

University of Windsor Scholarship at UWindsor

OSSA Conference Archive

OSSA 4

May 17th, 9:00 AM - May 19th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Mifsud

Raymie McKerrow

Jeffrey St John

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Raymie McKerrow and Jeffrey St John, "Commentary on Mifsud" (May 17, 2001). *OSSA Conference Archive*. Paper 84.
<http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA4/papersandcommentaries/84>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized administrator of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

Author: Raymie E. McKerrow and Jeffrey St. John

In Response to: Mari Lee Mifsud's *Continuing Thoughts on the Rhetorical Wedge*

© 2001 Raymie E. McKerrow and Jeffrey St. John

Mary Mifsud's paper is a cogently argued contribution to Johnstone's conception of the rhetorical wedge as it functions within rhetorical and philosophical argument. Johnstone would be justly proud of the critical analysis she provides. As we read her argument, it hinges on Johnstone's conception of *ad hominem* argument, and more specifically, on his early conceptions of inconsistency (Johnstone, 1992/1961) as the principle on which valid attack rests. One constant in Johnstone's long association with rhetoric and argument was his willingness to change his mind—otherwise he would not have come to recognize rhetoric's role in argument (both within the public domain and more precisely within the philosophical enterprise). Given his later ruminations on the consistency problem, there is a “wedge” that we might create within Mifsud's response to the question “how do we attack the wedge?” Before we come to that point in our analysis, our approach will be to take on specific claims advanced, and offer what might best be termed “qualifications” to the argument advanced. Our intent is not to reject outright specific claims, from an *ad rem* perspective, but rather to raise questions about the truth value of the claim as a factual assertion—on what grounds might it be accepted, and are there conditions or limits associated with the claim that should be recognized?

In beginning, we note that the initial question is raised as a “how” rather than a “why?” Raising it in this fashion presumes that one could and should attack as if it were clear why one might; Mifsud rightly returns the initial “why?” in noting that if the aim was to keep the conversation going, why not advocate the conception rather than seek to attack it? We might also note that to attack is to honor the person who formulated the idea: none of us hopes to write in obscurity, or to be taken seriously by sycophants only. We learn and grow from being challenged by those who, even though they may support the central principles, still see room for improvement in the ideas brought forward. Were he present, we believe Johnstone would even claim this for his reason—to ask it of one who, as a co-author, was best positioned to know its weaknesses and thereby improve on its formulation. A second reason to attack is to claim that Johnstone's claim is simply wrong. However, if one did not support the central principles, there is the question of whether or not one could even conceive of the idea's being wrong, as it would not appear to the person as an idea. However it is configured, raising the issue as a “how” rather than “why” potentially restricts the realm of responses by focusing attention on what form the attack might reasonably take.

A third reason, and this does presume that one agrees with the central principles, is to claim that the idea is unoriginal, that it is not a new conception of how rhetoric functions. As argued initially by Johnstone (1990), and more recently by Johnstone and Mifsud (1999), the wedge is defined as that space which enables a recipient of a message (an other's or one's own) to contemplate what it would mean to accept or deny the message. If we assume that rhetoric serves to evoke consciousness as the central act of becoming aware of an idea, event, or person not previously on one's radar screen, we might ask if there are parallel ideas that would account for the same phenomenon. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) assert that argumentation requires the existence of a mind—that to argue is to contact an other's mind as a condition of existence or value. Ehniger (1968) argued that the only standard of validity that had any real meaning was the sense of moral obligation a person felt to acquiesce in the face of a stronger argument.

McKerrow's (1990) conception of "pragmatic justification" was likewise based on the presumption of one's free act of determining whether or not an idea of act was worthy of belief or action. That one must be conscious to make these determinations—to construe an act as argument in Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca's terms, to decide on acquiescing in Ehninger's formulation, or to decide on the justifiability of an argumentative claim in McKerrow's sense—is a central presupposition not unique to Johnstone's formulation. That this is the case does not seek to destroy Johnstone's idea by itself. What it does suggest is that to attack from this perspective is not an *ad rem* attack, as it is not advanced from contrary principles. Nor is it a strictly *ad hominem* attack, as it does not seek to draw out an inconsistency. Rather, it seeks a third alternative: a measure of an idea's worth is what it accounts for in practice. To judge the various formulations by this criterion is not our aim; our goal is simply to note that alternatives exist to the narrow *ad rem/ad hominem* approaches advanced by Johnstone. Comparing "like" formulations for their intrinsic potency becomes a reason to mark those which are more from those less useful as accounts of argumentative practice.

With these initial observations as a frame of reference, we will work through Mifsud's analysis, taking exception to specific comments that are made along the way. Our hope is not to offer telling refutations, but rather cautions toward acceptance of claims as advanced.

Caution 1

Mifsud claims that "the very function of rhetoric is to call attention to a situation for which objectivity is claimed." Not in every case would we endorse this claim. Objectivity according to whom, on what grounds, with what purpose in mind? The sense of objectivity, and the possibility of its being realized, is far more complex than the assertion suggests. It also suggests that there is a "truth" that can be known, a singular interpretation of an event that can be discovered and agreed on.

Caution 2

To the claim that rhetoric opens the mind to an awareness "of which it has hitherto been unconscious" we would offer this qualification: at issue is consciousness at the moment of expression. The person may have been conscious of the claim in the past, may have even acted on it, but at the moment of expression, given the principle that rhetoric evokes consciousness, one should not draw the conclusion that the person was never conscious prior to that moment. This is assumed later by Mifsud in noting that "one may for the first time become aware," leaving open the possibility of having already been aware. That rhetoric evokes consciousness, as if it were not present already, is questionable: one may be conscious of an idea, but not certain of its importance or significance. A rhetor may move one's conscious awareness toward a reassessment of that which one knows. In this instance, the "wedge" is already ever present in the mind, but unformed as to direction or purpose. What rhetoric does in this instance is provide a reason for changing the value assigned to an already known idea.

Caution 3

That act of creating a wedge does not, in and of itself, create "open-mindedness through the coming of contradiction." There is nothing to prevent a person, once coming into awareness, to simply shut down again: the idea is nonsense, the speaker is silly, the request is illegitimate. Any

of these responses is equally likely with respect to creation. Of course, Johnstone and Mifsud could argue that there is a ‘degeneracy’ component at work here—an absence of bilaterality makes for non-genuine argument or rhetoric. Whether degenerate or not, we would claim that rhetorical action has taken place: meaning has been assigned and a decision made with respect to the request. That open-mindedness has not resulted is not in itself a reason to claim that rhetoric has not existed in the transaction. As a corollary, we would note that the entrance of a polemical assertion, as a claim on one’s attention, does not result in either revision or abandonment of a position. It may also result in a rejection of the polemic statement. Or it may result in a disavowal of interest to continue the dialogue, without either revising or abandoning the position; one could simply say that it is unimportant—neither critical to rethink, nor necessary to abandon, simply not useful to worry over. Thus, while the “mortality of inquiry comes with the stiffening of a position” (which implies rejection of the attack), it may also die from lack of interest in maintaining the exchange.

Caution 4

We accept the notion that “not all rhetoric is wedge-like.” But is partisan rhetoric, which presumes conscious agreement exists prior to the act, then not rhetorical? Note that if rhetoric can exist in the presence of a pre-existing consciousness, it is not the case that only the creation of a wedge constitutes that unconsciousness. And does such rhetoric always preclude the conscious deliberation on alternatives? Not if the rhetor begins by attacking the position of an opponent by raising that person’s ideas and then arguing against them. The audience, conscious of its own position, has to become also conscious of alternatives. Nor is thinking of them precluded by the simple act of the rhetor avoiding their mention. When the coach exhorts her team to win (when their record is 4-15 and they are playing a 19-0 team), would it be reasonable to presume that at least one of the players might consciously think of the alternative—“we might lose”?).

Caution 5

If it were the case that rhetoric only wedges, and does not also present a bridge via identification, does it follow that the mind “will collapse into schizophrenia?” We think this unlikely, at best a worst-case scenario. If consciousness exists as a consequence of having been aroused, is further rhetorical expression from the outside necessary to furnish the bridge? The idea of “reflexive rhetoric” is the solution proposed (Johnstone and Mifsud, 1999; Mifsud, 1998; Mifsud and Johnstone, 2000): the mind attends to itself, providing a bridge across which the mind can travel in re-arranging its sundered self. As they observe: “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*” (italics in original; p. 77). But must judgment be reached, lest schizophrenia take hold? We think not. Judgment may be rendered moot by other events at the time of expression. “Asked and answered” may be the sense given to an idea—bridged already by the rhetor and endorsed by the recipient—in a sense of judgment qualitatively different from that suggested by Johnstone and Mifsud’s analysis. Judgment may also be deferred: one waits for additional information, new insights, or simply for a time when deliberation might ensue more quietly or efficiently. Suspension of judgment is an option that leaves the self intact for the time in between reception and deliberation.

Caution 6

If we were to assume Johnstone's (1992/1961, 1978) earlier consistency position, one he rightly moves beyond, it could be argued that we could not conceive of the "wedge" were we to position ourselves within a different set of philosophical assumptions. As Mifsud argues, "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." To the contrary: That the mind is capable of conceiving and articulating positions completely foreign to its own (though one must arguably want to see the world through the ideas of another, if only for the purpose of defeating the other), would seem apparent from our ability to comprehend the fact that there are different positions. Johnstone could not have arrived at his argument without conceiving of its alternatives. His point, however, was that no such valid argument, as refutation, could be mounted against any philosophical position from outside that position (1978, p. 11), thereby invalidating any *ad rem* argument. This leads to his inconsistency "problem" (Johnstone, 1978, p. 3). Before getting to Mifsud's final argument on this issue, there are two points we would make as a prelude.

First, though an aside with respect to the general argument, we would be remiss if we did not note that the Whately quotation on which Johnstone premises his position derives from the Archbishop's commitment to nominalism (McKerrow, 1988). To the extent that Johnstone wishes to claim consistency as a central feature, it would be interesting to explore the nominalist foundation that he commits to in citing Whately.

Second, while we recognize that a recipient of a counter-argument must "see the *point* of a position," we are not certain why that entails one also seeing the "motivation underlying the position" itself. Were we to take a Burkean approach, we could argue that expressing motive is a shorthand way of describing the situation or position, but we are not certain that in this is the sense of "motivation" that is intended. Is motivation the ground of understanding the *point* in all cases? Without belaboring the matter, we are simply raising the question and seeking elaboration of the claim's warrant.

The final argument, and Mifsud's answer to the "how" question, points to the presence of an inconsistency in the advocacy of "rhetoric is a wedge" as a position. In doing so, one articulates a claim in a unilateral fashion, apart from the context in which it is embedded. To this we respond: so? If this is a true inconsistency, it is one that is non-unique, and one that invalidates all such advocacy of a singular claim from within a more generalized context; in this instance, to claim a distinction stands on its own, independent of its sequential act. The same is true of a "bridge" claim: to advocate it alone would constitute the same inconsistency. We could also claim, and Mifsud acknowledges this possibility, that the alleged inconsistency is not seen by us as an inconsistency. This places us squarely within Johnstone's "Consistency Problem" (1978, p. 135). As alluded by Mifsud, Johnstone switched to the claim that what mattered was one's *concern* for validity," making validity a "regulative ideal" rather than an "objective property" (italics in original, p. 135). Considered in this context, the issue turns on our willingness to worry about inconsistency as framed. Again, we might return to the "so what?" question. Are all inconsistencies of the same force—do all such claims force either revision or abandonment? If rhetoric can admit of degrees, from "mere" to "degenerate" to "full" or "genuine," why is consistency privileged to exist as a uniform force? In the present case, if a consistency issue is non-unique, and to enforce it would be to disable all singular advocacy wherein sequential ideas are implicated but not addressed, would we wish to claim an impasse?

In concluding, we return to Ehninger (1970), this time to the recognition that an argument is never finished. It may “end” at some point in agreement, only to be raised again at a later time under different circumstances. Mifsud is correct in ending on the same point: expressing an inconsistency, if such be the case, simply opens the possibility of awareness and the need for defense. Our final caution relevant to this issue: the defense may not, of necessity, be limited to either revision or abandonment; it may consider options from total acquiescence to total rejection, if not total indifference to the inconsistency as raised.

Taking a different route, Johnstone (1978) also repudiates the consistency issue by posing a conception of the self as capable of holding and resolving contradictory views (p. 137). If we move to this view, we drive a new wedge in the analysis as presented: consider ignoring the consistency issue as a problematic, and instead concentrate on what rhetoric as consciousness-evoking is a *consciousness of*. The content of what one is made aware of, and its status as worthy of assent, is the critical issue with respect to rhetoric’s consequences. It matters little whether the idea is consistent or inconsistent if it is unworthy of merit; the evoking of consciousness matters, but what matters even more is whether the recipient of a message need view the discourse as requiring attendance to one’s own position.

One Last Note

While Johnstone was remarkable for the generosity of his spirit and unselfish in his support of scholarship, writing this response brought back into clear relief that his argumentative spirit was unabashedly forthright—he gave no quarter and expected none in the battle of ideas. We hope to have responded in a manner that honors his work. We know that Prof. Mifsud will continue to do honor to his memory, and we are honored to have played a small role in that endeavor.

References

- Ehninger, Douglas. 1968. “Validity as Moral Obligation.” *Southern Speech Journal* 23: 215-222.
- Ehninger, Douglas. 1970. “Argument as Method: Its Nature, its Limitations, and its Uses.” *Speech Monographs* 37: 101-110.
- Johnstone, Henry W. 1978. *Validity and Rhetoric in Philosophical Argument: An Outlook in Transition*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Johnstone, Henry W. 1992. “Argumentation and Inconsistency.” In S.J. Bartlett (ed.), *Reflexivity: A Source-Book in Self-Reference*. New York: North-Holland. Originally published (1961) in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 15: 353-365.
- Johnstone, Henry W. 1990. “Rhetoric as a Wedge: A Reformulation.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 20: 333-338.
- Johnstone, Henry W., and Mary L. Mifsud. 1999. “Rhetoric as Wedge and Bridge: A Note on the Rhetoric of Identification and Distinction.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 29: 75-78.
- McKerrow, Raymie E. 1988. “Whately’s Philosophy of Language.” *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 53: 211-226.
- McKerrow, Raymie E. 1990. “The Centrality of Justification: Principles of Warranted Assertability.” In D. Williams and M. Hazen (eds.), *Argumentation Theory and the Rhetoric of Assent* (pp. 17-32). Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.

-
- Mifsud, Mary L. 1998. "On the Idea of Reflexive Rhetoric in Homer." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 31: 41-54.
- Mifsud, Mary L. and S.D. Johnson. 2000. "Dialogic, Dialectic, and Rhetoric: Exploring Human Dialogue across the Discipline." *Southern Communication Journal* 65: 91-104.
- Perelman, Chaim and Lucy Olbrechts-Tyteca. 1969. *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. Trans. J. Wilkinson and P. Weaver. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.