
Walter Fisher has devoted the past decade of his scholarship to constructing an account of "good reasons" as the rational basis for rhetorical communication and to developing narrativity as the paradigm for such communication. "Good reasons" theory, of course, has been afoot for several decades. It was initially a philosophical response to positivist views denying content to value statements. Later it was introduced to rhetorical theory by Karl Wallace as a construct to establish the rational grounds for rhetoric in substantive content rather than in methodology. Narrativity has come into more recent vogue with the rise of interest in deconstruction, although it has been an important theme in the scholarship on oral traditions and it has not gone completely unnoticed by rhetoricians of the modern era. In Human Communication as Narration, Fisher brings both strands together in an attempt to reconceptualize the foundations of rhetorical action.

Narratives have had a very strong hold on cultural consciousness. As the researches of Perry and Lord have shown, since prehistoric times the Greek bards (as did those of other civilizations) inscribed cultural identity on the consciousness of their tribal listeners. Narratives serve as bridges between a people's experiences and the norms to which they subscribe. Narratives are thoroughly infused with values in ways that are at least didactic if not overtly rhetorical. Before there was a theory of argument, or even the copulative verb that permitted argument as we now know it, there was narration. Is this more than a historical fact? Or is it a reflection of the ontology of expression—that there are features of experience that can be brought to language only by narratives or as narratives? I believe it is the latter, and also believe that this is a view Fisher endorses. But it is not the argument he makes.

The book contains Fisher's previously published essays on narrative and "good reasons," now edited to form a single volume advancing the thesis that narrativity is paradigmatic of public moral argument. Within this paradigm, he maintains, are located the rational foundations for all rhetorical transactions. His claims for the paradigm may be summarized as follows: All humans are definitively story tellers; they are of the species homo narrans. Because they are essentially story tellers, their communication assumes the basic form of stories. Consequently, all human communication must be seen as a story form to be properly understood. The individuated forms of discourse provide "good reasons," or a matrix of values and value-laden warrants for viewing the world in a specific way. "Good reasons" provide the rationale for accepting the story-teller's tale. Finally, there is a logic to stories, validated by the characteristics of coherence and fidelity, which all humans have a natural capacity to know. This is the logic one ought to employ when assessing human communication.

Fisher has embarked on a laudable mission, to free rhetorical theory from bondage to the explicit arguments and formal argument structures found in a text. He implores us to become more attuned to the whole rhetorical performance, including elements not reducible to the strict terms of the argument per se. His book is an attempt to escape from a reductionistic view of rhetoric as consisting of discourse whose value and merit are assayed exclusively by the standards of rational argumentation—all else
being window dressing or, worse, irrational appeal. For Fisher, such an elitist view has imperiled rhetoric's intellectual vitality, severing the sinews of its populist rationality. Rhetoric does not come to the people, he argues, as formula-driven instances of technical presentation to be tested by rigid and formal rules of inference, but as portraits of experience intentionally seeking to capture in words those of life's concerns that merit serious communication. Life is not experienced in the "terms" of formal arguments, but in episodes. And rhetorical performances typically seek to translate these structures into language forms that are resonant with the experiences of audiences. Their underlying rationality is mimetic with respect to the structure of experience, hence it is an episodic logic, not a formal logic, to which all human communication adheres. This is the structure Fisher attributes to "narration": "symbolic action—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them" (58).

The overall thrust of Fisher's argument is one rhetoricians may endorse—especially in light of rhetorical thought since I. A. Richards's Philosophy of Rhetoric set forth a conception of rhetoric as a function of meaning in context. The past fifty plus years have seen rhetoricians elaborating on rhetoric's dynamics and worth as other than what one spies through a positivist's lens, reinforcing Fisher's overall claim. And yet one comes away perplexed by the specific arguments of the book. The question is why?

Part of the problem stems from the nature of the book: an edited collection of previously published essays. Originally the essays were written for other occasions, not to form a coherent exposition and detailed analysis of the philosophical and theoretical presuppositions of a discipline. The essays, qua essays, possess connectedness that provides thematic unity, as one would expect from the collected reflections over a decade by a serious mind on a serious subject. But they lack the type of systemic analysis necessary to establish its thesis that narrativity is the ontological foundation of rhetoric (17) and, in this sense, is paradigmatic of all rhetoric (65). Such a thesis requires philosophical analysis of its basic terms. But rather than perform a philosophical critique of logos and narrativity as found concepts, for example, Fisher surveys the historical links of, say, logos to mythos in the poetic-rhetorical tradition, or provides an inventory of respected scholars who affiliate with his stance. At best this is sociology of knowledge. But even were one to agree with it as accurate, this is a mode of attack ill-suited to executing Fisher's assumed burden of establishing narrativity as the ontological foundation of rhetoric.

Closeness to the original essays creates a second difficulty by frustrating one's anticipation that a fresh look will answer prior objections to Fisher's proposed narrative paradigm. One hopes to find repairs addressed to claims that narrative is a mode of discourse, not a paradigm, or that the paradigm lacks internal criteria to resolve logical contradictions among conflicting stories. And in light of Fisher's use of "narration" to refer to more than fiction, more than explicit story, but to all rhetoric as inherently conforming to a narrative structure, one is left still with concern that the definition is too broad. In the face of an evident difference between discourse that is in story form and discourse that is in argument form, it remains unclear precisely what is added to any rhetorical season by delineating its phases with narrative's calendar. If everything is narrative, nothing is claimed by affixing "narrative" to it.

These omissions are symptomatic of more fundamental flaws with Human Communication as Narration's method and argument for providing a rational grounding to all of rhetoric. I had noted earlier that Fisher's analysis, in my view, overemphasizes his intellectual affiliations. The fact that he is able to accommodate his to other leading views is a scholarly version of asking "How can 50,000,000 of the French be wrong?" It neither proves nor refutes a thesis, however. One searches in vain for an analysis of logical positivism, for instance, analogous to MacIntyre's indictment of emotivism in After Virtue. The book does not trace its pivotal terms in ways that provide internal critique. Because it does not, it lays itself bare to objections that this is more an expression of its author's values and preferences than anything paradigmatic about human communication.

The consequences of a missing internal critique are evident in some important aspects of Fisher's overall case. For example, he maintains that rationality is at the heart of rhetorical action. For some this is a contestable claim. Certainly Gorgias would not have subscribed to it, nor would DeQuincey. Moreover, much of the linguistic turn taken by current, postmodern thought specifically argues against security in claiming that discourse is to be measured by rationality, a problem illuminated compellingly by William Bartlett III's discussion of the tu quoque retort to critical rationalism in Retreat to Commitment.

Nor is it evident, contrary to Fisher's claim (115), that rational argument is prerequisite to rhetorical competence. Unless one espouses a circular concept whereby whatever is labeled rhetorical is simultaneously denoted rational, is there rationality in such obviously competent rhetorical perfor-
mances as Antony’s arousal of the Roman mob or Lamartine’s quieting of equally inflamed Parisians? Inspection of their pleas, and those of legions who have moved “the people” to act, reveals their power in places commonly regarded, heretofore, as irrational.

Fisher’s response, I suspect, would object that I have molded my characterization of “rational-irrational” rhetoric on a rational-world model of rationality, not his proposed “good reasons” model. Not completely, since rationality is not necessarily the altar at which rhetoric prays. Claiming that rhetorical experiences are not necessarily grounded in rationality is not an indictment unless one privileges rationality, as does Fisher, which makes his objections to the rational-world model all the more perplexing, since he subscribes so thoroughly to its assumed privileging of rationality while trying to overthrow its limitations on reason’s form.

And what of the model of “good reason?” Does it provide a rational logic? “Good reasons” refers to “those elements that provide warrants for accepting or adhering to the advice fostered by any form of communication that can be considered rhetorical” (107). They are portrayals of events that link experiences to an audience’s frame of reference. Of course the problem is that “good reasons” themselves are subject to the vertiginous incommensurabilities of alternative world views. In the postmodern age, tradition has been atomized, and with it the template for adjudicating irreconcilable narratives has evaporated. If rationality consists of stories that ring true to an audience’s experience, then there seems no bridging the gulf between rationality 1 and rationality 2, as events in the Middle East make apparent daily. In addition to the irony of adopting the rational world’s assumption of reason’s priority to ground rhetoric’s alternative rationality, Fisher’s argument, if correct, undermines itself by embracing the apothecary of rationality as its very core, that is, subjectivity.

Fisher attempts to step over this fault line by positing the critic as judge of what is or is not a good reason. Ultimately, the critic may find the rhetor working within the experiential frame of the people but lacking rationality because the story told does not “constitute the ideal basis for human conduct” (109). As sympathetic as a reader may be with the image of Fisher’s own ideal world, his rationale for the critic’s values as superior to those of rhetors and audiences in determining the rationality of their discourses remains unconvinging. Why is this a “logic” and not an “ethic?” Why does subjectivity of subject matter legitimate subjective criteria for assessment (110)? Perhaps most basically, how is a case so thoroughly committed to valorizing as rational “the people’s” storied reasonings reconciled to the simultaneous privileging of a critical elite to judge which of these stories provide rationally acceptable public moral arguments?

Whenever a piece of speculative scholarship moves its reader to question, to object, to wonder, and to rethink, it has accomplished valuable work. By exhibiting in public some of the ways in which Human Communication as Narration engaged me, I celebrate the virtue of Professor Fisher’s work. This is a prickly, provocative, often insightful, at times troublesome, and always engaging consideration of the conceptual scaffolding for humanistic conceptions of communication. The Speech Communication Association has bestowed well deserved accolades on Professor Fisher’s work. My objections and intellectual reservations notwithstanding, this is a worthy piece of scholarship deserving of the readership’s serious attention.

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Kaplan develops a method of philosophical analysis he calls “analytical pragmatism.” His objective is to restore humans to their natural place in the universe. Currently, humans are alienated from natural values and moral conditions. Science, properly formulated as “analytical pragmatism,” is the appropriate vehicle for this human restoration project. Kaplan argues that moral analysis can be an objective enterprise, but only if the analyst/scientist resists the temptation to embrace a totalized, global method. Analysis of values in an interdependent world, albeit a loosely coupled one, proceeds best when systems are partially reintegrated in accord with pragmatic criteria. To illustrate his argument, Kaplan juxtaposes the global methods of various oppositional philosophies: Kuhn/Popper, Quine/Kripke, Wittgenstein/Derrida, Marx/Friedman. He contends that each of these philosophies begins with a partial truth but then distorts our understanding of it by totalizing it. Truth is partial, for Kaplan, but