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Commentary on Mifsud

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In Response To: Mari Lee Mifsud's [Rhetorics, Wedges, and Bridges: Thoughts on Critiquing Genuine and Mere Rhetorics](#)

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Professor Mifsud's paper is a valuable contribution to efforts aimed at elaborating the moral dimensions of rhetoric, defending the field against the charge that it lacks a commitment to substantive values, a charge as old as the discipline itself. The concept of the "wedge," i.e. the opening up of new choices and thereby of greater freedom for the *audience*, usefully points to what is indeed often a characteristic of "genuine" or "good" (as distinguished from "mere" or "bad") rhetoric. The idea of the "bridge" that Professor Mifsud elaborates further in this paper is an appropriate complementary concept, pointing back to the concerns of the *speaker*. I think it is important to keep in mind that rhetoric is significantly influenced by the purposes of rhetors. Any profession of a completely selfless concern for the audience, which might be implied by a too exclusive focus on the "wedge," would more likely be cause for growing suspicion rather than providing effective reassurance about the moral core of rhetoric.

So on the whole I think this is a well-conceived project, but I also think that there may still be some room for clarification. I will organize my remarks around five of the concepts that figure prominently in Professor Mifsud's paper:

1. *Wedge*

One question I would raise about the "wedge" is this: does it have to be opened explicitly or intentionally in order to make the rhetoric opening it "genuine"? Professor Mifsud uses radically biased political utterances, pep rallies, and partisan political gatherings as instances of wedgeless rhetoric. But can such statements and events not sometimes open up wedges anyway?

Let us think of examples such as hate speech that is used ironically, or that is so repulsive that it inadvertently opens up new choices for its audience. Should the intent be decisive? But then what if an intended irony is not perceived by the audience, or what if wedging is not intended but overwhelmingly effected anyway? The relative importance of intent, content and effect in determining whether a certain instance of rhetoric is indeed "wedging" deserves further thought.

Furthermore, are the examples of "spectator rhetoric" adduced by Professor Mifsud really completely wedgeless performances? I think it could be argued that for instance Gorgias' "Encomium of Helen," as well as "The Encomium of Baldness," and "The Eulogy of the Gnat" playfully suggested to their audiences that they could or should *reinterpret* the merits of Helen, baldness, or gnats, and perhaps also of rhetoric; and that by further implication things widely viewed with disfavor might not always fully deserve that general disdain. And could not Bill Clinton's 1999 state of the union address suggest to members of

its audience new interpretations of Bill Clinton (whether intended or not) that might not have occurred to them without listening to this speech in this situation?

2. *Interpretation*

Should interpretation be regarded as the genus of rhetoric, or as a species of rhetoric? Professor Mifsud states that "interpretation is not a species of rhetoric. Indeed, it will turn out that the converse is true." But I am not sure that the paper provides an effective argument in support of that assertion. If rhetoric is a species of interpretation, then there would have to be non-rhetorical interpretations, and that appears to me quite doubtful, since all interpretations are meant to persuade an audience to view something in a certain way. Professor Mifsud points to gun-supported threats and thunderbolts in the night as non-rhetorical events eliciting interpretation; but the fact that events *eliciting* interpretations are non-rhetorical does *not* show that the interpretations *themselves* are non-rhetorical. The interpretations in these cases are carried out by those who *observe* these non-rhetorical phenomena and *persuade* themselves to act (or not act) in certain ways on the basis of these interpretations: the observers engage in "reflexive rhetoric." A threat interpreted as not serious may be ignored, a thunderbolt interpreted as an omen may be heeded, etc. Such interpretations are not strictly "caused" by the events themselves, since alternative interpretations are indeed possible in every case.

3. *Bilaterality*

To what extent is bilaterality really required for "genuine" rhetoric? It is of course always *possible* to respond to a rhetorical performance, but bilaterality seems to imply that the performance *invites* such responses to the rhetor. But many theatrical, film, or television performances may be quite enlightening and choice-opening for those watching them, and yet not invite audience participation or response to those creating these events. And should we classify attorneys' speeches to juries or Supreme Court opinions as "mere" rhetoric, simply because they do not invite a reasoned response from their addressees, do not give their immediate audiences "the same freedom to use communicative strategies in addressing the rhetor as the rhetor does in addressing the audience?"

4. *Identification*

In this paper, the term "identification" is used to characterize the mode of operation of wedgeless "bacchanalian" rhetoric, as differentiated from the power of distinction inherent in the rhetorical wedge. Identification is said to operate through bypassing rather than overcoming different perspectives, moving the psyche by a power more akin to compulsion than to judgment. But the Burkean use of the term "identification" as a near-substitute for "persuasion" would seem to indicate broader implications, not limiting

identification to wedgeless rhetoric. Since Kenneth Burke's concept of identification is fairly widely attended to, it may be well to take into account this larger meaning. In fact, Professor Mifsud herself acknowledges later in her paper that a form of identification also operates in the "rhetorical bridge," so there appears to be a "genuine" as well as a "mere" identification here.

5. *Persuasion*

A widely used brief definition identifies rhetoric as the "art of persuasion," but Professor Mifsud asks "whether rhetoric's association with persuasion keeps it shrouded in suspicion," and she undertakes some efforts to dissociate rhetoric from persuasion. To that end, she posits that rhetoric is concerned with decision rather than persuasion, judgment rather than persuasion, bilaterality rather than persuasion. Such dichotomies tend to move the term "persuasion" ever closer to "manipulation," while I think that there is as yet no general perception that the two are indistinct. Since the association of rhetoric with persuasion is based on a very long and strong tradition, I am not sure that it would be productive to jettison the term.

It is of course true that rhetoric does not aim at persuasion for its own sake, but that does not imply that persuasion is not a step along the way towards decisions and judgments; the rhetor studies the available means of persuasion in order to be able to use them in the quest for good decisions and judgments, which are to be prepared and prompted by the appropriate deployment of these means of persuasion. Nor are bilaterality and persuasion mutually exclusive, as long as *mutual* persuasion and adaptation between speakers and audiences rather than *one-sided* manipulation is the order of the day.

6. *Wedge*

In conclusion, I return to the wedge, but from a somewhat different perspective. By treating the wedge as a chief characteristic of "genuine" rhetoric, Professor Mifsud at least implies that wedging is *always* a sign of "good" rhetoric, and I think that may be doubted. There may be unquestioned beliefs that would better stay unquestioned; would we applaud the wedging that made slavery or racist killings thinkable? How can a wedge that opens up "bad" choices be an indicator of genuine rhetoric? I know that concepts such as the rhetorical wedge and bridge are designed to provide moral content to rhetoric beyond the traditional focus on the purposes of the speaker or the effects of the speech. But I don't think that we can entirely dissociate the evaluation of rhetoric from such concerns. It is one of the insights of rhetoric that moral evaluations are affected by circumstances, and the evaluation of rhetoric is no exception.
