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Abstract

The thesis that rhetoric is epistemic has gained widespread acceptance and has influenced rhetorical theory. The thesis suggests that argumentative justification in rhetorical contexts is fundamentally epistemic. Unfortunately, however, much of the literature developing the thesis has employed vague or inconsistent definitions of key terms, resulting in theoretical errors and needless complications. This essay clarifies the definitions of “rhetoric,” “knowledge,” and “certainty,” showing how the notion that rhetoric is epistemic might be developed in a clearer and more useful way.

What Do You *Mean*, Rhetoric is Epistemic?

In 1967, Robert L. Scott advocated that “rhetoric is epistemic.”¹ This concept has enriched the work of rhetorical theorists and critics. Scott’s essay is founded in a concept of argumentative justification in rhetoric, viewed as an alternative to analytic logic. Other writers, including Brummett,² Railsback,³ and Cherwitz and Hikins,⁴ have offered variations on Scott’s theme. The thesis that rhetoric is epistemic has been controversial, however, and from the tone of the debate one may draw two conclusions: (1) many rhetorical theorists feel that Scott was on to something important and, (2) the thesis as it has been developed is flawed. Much of the dispute centers on what the thesis means. These discussions have not yet adequately clarified that issue.

The philosopher’s most fundamental obligation is to define terms with care. It is in precisely this respect that the rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists have fallen short. Some of the key terms in this literature include “rhetoric,” “knowledge,” “certainty,” and “truth.” In too many cases, the writers on rhetorical epistemology have not defined their key terms at all. In other cases, their definitions are inadequate or inconsistent. This essay undertakes to sort out the most important definitional problems, which center on the rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists’ habit of equivocating about the meanings of “rhetoric” and “certainty.” The result makes it possible to *endorse the validity of Scott’s essentially ethical conclusions*, while *dismissing a number of unnecessary complexities* in the arguments made by rhetoric-as-epistemic theorists. Finally, a few alternatives that might lead to more robust foundations for the rhetoric-as-epistemic thesis are suggested.

In 1978, after reviewing four distinct interpretations of the claim that rhetoric is epistemic, Leff concluded that clarification of what that claim means “deserves more disciplined treatment than it has received in the recent literature.”⁵ The same could still be said. After some thirty years of active research and speculation on the topic, one now sees fewer publications specifically advocating that rhetoric is epistemic. The distinguished rhetorical theorist Barry Brummett has declared the thesis deceased.⁶

All the same, textbook authors treat the thesis as a given, despite their tendency to interpret it in wildly different ways. Foss, for example, puts forward a view that “in the field of communication, the idea that rhetoric creates reality is known as the notion that rhetoric is epistemic, which simply means that rhetoric creates knowledge; *epistemology* is the study of the origin and nature of knowledge” (emphasis in the original).⁷ This version of the thesis, claiming that rhetoric actually “creates reality,” might be more ontological than it is epistemic.⁸ Herrick takes a dialectical view that “through rhetorical interaction, people come to accept some ideas as true and to reject others as false. Thus, rhetoric’s epistemic function in society can be seen in some ways to be a result of its benefit of testing ideas.” Herrick continues that “once an idea has been tested thoroughly by a group, community, and society, it becomes part of what these groups take to be knowledge.”⁹ Herrick contrasts this with the rejected view that “knowledge is all objective in nature and comes to us by way of direct experience or education.”¹⁰ Both Herrick and Foss offer interesting theses, and both attribute their views to Scott, but their views are obviously very different. There can be no surer evidence of the failure to use terms precisely.

Brummett attributes the demise of rhetoric-is-epistemic research to the failure of critics to employ the idea in rhetorical criticism.¹¹ Brummett might be right to the extent that much of the rhetoric-is-epistemic literature is indeed exceptionally abstract. Specific discussions might clarify some issues. Nonetheless, some notable rhetorical critics have indeed employed a concept that rhetoric is epistemic.¹² The issues remain unclear. Furthermore, rhetorical criticism *per se* cannot clarify the meanings of theoretical terms. More likely, one sees less and less published research about the thesis that rhetoric is epistemic precisely because the thesis has not been laid out clearly enough.

On the one hand, rhetorical theorists sometimes lose patience with what they perceive to be the overly technical arguments of philosophers. On the other hand, much of what follows might strike a philosopher as rather straightforward, boilerplate philosophy. In that context, my only excuses for offering this essay are these: (1) in claiming that rhetoric is epistemic, rhetoricians have walked onto Plato's playground and must expect to play by Plato's rules (that Athenian always was a stickler for definitions), and, (2), if the rhetoric-is-epistemic thesis in its present forms succumbs easily to boilerplate philosophy, that cannot be a good sign.

This essay focuses on the positions laid out by Scott and by Cherwitz and Hikins, for these have been by far the most influential versions of the viewpoint. Scott deserves credit for introducing the thesis that rhetoric as epistemic.¹³ Scott proposed what was in 1967 a new, radical way to understand rhetoric. It is in the nature of the first exposition of a new idea that the details may await clarification. Cherwitz and Hikins' work deserves attention not because they do an unusually poor job of offering definitions, but because

they have done by far the most thorough job of doing so. Their view differs from Scott's in important ways, but the definitional issues that they confront are very similar.

“Certainty”

Scott's articles on viewing rhetoric as epistemic work from a perceived relationship between certainty and knowledge.¹⁴ This raises a host of definitional questions. First, what is certainty? Second, what is the definitional relationship between knowledge and certainty? Most of what Scott has to say, indeed, the heart of his argument, trades on an equivocation between two meanings of “certainty.” Furthermore, he seems to assume, without argument, that certainty is part of the traditional definition of knowledge. Let us take up the first issue first.

“Certainty” can be objective or subjective in its meaning.¹⁵ One might say, “It is certain that a Republican will be president in the year 2025.” This is a claim for objective certainty. One might instead state that “I feel certain that a Republican will be president in 2025,” which refers more to my state of mind than it does to who will actually be president. The first statement entails that a Republican will be president in 2025; the second does not. I am not making any claim about what things, if any, are objectively certain; I am just explaining two meanings that the word “certainty” has in everyday use.

It is easy to think of circumstances under which one can have either kind of certainty without the other. To illustrate: perhaps, a mathematical formula is certainly true (in the objective sense), even though no mathematician as yet has completed a proof and knows that it is certain. It is also possible to feel completely certain about something without its being true, or even plausible. I have myself felt completely certain about matters on which events eventually proved me wrong.¹⁶

Scott does not define “certainty,” nor does he choose between these two meanings. Instead, he seems to slide from a subjective sense of certainty to an objective sense of certainty. For example, during his key argument, Scott states that “the question may be posed, ‘What do you mean by *certain*?’ To say, ‘I am certain that the sun will rise tomorrow,’ may be to make a common statement which will probably not elicit argument, unless one is engaged in an epistemological discussion.”¹⁷ This represents a subjective sense of “certainty,” that is, that certainty is a state of mind. A few sentences later, however, Scott asserts that “the only sorts of arguments which will answer the demands of certainty made in epistemological speculation are those arguments which Toulmin calls analytic.”¹⁸ This clearly implies objective certainty, one for which ironclad (i.e., analytic) proof is supposedly adduced. The conclusion of the present essay suggests that *subjective*, not *objective*, certainty is central to Scott’s theory. Nonetheless, Scott’s argument is fundamentally against objective certainty. Scott’s argument against the concept of certainty immediately short-circuits because it is founded on this equivocation.

In a later essay, Scott writes that “When reason leads to certainties, people no longer have a reason to reason with one another, for surely those who lack certainty, lack reason.”¹⁹ This argument implies that people who believe that they have a right to be certain will treat others wrongly. Nonetheless, reason of extraordinary quality would, in principle, seem to lead to objective certainty, which is something else. So, Scott’s real argument (freed from an ambiguous concept of certainty) should be something like, “People who have such confidence in their ability to reason that that cannot see the possibility of being in error, will no longer perceive a reason to reason with one another . . .” This is a worthwhile point, to which this essay will return.

Furthermore, Scott's essay leads us to the critical question of defining knowledge. Is certainty, whether subjective or objective, part of his definition of knowledge? Is certainty essential to knowledge? Does Scott believe that traditional theories of knowledge require a concept of certainty, which can be evaded only by viewing rhetoric as epistemic?

Ayer states that the conditions "for knowing that something is the case are first that what one is said to know be true, secondly that one be sure of it, and thirdly that one should have the right to be sure."²⁰ Therefore, for Ayer, one must feel subjectively certain that something is true for one to know it. However, Alston has argued convincingly that this kind of thinking represents a level confusion fallacy, in that for one to know something does not logically require that one is sure of it: for example, to say "Pat knows that *p* is true" means one thing, and "Pat knows that s/he knows that *p* is true" means something else. It is conceivable that I could know something without knowing that I know it, in which case I have knowledge, but might have no subjective sense of certainty.²¹ Fewer post-World War II philosophers, including the analytic philosophers against whom Scott's essay appears to be directed, seem to believe that certainty in either sense is a defining condition of knowledge. In any case, there has been a quite a lively debate on the question, and Scott assumes with little argument that epistemologists require that knowledge be certain in some sense or other.

Cherwitz and Hikins distinguish more carefully between the two meanings of "certainty," but as their study progresses they, too, equivocate between the two.²² Like Scott, they seem to assume that some form of certainty, or near-certainty, is necessary for the traditional accounts of knowledge. However, they confuse the issue to the detriment

of their position: “we need next to deal with *how* one can become certain that he or she has attained knowledge on an issue. . . . we set the ultimate, human standard for certainty at the fullest humanly possible level of confidence in beliefs.” This plainly states that *subjective* certainty is a necessary condition for knowledge. Yet, a page later, one finds them talking about certainty as if it is based on justification: “Although we cannot say with certainty what precise level of justification *any* proposition must have, we are confident that in such cases [as in certain of their examples] the requisite level *has* been reached, and the propositions stand as *knowledge*”²³ (emphasis in the original). Thus, they slide without an argument from a claim about *feeling* certain to one about being *justified* in being certain. This is a straightforward equivocation between the two meanings of certainty.

This is unfortunate for their theory, since viewing rhetoric as epistemic seemingly implies that there is a justificatory quality of some kind in rhetorical processes. Any argument for that claim short-circuits when it is founded on using a key term in more than one sense. It is, obviously, much easier to show that rhetoric can increase our feeling that we are certain (which, I think, Cherwitz and Hikins demonstrate throughout their book) than it is to show that it justifies our beliefs.

“Rhetoric”

Well, of course, all rhetorical theories are about rhetoric, so one takes the meaning of the word “rhetoric” for granted. Furthermore, rhetoricians have long shown a fondness for poetic definitions, like defining rhetoric as “the *rationale of informative and suatory discourse*” (emphasis in the original).²⁴ If we want to be clear, however, we need a more precise definition.

The root of “rhetoric” is “*rhē-*”, which in Greek signifies speech.²⁵ To the ancient Greeks, rhetoric was public speaking. Socrates asked Gorgias to define what his art was, and Gorgias defined it first as the ability to convince one’s listeners in the law courts and public assemblies, and then quickly agreed with Socrates that rhetoric is persuasion.²⁶ Over the centuries, and most particularly under the inspiration of Kenneth Burke, the study of rhetoric has come to include all persuasive communication, including written and nonverbal communication. According to Campbell, for example, “rhetoric is the study of what is persuasive.”²⁷ An essay of which Scott is a co-author implies a similar point, claiming that “the point made by Scott’s and Farrell’s writings is that the practice of rhetoric is epistemic (i.e., knowledge-producing) because we must be persuaded of our beliefs.”²⁸

When theorists say that rhetoric is epistemic, do they mean that *persuasion* has an epistemic quality? Do they mean to distinguish communication that is persuasive, or will they allow any communication to count as rhetoric? How broad, or how narrow, a conception of rhetoric is necessary in order to make sense of the claim that rhetoric is epistemic?

Many rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists operate with a very broad definition of rhetoric. This is troublesome. It might be hard to establish a significant epistemic role for set-piece persuasive speeches, but much easier to establish an epistemic role for rhetoric if rhetoric is conceived more largely. In a 1973 article, Scott suggests that any definition of rhetoric will be inadequate.²⁹ In a 2000 essay, Scott offers the definition that “Rhetoric is the possibility of bringing reason together with passion so that in action humans may civilize themselves.”³⁰ This is interesting, although it fits into the category of poetic

definitions. Cherwitz and Hikins, noting the importance of avoiding ambiguity, define rhetoric as “*description of reality through language*” (emphasis in the original).³¹ This expansive definition facilitates their argument that rhetoric is epistemic, for some epistemic function can surely be found for describing reality through language. As long as they work with this definition, they do not need to establish that persuasive communication is epistemic, for example, which would be a more difficult task.³² Railsback’s approach to seeing rhetoric as epistemic also works with a very broad conception of rhetoric: “Rhetoric thus mediates the relationship between language and external material conditions.” She implies both persuasive and non-persuasive aspects for rhetoric.³³

However, the broader the definition of rhetoric, the less interesting the claim that rhetoric is epistemic becomes.³⁴ If I could provide evidence that public speaking is fundamentally epistemic, this would be controversial, even implausible, but interesting. To claim that persuasive communication is epistemic would be nearly as interesting, and, if there is anything worthwhile to the claim that rhetoric is epistemic, this would, in my opinion, be the definition of rhetoric to use. If, however, one claims that rhetoric includes all language use, then all one has to prove to establish that rhetoric is epistemic is that language has an epistemic function. This could still be controversial (one question that ought to come up is whether a small child who lacks language also lacks the ability to know), yet it is an inherently less interesting claim. If one can by definition substitute the term “language use” for “rhetoric,” if all that a rhetoric-as-epistemic theorist means is that language use has an epistemic function, it is difficult to understand what the big fuss is about. The claim is too nearly obvious, too mundane, to justify so much study of the

topic. To say that “rhetoric” means “describing reality through language” is still a very broad definition of rhetoric. (It is also a technical use of the word “rhetoric,” one not well supported by everyday use of the term by educated, reflective non-specialists. Many uses of language to describe reality do not strike me as especially rhetorical, e.g., the rhetorical aspects of “Your telephone is ringing,” “There are dandelions in my lawn,” or “Yow, I hit my thumb” seem to me to be relatively unimportant.) In order for the claim that rhetoric is epistemic to be clear, one would hope for a definition that is specific enough to yield a discussion that makes worthwhile claims.

The Gettier Problem

Rhetoric-is-epistemic theories seem to assume that knowledge must be justified belief, and that the justification can, should, or must be rhetorical. Cherwitz and Hikins, for example, define knowledge as requiring “(1) truth, (2) belief, and (3) justification.” They cite, among others, a statement of Butchvarov that “equates knowledge with ‘true belief based on sufficient evidence.’”³⁵

Other rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists are not so careful to define knowledge, but they often seem to operate with an implied conception that knowledge is justified true belief. A basic idea behind viewing rhetoric as epistemic is to argue that justification has a rhetorical element. Scott, for example, repeatedly discusses issues of justification. Similarly, Railsback states that “consensus must be used as our primary indicator of the most true characterizations of the time.” She continues that “Consensus arises from the processes of inquiry and persuasion, and serves as the basis for future inquiry.”³⁶ If justification is not a defining quality of knowledge, that entire approach never gets started.

Lurking behind this is a problem posed in one of the most influential short essays ever published in a philosophy journal, Edmund Gettier's "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"³⁷ A by-product of Gettier's argument is to question the assumptions behind many of the familiar conceptions of rhetoric as epistemic. The traditional definitions of knowledge typically take the form that a person X knows something p if X believes p , if p is true, and if X is justified in believing p with a justification of sufficient rigor. Plato appears to endorse such a definition in the *Theaetetus*.³⁸ Ayer's definition quoted above also falls into this category. Since rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists are exploring the relationship between knowledge and rhetorical justification, their theories tend to be steeped in a similar conception of knowledge. Gettier argues that the traditional definitions fail because they do not constitute sufficient conditions for knowing something. Because of Gettier's argument, the conceptual relationship between knowledge and justification seems to be extremely problematic.

Gettier assumes, first, that it is possible to be justified in believing something that is not true. Second, Gettier assumes that if one is justified in believing one proposition, and then deduces a second proposition from the first, that one is justified in believing the second proposition. There seems to be no reason that rhetoricians should object to either of these assumptions.

Consider the following Gettier-type example. A political speaker sees that an election's results have been posted, and that the election officials have declared that candidate Jill Smith has received 2,220 votes, and that candidate Harry Early has received only 889 votes. The election officials have always been reliable in the past. The speaker concludes that Smith is the winner and, indeed, so announces in a speech.

Unfortunately, unknown to the speaker, the election officials had, by mistake, counted the ballots from a different jurisdiction entirely. (If a jurisdiction uses the punch-card ballots that were popular in the United States as of this writing, which contain little written information, such a slip-up could happen.) When the right ballots are obtained a few days later, it turns out that Smith received 2,001 votes, and that Early received 720 votes.

The speaker's belief that Smith won the election was true. It was also justified. Nonetheless, the speaker did not know that Smith was the winner. Only by chance was the speaker's belief true. Because of problems such as this, Gettier concludes that a belief can be true and justified, and yet not be knowledge.

Gettier's article has inspired a prodigious literature. At first glance, it seems that it should be easy to add a fourth condition of knowledge to the traditional definition that would rule out such accidental cases of justified true belief. Unfortunately, to this date, no such fourth condition has earned general acceptance. All of the proposed fourth conditions (one of which is mentioned by Cherwitz and Hikins; see below) have been refuted, usually rather easily, by various counterexamples.

A second solution to the Gettier problem is to require that knowledge be based entirely on true premises.³⁹ As Lehrer has pointed out, this very rigid condition would rule out much of what we would like to say we know.⁴⁰ An example of this might be the following: a lawyer argues that her client, Mr. Jenkins, is innocent of murder. Her client has an excellent alibi, and the client's fingerprints do not match those of the murderer. She so pleads to a jury. She and the jury both conclude that Mr. Jenkins is innocent. Mr. Jenkins actually is completely innocent; however, his alibi later turns out to have been based on mistaken identity. Nonetheless, the fingerprints still provide excellent proof of

his innocence. I would like to be able to say that the lawyer and jury know that Mr. Jenkins is innocent, but if I require that knowledge be based entirely on true premises, I cannot. Any attempt to make knowledge as strict as that seems unsettling, since requiring that all of the premises for a knowledge claim must be true rules out so much. One cannot easily imagine conducting a debate about a public policy issue, for example, if one is held to so unrealistically high a standard for one's knowledge claims. Furthermore, such an approach would defeat one of Scott's original purposes, which was to free knowledge from unreasonable standards.

A third solution to the Gettier problem, proposed by Butchvarov, is to require that all justification for knowledge be ironclad, to eliminate all possibility of mistake.⁴¹ However, surely no rhetorical theorist would wish to define knowledge in such rigorous terms that very few beliefs can qualify as knowledge.⁴²

Gettier's objection vitiates Cherwitz and Hikins' theory, since they explicitly trade on the definition of knowledge as justified true belief. Referring to Gettier's argument, Cherwitz and Hikins cite Lehrer's repair as preserving "the three criteria largely intact."⁴³ This seems doubtful. Lehrer's definition of knowledge in the cited reference is as follows: "in addition to having a completely justified true belief that P, the following fourth condition must be satisfied when a man knows that P: for any false statement F, X would be able to completely justify his belief that P even if he were to suppose, for the sake of argument, that F is false."⁴⁴ It is difficult to grasp how this complex repair retains "the three criteria largely intact."

Furthermore, Lehrer's fourth condition succumbs to arguments of the "barn county" family, which deal with beliefs that are founded on a pattern of deception.⁴⁵

Suppose that I go to the bank, where I have done business for years, to check on the balance of my savings account. The bank and the tellers have always been flawlessly accurate. Today, however, the teller is planning an embezzlement scheme and is lying to her customers about their balances to further her criminal plan. My own account contains only \$45.98, not enough for her to bother embezzling, so she tells me, alone among all of her customers, the truth. Based on her statement, I truly believe that my account has \$45.98, and my belief is justified, but I do not know that my balance is \$45.98 because this is true only by accident. Yet, my belief rests on no false statements and therefore satisfies Lehrer's tests. Therefore, even Lehrer's complex repair does not salvage the conception of knowledge as justified true belief.

Early in their study, Cherwitz and Hikins argue that justification must be both "relevant" and "sufficient."⁴⁶ Near the end of their study, however, they argue that the justification must be based on "sufficient evidence to guarantee that knowledge has been attained with the fullest humanly possible certainty."⁴⁷ This is not enough to counter Gettier's problem, since the "fullest humanly possible certainty" does not eliminate the chance of error. If they intend to require ironclad ("sufficient") justification to lie behind a belief in order for it to count as knowledge, then they would encounter the objections to that thesis discussed above. Actually, in either case, they come close enough that their definition restricts the realm of human knowledge considerably. Cherwitz' and Hikins' definition is thus not strong enough to avoid Gettier problems, but it is, unfortunately, strong enough to rule out many of our everyday claims to knowledge.

Interestingly, Railsback claims to perceive a trend in the rhetoric-is-epistemic literature to move away "from the philosophical definition of knowledge as 'justified true

belief' to a formulation which indicates that truth itself is 'warranted assertability.'" She cites to this effect a 1977 essay by McKerrow, which she holds to be compatible with her own view, which is based on the "bounded network theory of language."⁴⁸ In the cited essay, McKerrow argues that an argument is valid "if, and only if, it serves as a pragmatic justification for the adoption of a belief."⁴⁹ Now, on Railsback's account, Gettier problems (or worse) would be hard to avoid, since McKerrow clearly states that warranted assertability does not require ironclad justification. Indeed, McKerrow distinguishes that "arguments *justify* rather than *verify* their claims" (emphasis in the original).⁵⁰ Since "verify" by definition means to discover that something is true, there is clearly something here other than a claim that rhetoric is epistemic.

Although McKerrow discusses "rhetorical validity" as justification, he does not claim in the 1977 essay that a rhetorically valid argument produces either knowledge or truth. Thus, McKerrow does not try to define *knowledge* rhetorically; he is instead defining *validity*. He carefully avoids any claim that rhetorical arguments entail truth, and thus avoids the Gettier problem entirely. Such a decoupling of justification from truth and knowledge may in fact be the most practical solution to the Gettier problem. This essay's conclusion returns to such a theme.

Clarifying the Definitions

It is not clear that the thesis that rhetoric is epistemic is dead, although it most certainly has not been adequately formulated. Fixing the definitions can lead to a great deal of progress.

First, for the reasons above, rhetoric must be defined narrowly enough to produce an interesting discussion. One of the oldest and most common definitions of rhetoric is

“the art of persuasion.” Such a definition can lead to an interesting discussion. Defining rhetoric more broadly simply legislates an epistemic role for rhetoric by fiat; such an approach lacks interest. The question of significance to rhetorical theory is whether persuasion has an epistemic role, and that is the question that theorists should investigate.

Second, the discussion should dispense with the issue of certainty. The current philosophical literature presents no reason that *subjective* certainty is a necessary component of knowledge. Furthermore, rhetoricians in a line reaching long before Scott’s time have never shown any inclination to require objective certainty. Rhetoricians obviously do not want to maintain that rhetoric is a source of knowledge, and then claim that the matters about which people engage in rhetoric are unknowable. The current philosophical literature has not taken a strong stance in favor of requiring knowledge to be either objectively or subjectively certain, so the issue may (through no fault of Scott’s, who wrote in 1967) have become a red herring.

Two Ideas for a Rhetorical Epistemology

It might be useful to sketch out a few different routes that rhetorical theorists could choose while defining terms carefully.

There may be no need to examine the epistemological question at all. Scott’s insight may be, for the most part, ethical and personal. Nonetheless, many rhetorical theorists find the idea that rhetoric is epistemic intriguing. Furthermore, it is difficult to sympathize with Brummett’s pronouncement that the thesis that rhetoric is epistemic is dead. This essay will briefly suggest two avenues that rhetorical theorists could follow. Either of these approaches would make it possible to discuss how rhetoric is epistemic without encountering Gettier problems or relying on unclear conceptions of certainty.

One route that rhetoric-as-epistemic theorists could take is to adopt Alston's view that, in the normal course of life, our beliefs are justified if formed by our normal doxastic; i.e., belief-producing, practices. Alston does not imply an analytic connection between knowledge and justification. He simply argues that there is a presumption in favor of the normal ways in which we come to learn and believe things. Alston has a sense of community in mind, as he does not claim that any one individual's doxastic practices are necessarily reasonable. Rather, his point is that there is a presumption in favor of accepted doxastic practices.⁵¹

Alston's view is amenable to what rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists have in mind. Indeed, there is an obvious relationship between Alston's suggestion and Scott's stress on the epistemic function of communities.⁵² Furthermore, a good case might be made that rhetoric is part of our normal doxastic practice. In addition, since rhetoricians since the time of Aristotle have held that rhetoric typically establishes claims that are probable, not *necessarily* true, Alston's position should intrigue rhetoricians. For example, Cyphert's view that rhetoric-as-epistemic practices are culturally variable and community-based could be further developed with reference to Alston's argument.⁵³

Alston's line of reasoning is not strictly speaking *epistemic*, for he is not claiming that our doxastic practices always produce *knowledge*. However, if our normal doxastic practices are worth anything, it is good to form our beliefs in accordance with them. Following Alston's lead, rhetorical theorists would explicate how rhetoric is part of our doxastic practice, but they would sever this explanation from the definitions of knowledge and certainty. This would greatly simplify our thinking about these issues.

McKerrow's 1977 argument, discussed above, already seems to be moving in a similar direction.

A second avenue worthy of consideration by rhetorical theorists is the causal theory of knowing. This theory maintains, in essence, that I know that p if my belief that p was formed as the result of a reliable causal process. This, for starters, divests epistemology of the concept of justification, and thus avoids Gettier problems. Many epistemologists over the years have, in any case, argued that it is possible to know something even if one cannot offer a justification for it. That is, it is one thing to know that p , but something else entirely to be able to justify a belief that p . A cocker spaniel might know that it is time for a walk, but be unable to offer any justification.⁵⁴

A causal theory eliminates this awkward bump. One might think at first that this leaves little room for a rhetorician. For example, the idea behind McKerrow's notion of warranted assertability is to offer justification for one's claims. Nonetheless, presenting or receiving persuasive discourse might be a way of coming to know things, and so this theory does make it possible for rhetoric to be epistemic. Rhetoric-as-epistemic theorists would have plenty of room to discuss the reliability of the various argumentative and suasive devices that rhetoricians employ and to discuss when rhetoric does and does not reliably contribute to knowledge. A causal theory might yield interesting conclusions about value-laden, tradition-bound epideictic rhetoric, for example. What causes us to have beliefs about value issues? Are whatever processes that produce value-laden beliefs reliable? A causal theory seems to be incompatible with, for example, McKerrow's theory, but could yield interesting insights in other directions.

Railsback's explanation of the use of rhetoric as a means of use of rhetoric as a means of creating knowledge is probably as much ontological as it is epistemic:

"Rhetoric is thus a creator of what is known by humankind, both technical and social knowledge."⁵⁵ Creation is a causal process, however, and discussing causal process issues in depth might fill out theories of the category that she describes.

Epistemology, Ethics, or Both?

Looking toward a more precise understanding of what it means to say that rhetoric is epistemic, one other question arises. Can rhetoricians accomplish their purposes without analyzing and disputing concepts of knowledge, truth, and certainty at all? One might not call such an approach epistemic, but it might address the important problems that Scott raises. Much of the appeal of Scott's essays, one suspects, is due to the fundamentally ethical stance that he advocates for rhetorical discourse. Scott intends his 1967 essay to be a refutation of "the assumption . . . that men can possess truth."⁵⁶ However, why does he make such a contention? His primary purpose was never to solve abstruse epistemological problems. Instead, Scott testifies that "uncertainty demands toleration."⁵⁷ He continues that: "one who acts without certainty must embrace the responsibility for making his acts the best possible."⁵⁸ Indeed, in 1976, Scott pointed out the "basically ethical thrust" of his 1967 article.⁵⁹ In 1990, he states that "I do not value the label 'epistemic' highly. Let it pass."⁶⁰ He argues for tolerance and pluralism, and against dogmatism. He is probably right. He pleads that a rhetorical epistemology will achieve these ends. Maybe so.

One suspects, indeed, that "knowledge" is not really at issue in a fundamental way in any of Scott's papers. Nor is objective certainty, which would be nice to have if it

turns out to be possible for us ignorant travelers to the grave to get it on rare occasions. Scott's real purpose is to complain against *subjective* certainty.⁶¹ He argues that people falsely claim certainty when they are not entitled to do so. He points out, correctly, that people are rarely, if ever, entitled to claim exclusive, immutable knowledge of truth. He recognizes the contingent, value-laden quality of rhetorical discourse. He celebrates this as a good thing to have in our uncertain universe. In a later essay, Scott states: "Many of our human failings in becoming and remaining civilized grow out of the false consciousness of certainty."⁶² This hits the nail right on the head, and no objection can be raised to this fundamental claim.

Thus, once one cuts through the terminological problems, equivocations, and red herrings that have troubled this literature over the years, one realizes that Scott indeed is, and has been, onto something. The general feeling of rhetoricians that Scott's theory is important is fully justified. The mistake is to think that it is necessary to quarrel with the concepts of knowledge, truth, or objective certainty in order to achieve such ethical ends. Scott's claim could best be established by presenting evidence of the fallibility of the human mind. That people need to engage in rhetoric despite being fallible might lead us to suspect that rhetoric is doxastic, but there is no need—as far as the ethical argument goes—to establish that it is epistemic.

Aristotle wrote that rhetoric is the counterpart or contrary of dialectic.⁶³ Rhetoric and dialectic do not contradict; rhetoric advocates and dialectic investigates. Dialectic, however, is in part a communicative process, a matter of give and take. Cicero felt that Plato's dialogues left nothing proven for sure; Plato's disputants argued both sides of the issue.⁶⁴ Sloane discusses the practice of rhetoricians—and dialecticians too, of course, of

arguing both sides of an issue.⁶⁵ “If dialectic’s function is to find a probably truth through formal validity,” Sloane summarizes, “the function of rhetoric is to discern the available means of persuading people.” In both, Sloane continues, “the ends are achieved by indifferently setting up equally probably arguments pro and con.”⁶⁶ This does not make rhetoric an alternative to epistemology, but its counterpart, more or less in Aristotle’s sense. People interact to come to mutual or opposite understandings of truth as best they can. Thus, rhetoric may help us to understand how people examine their subjective uncertainty, and Scott’s approach could be vindicated.

However, scholars may wish to continue to investigate rhetoric as epistemic, and their investigations may bring considerable insights into rhetoric and epistemology alike. This inquiry must, however, define terms more carefully and consistently. To explore the relationship between rhetoric and knowledge, an analysis along one of the lines of inquiry suggested in this essay will be, one hopes, more precise and less, well, mystical, than many of those that have been circulating in the literature. Alternatively, an ethical focus could develop Scott’s issues without bringing up the issue of objective certainty. It would be a mistake to accept the rhetoric-as-epistemic literature in its present form, but might be an even worse mistake to abandon Scott’s insights entirely.

Notes

- ¹ Robert L. Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," *Central States Speech Journal* 18 (1967), 9-17.
- ² Barry Brummett, "Some Implications of 'Process' or 'Intersubjectivity': Postmodern Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 9 (1976), 21-51.
- ³ Celeste Condit Railsback, "Beyond Rhetorical Relativism: A Structural-Material Model of Truth and Objective Reality," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 69 (1983), 351-363.
- ⁴ Richard A. Cherwitz and James A. Hikins, *Communication and Knowledge: An Investigation in Rhetorical Epistemology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1986).
- ⁵ Michael C. Leff, "In Search of Ariadne's Thread: A Review of the Recent Literature on Rhetorical Theory," *Central States Speech Journal* 29 (1978), 77.
- ⁶ Barry Brummett, "A Eulogy for Epistemic Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76 (1990), 69-72.
- ⁷ Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration & Practice*, 2nd ed. (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 1989), 122.
- ⁸ Brinton notes the importance of the distinction between epistemology and ontology. He clarifies that "Insofar as rhetoric-as-epistemic represents a serious break with traditional rhetorical theory, its claim that rhetoric is a way of knowing must be understood as grounded in a view that rhetoric is in some significant way a creator of what is known;" Alan Brinton, "William James and the Epistemic View of Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68 (1982), 158.

- ⁹ James A. Herrick, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction* (Scottsdale: Gorsuch Scarisbrick, Publishers, 1997), 22.
- ¹⁰ Herrick, 22.
- ¹¹ Brummett, "Eulogy," 69-72.
- ¹² For example, Robert L. Scott and James F. Klumpp, "A Dear Searcher into Comparisons: The Rhetoric of Ellen Goodman," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 69-79, and Dale L. Sullivan, "*Kairos* and the Rhetoric of Belief," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (1992): 317-332.
- ¹³ Various writers feel that traces of this view can be found as far back as Aristotle, a controversial point that can await discussion at some other occasion. See, e.g., Leff, 79.
- ¹⁴ Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," 9-11.
- ¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. E. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (New York: J. & J. Harper Editions, 1969), p. 27e. This is not the same distinction that Brinton makes "between objective truth and subjective truth" in William James' psychology, although there are obvious analogies (Brinton, 165-166).
- ¹⁶ Cf. Wittgenstein: "One always forgets the expression "I thought I knew"" (5e).
- ¹⁷ Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," 11.
- ¹⁸ Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," 11.
- ¹⁹ Robert L. Scott, "Between Silence and Certainty: A Codicil to 'Dialectical Tensions of Speaking and Silence,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 86 (2000): 109.

- ²⁰ Ayer, A. J., *The Problem of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1957), 35.
- ²¹ William P. Alston, *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 153-171.
- ²² Cherwitz and Hikins distinguish between certainty as “*rational judgment*” and certainty as “*a dogmatic state*” (35; emphasis in the original). To his credit, Cherwitz has commented on the “lack of clarification and definition” in theories that rhetoric is epistemic; see Richard A. Cherwitz, “Rhetoric as Epistemic: A Conversation with Richard A. Cherwitz,” Charles W. Kneupper, interviewer, *Pre/Text* 5 (1984), 198-235.
- ²³ Cherwitz and Hikins, 155-156.
- ²⁴ Donald C. Bryant, “Rhetoric: Its Functions and Its Scope,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 39 (1953), 404.
- ²⁵ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 36, n. 34
- ²⁶ Plato, *Gorgias*, 452e-453a.
- ²⁷ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *The Rhetorical Act* 2nd ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1996), 8.
- ²⁸ Edward Schiappa, Alan G. Gross, Raymie E. McKerrow, and Robert L. Scott, “Rhetorical Studies as Reeducation or Redescription? A Response to Cherwitz and Hikins,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88 (2002), 114.
- ²⁹ Robert L. Scott, “On *Not* Defining Rhetoric,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 6 (1973), 81-96.

³⁰ Scott, "Between Silence," 109.

³¹ Cherwitz and Hikins, 67.

³² Edward Schiappa, "Second Thoughts on the Critiques of Big Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 34 (2001), 260-274, points out that a broad definition "does not necessarily make the term meaningless or useless" (268). This is true, but does not save the rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists, who must explain why a claim that translates to "language use is epistemic" is not mundane.

³³ Railsback, 361.

³⁴ This seems to be what Thomas B. Farrell has in mind, "From the Parthenon to the Bassinet: Death and Rebirth along the Epistemic Trail," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76 (1990), 82.

³⁵ Cherwitz and Hikins, 21. The citation is to Panayot Butchvarov, *The Concept of Knowledge* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 25. On my reading of this passage, Butchvarov does discuss the traditional definition that knowledge is justified true belief, but for the purpose of refuting it in its usual form. Butchvarov states that the traditional account of knowledge is not "mistaken," but continues that "it is hopelessly inadequate" (Butchvarov 26). Butchvarov also agrees that Gettier has identified "another paradoxical consequence of this conception of knowledge" (Butchvarov, p. 58, n. 27).

³⁶ Railsback, 363.

³⁷ Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23 (1963), 121-123.

³⁸ Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. F. M. Cornford, in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters*, Bollingen Series 71

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 201c-d.

³⁹ D. M. Armstrong, *Belief, Truth and Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 152 states that the evidence for saying that one knows something must itself be something that is known. This solves the Gettier problem, but at the expense of ruling out most of our claims to knowledge.

⁴⁰ Keith Lehrer, "Knowledge, Truth, and Evidence," *Analysis* 25 (1965), 170-171. See also Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, Routledge Contemporary Introductions to Philosophy, ed. Paul K. Moser (London: Routledge, 1998), 218-219.

⁴¹ Butchvarov, 54-61.

⁴² Butchvarov, whom Cherwitz and Hikins repeatedly cite, admits that insisting on "impossibility of mistake as the criterion of knowledge," as he does, leads to the "conclusion that most of what is ordinarily called knowledge in everyday life as well as in the sciences, is not knowledge" (Butchvarov 59).

⁴³ Cherwitz and Hikins, 21.

⁴⁴ Keith Lehrer, "The Fourth Condition of Knowledge: A Defense," *Review of Metaphysics* 24 (1970): 127.

⁴⁵ See Alvin I. Goldman, "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge," *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976), 772-773.

⁴⁶ Cherwitz and Hikins, 28-30

⁴⁷ Cherwitz and Hikins, 155.

- ⁴⁸ Railsback, p. 362, n. 10.
- ⁴⁹ Ray E. McKerrow, "Rhetorical Validity; An Analysis of Three Perspectives on the Justification of Rhetorical Argument," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 13 (1977), 135.
- ⁵⁰ McKerrow, 134.
- ⁵¹ William P. Alston, "A 'Doxastic Practice' Approach to Epistemology," in Marjorie Clay and Keith Lehrer, eds., *Knowledge and Skepticism* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1989), 1-29.
- ⁵² Robert L. Scott "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic: Ten Years Later," *Central States Speech Journal* 27 (1976), 258-266
- ⁵³ Dale Cyphert, "Ideology, Knowledge and Text: Pulling at the Knot in Ariadne's Thread," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87 (2001), 385.
- ⁵⁴ See a thorough development of a causal process theory in Alan H. Goldman, *Empirical Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Herrick seems to imply a causal theory of rhetoric as epistemic, although in very cursory fashion (22-23).
- ⁵⁵ Railsback, 363.
- ⁵⁶ Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," 10.
- ⁵⁷ Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," 10.
- ⁵⁸ Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," 16-17.
- ⁵⁹ Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic: Ten Years Later," 259.
- ⁶⁰ Robert L. Scott, "Epistemic Rhetoric and Criticism: Where Barry Brummett Goes Wrong," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76 (1990), 302.

⁶¹ To give Scott his due, his argument would have weight against Ayer's definition of knowledge, cited above.

⁶² Scott, "Between Silence," 109.

⁶³ Aristotle, 1354a; see p. 28, n. 2 in Kennedy's translation.

⁶⁴ Thomas O. Sloane, *On the Contrary: The Protocol of Traditional Rhetoric* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 26.

⁶⁵ Sloane, esp. 16-17, 85, 288.

⁶⁶ Sloane, 288.