

# ISSA Proceedings 2006 - The Relevance Of Intention In Argument Evaluation



## *Abstract*

*The paper discusses intention as a rhetorical key term and argues that a consideration of rhetor's intent should be maintained as relevant to both the production and critique of rhetorical discourse. It is argued that the fact that the critic usually has little or no access to the rhetor's mind does not render intention an irrelevant factor. Rather than allowing methodological difficulties to constrain critical inquiry, I suggest some ways in which the critic can incorporate the rhetor's intention in evaluating argumentation.*

Over the last decades, the notion of intentionality has been challenged from various theoretical perspectives within rhetoric and argumentation. For instance, some feministic rhetoricians have rejected intention as a key term in the definition of rhetoric, claiming that the rhetor's intent to persuade makes rhetoric an act of violence, oppression, and coercion. Likewise, but for different reasons, argumentation theorists associated with pragma-dialectic distance themselves from what they consider the critical pitfall of intention.

Although I share the common view that the definition of rhetoric cannot be reduced to matters of persuasion in a narrow sense, I nevertheless regard persuasion and persuasive discourse as pivotal to rhetoric. Furthermore, I maintain that rhetoric's most basic contribution to society lies precisely in its insistence that the impulse to persuade others is a constructive and valuable aspect of human symbolic interaction. In the first of the following three sections, I defend this view against the attack on persuasive intent. In the second section I turn to the pragma-dialectical view of the critical relevancy of the arguers intention. This discussion leads on to the third section in which I, via a presentation of an ethical standard for rhetorical argumentation, suggest how the arguers' intention remains central to rhetorical inquiry.

1. From her feministic point of view, Gearhart made the following allegation

against mainstream rhetoric: “To change other people or other entities is not in itself a violation. It is a fact of existence that we do so. The act of violence is in the *intention* to change others.” (Gearhart 1979, p. 196) In their proposal for an *Invitational Rhetoric*, Foss and Griffin (1995) adopted this view, although not quite as rigorously as Gearhart. **[i]**

I strongly oppose the distinction. Surely, the intention to change others can only be an act of violence if we assume that to change others always is against their interest and that persuasion occurs in situations where the rhetor has all the power and the audience no free will to make their own decision. But does not this assumption take us back to the “hypodermic” theory of communication that we all are supposed to have left behind us long ago?

Secondly, I oppose Gearhart’s distinction because of its general implications for rhetoric and democracy. Since the intent to change the environment and the minds of others is at the root of arguing it forces us to condemn argumentation and to exclude deliberative rhetoric from the field of legitimate rhetoric. **[ii]** Thus, in the end, to ban the intent to persuade is, in my mind, to undermine democracy. Thirdly, it is a simplification that the purpose of rhetoric should be to “change others”. The purpose of rhetorical communication is to effect change in public life – or defend *status quo* – and this involves influencing the minds of others. The intentions to do so may be good or bad, and the purpose may result in good or bad rhetoric – bad if it is oppressive.

Fourthly, making the intent to persuade *per se* an oppressive and immoral act leads language users and rhetorical criticism in the wrong direction. Whether rhetoric becomes an act of violence and dominance does not depend on the intention to change others. It depends primarily on the *means* you employ to persuade others. And instead of depriving humans of their right to seek to persuade or convince others as they think best, rhetoricians should advise debaters that it is more harmful to deny your intentions than openly admit them. For instance, politicians often do this, ostensibly wanting to *inform* the citizens although what they are actually doing is to persuade or convince. This arguably amounts to cheating with speech acts and is as problematic as aggressive or threatening argumentation, perhaps even worse because of its underhandedness.

2. The pragma-dialectical dismissal of intentionality is of another kind. It does not concern the morality of the arguer’s intention to persuade, but the critical *relevancy* of the arguer’s intention when evaluating argument. The pragma-

dialecticians distance themselves from the notion of intention for *methodological* reasons in order to avoid *psychologism* (van Eemeren et al. 1996, p. 276-277, Walton 1995, p. 272).

In connection with the *responsibility conditions* for argumentation, van Eemeren and Grootendorst emphasize that “the responsibility conditions do not imply that the speaker need always be sincere: He may be lying and think something quite different from what he says, but even then he is committed to what he has said and, consequently, the listener can hold him to his word.” And in the footnote they specify their point as follows: “The major consequence of the responsibility condition is that the speaker, because he is answerable for what he has said, may be deemed to act *as if he were sincere* - whether he actually is sincere or not. For our purposes, it is what the speaker can be held accountable to that counts, not what he privately thinks.” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992, p. 32)

The principle of *externalization* that van Eemeren and Grootendorst include in their pragma-dialectical research program has the same focus. In brief, *externalization* means that the critic of public argumentation must stick to what the speaker has uttered: “Whereas the motives people may have for holding a position might be different from the grounds they offer and accept in its defense, what they can be held committed to is not so much their actual position, but the position they have expressed in the discourse, whether directly or indirectly. [...] The study of argumentation should not concentrate on the psychological dispositions of the people involved in an argumentation, but on their externalized - or externalizable - commitments.” (van Eemeren et al. 1996, p. 276-277)

The same principle, as formulated here, also applies to rhetorical criticism in general. If, for instance, a politician during the election campaign makes a promise to preserve the program for early retirement (or expresses himself in a manner that makes voters entitled to understand his words as a promise), and then shortly after having won the election lets his government implement a cut in the said program, his explanations are irrelevant. It is no good, as the former Danish Prime minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen did in 1998, to say that people had misunderstood him the first time: He never meant what he said as a promise to make no reductions at all; if people had studied this or that statement by him and other leading social democrats they should have known that he only intended to secure the system, and words to that effect. In such a case, the critic is entitled to disregard later explanations and decide whether the rhetor actually made a promise or not on the basis of what was originally said in the campaign.

As long as it is a question of what people say or which speech act they perform, I agree that as a rule the rhetor's personal intent is irrelevant to the critic's interpretation. In this respect, rhetoricians primarily are concerned with intention as expressed in the artifact, and very often it would not be relevant or worthwhile to speculate further on the matter. However, I do find that sometimes it may be relevant to consider the author's own remarks on the intended meaning. This would typically be in cases of obscurity. An example could be the bewildering passage in *The New Rhetoric* that some readers have understood as Perelman's own view. I refer specifically to the sentence: "Argumentation addressed to a universal audience must convince the reader that the reasons adduced are of a compelling character, that they are self-evident, and possess an absolute and timeless validity, independent of local or historical contingencies." (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, p. 32) But, in retrospect Perelman expressly explains this as the point of view to which he was opposed and regrets to have "lead certain rhetorical readers to consider it as expressing [his] own ideas." (Perelman 1984, p. 190) So far, I have heard no scholar resort to the fallacy of intention, crying out: What Perelman intended to say is irrelevant!

You may dismiss this example as trivial: the authors simply did not express themselves clearly. However, the example illustrates a characteristic aspect of rhetoric that makes it natural to focus on intention. It concerns the productive dimension of rhetoric. When teaching public speaking and composition, or working as advisors in these areas, one acutely relevant question is: What do you intend to say? And next: How do you best design the speech or text so that your message comes across as intended?

One thing is the relevance of intention for interpreting what rhetors say, as in the Nyrup Rasmussen example. It is another thing if we next ask the question, essential to normative rhetoric: Was it an act of deception? When it comes to this question one cannot disregard the arguer's intention. According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst, the critic could censure Nyrup Rasmussen for not keeping his promise after the election. But was the promise all along only a trick to secure votes and get reelected? Such was the common Danish interpretation of Nyrup Rasmussen's statement and it caused an uproar among those who had voted for the social democrats because of his guaranties and who now felt deceived. If a critic were to reach the same conclusion, we confront a more serious offence than if Nyrup Rasmussen had expressed himself clumsily, or if he broke his promise afterwards because of a change of mind. Thus, the intentions of arguers are

relevant to evaluating the nature and gravity of their misdemeanor.

Walton, in *A Pragmatic Theory of Fallacy*, devotes a section to a nuanced discussion of the relevance of intention and deception to the definition of fallacies (Walton 1995, p. 269-272). He recognizes the question of the arguer's intent as a genuine problem, pointing out that fallacies often are used as a tactic of deception. He does, however, conclude that the arguer's intent to deceive is irrelevant in order to determine whether a fallacy has been committed. Prior to this, he has described a fallacy as "a very special and serious kind of error - not an intentional error or deliberate abuse of a technique, necessarily. Instead, it is defined as a misdirected execution - the use of a *tactic to bloc or prevent* legitimate goals of reasonable dialogue from being implemented." (Ibid. p. 259-260) I find this definition problematic, since the expression a tactic to bloc or prevent something implies an agent who argues intentionally. Nevertheless, Walton explicitly dismisses this implication as a confusion between the common goal of the discourse and the individual goal of the participants (Ibid. p. 272). This is an important distinction also from a rhetorical point of view but does not entail that the individual goal of rhetors can be deemed totally irrelevant to the critic's evaluation, as suggested in the Nystrup Rasmussen example.

3. The issue of intentionality of course depends on how we use the word. For some the concept is problematic because it connotes consciousness of one's own intentions. This is not how rhetoricians usually understand it. When I maintain intention as a key term in rhetoric, I do not hereby imply that rhetors necessarily have conscious intentions. This is often the case in typical rhetorical discourse, but not always. Rhetors may pursue a purpose with or without realizing the intention that motivates them, or they may be unaware or negligent of the purpose that can be applied to the situation. So, perhaps it would be more adequate to say that rhetorical discourse is *purposive* than *intentional*.

On the one hand, the attraction of theories that dismiss intentionality is that they give a clear cut solution to the problem that the critic usually does not know what goes on in the rhetor's mind. On the other hand, methodological difficulties must not dictate our understanding of how communication works: Communicators do have conscious or vague intentions, and audiences certainly attribute them to rhetors. The fact that the critic usually has little or no access to the rhetor's mind should not constrain critical inquiry in a way that totally disregards the rhetor's intention in evaluating argumentation. In many cases rhetorical critics do have

some available information to infer the arguer's intention. The Nyrup Rasmussen example again may serve as illustration. Ironically, his own explanations afterwards provided evidence suggesting that he did intend to deceive his voters. In the absence of new circumstances in the meantime, what other reason could he have had to not openly declare his willingness to accept some changes in the program for early retirement?

I consider a notion of rhetoric claiming that it does not matter if the rhetor is insincere or deceptive as untenable. Rather, the difference between legitimate and illegitimate rhetoric is of the utmost importance, and I am especially interested in what distinguishes the manipulative persuader from the rhetor who argues decently.

In our Danish textbook - in English *Practical Argumentation* - my colleague Merete Onsberg and I contemplate criteria for *good and bad* argumentation (Jørgensen and Onsberg 1999, chapter 6). We introduce a concept to evaluate argumentation ethically, a concept that has proven useful to many students in Denmark. The Danish term is the same word as Redlichkeit in German. I have had some difficulty finding the proper English translation. I have considered *honesty, probity, uprightness, reliability, and decency*, but have chosen *fairness* as the most fitting translation.

The normative standard of *fairness* concerns rhetor, the fairness of the argumentation depending primarily on the sender's *attitude towards the receiver*. We define *unfair* argumentation as argumentation in which the rhetor attempts to win the audience's adherence by *misleading* them. The unfair arguer abuses his privilege as sender, for instance preying on the audience's lacking ability to fully understand the line of argument. The standard allows evaluation by degrees, i.e., the rhetor may argue more or less fairly, and a breach of fairness may be more or less grave. The gravity is relative to the symmetry or asymmetry in the interaction.

If the interaction is symmetric, i.e., if the participants are equal in regard to competence, knowledge or power, they share the responsibility, and the audience that accepts unfair argument must also share the blame. Likewise, in formal debates, each debater's obligation to produce fair argumentation is lessened, since the allotment of roles delegates part of the argumentative burden to the other debater. After all, the counsel for the defense cannot be blamed for withholding the arguments of the prosecution.

In asymmetric situations it is possible for rhetors to exploit the unequal relation, to use it to their own advantage and gain the audience's adherence by deceitful means. If, for instance, the arguer deliberately suppresses information that would prevent the audience from being persuaded, this is unfair arguing. The opportunity to seduce or manipulate the audience increases with the asymmetry. Since rhetorical situations seldom are absolutely symmetric, there is usually reason to look for unfair argumentation. A violation of the fairness standard is grave if the rhetor clearly misleads the audience on purpose, an act of *retrickery* as Booth called it (Booth 2004, 2005). And when it works, unfair argumentation becomes 'dangerous rhetoric'. Then we can talk of 'demagogy' etc.

We distinguish between three categories of unfair argumentation, often overlapping, consisting in persuasion by means of *lying*, *suppression*, and *distortion*. All three must be applied with due respect for the specific situation of the artifact.

*Lies* are always unfair - apart from 'white lies' with no evil intent. Lying concerns both facts and opinions. The latter is the case, when the arguers parade an opinion as their own. In other words, they express an opinion that they do not share themselves, because they reckon it expedient in relation to the audience. An unfair lie may in certain situations be deemed a minor offence or even acceptable, if dictated by situational constraints.

*Suppression* is only unfair if the arguer deliberately omits something because he or she feels sure that it would be important to the audience and would prevent them from being persuaded. Since typical rhetorical situations are characterized by uncertainty and a shortage of time, arguers have to select among their arguments, even the relevant ones, and hence cannot be accused on this account, unless they hold something back in order to deceive.

Distortion consists in a manipulation of proportion or relevance. Of the three kinds of unfairness, distortion is the subtlest - and hence probably the most common kind. A downright lie is often too risky for the arguers themselves; to suppress something is often no use; but in the case of a distortion it is often difficult to hold arguers to their word. We distinguish between three kinds of distortion: They can be done through *exaggeration*, *simplification*, and *substitution*.

Distortion by *exaggeration* must not be confused with *hyperbole*. In the figure of

style the exaggeration is to be understood as such by the audience, whereas this is not the case in unfair exaggerations.

The typical example of distortion by *simplification* is the presentation of complex issues as questions of either-or, of black and white. Another is hasty generalization. Under the heading of distortion by *substitution* we find irrelevant direct ad hominem arguments and *ignoratio elenchi*, where the arguer in bad faith shifts the issue at hand to an irrelevant point.

*Scapegoat* arguments are a wellknown strategy associated with infamous arguing. Such arguments form a special type of unfair argumentation by distortion, including all three kinds: In trying to solve complex problems in a community by blaming a person, minority group or institution, the argument type includes the elements of substituting one problem with another, of simplifying the real problem, and of exaggerating a problem with the person, group or institution.

Discourse may be good or bad rhetoric for many reasons: the content boring, the arguments weak or unclear, the information incorrect, the language poor etc. The standard of fairness is only one of the various criteria that the critic can apply in evaluating rhetorical discourse from a normative point of view.

One might object to our definition of fairness that it is not the arguer's intent to mislead that counts, but whether the discourse is misleading. In fact, this objection has been raised in a Danish context (Foght Mikkelsen 2002). Our main reasons to maintain the focus on the arguer are the following.

The issue of ethical argumentative conduct requires a human agent. To say that the discourse misleads or manipulates the audience is a metonymy. Only humans can do this. Our next point is that you cannot accuse arguers of manipulative and deceptive rhetoric if they for instance pass on information as facts that later on turns out to be untrue. The critic can only evaluate the argumentation as unfair if the rhetor *in the situation* speaks against his better knowledge - or is in a position and assumes an authority where he ought to have acquired sufficient knowledge (Jørgensen 2000). We may all happen to say something wrong under various mitigating circumstances. This does not make it good rhetoric, but you can only be accused of unfairness if you act in bad faith. Thus, the standard of fairness is consistent with Perelman's theory of the universal audience when he says that he manages "to distinguish manipulative discourse from that which addresses itself to reason, conceived as universal audience, and which *cannot be deceptive*



(*although it might be mistaken*).” (Perelman 1984, p. 194, emphasis added) The same idea – that the intent to mislead is the decisive distinguishing factor between fair and unfair argumentation – is present in Aristotle’s Rhetoric when he points out that “the deliberate choice [*proairesis*] [of specious arguments]” separates speakers within the field of rhetoric, whereas it separates the sophist from the dialectician and their respective fields. (1355a, Kennedy’s translation 1991, I.1.14.)

A related reason to maintain the focus on the arguer is our reluctance to cut the line between rhetor and the rhetorical product, between arguers and the arguments they use. A responsible rhetoric must insist that rhetors are accountable for what they say and how they argue. It is not enough to keep your word; we also expect you to mean what you say. The whole lesson of the rhetorical notions of *ethos* and *pistis* comes down to this demand. Especially in contemporary public address, the discourse is often a concoction of several senders, making it difficult to place the responsibility. In the evaluation, rhetorical critics of course must take such complexities into consideration. While doing so, the critic must resist the tendency to let the distribution of responsibility result in the dissolving of the principle that humans are responsible for their rhetorical acts. The standard of fairness is suggested as a tool to secure this principle.

In conclusion, let me sum up my views of intention and rhetoric. I have not said that the private intentions of rhetors are the main object of rhetoric. I have said that intentionality in communication is a main focus in the study of rhetoric. Rhetoricians investigate how to implement intended meanings in discourse according to the purpose in specific situations and, ditto, how to evaluate discourse. Rhetorical criticism is mainly concerned with internal features of the rhetorical artifact, but external factors of the communication are always relevant to the interpretation. Among these the known or assumed intention of the rhetor is a significant aspect for the critic to deal with. And finally, we cannot distinguish good rhetoric from manipulative rhetoric without contemplating rhetor’s intention.

## NOTES

**[i]** On the further controversy, see especially Fulkerson 1996, Condit 1997, Foss, Griffin & Foss 1997.

**[ii]** For a fuller discussion in defense of argumentation in rhetoric and its teaching tradition, see Fulkerson 1996.

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