RHETORICAL DEVICES IN ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

This number of *Logique et Analyse* is devoted to the proceedings of the *Logic and Rhetoric* in Cambridge in 2006. It was the last conference I was able to organise in my capacity as Conference Director of the St Luke's Institute before it crashed to earth. It had been stellar indeed. My duty was merely to organise conferences, and I used the opportunity to organise meetings on subjects dear to my heart. Buddhism in Logic and Analytic Philosophy, the NF 70th anniversary meeting — both of which gave rise to published volumes of proceedings. In the middle came *Logic and Rhetoric*. Why would one have a conference with this title?

I have had a lifelong interest in the relations between logic and rhetoric. Being the smallest member of an articulate and *rechthaberish* family I gradually learnt that the only way to avoid being permanently in the wrong was to learn to appeal to reason, and to learn to argue. Thus when I started doing logic in my first year as a philosophy student I was ready for the *impromptu* lesson I received on the train one day travelling between my home in Cambridge and the university in Norwich. An old woman got into my (non-smoking) compartment and ignited a woodbine. When I remonstrated with her, she replied "Your hair's too long". It's a long way from truth tables and *Socrates is a man; all men are mortal; therefore Socrates is mortal* but a lot closer to real life. [1]

I think it was this experience that brought it home to me that the true function of human language is not to be a vehicle for discussions of How Nature Works, or the innocent transmission of information about our immediate environment or the weather forecast, but to survive the brutal realities of life as a social animal. It's there to transact power relations. Anything else is a spandrell.

The study of Rhetoric is thus tangent to the study of Logic. But Logic — and Philosophy — are not merely areas of inquiry adjacent to Rhetoric, but are also areas where the activity of Rhetoric is played out. Philosophy — whatever else it is — is a human activity. The manner in which it is conducted is accordingly determined in part by whatever natural laws determine the behaviour of humans. One current fashion is to explain much of human

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[1] See the quotation from Ben Franklin at `www.dpmms.cam.ac.uk/~tf` `/franklin.html`.

conduct by reference to the urge that humans (in common with other gene-bags) have to maximise the number of their grandchildren. To refer to this analysis as a *fashion* is not to disparage it — in fact it has much to recommend it — it is rather to make the point that the promotion of this analysis is itself part of the behaviour that the analysis is intended to explain. And the means by which this analysis — and its competitors — are promoted are of course rhetorical. And on the whole, the rhetorical devices used in analytic philosophy have not been given the close attention they merit. One project for my looming retirement is to provide it. What follows here is a sketch and a few pointers.

All communities need to assert their status and defend themselves from intruders. If the community is defined by an activity that produces a tangible good or service, then intruders and nincompoops can be detected by their inability to contribute. If the community isn't doing anything useful then it has to resort to other means when attempting to deal with intruders and nincompoops — or to disarm critics. Such communities do have strategies for defending themselves from outsiders and detractors and the techniques they use deserve far more study than they have received. (Sokal and Bricmont [5] have made a start on a study of one such community) and this is something I intend to write about in more detail myself when I have the leisure. The relevance here is that some of the devices used by the votaries of empty discourses are used also by entirely legitimate communities such as that of professional philosophers.

These two needs are met in part by two devices that I call *Discourse theft* and *Lexical choice semantics*. One way of making your community appear to be of higher status than it is is to appropriate the technical jargon proper to linguistic communities of higher status than your own. This is discourse theft, and there are numerous hilarious examples minuted in [5].

Speakers from a particular community can flag their membership of it by *choosing* to use a distinctive vocabulary in circumstances there is no technical need for one. When the conductor on my train says "...and at 10:29 we will be arriving *into* [*sic*] Norwich" he is using the flagged word to prove that he is a train conductor. Anyone can attempt to recover a text from a corrupt or damaged document; if you instead describe yourself as *recuperating* it then you saying that you belong to a specific community. These are examples of *lexical choice semantics*. Perhaps it is misleading to write of "lexical choice *semantics*" since the manner in which it conveys information is in no way compositional, but one has to call it something.[2]

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[2] It's not entirely clear whether "That word 'recuperate' means he's a literary theorist" is Gricean natural meaning like "Those spots mean measles" or whether it is Gricean *non*-natural meaning, since there is clearly speaker's intention. It might even belong with the various hard cases the literature has thrown up as part of the debate over whether or not Grice's distinction does, in fact, carve nature at the joints.

I think there are clear examples of Analytic Philosophy engaging in both these practices. One example of the first is the way in which Analytic Philosophy took to numbering sentences. However my pet example of the first is the way in which Analytic philosophy latched onto the beguiling device of possible worlds. I have written at length about the pernicious effect this fascination with possible-world-talk has had on the practice of philosophy (see [1]) but I did not there make the point that the roots of this triffid are bonded securely to the chip on their shoulder that many philosophers have about Logic. It should be said that there is a partial explanation that is entirely innocent. When someone invents the hammer it is entirely appropriate to review all unsolved problems to see if any of them are nails, and to try quite hard to represent them as nails. (One recalls in this connection the miraculous properties attributed to Radium when Marie Curie revealed it to an astonished world: they add up to a story that now makes our hair stand on end.) However it is proper that the flurry of activity should die down once all the genuine nails have been identified: it is perseveration in this task that is inappropriate.[3]

Of course, as well as rhetorical devices to use in combatting outsiders there are rhetorical devices used by philosophers within the tradition in their struggles against each other. Charles Pigden's analysis in this volume that the novel move in early modern philosophy of accusing your opponent of incoherence rather than falsehood was motivated by rhetorical needs is an good example of the kind of analysis we need more of.

*How the Demands of Rhetoric can distort Philosophical Positions*

One fascinating take on rhetoric in a philosophical context that I want to talk briefly about is the way in which the rhetorical presentational needs of certain philosophical positions can distort those positions.

Let me give you some illustrations.

- Philosophers of Science are — rightly — concerned that the endeavour to understand science done by earlier people in the West should not be seen merely as part of a process whose culminating point is us. They warn us against doing 'Whig history' — a reference to the great Whig historian Lord Acton whose histories supposedly had this character. One strategy for not turning into Lord Acton is to pretend that there is no such thing as progress in the sciences.

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[3] In the years immediately following Kripke's seminal work [4] on possible world semantics for modal logics the philosophical literature used the expression 'possible' worlds, but put it in scare quotes. An early example — plucked almost at random — is [3].

- People who study sociology of science are concerned with how scientific theories propagate through communities. For them, questions of the content and truth of those theories are a distraction, and one strategy for not being distracted is to pretend that the theories simply do not have content.

- Life's a bitch and then you die. A strategy for not worrying about the ills to which flesh is heir is to deny the reality of matter.

- The law of rape protects girls under the age of consent from the sexual attentions of men. It protects them whether they are toddlers, or fifteen-year-olds who may well be sexually (physiologically) mature. People who are concerned to protect adolescent girls will not wish any debate on how to do it to be diverted into a discussion of precisely how much worse a rape of a four-year old is that of a fifteen-year old. It may well be felt that to admit that such a discussion is legitimate would be to "send the wrong message". I am not being sarcastic in putting this sound-bite in scare-quotes. It is certainly a legitimate rhetorical consideration. After all there is at least the possibility of a slippery slope argument waiting to be exploited by pædophiles. One way of forestalling such a discussion is to deny that between these two crimes is there any difference to be discussed.

- Psychotherapists have to help their clients in their (the clients') difficulties in personal relations or life in general. The psychotherapist has no way of telling whether or not the client's version of events is true, but they have to help them anyway. *Therefore the truth (or otherwise) of the client's story cannot be a consideration.* In these circumstances it is easy to slip into the position that there is no such thing as truth.

- Pretending not to understand the motives of people who engage in behaviours you want to condemn. At the back of one's mind one probably has the French saw "Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner."

- Rhetorical moves made by people who are handicapped: denying the negative aspects of their disabilities as part of a strategy of mainstreaming.

- Refusing to defend a good practice (e.g. possibly, assisted suicide, euthanasia) because of the danger that instances of bad practice will be passed off as instances of it.

- There is a strong incentive to say that the Mengele experiments (for example) gave no useful information, because were we to admit that

they did we would have the problem of deciding whether or not it is proper to use information obtained by illicit means.

- New world tribes insisting on their creation myths in opposition to the attempts of western physical anthropologists to track ancient population movements. They are probably too sophisticated to take their creation myths literally, but they represent themselves as so taking them as part of a strategy of resisting the encroachments of western scientists.

- Finally, a topical example. Pope Benedict has principled objections to contraception. In particular he doesn't approve of condoms. He fears that if he gives the nod to the use of condoms for the purpose of obstructing transmission of sexually transmitted diseases he will give the appearance of approving of condoms *simpliciter*. Thus he is led to advocate the view that condoms are ineffective in preventing the spread of HIV. Indeed, he may even believe it.

What all these cases have in common is pressure on a belief-system coming from the rhetorical needs of the presentation or defence of that belief system. These rhetorical needs can result in people refraining from saying some things that they believe (e.g. that there is a difference between the rape of a fifteen-year and the rape of a four-year old); they can even result in people saying things that they do not believe and cannot possibly believe — e.g. that there is no difference between the rape of a fifteen-year and the rape of a four-year old.

What interests me is the further possibility that compliance with the demands of rhetoric can distort the belief-system itself. It might be that the best way — it's certainly *a* way — of not saying that there is a difference between the rape of a fifteen-year and the rape of a four-year old is to straightforwardly *believe* that there is no difference between the rape of a fifteen-year and the rape of a four-year old). The mechanism by which this distortion happens is the Orwellian device of *crimestop*.

I believe that there are metaphysical positions to be found in philosophy which are the result of distortions of this kind. There are two instances that particularly interest me, coming as they do from logic: Dialethism and Intuitionism. In both cases the advocates of the novel style of logic are advocating a policy of not using a particular logical principle (non-contradiction in the one case, excluded middle in the other). In both cases the claim is made that the principle is false (rather than that there are times when the principle is of no use to us) and the stronger claim is made for the rhetorical reason that it is more arresting. This is reminiscent of the way in which the complex points about how pornography exploits women get bundled together and transformed for rhetorical reasons into Andrea Dworkin's claim

that *Pornography is violence against women.* Dworkin's claim is more arresting, and use of it may be more effective in securing needed change, but literally, it is false.[4] The same thing is going on here.

*Constructivism*

In Classical Logic it can happen that we can find a proof of $(\exists x)\phi(x)$ even in circumstances where we can not prove $\phi(t)$ for any term $t$.

Suppose you are the hero in a mediæval romance. You have to rescue the Princess from captivity and maltreatment at the hands of the Evil Dragon. To do this you will of course need a Magic Sword to cut off the head of the Evil Dragon, and a Magic Key to open the door of the dungeon, because it had a Spell put on it by the Evil Dragon, so if you are to open it, only a Magic Key will do. How are you to proceed?

You can cheer yourself up with the thought: "Things aren't as bad as they might look. After all, these stories always have happy endings: the Dragon always gets killed and the Princess always gets rescued. This being the case there must be a Magic Key and there must be a Magic Sword! If there weren't there wouldn't be a Happy Ending, and there always is a Happy Ending."

You can say this to yourself — and you'd be right: there must indeed be a Magic Sword and a Magic Key. However this is not a great deal of use to you. It doesn't begin to solve *your* problem, since what you want is not an existence theorem for Magic Keys and Magic Swords — what you actually want is to *find* the gadgets and have them in your hand. And the chain of reasoning you have just put yourself through, sound though it undeniably is, tells you nothing about where to find them. It's reassuring up to a point, in that this inference-from-authorial-omniscience constitutes a sort of prophecy that the Magic Key and Magic Sword will turn up eventually, but it doesn't put them in your hand.

This is a perfect example of a **nonconstructive existence theorem.** We have a proof that there is a whatever-it-is, but the proof that there is one does not reveal where the whatever-it-is is to be found. Further, the situation in which the hero finds himself in one where a nonconstructive existence theorem is of very little use. In order not to find ourselves in the predicament of the hero of the mediæval romance who has proved the existence of the sword and the key but does not know where to find them we could consider restricting the principles of reasoning we use to those principles which, whenever

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[4] It has to be admitted that Dworkin's move can be represented as an arresting *metaphor* but I don't think this analysis captures the full force of the move.

they prove that $(\exists x)(\text{Sword}(x))$, also prove $\text{Sword}(a)$ for some $a$. The thinking behind this suggestion is that the Hero's energies (and perhaps his wits) are limited, and there is therefore no point in having clever inferences that supply him with information that he cannot use and which will only distract him. In such circumstances one has a strong incentive not to use principles which tell us that there are — as it might be — magic swords, but fail to tell us where to find them. As it happens, the law of excluded middle is one such principle. So we have a reason for not exploiting excluded middle.

This insight is sound. What would not be sound would be to be spooked by it into denying the law of excluded middle. I am not suggesting that this is what caused Brouwer to deny excluded middle. Nor am I suggesting that current subscribers to Intuitionism reached their present positions as a result of this false move. However the way in which the $\sqrt{2}^{\sqrt{2}}$ parable is used by Intuitionism's recruiting sergeants suggests that their calculation is that the public will in fact make precisely this mistake and will then sign up. The $\sqrt{2}^{\sqrt{2}}$ parable is an interesting and thought-provoking one, but it is not an argument for intuitionism unless you are making the mistake I describe.

*Dialethism*

There are people who believe that some contradictions can be true, and that the rule of *ex falso sequitur quodlibet* is not reliable (because of those true contradictions). I have to be careful what I say about these people because some of them are my personal friends and some of them — I am thinking in particular of Graham Priest — are much bigger than me and do martial arts to boot.

Why do they believe this?

If you are reasoning from uncertain premises then you should not be surprised to find — every now and then — that you have reached a contradiction. When this happens do you cheerfully infer *everything*, by an appeal to the rule of *ex falso sequitur quodlibet*? Of course not. One thing you do is send an underling out into the world to find out which of your assumptions was defective. When they come back with the requisite information you can then identify your mistakes, retrace your steps and proceed afresh. Meanwhile, of course, life has to go on, and decisions have to be made. How does life go on?[5] You just have to proceed with caution. And proceeding with caution will involve not trying anything novel; one should stick as far as possible to those practices that use only those assumptions that had

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[5] Quine found himself in this situation in 1940 when Rosser and Lyndon discovered a contradiction in the axiom system of the first edition of his *Mathematical Logic*.

always seemed safe in the past and were not obviously implicated in the recent contradiction that spooked us. One thing that caution most certainly does mean is not exploiting the *ex falso*. Does this mean that the *ex falso* is not a valid rule of inference? No it doesn't: it *can't!* The *ex falso* is demonstrably truth-preserving (and jolly useful it is too). What it does is remind us that the *ex falso* (although always truth-preserving) is only ever going to be *applicable* if at least some of the things from which you are reasoning are (potentially false) *assumptions* rather than known facts. You will never find yourself able to use it when you are reasoning solely from known facts about the world. If you do suddenly find yourself in a position to use the *ex falso* when you thought you were reasoning from facts (instead of facts-plus-assumptions) what that tells you is that some of those things you thought were facts weren't.

To summarise: there may be good principled reasons for doubting the law of non-contradiction, but the fact that we sometimes wish to refrain from using the *ex falso* is not one of them.

I hope I have said enough to persuade the open-minded reader that an examination of the rhetorical practices of Analytical Philosophy is a project that could shed light on the activity and ward off at least some possibility of error. It's a huge task, and one I look forward to contributing to, even if only in a small way.

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## REFERENCES

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