

Responses to My Critics

Donald N. McCloskey

A MILD RESPONSE TO WILLIAM BUTOS

Mild because Professor Butos and I agree, though the rhetoric of his piece does not acknowledge the agreement.

Butos says that science needs no “ratiomania of prescriptivism” (a sweet phrase, that) because science is a spontaneous order à la Hayek. McCloskey says, likewise, persuasive knowledge is social. It is a social event that Muth’s arguments came to be credible [p. 100, *The Rhetoric of Economics*; I omit marks around quotations from the book]. [T]he Keynesian revolution in economics would not have happened under the modernist legislation for science [p. 17]. Only when enough economists believe will there be a demand for tests [p. 19, summarizing Ronald Coase’s econo-sociology of science]. Most explicitly among many other places (summarizing a point made in detail by Michael Polanyi):

The notion of a conversation gives an answer to the demand for standards of persuasiveness. . . . The conversations overlap enough to make one [somewhat] sure about [the standards of] neighboring fields. . . . [T]he overlapping conversations provide the standards. *It is a market argument. There is no need for philosophical lawmaking or methodological regulation to keep the economy of intellect running just find* [pp. 27–28; italics added].

Butos says that it’s not right that “anything goes” in science, and in economic science, because “rules of conduct” (not rules of method) are necessary to maintain the spontaneous order. McCloskey likewise says, Far above method with a small *m*, at the peak of the scholarly enterprise, stand the conversational norms of civilization . . . *Sprachethik* [p. 24]. Were economists to give up their quaint modernism and open themselves officially to a wider range of discourse, they would not need to abandon data or mathematics or precision. They would merely agree to examine their language in action, and converse more politely with others in the conversation of mankind [p. 35]. The classical solution was to insist that the orator be good as well as clever: Cato defined him as “*vir bonus dicendi peritus*,” the good man skilled at speaking [p. 37]. [I]t is people, not intellectual devices, that are good or bad. Good science demands good scientists—that is to say, moral, honest, hard-working scientists [p. 37]. The best one can do, then, is recommend what is good for science now, and leave the future to the gods. What is good for science now . . . is good scientists, in most meanings of “good” [p. 53].

Butos says that rhetoric is epistemic, that “all knowing (and hence science) is rhetorical,” reducing the ambitions of epistemology to *doxa*, opinion. But along with Cicero, Dewey, Wittgenstein Mark II, parts of Quine, all of late Richard Rorty, Nelson Goodman, Robert Scott, and many others since Protagoras of Abdera, McCloskey agrees: The language used [by science] is a social object, and using language is a social act. It requires . . . attention to the other minds present when one speaks. The paying of attention . . . is called “rhetoric” [p. xvii]. The literary, epistemological, and methodological strands have not yet combined into one cord. They belong together, in a study of how scholars speak, a rhetoric of inquiry [p. 30]. Other sciences, even the mathematical sciences, are rhetorical [p. 32]. During crises in mathematics [t]he rhetoric of proof is in question [p. 33]. As Frank Knight said, “We surely ‘know’ these

propositions [in economics] better, more confidently and certainly, than we know the truth of any statement” [quoted p. 46]. [L]iterary forms are scientific [p. 55]. Even the science of the counting house and the railroad station, cold-spirited as it is, draws on the gilded rhetoric of poets and mathematicians [p. 137]. Science is social [*passim*].

The reader will see why I am puzzled that Professor Butos thinks we disagree. The character “McCloskey” enters his piece as someone opposing or at best neglecting these fine ideas. But wait a minute. They’re not “mine” exactly (I stole them fair and square from Rorty, Toulmin, Feyerabend, Booth, Kuhn, and Burke); but at least I deserve credit for stealing them.

To go through the three points again—this time to make them perfectly clear instead of to show that they are already in the book—Butos believes that I ignore the idea of spontaneous order. Yet see above. Ignoring the spontaneous order in science or life would be hard for an economist who knew his or her trade beyond the mathematics of engineering. For that matter it would be hard for any social scientist after Locke or Mandeville or Smith. Enough said, for Butos has said it at length.

Butos believes that I adopt “anything goes,” although he cannot find a place in the text where I do. A.W. Coats and certain other normally rational people allege this about me, against the evidence of what I say and what I do, and apparently Butos has picked it up from them. Maybe I had better straighten it out here. See again above: I believe in rules for games, and carry them out, but rules at the level of morality, not at the level of shortcut formulas for thinking (“Regress Y on X and publish”; “Never ever use questionnaires”; “Consider the observable implications only”). The phrase “anything goes” is Paul Feyerabend’s, a persuasive philosopher of science. Although I agree with Feyerabend largely, here I think he falls for the modernist dichotomy between “ratiomania” and irratio-mania. It’s the latest form of McCarthyism. Either you’re a supporter of the Freedom Fighters in Nicaragua or you must be some kind of communist. Admirably, Feyerabend replies, To hell with you, then: in that case I *am* a communist. If you dopes can’t imagine more categories for thinking than following every ukase of the philosophers on the one hand or a burbling “irrationalism” on the other, then I’m for the irrationalists, and proud of it. So says our Paul. By contrast I affirm, along with Senator Inouye, that I am not a communist; nor an irrationalist, nor a nihilist, nor a deconstructionist, nor any of the other nasty things that modernists call people who will not stand up smartly and salute their flag. Butos agrees with me on this, but has gotten muddled about which side of the committee room he is on.

Butos believes that I am “reluctant” to use the “rhetorical theory literature.” Once again he sounds like the preacher blaming the congregation on Sunday for the people who didn’t come. The intellectual milieu within which I work includes Iowa’s Department of Communication Studies (a largely Midwestern field: Wisconsin and Iowa are acknowledged as the two best departments), which is involved in a fortnightly seminar, year-round since 1980, in which faculty from all disciplines at Iowa (English, mathematics, history, accounting, economics, law, political science, German, religion, anthropology, psychology, finance, physics, and so forth) present papers on speech communication in their discipline. This has resulted, among other things in the Project on Rhetoric of Inquiry (Poroi, “ways and means”), which I co-direct, and a conference volume *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences* (Wisconsin, 1987), which I co-edited, as part of a series of twenty or so books from the University of Wisconsin Press. My book is one of the series. The bibliography, taking only the “rhetorical theory literature” strictly defined to exclude other literary criticism, cites Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, Booth, Burke, Lanham, the Mechlings, Nelson, Perleman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, Robinson, Scott, and Wenzel. The book

used more than it cited: for instance, it used participation in the Alta Conference on Argumentation, sponsored by the Speech Communication Association and the American Forensic Association (in the proceedings of which Chapter 6 was first published); and participation in a conference honoring Kenneth Burke (parts of Chapter 4). As I write this I'm looking at notes on "The Rhetoric of Statistical Theory" for the Fifth Summer Conference on Argumentation at Alta, which takes place in two weeks. Is this a reluctance to explore "a large and arguably relevant literature"? Heh: I'm the one arguing that it is relevant.

So I welcome Professor Butos' help in making economists aware of their speech. The literature of speech communication is relevant, all right. So is the literature of literature departments—English, comparative literature, classics, French, German. So is the literature of law. And of linguistics and linguistic psychology. And of pragmatics and pragmatism. These represent in our world the ancient tradition of rhetoric, the practical matters of reading and writing by which we argue. They deny that argument can always be reduced to a syllogism and a measurement. Syllogism and measurement are fine in their place, but their place is not everywhere. The mathematician uses standards of argument drawn from the traditions of her conversation, the physicist uses metaphors drawn from his human experience, the economist uses stories heard at her mother's knee; all for science. We will have a better science, Professor Butos and I agree, when economists wake up to the other half of the argument.

AN AGREEABLE REPLY TO A.W. COATS

I entirely agree with A. W. Coats that *The Rhetoric of Economics* did not deal adequately with economic methodologists now writing. I have no excuse but exhaustion, from trying to avoid error in too many fields at once. Writing the book required breadth I do not possess, and something had to go; a close study of work by recent economic methodologists, including his own, was the opportunity cost of other reading.

But Coats would agree (it is point ii.) that economic methodology in practice does not, unfortunately, follow what the most enlightened economic methodologists are presently thinking. If it did my task would be easier. My reading of the economic methodologists since finishing the book suggests that they are natural allies of a rhetorical approach. (That some of them have at first been unfriendly to rhetoric can be attributed to my failure to treat the existing methodological literature with proper respect and to their failure to distinguish between what is good for philosophy and what is good for economics. I believe they will start understanding soon; some have already.)

The sociologists of science that Coats alludes to, for example, have already come together with the rhetoricians of science, at professional meetings and in their works. They agree that a rhetoric of science overlaps largely with a sociology of science. The father of American sociology of science, Robert Merton, invented the genre with *On the Shoulder of Giants* (Harcourt Brace, 1965). Michael Mulkey's *The Word and the World: Explorations in the Form of Sociological Analysis* (Allen and Unwin, 1985) and Harry M. Collins' *Changing Order: Replication and Induction in Scientific Practice* (Sage, 1985) are rhetorical treatments of scientific debate. A conference on the matter is being held at Iowa this fall, under the auspices of the Russell Sage foundation, bringing Harry Collins, Trevor Pinch, Barry Barnes, and others across from Britain. So Coats and I are closer than he thinks.

Coats calls the methodology as practiced by nonphilosophical economists "the crude misuse . . . of 'modernist' claims," and says that it is "largely a dead horse." I agree with his characterization of its sophistication; but the horse still delivers vicious kicks. How else would

one explain the fetish for econometric evidence in the debate over rational expectations? Or the dreary papers filling up the journals with results "consistent with" otherwise ridiculous hypotheses? Or the tiresome parade of footnotes to Adam Smith and F. Y. Edgeworth dressed up as "theorems"? Or the employment prospects of economists who do not follow the methodological party line? I propose to shoot the horse in the head before it gets up again.

Here again Coats and I agree. Everyone does. Robert Solow and Wassily Leontief and Charles Kindleberger and the late Harry Johnson and a lengthening list of our elders agree with Coats and me that the horse must be shot. Advanced training in economics nourishes the vicious modernist horse. Its ahistorical character, for example, has been skewered by Solow, Kindleberger, Walt Rostow, and Kenneth Arrow in William Parker, ed. *Economic History and the Modern Economist* (Blackwell, 1986).

Coats and I largely agree. Our one important disagreement is the last line: "no significant change is likely in this state of affairs." On the contrary. Once we recognize that economics is a serious matter of words, we need merely learn some other languages to change it.

A DISAGREEABLE REPLY TO STEVEN PRESSMAN

Steven Pressman agrees that economic rhetoric needs to be reconsidered, but does not think I go far enough. His claim is that "McCloskey . . . does not provide guidelines for improving our rhetoric."

I don't believe that is right. In the restricted sense in which he understands "rhetoric," namely, as style, "clearly communicating," the glass through which we see the World As It Is, I have provided guidelines at some length, *The Writing of Economics* (Macmillan, 1986). In a somewhat broader sense, as "guidelines for improving our arguments," Chapters 8 and 9 among others of *The Rhetoric of Economics* do so, on the subject of quantitative arguments in economics.

And like any economist I am filled with advice on how arguments in particular fields should be carried on—how we ought to think about late Victorian economic failure, for instance, or about English open fields. That is the point. Scientific thinking consists of rhetoric; which is to say, of attempts to influence other scientists to take one's argument seriously. For example, the formalism of which Pressman disapproves (and of which I do not, so long as people admit candidly what it is) is in part an "ethical" appeal, as they say in rhetoric, an appeal to character, in this case the character of a Proper Scientist (for which see Chapter 6, "The Rhetoric of Scientism: How John Muth Persuades"). There's nothing wrong with ethical appeals. After all, it's good to be a Proper Scientist. So long as we admit that part of the force of mathematical arguments comes from this direction, no harm is done.

I disagree, therefore. I do give guidelines, as we all do, every day.

University of Iowa