

## A Definition of Rhetoric<sup>1</sup>

Because definitions are so commonplace and familiar, we tend to forget they are not a part of the natural world--that they are, in fact, human inventions. We fail to realize, for example, that the category "mammal" is a division that was invented by humans and that its definition, "a warm-blooded animal with hair covering all or most of its body, the female of which produces milk to nurse the young," is an arbitrary human creation. When the biological taxonomy was invented, the categories could have been defined more broadly (so as to include more animals) or more narrowly (so as to include fewer animals). To create such definitions, some human being arbitrarily determines the characteristics of a category or a concept; those characteristics, then, determine whether particular cases legitimately fall within that category or concept.

Defining a concept is an arbitrary, human process that includes some cases while simultaneously excluding others. Still, the process of definition is an important one because our definitions determine which cases are legitimate examples of a concept and which are not. A narrow definition is advantageous because it leads us to focus on clear-cut examples of the concept but is disadvantageous because it leads us to exclude other important, if less clear-cut, cases. A broad definition is advantageous because it leads us to include important cases that a narrow definition might exclude but is disadvantageous because it leads us to include cases that are, at best, marginally legitimate cases of the concept. Wayne Booth's metaphor of fish and nets reminds us that just as too large a net will catch some fish we want to throw out, too small a net will cause us to miss some fish we might want to keep.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the breadth of the definition directly influences which cases are included and excluded in the concept.

One way to choose a definition of appropriate range is to consider the purposes of a definition. While the primary purpose of a definition is to tell us what the concept is, it also must tell us what it is not. Just as a biologist wants a definition of "animal" that distinguishes animals from plants, we need a definition of rhetoric that allows us to contrast rhetoric with things that are nonrhetorical. Thus, our goal ought to be to select a definition that meets two criteria: first, it should be broad enough to include all of the interesting and important examples; and second, it should be narrow enough to distinguish the rhetorical from the nonrhetorical.<sup>41</sup>

We have decided that our definition must recognize two senses of the term "rhetoric." In one sense, rhetoric is an action humans perform, and in a second sense, it is a perspective humans take. As an action humans perform, rhetoric involves humans' use of symbols for the purpose of communicating with one another. As a perspective humans take, rhetoric involves focusing on symbolic processes. The ways we have defined both senses of the term "rhetoric" are fraught with difficulties, so let us begin by unpacking and explaining each of the two major parts of our definition.

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1 From Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss, & Robert Trapp. "A Definition of Rhetoric," *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric* (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 1991): pp. 13-20. Pagination is different from the original.

### Rhetoric as an Action Humans Perform

When we say rhetoric is an action humans perform when they use symbols for the purpose of communicating with one another, we are saying four things: (1) rhetoric is an action; (2) rhetoric is a purposive action; (3) rhetoric is a symbolic action; and (4) rhetoric is a human action. Although these four ideas are overlapping, for the sake of clarity, we will discuss each of them separately.

Action. Action is the key term because it subsumes the other three. In Chapter Seven, we will discuss Kenneth Burke's distinction between action and motion; the other three elements we have included here (human, purpose, symbol) are all a part of Burke's distinction between action and motion. When we engage in action, we are not being passive; we are making conscious decisions about what to do. When we engage in rhetorical action, not only do we make a conscious decision to communicate, but we also make conscious choices about the strategies we will employ.

Let's take a couple of examples to see whether or not the concept of action can help us distinguish between the rhetorical and the nonrhetorical. In the first case, let's say that I go to my doctor because I am suffering from pain in my chest and arm. After I explain the nature and location of the pain, she diagnoses my condition as a heart attack. In the second case, I am awakened in the middle of the night by a severe pain in my arm and chest. An ambulance takes me to the hospital, where I am examined by a doctor. The doctor examines my heart rate and rhythm and concludes that I have suffered a heart attack. In the first example, I chose to explain my condition to the doctor, and I chose my strategies in an effort to make the nature and location of my pain clear to the doctor. This is an example of rhetorical action. In the second example, I communicated to my doctor through symptoms (heart rate and rhythm) that were directly connected to my illness. But the changes in the rate and rhythm of my heart beat were not conscious choices. They were directly connected to my physical condition. This is not an example of action and thus is not rhetorical.

Purposive Action. Some communication is purposive and some is not. Rhetorical action has occurred when someone does something for the purpose of communicating to another person. When the United States deploys an aircraft carrier off the coast of a Central American nation to warn its government not to install a weapon system that could endanger North America, the United States has performed a rhetorical action. We have taken action designed to communicate our intentions to the government of another nation. If a United States reconnaissance plane accidentally strays over the Soviet Union without the purpose of communicating anything to the Soviet Union, the pilot is not engaged in rhetorical action.<sup>42</sup>

Symbolic Action. Communication is a system of signs. In the simplest sense, a sign communicates when it is connected to another object. A distorted heart rhythm is connected to a heart attack. The changing of the leaves in autumn is connected to the change in temperature. The word "kitchen" is connected to the place where we prepare our meals. Some signs are symbolic; others are not. A nonsymbolic sign is inherently connected to its physical referent in

the way that changes in heart rate and rhythm are connected to a heart attack and the changing leaves are connected to temperature. All of these events are communication, but none is rhetorical. A symbolic sign, in contrast, is only indirectly connected to its referent and is a human creation. The word "kitchen" has no natural relationship to the place where we prepare our meals; it was invented by someone who needed to refer to the place where meals were being prepared. Thus, rhetoric involves symbolic action or the use of arbitrary symbols to communicate with other people.

But how does the concept of symbolic action help us to distinguish the rhetorical from the nonrhetorical? All sorts of nonrhetorical ways of communicating exist. When I communicate my condition to my doctor with a cry of pain, my communication is symptomatic not symbolic. In a similar fashion, a barometer communicates the barometric pressure; the clouds in the sky warn us of rain; and my word processor beeps when I commit an error. All of these events are communication, but none is rhetorical.<sup>43</sup>

Human Action. As far as we know, humans are the only animals who create a substantial part of their reality through the use of symbols. Some people debate whether or not symbol use is a characteristic that distinguishes humans from all other species of animals, pointing to recent research with chimpanzees and gorillas in which these animals have been taught to communicate using American Sign Language or other kinds of signs. Although many of the people whose ideas we will discuss in this book argue that symbols are uniquely human, we believe that this debate is unresolved and perhaps unresolvable.

Fortunately, we can avoid much of the debate by reducing the scope of our claim. We claim that the difference between humans and other animals with regard to symbol usage involves such a difference in degree that whether or not it is also a difference of kind is largely irrelevant to the position that the human is the symbol-using animal. Even if certain primates can be taught signs that operate in some fundamentally symbolic ways, these species do not create any substantial part of their reality through their use of symbols. Accordingly, humans are animals who engage in action and who use rhetoric. Birds, bees, flowers, and trees communicate, but they do not communicate rhetorically.

How does the question of whether symbol use is uniquely human help us distinguish the rhetorical from the nonrhetorical? Quite simply, rhetoric is not found in nature. It is a human invention. Trees cannot use rhetoric, and trees are not rhetoric; however, people can use trees as a part of rhetorical action. For instance, Christmas trees are used in symbolic ways. Simply the act of bringing a tree into the house and decorating it symbolizes certain aspects of the Christmas holiday. But Christmas trees can be used to symbolize other meanings, as well. Some people choose real rather than artificial Christmas trees to symbolize their disdain for anything counterfeit. Some people keep a live Christmas tree in a pot that can be reused year after year to symbolize their respect for nature and their disdain for killing trees. Humans use all sorts of nonrhetorical objects in rhetorical ways, but only humans can use rhetoric. Rhetoric, then, is a human action.

In summary, people engage in rhetorical action when they use symbols for the purpose of communicating with one another. Another important sense of the term "rhetoric" exists as well.

### Rhetoric as a Perspective Humans Take

Although rhetoric as an action humans perform is the most common meaning attributed to "rhetoric," another important sense involves rhetoric as a perspective humans take. To say that someone takes a "perspective" on something is to say that person has a particular way of viewing that object or concept.<sup>44</sup> A perspective is a set of conceptual lenses through which a person views the world. Just as a real set of lenses can color our world, a set of conceptual lenses can color the way we interpret a phenomenon. A person's religion, race, educational background, or personal philosophy are just a few examples of things that can become perspectives through which we view other objects and concepts. Say that two persons are examining fossil records for the purpose of understanding them. A person whose educational background is in anthropology will see the fossil record as a trace of the process of human evolution. A person whose religious background is in line with some types of Christian Fundamentalism may see the remnants of animal species which were biologically similar to each other because they were created by the same God.

When we analyze the process of symbolism, we are taking a rhetorical perspective. The two key terms involved in this definition of rhetoric are "process" and "symbolism."

Process. We take a rhetorical perspective when we focus on the process rather than on the content of symbolism. Examples of how we take rhetorical perspectives are many and varied. Common examples include attempting to understand how a world view is created by the communication strategies of an anti-abortion group, attempting to understand the argumentative strategies of social scientists, analyzing the persuasive strategies of an evangelist, or even attempting to understand how an artist or an architect creates a symbolic message. Thus, adoption of a rhetorical perspective involves an interest in the analysis of the symbolic processes. We focus on the process of symbolism rather than the content when we analyze how the symbols work rather than what the symbols communicate.

The notion that a person focuses on the process of symbolism rather than on the content does not mean that content and process are separate and unrelated. We cannot analyze process without content because the process cannot be seen without its content. Similarly, since all content is produced by a process and that process is always a part of the content, we cannot understand content apart from form. Process and content are like the parts of a two-color mosaic; if either of them is taken away, the entire structure crumbles. Still, we can focus on one color in the mosaic and then switch our focus to the other color. For example, Donald N. McCloskey argues that the science of economics is a rhetorical process.<sup>45</sup> When he studies articles reporting the results of economic studies, he focuses on the rhetorical processes that economists use to persuade their audiences (other economists) instead of on the content as it relates to the field of economics. For McCloskey, the rhetorical process is in the foreground,

while economics is in the background. A different economist, say Lawrence Summers, may read the same econometric study, not because of interest not in its rhetorical processes, but because of interest in its content. Both persons read the same econometric study, but McCloskey takes a rhetorical perspective while Summers takes an economic perspective.

Symbolism. We can focus on the process of symbolism in at least two ways: (1) by analyzing how people perform rhetorical action; or (2) by analyzing how people interpret symbols. The first way of taking a rhetorical perspective overlaps almost entirely with the first sense of rhetoric (performing a rhetorical action). If someone is performing a rhetorical action by telling a story about a small Midwestern town, I can take a rhetorical perspective on that action by analyzing the narrative strategies used. In this case, the two senses are overlapping. One person is performing a rhetorical action while another person is using a rhetorical perspective to analyze that action.

The second way of taking a rhetorical perspective may not overlap with the first. We can analyze the symbolic interpretations of a deed that is nonsymbolic from the perspective of the sender. In this case, the first person is taking a rhetorical perspective by analyzing a situation for its symbolic interpretation, even though the other person's action may have been committed for nonsymbolic purposes. Let's return to the example we discussed earlier where a United States reconnaissance plane accidentally strayed over the territory of an unfriendly government. If the situation were truly accidental, the pilot was not performing a symbolic action. At the same time, a rhetorical critic might take a rhetorical perspective by analyzing how military movements can be used as warnings against certain actions. In this case, the critic has taken a rhetorical perspective by focusing on the symbolic interpretation of the U.S. action even though that action was not committed for symbolic purposes.

This example of the reconnaissance plane illustrates how the two parts of our definition are different by showing how someone can take a rhetorical perspective on nonrhetorical action. This and other examples of taking a rhetorical perspective on nonrhetorical objects raises the question of how we fulfill the second criterion for an adequate definition--how we distinguish the rhetorical from the nonrhetorical. According to our definition, no objects are inherently rhetorical. Rhetoric has a symbolic but not a material existence. Objects such as copies of speeches, billboards, songs, paintings, and trees are not rhetoric. They may be rhetorical artifacts--remnants or traces of rhetorical actions--but they are not rhetoric. Rhetoric is an action people perform or a perspective people take, but it is not an object.

Thus, we have defined rhetoric in two ways--as a particular type of action that humans perform and as a particular type of perspective that they take. While these two senses of rhetoric are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, they are both important to the study of rhetoric. Although we have chosen to emphasize one of these senses (perspective) instead of the other (action) in the title of this book, we will deal with both senses of rhetoric. The eight scholars whose contributions to rhetoric we discuss here take a rhetorical perspective; at the same time, their ideas explain how people perform rhetorical action.

## Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric

We have chosen to use the term "perspectives" rather than "theories" or "philosophies" to describe the contemporary views of rhetoric included in the chapters that follow. We prefer to see them as "perspectives" for two reasons. First, that term is consistent with our definition of rhetoric. Second, "theory" is frequently interpreted according to its use in the physical, biological, and social sciences. Used in this sense, "theory" implies a coherent body of knowledge that attempts to organize, explain, and predict some aspect of the world. Since rhetorical theories are aimed more at explanation rather than prediction, we decided to avoid confusion by using the term perspective instead.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, while some of the ideas we discuss clearly are "philosophies" in that they deal with questions about the nature of reality, knowledge, or values, others do not. Thus, "perspective" is the most descriptive term we could find to organize and present the work of these eight thinkers.

1. Wayne Booth, "The Scope of Rhetoric Today: A Polemical Excursion," in The Prospect of Rhetoric, ed. Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 93-114.
2. Our readers may wonder why we chose to use the term "rhetoric" rather than "communication." Although in a very literal sense, the term "communication" is so broad that it can even include such nonrhetorical processes as a slime growing on a rock (Dance, date), we believe that the terms as they are used by scholars in communication and speech communication departments are essentially synonymous terms. Gerald R. Miller in Speech Communication: A Behavioral Approach (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), considers the terms interchangeable, as does Wayne E. Brockriede in "Dimensions of the Concept of Rhetoric," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 54 (February 1968), 1-18. For more contemporary examples, see Harper, p. 11; and Walter R. Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," Communication Monographs, 51 (March 1984), 1-22. The choice of the term--"Rhetoric" or "communication"--seems to be a personal one, often stemming from the tradition of inquiry in which one is grounded. Scholars trained in the social-scientific areas of communication or speech communication, for example, may prefer the term "communication," while those who gravitate toward more qualitative or critical methods of inquiry or who are rooted in the humanities and philosophy may tend to select the term "rhetoric."
3. In contrast, the second part of our definition will show how others might take a rhetorical perspective on that and other nonrhetorical action.
4. Because humans have highly developed symbol systems, our symbolic processes are even brought to bear on these symptomatic signs. For instance, while the height of a column of mercury in a barometer is a symptom (not a symbol) of the weight of the air in a column extending from the barometer to the highest point in the atmosphere, some human being invented the barometer and placed symbols (numbers corresponding to the height of the column of mercury) on it in order to allow us to talk symbolically about air pressure. Even though symptoms of the weather such as clouds and barometers are not inherently rhetorical, they are interpreted symbolically (thus rhetorically) by humans communicating with one another.
5. We are using the term "perspective" in the same way that Brockriede and Fisher do. See Wayne Brockriede, "Arguing About Human Understanding," Communication Monographs, 49 (September 1982), 137-47; and B. Aubrey Fisher, Perspectives on Human Communication (New York: Macmillan, 1978), especially p. 51.
6. The Rhetoric of Economics, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.
7. Barry Brummett, in "Rhetorical Theory as Heuristic and Moral: A Pedagogical Justification," Communication Education, 33 (April 1984), 97-107, proposes an interesting distinction between social-scientific and rhetorical theories of communication. His definition of rhetorical theory implies intent and actual application to experience: "a rhetorical theory is a form, pattern, or recipe, a statement in the abstract of how a person might experience a rhetorical transaction" (p.103). A social-science theory, on the other hand, must consist of a set of systematic propositions that assert that some regularities exist in the world" (p. 98). His distinction, although quite specific, seems to confirm the distinction we are proposing between a theory as regarded in the social sciences and the notion of perspectives.