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The Unconsummated Flirtation:
Contextualist Approaches to Argument

James F. Klumpp
University of Maryland at College Park

Contextualist thought is the fastest growing intellectual phenomena of the late twentieth century. Contextualism is important to students of rhetoric and language because the power which contextualism grants to interpretation elevates rhetorical use of language to a central place in the intellectual process. As a result, contextualist theories dominate literary and rhetorical studies in America as well as literary studies on the continent of Europe. Despite the popularity of contextualist theories of language, however, rhetorical theories of argument have had a limited influence on the work. This seems odd and this paper is an attempt to explore the failure of rhetorical logic to penetrate these fecund theories.

Contextualist Rhetorics

Contextualism is a general pattern for building knowledge from experiential encounters with the world. The contextualist understands the human power of interpretation to be a central

creative element in the construction of meaning. Knowledge to a contextualist is organized from the encounters of text with context. Central to contextualist thought is the dialectic logic expressed in the text-context relationship. A text wills its context into significance, a selection of phenomena into a textured account of experience. The phenomena itself is, of course, available to the contextualist but meaning emerges only with the creation of the context in the textual act. Stephen Pepper has called the "historical event" the root metaphor of the contextualist thinker (232). By this he means that the intellectual force of contextualism lies in its ability to construct accounts which organize the meaning of events from their relationship to other events -- the historian's skill.

The contextualist is unconcerned with generalization (the present not the universal is the key to knowledge), with ideal forms (ideals and formal structures may be human inventions that can become part of the contexts but nothing more), and with the ultimate telos of change (change makes each successive moment contingent on the transformation of context into text anyway). The contextualist's truth lies in the power of a textual account of context to inform understanding. Understandings are enriched by other legitimate accounts which we may also call, as appropriate, true.

It is natural that theories of language, particularly theories of rhetoric should be contextualist. The power of the text to organize the world elevates the status of rhetoric. The

American move to contextualist theories has been led by Kenneth Burke. In the tradition of the American pragmatists Burke views rhetoric as the symbolic inducement to action. His Grammar of Motives generates a vocabulary for textualizing accounts of experience and argues the linkage between the facility for various interpretational strategies and identifiable philosophies. The entire body of his work traces the linkages between the interpretational strategies of language and cultural or social order.

Like Kenneth Burke, the continental contextualists are more likely to be read as critics of discourse than as theorists, yet their work defines theory. The critical theorists define a possible starting point for tracing the European movement. Certainly, through the work of Foucault and into the deconstructionists, the European movement has highlighted the power of text to structure social reality. Post-modernism with its localized notion of order dominates many areas of European intellectual life and is contextualist in its basic assumptions.

Among the divisions which sort contextualists, one of the more important is the distinction between the humanistic and social contextualists. The humanistic voice stresses the power of the individual to construct accounts of experience which give meaning to his/her life. These contextualists tend to see the social in terms of the opportunity for the individual to participate in communication which constructs public knowledge and guides public action.

The social voice, by contrast, stresses the emergence of public interpretation from the communication process. Significance follows this emergence of public interpretation from the various possible understandings. The emergent understanding is the central rhetorical accomplishment and individual interpretation attains its significance by its dialectical tension with the emergent knowledge. Although both theories -- humanistic and social -- locate the process of construal in language acts, the social more obviously makes the key act extra-mental.

The Flirtation

The history of the relationship between contextualists and theories of argument is a strange one. Generally, contextualists are not warm to logic, reason, and argument. Kenneth Burke deals only lightly with the subject in his early work and, in the last fifty years, has not concentrated at any length on the argumentative dimension. The post-modernists are even more strenuous in their objection to reason, declaring it the symbol of modernity.

Yet, central characteristics of contextualism practically demand a form of reasoning. First of all, contextualism -- unlike any of Pepper's other World Hypotheses -- derives meaning in individual novel acts of construal. Where other ways of thinking can call upon forms of thought or universal principles of organization, constructing order is the constant and

definitive problem for contextualism. Thus, the ordering of phenomena which we characteristically see as logic is central to contextualism.

There is an even more compelling necessity for argument in a complete contextualism, however: contextualism needs something like a rhetorical reason which accounts for the persuasive appeal of particular interpretations. Humanistic contextualists always must deal with the threat of solipsism in their way of construal. If the power of construal is an individual act, in what sense is it meaningful? Indeed, in what sense is its textuality significant? Once a social answer is posited, with textuality in the account, the concept of the appeal of the text becomes a necessary element to explaining the sociality. Social contextualists have even more obvious linkages with persuasive appeal. The emergence of socially authorized interpretation is a central tenet of their theory. Obviously, the transformation of individual accounts into socially authorized interpretations involves an element of appeal, if not of the speaker then certainly of the text itself. Thus, the sense of appeal that is at the heart of rhetorical argument becomes foremost. All contextualists work with a dispersive theory of interpretation. Thus, for all, the fact of coherence as humans act in their world requires that a concept of appeal be a central concept of text.

Indeed, contextualists show an awareness of these necessary elements to their theories. The concept of appeal is ever-present in Burke's work. Perhaps his most famous criticism,

"The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'," is built on the appeal of the German dictator. Foucault's concept of power includes the control which a discursive formation exerts over the freedom of interpretation. His work often features the power elites building rhetorical appeal into a particular interpretive framework. The work of the deconstructionists is overtly defined by their resistance to the rhetorical appeal of the texts which they take apart. Whether acknowledging the relationship or not, all contextualists flirt with rhetorical argument to achieve the social cohesive quality of textual interpretation.

The Barriers to Consummation

So why do the flirtatious contextualists still find rhetorical argument problematic? Perhaps the answer lies in the history of rhetorical logic that precedes the contextualist move.

Our understanding of rhetorical argument has developed from two other intellectual perspectives: perspectives Stephen Pepper calls "formism" and "mechanism." The formal approach rests on two basic assumptions. First, the Ramian division between dialectic and rhetoric, which isolates reason to dialectic, built the logic of formal argumentative analysis on a separation of substance from expression. The system of logic is then constructed: the referential relationship allows the movement from concrete instantiated meaning to the abstract ideal form, the mastered forms of argument can then be applied to evaluate the argument. The second assumption of formism values "reason"

as a way to evaluate the veracity of an argument. In this way, built into formal reason is a motive of perfection in which substantive ideals are sought.

Formal rhetorical logic reduces the conceptual separation of substance and expression to a methodological distinction, thus generating a framework of argument types and tests which permit the evaluation of arguments. The maintenance of the power to evaluate arguments affirms the second assumption: the perfecting motivation of the system.

In the main, by the 1980s, formal rhetorical logic had been replaced by the second understanding of rhetorical logic -- mechanistic logic -- which treats reason as a matter of attaining assent by auditors or an audience to propositional substance (Bettinghaus 1972; Perelman 1969). This logic rejects formal logic, by claiming a "more realistic" approach to argument, thus overtly rejecting the perfecting motive of formism. Perhaps it is better understood, however, as transforming the perfecting motive from a judgment resting on the relationship to ideal form to a judgment resting on effectiveness in persuasion. This approach to argument seeks to identify the linear relationship of particular strategies to successful persuasion. It is often supported with experimental methods of evaluating the comparative strength of various techniques. The intellectual move at the base of this rhetorical logic is to establish principles of effectiveness in argument which can then be matched to rhetorical purpose.

The failure to consummate the contextualist interest in rhetorical logic has really rested on two problems. First, many contextualists reduce the rich potential variety of logic and reason to only the formal model. They thus reject reason as an invention of the modern era, used to perpetuate the power of particular interests. This voice is loudest in the post-modern attacks on modernity. In fact, many of the subsequent attacks on post-modernism (Habermas, Philosophical 184-210) show the problem of having no concept of reason to complete the theory.

The second problem is the more interesting because the errors rest in the attempt to construct a contextualist reason rather than in using reason as a scapegoat. These attempts fail because they do not thoroughly transform the logics into the contextualist assumptions. Their surface adaptation of formal and mechanistic logic leave confusing voices which prevent the successful use of rhetorical logic in their project. To explore these much more serious attempts in more detail, I want to examine two specific instances of the problem: the work of Walter Fisher and Jürgen Habermas.

Fisher's Narrative Logic

Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm is an excellent example of a contextualist approach to rhetoric. The central figure of the theory -- the human as storyteller -- is obviously a restatement of Pepper's metaphor of the historical event and the central figure of contextualism. Fisher generates his paradigm

from the following presuppositions:

(1) Humans are essentially storytellers. (2) The paradigmatic mode of human decision making and communication is "good reasons," which vary in form among situations, genres, and media of communication. (3) The production and practice of good reasons are ruled by matters of history, biography, culture, and character along with the kinds of forces identified in the Frentz and Farrell language-action paradigm. (4) Rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings -- their inherent awareness of narrative probability, what constitutes a coherent story, and their constant habit of testing narrative fidelity, whether or not the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives. . . . (5) The world as we know it is a set of stories that must be chosen among in order for us to live life in a process of continual re-creation.

(64-65)

These presuppositions constitute a balanced characterization of contextualist thinking. Presupposition two declares the variety of human life, thus rejecting idealistic formism and regulated mechanism. Presupposition three may have too strong a verb -- "ruled" -- to permit the opening for the creation of the text, but presupposition five makes clear that ours is a world of flux in which re-creation is the strongest rhetorical force.

Presupposition four places the power of reason in the context of the textual act at the heart of contextualism. Thus, Fisher's logic seems potentially fruitful.

Within presupposition four, however, is a dangerous position that threatens to deny the power of narrative -- the move which sets up what Burke calls "a theory of knowledge" rather than "a theory of action" (Permanence 274). Fisher uses the term "awareness" to characterize human command of coherence and fidelity. Awareness can be treated formally as a mastery of the ideal or contextually as an expression of the act of textualizing something into significance. There also is the verb "testing" which can be formalist if it is contextualized in the perfecting motive, and contextualist if it is a part of the motive of constructing an account. So the question becomes: Can Fisher elaborate these concepts in contextualist directions or will he fall back into a formalism?

In truth, the answer is an ambivalent one. One of the tasks which Fisher assumes is the full elaboration of his paradigm. In the beginning of that project he commits himself to a "narrative rationality, a 'logic' intrinsic to the very idea of narrativity" (19). But around that commitment is an elaboration of the components of narrative logic as "norms," "assessments," and "principles." The terminology separates the evaluation of substance (Fisher invokes the formalists' separation of substance and expression in condemning Burkean dramatism for implying a "presentational standard" to which he presumably seeks a

substantial standard) from the organizational force of narrative. Fisher reduces coherence and fidelity from qualities enacted within narrative to "standards" known by the narrativizer and applied as s/he proceeds to narrativize.

The result of this direction of elaboration of the theory has been the criticism of Fisher that he fails to elaborate the character of the criteria that are entailed in narrative logic. The elaboration of the standards of coherence (47) become types of coherence rather than elaborations. Having established the expectation of standards, Fisher does not fulfill the expectations. The elaboration of standards of fidelity (47-48; 105-123) calls upon theories built fundamentally as formal (Ehninger and Brockriede's version of Toulmin) and mechanistic (Perelman) as the basis for these standards. Thus the criticism: "Where's the Beef?" The effort to rescue the theory with "good reasons," which still provides no criteria, creates a confusion that could be avoided with a treatment of rhetorical logic that does not ground itself in formal and mechanistic approaches.

There is another Fisher, however: the critic. Fisher promises us some treatments of discourse which enact his theory. An interesting thing happens in that project. When Fisher turns to a study of Ronald Reagan and to the coherence and fidelity of Reagan's character, Fisher becomes a storyteller (147-154). His text selects and shapes the context for his judgment in a way true to the quality of coherence and with an awareness of the fidelity of the story. Gone is the advice to borrow standards

from old rhetorical logics (with the exception of a brief and insignificant reference to "ethos") as Fisher constructs a logic of good reasons before our very eyes. Thus, Fisher the critic achieves a treatment of narrative logic by abandoning the vocabulary and strategies of Fisher the theorist. His treatment of argument in The Great Gatsby finds a quality of argument in the literary work and proceeds to contextualize that judgment in a way that textually constructs the quality into a significant dimension of the work. The point, of course, is that Fisher the critic is true to the "re-creative" power of narrative in a way that Fisher the elaborator of the theory is not. The unneeded translation of the forces which compel contextualism toward rhetorical argument into the formal demands of argument systems is missing in the criticism, with an illuminating account the result.

Jürgen Habermas

Habermas is a less clear case of a contextualist project. The work of A Theory of Communicative Action is most assuredly toward more normative structures of understanding. But the original formulation of Habermas' project, growing as it did from the Frankfurt school, was decidedly contextualist. Habermas' distinction between the rationalization of purposive-rational action systems and the rationalization of communicative action contrasted a mechanistic logic of control with a logic of less repressiveness and rigidity built on the basis of increasing role

distance and flexible application of norms. This would be discursive will formation through communication free of domination. (See particularly the treatment of this subject in Benhabib 50.) The social contextualism here is obvious. The argument empowers the voice to will social arrangements. "Free of domination" reads as an attack on the rigidity of norms in favor of constructed accounts of the domination that would destroy its power through demystification.

Of course, a social contextualist position requires most obviously a vocabulary for explaining the emergence of the social from communication. This is the problem that a rhetorical logic might provide. But Habermas' solution turned elsewhere. One development was toward the ideal speech act. Obviously, the key term of the phrase indicates the turn to a formism. Habermas, despairing of the failure to overcome the dominating rationality of purposive-rational control, instead posited the ideal process and began extracting the constituents of the norms which would yield his critique.

A second development in Habermas' work was to begin to abandon the theory/praxis relationship of contextualist thought for a more traditional view. A social theory critical of ideology can "identify the normative power built into the institutional system of a society only if it starts from the model of the suppression of generalizable interests and compares normative structures existing at a given time with the hypothetical state of a system of norms formed, ceteris paribus,

discursively" (Legitimation Crisis 113). Thus, Habermas turned to a formal norm-controlled analysis as the only hope to counter the power of norm-control. This became his formula for constructing "theory" and it is a form which abandons the dialectical relationship of theory and praxis for a traditional view that practice can be altered only when a theory is developed which can then intervene to correct it. Theory and practice are separated into sequential interaction in a way that a contextualist rejects.

Thus, Habermas abandons the contextualist logic of critique in favor of the search for a formal method of analysis.

Toward a Rhetorical Logic for Contextualism

A brief examination of the problem of contextualist logic does leave us with some claims that can direct work toward consummating the flirtatious relationship. First, it seems obvious that there is a compelling reason for contextualists to work with rhetorical logic. Rationality inheres in the text/context relationship. The transformation of context/text into meaning involves the willing of ratios among many qualities that constitute an important element of reason. But, perhaps, more important, the project of a contextualist rhetoric requires a concept of the dialectic between the individual will to text and the social reality of communication. Thus, a vocabulary for enacting relationships of qualities in an individual/social tension is needed, and rhetorical logic is such a vocabulary.

Second, some problems with past attempts to adapt rhetorical logic to the contextualist project emerge from this framework. Primary among these is dealing with the problem of "theory." Those working with rhetorical logic are accustomed to think of theory in formist or mechanistic terms. "Theory" means something different for the contextualist. Theory emerges from the text/context relationship as the willed linguistic expression of a particular account. Thus, the meaning of "theory" is more along the lines of "I have a theory that" The result is that a vocabulary does not need to be turned into concepts with an independent spread of time -- such as idealistic forms or universal assertions of relationship -- to be used again and again. The burden of vocabulary is to permit the exercise of textual expression to define meaning. Indeed, the spread of time in a vocabulary is contained within the assertion of text and needs no further conceptual assumptions. Contextualists who trade the theory/praxis dialectic for an interactional relationship of differentiated theory and practice will probably fail to benefit from rhetorical logic.

It seems less obvious, but probably fruitful to try first to construct a critical logic. Such a logic will not separate materiality from value but merge them in the dialectical relationship necessary to criticism. Fisher's argument for this perspective is eloquent and his exemplification of the power of the approach is striking. The logic of Fisher's presupposition of the power of text as the power of re-creation also suggests

that we follow this trail. Habermas' original project, following as it does from the critical theorists, would suggest the same search.

Overall, the effort to construct a rhetorical logic within contextualist rhetoric seems a necessary and important task if those rhetorics are to be satisfactory statements of rhetorical action.

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