THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE
Feb '14 *Philosophy is Everybody's Business* Nº 754

THE "SALES TALK" AND OTHER FORMS OF PERSUASIVE SPEECH

Mortimer Adler

- 1 -

The title of this chapter may arouse the reader's misgivings. What does a philosopher know about how to make a sales talk? That is hardly a subject which falls within his ken.

To set the reader's mind at rest on this score, I am going to start right out by doing what Aristotle, who was also a philosopher, recommended as the first step to be taken by anyone trying to persuade anyone else about anything, especially in the sphere of the practical.

Many years ago, when the Institute for Philosophical Research was established in San Francisco, an invitation came to me as its Director to address a luncheon meeting of the associated Advertising Clubs of California. They asked me in advance for a title. I suggested that it be "Aristotle on Salesmanship," a title I thought would be sufficiently shocking to them. It was. No one had ever before connected the name of Aristotle with salesmanship—or with advertising, which is an adjunct of selling.

The speech I delivered began by explaining the title. Advertising was a form of selling, was it not? I asked.

They nodded assent. And was not every form of selling an effort at persuasion, in this case an effort to persuade potential customers to buy the product advertised? Again they nodded.

Well, then, I went on, Aristotle is the master of that art—the art of persuasion—about which he wrote a lengthy treatise entitled "Rhetoric." To boil down its essential message for the occasion, I told them that Aristotle pointed out the three main tactics to be employed if one wished to succeed in the business of persuasion. There are no better names for these three main instruments of persuasion than the words the Greeks used for them: ethos, pathos, and logos. That, in a nutshell, is all there is to it.

Before I explain the tactics these three words name, I must report that the advertising experts assembled at that luncheon were so impressed by Aristotle's know-how about their own business that, as I learned afterwards, the bookstores of San Francisco were besieged that afternoon by members of the audience trying unsuccessfully to buy copies of Aristotle's Rhetoric.

The Greek word ethos signifies a person's character. Establishing one's character is the preliminary step in any attempt at persuasion. The persuader must try to portray himself as having a character that is fitting for the purpose at hand.

If, facing an audience of one or more persons on a particular occasion, you wish others to listen to you not only attentively but also with a sense that what you have to say is worth listening to, you must portray yourself as being the kind of person who knows what you are talking about and can be trusted for your honesty and good will. You must appear attractive and likeable to them as well as trustworthy.

To achieve this result with my audience of advertising specialists, I told them two stories about myself. The first was about a conversation I had had with one of Encyclopaedia Britannica's bankers at the time that that company was spending large sums of money on the production of *Great Books of the Western World* and the *Syntopicon*, of which I was editor.

The banker came to that meeting highly skeptical of the saleability of the product on which the company was spending so much mon-

ey, and especially skeptical about this strange thing called the Syntopicon that threatened to consume more than a million dollars—a lot of money in those days—before it was completed. What good would the *Syntopicon* do anybody that might arouse their desire to purchase the set with the *Syntopicon* attached to it? "I, for example, am interested in buying and selling," the banker said; "and if I went to the Syntopicon's inventory of 102 great ideas, would I find one on salesmanship?"

That stumped me for a moment because, of course, the word "salesmanship" does not appear among the names of the 102 great ideas, nor does it even appear in the list of 1,800 subordinate terms that provide an alphabetical index referring to aspects of the 102 great ones. I got over being stumped by asking him a question.

Did he agree that to sell anybody anything one must know how to persuade them to buy what one wanted to sell? He agreed at once. I then clinched the matter by telling him that one of the 102 great ideas is rhetoric, which is concerned with persuasion, and that, if he consulted the Syntopicon's chapter on that idea, he would find many extremely helpful passages in that chapter, even though none of the great authors cited there ever used the word "salesmanship."

That was all I had to do to put an end to the banker's qualms about the money being spent on the production of the *Syntopicon*. I had sold him on it. I then told my audience in San Francisco the story of how I had to sell five hundred sets of *Great Books of the Western World* in order to raise enough money to defray the printing and binding costs for a first edition.

I did this almost single-handed, first by writing a letter that Bob Hutchins (who was then President of the University of Chicago) and I sent out over our signatures to 1,000 persons who might feel honored to become patrons of a special first edition of the set by purchasing it in advance of publication at the cost of $500—again a lot of money in the nineteen fifties.

That one letter brought in 250 purchase orders accompanied by checks. The 25 percent rate of return on a single appeal struck my audience of advertising men as an unparalleled success in the business of direct-mail advertising. I followed that initial success by selling the remaining 250 sets to individual patrons, either on the phone or by visiting them in their offices.

On one such occasion, I sold the head of a chain of over eighty department stores forty-five sets—one to be given away by each of

the forty-five stores in its hometown to the local library or college as a public relations gesture. This particular sale took less than thirty minutes to make. The chief executive clearly indicated that he had little time to give me on a late Friday afternoon when he was about to leave town for the weekend. So I cut my sales talk to the bone in order to avoid impatience on his part, thereby gaining his good will.

By the time I had finished this second story, the advertising experts in my San Francisco audience were sufficiently impressed by my own personal involvement in the business of persuasion and of selling to be all ears when I then went on to explain how Aristotle had summed up the essence of salesmanship in his analysis of the three main factors in persuasion. I had succeeded in establishing my own ethos with them before I started to explain the role that ethos, pathos, and logos play in persuasion.

And that is what I hope I have just done with you by telling you these two stories about my own personal experience as an advertiser and a salesman.

- 2 -

Of the three factors in persuasion—ethos, pathos, and logos—ethos always should come first. Unless you have established your credibility as a speaker and made yourself personally attractive to your listeners, you are not likely to sustain their attention, much less to persuade them to do what you wish. Only after they are persuaded to trust you, can they be persuaded by what you have to say about anything else.

There are, of course, many ways to take this initial step in the process of persuasion. You can do it by telling stories about yourself, the effectiveness of which will be heightened if they provoke laughter and the laughter is about you. You can do it more indirectly by underestimating your credentials to speak about the matter at hand, thus allowing the listeners to dismiss your underestimation as undue modesty. You can also do it by suggesting your association with others whom you praise for certain qualities that you hope your listeners will also attribute to you.

Two classic illustrations of the role of ethos in persuasion are to be found in the speeches made by Brutus and Marc Antony in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. It is, of course, somewhat incongruous to refer to these two great orations as sales talks. They are instances of political persuasion, in which the attempt is to move the listen-

ers to take one or another course of political action.

Nevertheless, practical persuasion is always selling, whether it be in the market place or in the political forum, across the counter or in a legislative chamber, in a commercial transaction or in a campaign for public office, in the advertisement of a product or in an appeal for a public cause or a political candidate.

In Shakespeare's play, you will remember, Julius Caesar has just been assassinated. The citizens of Rome, gathered near his dead body in the forum, grieving for their loss, angrily demand an accounting. Brutus, one of the conspirators who took part in the assassination, mounts the rostrum to address them:

Romans, countrymen, and lovers! hear me for my cause, and be silent, that you may hear: believe me for mine honour, and have respect to mine honour, that you may believe: censure me in your wisdom, and awake your senses, that you may the better judge. If there be any in this assembly, any dear friend of Caesar's, to him I say, that Brutus' love to Caesar was no less than his. If then that friend demand why Brutus rose against Caesar, this is my answer: Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more. Had you rather Caesar were living and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live all free men? As Caesar loved me, I weep for him; as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honour him: but, as he was ambitious, I slew him. There is tears for his love; joy for his fortune; honour for his valour; and death for his ambition. Who is here so base that would be a bondman? If any, speak; for him have I offended.

Who is here so rude that would not be a Roman? If any, speak; for him have I offended. Who is here so vile that will not love his country? If any, speak; for him have I offended. I pause for a reply.

The citizens reply in unison: "None, Brutus, none."

Then, satisfied that he has persuaded them that the assassination was justified, Brutus yields his place to Marc Antony. Before Antony can speak, the populace, completely won—or sold—by Brutus, shower him with acclaim and proclaim the public honors they wish to bestow upon him in dead Caesar's place. Brutus quiets them and implores them to listen to Antony, to whom he has granted permission to speak. Thus introduced, Antony addresses them:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.

The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones;
So let it be with Caesar. The noble Brutus
Hath told you Caesar was ambitious;
If it were so, it was a grievous fault,
And grievously hath Caesar answer'd it.
Here, under leave of Brutus and the rest-
For Brutus is an honourable man;
So are they all, all honourable men-
Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral.
He was my friend, faithful and just to me:
But Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honourable man.
He hath brought many captives home to Rome,
Whose ransoms did the general coffers fill:
Did this in Casesar seem ambitious?
When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept:
Ambition should be made of sterner stuff:
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honourable man.
You all did see that on the Lupercal
I thrice presented him a kingly crown,
Which he did thrice refuse: was this ambition?
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And, sure, he is an honourable man.
I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke,
But here I am to speak what I do know.
You all did love him once, not without cause:
What cause withholds you then to mourn for him?
O judgement! thou art fled to brutish beasts,
And men have lost their reason. Bear with me;
My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,
And I must pause till it come back to me.

The short speech of Brutus mainly illustrates the role of ethos, as does the somewhat longer opening portion of Antony's address. Brutus, satisfied that he has exculpated himself and his fellow conspirators, does not try further to arouse the citizens to any course of action. He asks them only to allow him to depart alone. Antony, on the other hand, has a further purpose in mind. He wishes to avenge Caesar's death by arousing the multitude to take drastic action against the conspirators, especially Brutus and Cassius. (Honorable men, indeed!) To do this, he resorts to pathos and logos, the other two factors in persuasion.

Whereas ethos consists in the establishment of the speaker's credibility and credentials, his respectable and admirable character, pathos consists in arousing the passions of the listeners, getting their emotions running in the direction of the action to be taken.

Pathos is the motivating factor. It makes its appearance fairly early in Antony's speech, commingled even in the opening passage with the development of the speaker's ethos. Antony reminds them of all the things that Caesar did for Rome, things from which they benefitted, and as he recounts these benefactions, he repeatedly asks them whether they can believe that Caesar displayed self-seeking ambition rather than dedication to the public good.

Antony thus succeeds in changing the mood that Brutus had established. One citizen cries out: "Caesar has had great wrong"; another exclaims: "He would not take the crown; therefore, 'tis certain he was not ambitious"; and still another expresses the admiration for Antony that Antony's use of ethos sought to produce, saying: "There's not a nobler man in Rome than Antony."

Satisfied now that he has established his own good character and also that he has their emotions running in the right direction, Antony proceeds to reinforce the passions aroused by adducing reasons for the action that he has sought to motivate.

Logos—the marshalling of reasons—comes last. Just as you cannot bring motivating passions into play, feelings in favor of the end result you are seeking to produce, until you have first aroused favorable feelings toward your own person, so there is little point in resorting to reasons and arguments until you have first established an emotional mood that is receptive of them.

Reasons and arguments may be used to reinforce the drive of the passions, but reasons and arguments will have no force at all unless your listeners are already disposed emotionally to move in the direction that your reasons and arguments try to justify.

How does Antony in the concluding portions of his address commingle pathos and logos so effectively that he succeeds in moving the citizens of Rome to take arms against Brutus, Cassius, and their associates?

First of all, in the course of other remarks he slyly gets around to mentioning Caesar's will and intimating that, when the citizens

learn of its provisions, they will find themselves Caesar's beneficiaries:

O masters, if I were disposed to stir
Your hearts and minds to mutiny and rage,
I should do Brutus wrong, and Cassius wrong,
Who, you all know, are honourable men:
I will not do them wrong; I rather choose
To wrong the dead, to wrong myself and you,
Than I will wrong such honourable men.
But here's a parchment with the seal of Caesar;
I found it in his closet, 'tis his will:
Let but the commons hear this testament-
Which, pardon me, I do not mean to read-
And they would go and kiss dead Caesar's wounds
And dip their napkins in his sacred blood,
Yea, beg a hair of him for memory,
And, dying, mention it within their wills,
Bequeathing it as a rich legacy
Unto their issue.

The citizens beseech Antony to reveal the contents of Caesar's will to them. But before he tells them that the will provides a gift of seventy-five drachmas to every citizen, he launches into a peroration that raises their passions to a fever pitch:

If you have tears, prepare to shed them now.
You all do know this mantle: I remember
The first time ever Caesar put it on;
Twas on a summer's evening, in his tent,
That day he overcame the Nervii:
Look, in this place ran Cassius' dagger through:
Through this the well-beloved Brutus stabb'd;
And as he pluck'd his cursed steel away,
Mark how the blood of Caesar follow'd it,
As rushing out of doors, to be resolved
If Brutus so unkindly knock'd or no;
For Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's angel:
Judge, O you gods, how dearly Caesar loved him!
This was the most unkindest cut of all;
For when the noble Caesar saw him stab,
Ingratitude, more strong than traitors' arms,
Quite vanquish'd him: then burst his mighty heart;
And, in his mantle muffling up his face,
Even at the base of Pompey's statue,
Which all the while ran blood, great Caesar fell.

O, what a fall was there, my countrymen!
Then I, and you, and all of us fell down,
Whilst bloody treason flourish'd over us.

This speech has the calculated effect. The citizens cry out for revenge against the assassins and their cohorts, calling them traitors and villains. They are no longer honorable men. But Antony, to be sure that he has won the day and sold the populace of Rome the action he wishes to be taken, takes one more step to consolidate his gains.

As the opening lines of his speech indicate, this action plays once more on the ethos of Brutus as compared with the ethos of Antony, epitomizes the reasons—the logos—for the action to be taken, and confirms the feelings—the pathos—he has already aroused:

Good friends, sweet friends, let me not stir you up
To such a sudden flood of mutiny.
They that have done this deed are honourable:
What private griefs they have, alas, I know not,
That made them do it: they are wise and honourable
And will, no doubt, with reasons answer you.
I come not, friends, to steal away your hearts:
I am no orator, as Brutus is;
But, as you know me all, a plain blunt man,
That love my friend; and that they know full well
That gave me public leave to speak of him:
For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth,
Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech,
To stir men's blood: I only speak right on;
I tell you that which you yourselves do know;
Show you sweet Caesar's wounds, poor poor dumb mouths,
And bid them speak for me: but were I Brutus,
And Brutus Antony, there were an Antony
Would ruffle up your spirits and put a tongue
In every wound of Caesar that should move
The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny.

"We'll mutiny!" the citizens roar. "We'll burn the house of Brutus" and we'll go after the other conspirators. Then, and only then, does Antony clinch the matter by revealing how every citizen of Rome benefits from Caesar's will. That does it. The citizens cry out "Go fetch fire. . . . Pluck down the benches. . . . Pluck down forms, windows, anything." Satisfied that he has done the job, Antony retires, saying to himself: "Now let it work. Mischief, thou art afoot, take thou what course thou wilt!"

To be effective in the use of pathos, in order to evoke favorable emotional impulses, persuaders must bear two things in mind.

First of all, they must recognize those human desires that they can depend upon as being present and actively motivating forces in almost all human beings—the desire for liberty, for justice, for peace, for pleasure, for worldly goods, for honor, good repute, position, or preference. Taking for granted that such desires generally abound with driving force, persuaders can call upon them for the objectives they have in mind, concentrating on the reasons why the course of action recommended is a better way of gratifying them than some alternative that a competitor might be trying to sell.

Here it is the logos rather than the pathos that persuaders must employ to tip the scales in their favor, whether they are trying to make their products more desirable than those of competitors or trying to make their candidate for public office preferable to an opponent for the office. Both products may serve the same purpose and so both may be responsive to a desire that exists and that they need only invigorate; their task, therefore, is to give the reasons why their product should be preferred.

Similarly, in political campaigning or in legislative debate about conflicting policies, where the emotional appeal is for the preservation of peace, the protection of liberties, or the securing of welfare benefits, persuaders do not have to create a desire for peace, liberty, or welfare. It is there to be used. They need only argue that their candidate or their policy serves that purpose better.

Persuaders cannot always count on desires that are generally prevalent in their audiences and ready to be brought into play. Sometimes they must instil the very desire that they seek to satisfy with their product, their policy, or their candidate. Sometimes people have needs or wants that are dormant, needs or wants of which they are not fully aware. These, persuaders must try to awaken and vitalize. Sometimes they must try to create a desire that is novel—generally inoperative until they have aroused it and made it a driving force. This is what must be done with a new product on the market. So, too, this is what a candidate for public office must do if his or her claim to it is based on a novel appeal.

The element of ethos may either precede or be combined with the employment of pathos in the sales talk. The role of the PR expert

or the Madison Avenue consultant is to make the company that is trying to sell a product look good as well as to make the product itself more desirable than what the competition has to offer. When such experts in persuasion work for a political candidate, they work in the same way. They try to paint a glowing picture of their candidate's character in addition to activating the motives for subscribing to the policies for which he or she stands.

- 5 -

With ethos and pathos fully operative, logos remains the winning trump in the persuader's hand. Here there are things to be avoided as well as things to be done well.

Above all, the persuader should avoid lengthy, involved, and intricate arguments. The task to be performed is not to produce the conviction that can result from a mathematical demonstration or scientific reasoning. Effective persuasion aims at much less than that—only a preference for one product, one candidate, or one policy over another. Hence the argument to be employed should be much skimpier, much more elliptical, much more condensed.

Persuaders must, therefore, omit many steps in the reasoning they present to catch the minds of their listeners. The classical name for such reasoning is the Greek word enthymeme, which signifies a process of reasoning with many premises omitted. The unmentioned premises must, of course, be generalizations that the persuader can safely assume will be generally shared. In arguments before a judicial tribunal, counsel for the prosecution or defense can take for granted certain generalizations of which the court takes judicial notice because, being generally acknowledged as true, they do not have to be explicitly asserted.

With such generalizations taken for granted, the persuader can go immediately from a particular instance, one that falls under the assumed and unmentioned generalization, to the conclusion that the applicable generalization entails. This is arguing from example. If I wish to persuade my listeners that a particular product or policy should be bought or adopted, I can do so effectively by showing how it exemplifies a generally accepted truth.

I do not have to assert that whatever contributes to a person's health is good. I need only describe my product as doing just that and doing it in full measure. I do not have to assert that everyone has a right to earn a living and that those who remain unemployed through no fault of their own suffer a serious injustice. I need only

describe my policy as one that will increase employment. If I am prosecuting someone indicted for a serious crime, I do not have to assert that suddenly leaving the vicinity of the crime is an indication of guilt. I need only produce evidence to show that the prisoner at the bar did precisely that and that his departure has no other explanation.

Brevity or sparsity of reasoning is not the only factor in presenting a persuasive argument. Another is the employment of what are called rhetorical questions. Rhetorical questions are those so worded that one and only one answer can be generally expected from the audience you are addressing. In this sense, they are like the unmentioned premises in abbreviated reasoning, which can go unmentioned because they can be taken for granted as generally acknowledged.

Thus, for example, Brutus asks the citizens of Rome: "Who is here so base that would be a bondman?" adding at once: "If any, speak, for him have I offended." Again Brutus asks: "Who is here so vile that will not love his country?" Let him also speak, "for him I have offended." Brutus dares to ask these rhetorical questions, knowing full well that no one will answer his rhetorical questions in the wrong way.

So, too, Marc Antony, after describing how Caesar's conquests filled Rome's coffers, asks: "Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?" And after reminding the populace that Caesar thrice refused the crown that was offered him, Antony asks: "Was this ambition?" Both are rhetorical questions to which one and only one answer can be expected.

- 6 -

In the course of explaining how the three essential elements in persuasion operate to make it effective, I have indicated the various kinds of speaking with a practical purpose that I have lumped together under the general heading of the sales talk. We normally restrict that term to obvious instances of salesmanship in the advertising and selling of commercial products. But speaking with a practical purpose in the political arena, in the legislative chamber, in a courtroom where someone is being prosecuted or defended, at a public ceremony where someone is to be honored or something is to be commemorated-all these, no less than winning customers for a product, involve selling.

Every form of public speaking with a practical purpose involves

the same three essential factors in persuasion that must be employed in successful salesmanship. What has just been said applies equally to practical speaking that is not public—the kind of speech made by the chairman of the board to his colleagues, the kind of speech made by the proponent of a certain policy at a business conference, and even the kind of speech made by one member of a household to the rest of the family, with the practical purpose of getting them to adopt a recommendation being advanced.

In the classic expositions of practical rhetoric, from Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian down to the present, such terms as "selling" and "salesmanship" do not occur. The kinds of practical speaking are enumerated under such headings as deliberative (which refers to political oratory in legislative assemblies), forensic (which refers to the kind of speech that occurs in judicial proceedings, as, for example, counsel's summation to a jury), and epidictic (which refers to any effort to praise or dispraise something, whether that be a person or a policy), all of which are forms of persuasion.

It should be obvious that selling a product, like praising a person or a policy, is an effort at eulogistic persuasion. It should be no less obvious that political and forensic oratory are efforts to persuade the listeners to buy something—a policy being advocated or an evaluative judgment. 

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE
Is published weekly for its members by the
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS
Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann
Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor
Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist
A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.