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# Commentary on Gellis

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**In Response To:** Mark Gellis's *Sermons of corporate identity: argument in two corporate annual reports*

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I must confess that I began reading Mark Gellis' paper with a skeptical attitude. Rhetoric can be found anywhere there is language, but the corporate annual report seemed unlikely to yield much of interest. The paper quickly dispelled this skepticism and persuaded me that the project has real merit and great promise. In particular, I was struck by the parallels that Gellis drew between the annual report and the sermon, and I want to focus my commentary on this analogy.

I use the term analogy here with hesitation. It is not Gellis' word, and when he comes to describe his mode of inquiry, he says it is more akin to "ethnography" than to "experiment." Moreover, in an important sense, what we do get in the paper is an ethnographic encounter with two corporate reports; the rhetorician, as it were, visits these exotic sites of discourse and attempts to render them familiar through the language of his own discipline. Nevertheless, Gellis' initial comparison between the sermon and the annual report reminded me of a once promising but now forgotten mode of rhetorical criticism--the analog method. Given the current interest in analogy among argumentation scholars, I think it might prove useful to view the paper from this perspective and consider how the rhetorical critic generates arguments.

Analog criticism emerged about thirty years ago as the product of Lawrence Rosenfield's fertile imagination. The basic idea is quite simple: Take any two items of critical interest and rattle them against one another. The process of interpreting the two should generate insights as it proceeds, and since the critic is not restricted by extrinsic methods or goals, the exercise should stimulate creative interaction with the objects of study. Any type of discursive object, event, or genre can be used--a comparison and contrast between two short speeches is as much part of the game as the study of two complex discursive formations. We can use items that are apparently quite similar to each other (e.g. apologetic speeches by Harry Truman and Richard Nixon) or items that seem entirely alien (e.g. pornography and political rhetoric; see Rosenfield, 1968 and 1973). And we should be open to the discovery of the unexpected--incongruities between things that are apparently similar and similarities between things that appear incongruous. Above all, the critic should sustain a fluid relationship between the two analogs rather than to use one as a dominant and stable referent for judging the other.

When Gellis introduces his comparison, he seems to convey some sense of Rosenfield's playful method. Most argumentation scholars probably have never thought that a corporate report is anything like a sermon, and yet, Gellis can show us that there are some intriguing similarities: Sermons tend to serve conservative purposes; so do the reports. Sermons valorize existing

community values and hierarchies; so do corporate reports. Sermons function to invoke community; so do the reports. And then again, Gellis tells us, the two are different. While the reports invoke certain common values, they do not promote unity as directly or persistently as the sermon. Perhaps, Gellis speculates, this difference has to do with the addressor-addressee ratio. In the sermon a member of the community addresses other members of the community. But the audience for a corporate report does not form a community in the same sense as a congregation does, and so the report is not a communication among insiders. Furthermore, Gellis asserts that although sermons rarely have a judicial element, the reports do, since the companies want to justify past performance to current or potential investors.

To this point, then, the two genres of discourse are kept in play. Gellis, however, does not pursue the analogic path that he opens, and it soon becomes clear that he wants to use the sermon (as a species of ceremonial rhetoric) as the standard for investigating the corporate report. Indeed, the concluding paragraph of the paper stresses the role of judicial features in the report and recommends that future studies treat the report as both judicial and ceremonial. This position clearly indicates that Gellis' critical arguments move primarily in one direction: he uses features from other genres in order to explicate the rhetoric of the corporate report.

The pattern of inference is common and entirely justifiable, and Gellis puts it to good use as he engages the texts of the reports. But we might want to explore the path not taken. What would happen if, instead of using the sermon to model the report, we continued a back-and-forth analogic study of both?

Since I know little about the sermon and nothing about corporate annual reports, I cannot present anything like a reasonable version of the analog argument. Still, there are some points that seem to follow from reading Gellis' paper, and these suggest interesting comparisons. In this exercise, I will narrow the attention specifically to the Puritan sermon of the seventeenth century, since I know a little about the topic from reading Perry Miller (1956) and Sacvan Bercovitch (1978) (and, as further justification, I note that Gellis himself singles out this type of sermon for special consideration).

By limiting our attention to the Puritan sermon, at least one notable similarity leaps out at us when we compare it to the corporate report: Both forms of discourse emerge from the dominant institution in the two societies. The power and prestige of the late-twentieth century American corporation seems parallel to the position of the Church in seventeenth century New England. So we are dealing with discourses that come from within loci of power, and of course, this fact would tend to augment the self-justificatory and conservative tendencies that Gellis has noted.

In one important respect, however, we need to modify Gellis' position when dealing with the Puritan sermon. Gellis observes that "sermons generally do not have a judicial element--they do not ask an audience to make a decision about the past." Perhaps this is true of sermons in general, but the

seventeenth-century Puritan version abounds in judgments about the history of the community. In the form known as the Jeremiad, the preacher calls to attention the sins of the community and attempts to force the congregation to pass judgment on its errant ways. Since Puritan theology regards material conditions as a sign of spiritual health, the Jeremiad could combine secular problems (e.g. war, plague, poverty) with religious concerns. So the preacher, in effect, is giving a "progress report" (or perhaps more appropriately in this case, "a regress report").

But, as Gellis very astutely observes, there is a big difference between the corporate "progress report" and the sermon in terms of the relationship between the speaker (or writer) and the audience. The Puritan congregation is a living community, and the preacher is a member of it; he knows the audience directly and personally, and they know him. The judgment he issues applies to the community as a whole, and responsibility for faults and wrongs is assigned to the community. The speaker calls for the audience to reform itself.

The readers of the annual report are a community only insofar as they have a common economic interest. Typically they do not know one another and do not know the executives of the corporation. And no one assumes that they (that is, the investors) are responsible for the decisions that affect corporate performance. So the report does not seek to reform its audience, but instead it functions to justify the record of the corporate leadership. Very much unlike the Jeremiad, fault-finding is not an inherent part of the contemporary genre, and where problems exist that cannot be disguised (as is true of both reports Gellis studies), then the leadership must find some mechanisms for defending itself. Thus, the reports place blame on external conditions (war, political turbulence, generally adverse economic conditions); or they indicate that the leaders have seen the errors of their way, understand what was wrong, and have reformed. (We did let quality slip, but no longer). Or again, when new leaders emerge, implicitly or explicitly they can place blame on the old regime. (See, we are totally different; we even issue the report on a different kind of papers).

As Gellis continues his study of the corporate report, he undoubtedly will find many more argumentative *topoi* of this kind. For present purpose of comparison, however, the ones he has gathered are sufficient to make the point. The corporate report deals with crisis through apologetic arguments. Using the indirect medium of a largely anonymous and dominantly statistical publication, the executives attempt to influence external judgment of their own behavior. The reader's action is limited to this judgment and the corresponding decision about investment; she may decide to keep her money in General Motors or she may change to Toyota, but she does not have any sense of participation in or responsibility for corporate decisions. Thus, if a genuinely human issue arises, such as downsizing, the report can express conventional regrets and then explain why the decision represents the one common interest of the community of investors--corporate profit. The fate of workers is so remote and so far out of the control of investors that it hardly seems a matter of ethical concern.

This kind of detachment is impossible within the rhetorical economy of Puritan life. The Jeremiad, no doubt, took its toll on the congregation, leaving them with fears and repressions that few of us would find tolerable. Nevertheless, it also encouraged identification with the community and a sense that the actions of individuals had a relationship to the welfare of the whole community. Life within the corporate world of mature capitalism offers less space for affliative sentiments and communal sensibilities. As Bellah and his colleagues have noted, contemporary Americans have a rich vocabulary for dealing with the objective business of business and also for expressing their views about private rights and sentiments. What is lacking is a vibrant language of community--a rhetoric with a social and communal focus (Bellah, et. al.: 1985).

Perhaps the comparison and contrast between the Puritan sermon and the Corporate Annual Report helps explain this phenomenon. Perhaps not. This is only a fanciful and quick look at complex discursive forms, and the results turn out to be what one would expect from a middle-aged, middle-class liberal. But the potential does seem interesting. Instead of the dreary business of hunting for flotsam and jetsam in one kind of discourse to see where it fits into some abstract model of discourse, the analog mode allow us to think on our critical feet and to pay attention to a two-sided process. And looking to the side sometimes helps us to look more carefully.

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