
Scott R. Stroud: *Kant and the Promise of Rhetoric*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014. x, 274 pp. ISBN: 978-0-271-06419-2.

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The “promise” referred to in the title of Stroud’s new book, *Kant and the Promise of Rhetoric*, concerns the discovery of a whole set of communicative practices “oriented toward persuasion, belief formation, and actional change” (7), which are an essential part of Kant’s project of moral cultivation but which were never acknowledged by Kant himself as containing any genuine “rhetorical” value. The purpose of the book is to vindicate the validity of this largely ignored yet immensely fruitful field of inquiry.

Stroud’s main contention is that the communicative practices in question are designed to “make ourselves and our communities more virtuous and capable of instantiating autonomy” (8). This view upends conventional wisdom, according to which Kant is “a modern defender of Plato’s attack on rhetoric” (5) and regarded “the art of persuasion through communicative means” with great antipathy and distrust. Kant’s biography seems to confirm this picture, as he “turned down the post of professor of poetry at the University of Königsberg in 1764, even though he was eager for academic advancement and funds” (4). Therefore, reclaiming a positive role for rhetoric in the Kantian corpus is an ambitious project. It requires not only overhauling entrenched Platonic habits of thought, but also reinterpreting the very letter of Kant’s writings, which are often openly hostile toward rhetoric.

Such hostility, Stroud argues in the first chapter, owes much to historical contingency. It was motivated by Kant’s relation to Christian Garve, a “popular philosopher” who taught rhetoric and translated Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric* and Cicero’s *On Duties*. The Garve-Feder review of the first *Critique* in the *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen* (1782) accused Kant of lacking originality and being incredibly hard to read. Not only were those charges a spur to write the *Prolegomena*, but they also led Kant to identify rhetoric with the pursuit of honor and happiness – the kind of externality the *Groundwork* disparaged as having no intrinsic moral worth. Stroud’s thesis is that Kant conflated the whole of rhetoric with Garve’s version of it. This explains why “Kant so often restricts his notion of rhetoric to end-based activity, especially connected to maximizing pleasure” (21), and turns rhetoric into a mere “tool in a system of moral egoism, or the pursuit of one’s idiosyncratic self-interest” (22).

Much is lost, however, with this conflation. For, although “[i]t is dreadfully true that Kant did not write or lecture on the art of speaking or the art of rhetoric, [...] this should not prevent us from seeing communicative means of moral improvement in his work” (13). “All that is stopping us from exhuming a useable form of rhetoric in Kant,” Stroud believes, “are our own inhibitions” (137). As he candidly puts it: “It is not disingenuous to say that one needs a certain amount of faith to find a sense of rhetoric in Kant. [...] To a very real degree, one must have faith that there is a sense of rhetoric in Kant to unearth rhetoric in Kant” (138).

To forestall the charge of empty prophesying, Stroud must be able to cobble together, from what Kant did *not* write or say about rhetoric (there is no specific book or record to draw from), a hidden pattern of evidence about how rhetorical practices can play an essential role in our moral improvement. The methodological challenge, in short, is to make explicit what Kant must have thought but did not say about rhetoric. To get the project off the ground, Stroud tackles in chapter two what is broadly considered the most damning piece of evidence *against* rhetoric in the Kantian corpus: § 53 of the third *Critique*. In this section, Kant compares the value of the various fine arts and praises poetry at rhetoric’s expense. “The art of poetry,” Kant argues, “claims the highest rank of all” because it sets the imagination free, “letting the mind feel its capacity to use nature on behalf of and, as it were, as a schema of the supersensible” (KU, AA 05: 326). In contrast,

Rhetoric (*Beredsamkeit*), insofar as by that is understood the art of persuasion, i. e., of deceiving by means of beautiful illusion (as an *ars oratoria*), and not merely skill in speaking (*Wohredenheit*) (eloquence and style), is a dialectic, which borrows from the art of poetry only as much as is necessary to win minds over to the advantage of the speaker before they can judge and to rob them of their freedom; thus it cannot be recommended either for the courtroom or for the pulpit. (KU, AA 05: 327)

Unlike poetry, which connects a sensible presentation “with a fullness of thought to which no linguistic expression is fully adequate, and thus elevates itself aesthetically to the level of ideas” (KU, AA 05: 326), the art of persuasion obfuscates the truth and deceives “by means of beautiful illusion” (KU, AA 05: 327). Instead of serving as a symbol of morality, the beautiful is used here to dupe us, to cloak “vice and error,” instilling “the deep-seated suspicion of artful trickery” (KU, AA 05: 327). “Put simply,” Stroud says, “the evocation of emotions subverts the audience’s power of reason to get their cooperation in pursuit of a speaker’s end, which renders such a practice manipulative and harmful to the audience’s freedom” (40). For, as Kant explains in a footnote, oratory “understands how to move people, like machines, to a judgment in important matters which must lose all weight for them in calm reflection” (KU, AA 05: 328n.). It is not accidental, then, that Kant connects this kind of communication with “dialectic” and “per-

suasion,” terms which designate the illusory workings of reason when it oversteps its proper limits, and with the passing of private/subjective grounds as if they were public/objective.

Yet, Stroud insists, to confine this passage to a cluster of Platonic dualisms (truth vs. illusion, reason vs. emotion, etc.) is to flout important interpretative possibilities. As he sees it, Kant leaves room here for a positive sense of rhetoric, understood as “skilled speaking (*Wohlredenheit*) (eloquence and style)” (KU, AA 05: 327), as opposed to *Beredsamkeit*, the manipulative and deceitful use he so forcefully condemns. Indeed, certain kinds of human affairs, Kant proceeds to explain, contain “distinct concepts” that are debased when “the machinery of persuasion” is set in motion, but which can receive new life when “combined with a lively presentation in examples, and without offense against the rules of euphony in speech or of propriety in expression” (KU, AA 05: 327). This is what sometimes happens in the “courtroom and the pulpit”, where “it is a matter of civil laws concerning the rights of individual persons, or of the lasting instruction and conscientious observation of their duty” (KU, AA 05: 327). Here “eloquence and style” often work on behalf of morality, using beautiful expression as a kind of *hypotyposis*, “the vivid presentation of a concept that ordinarily escapes our ability to understand it empirically” (28). Such sensuous presentations, Stroud argues, transform our affective and cognitive states, allowing us to attain, as a result of the rhetorical experience, a genuine respect for the moral law.

By challenging the grounds of Kant’s invidious comparison between poetry and rhetoric, Stroud manages to draw a wedge into what appeared to be a monolithic sense of rhetoric. This move allows him to topple the traditional Platonic conception of rhetoric as the other of reason and to replace it with a distinction within rhetoric itself – a distinction that allows the old enemies to reconcile. According to this view, what matters is not the content or tactic used in the process of communication (whether, for example, the speaker resorts to figurative or argumentative language) but the moral orientation an agent brings to bear in the communicative exchange, for “figurative language can be used in a speaker’s purposive scheme to disempower the audience, or it could be used with the intention of empowering the audience” (45 f.). The reification of rhetoric as a manipulative practice is a form of reductionism that forecloses its non-manipulative potential, i. e. its capacity to edify and promote human freedom.

I

Rhetoric, it follows from this view, has an epistemic status comparable to pragmatic anthropology: although cognizing human nature is supposed to remind us of our moral teleology (what “the human being [...] as a free acting being [...] can and should make of himself” (Anth, AA 07: 119)), this knowledge can equally be used to promote immoral purposes. Just as the vicious and the virtuous alike can take advantage, for example, of “what has been found to hinder or stimulate memory” (Anth, AA 07: 119), they can also deploy rhetorical means to stifle or to trigger the exercise of human freedom. But to forego the “promise” to prevent the “curse” is a grave mistake. For both anthropology and rhetoric belong to what Robert Louden has aptly called “Kant’s impure ethics,” the “second part” of morality that teaches us how the pure, a priori principles of Kant’s practical philosophy apply to the historically contingent conditions of human existence.⁸ In the Introduction to the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant refers to this project as “moral anthropology”:

The counterpart of a metaphysics of morals, the other member of the division of practical philosophy as a whole, would be moral anthropology, which, however, would deal only with the subjective conditions in human nature that hinder people or help them in *fulfilling* (*die Ausführung*) the laws of the metaphysics of morals. It would deal with the development, spreading, and strengthening of moral principles (in education in schools and in popular instruction), and with similar teachings and precepts based on experience. (MS, AA 06: 217)

In the rest of the book, Stroud explores the contributions of rhetoric, a branch of “moral anthropology” neglected until now, to the field of impure ethics. So construed, the “promise” alluded to in the title must be delivered by showing how rhetoric contributes to overcoming “the subjective conditions in human nature” that hinder our moral development.

In chapter three, Stroud connects those subjective limitations with what he calls “the problem of force” in Kant’s practical philosophy. The problem arises because it is unclear how to connect external and internal freedom, “acting” and “willing,” which are modes of exercising human agency that obey irreducibly different kinds of legislation – external coercion and self-constraint. This distinction structures the *Metaphysics of Morals*, which Kant divides into the Doctrine of Right and the Doctrine of Virtue. In Stroud’s reading, the relation between them is hierarchical: “The principle of right is the minimal systemic condition that must

⁸ Robert Louden, *Kant’s Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000; and *Kant’s Human Being: Essays on His Theory of Human Nature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

be realized as a precursor to the kingdom of ends” (95), the ideal community of virtuous agents. This condition is “minimal,” because even when agents “are not well disposed in manner or habit, coercive force might efficaciously be brought to bear” (95). By disciplining inclinations, Kant hopes, the state will eventually weaken our self-conceited tendencies and foster moral dispositions. Yet, Stroud warns us, there is reason to be doubtful of such hope: although the public sword can determine my actions, it cannot possibly *force* me to be moral. This is an act of internal freedom I cannot be constrained by others to perform.

Since Kant believes that coercion to have ends is self-contradictory (MS, AA 06: 381) and that making another person virtuous is self-defeating because it destroys the autonomy it wants to preserve, it follows that the state is *in principle* unable to moralize its citizens. At best, politics can prevent bloodshed and secure our property, but it cannot possibly make us *good* people. At this juncture, it would seem that the virtuous must surrender to quietism or despair, waiting for others to do a job that external moral intervention would mangle. Yet, Stroud argues, precisely here, where politics is to no avail and morality has still to be chosen, lies the “promise of rhetoric.” For persuasion offers a middle ground between “waiting on others to self-cultivate and manipulatively forcing them to ‘freely’ choose self-perfection” (102). It avoids both extremes, since rhetoric has the power to transform an agent from within, to change her disposition in a non-coercive and respectful fashion. Stroud’s point is that non-manipulative rhetoric offers those who embrace Cato’s ideal of the *vir bonus discendi peritus* (“the good man, powerful in speech” (KU, AA 05: 328n.)) a way to honor their own agency and integrity without jeopardizing the agency or integrity of others.⁹ When force leaves human beings stranded, and deception leaves them adrift, only forthright persuasion can release them from the grip of natural causality.

II

The “problem of force” plays itself out in various communicative contexts. Chapter four is devoted to education. Here, the fundamental tool of non-manipulative rhetoric is the use of hypothetical examples, whose role is to persuade agents to adopt a moral self-conception. Unlike real examples, which often instigate jealousy and blind imitation, hypothetical examples stipulate motives and maxims in a given situation. It is not a matter of historical accuracy or logical

⁹ Kant mistakenly attributes the saying to Cicero, whom he accuses of not “always remaining true to this ideal” (KU, AA 05: 328n.).

truth – what matters is the effect the constructed example has on the moral orientation of the student. When successful, “[t]he end desired (a certain disposition) is an integral part of the means of communication” (118), for the rhetorical experience helps the attending agent to actualize the moral mindset described in the example. Stroud calls this self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating communicative dimension “end-instantiating logic” (118), a feature completely lacking in manipulative rhetoric, where “the speech is a mere goad to get the hearer to (unknowingly) do what the speaker wills” (119). What hypothetical examples reveal is “not the physical possibility of a given behavior” but “a certain way of thinking, a certain disposition toward why one acts in regard to self and others” (126). In this way, examples fulfill an important function in the process of moral schematism: they present something abstract, unknown or not totally understood to the auditor by rendering it “‘comprehensible through analogy with something of the senses’ (Rel, AA 06: 65n.)” (119).

Chapter five, in my opinion the most original and insightful in Stroud’s book, extends the discussion of rhetoric to Kant’s philosophy of religion. The claim is that while “religious narratives and symbols provide vivid ways of *presenting* the moral disposition or orientation” (140), rituals offer the chance of “*performing* the moral disposition in communal settings” (141). “Through the vivid presentation and performance of such dispositions, Kant’s religious educative rhetoric seeks to persuade individuals to move toward the goal of self-improvement, all the while avoiding the pitfalls of ego focus, self-love, and competition with others” (141). In this model, the visible church “occupies a middle point between the state of right (political, external harmony established by coercion) and the ideal state of individuals governing themselves under the law of virtue (as indicated in the universal church and the kingdom of ends), since the visible church is hailed as a vehicle to gradually lead humans to progress toward a community that encompasses all human agents of their own free volition” (146). Far from being an instrument of oppression, religious institutions serve as the locus of free public discourse (147). The community is supported by rituals that embody “ways of acting in a meaningful fashion,” and hence evoke “the performative force of Kant’s internally motivating rhetoric to a high degree, as it often relies on performed action more than the exact words that are said in its performance” (170).

The final chapter examines the educative effects of “making our own assertions and [...] evaluating the claims of others during our communicative interactions” (184). Stroud’s point is that “if citizens speak and listen to one another in the right way, they not only instantiate a moralized disposition in the present but help bring about its presence in future experience” (207). The rhetorical subject functions as producer and receiver of messages, roles Stroud calls “*critical rhetor*” and “*rhetorical critic*”, respectively. The critical rhetor abides by three maxims:

to think for oneself, to think in the position of everyone else, and to think consistently (KU AA 05: 294; cf. Anth, AA 07: 228). These maxims lead her to be simultaneously partisan and cosmopolitan – a tension that is resolved by detaching one's personal self-interest from the act of presenting a persuasive argument. This detachment happens when we submit our assertions to free and public scrutiny, a process which instills an attitude Stroud calls "skeptical fallibilism" (214). The rhetorical critic, on the other hand, is aware that "the tribunal of reason lies in each of us" (216) and hence develops an open-minded attitude to judge her own views and those of others. She treats others as equals, considers their claims as potential bearers of truth, and doubts that her own criticisms are certain or exhaustive (229). "These maxims all add up to produce what could be called the primary guideline of Kantian rhetorical criticism: a critic's normative self-worth is revealed by the moral worth he or she attributes to the subjects of criticism, no matter how much he or she disagrees with them" (231).

III

There is much to praise in Stroud's book, arguably the most ambitious and detailed study of Kantian rhetoric to date. My main reservation concerns Stroud's confidence in the accessibility of an agent's moral orientation, which, in his analysis, is the key to determining whether rhetoric is deployed for manipulative or non-manipulative purposes. As I see it, this confidence goes too far, for it overlooks the pernicious influence of the "dear self" (GMS, AA 04: 407) and our deep-rooted tendencies toward self-deception, which lead us to "throw dust in our eyes" (Rel, AA 06: 38) and flatter ourselves regarding the purity of our intentions. This is an important theme in Kantian ethics, which Stroud fails to properly address – an omission that makes the account stumble on the very question upon which it stands or falls, since there is nothing more dangerous than the rationalizations and self-justificatory stories of so-called moralizers.

Leaving this objection aside, there is no doubt that *Kant and the Promise of Rhetoric* is a much-needed and important contribution to the field of Kantian studies. It expands the field of "impure ethics" in new directions and will trigger renewed interest in this neglected dimension of "moral anthropology."