
COMMUNICATING CHRIST TO THE POSTMODERN WORLD: RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVISM AND CHRISTIAN EPISTEMOLOGY

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Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. – Paul (I Corinthians 13:12b)

For that which is communicated is speech, but speech is not that which is perceived by the senses and actually exists; therefore the things that actually exist which are observed, are not communicated but [only] speech, but they are perceived by the senses. – Gorgias (Enos 1976, 45)

Then which kind of persuasion concerning justice and injustice does rhetoric effect in law courts and other public gatherings, the kind which produces belief without knowledge, or the kind which yields knowledge? – Plato (*Gorgias*, Helmbold, 6)

For nearly two millennia rhetorical theory has wrestled with epistemological controversies over such issues as the nature of truth, certainty, opinion, belief, and their relationship to persuasion. Thus rhetoricians have a unique perspective, both current and historical, from which to illuminate the *intertwoven* issues of knowledge and language. One arena where such contributions emerge is *rhetorical epistemology*, the study of the relationship between persuasion and human knowledge acquisition.

Today, Christianity is confronted with postmodernism and its denial of truth and the celebration of opinion (Middleton and Walsh, 1995). Rhetorical theory has presented an answer to the postmodern epistemology in the theory of *rhetorical perspectivism*, an outgrowth of the philosophy of perspective realism. Even though this essay examines the argument in the current communication and rhetoric literature, the answers provided by rhetorical perspectivism are consonant with Christian principles and may provide insight into a Christian response to postmodernism. I will explain the debate between the postmodern epistemic position of constructionism, that language constructs reality, and rhetorical perspectivism, that language

reflects our perspective of reality. Also, I will add several original components to the theory, commenting on the consonance between rhetorical perspectivism and Christian epistemology, and making suggestions for communicating the Gospel.

Central to the problem Christians have with postmodernism is its rejection of even the possibility of truth, in favor of story or opinion (Sire 1997, 178). The philosophical presupposition here is that if absolute truth actually existed, it would be absolutely true, and would be universally apprehended by all people everywhere. Since there is no single truth that is apprehended universally and equally, then there must be no truth at all. Doubt, then, is a proof against a proposition of truth. Postmodern reasoning would follow: "If I can doubt it, then it *must* not be true, because if it *was* true, then I could not *doubt* it." This reasoning is clear to non-Christians. For example, I was witnessing to a man who responded, "I'll believe in God when all you Christians can agree on Him." He suggested that if there really was an absolute sovereign of the universe, then he would be the same to everyone everywhere. This is where the epistemology embodied in Paul's statement in Corinthians is so important, "Now I see but a poor reflection . . ." for Paul realized that we are finite beings, limited in our ability to perceive. We only know *part* of God's creation, we can only see from our individual, unique point of view.

As I hope to demonstrate in this essay, *perspectivism* subsumes subjectivity in the individual's finite perception. Truth and reality can and do exist, but we perceive them from our individual perspective. It is reality independent from human knowers that insures a commonality for human communication. It is with effort and empathy that we can expand our perspective to include that of others.

According to postmodernism, without an objective reality that exists independently of the human knower, our language does not refer to real objects of reality, but becomes reality for us (Sire 1995, 174) This notion that language *constructs* reality formed the impetus for the current epistemological debate in rhetorical theory. It is to that debate we will now turn our attention.

An Overview of the Debate

Robert L. Scott directly confronted contemporary rhetorical theorists with the postmodern question of Rhetoric's epistemological significance in a keynote essay in 1967. Seeking to "set forth a different position as a starting point for rhetoric" (10), Scott advanced a claim that has become central to the discipline of Communication and other language arts: it is through language that our social reality is produced. As Scott (1967) put it, "Man must consider truth not as something fixed and final, but as

something to be created moment by moment in the circumstances in which he finds himself and with which he must cope" (17).

Scott himself took the epistemological position of *Constructionism* (that rhetoric constructs reality). He claimed that "cooperative critical inquiry" or rhetoric is what establishes certainty or a sense of truth (14). He believed that universals were not objectively true, but were accepted by individuals on faith as axioms for guiding behavior (14). Scott concluded that individuals can find commonality, but not certainty, in experience (15). As people attempt to act in an uncertain world, they must deal with conflicting claims about certainty and truth, and rhetoric serves as the means by which those claims are evaluated and acted upon (15). Ethical behavior, Scott claimed, is the result of facing this uncertainty with "tolerance, will, and responsibility" (16). Tolerance is essential, since no individual's knowledge claim can be certain, and enforcing tolerance is an act of individual will, but the individual must take responsibility for their own actions. Indeed, Scott's essay pushed beyond epistemological constructionism to include arguing that rhetoric contributes to social knowledge, which is not certain, but which is relative to individuals and cultures (16).

Ten years later, Scott had not altered his conclusion that "Rhetoric aims at knowledge that is social and ethical" (1976, 259). He confirmed the notion of "intersubjectivity," that certainty can be approximated in a society by individuals comparing their own purely subjective knowledge with other's equally subjective knowledge. This comparison, argued Scott, is done through rhetoric (259).

It must be noted here that Scott's contention (that truth does not precede its articulation in discourse, but is rather created as the result of language use) captured the imagination of numerous scholars who sought subsequently to enlarge and expand this doctrine. What soon became known as the "rhetoric-as-epistemic" thesis burgeoned as a multitude of theoretical explorations concluded that the creation of truth or knowledge proceeds, in one fashion or another, linguistically, that is, *through rhetoric* (Brummett 1976, 1981, 1982, 1990a, 1990b; Farrell 1976, 1978, 1990; Carleton 1978; Gross 1990; Simons 1990).

By the last decade of the twentieth century, the postmodern rhetorical knowledge thesis became commonplace, articulated in terms of a generalized doctrine. As Ann Gill expressed this predominant contemporary view in her recent book *Rhetoric and Human Understanding*: "Human beings experience reality only through their various systems of signs and as it is presented to them by the society within which they live and the groups of which they are a part." She concluded, "Reality is, in human terms, socially constructed by human means" (1994, 245). As Sonja Foss describes it,

“Reality, then, is simply the world as seen from a particular description or language: it is whatever we describe it as” (1989, 188). These versions of the rhetoric-as-epistemic thesis are typically called “constructionist” because they claim that reality is *constructed* by each individual through rhetoric. In this line of reasoning, “reality” is a word, and its meaning is individual to the user. Likewise “truth” is just a word, whose meaning is constructed. Thus “God” is reduced to merely a word, whose reality we construct linguistically.

This constructionist formulation of the rhetorical knowledge thesis has been vigorously opposed by a number of scholars. For the most part, opponents of constructionist theories do not deny that rhetoric *is* epistemic, in that it contributes to knowledge; rather, they question the ways in which Constructionism interprets this claim.

While the theorists we have examined to this point all developed epistemic theories of rhetoric that are clearly relativist in flavor, Richard Cherwitz (1977) proposed a theory in direct counterpoint. Although he agreed with Scott that rhetoric is epistemic, he denied that all rhetoric *creates* reality or that the knowledge attained by rhetorical means is wholly or necessarily relative. Instead, Cherwitz held that part of human rhetorical activity *validates* facts about the world that are independent of human communication behavior.

In other words, rhetoric is “truth evocative” because it does not create reality for each individual, subjective and relative to that individual, but in a *realist* sense it is part of the process that justifies, as true or false, claims made about an already existing reality (Cherwitz 1977, 216). Cherwitz suggested that rhetoric is part of the cumulative process of establishing knowledge. As ideas are debated in the marketplace of ideas, they are compared to reality as it is perceived from individual points of view, and either accepted or rejected or maintained for further evaluation. No single utterance may be, in and of itself, knowledge, but epistemologically productive rhetoric must be seen as “a dialogic process or a series of speeches whose cumulative effect is epistemic” (217). Reality is not created, argues Cherwitz, but truth about reality is earned, established, validated, and justified rhetorically. Thus we come to the theory of Rhetorical Perspectivism.

Rhetorical Perspectivism

The theory of rhetorical perspectivism as developed by Cherwitz and James Hikins (1982, 1983, 1986, 1990) is based on a version of philosophical *realism*. As such, it holds that the content of reality exists largely independent of humans’ attitudes, beliefs, values, or communication.

According to realism, whatever the nature of the world is, there is only one world and it includes more than humans and their language use. It follows that, in many significant ways, the world is not changed or changeable by what humans say or think about it (Searle 1995, 155).

According to the specific version of realism Cherwitz and Hikins adapt to rhetoric, all elements that comprise the world are produced by a fundamental ontological property, namely, *the relation*. A thing is what it is because of the relationships in which it stands to all else. Individual “things,” they contend, have no intrinsic properties, that is, no properties that are wholly constitutive of the thing itself. Instead, properties or characteristics of things *arise* only as the result of the *relation*. The chair is not a chair because of its “chairness,” but because of the relationships of the wood, screws, glue, and varnish which comprise the chair, as well as element such as gravity which allows us to sit in it. These are all just a portion of the relations that exist in the “Chair.”

In other words, everything that exists, exists *in relation* to everything else, and *independent* of humans. This is consonant with Christian ontology that claims God exists prior to and independent of mankind. Genesis 1:1 is, thus, an ontological statement of God’s relationship to reality, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”

People, because they are aggregates generated from and situated in larger relational contexts, are always conscious of reality from their own particular locus or place in the universe. That locus situates individuals in relation to everything else in reality, and, being finite, they interact with everything else from their own unique place. This conscious interaction can operate through perceptions, which means that humans perceive reality from their own unique points of view. In other words, humans each have their own *perspective*.

As a result of this perspective, people often “see” only part of their immediate surroundings, and their rhetoric reflects what would appear to be a “subjective” stance. Unlike the constructionist notions of subjectivism and intersubjectivism, a perspective is not created through language; instead it represents the perceiver’s assay of an objective aspect of reality. This explains how reality can exist independently of the human knower, yet each human can know reality in a slightly different way. Thus, differences of opinion stem from differences in individual points of view, not differences in reality. As can be seen in a court of law, for example, five witnesses to an accident can see five different things. Not because there were five different accidents, but because the five witnesses each exist in a unique relation to everything else and their testimony evidences those five individual perspectives.

Could not the same be true of God? We each have a *personal* relationship with Jesus Christ. We each approach Him in the context of that relationship. We each perceive Him, in part and from our own unique point of view. Notice how the Bible uses many different names and titles for Jesus: Emanuel, Mighty God, Counselor, Prince of Peace, Son of Man. Each name embodies part of the available multiplicity of relationships between people and God the Son. Extending this idea, we can observe that we gather ourselves together in congregations, churches, and denominations that share commonalities between our own individual perspectives.

According to this theory, any communicator can, and frequently does, get others to know or “see” dimensions or aspects of the world through the linguistic descriptions of reality. One can describe certain features (aspects) of reality and get an audience to understand those features. Unlike related claims of constructionism, rhetorical perspectivism claims that subjectivity is rarely absolute and may be *overcome* through a certain mode of rhetoric (Cherwitz and Hikins 1983, 265). As humans, we share many perspectives and engage in discourse about those perspectives, a mosaic of the world can be constructed and tested. But what is the motivation to communicate? How can we ethically engage each other’s perspectives? I will add two concepts to the theory of rhetorical perspectivism which will aid in answering these questions.

Additional Concepts

I propose additional concepts, new to rhetorical perspectivism: the “epistemic impulse,” and “critical empathy.” The epistemic impulse is a concept that emerges from what I regard as a general human trait or characteristic, specifically, the desire *to know*. As a Christian, I believe God created this desire in us, so that we would turn our attention to Him and come to know Him. “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible Qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made . . .” (Romans 1:20). We have no excuse for not knowing Him.

This trait could be understood as a kind of innate curiosity. Curiosity is a motivation in humans to make and accept epistemic *judgments*, or *claims*, about various aspects of the world. We all make and accept such claims. We typically assess them as *true* or *false*. I define this “epistemic impulse” as the human need to know about reality. I am contending that humans, by the design of God, have an *innate* desire to know, and ultimately, to know God.

If all humans exist in their own unique perspective to objects in the universe, then people have different views of the same object. Some relatively “simple” objects may be more or less fully seen, while others may be so vast or complex that each of us sees only an incomplete portion. God is in the latter category. We, who are finite are attempting to understand the infinite.

In order to test and develop our knowledge claims, one thing we can do in the process is compare and contrast other perspectives. These multiple perspectives provide a way for us to develop knowledge outside our own unique point of view. The epistemic impulse thus provides the motivation for our communication. In order to know, and know more, we *must* communicate. In order to understand the other person’s perspective, we must *listen* as their language describes their perspective.

This is a dramatic conclusion for the Christian community. So much emphasis on personal evangelism is placed on *talking*, on the persuasive technique that will convince someone to accept Christ. But, as a consequence of rhetorical perspectivism, I propose that *listening* should be a significant part of personal evangelism. Listening allows us to see the world from another person’s point of view. This accrues two benefits. One, it communicates that the speaker is valued and accepted (Devito 1998, 148). The gospel message is not just one of doctrine it is one of love and acceptance. It is a message of hope, and when the speaker feels valued and accepted, they are more open to the gospel of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Two, listening to understand another’s perspective will aid us in understanding the speaker’s point of view. By understanding what they say, we can see into their heart, “Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:43b), and that is where the love of Jesus Christ can reach them. By knowing their heart, we can better communicate the Gospel in *their* terms, not ours. Christ came to fishermen as a “fisher of men” and came to the women at the well as a “well that will not run dry.” Imagine the confusion if he had told the woman at the well “I will make you a fisher of men.” We, also, must learn that people’s perspectives may be very far removed from ours, or their perspectives may occlude a view of the Gospel, and we must talk to them in their terms, not ours.

The responsibility of the Christian communicator is to be able to approach the rhetorical situation empathetically, listening to what the speaker, or rhetor has to say. In this regard the Christian communicator is much like the rhetorical critic, approaching the rhetorical situation presented by a speech or a rhetorical artifact. The communicator/critic tries to move into the same perspective as the rhetor, to see it from the

rhetor's position. Empathy is feeling with someone "seeing the world as they see it" (Devito 1998, 142). When the communicator or rhetorical critic engages in this empathy in order to critique a message or rhetor with the goal of increased understanding and knowledge, it is what I call critical empathy. The practice of critical empathy allows us to listen and increase our understanding of the rhetor's perspective while maintaining our own unique point of view.

The challenge for critical empathy is to be able to see from the rhetor's perspective, with a minimum of intrusion of personal valuation on the part of the communicator/critic. This by no means entails the slightest doctrinal compromise. We as Christian communicators are never divorced from our own relationship with Jesus Christ, and do *not* have to *accept or embrace* the rhetor's viewpoint, only understand it. The communicator's personal perspective can come into play later, after the rhetor's perspective is empathetically enjoined, in order to more effectively communicate the Gospel.

Critical empathy entails a flexibility on the part of the communicator/critic to see from another's point of view, while admitting that the unique perspective of the communicator/critic cannot be abandoned, and without having to agree with the rhetor's position. We can see, but not agree. Recall that rhetorical perspectivism suggests that some views may indeed be more accurate than others, not all views are equal as postmodernism suggests.

We all have our own ingrained enculturation and complete, absolute, disenjoined objectivity is practically impossible. Critical empathy allows us to celebrate diverse perspectives because no matter how accurate or inaccurate, they are all *multiple* perspectives of one reality, *one* God, *one* Lord and Savior. A benefit of approaching people this way is that the audience for the gospel is invited to engage in the same empathetic operation as the Christian: empathy, comparison, and evaluation. Thus, we never wholly lose our own individual uniqueness, while providing an opportunity for non-Christians to also have their perspectives widened and their view of the Gospel to increase.

In Conclusion

Postmodernism claims that there is no truth, no reality, no certain knowledge beyond our own language. Language creates a subjective, relative reality, and the best we can hope for is intersubjective agreement not knowledge. The realist theory of rhetorical perspectivism claims that humans exist in relation to reality, and language reflects the individual's

relationship. Language describes an objective reality, and we can gain knowledge of that reality. We see reality in part, we know it in part, from our own place in creation. This theory provides secular consonance with our own Christian ontology, that God and reality exist independent of humans, and our epistemology as illustrated in Corinthians: 13:12b, “Now I know in part, but then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

We have an epistemic impulse, a desire to know, and that is directed at different objects in reality. As Christians, we need to use the idea of critical empathy, empathizing with a rhetor to see from their perspective, to make our efforts at spreading the gospel more effective. Therefore we can see that this rhetorical/epistemological essay has returned us to an emphasis in Christian communication on empathy, love, acceptance, and hope. We want to save people, because we love them. So we find ourselves in the same place Paul did in I Corinthians 13:13 “And now these three remain, faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love.”

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