



University of Richmond
UR Scholarship Repository

Rhetoric and Communication Studies Faculty
Publications

Rhetoric and Communication Studies

2001

Revision and Immortality in Philosophical Argumentation: Reconsidering the Rhetorical Wedge

Mari Lee Mifsud

University of Richmond, mmifsud@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/rhetoric-faculty-publications>

 Part of the [Rhetoric Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mifsud, Mari Lee. "Revision and Immortality in Philosophical Argumentation: Reconsidering the Rhetorical Wedge." *Informal Logic* 21, no. 1 (2001): 51-60.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Rhetoric and Communication Studies at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Rhetoric and Communication Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Revision and Immortality in Philosophical Argumentation: Continuing Thoughts on the Rhetorical Wedge

MARI LEE MIFSUD *University of Richmond*

Abstract: This essay explores Johnstone's idea that "rhetoric is a wedge." In particular, it explores the place of this idea in Johnstone's philosophy of argument, the need to confront this idea with argument, and ways of confronting it with *ad rem* and *ad hominem* arguments.

Résumé: On explore l'idée du Johnstone selon laquelle la rhétorique est une "coin". En particulier, on examine l'importance de cette idée dans sa philosophie de l'argument et le besoin d'opposer cette idée aux arguments *ad rem* et *ad hominem*.

Keywords: Henry Johnstone, rhetoric, argument, the rhetorical wedge, the rhetorical bridge, *ad rem*, *ad hominem*, self-referential inconsistency.

I write this essay in tribute to Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., my mentor and friend. Before Johnstone died we had a final conversation about writing. He remarked to me that he had tried to write as he had tried to live, freely and with the kind of passion, surprise, and wonder that can come only from an unprogrammable approach void of obstacles or plans, with the exception of interesting questions arising from perplexing problems. I write this tribute to Henry Johnstone with these remarks in mind. I begin with the question that Johnstone asked me toward the end of his life, namely how can one attack the thesis "rhetoric is a wedge"?

This question has a certain shock value when we consider that the idea of the rhetorical wedge is one of the most pivotal in Johnstone's philosophy of argument. The rhetorical wedge, as Johnstone came to frame its function, is a means, perhaps the only means, of evoking and maintaining the consciousness necessary for communication (Johnstone, 1970, pp. 115-121). The very function of rhetoric is to call attention to a situation for which objectivity is claimed. Rhetoric's solicitation of attention is wholly different from a stimulus that directly excites a reflex, never emerging as an object of consciousness. Such a stimulus is irrelevant to rhetorical transactions (Johnstone, 1990, p. 334). All rhetorical transactions open up a space of consciousness between an audience and some fact or idea of which it has been hitherto unconscious. Johnstone uses the rhetorical wedge metaphor for whatever act of speech that is capable of separating a subject from an object in such a way that the former becomes conscious of the latter. These acts of speech can be as

mundane as someone asking, "Isn't that your telephone ringing?" or as extraordinary as someone asking "Will we always be able to bear the financial cost of applying the results of ongoing medical research to the project of extending our lives further and further?" Upon hearing this question, one may for the first time become aware of having hitherto unthinkingly assumed the cost to be continually bearable.

When rhetoric acts like a wedge, it functions to evoke consciousness by separating a person addressed from some of her stimuli:

Wedges separate. What has been separated must have at least two parts. The two parts separated by the wedge of rhetoric are the hitherto unnoticed items now brought into the focus of attention, and the self that does the attending. One cannot evoke an object of attention without evoking a self. (Johnstone, 1980, p. 68.)

In the absence of the rhetorical wedge, no medium can be opened between consciousness and its object. Johnstone found Aristotle's message to Democritus important for articulating this position, namely that in the absence of a medium we could see nothing at all.¹ Sight presupposes a *metaxu*, or an "in-between," what Johnstone sometimes called an interface. We could not, for example, see an object placed directly on the eye. Language, the medium of communication, must likewise separate the message from its recipient. Otherwise the activity would be akin to opening a person's skull and simply placing the information on her brain. Computer communication works this way, but in human communication, information does not pass directly from its source to the storage facilities of the receiver. The gap that interrupts this direct passage is created by the interface of the rhetorical wedge. The rhetorical wedge is what creates open-mindedness through the coming of contradiction. On the one hand, persons experiencing the rhetorical wedge wish to maintain themselves. On the other hand, their exposure to something that appears to bring their position into contradiction necessitates their risking change. The tension between the desire to maintain themselves and the risk of change is brought into being by means of the rhetorical wedge. "Such tension is necessary to any human being who wishes to transcend the horizons of immediate experience and inhabit a world" (Johnstone, 1965, p. 4).

Considering the importance of the position that "rhetoric is a wedge" has in Johnstone's theory of argument, before obliging him in pursuit of the question of how we should attack it perhaps we should begin by asking *why* we should. We might justify the inquiry on the surface by attending to the fact that Henry Johnstone, the dying author of the idea, wanted to keep the conversation going. But framing the "why" in this way is problematic. If Johnstone had wanted the conversation on "rhetoric as a wedge" to continue, why would he have been motivated to attack it? Why not advocate the motto to identify his philosophical legacy?

Although much of this essay will be devoted to pursuing this question, we can begin for now by exploring the possibility of polemic in argumentation. Polemical

confrontation forces a person to either revise or abandon her position. Both revision and abandonment are ways of elaborating and continuing the life of inquiry—revision does so by allowing the position to become more nuanced and complex; abandonment does so by its committing inquiry to the quest for a more satisfactory substitute (Johnstone, 1978, p. 38). The mortality of inquiry comes with the stiffening of a position. Positions stiffen when they are not kept flexible by arguments voiced effectively against them. Such flexibility can be recognized as an age-old office of rhetoric whose duties are to move and to bend (*flectere*). To prevent such stiffening of “the rhetorical wedge,” to make it flexible, hence to allow it to move and live on, we need to confront it with argument.

Perhaps the best way to start would be to review the work Johnstone and I did prior to his death. We had noted only that rhetoric and the wedge do not often coincide (Johnstone and Mifsud, 1999). Many wedges are not rhetorical, and more important to our concerns at the time, not all rhetoric is wedge-like. Examples of both such failures of coincidence abound. Commands and threats are uses of the wedge to produce non-rhetorical results; they reveal the failure of wedge and rhetoric to occupy the same relative position. While threats and commands can perhaps be thought of as exemplifying rhetoric, albeit of a “degenerate” sort—one can hardly look down the barrel of a pistol without becoming fully conscious—there is no obvious way in which they are degenerate uses of the wedge in any useful sense of ‘degenerate.’ The threatener and the issuer of commands ignore bilaterality, a concept central to Johnstone’s idea of the rhetorical wedge. Johnstone marks off the orthodox version of rhetoric from the degenerate version by observing that what is ordinarily recognized as rhetoric is bilateral. A threat, on the other hand, is unilateral; a gunman, for example, drives a wedge into the experience of his victim, but not vice-versa. The gunman objectifies his victim as a means to fulfilling his wishes, but whatever is objectified to this extent is likely to lose its objectivity and recede into the background of unnoticed stimuli. A victim so objectified cannot force himself upon the attention of the gunman (Johnstone, 1990, p. 335). That the gunman’s performance suppresses all efforts of his victims to cope with him in reciprocative terms is a requirement fundamental to the success of his performance. To put the matter another way, the person successfully addressed by a threat or command is unable to respond freely. Neither are natural wedges, as opposed to symbolic wedges, generally considered rhetorical acts. Besides reacting by unplugging one’s computer, how can one respond in kind to a lightning bolt? Wedges fall short of full rhetoricality when they do not maintain throughout the possibility of bilateral exchange.

Not only do the wedge and rhetoric fail to overlap because not all wedges are rhetorical, but because not all rhetoric is wedge-like. Such wedgeless rhetoric is generally characterized by a speaker’s intention to bypass audience consciousness to the greatest degree possible. The most effective bypassing of audience consciousness would be subliminal persuasion, but the rhetoric of pep rallies and

partisan political gatherings is more likely that which one thinks about when considering rhetoric that does not drive a wedge. At no point during a pep rally, for example, does the speaker wish his audience to ask, "Is it the case that our team really will, or better yet should, win the game tomorrow?" Rather, such performances bridge both the speaker and audience with the shared idea of the worthiness of a position. This bridge is an act of identification which precludes the possibility of alternative perspectives being brought to consciousness. Rather than bringing to light new consciousness, rhetoric that bridges in this way may be thought of as manipulating a consciousness already existing in an audience. This rhetoric is not precipitated by calling to the attention of the participants anything the truth of which they are not already persuaded of. Although some might regard this rhetoric to be part of what has traditionally been known as epideictic (rhetoric that displays that which is praiseworthy and blameworthy within a culture), we do not have to regard the function of epideictic as degenerate. We could point out, for example, that epideictic rhetoric attempts to bridge a person to a virtuous other, to teach public excellence by identifying an audience with public models of virtue. As a bridge, epideictic connects an audience's consciousness of virtuosity with a model of public virtue (Johnstone and Mifsud, 1999, p. 76).

Johnstone and I also looked to the common rhetorical techniques in addition to the genres of rhetoric for operations of the rhetorical bridge. We recognized that amplification, a favored and frequently used rhetorical technique, takes as its subject the undisputed. It draws from a common pool of readily available and agreed upon beliefs, values, and understandings. As Aristotle describes, when a particular consciousness is in an audience already, all that remains to be done by the rhetor is to attribute to it greater beauty and importance, in other words to celebrate this consciousness. We note that while this celebration is not a wedge, because it calls attention to nothing the audience did not already believe, it is a bridge. It is an appeal to the identification of "like" consciousness (Johnstone and Mifsud, 1999, p. 76).

If arguments were to be made against "rhetoric is a wedge" that stemmed from such considerations as these, namely of the failure of rhetoric and wedge to coincide, it would be easy to defend the position. For example, we could point out that "rhetoric is a wedge" refers to a particular moment in a larger rhetorical process, a tri-partite process that begins with the evocation of consciousness and ends in decision after having proceeded through deliberation. The earlier part of the process, namely the evocation of consciousness of a particular problem, can be governed by the metaphor "rhetorical wedge" and the latter part of the process, namely the arrival of a decision, can be governed by the metaphor "rhetorical bridge." This would be the case whether we are speaking of the more traditional Aristotelian referent of public address, or whether we are speaking of a performance of identification beyond this, such as the reflexive rhetoric of personal deliberation. As Johnstone and I have noted, if rhetoric only wedges, when an indi-

vidual is torn asunder by the recognition of a particular problem, the sundering will collapse into schizophrenia. The end of reflexive rhetoric would be to bridge the sundered mind, allowing for a unity manifest in a personal decision. Considering the possibilities of a response such as this, we might rest on the position that while "rhetoric is a wedge" may not need to be abandoned, it needs to be supplemented with "rhetoric is a bridge" (Johnstone and Mifsud, 1999, p. 77).

But should we rest here? Is supplementation of a position the same as revision? If by revision we mean that which one must pursue when he recognizes an inconsistency between his propositions and their formulation, and if by supplementation we mean something in addition to the position in question, then supplementation is not the same as revision. A supplement in this regard is an addition *to*, not a confrontation *of*. Such a supplement does not puncture "rhetoric is a wedge"; it leaves the proposition about rhetoric's function to distinguish and the formulation of this proposition intact and merely adds some new proposition about rhetoric's function to identify and the formulation of this proposition, namely "rhetoric is a bridge." But positing a "supplement" is not only insufficient for creating a genuine contact of minds, it is irrelevant to the enterprise. No contact is made between the advocate of rhetoric's function to identify and the advocate of rhetoric's function to distinguish. The two remain distinct without ever having to take each other seriously.

If we privilege the genuine confrontation of a position with difference, a confrontation that will force either revision or abandonment so that the inquiry can be elaborated by a genuine contact of minds, we will reject using such tactics for attacking and defending "rhetoric is a wedge." These tactics are cheap because they approach the question *ad rem*. *Argumentum ad rem* points to a world beyond that which is presented by the position in question, and in doing so fails to confront the position on its own terms. To attack the viability of "rhetoric is a wedge" by pointing out to the holder of that position that he has not accounted for the fact that "rhetoric is a bridge" begs the question. The attempt to call a person's attention to what his own principles prevent him from attending to is a *petitio principii*, akin for example to confronting a blind man with a stop sign (Johnstone, 1987, p. 132). Arguing *ad rem* fails because a person's attention cannot be called to something that he is incapable of attending to by virtue of his own commitments. Each person attends to the world as characterized by whatever feature or features they regard as fundamental. This is easy to see in the world of ideas. Just as Parmenides never seems to notice change in the world, B.F. Skinner never seems to notice behavior not resulting from conditioning (Johnstone, 1987, p. 131). Argumentation as an activity of various advocates attending to various features but inattentive to others creates an impasse or stand-off where differences can only be pointed out and explained. We would likely not call this argumentation, but rather exposition. Opposing positions cannot be pointed out simply to a person because her own position renders her incapable of recognizing this opposition as a problem, or possibly even as a phenomenon.

If *ad rem* arguments are unavailable to us, how then do we confront a position with difference? We can begin to pursue this question with what Johnstone considered a general desideratum in formulating an argument, namely to approach argument self-referentially, in other words to attempt to confront a position by showing that on its own principles it is inconsistent. The significance of asserting that a position ought to be argued self-referentially is to imply that its validity depends on no reference to a fact or situation external to it (Johnstone, 1978, p. 11). Much of Johnstone's writing on argumentation set out to show not only that self-referential refutation exemplifies a valid use of *argumentum ad hominem*, but also that many other types of argumentation belong to the same category of *ad hominem*.

The *ad hominem*, as Johnstone treats it, can be approached most succinctly by way of contrast to *ad rem* argument. Johnstone draws from Richard Whately's treatment of *ad hominem* to distinguish it from *argumentum ad rem*. Whately states, "The conclusion which actually is established, is not the absolute and general one in question, but relative and particular; viz., not that 'such and such is the fact,' but that 'this man is bound to admit it, in conformity to his principles of reasoning, or consistency with his own conduct, situation,' &c." (Whately, 1838, p. 196). *Argumentum ad rem* exhibits those properties which, according to Whately, *argumentum ad hominem* does not. Thus *argumentum ad rem* claims to establish an absolute and general conclusion of the form "such and such is the fact." Its cogency does not depend on its audience in the way that the cogency of *ad hominem* must.

Ad rem arguments do not establish their conclusions based upon the principles of those to whom they are addressed, but *ad hominem* arguments must be established from the principles of those to whom they are addressed. *Ad hominem* arguments in this way engage the reasoning and adapt to the assumptions of the interlocutor. The motive is to reveal a contradiction in the interlocutor's position, and force an interlocutor to confront the commitments and consequences of her position. Such a revelation can only be witnessed from the perspective of the self, hence the *ad hominem* argument is evocative of self-awareness and the need to reflect responsibly on one's own position.

Such argument will presuppose that the interlocutors see the point of a position. However, one cannot see the point of a position until she grasps the motivation underlying the position. A problem arises now with the recognition of the insufficiency of describing the motives from which a philosophical position is taken, since such motives will themselves seem arbitrary. Suppose we are told that the rhetorical wedge stems from a concern with distinction, and the rhetorical bridge from a concern with identification. One might be tempted to ask what the point is of such concerns. Answering this question requires becoming involved in the differences between the rhetorical wedge and bridge, instead of being content merely to describe these differences. Being involved in the differences, we shall

have to be polemical instead of expository. Being polemical as such means we do not side-step the issues of an argument, but meet them and each other head-on. Such polemical argumentation is evocative. It evokes consciousness by addressing another where he lives, not by hitting him over the head with facts (Johnstone, 1978, p. 137). What I have been introducing in this essay thus far as the contrast between ineffective argument about "rhetoric is a wedge" and the possibility of relatively effective argument is brought into perspective now through the difference between the use of *argumentum ad rem* and the use of *argumentum ad hominem*. Relatively effective argument against "rhetoric is a wedge" is going to be *ad hominem*.

Before proceeding, we need to return to the beginning, to the inquiry about why one would want to attack "rhetoric is a wedge". The contrast between *ad rem* and *ad hominem* arguments forces us to question whether the activity I have been engaging in thus far with "rhetoric is a wedge" is more like a game or a clever pursuit of the last wishes of a dying man and less a genuinely motivated argument. Genuine motivation would have to come from the recognition that a thesis needs to be confronted because of its inconsistency, in other words the inconsistency between its propositions and its formulation. Such an inconsistency would threaten to destroy the very principles a position is trying to establish. The only genuine reason to attack "rhetoric is a wedge" is if the formulation of this position demonstrates such an inconsistency. And indeed the slogan "rhetoric is a wedge" does demonstrate such an inconsistency. The slogan, while proposing "rhetoric is a wedge," is itself actually rhetoric functioning to bridge, functioning to create identification with and adherence to the formulation of the position. Hence, the very advocacy of "rhetoric is a wedge" threatens to destroy it. The stronger the advocacy of "rhetoric is a wedge," the stronger the motive to drive the wedge of "rhetoric is a wedge." Such strengthening of the activity, however, overwhelms the situation, and leads the advocate into self-referential inconsistency. The activity of the advocate of "rhetoric is a wedge" becomes unilateral. This exhibition of unilaterality shows the advocacy of "rhetoric is a wedge" to be inconsistent with the commitments that one who holds the position must make, namely those commitments to bilaterality presupposed by the rhetorical wedge. Therein lies a genuine motivation for argument about "rhetoric is a wedge."

We might find that going to the idea that rhetoric is an interface might offer some specifics on revision. An interface is both a wedge and a bridge. It is a genuine gulf between the communication of information through language to an understanding subject. The peculiarity of this gulf is that it can be crossed. But the specifics of revision lie beyond the scope of this present essay.

Before closing, I want to qualify that I am not suggesting that Johnstone's philosophy of argument advocated, as a means of positing, the position "rhetoric is a wedge." Johnstone was quite careful not to do this. He tells us as much in the opening of one of his most explicit treatments of the rhetorical wedge (Johnstone,

1990, p. 333). He notes that prior to the time that George Yoos referred to “rhetoric as a wedge” as part of Johnstone’s theory of argument, Johnstone himself had only incidentally and in passing used the phrase.² He also notes that most indexers of the books in which he had used the phrase had missed it altogether. I wish to suggest only that advocacy is a possible consequence of the rhetorical wedge taking hold in certain circles, say for example, in scholarly circles that might find the idea worth advocating as a critical perspective on discourse, or in pedagogical circles where teachers of rhetoric and argument might advocate the idea to their students as an ethical framework for their practice.

Second, I do not want to suggest that what I call an inconsistency, anyone holding the position that “rhetoric is a wedge” will necessarily admit to be an inconsistency. The question arises then whether such an argument can really overcome the solipsistic impasse that seemed to preclude genuine argument about “rhetoric is a wedge.” This question requires much more attention than this essay can provide, including full attention to the Consistency Problem and the way in which this problem brings to light the need to reject notions of objective validity and to adopt notions of validity as a regulative ideal (Johnstone, 1978, p. 135).

For now, however, we can be assisted by Johnstone’s general framing of the situation: Suppose an advocate of *A* produces a presupposition involved in *B* that is, in his opinion, inconsistent with the formulation of *B*. What reason is there to suppose any advocate of *B* must agree that there is an inconsistency? If he need not agree, the impasse remains. Of course, the attacker may be mistaken. Perhaps what the attacker takes to be an inconsistency between the formulation of *B* and the presuppositions of *B* is not really an inconsistency. The question Johnstone raises however is just whether such an attacker must always be mistaken. Is it possible for an inconsistency to develop within a position that has reason on its side? If it is possible, that will be sufficient to overcome the impasse (Johnstone, 1978, p. 50). Inconsistency is not a matter of fact but a matter of probability. I am only prepared to frame the matter this way: if such inconsistency were to be accepted as inconsistency, it would necessitate that “rhetoric is a wedge” be revised or abandoned on account of this inconsistency. However, abandonment seems an unlikely outcome because the *ad hominem* argument calling attention to such an inconsistency is itself a rhetorical wedge opening up the advocate of the position that “rhetoric is a wedge” to the need to attend to his own position.

Notes

¹This reference can be found in *De Anima* 419a17.

²Yoos’s paper, “Rhetoric of Appeal and Rhetoric of Response,” was presented at a session of The International Society for the History of Rhetoric in Chicago in November, 1986. It was later published in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 20 (1987): 107-117.

References

- Aristotle. (1974). *De anima*. W. D. Ross. (Ed.), *Scriptorum classicorum bibliotheca Oxoniensis. n.p.: E. typographeo clarendoniano*.
- Johnstone, H. W. (1965). "Some reflections on argumentation," in M. Natanson & H. W. Johnstone (eds.), *Philosophy, rhetoric and argumentation*, pp. 1-9. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- . (1970). *The problem of the self*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- . (1978). *Validity and rhetoric in philosophical argument: An outlook in transition*. University Park: The Dialogue Press of Man and World.
- . (1980). "Rhetoric and death," in E. White (ed.), *Rhetoric in transition*, pp. 61-70 . University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- . (1987). "Response to Carroll Arnold and George Yoos," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 20, 129-134.
- . (1990). "Rhetoric as a wedge: A reformulation," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 20, 333-338.
- Johnstone, H. W. and Mifsud, M. L. (1999). "Wedge and bridge: A note on rhetoric as distinction and as identification," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 29, 75-78.
- Whately, R. (1838). *Elements of Logic*. New York: William Jackson.
- Yoos, George. (1987). "Rhetoric of appeal and rhetoric of response," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 20, 107-117.

Mari Lee Mifsud
Department of Rhetoric and Communication Studies, University of Richmond
Richmond, Virginia 23173, U.S.A.
mmifsud@facstaff.richmond.edu