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Rhetoric and Liberation

Thomas Kuhn

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Draft: Symposium on Rhetoric of
the Human Sciences, University
of Iowa, 28 March 1984. Not
for quotation or paraphrase.

RHETORIC AND LIBERATION

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I come before you as Cassandra. There is much in this morning's papers with which I agree and even more which I find of interest. But there is also a common theme which deeply alarms me. In different ways and to different degrees, all three papers celebrate a new liberation, intellectual and political, which is to follow on the proper appreciation of rhetoric's place in human life. I believe that that impulse to celebration rests on a profound misconception of the human condition, a misconception here manifest in an insufficient respect for the intrinsic authority of language. Reading these papers I have repeatedly been reminded of the occasions during the sixties when my more radical students said to me: Thank you, Professor Kuhn, for telling us about paradigms; now that we know what they are, we can get on without them. For all my sympathy with the reforms those students sought, I knew (and thought I had taught them) that in that direction there was, in principle, no help to be had.

In twenty minutes I shall not persuade you of my position, but I can perhaps suggest to you what it is. For the purpose I am fortunate to be able to start from Professor Rorty's paper. With many of its most important theses my agreement is wholehearted and

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entire, a fact that should enable me to locate with special precision the points where our views diverge. Most of my time will be directed to his contribution. Only in closing shall I note how the other two papers contribute to the concerns I have been discussing.

Let me start with agreements. Rorty and I both insist "that there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society -- ours -- uses in one or another area of inquiry" (5). There is, we again concur, "no room for a kind of justification which is not merely social but natural, springing from human nature itself, and made possible by a link between that part of nature and the rest" (3). Neither of us believes that there is an Archimedean standing point outside of the tribe and its history. And both of us see in discourse the primary motor for change of belief. The working title of my own current project is *Scientific Knowledge as Historical Product*, and it opens by suggesting that those of us who, a quarter-century ago, called upon philosophers of science to pay attention to its history missed a point. For most of us history was simply a source of data about scientific practice, data which we thought might equally well have been drawn from one or another non-historical source. We did not, that is, sufficiently recognize the intrinsically historical nature of the new view we were trying to shape. And, finally, much of the book in which I hope to develop these points will be concerned with scientific language and its changes.

The extent of that agreement is sufficient to place Rorty and me in a small minority, and I greatly value the continuing

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discourse which that common membership has fostered. Nevertheless, there are issues of great importance that divide us. Rorty speaks repeatedly of "solidarity," a term which, by its nature, applies to the members of a group, and on occasions he refers to such groups as "cultures". Another phrase he might have used is "language communities," for language is part of what binds the members of a culture together, makes their discourse possible, and thus provides the vehicle for historical change in a group's beliefs. But when Rorty discusses beliefs and commitment to them, he repeatedly attributes them to an individual: "the pragmatist," he proclaims, "says that there is nothing to be said about truth save that each of us will commend as true those beliefs which he or she finds good to believe" (6). For Rorty there is no difference between the beliefs shared by the members of a culture -- beliefs which I should describe as constitutive of it -- and the various different opinions accessible to one or another of its members.

About all this Rorty is explicit: "The same Quinean arguments which dispose of the positivists' distinction between analytic and synthetic truth dispose of the anthropologists' distinction between the inter-cultural and the intra-cultural" (10). Or again, "The Tasmanian aborigines and the British colonists had trouble communicating, but this trouble was different only in extent from the difficulties in communication experienced by Gladstone and Disraeli" (*ibid.*). But this application of what Rorty calls "Quinean arguments" is, I think, a mistake, and his illustration of its conclusion depends on a category switch. It is not Gladstone and Disraeli, but the Whigs and the Tories, whose communication problems should be compared to those of the aborigines and

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colonists. Both pairs can then be seen to involve inter-cultural rather than intra-cultural communication, and it is the problems of inter-cultural communication which Rorty joins Putnam in dismissing.

The name of those problems is, of course, "incommensurability," and I have recently written at length about it. Time prevents even an epitome of that paper here, but I shall draw two essential points from it. First, both Rorty and Putnam are mistaken in thinking that I take incommensurability to characterize the relation between whole languages. My use of the term has throughout been local, restricted to particular sets of interrelated terms, to local pockets of language within which translation is impossible without drastic distortion and misunderstanding. Second, to say that translation is impossible is by no means to deny transcultural recourse. One can, with whatever difficulty, learn the other language, and then use it to talk with the natives, whether aborigines or Tories. Though doing that will still not make translation possible, it does open the doors to communication. But one cannot pass through those doors without becoming, however vicariously, a participant in the other culture. There is no *lingua franca*; one must use the language of one culture or the other. The alternative is to wait for a pidgin to develop, and that is to wait for the evolution of another culture still.

My point is that language cannot foster group solidarity or the evolution of belief through discourse except by simultaneously constraining the options open to the members of the group it binds. It is ironic that Rorty, who wants to keep "Greeks or Frenchmen or Chinese" from being homogenized within the concept of

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"objective knowledge of...humanity as such" (3) should simultaneously invoke the universality of language, a concept with at least the same homogenizing power. And it is extraordinary that he should attribute the forces that hold a culture together simply to "bureaucrats and policemen" (10). There are, of course bureaucrats and policemen, often in excess. But the first forces that constrain the members of a culture are intrinsic to the existence of culture itself. Leave aside the anthropological evidence which Rorty simply dismisses, but note a strange sentence in his paper: "Only if one shares the logical positivists' idea that we all carry around things called 'rules of language' which regulate what we say when, will one suggest that there is no way to break out of one's culture" (9). Why, if inter- and intra-cultural communication are the same, should Rorty suppose that talk with foreigners requires breaking out? And why, if breaking out is really needed, should he suppose that it demands anything less than learning a new language, a process that need not, any more than riding a bicycle, be governed by rules?

To see why these disagreements are important, return to the area in which Rorty and I agree. There is no standing point outside the history of the tribe, and within that history inquiry is simply the "continual reweaving of a web of beliefs" (9). But there are, of course, numerous tribes, and on my view, unlike Rorty's, discourse between them is in principle limited. Change and development can therefore occur in two distinct ways, either within an individual tribe or sub-tribe or else in the multiple relationships between them. Look first at intra-tribal development, at the continual reweaving which is the most likely

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candidate for the title of progress. Rorty suggests that we may think of it "as making it possible for human beings to do more interesting things and be more interesting people" (12), an evaluation apparently equivalent to the one he attributes to me. "To say that we think we're heading in the right direction is," he writes, "just to say, with Kuhn, that we can, by hindsight, tell the story of the past as a story of progress" (11).

With that much I agree, but it does not imply that history has no externally recognizable direction. Like biological evolution, historical development is a unidirectional process, one which admits of no circling back. If a tribe develops at all, then there are externally visible ways to distinguish its earlier from its later state. One may not approve them, and one need not call them progress (not all of us are sure that we do do more interesting things or that we are more interesting people). But one cannot eliminate them or their testimony to the direction of time. Transcultural criteria of historical development do not vanish with transcultural criteria of truth. The former are an essential ingredient of the historical process, and no one who takes that process as seriously as Rorty does may ignore them. Their role in determining what we tribe-members believe is immense. Among them is the source of something very like the law of the excluded middle.

One of the clearly marked indices of the passage of tribal time is the one Rorty attributes to Feyerabend and urges us all to make part of our thinking. We must abandon the view of "inquiry, and human activity generally, as converging rather than proliferating, as becoming more unified rather than more diverse"

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(12). I entirely agree. In the life of the mind, at least, no phenomenon is more striking than the increase over time in the number of barely communicating specialties. A diagram tracing the proliferation of these sub-tribes would look like nothing so much as an evolutionary tree. Where discourse is given free reign -- a *desideratum* I value as highly as Rorty -- nothing else is to be expected. There is no other process by which inquiry can grow, though its consequences make this use of the term "growth" problematic. If the same manifest tendency to separatism is less successful in the political arena, that results from the limited effectiveness of political discourse as compared to *force majeure*.

Rorty opens his paper by attempting to drive a wedge between objectivity and solidarity. At the end of his paper, hammering the last nail into the coffin of objectivity, he writes: "The best argument we partisans of solidarity have against the realistic (*sic*) partisans of objectivity is Nietzsche's argument that the traditional Western metaphysico-epistemological way of firming up our habits simply isn't working anymore" (20). I agree that it is not. But in that foundational sense, solidarity isn't working either. The very proliferation and divergence that Rorty and Feyerabend invoke to rid us of our gods, of the other-worldly concept of objectivity, testify to the decline of solidarity as well. That, however, is as it should be, for the two are, I think, opposite sides of a single coin. Like solidarity, objectivity extends only over the world of the tribe, but what it extends over is no less firm and real for that. When that reality is threatened, as it sometimes is by exposure to other solidary groups, solidarity is necessarily threatened as well. Both

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"solidarity" and "objectivity" are, if you will, names for a character in a myth. But they name a single character; their myth is the one we live; and I can imagine no human life without it.

I said I would speak as Cassandra, and I have been doing so. What I fear are attempts to separate language or discourse from the real and to do so in the name of freedom. I have recounted my fears by speaking of Rorty's paper, for it is there that the attempt at separation is most carefully and fully developed. But the two papers that have accompanied his point the same direction, and I shall close by indicating how they do so. Both deal explicitly with rhetoric, as Rorty's does not, and both presumably understand by that term not mere verbal fireworks but techniques of effective argument as deployed within the various fields of inquiry. On this subject both have much to report. But I am troubled that, for all the important things they have to say, Professors Hersh and Davis should view the ideal structure of mathematical proof as non-rhetorical and locate the rhetoric of mathematics solely at the place or places where in practice that ideal fails. For purposes of this gathering one might instead explore the idea that mathematical proof is itself a piece of rhetorical apparatus, a trope. Mathematics might then prove more centrally rhetorical than Hersh and Davis are quite prepared to see.

In fact, I think something of that sort must be the case, though I have neither the expertise nor the time to carry the argument far. Tropes are rhetorical figures which, by substitution, disclose unsuspected consequences of the meanings of the terms they deploy. Since Poincare, however, it has been

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standard to suggest that mathematical proof simply unpacks, again by substitution, unsuspected consequences tautologically present in the proof's premises. Can it be simply wrong to suggest that tautological substitutions are the limiting case, and thus perhaps the purest, of all tropes? Could the most coercive of all forms of argument perhaps turn out to be rhetoric at its most pristine? Discourse would then surely have its tyrannies, and one would not know how to be without them.

Such a conclusion would, I take it, be unwelcome to Professors Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey, for they -- like Professor Rorty but by very different means -- are centrally concerned to separate talk of truth from talk of discourse and to locate tyranny with the former. On their reading (of the *OED*) to convince is to coerce belief, while to persuade is to induce it. Rhetoric is concerned exclusively with the latter, and they are, of course, for it. Of the opposition, they say, "Those who know, know -- because they ultimately benefit from a privileged (and often undiscussable) intuition or observation that allows certain conclusions to follow immediately, by sheer logic. Thus conclusions are imposed by authority (supposedly grounded in truth) -- often without adequate argument and typically without any attention to the contextual and personal details that rhetoric recognizes to be crucial for persuasion" (6).

By now it will surprise none of you to hear that I firmly disagree, not about the coercion of belief (which the *OED* by no means equates with convincing) but about rhetoric, logic, and authority. Rhetorical consciousness will not banish coerciveness from discourse unless discipline and cogency are to be banished as

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