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# Another reformulation of rhetoric as a wedge

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**Title:** "Rhetorics, Wedges, and Bridges: Thoughts on Critiquing Genuine and Mere Rhetorics"

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**Response to this paper by:** [Hanns Hohmann](#)

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For rhetoricians, the question of what one does can be arresting. This is likely to be, at least in part, because of the suspicion surrounding rhetoric, a suspicion ever present at least since Achilles announced that he hates that man who thinks one thing in his mind yet says another. Centuries later, suspicion still surrounds rhetoric, as is most evident in popular critiques of political discourse, where if the word "rhetoric" is mentioned at all it is likely to be qualified by "mere" and/or contextualized so that "rhetoric" calls forth both the speaker's bias against the practice and the listeners' tendency (or willingness) to think only of its manipulative character.

For rhetoricians, especially those being called upon to explain what it is that they do, the question remains, and likely always will, of how to deal with the suspicion that rhetoric is always mere rhetoric when one knows, as most rhetoricians do, rhetoric's potential to humanize both rhetor and audience. I will explore in this essay how the ideas of Henry Johnstone, a philosopher interested in rhetoric, can provide an interesting way to understand this contradiction. I will focus my attention on Johnstone's idea of the rhetorical wedge. The phrase "rhetorical wedge" was coined by Johnstone to talk about that function of rhetoric which opens up consciousness of a particular thesis or idea. Rhetoric can drive a wedge between an audience and a particular thesis or idea so that the former becomes conscious of the latter and thus opening up both.

The knowledge of rhetoric's potential to cultivate the humanity of both speakers and audiences seems to me to be a cornerstone of Johnstone's associations of rhetoric with a wedge. When rhetoric drives a wedge between an audience and a thesis of which it was previously unconscious, it creates a space of awareness where none existed before. This space of awareness is a space of freedom. In it, people are free from the limitations of unconsciousness and are free to experience the possibilities that are manifest, not just possible choices to make but the very possibility of making choices, the identification of one's freedom to judge and act on one's own behalf. When rhetoric wedges, choices are made apparent, and where choices are apparent, human freedom emerges.

The rhetorical wedge presupposes another concept that Johnstone has often talked about, namely bilaterality. Bilateral communication treats participants as equally free to communicate. In other words, the audience has the same freedom to use communicative strategies in addressing the rhetor as the rhetor does in addressing the audience. In ilateral communication, the audience must in principle be able to reply in kind to the speaker. An appeal by

one person to another is bilateral only when it does not deprive the person addressed of the capacity to use on the addresser precisely the same communicative approaches that the latter has used against the former.

The rhetorical wedge is a useful idea for rhetoricians who wish to explain that what they do is something greater than gymnastics with language. Yet, this idea is not useful in overriding the idea of mere rhetoric, nor would any rhetorical theory be likely to overcome what seems to be an ever present popular understanding of rhetoric. Instead, the usefulness of Johnstone's rhetorical wedge arises from its ability to help us make sense out of mere rhetoric. The qualification of rhetoric with mere invites swift dismissal of rhetoric. The association of rhetoric with a wedge does more than just halt this dismissal for the purpose of considering a more genuine function of rhetoric. This association invites us to consider why mere rhetoric is so swiftly dismissed as communication unworthy of further consideration. In the following exploration, the rhetorical wedge will be scrutinized in order to see more clearly the implications of the association of the two rhetorics ("genuine" and "mere").

We must begin by asking whether it is the case that rhetoric and the wedge coincide?<sup>1</sup> Is it the case that every rhetorical act wedges? Is it the case that every wedge-like act is rhetorical? To fashion arbitrary definitions that would answer these questions one way or another would be easy. We could say, for example, that rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and that there are many instances of the operation of a wedge evoking consciousness that are neither artful nor persuasive; e.g., a thunderbolt (unless it be interpreted as a message from Zeus, as in the Homeric world). And, having in hand the definition of the wedge as the evocation of consciousness, we could point out that in the case of what might be called mere rhetoric, the speaker is not trying to evoke consciousness, but perhaps to manipulate the consciousness that the audience has brought with it to the speech or else to bypass it altogether. Such maneuvers do not resolve the question of the coincidence of rhetoric and the wedge. We can deal more adequately with their coincidence by ringing them into a dialogue, each with the other.

A concept that Johnstone made use of in 1990 was that of interpretation (Johnstone 1990: 337). When human speakers confront us with certain interpretations of positions or states of affairs they are clearly engaging in a rhetorical activity. As Johnstone pointed out to me, we could say that their purpose is to persuade; but we could equally well bypass the alleged role of persuasion, taking interpretation itself as a rhetorical act requiring no further analysis. Interpretation does, in any event, drive a wedge; it separates subjects from their own previous naïve perceptions of what is now being interpreted. Johnstone used the example of the unthinking assumption that we will 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. In hearing a speech questioning this assumption, one may for the first time become aware of having hitherto unthinkingly made it oneself. But, some events invite interpretations not urged on an audience by a human speaker. When one

interprets a thunderbolt either as an electrical discharge or as a reason for unplugging one's computer, no speaker is at the moment arguing for either of these interpretations. It is the thunderbolt itself that has evoked the interpretation.

Johnstone illustrated the wedge once in terms of the question "Isn't that your telephone ringing?" asked by a bystander (Johnstone 1990: 333). In making use of this question Johnstone intended to suggest that the bystander in driving this interrogative wedge was playing a rhetorical role. But such a bystander is not indispensable. One can oneself suddenly begin to attend to a ringing that has been going on hitherto unnoticed. If one does, has the situation, supposing it was rhetorical when participated in by two persons, suddenly become non-rhetorical? There doesn't seem to be any good reason for supposing that it has. The rhetoric has merely shifted from the mouth of a bystander to one's own alerting of oneself, whether this response be in terms of mental words or not. Whatever form this reflexive rhetoric may take, through it one has oneself driven a wedge separating one's own consciousness from an objective phenomenon.

The reflexive event here characterized is clearly an interpretative act, thus again illustrating Johnstone's 1990 claim that interpretation is a category of rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> One interprets a sound as the ringing of one's telephone. This is a vastly simpler example of the rhetoric of interpretation than the case of the speaker putting before an audience a reinterpretation of the value of ongoing medical research by pointing out that the results of this research are applicable to the solution of the health problems of individuals only at an expense rapidly becoming unaffordable—but it is no less an appropriate example. Note that while "reflexive" marks off a species of rhetoric existing side by side with the species of situations in which speaker (or some non-human attention-getter) and audience are distinct, interpretation is not a species of rhetoric. Indeed, it will turn out that the converse is true.

Interpretation, whether reflexive or not, is clearly an example of the operation of the wedge as well as exemplifying rhetoric. But if we are tempted to conclude that the wedge and rhetoric are equivalent terms, both denoting the same class of events, we ought to consider that while threats 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, for it is a requirement fundamental to the success of their performances that they suppress all efforts to cope with them in their reciprocative terms. To put the matter succinctly, the person successfully addressed by a threat or command is unable to respond freely. Commands and threats are uses of the wedge to produce non-rhetorical results; they reveal the failure of wedge and rhetoric to overlap completely. Moreover, it does not seem easy to apply the concept of bilaterality to interpretative events brought about by non-human attention-getters. How does one reply in kind to a thunderbolt, as opposed to

merely interpreting it and reacting accordingly?

It seems that we must conclude that not all events eliciting interpretation are rhetorical, even though they depend on the use of the wedge. Granted, no one is likely to have in mind "rhetoric" when describing threats with guns or thunderbolts in the night, and likewise few, if any, have in mind "mere rhetoric" as a description of these events. So what have we accomplished by dismantling the rhetorical wedge in this way? We have introduced the fallibility of this slogan. And with this introduction we can proceed to see with greater clarity the ways in which rhetoric and the wedge fail to coincide, not just on the occasions of threats and thunderbolts, but on the occasions of pep rallies and partisan political gatherings. These latter occasions are examples of wedgeless rhetorical performances, whereas the former are examples of rhetoric-less wedge-like performances. In both performances, rhetoric and the wedge fail to coincide.

Performances of wedgeless rhetoric ranging from political utterances perceived as radically biased through pep rallies and other partisan gatherings might be aptly characterized as "bacchanalian."<sup>3</sup> Through their revelry and indulgence, these performances fix both the speaker and audience on the particular worth of an action, idea, event, or person in such a way that the possibility of alternative perspectives is never brought to consciousness. Generally such bacchanalian rhetoric brings to light no new consciousness, but rather manipulates a consciousness already existing in an audience. Bacchanalian rhetoric is not precipitated by calling to the attention of the participants anything the truth of which they are not already persuaded of. Rather, this category of mere rhetoric prevents spaces of alternative (better yet oppositional) consciousness from opening at all. This rhetoric is rightly "mere" because it works to prevent a wedge from being driven.

When rhetoric does not function to drive a wedge, how does it function? Certainly, rhetoric's power is still present, but it is a different kind of power now. What is the nature of this power? I would like to suggest that identification is the nature of this power. Whereas the power of distinction seems to undergird all performances of the rhetorical wedge, the power of identification seems to undergird all wedgeless rhetoric. The success of bacchanalian rhetoric depends in part on an audience either already identified with the values of a rhetor's message and therefore willing to identify with whoever expounds such values, or in part on a rhetor who knows how to whip an audience into a frenzy of identification. In either case, what moves the psyche along is more akin to compulsion than judgment. Such rhetoric bypasses different perspectives rather than overcomes them. "To overcome" suggests direct experience with opposition, while "to bypass" connotes indirection, or avoidance of opposition, through such tactics as silence or raising misdirected issues against opposition, what some might call trickery.

In a state of identification when both the rhetor and the audience come to identify because of some already in place shared opinion, continuing to agree

is the goal of communication, always with the hope that the certitude one feels (whether rhetor or audience) will be pleasantly protected by the strength of identifying and communing with others who hold the belief as well.

Amplification, a rhetorical technique that Aristotle describes as generally applicable to all three types of speech but particularly well suited for epideictic (1368a), seems to be at work here. Amplification takes as its subject the undisputed. It draws from a common pool of readily available and agreed upon beliefs, values, and understandings. 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 (1368a). Where no doubt exists about an audience's beliefs, in other words where the entire subject of a speech (as opposed to a particular line of argument) is generally agreed upon, the focus of rhetoric becomes accentuating, or amplifying, the importance of this point. This amplification depends upon what we might call, and perhaps what Aristotle first suggested to be, the non-artistic proof of pathos. Bacchanalian rhetoric, as a species of mere rhetoric, particularly of an epideictic kind, proceeds through non-artistic pathos, where emotions that already *are*, are then amplified.

While Aristotle's description of the use of amplification as one of the three common rhetorical techniques (the other two being enthymeme and example) was not meant to convey a necessarily corrupt function of rhetoric, when identification through amplification descends into an ecstasy beyond reason it becomes corrupt. It degenerates into mere rhetoric. It fails to wedge, since it calls attention to nothing the audience did not already believe. The "wedge" does not seem to be a suitable metaphor for this kind of rhetoric. No new space of consciousness is being opened in the audience of a bacchanalian rhetoric. Perhaps we could say that bacchanalian amplification attempts to widen the gap of consciousness that a prior wedge has already opened up. But this is all we could say. Widening the gap of consciousness, and creating it are not the same processes and can't be governed by the same metaphor.

Bacchanalian rhetoric is not the only species of a wedgeless performance of mere epideictic rhetoric. What we might call "spectator rhetoric" is another species. "Epideictic" (from *epideixis*) literally means an exhibition or a display. Though Aristotle seems to use the term to refer to a display of virtues and vices for the purpose of cultural praise and blame, the term came to be used for those exhibitions of eloquence or "show-off" speeches in the rhetorical contests of Greece and later Rome. Epideictic audiences were spectators who wanted to see a rhetorical show. They wanted to see how rhetors performed their art, displayed cunning, and turned phrases. Nothing was really recognized to be at stake in such displays of eloquence: not the future of a deliberating state nor that of an accused individual, nor even the maintenance of a particular belief or value system (cultural or personal), but merely the pleasure of the audience brought on by the aesthetics of rhetoric. Whether Gorgias' audiences to his "Encomium of Helen" generally believed Helen to be free of blame seems irrelevant. More than likely his audience was not attending the speech to judge Helen's moral character, but rather to see the famed

Gorgias perform his art. Nor did it matter if speeches of the second sophistic in imperial Rome, like "The Encomium of Baldness" and "The Eulogy of the Gnat" had audiences who generally believed baldness and gnats to be praiseworthy.

Surely equivalent contemporary audiences exist, like, in general, those audiences of mass advertisers who are less interested in the merits of a particular product or service than the symbolic artistry of its advertisement. Or, in particular, those audiences of Bill Clinton's 1999 state of the union address who were less interested in judging his ideas than in witnessing the avoidance techniques he used to bypass attention away from his scandalous behavior with Monica Lewinsky.

The audiences of these performances of mere rhetoric (both ancient and contemporary) are spectators, watching the way rhetors perform their art, at least potentially indifferent to a rhetor's particular thesis, yet greatly invested in experiencing aesthetic delights of speech-making (or in contemporary terms, symbolic artistry). Again, no wedge seems to have opened up consciousness in the way Johnstone originally described the function of the rhetorical wedge. While we might be able to say that this kind of rhetoric wedges consciousness of technique, this is not the kind of consciousness for which Johnstone was originally interested in accounting.

But classifying bacchanalian and spectator rhetorics as "mere" because of their wedge-less performance and labeling the whole category "epideictic" is misleading on at least two counts: 1) not all mere rhetoric is epideictic; 2) not all epideictic is mere rhetoric. The first point calls into question the possibilities of other genres of mere rhetoric. For example, perhaps we might say that deliberative rhetoric which focuses on persuasion rather than decision fails to drive a wedge in the way Johnstone suggested rhetoric wedges. In a genuinely deliberative situation, where speakers and audiences exist in a bilateral relationship, the end is decision, not persuasion. Perhaps deliberative rhetoric that can be qualified as "mere" would be something akin to what we might call authoritarian rhetoric. Again this "mere" rhetoric is characterized, at least in part, by reliance on non-artistic proofs, just like bacchanalian rhetoric. But whereas the latter would rely on non-artistic pathos, the former would seem to rely on non-artistic ethos. Perhaps we can approach the matter this way: in a typical scenario of hierarchical communication, one who gives "advice" in a deliberative situation presumes an authority to do so. The recipient of this advice must make a judgment, but not necessarily about the advisor's particular thesis or idea, but rather about the advisor's existing (in other words non-artistic) authority. If a judgment is made on the grounds of non-artistic ethos, no real decision about a particular course of action has been made. And no wedge, in the way that Johnstone originally conceived it as a metaphor for rhetoric, has been driven. The advisor has persuaded the advisee, but a decision arising from bilateral communication is not something someone can be persuaded into.



This latter point calls into question whether rhetoric's association with persuasion keeps it shrouded in suspicion. As well, so might its association with judgment numbing style and the manipulation of existing emotions. But these latter two associations seem to be generally recognized as contributing to rhetoric's bad name, the former, persuasion, seems to be overlooked as a contributor. We might benefit by reminding ourselves what Aristotle asserts is the telos of rhetoric: judgment, not persuasion .

Not only is not all mere rhetoric epideictic, but not all epideictic is mere rhetoric. While epideictic has certainly been held in suspicion because of its tendency (throughout history) to display oratorical excellence, rather than public excellence, we are not forced to be suspicious. We can for instance envision a less suspect function of epideictic which would entail seeing the ways in which cultural excellence comes to be identified. Gerard Hauser (1999) has most recently put voice to such a vision by exploring epideictic as didactic, as a teacher of public excellence through the display of public models of virtue. Didactic epideictic provides a common ground of public virtue from which deliberative and forensic argumentation can proceed. And of course Lawrence Rosenfield's (1980), "The Practical Celebration of Epideictic" elaborates what seems to be a wedge-like, didactic epideictic here amplification is an objective phenomenon where a rhetor wants an audience to see what he is talking about writ large. To say that epideictic can be didactic suggests that it can be a wedge. When didactic, epideictic opens audiences to the ideal of virtuous behavior. But didactic rhetoric seems to do more than this. It also seems to act as a bridge, connecting an audience's consciousness of virtuosity with a model of public virtue. It bridges the self with the virtuous other.

This brings me to my final point. Johnstone and I have recently noted (Johnstone and Mifsud 1999: 75-78) that the idea of "the rhetorical wedge" needs to be supplemented with the idea of "the rhetorical bridge." What we have just seen in didactic epideictic is one good reason why. To say that rhetoric wedges is only part of the story. Not just in epideictic but in deliberative and forensic genres as well, genuine rhetoric of the kind that Johnstone theorizes must both wedge and bridge. Rhetoric works as a wedge in deliberative and forensic speech primarily to open audience's awareness to the existence of a particular problem that needs attending. But the evocation of this awareness is only the beginning of what might be described as a tripartite rhetorical transaction. Beginning with a problem, deliberative and forensic rhetoric proceeds through deliberation to a decision. It is the third term which requires the rhetorical wedge to be supplemented with the rhetorical bridge. The wedge alone cannot bring the rhetorical process to its necessary end of judgment. This is 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 which both of us have considered (Johnstone 1970, 1990; Mifsud 1998). Reflexive rhetoric, where rhetorical transactions particularly of a deliberative kind are internalized within one individual, finds an individual torn asunder by the recognition of a particular problem and the alternative ways of solving the



problem. If rhetoric only wedges, the sundered self will collapse into the divided mind characteristic of schizophrenia. The end of reflexive deliberative rhetoric is to bridge the poles of the divided mind, re-creating a unity of mind manifest in a personal decision.

A properly rhetorical transaction must both wedge and bridge. What begins as an opening of consciousness must end in judgment in order for a rhetorical transaction to reach its telos. While one might say that the coming of awareness of a particular problem (as in the case of most deliberative and forensic rhetoric) or a particular ideal of virtue (as in epideictic rhetoric) is a rhetorical moment, it is not the telos but the arche of the rhetorical transaction. For the transaction to be completed it must move from awareness to judgment. The metaphor of the rhetorical wedge governs the former event while the rhetorical bridge governs the latter.

If rhetoric wedges without bridging, no judgment can be realized and the rhetorical transaction is incomplete. And if rhetoric bridges without wedging it becomes bacchanalian, or it becomes the object of mere spectatorship, or it becomes authoritarian, to name just a few of the degenerate rhetorics suggested in this essay. Regardless of the particular name we give to the rhetoric that bridges without wedging, this is the nature of that which people refer to as "mere rhetoric." While Johnstone's attempts to theorize a genuine rhetoric as a wedge help counter-act the deleterious effects of the ever present dismissal of rhetoric as "mere", it is not until we see the limitations of the rhetorical wedge that we can start understanding its full usefulness to those of us interested in reclaiming a legitimate role for rhetoric in public and private affairs. When we recognize that the slogan "the rhetorical wedge" is not always the case, in other words that not all wedges are rhetorical and not all rhetorics are wedge-like, then we can begin to reconcile (or bring ourselves to accept) the existence of both genuine and mere rhetoric. As long as teachers and scholars of rhetoric are trained and employed in universities, the critique of rhetoric as "mere" is not likely to be successful in its attempts to dismiss the art entirely. However, the idea of "mere rhetoric" is not likely to go away just because teachers and scholars of rhetoric theorize a genuine version of it.

What must take place, and what I have attempted to do in part in this essay, is to bring "rhetoric" and "the wedge" into a dialogue with each other for the purpose of pursuing an understanding of the relationship between genuine and mere rhetoric. This dialogue revealed that rhetorics and wedges do not always coincide. Not all wedges are rhetorical and not all rhetorics are wedge-like. This latter failure of rhetoric and the wedge to coincide characterizes mere rhetoric. Pursuing this failure allows a discovery of the way in which genuine rhetoric not only wedges but also bridges, thus creating both consciousness and communion. Moreover it allows a discovery of the way in which mere rhetoric is rightly so: it bridges without wedging creating degenerate forms of communion and bypassing consciousness--at least the consciousness that is a part of genuine rhetoric-- altogether. It seems that I have found that even when Johnstone's ideas breakdown, they remain useful for exploring the nature

and function of rhetoric in human communication.

## ENDNOTES

1The following section on non-rhetorical wedges was suggested to me by Henry Johnstone in our personal correspondences. Throughout this essay, whenever I refer to something of Johnstone's without giving a citation, I am noting ideas of his contained in our correspondence.

2The possibility that there may be a reflexive rhetoric was also discussed in Johnstone 1990 and is explored by Mifsud 1998. But neither of us claims to have been the first to assert the possibility of reflexive rhetoric.

3I take this term from Plato's *Ion* (534). Though he was referring to the effect of rhapsodes, not rhetors, on audiences, it seems reasonable to think this transfer to rhetors would be acceptable to him.

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