

Axiology & Rhetorical Criticism: Some Dimensions of the Critical Judgment

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... one's values can only be understood and must always be interpreted and criticized in the light of one's world view. No one has the right, rationally speaking, to say, "This is of value," unless he has related it to everything he knows.¹

THE UNDERLYING ASSUMPTION of this study is that any assessment of an art is in terms of values, and that the art of rhetoric is no exception. For centuries critics have been applying value judgments to public addresses, and rightly so, but few attempts have been made to justify those judgments in terms of the study of values.

Although some suggestions have been made about analyzing the values of the rhetorical critic,² no specific theoretical directions have been identified. Other attempts have analyzed the relationships of rhetoric and the values of specific groups or social values as a genre.³ Again, the critic has been left with no specific suggestions about his own values and their relations to his criticism.

In an insightful essay Ratcliff has dealt with the product of the critic as a value judgment by saying that "The statements of the critic must be weighed carefully in light of his reasons for making them. The critic can never give proof of his opinion but he will always be held responsible for his reasons. His reasons will be in light of his own values and world view. If his reasons are meaningful, his criticism will be meaningful."⁴ However, the focus of Ratcliff's essay was not on the implications of the first principles

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¹ Edgar Sheffield Brightman and Robert N. Beck, *An Introduction to Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1963), p. 194.

² Ralph T. Eubanks and Virgil L. Baker, "Toward an Axiology of Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 48 (1962), 157-68.

³ Edward D. Steele, "Social Values, the Enthymeme, and Speech Criticism," *Western Speech*, 26 (1962), 70-75; Edward D. Steele and W. Charles Redding, "The American Value System: Premises for Persuasion," *Western Speech*, 26 (1962), 83-91; Milton Dobkin, "Social Values and Public Address: Some Implications for Pedagogy," *Western Speech*, 26 (1962), 140-45.

⁴ Linnea Ratcliff, "Rhetorical Criticism: An Alternative Perspective," *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 37 (Winter 1971), 134.

of axiology and their relationships to rhetorical criticism. Therefore, in order to refine the critic's usage of value judgments and to assist in making his reasons meaningful the purpose of the present essay is to investigate the relationships between axiology and rhetorical criticism.

No attempt will be made to present a fully developed axiology; the treatment here is strictly of the first principles of values. Neither does this study aim at system building in axiology, but at inference making from what is known. In the same vein, a fully developed rhetorical theory will not be presented here, but some new dimensions of the critical judgment will be attempted.

DEFINITIONS

To expedite a discussion of the area outlined, several terms demand definition. The terms "rhetorical criticism," "axiology," "value," and "value system" particularly need expansion. The essence of rhetorical criticism will be taken as dealing with critical judgments about an instance of the application of the art of rhetoric. According to Thonssen, Baird, and Braden, "It [rhetorical criticism] is concerned with analysis of the free choices men make in adapting the spoken word to practical problems. . . . By applying appropriate standards which derive from the interaction of subject, speaker, audience, and occasion, the critic assesses the effect of speeches upon particular audiences and, finally, upon society."⁵

"Axiology" is widely described as the study of value. This definition should be expanded to include "value." A classic definition of "value" is contained in the observation by Brightman and Beck: "It is common practice to use the word *value* to designate the realm of what is esteemed to be intrinsically worthy as an end of human action or enjoyment."⁶ Hence, it may be fairly concluded that the "standards" referred to by Thonssen, Baird, and Braden contain values as one of their constituents.

Values, however, are seldom found to exist in a vacuum and are usually

⁵ Lester Thonssen, A. Craig Baird, and Waldo W. Braden, *Speech Criticism*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1970), p. 19.

Other definitions of rhetorical criticism differ in approach, but retain the judgmental criterion. For instance, Black states that "Criticism is a discipline that, through the investigation and appraisal of the activities and products of men, seeks as its end the understanding of man himself." See Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* (New York, 1965), p. 9.

Blau's philosophic approach emphasizes the judgment: "In a word, it is the province of the philosophic critic of public address to weigh the credibility of its intellectual revelations." See Joseph L. Blau, "Public Address as Intellectual Revelation," *Western Speech*, 21 (1957), 78.

Even the scientific approach to criticism implies the tested judgment. Bowers notes that "The term implies that, in this frame of reference, the rhetorical critic's principal task is to produce testable hypotheses which, when verified, will have the status of scientific laws." See John Waite Bowers, "The Pre-Scientific Function of Rhetorical Criticism," in *Essays on Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Thomas R. Nilsen (New York, 1968), p. 127.

⁶ Brightman and Beck, p. 186.

a part of a value system. The concept of "value system," then, also needs definition. "A value system," in Taylor's words, "is a set of standards and rules of a certain kind arranged according to the place they have in the verification and validation of value judgments (and prescriptions) of that kind."⁷ Thus, a value system and a system of rhetorical criticism appear to rest on common ground, that being the judgment.

Similarly, the tasks of value theory may be closely identified with the tasks of rhetorical criticism. Edel sets out the tasks of value theory as "analysis, description, causal investigation, and criteria or standard development."⁸ Again, the judgment rendered by the critic seems to be the rallying point for both value theory and rhetorical criticism. With these terms described, the analysis will proceed to an examination of philosophical viewpoints about values, and then to the relationships these viewpoints might have to rhetorical criticism.

An analysis of the first principles of values suggests three distinct dimensions that speak to the rhetorical critic. These dimensions may be labeled the *intuitive* approach, the *subjective* approach, and the *objective* approach. These labels and categories are not the only ones possible, but they seem to represent the leading points of view.

The first two views will be considered here as counterparts to the objective approach. The summaries and explanations of the consequences of these two views are not intended to be exhaustive, but to represent a line of reflection leading to the objective view of values.

THE INTUITIVE VIEW

The *intuitive* view stresses reaction to feeling. This approach holds that values are neither good nor evil and come from some ideal conception. Quick epitomized this view by stating that "the dialectic of value may teach us that the ultimate goodness of the universe can only be appreciated by minds which have exercised the rigorous self-denial of enquiry into the world as though it were neither good nor evil."⁹

This intuition does not stop at the analysis of the world by rigorous minds, but moves on to the sources of the dialectically sought values. For the intuitionist these sources turn out to be such matters as animal reaction, vital preference, and unconscious physiological activities. In Reid's judgment, these activities are "perhaps forever beyond our understanding; but they are realized and enjoyed in moments of immediate pleasure or conscious satis-

⁷ Paul W. Taylor, *Normative Discourse* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1961), p. 107.

⁸ Abraham Edel, "Concept of Values in Contemporary Philosophical Value Theory," *Philosophy of Science*, 20 (1953), 204.

⁹ O. C. Quick, "Value as a Metaphysical Principle," *Hibbert Journal*, 22 (Oct. 1923),

faction."¹⁰ The value experience for the intuitionist seems to be essentially non-replicable.

The intuitive outlook attaches a special meaning to the term "value." The intuitionist emphasizes the relational nature of valuing. The relationship occurs between the object and the act of interest in that object. This relationship is "such that a positive value is enstated if the interest is being satisfied and a negative value if the interest is being thwarted."¹¹ Thus, most intuitionists do not stress the ends of human action or enjoyment as much as they stress the internal response or relation. This relation occurs in the valuer, and may be applied to the critic's relational reactions to a speech. The intuitive notion of values represents a relational way of thinking about values.

Much philosophical attention has been drawn to a controversy between the *subjective* view and the *objective* view. In an attempt to find precise meanings for the terms *subjective* and *objective*, Lee pinpoints the controversy:

When it is assumed uncritically that value and being valued are the same, then it appears that value is subjective. On the other hand, however, many persons feel impelled to say "No, value and being valued are not the same. Value is the object of the experience, existing independent of its apprehension." Thus they argue that value is objective. . . .¹²

The dispute seems to hinge on whether values inhere in the individual or in the object. There is, however, some ground for agreement between the two conceptions. Both viewpoints would hold that value is a kind of quality.¹³ In other words, value itself has a character about it and is not an object. The subjective and objective views can now be examined in turn.

THE SUBJECTIVE VIEW

The major argument for the *subjective* idea proceeds from the apparent change in values with no corresponding change in the object. An international gold crisis can serve as an example. Gold is apparently valued not only by individuals, but also by nations. It is valued to the extent that it is a standard against which currency is measured. For a variety of reasons, gold may suddenly become more highly valued on the open market, and more currency is required to purchase a given amount of gold. The change can be attributed either to the increase in value of gold or to the decrease in value of the

¹⁰ John R. Reid, "A Definition of Value," *Journal of Philosophy*, 3 Dec. 1931, p. 689.

¹¹ John R. Reid, "Definitions, Criteria, Standards, and Norms," *Philosophical Review*, 53 (1944), 247.

¹² Harold N. Lee, "A Precise Meaning for Objective and Subjective in Value Theory," *Journal of Philosophy*, 7 Nov. 1940, pp. 626-27.

¹³ George N. Belknap, "Objective Value," *Journal of Philosophy*, 20 Jan. 1938 p. 30.

currency. Either way, the subjectivist would contend, the value of the gold itself did not change, but the individuals who valued it changed and thus the value of gold to them changed. The same argument could be applied to speeches: value does not inhere in the speech itself, but in the consumer of the speech. Hence, to the subjectivist, values reside in the individual and not in the object.

Using the preceding argument, the subjectivists classify values according to whether they relate to "real" life or to "ideal" life. Some of the classifications of "real" life values are self-preservation or health, comfort, workmanship, ambition, and love. Some "ideal" life values would be play, art, and religion.¹⁴ Here again the critic of speeches would be dealing with what he conceives to be his "real" or "ideal" life values in relation to the speech.

What, then, are the consequences of the subjective view of value? Values become relative to time and occasion; what is valued today may be rejected tomorrow. The world is interpreted by each person in the light of his particular world view. Yet values may become societal; what is valued in Australia is not necessarily valued in Greenland. Parker, however, personalizes the concept by arguing that the consequence of the subjective notion is freedom: "There is no value prison confining man, no categorical imperatives. There is, rather, an open perspective of choices and decisions. In the end, each man makes for himself what is for him categorical."¹⁵

THE OBJECTIVE VIEW

In juxtaposition to the subjective outlook is the *objective* view of values. Essentially, this theory holds that values exist in the world of objects. Belknap concisely states the objective view by noting that "a theory of objective value defends the predication of value in propositions where the logical subject is an entity in the world of objects."¹⁶

This concern with the external world has several implications for the directions open to the objectivists. To Rice, the principal directions in which objectivists seek values are "(1) in the properties of valued objects themselves; (2) in universal validity of the rules which guide conduct; (3) in the universal concepts with an objective foundation in reality; (4) in agreement, or the social dimension of valuation; (5) in knowledge of the 'conditions' of value experience."¹⁷

An important aspect of the objective outlook is the possibility of the verification or checking of values and value judgments. Since values do not

¹⁴ DeWitt H. Parker, "On the Notion of Value," *Philosophical Review*, 38 (1929), 315-16.

¹⁵ DeWitt H. Parker, *The Philosophy of Value* (Ann Arbor, 1957), p. 238.

¹⁶ Belknap, p. 29.

¹⁷ Philip Blair Rice, "'Objectivity' in Value Judgments," *Journal of Philosophy*, 7 Jan. 1943, p. 6.

depend on the beholder, it is possible, for the objectivists, to test values against the world. If verifiability of values is central to the objective idea of values, that verifiability necessarily rests on empirically objective criteria.

The criteria should not only serve as standards of judgment, but also should, themselves, be open to empirical verification. The three most important criteria for empirically objective judgments are, to Lafferty, (1) the effect of enriching our appreciation of values, (2) the tendency of values to sensitize men to other values, and (3) the sharable or communicable quality of values.¹⁸

By the application of these or similar criteria the objectivist verifies his values and value judgments. The process of verification of value judgments is summarized by Pap: "To verify a value judgment . . . means to show on the basis of factual knowledge that the valued object or action has the properties which are 'admitted to be good without proof.'"¹⁹ This, of course, presumes that men can admit anything to be good without proof.

Others, notably Rice, go beyond Pap's definition of proof as admitted. The hypothetico-inductive process of inference from evidence is necessary as proof in their view. In addition to this process there seems to be degrees of probability when discussing evidence. "Or if we must generally be content with a lower degree of probability than is usually obtainable in, say, physics," says Rice, "we still wish to found our value judgments on evidence and on hypothetico-inductive inference from evidence."²⁰ Evidence and inference, then, are key processes for the empiricists who hold the objective contentions about values.

Several consequences adhere to the objective point of view about values and value judgments. First and foremost, values are seen as independent of the beholder. This consequence suggests permanent values in human affairs. An obvious consequence of this vista is that values can be subjected to observation and testing in order to determine the validity of their nature.

Other consequences are suggested by Lepley in summary of his ideas. The "dualisms which separate thought and action" will less sharply divide the two. "Secondly," he holds, "there will be increasing recognition that as much care must be taken in framing and testing ideas about values as is used in forming ideas about events." Finally, he sees the objective view as providing a unitary approach to human interests rather than a fragmentary dualistic approach.²¹

These then, in brief summary form, are the major axiological positions. The summaries are included as guideposts to the rest of the essay, in which

¹⁸ Theodore T. Lafferty, "Empiricism and Objective Relativism in Value Theory," *Journal of Philosophy*, 17 Mar. 1949, pp. 141-55.

¹⁹ Arthur Pap, "The Verifiability of Value Judgments," *Ethics*, 56 (Apr. 1946), 184.

²⁰ Rice, p. 5.

²¹ Ray Lepley, "The Dawn of Value Theory," *Journal of Philosophy*, 8 July 1937, p. 372.

implications—though not complete descriptions—will be drawn from these positions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RHETORICAL CRITICISM

The remainder of this investigation will seek some new dimensions for the critical judgment in the axiological positions of intuitionism, subjectivism, and objectivism. What kind of rhetorical criticisms can be constructed from an intuitive interpretation of value? The axiological intuitionist would suggest that the world is neither good nor evil, and speeches might well be examined on that basis. Here, the rhetorical critic might well analyze a given speech from an amoral point of view, ignoring the effect of the speech on society. The concern would be for the values inherent in the speech. This approach would seem to ignore the idea that oratory is usually for an immediate situation and an immediate audience. The effects of demagoguery would be hard to detect from an intuitionist position.

A rhetorical criticism based on an intuitive interpretation of values would seem to rely on the intuition of the critic. His value judgments would reflect the impact of the speech on the critic. If it can be assumed that the critic's judgment adequately reflects that of the entire society, then his conception might be viable. In most instances, however, this assumption is tentative at best, and more reliable judgments must be sought.

The relativism of values implied by the intuitive position also poses problems for the critic. Particularly of concern is the idea that the value judgments of a speech offered by a given critic would be relative only to his ideals and interpretations. The intuitive critic would appear to have to account for only his own ideals, while ignoring those of the situation under review.

Perhaps the subjective analysis of values can provide additional dimensions for rhetorical critics of today. The subjective analysis seems to imply that the critic would appraise a given speech in terms of his own experiences. This might mean a more representative basis than the intuitive outlook; the consumer of the criticism could assess the representativeness of the experiences of the critic.

Some improvement over the intuitive position could be accounted for by the subjectivist's conception of change. This view of change would allow for the interpretation of the speaking of such men as Joseph McCarthy. The value of what he said has not changed, but interpretations of his advocacies have changed. No longer do men value the demagoguery forwarded by his untempered attacks. Thus, this change in position would emphasize the situational nature of the practice of rhetoric.

Problems in the subjective analysis may be encountered when the classification of values is considered. The classifications of self-preservation,

comfort, workmanship, ambition, love, play, art, and religion sound like a list of motive appeals. These appeals are important aspects of rhetoric, but the subjective analysis does not appear to account for logical and ethical values that may be raised by a speech or a speaker.

The subjective approach also appears to get bogged down in the consequences of holding that view. The consequence that the criticism of values would be relative to the time and occasion seems consistent with the tasks of rhetorical criticism, but the subjective dependence on the individual critic's world view introduces an apparently unnecessary reliance on the individual. The subjective critic would seem to be imposing his values and imperatives on those of the speaker and those of the society affected by the advocacy being criticized. This is not necessarily a problem, but it does seem to depend unnecessarily on the subjective reactions of one man and his experiences.

The most serious problem in the subjective approach would lie in the difficulty of replication. If each individual critic is responding to a given act of rhetoric from his own set of values, all well and good, but the consumer of the criticism has a right to know what those values are in order to determine his own reaction. If the subjectivists do not reveal their values, then no cross-critic comparisons can be made.

The intuitive and subjective implications for rhetorical criticism have much to offer to rhetorical critics of those particular persuasions. The suggestions made here, however, lead to the implications of the objective approach to values. Thus, the preceding should not be viewed as merely a phase in a "method of residues" argument leading to the favored alternative; they should be seen, rather, as phases in a pattern of thinking culminating in the objective view.

Some new dimensions in rhetorical criticism can be suggested by the objective analysis of values. If value can be said to exist in objects, then the speech itself as a cognition of the listeners may be said either to have value or not have value. The value of the utterances could be determined by the hypothetico-inductive method of inference. The verification of values and value by this method offers interesting implications for the rhetorical critic. The testing of a speaker's value statements against value statements of audiences could be assessed empirically, for instance. Of more importance to the critic would be the verifiability of what Dewey called the "social method."²² The value statements of the critic could be compared by the consumer of the criticism to his own value judgments or to the value judgments of other critics of the same speech.

Some of the most important implications for rhetorical criticism employing the objective approach to values lie in the direction of the consequences

²² John Dewey, *Theory of Valuation*, Vol. II, No. 4 of *The International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, ed. Otto Neurath (2 vols.; Chicago, 1939), pp. 58-60.

attending the objective view. First, if values can exist independent of man, then the rhetorical critic can assume some validity in making historical judgments. Even though most speeches are directed to an immediate audience, historical judgments of a speech act are often desirable and frequently rendered. Not a few values supported by an eighteenth-century speaker indeed have relevance today. Even though society changes, many human values endure. The objective approach to axiology seems fitted to reveal those values.

The objective standard of the testing of value judgments against criteria also can hold some valuable dimensions for criticism. Instead of merely describing his internal reactions, the critic would be forced to lay bare the criteria by which he arrived at his value statements about a given speech. This practice should make for more supportable generalizations and more universally testable judgments. Once the criteria for judging the object were made clear, then other critics of the event should be able to apply those criteria to the same speech and get fairly similar results.

The unification of dualities could be seen as a whole process centered around the objective contribution a given set of elements makes to the entire speech act. For instance, the act, the agent, the agency, the purpose, and the scene are partially united, in Kenneth Burke's thought, by language. The critic may be able to unify the conception of all six elements by examining the objective axiological implications. The critic could place each of these parts in a unitary perspective bounded by the objectively discernible values in the situation.

On another level the critic can see the unitary nature of the event more clearly against his own conception of the relationships between axiology and rhetorical criticism. Here the critic should explicitly state his own views as a method of verification for the user of the criticism.

Finally, the objective approach to values in rhetorical criticism could facilitate the unitary conception of the art of rhetorical criticism. Many artificial dualities between the various aspects of criticism, such as language and delivery, could be resolved to the unitary end either of enhancing the speaker's value statements or detracting from them.

CONCLUSION

An overall assessment of the relationships between axiology and rhetorical criticism would not fairly lend itself to a wholesale acceptance of any of the three viewpoints on values discussed here. The intuitive, subjective, and objective approaches all deal with matters that recommend them to some rhetorical critics. Likewise, all three approaches have drawbacks in light of the situation of the rhetorical critic.

Some new dimensions of the critical judgment can be elicited from an analysis of the relationships, however. Drawing from intuitionism, subjectivism, and objectivism the rhetorical critic would seem obligated first to make his value assumptions explicit. Thus, even if a strict subjective approach is taken, verification of the values espoused can be made by checking the critic's values against those of the speaker and the audience. This procedure might also help unite the objective approach with the other viewpoints in the perspective of the rhetorical critic.

The direction of rhetorical criticism enlightened by axiology might then proceed to the discovery of the verifiable values of the speaker and his background, the occasion or setting of the speech act, the audience, and the actual speech. The identification of these values and value systems could then be used in some determination of effects.

Furthermore, the effects of the speech should be assessed in terms of values and value systems. Appropriate criteria for this judgment might lie in the area of the value of the speech to the audience. Both subjective and empirical statements could be made about the overall value of the speech to the audience. A concomitant judgment based on values could well be a judgment of the value of the speech to society. Here a comparison and contrast of the society's values and those expressed by the speaker would need to be made.

If this approach to criticism may be said to utilize some new dimensions of the critical judgment, then, hopefully, rhetorical critics will earn the right to say "This is of value," because that statement has been related to what we know in terms of values.

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