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Analyzing How Rhetoric is Epistemic: A Reply to Fuller

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My point in "What Do You *Mean*, Rhetoric is Epistemic" (Harpine 2004) is that unclear and inconsistent use of terms has hindered previous research on the idea that rhetoric is epistemic. I propose to clarify definitions to alleviate this problem and encourage further research into how rhetoric might be epistemic. Professor Fuller's viewpoint is that definitions are inherently problematic, and that my call for rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists to formulate their definitions more carefully would hold rhetorical theory to "illusory" standards (2005, 000). However, I feel that his criticism of definitions overstates what his arguments demonstrate. Fuller (2005) also expresses doubts about the concept of certainty, doubts which echo points in my essay. Along the way, he offers an interesting line of reasoning that might advance the dialogue in the way that I had hoped. To an extent, Fuller seems to reach similar conclusions about the relationship between rhetoric and knowledge, albeit by a different route.

Certainty

My essay argues that certain claims of rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists trade on an equivocation about the meaning of "certainty." The word "certain" can carry an objective meaning: "It is certain that I will have to pay taxes," or it can be subjective: "I feel certain that I will have to pay taxes." An ordinary person can easily see that the two claims mean something different. Although Wittgenstein explains this distinction most clearly, in a statement that Fuller (2005) himself quotes, the distinction routinely arises in everyday

discourse. An argument that works surreptitiously by sliding from one of these meanings to the other commits the fallacy of equivocation. The rhetoric-is-epistemic literature does exactly that all too often.

On this matter, expressing doubts about objective certainty, Fuller comments that the role of certainty in philosophy is "inconclusive" (2005, 000). I fully agree with this point. My argument is to show how rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists fallaciously rely on an ambiguity in meaning, not to claim that some things really are objectively certain. It is not the purpose of rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists to argue that nothing is certain—there are much more straightforward ways to do that—but to show that rhetoric has an epistemic role. To accomplish this, they need an argument that does not short-circuit by equivocating in the use of key terms. In any case, my essay notes that "the current philosophical literature has not taken a strong stance in favor of requiring knowledge to be either objectively or subjectively certain," which resembles Fuller's own conclusion, and also that rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists "should dispense with the issue of certainty" (Harpine 2004, 346), which, if Fuller agrees (as I suspect he does), renders further details moot.

Knowledge

Most rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists work either explicitly or implicitly with the traditional definition that knowledge is justified true belief. They point out that rhetoric offers justification. Gettier's argument shows that the traditional definition fails to capture the meaning of "knowledge." Thus, the rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists have a problem tying their theory to their conception of knowledge. The point is not that

different rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists have used *different* definitions of knowledge, but rather that they work with an *inadequate* definition. Fuller agrees with Gettier's point, gives additional arguments on its behalf, and offers an interesting discussion of the rhetorical implications of Gettier's argument. Since Gettier's argument may lead one to question whether justification is a defining quality of knowledge, rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists might look for other kinds of linkages between rhetoric and knowledge. The concluding portions of my essay suggest several such possible linkages.[1]

Does my argument resemble the Babel thesis? Elsewhere, Fuller (2002, 104) explains the Babel thesis as the claim that disagreements are due to different meanings, not to different beliefs. One must agree with Fuller that the Babel thesis overstates the importance of meaning. However, a similar insight arises in more modest guise as Davidson's principle of charity. Studying intercultural relationships, Davidson (1984, 136) suggests that when we encounter people whose beliefs differ from ours, we should, as our first attempt, assume this to be due to different interpretations or category systems rather to differences in perceptions of the facts. Only if this fails do we look to disagreements over facts. I would favor this procedure as a way to deal with vagueness: to adjudicate meanings to see if we can avoid unnecessary quarrels. As I argue below, however, vagueness is not the main problem with the rhetoric-is-epistemic literature.

Rhetoric

My essay argues that a broad definition of rhetoric trivializes the claim that rhetoric is epistemic. For example, if one defines rhetoric as "language use," then the claim that rhetoric is epistemic really just means that language use is epistemic. Such a

mundane claim arouses little interest. Plato's narrower definition of rhetoric as the art of persuasion renders "rhetoric is epistemic" into an interesting claim (Harpine 2005, 340-341).

Definitions

Do definitions matter in philosophy?[2] Or in rhetoric? My essay is entitled, "What Do You *Mean*, Rhetoric is Epistemic?" To use language clearly, one should have some explicit or implicit idea of what one means. In general the ways in which rhetoric-is-epistemic theorists use the terms "knowledge," "rhetoric," and "certainty" create problems. The most straightforward way to address this is to define terms more carefully. Nonetheless, the underlying problem is not some textbook failure to give definitions, but the deeper failure to be clear, perhaps even to oneself, about what one means.

A large part of Fuller's response discusses the "paradox of the heap" or "sorites" (sorites from the Greek word for heap). Fuller draws two important conclusions from this paradox: first, he questions the importance of definitions, defending the use of vague terms in rhetorical theory; second, he advocates an understanding of knowledge founded on mathematical probability.

The paradox of the heap, as Fuller (2005, 000) explains, involves "differences in degree." The paradox works like this. One grain of sand is not a heap, nor are two grains of sand a heap. If we add grains one at a time, so that each pile differs only slightly from its predecessor, it seems arbitrary to call one pile a heap but not the previous pile. Why would it not be true to say that a pile of 10,000 grains is a heap, if an indistinguishable pile of 10,001 is? Many terms are, indeed, inherently vague. The paradox is important for

various reasons, including a logic problem that it causes for vague concepts (Williamson 1994, 42-52; 186). How does one deal with the borderline cases?[3]

This leads Fuller (2005, 000) to the view that "philosophy has not univocally decried the use of vague terms in argument."[4] My reply to this, Fuller's first objection, is that the paradox of the heap deals with *vagueness*, not with *equivocation*. Equivocation can occur when a speaker uses one word with two different senses: for example, bank and bank. An argument that "the bank of the river is strong, and therefore a bank is a safe place for your money" equivocates, and the paradox of the heap does not save it. Williamson himself distinguishes between vagueness and equivocation while discussing Frege's work: "Frege lumps vagueness together with ambiguity and partiality, of which coherent accounts surely can be given. If a mathematician uses the name '7' ambiguously for two different objects, one can coherently say what they are" (Williamson 1994, 43).

With respect to my essay, the distinction between objective certainty and subjective certainty is a difference in sense, not of degree. Gettier's argument about the definition of "knowledge" also does not involve differences of degree. My discussion of "rhetoric," with which Fuller does not otherwise quarrel, does rest on differences in degree in the meaning of "interesting." I would be content to say that the claim that "rhetoric is epistemic" becomes progressively more interesting in proportion as the definition becomes progressively narrower, acknowledging that there is no one point at which it becomes distinctly interesting as opposed to distinctly mundane.

The second objection that Fuller draws from the paradox of the heap is that knowledge is a matter of degree and the concept of knowledge is therefore vulnerable to the paradox. A person who believes something with 1% probability is ignorant; perhaps

someone who believes something with 50% (or 99%) probability has knowledge. A belief held with some degree of probability is presumably held with measurable, but imperfect justification. This explanation of knowledge appears to invite the Gettier problem. If one can be justified in holding a belief that is false, then the concept of knowledge as justified true belief succumbs to Gettier-type examples. Thus, only a person who holds a belief with a probability of 100% should be entitled to claim knowledge. This would greatly restrict the realm of knowledge. A causal theory of knowing would alleviate this problem, but Fuller and Collier (2004, 59-68, esp. 66) have elsewhere argued against the causal theory, and Fuller is therefore unlikely to choose this course. The best solution for these conundrums may be to conclude that justification is not a defining quality of knowledge. This, as I argued in my essay, may lead the rhetoric-is-epistemic thesis in different, but interesting directions (Harpine 2004, esp. 346-347).[5]

Final Thoughts

Although Fuller disagrees with much of my argument, he comes close to endorsing one of my conclusions: "The sense of 'certainty' under Scott's fire," he says, "is precisely the illusory sort that results once matters of knowledge are severed from matters of morals and action" (Fuller 2005, 000). My point is less metaphorical: "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" (Harpine 2004, 350). The "illusory sort" of certainty sounds like a relative of subjective certainty. People indeed are responsible to make reasonable judgments and to act appropriately in response to those judgments. A false sense of certainty can lead human

beings astray, and a theory of knowledge that leads persons to overconfidence can indeed have serious moral implications.

More generally, Fuller and I differ in our approach to inquiry. My essay is indeed analytical: its purpose is to tease ideas apart, to make distinctions, to be as precise as I am able to be. The outcome, I hope, is clarity combined with a sharper sense of direction and purpose. Fuller's response is synthetic: he looks for similarities among different points of view; he seeks a common thread in the arguments of disparate authors. Thus, Fuller (2005, 000) comments that "the ultimate value of the contest of ideas lies not in the resolution of specific problems but the more general sensibilities the contest spreads throughout the general culture." An analytical author, such as myself, is more likely to think that we need to resolve specific problems before we work on our general sensibilities. (I would not paint my bathroom until I fix the leaks.)[6] Both approaches have their merit.

I felt when I wrote "What Do You *Mean*, Rhetoric is Epistemic" that the work of this school of thought has stalled because of a failure to use terms carefully. I still feel that way, and hope that its exponents will find in my essay the tools they need to renew their efforts. Nonetheless, along the way, Fuller offers insights for synthesizing the arguments, for finding a common thread: for example, he perceives linkages between morality and knowledge and between rhetorical theory and stoic philosophy. This is not how an analytical Aristotelian such as myself would approach the problem, but one can only hope that Fuller will continue to devote his considerable talents to those issues.

Neither philosophy nor rhetoric is a destination; they are journeys. In both fields, one looks for important questions, musters considerations to answer them, and responds

to criticism. In an epistemology seminar that I took from William P. Alston many years ago, one of the students was a senior philosophy professor auditing the class. We spent several weeks reading a recent book by a well-known epistemologist of the time. Alston spent three hours a week pointing out the author's many errors. Exasperated, his colleague eventually asked, "Why are we reading this stuff?" Alston chuckled and gave the names of Plato, Hume, and Kant. He pointed out that no one really agrees with any of them today, but we study them, in part, because they asked interesting questions. Likewise, Robert Scott has raised interesting and important questions, questions that warrant our continued and disciplined inquiry.

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Notes

[1] On this issue, Fuller (2005, p. 000) represents analytic epistemology to conclude that

that "you cannot know anything unless you know everything." On my reading, this

considerably overstates the foundational epistemology school of thought.

[2] Fuller (2005, 000) correctly notes that definitions greatly interested the logical

positivists, but, of course, definitions have interested others as well.

[3] In a subjective judgment, I do not read Williamson (1994) to draw as pessimistic a

conclusion about definitions from the sorites paradox as does Fuller; I read the entire

book as an attempt to resolve the paradox with an epistemic solution.

[4] Contrast this, however, with Fuller's (2002, x) comment that, in English "'know' and

'knowledge' are made to cover too much semantic ground."

[5] There are other routes, of course, including the possibility that "knowledge" and

"knows" may not be subject to analytical definition at all, although it may still be

possible to obtain "reflective understanding of them." Williamson, 2000, 30-33.

[6] On, perhaps, a related note, I argued many years ago that rhetoric and dialectic cannot

serve the functions of logic (Harpine, 1985), a position that I continue to hold.