Communitarian and Authoritarian Functions of Rhetoric

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My purpose is to examine the function of rhetoric in an ethical context. I am defining rhetoric as communication that addresses how the people who constitute a community might best protect their common interests and meet their common needs. I am treating ethics as community-based, as determined by the shared values of those people who are connected by common needs and common interests. My examination is governed by an assumption that the communities of which we are members hold as a primary value the right of their members to contribute to the process of defining collective beliefs and actions. Rhetoric can function within a community in such a way that it provides people with the opportunity to do so by enabling them to participate in a deliberative process, but it can also function in such a way that it denies them that opportunity by preventing their participation. In other words, rhetoric can function within our communities both, given our set of values, ethically and unethically. Whether a rhetorical discourse functions ethically or unethically within a community depends, I believe, less upon what the person presenting the discourse intends than it does upon how those who hear or read the discourse respond to the rhetoric.

Rhetoric describes communication which is brought into existence in order to influence the beliefs and actions of a community. We have inherited a tradition of theory and practice through which we understand rhetoric to be assertions articulated for the purpose of directing a community toward some kind of collective belief and, ultimately, collective action.[1] That tradition explores how rhetoric functions as a means of mediating the various and often conflicting perceptions and priorities of people who must cooperate socially, economically, and legally—as a means of solving problems which we might describe as public.[2] In doing so the tradition makes it clear that the essential function of rhetorical communication is, in the general sense of the word, political.

Because rhetoric is used by people to influence others in matters of common concern, the ethicality of its use would seem to be determined principally by the intent, or purpose, of its user, the rhetor. In communities which value the full and free political participation of their members, we assume that the fundamental purpose of an ethical rhetor would be to allow the hearers or readers of a discourse, the audience, to determine freely the extent to which that discourse will influence their attitudes and actions.[3] The fundamental purpose of an unethical rhetor within those communities, we assume, would be to constrain that freedom. Indeed, the ends
of rhetoric as Cicero identified them—to instruct, to move, to please—can be achieved by a rhetor with either purpose.

I am arguing, however, that the purpose for which rhetoric is used does not necessarily determine its function. Certainly the purpose of any discourse is controlled by the rhetor, but whether that purpose becomes functional—whether it is actually enacted by the community—remains within the control of the audience.[4] Consequently, the purposes for which rhetoric is used within a community are not as significant as the functions rhetoric is allowed to have because the effects of rhetoric, what it actually causes to occur, are determined not by what a rhetor intends but by how an audience chooses to respond.

I will explain my basis for this assertion by describing two opposing functions of rhetoric—one that is essentially authoritarian and the other essentially communitarian in order to demonstrate that the status of each is determined primarily by the response of the audience. This will support my thesis that whether discourse functions in a community to support the free participation of its members in the construction of collective knowledge and the deliberation of collective action or to limit that participation depends less upon the intent of rhetors within that community than it does upon response of audiences to rhetoric. This, I believe, places the primary responsibility for the ethical function of rhetoric with the audience, and thus with the community itself.

The function of rhetoric is authoritarian when members of a community enact, unexamined, the assertion of a rhetor. The process often begins with a rhetor who asserts a single interpretation of proper collective belief and action in the expectation that the audience will accept that interpretation without fully judging it. This expectation is founded upon an assumption that the community is structured hierarchically and within that hierarchy this rhetor is authorized to decide this matter for others. Rhetors with this assumption expect their audiences to acknowledge that authority with immediate assent. When an audience does so, that audience accepts and thus shares the rhetor's authoritarian assumption about the structure of the community. Consequently, while such rhetoric is clearly authoritarian in its intent, or purpose, it becomes authoritarian in actual function only when an audience responds with passive assent.

If the authoritarian function of rhetoric depends not upon what a rhetor intends but upon whether the audience enacts that intention without independent judgment, then even rhetoric that is not authoritarian in purpose can be made to be authoritarian in function. If an audience shares the assumption of the authoritarian rhetor—that the rhetor is authorized to judge for them—that audience perceives
rhetoric as monologue, and will assent to the rhetor's position without examining it regardless of its intent. What an audience does when it accepts this assumption is enact its own political subordination to the rhetor within the community they share.

In direct opposition to the authoritarian function of rhetoric is the communitarian function, a function brought into existence when the members of a community who are the audience actively examine, evaluate, and even revise the interpretation of proper collective belief and action which a rhetor has asserted. Rhetoric is communitarian in purpose when it is based upon the rhetor's expectation that the audience, composed of people who share with the rhetor responsibility for the well-being of the community, will respond to what is asserted by examining, by evaluating, by even asserting a revision in response. That expectation is based upon an assumption that the community is structured without inherent hierarchy, that each member is authorized to judge the interpretations of others in the process of negotiating an agreement about what they will collectively believe and what action they will collectively take. If, however, the rhetoric is to become communitarian in its function, it must have an audience whose response will be founded upon this equalitarian assumption about the structure of the community.

Members of an audience who respond on this basis perceive rhetoric functioning primarily as dialogue within the community rather than monologue, perceiving themselves as active participants in the rhetorical—and political—process.[5] Indeed, if the structure of a community is equalitarian, the roles of rhetor and audience are alternated: after asserting a position a rhetor must become audience to enable some of those who had been audience to become rhetors in response. Consequently, when people act upon this assumption about their place in the community and their role in the rhetorical process within that community they respond to rhetoric critically, with deliberated judgment. They respond in this way regardless of the intent or purpose of the rhetoric they confront, thus preventing its authoritarian function. When they refuse to accept the authoritarian assumption that subordinates audience to rhetor in a rhetorical interaction, they enact their essential political equality within the community by demanding by their critical response that the process of defining collective beliefs and actions be collaborative.

One of the earliest voices in the rhetorical tradition, Plato, addressed these two opposing functions of rhetoric in an ethical context. In an early dialogue, the Gorgias, Plato condemned rhetoric as it was taught by the rhetoricians of Athens. For most of them rhetoric was, as George A. Kennedy writes, a kind of magic a rhetor would work upon an audience
to "stir the passions or obsess the mind and draw on the listener to unconscious agreement with the speaker" (Classical Rhetoric in Its Christian and Secular Tradition {Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1980}, p. 30). For them, rhetoric was a method for manipulating an audience to accept and to enact the will of a rhetor, thus empowering those who use rhetoric well to impose their will upon others.

In his attack on this function of rhetoric, Plato compared the methods available for maintaining the political body, a community, to those available for maintaining a physical body, identifying as "true arts" those which strengthen and as "false arts" those which provide only an illusion of strength. First, Plato described gymnastics as a true art for maintaining the physical body which, in return for active exertion, provides strength, contrasting it with cosmetics, a false art, which provides only an illusion of strength. He then identified the corresponding true and false political arts: what he called judgment, through which members of a community participate in the construction of solutions to common problems; and rhetoric, through which they are led to accept solutions dictated to them while enjoying the illusion of self-government.

At the heart of the distinction Plato made between the true and false arts for maintaining a community is the level of participation allowed its members in the process: inherent in the true art of politics is the active identification by those who constitute the community of acceptable collective beliefs and actions; and inherent in the false is the absence of such activity. In the Gorgias Plato condemned rhetoric as he had seen it function because it generally denied the audience--the majority of the citizens of Athens--an opportunity to judge matters that concerned them. In a later dialogue, however, Plato described rhetoric as he believed it should function, enabling members of a community to judge and respond to the assertions of rhetors and so contribute to the construction of collective belief and action.

In the Phaedrus, Plato portrayed rhetoric functioning dialectically as a process of collaborative inquiry progressing toward a product of shared understanding. It is, essentially, rhetoric functioning as dialogue rather than monologue. Such rhetoric, as Stanley Fish describes it, "does not preach the truth but asks that its [audience] discover the truth for themselves," and Plato both described and exemplified this function through the interaction of his two characters, Socrates and Phaedrus (Self-consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature {Berkeley: UC Press, 1972}, pp. 1-2).

Phaedrus recites to Socrates a speech he has learned from the rhetorician Lysias, a speech that gives Phaedrus pleasure, but which he has not judged. In response Socrates begins the
process of teaching Phaedrus what Plato would teach us, that accepting speeches unexamined allows us to risk accepting and enacting ideas which are false, which violate what we value. Socrates guides Phaedrus through the process of judging the speech and examining the issues it raises and, in that process, they begin to describe together a more ethical function of rhetoric. Although Socrates has a strong sense what that ethical function might be, he does not impose it upon Phaedrus. Rather, he invites Phaedrus’ judgment at each stage of his presentation, allowing the understanding of rhetoric which they come to share to emerge less from the instruction given Phaedrus by Socrates than from their collaborative examination of the answers each offers to the questions posed by the other. [6]

A shared understanding of an ethical function of rhetoric, although guided and even dominated by Socrates’ assertions, emerges through the process of their dialogue. Socrates asserts a position, inviting Phaedrus’ judgment; Phaedrus considers it and responds with statements and questions that suggest a revision; Socrates then refines his position in response to the understanding of Phaedrus and the progressing content of their exchange. When Socrates and Phaedrus finally articulate their shared understanding of rhetoric, it is a construction in which the prior judgment of Socrates, although still prominent, has been improved upon through its confrontation with and resolution of the questions and concerns of Phaedrus. And because it was constructed in the context of values they share as members of the same community, their notion of rhetoric is, for them, ethical.

When Plato argued for a rhetoric based upon the principles of dialectic, he was insisting upon the active participation of audience in any rhetorical exchange. Only such participation can ensure that rhetoric will have an ethical function, that it will support the shared values of the people whose concerns it addresses. In Plato’s rhetoric, one person might lead the exchange, as Socrates did in the Phaedrus, and one position may even dominate the process, but those assertions will not be accepted and enacted unexamined. The audience will judge them carefully, will question, will criticize, and will assert revisions in response, thus making the rhetor an audience. Had Phaedrus not done so, had he responded to Socrates’ assertions without independent judgment, with passive assent, rhetoric would have functioned in the Phaedrus as the false art of delusion which Plato condemned. If the audience is passive, accepting and enacting unexamined what a rhetor asserts, the function of the rhetoric, regardless of what the rhetor intends it to be, will be authoritarian.

Plato’s notion of an ethical rhetoric emphasizes response, not assertion. Assertions are the expressed perceptions of one or of a few and thus they are inherently narrow,
inherently incomplete. They can be presented as if they are whole, as if complete, for the purpose of imposing the understanding of one or a few upon many, or they can be offered to a community as heuristics that propel collaborative deliberation and inquiry. In either case, assertions alone do not necessarily support community values. They require the completion and validation that comes through the critical response of an audience. Only the judgment of the collectivity can develop useful knowledge that supports collective values and meets collective needs.

The practical implication of my argument is this: rhetoric will function ethically in communities where audiences are critical, where they participate in the dialogical process of constructing collective belief and deciding collective action. Rhetors should inform their audiences that they expect judgment, criticism, revisions of their assertions, and encourage such responses by returning readily to the role of audience. But, more important, audiences must be careful to neither fulfill the authoritarian purpose of a rhetor who would dictate nor subvert the communitarian purpose of one who would only suggest by accepting unexamined the assertions of either. The audience must examine all assertions, judge them, and then respond. The alternative is to abdicate the right to self-government by empowering only those who can use rhetoric well. The ethical function of rhetoric in any community is, indeed, in the hands of the audience.
NOTES

[1] Aristotle's three "genres" of rhetoric are defined on the basis of the kind of public action each invites: legal, legisitative, or ceremonial. Cicero's extended discussion in de Oratore develops at length the public nature of rhetoric.


[3] The best modern interpreter of Aristotle's Rhetoric, which is the fundamental theoretical statement of the function of rhetoric, argues that the purpose of public discourse is not to change the mind of the audience, but to present a reasonable position to which the audience might choose to assent. William M. A. Grimaldi writes: "The art, or technique, of rhetoric is the ability to perceive and to present evidence which makes decision...possible; but to stop with presentation" (Studies in the Philosophy of Aristotle's Rhetoric (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1972). p. 27).

[4] I am indebted to William A. Wilson, whose comments in response to an earlier paper focusing on the role and responsibility of the rhetor led me to look again at the role and the responsibility of audience.

[5] A series of studies published in the Quarterly Journal of Speech during the last fifteen years has examined the dialogical nature of rhetorical communication. The seminal article is Richard L. Johannesen's "The Emerging Concept of Communication as Dialogue," (Dec 1971), 373-382.