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The failure of certainty: Why economics needs rhetoric

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ABSTRACT: Privileging deductive first principles over inductive contingencies, I argue, contributed to the economic meltdown of late and will continue to limit the range of reasonable solutions available to solve entrenched economic problems. I cite Toulmin's critique of scientific certainty and the rancor over the demise of the ninth planet Pluto to posit a role for rhetoric in making valid claims across all fields of study, calling for more productive uncertainty subject to vigorous argumentation.

KEYWORDS: Adam Smith, deduction, economics, financial crisis, induction, philosophy, political economy, rhetoric, scientific method

1. INTRODUCTION

The last forty years of American economic policy, according to former longtime head of the Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan, marked an experiment to test the assumed efficacy of persons acting in their self-interest for the benefit of all. In response to questions from a US Congressional committee seeking information about the causes of the financial collapse of 2008, Greenspan conceded,

I made a mistake in presuming that the self-interests of organizations, specifically banks and others, were such as that they were best capable of protecting their own shareholders and their equity in their firms (Corn, 2008).

The disastrous results of such presumptive certainty spread around the globe, pointing to errors in the model. Modern mainstream economists, at least by Greenspan's own account, created the conditions for an economic collapse fostered by a mistaken characterization of Adam Smith's ideas—highlighting the presumed sanctity of self-interested behavior and the widespread benefits of the "invisible hand." What is hardly mentioned by strident free market purists and advocates of deregulation is that Smith balanced notions of an open marketplace with social and civic responsibility, armed as he was with a profound appreciation of human behavior and knowledge of rhetoric. I cite Smith's overtly rhetorical and less dogmatic approach in his *Wealth of Nations* to contrast this with the deductive leap taken by political economists in his wake; yet, it was the same Smith who admired the use of first principles as a professor of rhetoric and advocated it to his students. Under the banner of the didactic method, Smith advised in lectures:

[I]n the manner of Sir Isaac Newton, we may lay down certain principles, primary or proved, in the beginning, from whence we account for the several phenomena, connecting all together by the same chain . . . It gives us pleasure to see the phenomena which we reckoned the most unaccountable, all deduced from some principle . . . (Smith, 1971, p. 140)

Newton's manner, as Smith calls it, became what Stephen Toulmin calls "the physics that never was" (2001, p. 55), and found adherents for its ability to predict in a stable universe, with little need to debate infallible first principles. In this essay, I trace the path and consequences of emulating the methods of Newton in pursuit of certainty in the field of economics. Before tracing the historical developments that contributed to the transformation of the (mainly) inductive philosophy of early political economy to the (mainly) deductive science of latter-day economics, I want to briefly foreground Smith's ambivalent relationship with deduction and induction in his own writings with the help of one of Plato's most insightful dialogues on the conflict between rhetoric and dialectic: *Protagoras*.

Plato's *Protagoras* provides a dramatic demonstration of the age-old split between rhetoric and philosophy and disputes over methods so central to the transformation of political economy to the science of economics. Socrates pays a visit to the famous sophist (and namesake of the dialogue) to find out why he thinks virtue can be taught. Protagoras, an eloquent speaker in love with the sound of his own voice, draws upon historical, cultural, and social themes to defend his position that, indeed, virtue is teachable. Meanwhile, Socrates is impatient with Protagoras' voluminous yet spellbinding speech, and he insists on short answers to brief questions to move the dialectical contest forward to the truth (and, of course, secure a victory) (Plato, 1989, 334e-325). In the end, the debate disintegrates into a puerile pouting-match between the foes, and, for Plato, a demonstration of the hubris of human beings and corresponding pitfalls of using contrastive methods in pursuing truth. To illustrate my analogy, Socrates plays the deductive/abstract philosopher (qua-scientist) and Protagoras the inductive/historical sophist (qua-rhetorician). Moving back to Smith, I see him as a bit of both Protagoras and Socrates: inductive rhetorician and deductive philosopher. Smith "recognized the patent contradiction between reality on the ground and conclusions drawn solely from deduction" (Kennedy, 2008, p. 137), and so Smith's "methodology was eclectic," with a blend of the "empirical, the theoretical, the institutional, the philosophical, the static, and the dynamic . . . all intermingled" (Sowell, as cited in Milonakis & Fine, 2009, p. 16). In short, he applied deductive and inductive methods, and for the rest of economic history to the present, the two sides of Smith, like the estranged children of Abraham, began their own antagonistic methodological economic traditions. Irish historical economist, Cliffe Leslie, first noted this in 1870, pointing to the "dualism" in Smith that split into two distinct schools with opposite methods: "[o]ne of them is represented by [David] Ricardo as the founder of the deductive method; the other of which [Robert] Malthus and [John Stuart] Mill are the chief representatives, combines a priori and inductive methods" (Milonakis & Fine, 2009, p. 18). Although Smith "employed deductive reasoning," it was "not of an axiomatic nature," and as "a keen observer . . . of history and different societies" he "frequently used facts to

illustrate arguments. In short, his deductions were usually empirically founded” (John Phedy, as cited in Milonakis & Fine, 2009, p. 18). Smith may have lectured admiringly about Newton’s method, nevertheless, his *Wealth of Nations* reasons from inductive to deductive proofs.

It wasn’t until 1870 when economics, as a newly emerging social science, began to take on in earnest earlier attempts to emulate Newton’s physics. In his lectures, years before he wrote the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith discerns two distinct methods in didactic, or instructional, writing; one associated with Aristotle and the other with Newton:

[I]n Natural Philosophy, or any other science of that sort, we may either, like Aristotle, go over the different branches in the order they happen to [be] cast up to us, giving a principle, commonly a new one, for every phenomenon; or, in the manner of Sir Isaac Newton, we may lay down certain principles, primary, or proved, in the beginning, for whence we account for the several phenomena, connecting all together by the same chain. This latter, which we may call the Newtonian method, is undoubtedly the most philosophical, and in every science, whether of Morals or Natural Philosophy, etc., is vastly more ingenious, and for that reason more engaging, than the other. (Smith, 1971, p. 140)

Sharing Smith’s glowing appraisal of Newton’s method was a new professional class of experts in the various emerging studies that would become the social sciences. Smith scholar Pierre Force ponders Smith’s contrastive methods in his two famous works, giving some understanding of the rhetorical method of inquiry and role of primary and subordinate propositions in both. Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Force notes, “operates in *more geometrico*,” advancing a first principle (sympathy) followed by the consequences of those principles (2003, p. 127). By contrast, in the *Wealth*, Force adds, Smith employs an analytic strategy, beginning with a problem “(what are the causes of the wealth of nations?), and he gradually analyzes the problem, by identifying explanatory principles that are more and more general” (2003, p. 127). The attraction of this strategy to Smith in the *Wealth* seems to be that it allows an unfolding of general principles grounded in moral precepts drawn from actual examples of human behavior. In this light, one can view Smith as a rhetorician and moral philosopher who applied his methods to the problems of political economy.

In an attempt to gain the status of a pure science in a Newtonian sense, the philosophy of political economy, etched with historical, social, and ethical concerns had to be jettisoned and left to re-organize as separate fields of study. Recalling Plato’s dramatic dialogue in *Protagoras*, wherein Socrates’ concept of virtue as an individual’s choice for pleasure over pain (1989, 357a-b) (the proto-utility maximizing self-contained unit) is pitted against Protagoras’ concept of a pluralistic participatory virtue hashed out in the public forum (1989, pp. 327-328) (a rhetorically-defined individual situated in a social political arena)—these two contrastive methods of discovering virtue in classical philosophy and rhetoric mimic competing methods in economics. Rhetoric, as Protagoras maintains, decides the meaning of public attitudes about virtue in the public forum, informed by historical and sociopolitical contingencies (and where reasonable/inductive methods

predominate), whereas, Socrates' dialectic of scientific certainty (rational/deductive methods held to a standard of non-contradiction) is a closed business to serious minds (at that time, philosophers, today, perhaps economists) bound to the rules of game, leaving aside the contingent concerns so important to rhetoric. Both sides insist that their own methods are necessary conditions to reach truth. Put another way: for Protagoras, *virtue exists in speech acts* carried on in public and informed by historical and social precedents; for Socrates, *virtue exists—period*—the properties of which can be discovered with the proper methods of inquiry.

After Smith and the advent of more rigorous scientific approaches, British commentators debated the vices and virtues of shedding social and hence moral responsibility from political economy to move toward a disinterested economic "reality" (a move from labor and class analysis to a science of distribution and exchange theory, as it has since become) (Milonakis & Fine, 2009). This snowballed into a serious professional feud over the purpose and methods of political economy characterized by economic historian Arnold Toynbee in the early 1880s as a "bitter argument between economists and human beings" (as cited in Winch, 1996, p. 6). As one might guess, the argument continues, a subject that requires a look at a myopic desire for scientific certainty across the social sciences and particularly in the study of economics.

In the pages ahead, I examine the limits imposed to inquiry in the transformation of political economy to the science of economics, which is shorthand for the privileging of rationality over reason, certainty over rhetoric, deduction over induction, and ideology over material reality. In addition, this will entail a review of the challenges to contemporary rhetoric that have their origins in its strained relationship with *scientific rationality*, which ruptured in earnest with the advent of the Enlightenment and the privileging of scientific rhetoric.¹ In course, this will necessitate a look at rhetoric's equally strained relationship with the natural and social sciences once housed in the catchall field of study known as Philosophy. I will conclude by making a case for rhetoric and productive irony (the product of uncertainty), but first, I begin with a story that I think narrows the difference between knowledge production as science or rhetoric, and outlines the scope of persuasion in fields long deemed unimproved by the study and application of rhetoric—a look at rhetoric's troubled relationship with scientific logic illustrated within the brief history of the planet Pluto.

2. PLUTO'S DESCENT AND THE LONG NIGHT OF RHETORIC

"Whoa! Pluto's dead," said astronomer Mike Brown, of the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, as he watched a Webcast of the vote. "There are finally, officially, eight planets in the solar system." (Iman, 2006, p. 1)

¹I say "scientific rhetoric" instead of "scientific method," because as Richard Rorty points out, "A quarrel about method requires a common goal, and a disagreement about the means of reaching it" (1982, p. 196). Part of my criticism is aimed at the *rhetorical application* of scientific methods in social scientific fields that may or may not share a common goal, and only tangentially with "The Scientific Method" *in situ*.

In 2005, the International Astronomical Union (IAU) decided to end the career of Pluto, which had been widely viewed as the ninth planet since its discovery in the 1930s. The majority of researchers ruled Pluto did not fit a rearticulated definition of a planet, which included orbiting the sun, possessing enough mass to assume a round shape, and being large enough to dominate its orbit. Pluto failed on the last of the three requirements (there were other planetoid objects sharing its orbit), with a few participants dissenting (Iman, 2006, pp. 1-2). Of course, Pluto did not become a planet through scientific observation alone, and just as quickly as the “known facts” of the time created the ninth planet, debate and “other facts” could undo it. Alan G. Gross’s *The Rhetoric of Science* helps us to appreciate the rhetorical and truly unremarkable nature of the Pluto controversy, as he argues that scientific knowledge is not special, but rather, social. He notes that “scientific discovery is properly described as invention . . . To discover is to find out what is already there” (Gross, 1990, p. 7), so, he adds, “discovery is not a description of what scientists do: it is a hidden metaphor that begs the question of the certainty of scientific knowledge” (Gross, 1990, p. 7). In other words, a rhetorical metaphor of discovery helped to launch the ninth planet, and thus a new invention (a definition, no doubt wrangled over and pleasing no one completely) could return it to just another large icy rock orbiting the sun. The gist of the claim is that “planets are *like this*, not *like that*.” Outside and inside the scientific community, many were aghast, hurt, and angry.² I’m sure many science teachers tried to explain to their disillusioned students what even some astronomers failed to appreciate. As Gross explains,

If scientific theories are discoveries, their unflinching obsolescence is difficult to explain; if these theories are rhetorical inventions, no explanation of their radical vulnerability is necessary. (Gross, 1990, p. 7)

The politics of science reveals what many would rather not know: scientific certainty (what is assumed to be known at any given time), like other kinds of knowledge and opinion, has a shelf life of unknown duration. Truths, like opinion, are not stable, but ever shifting moments of consensus achieved through using language, however strong the “evidence” appears to be. No wonder many people balked—what other “truths” could fall from the sky?

Pluto, the *former* planet, is not the primary concern, but rather, its emblematic role as a character spanning the gulf between pure science and applied rhetoric. It turns out that planets cannot exist without *agreed upon* physical properties and *consensus* regarding proper terminology. In this case, deciding what it *means* to be a planet.³ As Kenneth Burke says, “Wherever there is ‘meaning,’ there

²Some thought Pluto and some forty-plus similar objects that did not dominate their orbits should be called planets. A few sought an exemption for Pluto, and still others suggested Pluto be included in a new class of so-called dwarf planets. A few said that they would go on regarding Pluto as a planet (Iman, 2006, p. 2). It was widely reported that many schoolchildren, unaccustomed to reversals of catechistic thought, protested and pouted—vowing to never surrender their belief in a ninth planet.

³ The meaning of a new definition must be argued, it cannot be discovered. The deliberation concerning what a planet is provides a case point: “But for now the vote is drawing some opposition.

is persuasion,” and persuasion is rhetoric (as cited in Booth, 2004, p. 171). Science as a language practice, in this sense, follows a pattern found in Aristotle’s judicial and deliberative discourses: “So let it be argued, so let it be decided, so let it be done.” Science and its social science cousins often leave these more political aspects of bargaining and wrangling definitions out of the picture. Once in a while, a crisis like the status of Pluto becomes untenable within the community of experts charged with knowing what is and is not a planet, and then non-experts get to see how the experts do things. There would be dissent, but the collective will of the voting assembly will stand for now.⁴

Rhetoric most certainly played a key role in this change, or, in an ironically apropos statement by Gross, “Science is less a matter of truth than of making worlds” (1990, p. 205). Pluto’s fall from the heavens illustrates the hand of rhetoric in domains often viewed as hostile to it, and shows the suasive at work in all disciplines, from philosophy and social sciences, to the so-called *hard* and *soft* sciences.

Stephen Toulmin’s *Return to Reason* ends with a clarion call for more certainties like Pluto to fall from the sky:

Our first intellectual obligation is to abandon the Myth of Stability that played so large a part in the Modern age: only thus can we heal the wounds inflicted on Reason by the seventeenth-century obsession with Rationality, and give back a Reasonableness the equal treatment of which it was for so long deprived. (Toulmin, 2001, p. 214)

What this entails, Toulmin argues, is recognition of “the reasonableness of narratives” as contrasted with “the rigor of formal proofs,” which further shows the difference between “local knowledge of the patterns we find in concrete events, and the universal, abstract understanding embodied in purely theoretical points of view” (2001, p. 15). Toulmin is preparing the ground for an acceptance of the validity of non-formal proofs across the professional disciplines, and he opens up the possibility that rhetorical analysis can disturb an impenetrable scientific pretense that is borrowed from physics and made to apply to disciplines in the social sciences, especially economics. The story of Pluto and its planetary ambitions is, ironically, a fitting place to begin this examination, as Isaac Newton’s theories about the workings of the planets took part in the creation of the scientific certainty as it stands today.

Returning to Toulmin’s narrative, he traces the historical events that hastened what he calls a split between *reason* and *rationality*. He asks,

Planetary scientist Andy Cheng said the definition is ambiguous, because it hasn't answered the question ‘how round is round?’” (Iman, 2006, p. 2).

⁴ Alan G. Gross observes a conceptual voting assembly in a less absolutist science: “Indeed, this absolutist view of scientific truth now has an alternative, a sophisticated relativism in which truth depends not on conformity to a substratum of reality, but on agreement among significant persons” (1990, p. 21).

Why was Newtonian dynamics seen as the type example of a Serious Science, to be emulated by economists, sociologists, and psychologists no less than physiologists and biochemists? Why were social scientists so keen to be the ‘Newtons’ of social theory? (Toulmin, 2001, p. 47)

He isolates Newton’s *Principia Mathematica* (influenced by the axiomatic simplicity of Euclidean geometry) as the pivotal text that set the standard for future scientific works emphasizing universal laws and stable truths (Toulmin, 2001, p. 48). Toulmin calls this “the physics that never was” (2001, p. 55) because, as Newton’s contemporary and arch-critic Gottfried Leibniz observed, his

theorems proved only that the Law of Gravitation accounts for the motions of *one planet at a time* around a more massive center of attraction, such as the Sun. With this simplification, the equations of motion for a single planet are easily solved . . . [but] [o]nce we introduce into the picture a third body—say a second planet—the equations are, however, no longer algebraically soluble. (Toulmin, 2001, p. 50, emphasis in original)

In short, Newtonians had to use “arithmetical dodges” to explain deviations from his simplified orbits (Toulmin, 2001, pp. 50-51). This doesn’t mean that Newtonian physics wasn’t a groundbreaking achievement and empirically useful, it simply means that Newton’s hope of showing a predictably rational God through a predictably rational Universe was flawed⁵ (Toulmin, 2001, p. 55). The beauty and simplicity of his equations purporting a stable planetary system could not describe the actual workings of the solar system, thus, Toulmin says that “the model that for so long held center stage as the ‘the ideal form of theory for any would-be Science’ remained that of a Physics that Never Was” (2001, p. 55). Borrowing the form and method (the rhetoric) of physics, social scientists hoped to achieve three goals:

a) an abstract theory with a rigorously valid axiom system, b) deductions of the nature of human institutions from its universal principles, and 3) scientific explanations of the character of particular social institutions. Yet this triple prize was never a realistic possibility: it had never been achieved even in planetary astronomy. (Toulmin, 2001, p. 54)

The legacy of emulating physics is seen especially in economics, where universal applications of principles have been “wrong-headed or even disastrous” (Toulmin, 2001, p. 60). Toulmin cites the intervention of modern economic theory on the Island of Bali, where “rational” attempts to increase rice production caused plagues of pests and funguses on a biblical scale. The problem with abstract solutions based upon a universal principles is not tied to an inherent flaw in technology or economics, but rather, in a belief that their solutions can be founded and applied without consulting the entire web of practices and beliefs of the people they are

⁵ Regarding the stability of the universe: “Astronomers may have discovered the aftermath of a collision between a Saturn-size planet and a smaller world, perhaps the size of Uranus, some 170 light-years away” (Lovett, 2008). Toulmin notes, “in our own time the dynamics of our planetary system are still a matter of public concern,” citing other collisions between planetary objects and dire predictions of an asteroid hitting the earth (2001, p. 54).

supposed to help (Toulmin, 2001, pp. 60-61). If a vibrant rhetoric of economics is to move beyond an adherence to numbers and predictions, it must include actual human needs, histories, social conditions, cultural beliefs, and stories. At the heart of Toulmin's analysis is his plea for ways of thinking and postulating reality that retain a narrative sensibility. Following this, it is helpful to review the current status of rhetoric as a field and what is lost by its formal ostracism from serious science.

Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric* explores, among other things, how neglecting the study of persuasion can make some problems impossible to solve without violence or stagnation. Booth sees a role and agenda for rhetoric in the 21st century—to combat dishonest, fraudulent, and contemptible rhetoric. For Booth the remedy is *more* rhetorical education not *less* (2004, pp. xi-xii). What Booth wants is recognition of the uses of rhetoric in *all* fields, and for professionals to ask what constitutes good and bad forms of persuasion in each discipline (2004, p. xii). “Bad” persuasion comes in many forms, and a virulent strain comes from claims of scientific certainty in domains better served by rhetoric sensitive to the political exigencies and needs of the community it addresses. As English Studies have long explored the texts of powerful fictional literature, Rhetoric Studies should engage the persuasive fictions of economics that wield so much power,⁶ reclaiming for study the various compartments Aristotle included in his *Rhetoric*—ethics, politics, psychology, logic, history, and poetics (Burke, 2008, p. 51).

The split between formal logic and reason (rhetoric) might be tolerable or even admirable in a world that recognized the same distinctions within human affairs. Perhaps we should be grateful that there can be neither purely logical nor purely rhetorical endeavors, for this is what makes us human. Antonio Grassi, in *Rhetoric as Philosophy*, writing about the Italian Humanists' response to Descartes' war on the humanities, points to the same issue in the realm of philosophical studies, which, he claims, is hobbled by the eviction of probable, situated, and politically prudent courses of action in favor of single standard of truth:

The defects of rationalistic, critical philosophy are much more than they appear at first sight. By failing to take into account political faculties and the art of eloquence, this philosophy disregards two of the most important branches of human activity. The one-sided concern about truth misses the preparation for recognizing individual cases, and it ignores the necessity for political education. (Grassi, 1980, p. 40)

With political education, we return to the realm of rhetoric, which includes concerns about ethics and morals, and which must deliberate with care to the collective and individual, not universals. Here, we can hear echoes of Booth's manifesto and Toulmin's claim (repeated by contemporary rhetoricians across the board) that neglect of the virtues of rhetoric (i.e. argument and debate) limits the ability of problems to be addressed by negating a whole range of arguments now deemed extrinsic to thoughtful consideration.

⁶ Victor Villanueva, in “Toward a Political Economy of Rhetoric,” laments the lack of attention to the economic texts that carry so much ideological weight and referee material outcomes, writing: “There is a rhetoric of economics, a rhetoric of political economy. We need only to reclaim it” (2005, p. 62).

In the final analysis, the “scientific method,” like other uses of language that persuade and construct a vision of reality, is both rhetorical and ideological. For many early followers of Newton and Galileo, both of whom used mathematical symbols to represent the natural world, the vocabulary of science was closer to truth, to God. Many thought that the language itself represented a new window on reality. For Richard Rorty, the success wasn’t due to “something called the ‘scientific method,’” but rather, it was the ability to finally predict with “simple mathematical ratios” (1982, p. 191).

Galileo and his followers discovered, and subsequent centuries have amply confirmed, that you get much better predictions by thinking of things as masses of particles blindly bumping each other than by thinking of them as Aristotle thought of them—animistically, teleologically, and anthropomorphically. They also discerned that you get a better handle on the universe by thinking of it as infinite and cold and comfortless than by thinking it as finite, homey, planned, and relevant to human concerns. (Rorty, 1982, p. 191)

Echoes of the siren call of objectivity are apparent here, and the need to remove the human from such a cold and mechanical natural world. Galileo, Rorty tells, believed his “vocabulary worked because it fitted the universe as a key fits a lock” (1982, p. 192). Kant suggested those with the key, perhaps unwittingly, made the lock (Rorty 1982, p. 192). In any case, the cat was out of the bag, and it appears that the method of science is not so different from what humans do in every activity:

They check off examples against criteria; they fudge the counter-examples enough to avoid the need for new models; they try out various guesses, formulated within the current jargon, in the hope of coming up with something which will cover up the unfudgeable cases. (Rorty, 1982, p. 193)

Newton’s calculations were also simplified, and mathematical dodges used to “cover up the unfudgeables.” This sounds a lot like the way planets are “discovered” and demoted. In fact, the Pluto story recounts the use of criteria (how to define a planet); a fudging of counter-examples (other orbiting objects equal in size to Pluto but not called planets); a new model that becomes no longer avoidable (having been fudged for too long many astronomers believed); and so the process begins again, with new jargon (terminology) to describe a planet, and new criteria with a different quality of fudging (i.e., “how round is round?” (Iman, 2006, p. 2)—not perfect, but eliminating today’s inconsistencies).

3. EMBRACING RHETORIC, UNCERTAINTY, AND IRONY

So, in answer to those in the humanities seeking to find the magic formulae to the success of the sciences through a rhetoric that mirrors reality, Rorty replies,

Galileo’s terminology is the only ‘secret’ he had—he didn’t pick that terminology because it was ‘clear’ or ‘natural’ or ‘simple,’ or in line with the categories of the pure understanding. He just lucked out. (p. 193)

I suppose this means that Galileo did what anyone faced with a rhetorical challenge must do: find a way to communicate a message to an intended audience. The point is that science and social science do not differ in their methods as a rule, as they both employ a language designed to convince. Social scientist can use scientific terminology when they want to convince that they can predict, and this can be successful (especially if this is what audiences expect), but the practical realizations of those predictions are markedly less so. As Rorty points out, “the last fifty years of research in the social sciences have not notably increased our predictive abilities” (Rorty, 1982, p. 197; see also Taleb, 2007).

What Toulmin, Grassi, and Rorty all prize is the ability of the humanities and social sciences to tell us stories, to interpret other people to us, and to introduce us to subjective experiences in the world we share but often see so differently. In a rhetorical practice that doesn't deny the homey comfort of human emotions, and in which individual and cultural narratives are allowed to commingle with now less “cold” and less “value-neutral” facts, there is potential for “enlarging and deepening our sense of community” (Rorty, 1982, p. 203). Rorty hopes that

[w]hen the notion of knowledge as representation goes, then the notion of inquiry as split into discrete sectors with discrete subject matter goes. . . . The lines between subject matters are drawn by reference to current practical concerns, rather than putative ontological status. (p. 203)

Here, I see Rorty's neo-pragmatism (or anti-theory theory) capturing the challenge for rhetoric studies moving forward. Speaking to practical concerns of contemporary rhetoric, a study of the rhetorics-across-the-disciplines should be aware of its own fudging of counter-examples and, taking a cue from Booth, they should be alert to the “good” as well as the “bad” in the social sciences. Rorty points out that Michel Foucault saw the dark side of social science (“instruments of domination”) while John Dewey saw the hopeful side (“social engineering”) (1982, p. 204). Rorty opts for hope above gloom, and a possibility for transformation of institutions through solidarity and collective action (1982, p. 208). Of course, rhetoric, like science, can evince a common picture of the world by consulting its various components, but we should be mindful of limitations even as we celebrate its capacity. Steve Fuller and James H. Collier, seeking to build interdisciplinary connection across the humanities and social sciences, see contemporary rhetoric as insightful to the ways knowledge is produced and communicated. They also remind us that friends of rhetoric

tend to overemphasize the community-building functions of well-chosen language, often harboring some fairly nostalgic (if not downright mythical) views about the degree of common ground that is achievable or desirable between people. (Fuller & Collier, 2004, p. 14)

I too find hope irresistible, but a little gloom and doom, and large measure of “what other people think” can help keep rhetoricians from over-fudging their own accounts.

There have been other calls to bridge the divide between methodological camps. Of course, according to Aristotle, both methods need each other, as the deductive and inductive dialectic method defines certainties to the point where parties can at least agree to the terms and issues to be discussed, at which point rhetoric steps in to finish the job of proposing a course of action (a judgment or an attitude is reached). This is the rhetoric of particular cases: (non-universal) questions of probable truth (Kennedy, 1963, p. 96-7). William James, offering pragmatism as the answer to the dichotomy between humanism and science, writes,

You want a scientific loyalty to facts and willingness to take account of them, the spirit of adaption and accommodation, in short, but also the old confidence in human values and the resultant spontaneity, whether of the religious or the romantic type. (as cited in McCloskey, 1994, p. 70)

Deidre McCloskey says, “Economists can do better than taking sides between thought and feeling, between the Sciences and the Humanities” (1994, p. 70). Modern economics needs to reengage the methods of Adam Smith, McCloskey holds, by “analyzing both action and behavior, understanding the reasonableness of what people do down in the ruck of the market and seeing them also ‘from the eighth floor,’ as a sociologist put it” (1994, p. 70). The problem is complicated, because, as Milonakis and Fine explain, “whilst economics profoundly reflects historical and social processes both materially and ideologically, it is blissfully ignorant of them and wishes to remain so” (2009, p. 4).

In *The Rhetoric of Economics*, Deidre McCloskey defines all economics as rhetorical because it is “speech with intent” to persuade, and although she concedes (along with Booth) that rhetoric is “not everything,” it is “everywhere in the speech of human persuaders” (1998, p. 8). McCloskey points out that modern economists with exclusive scientific pretensions such as

Robert Solow or Milton Friedman do not know anything of classical rhetoric—they grew up at the nadir of rhetorical education—but they can spot when a formal assumption is being used well or badly, and they can sense when this or that verbal device is appropriate. And the wordcraft that the best economists exercise by instinct can be taught, at least a little. (McCloskey, 1998, p. 5)

The notion of teaching rhetoric is bound with the notion of teaching virtue, a contest also explored in the conflict between Socrates and Protagoras. Focusing on the kinds of stories economists like to tell, McCloskey also apprehends a proving of opposites as conducive to a shared search for meaning and the ability of “small t” truth to explain reality, suggesting that a “variety in economic narratives is good for the soul. Marxist narrative provides a criticism of the bourgeoisie ‘neo-classical’ narrative, and vice versa” (McCloskey, 1998, p. 146). Booth celebrates the call and response of answering rhetoric with still more rhetoric in the form of powerful narratives to counter other powerful narratives, noting that the “serious ethical disasters produced by narratives occur when people sink themselves into an unrelieved hot bath of one kind of narrative” (as cited McCloskey, 1990, p. 146). Recalling Greenspan’s testimony in front of congress about “smart people,” the best minds of

the Federal Reserve, who could not foresee the 2008 collapse of the economy (Corn, 2008), an adherence to preferred perspectives and *covert* rhetorical methods of inquiry (both grounds for “small t” truth and “big T” Truth) is the hot water of the current crisis. The rhetorical appeal of methodologies bound to first principles (a rhetoric *of* method) may be aesthetically pleasing but not necessarily the route to unimpeachable truth. In his lectures on rhetoric, Smith, in another demonstration of his ambivalence concerning method, seizes upon the distinction between a perception of truth earned by following a method and an actual apprehension of reality:

We need not be surprised, then, that the Cartesian philosophy (for Descartes was in reality the first who attempted this method), though it does not perhaps contain a word of truth,—and to us who live in a more enlightened age and have more inquired into these matters, it appears very dubious,—should nevertheless have been so universally received by all the learned in Europe at that time. The great superiority of the method over that of Aristotle, the only one then known, and the little inquiry which was then made into those matters, made them greedily receive a work which we justly esteem one of the most entertaining romances that have ever been wrote (*sic*). (Smith, 1971, p. 40)

Smith has it right. Indeed, a great story made great by its rhetorical method is likely to deceive by its appearance of infallibility. In the realm of one-sided economics, where one hand (the rational scientific) does the work of the other (the reasonable social), the consequences are disastrous. We need Protagoras *and* Socrates, and a host of other voices to school us in the range of disagreement required to live a critical life. Trumpeting the need for vigorous argumentation, McCloskey writes,

If economists tell stories and exercise an ethical sense when telling them, then they had better have as many stories as possible. This is a principled justification of pluralism, an argument for not keeping all one’s eggs in a single narrative basket. If you are accustomed to thinking in Platonic terms within which knowledge consists mainly in propositions like the irrationality of the square root of two, provable now and forever, then monism looks attractive. There’s One Truth out there, isn’t there. If you are by contrast accustomed to thinking in Aristotelian terms within which knowledge consists of judgments like the desirability of democracy, uncertain even when agreed to after much discussion of people of good will, then monism in the tales we tell looks foolish, as it is. (McCloskey, 1990, p. 146)

In *Protagoras* the debacle between Socrates and Protagoras is perhaps another moment in which Plato shows us the problem of democracy, which is a good problem to have, considering the alternatives; but pluralism in the economics of modern American democracy (in theory and policy) is rarely honored or practiced, except in times of periodic crisis, when alternatives are required to save face and prevent further harm (bailouts, new deals, stimulus packages, and all the rest). In spite of reasonable voices pointing to facts on the ground that undermine the professed success in the last forty years of neo-liberal *laissez faire* policies (see Klein, 2007; Greider, 1997; Chang, 2008; Phillips, 2008), modern mainstream economics occupies the rostrum, that is, until something bad happens, to be followed by a band aid approach to “saving markets” while the fundamental

problems remain. The experiment in free-markets as a panacea to human fulfillment and harmony (Greenspan's "it was working exceptionally well" (Corn, 2008)) represents a lack of productive irony—productive in the sense of proposing less "certain" but more "reasonable" versions of reality. If rhetoric may be accused of deliberately producing irony, then it may wear that accusation quite well. Burke notes in his dramatic analogue to dialectical rhetorical speech that in "a *development* that uses all the terms . . . (this 'perspective of perspectives'), none of the participating 'sub-perspectives' can be treated precisely right or precisely wrong (1969, p. 512, emphasis in original). In other words, Burke observes how rhetorical debates are similar to dramatic performances, wherein, "all voices, or personalities, or positions, integrally [affect]one another" (1969, p.512). The economic crisis was nurtured by a dominating sub-perspective of a scientifically modeled economics that fudges to accommodate messy practical contingencies apparent to contrary voices in the dialectic performance. An extreme deductive and positivist mainstream economics like Milton Friedman's begins with assumptions "that need bear no relation to reality; it can even be claimed that theory has greater purchase the more unrealistic its assumptions"(Milonakis & Fine, 2009, p. 69). In this "theoretical world," if "ex post reality checks" (data to verify or falsify) do not confirm the theory, this can "be accommodated by appropriate statistical manipulation or model refinement" (Milonakis & Fine, 2009, p. 69). In other words, more fudging to make the beautiful models function as intended.

In this light, concerns about the loss of "positive" knowledge in a world of "relative" claims are wholly misplaced. "In relativism," Burke says (applying a rigorous definition of the word) "there is no irony," because it sees "but one set of terms," and so in a strict sense, a relative viewpoint is, ironically, a sub-certainty parading as the absolute last word on the subject⁷ (1969, pp. 512-513). So much for the line between pure and fuzzy truths, and Burke offers a continuum, or ratio, to measure the ironic inverse relationship: "the greater the absolutism of the statements, the greater the subjectivity and relativity in the position of the agent making the statements" (1969, pp. 512). An absolute stand is "relativistic" if this means choosing one reigning side of a dialectical situation in its entirety. Irony is a suspension of contraries, neither totally right nor totally wrong, and thus, what is 'A' can return as 'non-A' (i.e., Pluto the planet and not a planet), even if it means abandoning certainty for irony.

Irony is integral to the human condition; perhaps this is why it is the stuff of great drama and tragedy, but a bit of certainty is good for ease of mind and a measure of common ground. So, what to make of charges of relativism (this time the "relativism" as bogeyman to rational thinking) against those who condone a more rhetorical pursuit of "small t" truth? If "relativism" is taken to mean, "anything goes, arguments are all equal, scholarship does not advance, [and] we have no way of reaching common ground," then McCloskey, and other reasonable and rational people, condemn this too (McCloskey, 1994, p. 315). That brand of "relativism" is the bogeyman of clear thinking, but the good news is that "[i]f there *were* any real

⁷ One might call this a *tu quoque*, as it does insinuate that "relativism" sticks best to the "positivists" hurling the accusation.

relativists,” Rorty holds, “they would, of course, be very easy to refute” (as cited in McCloskey, 1994, p. 315, emphasis in original). The iron rule of irony is that contrastive pairs only appear to offer a clear choice between contraries—when, in fact, they can only name perspectives, attitudes, relevancies, and judgments about the dramatic situation (Burke, 1969, pp. 511-513). And thus, all is not lost if the threshold of rhetoric is crossed, as two plus two will still equal four, and besides, McCloskey quips,

one does not give up the ability to distinguish between the Ajax Kitchen Cleanser jingle and Gödel’s Proof by noting that both are designed with an audience in mind, with perlocutionary force, with patterns of repetition, with a style suited to the occasion, with an implied author, with metaphor, synecdoche, and all the rest. (McCloskey, 1994, p. 290)

A rhetorical view of need satisfaction invested in the relationship between economics and human communities is, it turns out, more cognizant of a deeply felt and lived social reality than any “perfect” economic model can reveal. It is, at last, the grown up approach to the most important human questions about how we will live and die, and an optimistic and empowered response to what Thomas Carlyle called an otherwise “dismal science.”

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