that express antagonism and aggressiveness toward another.

The daily use of ultimate terms is so prevalent particularly in print and broadcast journalism. It tends to encourage ethnocentrism, bigotry and sometimes mass hysteria, when carried to excess. The different "god terms" and "devil terms" articulated by Weaver in his

books *Ethics of Rhetoric* (1970) and *Language is Sermonic* (1970), have been and are so commonly used not merely in the USA (another ultimate term) but also in other parts of the world, whether in the “advanced” or “developing” countries. The last two terms — “advanced” and “developing” — also have their own “right” and “wrong” value judgements. The categorization of countries into advanced or developed and developing was originally used to express various economic complexities inherent between countries in the “North” and the “South,” or between the “West” and the “East.” Yet, there is always the inclination to be condescending or ethnocentric in expressing these common words.

The language used in international reporting typifies the rampant creation of partial and incomplete images about other parts of the world. Apart from words such as progress, science, fact, and efficient which Weaver had discussed at length, “modern” shorthand labels such as “left” and “right”, “extremists,” “fanatics,” “fundamentalists,” “terrorists,” “communists,” Marxists” and “capitalists” and many others are applied so carelessly (or intentionally) by media semanticists — “words that seem to cut off and isolate, cause more misunderstanding than they prevent” (Berg, 1972, p. 260).

Conclusion

Almost everyone is guilty of having applied some ultimate terms in daily communication activities. These ultimate terms may be construed as “god terms” or “devil terms” depending on which end of the spectrum one is at. To this, however, Weaver offered words of caution: “An ethics of rhetoric requires that ultimate in some rational sense ... through an ordering of our own minds and our own passions”,(Weaver, 1970, p.111).

Consider, for example, the following verses as food for thought:

If all the nuclear warheads
Were one thermo-nuclear warhead
What a great thermo-nuclear warhead that would be.

If all the intercontinental ballistic missiles
Were one intercontinental ballistic missile
What a great intercontinental ballistic missile that would be.

If all the military men
Were one military man
What a great military man he would be.

And if all the land masses
Were one land mass
What a great land mass that would be.

And if the great military man

Took the great thermo-nuclear warhead
 And put it into the great intercontinental ballistic missile,
 An dropped it on the great land mass,

What great PROGRESS that would be!

(Kenneth Burke, 1968, pp. 21-22)

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