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“THAT’S JUST RHETORIC!”

Mortimer Adler

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Shortly after the explosion of the first atomic bombs, President Hutchins of the University of Chicago instituted a Committee to Frame a World Constitution. Among the eminent persons who composed the group were two men of quite opposite temperaments—one, the Professor of Italian Literature at the University, himself a poet of renown, Guiseppe Antonio Borgese; the other, James Landis, the staid, prosaic, matter of fact Dean of the Harvard Law School.

On one occasion at which I was present, Professor Borgese addressed his colleagues on a subject dear to his heart. As he warmed to his subject, his voice rose, his eyes flashed, and his language became more and more forceful, reaching a crescendo of poetry

and passion that left all of us spellbound—all except one. In the moment of silence that ensued, Dean Landis fixed Borgese with a cold stare and said in a low voice, “That’s just rhetoric!” Borgese, equally cold but with anger, and pointing a finger at Landis that might have been a pistol, replied: “When you say that again, smile!”

What did Dean Landis mean by his remark? What could he have meant?

Certainly not that Borgese’s speech was ungrammatical and illogical, leaving it no qualities of utterance at all except those which were rhetorical. Though English was not his native tongue, Professor Borgese was a master of the language. From having engaged in many arguments with him, I can vouch for his analytical prowess and the cogency of his reasoning. He had a flair for embellishing his remarks with imagery, with metaphors, with well-timed pauses and staccato outbursts that riveted attention on what he was saying and drove home the points he was trying to make.

Therein lay the rhetorical power of his address, a power that the equally well-phrased and well-reasoned remarks of the reserved Anglo-Saxon Dean of the Harvard Law School almost always lacked. Why did the Dean object to this quality in his Italian colleague’s utterance? What was wrong with it? He may have restrained himself from resorting to the devices so skillfully employed by Professor Borgese, but their temperamental difference in style did not justify his dismissing the speech of Borgese as “just rhetoric.”

To put the best face on the criticism that Dean Landis leveled at Professor Borgese, we must interpret it as meaning not that the latter’s oration was *just* rhetoric, but rather that it was *more* rhetorical than the occasion required.

Borgese was not on a platform addressing a large audience of strangers, whom he was trying to persuade. He was sitting around a table with colleagues who were engaged with him in an undertaking the underlying presuppositions of which they all shared. The issue under consideration called for the examination of a wide assortment of facts and the weighing of many reasons pro and con.

That, in the view of Dean Landis, could only be done well by sticking, closely and coolly, to the pertinent matters, eschewing all irrelevant digressions that added more heat than light to the discus-

sion. Hence his curt rebuff to Borgese that, in effect, said: “Cut the unnecessary rhetoric out!”

Unnecessary because it was too much for this particular occasion? Or unnecessary because it is never needed at all? It can hardly be the latter. To think so amounts to thinking that speaking grammatically and logically always suffices for the purpose at hand. That it almost never does. One might just as well say that speaking to others never requires any consideration of how to get them to listen to what you have to say or how to make what you have to say affect their minds and hearts in ways that you wish to achieve.

Grammar, logic, and rhetoric are the three arts concerned with excellence in the use of language for the expression of thought and feeling. The first two of them may suffice for putting one’s thoughts and feelings down on paper as a private memorandum to file away for future reference. We do not need the skills of rhetoric in talking to ourselves or in making a written record for our own use. We seldom if ever have to persuade ourselves that our thinking should be hearkened to and adopted or that our sentiments are well-grounded and should be shared. But if we ever stand in need of persuading ourselves that we are on the right track, then just being grammatical and logical in our soliloquizing or note-making will not be enough. We must do something more to win our own commitment to the conclusion reached or the sentiment proposed. As we sometimes say, we have to “talk ourselves into it.” That is where rhetoric comes in.

Rare as the need for rhetoric may be when we are speaking only to ourselves, we are unlikely to be able to do without it when we are speaking to others. The reason is clear. We almost always have to try to persuade them not only to listen to what we have to say, but also to agree with us and to think or act accordingly.

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The ancient and honorable art of rhetoric is the art of persuasion. Along with grammar and logic, it has held an important place in education for almost twenty-five centuries. That place was much more important in Greek and Roman antiquity, when an educated person was expected to be something of an orator, and also in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when emphasis was laid not just on substance but on style in speech and writing.

These arts have all but vanished in the basic schooling of the young today. Of the three, rhetoric is the one most strikingly absent from the first twelve years of education. A few of those going

on to college may take courses in public speaking, but most have not been trained in the skills of persuasion.

Throughout its long history, the teaching of rhetoric has been concerned mainly, if not exclusively, with oratory and with style. Style in the use of language, style that makes the communication of substance either more elegant or more effective, is a quality common to both the written and the spoken word. Whether or not elegance is always desirable, it may not always render the communication more effective as an effort at persuasion.

Since our interest in rhetoric is concerned with effective persuasion in speaking to others, we cannot help being struck by the fact that, in its long history, rhetoric has been so closely, if not exclusively, associated with oratory. Many books on the subject—for example, a famous one by Quintilian, a Roman master of the art—use the word “oratory” in their titles rather than the word “rhetoric.” In antiquity and early modern times, the descriptive epithet “orator” was interchangeable with “rhetorician.”

What’s wrong with this? Simply that oratory consists of attempts to persuade others to act in one way or another. The rhetorical skill of the orator is aimed solely at a practical result, either a course of action to be adopted, a value judgment to be made, or an attitude to be taken toward another person or group of persons.

A practical result, however, is not the sole use of rhetoric, not even its most frequent or most important application. We are as frequently concerned with moving the mind of someone else to think as we do. That is often as important to us as moving someone else to act or feel as we wish them to. Our rhetorical aim then is purely intellectual, one might almost say theoretical, rather than practical. When we try to exert our rhetorical skill for this purpose, we are persuaders of a different kind than when we engage in oratory for a practical purpose.

The trouble with “oratory” as the name for the practical use of rhetoric in speaking to others is that it smacks too much of the political platform, the court room, or the legislative assembly. Politics is not the only arena in which human beings need rhetorical skill. They need it in business. They need it in any enterprise in which they are engaged *with* others or *against* others in attempting to achieve some practical result.

In all these areas, as well as in politics, we may find ourselves trying to sell something to someone else. Practical persuasion in all its

myriad forms is salesmanship. I am, therefore, going to adopt the lowly phrase “sales talk” as the name for the kind of speaking to others that involves persuasion with an eye on some practical result to be achieved.

What name, then, shall we adopt for the other kind of speaking to others, the kind that involves persuasion with an eye on some purely intellectual or theoretical result? Teaching? Instruction? Yes, though it should be remembered that instruction takes many forms. Sometimes the teacher is not simply a speaker addressing an audience that consists of silent listeners. When teachers perform that way, they teach by telling rather than by asking. Teaching by telling is lecturing, and good lecturers are just as much concerned with persuading listeners as good salespeople are.

Though persuasion is involved in both instruction and selling, the one for a purely theoretical or intellectual result, the other for a practical result, I think it most convenient to adopt the following terminology. I will refer to all attempts to achieve a practical result as “persuasive speech,” and all attempts to achieve a change of mind (without any regard to action) as “instructive speech.” What I have called the “sales talk” is persuasive speech. The lecture is instructive speech.

I shall discuss these two main types of uninterrupted speech before I consider special variants of each of them: in the next chapter, the sales talk; and in the one following, the lecture.

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Such terms as “sales talk,” “persuasion,” and even “rhetoric” carry invidious connotations for those who think that to engage in selling, in persuasion, or in the use of rhetorical devices is to indulge in sophistry.

Fortunately, those who harbor this view are mistaken. It would be very unfortunate, indeed, if sophistry could not be avoided, for then no honest or morally scrupulous person could, in good conscience, have anything to do with the process of persuasion. Yet most of us find ourselves inclined or obliged to try to persuade others to act or feel in ways we think desirable and honorable. Rare is the person who can completely bypass the business of persuasion. Most of us, in our daily contacts, are involved in it most of the time.

There are some skills that can be used for good or evil purposes. They can be used scrupulously, in good conscience, or unscrupu-

lously. The skill of the physician or surgeon can be used to cure or maim; the skill of the lawyer, to promote justice or to defeat it; the skill of the technologist, to construct or destroy. The skill of the persuader—the political orator, the commercial salesman, the advertiser, the propagandist—can be used with a high regard for truth and to achieve benign results, but it can also be as powerfully employed to deceive and injure.


Sophistry is always a misuse of the skills of rhetoric, always an unscrupulous effort to succeed in persuading by any means, fair or foul. The line that Plato drew to distinguish the sophist from the philosopher, both equally skilled in argument, put the philosopher on the side of those who, devoted to the truth, would not misuse logic or rhetoric to win an argument by means of deception, misrepresentation, or other trickery.

The sophist, in contrast, is always prepared to employ any means that will serve his purpose. The sophist is willing to make the worse appear the better reason and to deviate from the truth if that is necessary in order to succeed.

In ancient Greece, the sophists were teachers of rhetoric for the purpose of winning lawsuits. Each citizen who engaged in litigation had to act as his own lawyer—his own prosecutor or defense attorney. To those who regarded success in winning a lawsuit as an end that justified the use of any means, whether honorable or not, the sophistical misuse of rhetoric recommended itself.

That is how rhetoric first got a bad name, which it has never been able to shake off completely; it is important for all of us to remember that sophistry is an unscrupulous use of rhetoric. The thing misused is not itself to be condemned.

There can be honesty and dishonesty in selling, or in other efforts at persuasion, as in many other human transactions. A sales talk need not resort to lies and deceptions in order to be effective; nor need successful selling employ the devices of the con artist. What I have just said about selling applies to other forms of persuasion and other uses of rhetoric.

I am aware that, in certain quarters, these terms—salesmanship, persuasion, rhetoric—are terms of ill repute. But once it is understood that their connection with sophistry is adventitious, not inescapable, I see no reason for giving the terms up. They refer to activities in which all, or most, of us engage and can do so without recourse to reprehensible trickery, lies, or deception. 

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