

Book Review

Rethinking Rhetorical Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy: The Living Art of Michael C. Leff

John Angus Campbell, Antonio de Velasco and David Henry (Eds.)

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Michael Leff's prominence in the fields of rhetoric, communication, and argumentation has been appropriately recognized in this recent publication. This collection of essays represents the principal themes that occupied him over the course of his career and conveys the uniqueness of his thinking. Each of the parts of the book is preceded by an introduction justifying the theme of that section, however, the attentive reader will uncover a rich variety of themes relating to a variety of disciplines. Indeed, we might imagine Leff encouraging the reader to identify and highlight these other themes, given his emphasis on the role of practice.

The book itself is divided into five parts, each of which contains four to six essays that the editors take to be representative of each of these five aspects of Leff's work. In the first part "Greek and Latin Rhetorical Theory", we become familiarized with Leff's interpretation of the ancient rhetorical texts, noting

the contributions of their authors and the major themes of those texts. Most notably, Leff turns to Cicero as a rhetorical theorist and philosopher, while integrating insights from Aristotle and Isocrates. The second part is “Contemporary Extensions of Classical Rhetorical Theory”. These essays shift the focus from interpreting the classical theorists to situating their theories in the contemporary rhetorical landscape. The third section is called “Theories of Criticism”. The two main threads of this section are criticism and interpretation. Both threads are important to the body of academic rhetorical theory. For example, there are many competing approaches regarding what the proper units of rhetorical criticism can and should be, as well as the sources and importance of interpretation, and how different theoretical approaches change rhetorical analyses. Leff provides summaries, comparisons, criticisms, and future directions for the field. The fourth section, “The Practice of Rhetorical Criticism”, draws on the theoretical basis of the previous section and applies Leff’s own approach to famous texts. Exemplary orations/speeches/texts of both Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. are subjected to Leff’s inimitable style of close reading. Each essay in Section Four highlights some issues in rhetorical practice and resolves them through a case study. The final section is “Rhetorical Pedagogy”. This section contains the most papers that had been previously unpublished, often from conference presentations. It highlights the value of the liberal arts in general as much as it highlights how we might approach teaching rhetoric in university courses, both within the discipline and how other disciplines approach rhetoric. It is in this final section, in the last line of the last paragraph, that we get an answer to the question “what is rhetoric” or, “what is your preferred conception of rhetoric?”

By the end of the book, the reader will be familiarized with several methodologies, approaches, and theories that are distinctly “Leffian”. This review will proceed by outlining three noteworthy themes: returning to and integrating both Isocratean and Ciceronian theory into the modern rhetorical paradigm; how analysis of rhetorical practice blurs or eliminates sharp distinctions in rhetorical theory; and the power of rhetoric as a social tool to overcome disparate positions, transform individuals, or galvanize the views of a community. All of these themes are coloured by Leff’s humanist allegiance, which understands rhetoric to be a way of expressing values, and a way of knowing. Other main themes that are interwoven with the previous three are: the role of tradition or experience in rhetorical theory and practice; the source of rhetorical invention; and the application of key rhetorical concepts such as decorum, metaphor, and elo-

quence. And we will trace one less obvious thread that will perhaps be most noticeable to the theorist of argumentation: the progressive shift in Leff's characterization and approach to argument. This shift is perhaps most evident when the focus is on the chronological order of their composition rather than on the order in which papers appear in this collection.

Almost all of the above themes are introduced in the first paper of the book, "Tradition and Agency in Humanistic Rhetoric" where Leff argues, "that the humanistic approach entails a productively ambiguous notion of agency that positions the orator both as an individual who leads an audience, and as a member of a community who is shaped and constrained by the demands of the audience." (Leff 2003: 7). In this paper, Leff defends rhetoric as a humanism, reminds us that tradition is always embedded in an audience and therefore provides the limits for creative license in the arguer, all while breaking down the barriers between theory and practice.

The reader does not yet know that these will be the overarching themes of the rest of the book. The essay itself is well placed in this regard, a sort of proemium to the entire collection, pointing toward what will follow. This first paper is notable because it is written in 2003 and therefore represents some of Leff's most mature thoughts as an academic. The themes outlined above are meticulously worked out in the papers that follow; indeed, the later papers are ultimately what lead to "Tradition and Agency in Humanistic Rhetoric" chronologically. While this paper does cover all of these themes, it provides Leff's most explicit defense of the role of tradition in rhetoric. The roles of audience and tradition are common refrains throughout the book. We see them, for example, in the way the political or social landscape provides the backdrop necessary for Martin Luther King Jr. to make powerful appeals to his fellow clergymen to situate himself as a part of, rather than apart from, white middle class society (Leff 2004); or how Abraham Lincoln drew on the previous actions of the founding fathers in America to show that, contrary to Douglas's argument, the constitution did not support slavery (Leff 1974). However, it is in this paper that we see the reasons why tradition and audience are so important. Without tradition, Leff argues, rhetoric loses its constructive capacity for novelty and invention, and thus it is without tradition that rhetoric is reduced to mere adornment. Because the practice of rhetoric involves making a case to an audience, which carries a set of experiences, beliefs and assumptions, tradition plays an essential role in communication, and lifts rhetoric above this deflated conception (Leff 2003: 13-17). Ultimately this paper argues for how to think of agency and in-

vention in rhetoric; however, what is front and centre is how both Cicero and Isocrates view rhetoric as an art that is “a meaningful part of the history of the community and affords the community opportunities to perform new versions of itself without losing a sense of identity” (Leff 2003: 18). Leff champions the views of both these ancient thinkers in highlighting the importance of rhetoric then and now.

With Cicero and Isocrates placed at the centre of rhetorical theory, the next major theme addresses how it is that sharp theoretical distinctions can be overcome in rhetorical practice, exemplified in “Topical Invention and Metaphoric Interaction” (1983). There Leff shows how metaphor has been characterized as the apex of rhetorical adornment since the rise of more formal approaches to speech and argument. He explains how metaphor had lost its earlier importance and come to be seen as superfluous to the arguments of a text or speech (Leff 1984). He charges theorists such as Burke, Barthes, and Saussure with diminishing the role of metaphor by failing to acknowledge its argumentative function (Leff 1984: 123). In contrast to these theorists, Leff shows that metaphors can provide propositional content to arguments, and indeed, that the argument would not be present without metaphor. Regarding the role of theory and practice we see that,

when we move outside the realm of pure theory and consider rhetorical discourse as it is actually practiced, Burke’s speculation about the confluence of ideas and images demands attention. The more closely we contemplate the workings of specific rhetorical transactions, the less obvious is the dichotomy between metaphoric frames and argumentative contents. (Leff 1984: 123)

His subsequent discussion argues that an appeal to the practice of rhetoric breaks down, or blurs, sharp distinctions within or between rhetorical theories. The humanist thread that can be traced through these works also shows how theories are not ideally pre-given and then adhered to in practice. Rather, for Leff, theory arises from practice. Theory is posited after reflecting on practice, and then theory is revised through its application in practice. So, practice has a dual function of theory collapse and theory creation. The living art of rhetoric navigates between these two functions to refine the tools for community building and rhetorical effect.

Throughout the book Leff’s appreciation that rhetoric is a powerful, effective tool to motivate and inspire communities to action becomes clear. In his view, rhetoric not only deals with

values of the community, it also has epistemic strength: it is through rhetoric that we come to know the world around us. Of particular importance to Leff is the notion of decorum, which he understands as appropriateness—how to speak well about something (Leff 1990: 159). In different places decorum: (1) accommodates the circumstances, mediates between arguer and audience, and organizes the internal form of discourse (Leff 1990: 176), and, (2) “Decorum yields eloquence, and eloquence informed by prudence is not empty verbiage; it is the point at which knowledge becomes articulate, thought and word coalesce, and wisdom enters the service of the community” (Leff 2000: 466). So, rhetoric, and here, decorum, are tools for activating, motivating, and galvanizing a community, putting knowledge and experience to work. Rhetoric is not simply about values; it is also fundamentally epistemic.

Rhetoric also establishes the identity and agency of persons. The most vivid examples are Leff’s analyses of Abraham Lincoln’s speeches, and Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”. In the first case, Leff argues that Lincoln establishes himself in his Cooper’s Union address, first as a political candidate and the person with the true interpretation of the founding fathers’ constitutional intent (Leff 1974), and over time and through his rhetoric, as an almost mythical figure, so complex that he can be invoked and interpreted in many different ways (Leff 1997). In Martin Luther King Jr.’s rhetoric, we find that King is able to construct an identity for himself among the white, working class, religious community, and thereby connect with that community, despite being otherwise alien to them (Leff 2004). In his textual analyses we see that Leff is able to provide a rhetorical account of these seminal speeches and figures that shows how each changed the hearts and minds of those around them. This effect is due to the dual epistemic and value functions of rhetoric. Rhetoric is a tool for building agents, identities, and communities.

As we noted above, one of the more subtle aspects of Leff’s thinking—his characterization of argument—can be gleaned by viewing his works chronologically. Consider the following:

... an argument is a series of propositions offered as reasons to support a conclusion about a doubtful issue. The propositions that serve as reasons may be divided into two classes: those that establish the data of an argument, and those that warrant the connection between the data-establishing propositions and the conclusions. (Leff 1984: 120)

What immediately stands out to the argumentation theorist is the use of Toulminian terms ‘data’ and ‘warrant’ (Toulmin 1958). This model takes arguments to be eternal abstract objects. The account works well for Leff’s treatment of metaphor later in the paper. But we would not expect a rhetorician to adopt such an account, as it deviates from traditionally rhetorical accounts of argument, which tend to include the audience as a defining feature of arguments. The most plausible explanation for its adoption at this stage is that he must not have had anything better.

Ten years later the situation has changed; we see a different conception of argument from Leff that still looks more or less compatible with the Toulminian account. However, this new characterization adds to the Toulminian approach to argument by explicitly referencing the interlocutor to an argument, and how the audience influences the arguer. Here Leff states:

In the conflicted scenes of public argument, the orator must consider not just reason, but the opposing reasons that always enter into controversies and must be able to argue on both sides of an issue in order to recognize and encompass the demands of the situation (Leff 1994: 466).

The sense of argument that Leff understands here has strong connections with the concept of argument put forward by Ralph Johnson (2000), where arguments consist of an illative core, a set of propositions that support a conclusion, and a dialectical tier, which addresses possible objections. In the serious consideration of opposing reasons, Leff’s orator is operating at the level of the dialectical tier. In between these two accounts of argument by Leff, we find a 1990 paper where he notes that in Cicero the function of the orator is to prove, please, and sway. By associating these three functions with the Aristotelean modes of proof, Cicero, Leff claims, breaks down the division between argument and style established in ancient Greek and Roman thinkers (Leff 1990: 177). Notably, there is no trace of the Toulminian account of argument in the 1990 or 1994 papers. While argument garners some attention from Leff, his account begins to move away from Toulmin. It is important to note that Leff’s view of argument seems to be changing over time.

One objection to our interpretation of Leff’s view of argument would be that, in the first example, Leff is describing argument as a product, and in the second example argument as process. In the first example, seeing argument as product seems fairly straightforward. However, the language of the second example does not seem to support the idea that Leff is referring strictly to the process of argument. In this example, the orator

gives a public argument (product) that takes into account opposing reasons. Then, a separate practical skill is that the orator is able to argue on both sides of an issue. This ability (as process) contrasts with the first act of giving an argument (as product). The second example moves slightly away from the first definition by incorporating the role of the audience.

A final example is more subtle, but marks the full shift away from a Toulminian model of argument and into a model that is more rhetorical. In this passage,

The prophetic voice does not rise from the outside; it must arise from within the people whom it criticizes... . And what is required to be a prophet among white Americans? That is a role that King neither inherits by birth nor gains through any other easy access. *He must argue himself into it*, and the letter is wonderfully designed to achieve just this purpose. It constructs King as an agent who grounds his identity in the religious, intellectual, and political views on the American tribe... . King emerges from the letter not just as someone who can argue with a white audience on its own terms and [sic.] but as an agent who can elevate that audience by forcing it to acknowledge its sins of omission and by demanding consistency between its actions and its highest values. (Leff 2004: 387-388; emphasis added)

Here Leff characterizes argument as something that allows the arguer to gain access to a community that would otherwise prove difficult. Furthermore, an arguer is only able to argue with specific communities who already accept that arguer in certain important ways. This characterization of argument reflects the full rhetorical role of argument by showing how Martin Luther King Jr. was able to “argue himself into” being seen as part of a culture of white America, and as a person who can lift up white America. To do so requires all of the nuance of rhetorical argumentation, making himself present, establishing his *identity* in the eyes of an audience by appealing to knowledge and values that they can relate to. The Toulminian model of argument as product does not account for the complex relations that are needed to argue oneself into a role that one does not currently occupy. Furthermore, it extends past Johnson’s (2000) definition of argument, because, Martin Luther King Jr. need not anticipate objections; rather, he needs to re-shape *himself*, his *ethos*, in the minds of his audience. One might object here that we are over-analyzing Leff’s use of the word “argument”. However, Leff could have chosen a number of words or phrases to capture this process, “He must establish himself as...”, “He must make

himself present as...”, or a number of other sentences that draw on rhetorical theory. Instead, Leff chose, “He must argue himself into it...”. This marks a change in Leff’s idea of argument, where argumentation is itself rhetorical and fits with the overall theme that rhetoric, and now rhetorical argumentation, establishes agents.

The closing paper, “What is Rhetoric?”, delivered at the University of Windsor in 2009 and publicly available for the first time in this volume, fittingly pulls together the threads that weave throughout the collection, reminding us of the concerns and issues that occupied Michael Leff over his career, reiterating and emphasizing what he found important and looked to pass on: The merits of practice over theory, the richness of his humanism rooted in the tradition of Isocrates and Cicero, the value of decorum. When he arrives, via meandering insightful paths, at the question captured in his title, his reluctant answer (because his audience demands one) could stand as a description of Leff’s work itself: “the practice of adapting discourse to its purpose, or a theory of persuasion, or an aspect of cultural history, or a mode of ideological critique, or a condition of life” (480). This rich compendium of recurring, developing ideas captures all this and more. It makes present a generous thinker of character and insight and shows him working through questions of immediate and longstanding importance.

The editors are to be applauded for bringing the work of a major American practitioner (and theorist) to a wide audience. We might quibble about some of the exclusions and the infelicities that have accompanied the transitions from computer files to text. But with such a rich harvest to draw from, the choices must have been difficult, and there is no gainsaying the value of the organization of the papers into the five parts. Moreover, the Introduction makes mention of an accompanying website on which other Leff essays will be available. We look forward to its appearance. Finally, there are many occasions to lament the decision not to provide an index that would have allowed the reader to track terms and concepts throughout the book. Yet these omissions are insignificant against the value of having such important essays available in a single volume. Future students of rhetoric and argumentation should return to these essays again and again, always finding rewards for their efforts.

References

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