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Chapter Three

RHETORIC OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Any essay which takes as its topic ‘the rhetoric of social psychology’ immediately sounds like a critical challenge. The reader might reasonably expect social psychology to be attacked, as the rhetorical tricks of social psychologists are ruthlessly exposed. No doubt those social psychologists, who spend much of their professional lives conducting and teaching about experiments, will interpret this essay as an attack, and possibly they will be correct. However, the terms of the attack must be clarified. At the outset it needs to be said that the present essay does not seek to expose rhetorical tricks nor to accuse experimentalists of dishonestly manipulating language. In order to avoid misunderstanding on this score, it is important to specify what is meant by ‘rhetoric’, and most importantly what is not meant by the term. If this is not done, then the experimentalists might read more into the criticism than is implied, and, worse still from the point of the critic, the nature of a rhetorical analysis, and indeed of rhetoric itself, may be misunderstood.

RHETORIC AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

The word ‘rhetoric’ is often used as a pejorative term. To call a piece of discourse ‘mere rhetoric’ is to dismiss it, with the implication that the discourse contains no substance. Thus, one politician might label the speech of a rival as being ‘rhetoric’, and in so doing gives the impression that only empty phrases have been uttered by the rival, in contrast with one’s own substantial political efforts. In this context, the accusation of being ‘merely rhetorical’ can carry with it a moral implication. The ‘rhetorical’ politician is [48] one who is deliberately using fine phrases as a camouflage, whether it be to hide incompetence, inactivity, or venality. For instance, the speech, which is accused of being ‘rhetorical’, might be thought to contain the sort of uplifting phrases, which might lull the audience in to thinking that the politician is actually doing something about the issues, rather than merely speaking eloquently about them. In this case, not only is the speech accused of being merely words, but the mere words are considered dishonest, for they give the impression that more than words are involved.

If the word ‘rhetoric’ is used in this way, then calling experimental social psychology ‘rhetorical’ is most certainly a strong accusation, and one that would justifiably anger experimentalists. In essence it would be alleged that social psychological writing is empty of real content, and, moreover, that social psychologists specifically choose their language to hide this poverty of content. Some critics have claimed that social psychology is ‘rhetorical’ in

this sense. For instance, Rom Harré (1981) uses the word in this way, when he reproduces a lengthy example of social psychological writing, which is full of impressive sounding, technical jargon. Harré demystifies the jargon, in order to claim that the writer is really saying something quite banal. Not only is the writing devoid of any genuine significance, but the writer has deliberately chosen a form of expression which conceals this emptiness. Harré calls this sort of writing 'rhetorical' and he suggests that experimental social psychologists commonly write in this way. Because this writing is devoid of interesting ideas, but is clothed in the uniform of dense, scientific verbiage, it is, according to Harré, merely rhetoric. Once the rhetoric has been stripped away, nothing much remains. In consequence, a rhetorical analysis of social psychology, in this sense, would be a process of exposure. The aim would be to substitute a social psychology, which was flawed by being rhetorical, by one which was essentially free from rhetoric.

Harré's analysis assumes that 'rhetoric' is something to be avoided, for rhetoric is equated with empty phrase-making or the adornment of language, which can get in the way of the communication of meaning. Harré's rhetorician is like Plato's: a clever but morally suspect person who juggle with words to make poor ideas appear impressive. However, there is another sense to the word 'rhetoric' and in this sense a rhetorical analysis has a somewhat [49] wider, and less accusatory, role than in Harré's sense. The term rhetoric need not be used in a derogatory manner. In fact, until the twentieth century, 'rhetoric' specifically occupied a central, and much venerated, place in western education. Every well educated person was expected to have studied the discipline known by that name, reading with respect the writings on rhetoric by Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. These rhetorical writings were certainly not to be dismissed as being devoid of content.

The rhetorical classics were held to contain the essentials for instructing the arts of good speaking and good writing. In other words, rhetoric was the discipline of good communication. According to this conception of 'rhetoric', acts of communication are, and should be, rhetorical. The aim is not to reduce the rhetorical elements from communication. The accusation against experimental social psychological writing is not that it is *merely* rhetorical, but that it is *insufficiently* rhetorical, in the sense that it overlooks the essentially rhetorical aspects of communication. It will be suggested that social psychology expresses a philosophy which opposes and seeks to transcend rhetoric. By espousing such a position, social psychologists then tend to overlook the inherently rhetorical nature of the topics which they investigate as well as the rhetorical nature of the enterprise of social psychology itself.

Aristotle at the start of his *Rhetorica* defined rhetoric as being the study of the available means of persuasion (1355b). To be sure, this included the less reputable tricks which a speaker might use to impress an audience, and it would embrace the use of scientific jargon, which is designed to make readers think that the author is an incredibly clever expert. However, Aristotle dealt with far more than the stratagems by which a superficial idea can be presented as a profound one. He discussed the basic ways of arguing, to be employed by anyone wishing to convince an audience. For example, he noted that ordinary speech was different from formal logic. Normally, people do not fill their discourse with logical syllogisms, which deduce single conclusions from two separate premises. Instead, they use forms of reasoning, which Aristotle called 'enthymeme'. Although Aristotle seemed a bit confused about what constituted the basic character of an enthymeme, he suggested that it involved the assertion of a conclusion and a justification. [50]

The study of rhetoric was a reflexive study, for the rhetorical authors, when they wrote their

textbooks or delivered their lectures on rhetoric, were themselves using rhetoric. Aristotle's *Rhetorica*, based upon the afternoon seminars given to his advanced students, was itself intended to be a piece of persuasive communication. It's own mode of argument was enthymemic, as opposed to syllogistic. Similarly, Harré's debunking of the 'merely rhetorical' nature of social psychological writing was itself a piece of writing designed to persuade an audience and thereby was itself rhetorical. The present essay is, on this account, rhetorical. In short, the wider conception of rhetoric does not view rhetoric as something shameful, to be avoided by all speakers and writers. In fact, the idea of advocating the use of language as communication in a way which escapes rhetoric is seen as self defeating, just as it would be to utter 'this is not an utterance'.

In recent years there has been an intellectual revival in the traditions of rhetorical scholarship. Habermas (1987) has discussed the deconstructionist and post-structuralist movements in modern philosophy in terms of an attempt to establish the primacy of rhetoric over logic. These modernist movements, or perhaps more accurately post-modernist movements, do not downgrade rhetorical communication as an illegitimate form of discourse, for they accept the wider conception of rhetoric itself. This sort of modernism, or post-modernism, specifically sets its face against any attempt to transcend rhetoric by seeking a higher realm of discourse, in which truths will have an absolute status, impossible in ordinary discourse. For example, post-modernists do not suggest that formal logic or mathematics can supply a higher realm of philosophical truth than can natural language. Nor is there the belief that scientific methodology can provide an escape from the reflexivity of rhetorical language. By contrast, science itself is seen as an intrinsically rhetorical, or persuasive, activity, and, consequently, a rhetorical analysis of science is not so much an exposé, but an analysis which looks at the way that scientists argue and discuss their scientific cases (Leff 1987; Rorty 1987; for examples relating to psychology, see Bazarman 1987; Potter 1988; Potter and McKinlay 1987).

The modern approach to rhetoric stresses the enthymemic aspects of rhetoric, rather than seeing rhetoric as a means of providing elegant adornment to essentially non-rhetorical [51] discourse. Consequently, reasoned discourse is held to be rhetorical. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1971), who have done much to lay the basis for 'the new rhetoric', have stressed the key role of justification and criticism in rhetorical communication. In persuasive communication, speakers and writers attempt to present their discourse as reasonable by giving justifications for their position and by countering objections with criticisms. In short, they produce reasoned arguments and rhetoric involves the production of argumentative discourse, which in a literal sense is justified and reasonable. Habermas (1984) develops the point by suggesting that any theory of rational communication must embody a theory of argumentation.

As far as social psychology is concerned, there are a number of implications from this link between rhetoric and argumentation. Billig (1987) has suggested that the processes of thinking are modelled upon those of argumentation: when we think we conduct internal arguments, which would not be possible were there not public arguments between people. In consequence, a number of cognitive phenomena, which psychologists have traditionally treated as individual processes, can be seen to possess argumentative aspects. Attitudes represent a case in point. They are not to be viewed primarily as personal schemata for organising information around a stimulus topic, nor as expressions of individual affect. As Lalljee *et al* (1984) suggest, attitudes are communicative acts. Yet they are communicative with a rhetorical, or argumentative dimension, for they are rhetorical stances taken in matters of public controversy (Billig 1988a and 1988b; Billig *et al* 1988). As such, justifications and criticisms are very much intrinsic to attitudes.

When one expresses an attitude *in favour* of a particular position, one is expected not only to justify that position enthymemically, but one is also criticising the counter-attitude. For instance, a central part of expressing an attitude in opposition to capital punishment is opposing critically the arguments of the counter-position, which advocates the death penalty. In other words, attitudes are held in a general context of public controversy, which argumentatively pits stance and counter-stance, justification and criticism against each other.

There is an implication here about how to understand reasoned discourse. It is tempting for psychologists to approach the problem of meaning in terms of information processing or affective state:[52] the meaning of an attitude or belief is to be based upon the function that it serves for organising the individual's stimulus world, or upon a hypothesised inner motivational state. By contrast, the rhetorical position suggests that an argumentative meaning must be sought for expressions of attitude. To understand the attitude, one must place it alongside the counter-attitude; and to understand a justification, one must search for the possible or actual criticisms which the speaker is seeking to deflect. In this respect, a rhetorical analysis explores the meaning of a piece of discourse by locating that discourse within its context of controversy, for the meaning of the discourse is contained in its rhetorical relation to the counter-discourses.

All this is relevant for any rhetorical analysis of social psychology itself, for it sets up the basic question to be asked by any such rhetorical analysis. When faced by the textbooks and the journals of social psychology, with their specialised vocabularies and their descriptions of the strange rituals of experimentation, one might ask 'what is the meaning of all this activity?' The answer is not to be found merely by examining the motives, laudable or otherwise, of the practitioners of social psychology; nor is it to be discovered by looking at the stylistic qualities to be found in their discourse. Instead, the argumentative context of social psychology must be sought. In consequence, the fundamental rhetorical question is 'what is this social psychological discourse arguing against?'

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND COMMON SENSE

A short, and deliberately over-simplified, answer is that contemporary social psychology, considered as a single activity, constitutes an argument against common sense. The experiments, in which college sophomores are lied to and then have a choice between alternatively strange reactions, are not to be dismissed as meaningless. Nor, because their reports are composed in a singularly graceless language, which often expresses a myopic vision of the world, should they be considered as lacking any philosophy, or argumentative purpose. The experiments are justified by a wider argument, and in turn they are cited as the rhetorical justifications for that argument. At the basis of that argument is the contention that ordinary common sense is unsatisfactory and that social psychologists must labour hard to [53] correct its imperfections, or, better still, to replace it by a new form of knowledge. Experiments are producing the statistically significant data which will provide the elements for the new, improved, uncommon sense. The topics of social psychology are those which are covered by common sense. Students studying the discipline are introduced to issues, about which they already have opinions, such as, for example: How do people make good impressions on each other? Why do people get angrily violent? Do people always do what they say they will do? To all these social psychological questions, it is possible to give ordinary non-specialist answers, which are quite reasonable but owe none of their reasonableness to the technical journals. Ordinary people answering the broad questions, which professional social psychologists have addressed, can draw upon their own

experiences and, most importantly, upon the collective experiences contained within common sense. They have a store of collectively shared lay theories, or what are sometimes called social representations (Jodelet 1984; Moscovici 1984a; Moscovici 1984b; Moscovici 1987; for criticisms of the notion of social representations, see, *inter alia*, Potter and Litton 1985; Potter and Wetherell 1987; McKinlay and Potter 1987).

The situation is quite different from most other academic disciplines. The ordinary non-specialist is not expected to have lay opinions about the structural form of neutrons, protozoa, or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In few other disciplines do teachers feel the need to warn first year students against answering examination questions on the basis of common sense: candidates, if faced by the question 'Why do people fall in love?', should put aside their previous knowledge and should concentrate upon newly acquired information about experiments. Students are not warned against common sense because social psychologists are claiming to have discovered dark continents of hidden psychic forces. For example, psychoanalysts often addressed common sense issues, but claimed that the common sense answers were unsatisfactory, because in ordinary life people were unaware of the operations of the unconscious. It has always been a part of psychoanalytic theory, not merely to claim the existence of a hidden psychic force, which explains psychological reality, but also to explain why that force has remained hidden.

However, social psychologists do not criticise common sense [54] because the latter has ignored the vital substrate of psychic reality. In fact, the argument against common sense is not based upon an alleged empirical finding. It is a philosophical argument, which would still be made, regardless of whether the experimental results fall one side or the other of the conventional boundary dividing the significant result from the non-significant one. The argument is that common sense is inherently suspect, because it is unscientific. This argument was clearly expressed, for example, in Fritz Heider's *Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (1958), which advocated a 'naive' or 'common sense' psychology. However, the naive psychology which Heider advocated was not one which would respect ordinary common sense. It was naive in that it took ordinary common sense, or naive perceptions, as its subject matter. Heider proposed that social psychologists should examine how ordinary people make sense of their world. However, this examination was not itself to be naive, but sought to transcend the naivety of its subject matter.

This desire to transcend the naivety of common sense is expressed in the introductory chapters of most textbooks in social psychology. For instance, it can be seen in a book by two modern cognitive social psychologists, who have attempted to bring Heider's influential psychology up to-date. Fiske and Taylor (1984) write on the first page of *Social Cognition* that research on social cognition can be conducted by asking people how they make sense of others. However, the information collected is not merely to be left to speak for itself. It must be tested for accuracy. A great deal of cognitive social psychological research has been devoted to showing how inaccurate naive perceivers are in the way that they form their expectations about the world (i.e. Hamilton and Trolier 1986; Nisbett and Ross 1980; Tversky and Kahneman 1980). Kelley's work on attribution theory assumes that ordinary perceivers assign causes to events using strategies, which are crude versions of the more sophisticated analyses of variance techniques used by professional social psychologists (Kelley 1972; Kelley and Michela 1980). This sort of work contains an argument against common sense, for the biases and inaccuracies of naive perceivers are compared unfavourably with the rationality of the scientific expert. Yet common sense is not merely to be dismissed because it might be wrong. Even if correct, it cannot be

accepted unmodified. Fiske and Taylor state: 'if people are right, one can [55] build formal theories by making their insights scientific, by pulling together patterns across many people's intuitions' (Fiske and Taylor 1984: 1). In other words, right or wrong, common sense is to be transcended by a new form of knowledge. At best it can provide a preliminary step to a scientific reconstruction. At worst, it is an erroneous obstruction. Either way, common sense is unsatisfactory as it stands.

One reason why common sense is held to be unsatisfactory is that it contains so many contradictions. This view is often expressed in the textbooks, which feel the need to express a justification for the whole subject. A frequent argument is to suggest that common sense is confused, because it contains contrary maxims. For instance, social psychology textbooks often point to the contradiction between 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' and 'out of sight out of mind' (see Billig 1987: 205 ff. for details). It is not suggested that experimentation will reveal one maxim to be completely correct and the other incorrect. Both have elements of truth, but the existence of contrary, but equally reasonable, truths is held to be unsatisfactory. Something must be done to sort out this state of affairs. Therefore, it is claimed that detailed experimentation will tell us the limits of the truths of contrary maxims; they will specify the situations when the one is right and the situations when the other is. Thus science will clear up the confusions of common sense and allow 'unfounded speculation' to be replaced by 'orderly and precise experimentation' (Baron, Byrne, and Griffit 1974: 2).

There is a further point to note about the social psychological critique of common sense. It is based on the notion that truth must be unitary and agreed upon. It contains what Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey (1987: 11) have called 'the vision of a single, certain, natural and rational order'. The vision contains an implicit critique against rhetoric, which accepts that there can, and indeed must, be open-ended contrary truths (Perelman 1979; Rorty 1987; Billig 1987). It has been suggested that the contrary elements of common sense, far from being an impediment to ordinary life, actually are necessary for ordinary thought (Billig *et al* 1988). Because common sense contains contrary elements people can argue, using common sense, and, indeed, they can think by arguing with themselves. In consequence, it is the contradictions of common sense which permit the existence of what Moscovici [56] (1983) has called 'the thinking society' (see Billig, *in press*, for an elaboration of this argument). By contrast, the contradictions of common sense are presented by scientific social psychologists as a challenge and an obstacle. The social psycho-logical aim of clearing up the contradictions of common sense is tantamount to a wish for the end of argumentation. Matters of controversy, which can be argued about, and for which justifications can be given on both sides, will be finally settled by a unitary, agreed scientific truth.

SCIENCE IN ACTION

In practice the scientific activity of social psychologists has not succeeded in clearing up the messy confusions of common sense. The dream of producing clear psychological principles each neatly tied to different sorts of situation has not been realised. Instead, an intricate and sprawling subject has been created, whose own internal theoretical structure is every bit as contradictory as common sense. This can be illustrated briefly by considering one of the major trends in social psychological research during the 1960s and 1970s, which went under the general, and rather misleading, heading of 'risky-shift' research (for comparatively recent reviews of this research tradition, see Doise and Moscovici 1984; Fraser and Foster 1982).

A vast amount of experimental research was provoked by a commonsensical question: do groups of people tend to make riskier or more cautious decisions than do solitary individuals? Common sense maxims and observations suggested that answers could be given either way. However, social psychologists decided that the question needed answering definitively with experimental evidence. Therefore, an experimental paradigm was constructed, in which groups and individuals discussed and made decisions about hypothetical risk-taking situations. Initial results suggested that groups were riskier than individuals (i.e. Wallach, Kogan, and Bem 1962). Various explanations were formulated to suggest why groups should show this propensity to risk-taking (Brown 1965). However, the simple social psychological law, linking enhanced risk-taking to group situations, did not remain intact for long. Soon experimental evidence was produced to show that sometimes groups could be more cautious than individuals, and, thus, there [57] was a cautious-shift, to match the risky-shift (Fraser, Gouge, and Billig 1971). Explanations and psychological principles were formulated to explain why groups could be more risky, less risky and just the same as individuals.

Later, it was suggested that the shifts had nothing to do with risk or caution, but that there was a general principle that groups become more extreme than individuals: they polarise individual tendencies, whether towards conservatism or towards risk (Moscovici and Zavalloni 1969). Just as the original risky-shift phenomenon provoked numerous experiments, so too did the phenomenon of polarisation. And just as this research gave rise to a process which was the reverse of the original process, so too did the polarisation research: depolarisation was announced. And again it became a matter of discovering the situations to which the process or its opposite applied. As Fraser and Foster have written:

Now that sufficient evidence has been accumulated to support the polarization hypothesis, greater attention can be given to the fact that it may occur only in particular conditions and that other conditions may produce depolarisation instead.

(Fraser and Foster 1982: 482)

By the time of depolarisation, however, the popularity of the risky shift area of research has declined. When there was a chance that a clear psychological principle might be discovered, the area attracted considerable interest and research effort. The result has been a proliferation of findings, so that the reviews of the research now creak under the weight of accumulated experimental evidence, contrary psychological principles and claims about special circumstances. Far from anything having been made more orderly, the result is greater complexity and diminishing theoretical interest. Nor have any of the basic questions been resolved, except that complexity, based on contrary principles, has been found where social psychology, but not necessarily common sense, seemed to have expected simplicity. And because the whole area by now lost any neat theoretical shape, the sharp experimentalists have moved on to other issues.

The pattern is not one, which is peculiar to the area of group decision-making, but has been found many times in the recent history of social psychology. A seemingly simple psychological [58] principle occasions a burst of research activity, which then in its turn produces the discovery of the reverse principle. Research on the reinforcing qualities of rewards has been countered by research on intrinsic justification, in which rewards lessen the chance of behaviour being repeated; research about attitudes giving rise to behaviour has been followed by studies showing the reverse process, as behaviour is shown to produce attitudes; studies revealing people to avoid

inconsistent information are followed by those in which people seek out such information; studies showing people having a propensity to explain events in terms of personal, rather than situational, qualities are then countered by studies revealing an opposing propensity. In each case, a simple theory, or psychological principle, is confronted by the opposite theory, or principle. And, in each case, both principles have their respective empirical justifications and, rhetorically speaking, are quite reasonable.

In point of fact, the above description is far too simplified, for it only mentions very broad psychological principles. On a detailed level, minor psychological principles find themselves qualified by their opposites. The issue, then, is not to prove whether either principle is wholly correct, but to search for the situations which are relevant to either. For example, researchers might conduct studies to demonstrate when either polarisation or depolarisation will occur. The researcher, having conducted an experiment, will then claim that a particular principle is relevant to this sort of situation. In making this claim, the researcher is stating another principle: i.e. in situations, containing characteristic X, one will find depolarisation. The researcher will not leave matters there, but will offer a reason, or more typically a new technical term, to say why X gives rise to depolarisation. This, on a very detailed level, will be another psychological principle, and will be vulnerable to qualification from an opposite principle. As likely as not, an ingenious experimenter will design a study, whose results predictably contradict the principle, and suggest an opposing principle to explain why sometimes polarisation occurs in some situations bearing the characteristic X. In its turn, this new principle will be qualified by further experimentation. This process is potentially infinite, for there is an infinity of different situations to which the opposing principles can be applied.

The net result is a growing complexity of social psychological [59] research. Moreover, areas of research, like the risky shift, are not abandoned by researchers because the problems have been solved. In fact, few of the problems are solved. Instead the number of problems becomes multiplied and their range becomes increasingly restricted. And as the interesting common sense problem becomes fragmented into these potentially infinite chippings, so suddenly a fresh problem takes the attention. A new social psychological breakthrough will be announced. Then, the process from the simple, easily comprehended idea, to diverse and contradictory qualifications will be repeated. The net result is that the more comprehensive textbooks become ever more complex and their writers claim that this complexity is the real discovery of social psychology.

The social psychological theories and findings do not form an orderly picture, but there is a sprawling mass of conflicting principles and research findings. No simple laws are permitted to stand on their own, but each law provokes an equally reasonable reaction. In this respect, the uncommon sense of social psychology resembles the more ordinary common sense, which it seeks to replace. 'Shift-to-risk' and 'shift-to-conservatism', 'group polarisation' and 'group depolarisation' indicate pairs of principles, just like the maxims of common sense: 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' and 'out of sight out of mind', 'many hands make light work' and 'too many cooks spoil the broth', 'nothing ventured nothing gained' and 'look before you leap', etc. Nor have the infinitude of social situations been so classified that to each can be unarguably affixed the relevant psychological principle.

The maxims of common sense provide the basis for arguments in ordinary life, or, to use the jargon of classical rhetoric, they are the argumentative *common-places*, simply because they are generally held to be reasonable and conflict with each other (Billig 1987; Billig 1988c; Billig *et al* 1988). If common sense, then, has an argumentative structure, in that it contains reasonable

but conflicting elements, then so does social psychology. One might say, that social psychology, in common with common sense, possesses an argumentative structure. Social psychologists, rather than abolishing argumentation in their discipline, are caught up in an argumentative context, as each experiment, and its justificatory principle, argues against the counter principle. As a result, the argument against common sense possesses the structure[60] of ever increasing internal arguments. No end is in sight as social psychologists are unwillingly caught up in their rhetorical activities of argumentation. In short, for all their zeal, they have not succeeded in planting the orderly Eden, whose sense of harmonious agreement would install tranquillity upon the ruins of the rhetorical Babel. [End of page 60]