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Rhetorical Humanism vs. Object-Oriented Ontology: The Ethics of Archimedean Points and Levers

Ira Allen

Archimedes of Syracuse has long provided a touchstone for considering how we make and acquire knowledge. Since the early Roman chroniclers of Archimedes' life, and especially intensively since Descartes, scholars have described, sought, or derided the Archimedean point, defining and redefining its epistemic role. "Knowledge," at least within modernity, is rhetorically tied to the figure of the Archimedean point, a place somewhere outside a regular and constrained world of experience. If this figure still leads to useful ways of thinking about knowing, we are left with the question of *how* different modes of making knowledge approach their "Archimedean" points. The question is especially important today as a renewed ontological enthusiasm sweeps through humanities disciplines that have grown wary, perhaps rightly, of epistemological skepticism. I distinguish here between epistemic approaches that focus on the firm ground of the Archimedean point, offering certitude à la Descartes, and approaches more oriented, like Archimedes himself, toward assemblages where "knower," point, and lever are mutually implied. These approaches, elaborated in more detail below, comprise two opposing epistemic styles: a lever-oriented approach tends to foster an uncertainty with positive ethico-political implications and a point-oriented approach tends to foreclose it. Starting from the (contingent) assumption that our figuring is rhetorical all the way down, I describe these contrasting approaches as epistemic styles in order to highlight that who we are is at stake in how we think we know—even when we claim to sidestep epistemology altogether—and that in the entanglement of who we are and how we know, we owe much to all our others.

Toward a New Rhetorical Humanism

It is, at any rate, not the case that all styles of knowledge-making involve searches for an outside view of things or for firmness and certainty, to take two common ways of thinking about Archimedean points. Since antiquity, rhetorical theorists have regarded knowledge-making as the collection and examination of contingent points and effective levers,

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precisely those points and levers whose working forms the knowledge-maker. As such, rhetorical knowledge is at once both broadly anticipatory and intensely local, requiring a knower always in the midst of negotiating the contexts of her knowing. It thus imbricates ethics with epistemology: who we ought to be with how we imagine we know. James Crosswhite puts the implication of this point nicely in *Deep Rhetoric*, observing that "rhetorical wisdom demands a virtually impossible ethical posture, or at least a fundamentally unstable one" (347). Because rhetorical theory studies language and symbols with the self-critical aim of discovering places to stand and work a lever within a shared symbolic domain, it demands a knower who is intensely attuned to the contingency, temporality, and potential effectivity of her own position. Such a knower owes other symbol-users rather a lot.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, the aims and interests of rhetorical theory were broadly harmonious with other dominant strains of thought in the West, lining up nicely alongside a linguistic turn, postmodern skepticism toward metanarrative, feminist anti-essentialism, postcolonial attention to hybridity, and so forth. Today, however, there arises a renewed and intensified desire for points of certainty, perhaps especially within the fiscally ravaged humanities. Ours is a time of reinvigorated ontological thinking, suffused with an anxious desire to establish firm points regarding the being of being, and thus impatient with what comes to seem, in lever-thinking, a self-involved relativism. And, indeed, there is a basis for such an attitude.[1] From Plato to the old warriors of the left, the warning resounds: an easy reliance on relative, effective, local ways of knowing benefits the most unscrupulous members of a society. Witness Sean Hannity or Ann Coulter. My concern is that some avatars of the contemporary desire for certainty, in disavowing what they see as Cartesian roots, grasp after too much and float quite away from the earth out of which knowledge is formed, the typically (though not exclusively) human experience of symbolicity.[2]

For some today, epistemological skepticism remains commonsensical. But ontology-generating movements have become increasingly attractive across a variety of humanistic disciplines, accompanied by renewed claims to firm points upon which to anchor certainty about being. One of the fastest-spreading among today's ontologies claiming to dispense with epistemology altogether is object-oriented ontology. Offering "objects" as a new point of certainty, object-oriented ontology (OOO) presents itself as having moved well beyond the old avatars of doubt and certainty alike.[3] Leaders of the OOO group like Graham Harman and Levi Bryant claim that Descartes and Kant have dumped ontology into the dirty pond of epistemology and that OOO sets us straight by fishing it out again. My

aim, in critically engaging how they share what they've caught, is to help forestall a new epidemic of certitude.

This essay contrasts a contemporary object-oriented ontology with a classical-rhetorical, *topoi*-oriented approach to the world and argues that the latter's epistemic style better maintains an ethically productive attunement to uncertainty. Whereas contemporary OOO attempts to establish an Archimedean point, the classical approach wishes to discover, understand, and work Archimedean levers. Archimedes himself was much more of a lever-thinker than a point-thinker, and so after an overview of Archimedean levers and points, I will consider *topoi*-thinking as ethical lever-thinking in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's modern revitalization of the Aristotelian tradition, the *Traité de l'argumentation*. Subsequently, I discuss some difficulties with the point-thinking of object-oriented ontology, primarily in Levi Bryant's *The Democracy of Objects*. OOO's epistemic style tends to foreclose the sort of ethico-political conversation that comes from recognizing ourselves as components of human assemblages of knowing.[4] I am *not*, however, arguing that OOO is necessarily and irreparably unethical—that would contradict my own emphasis on the contingency of lever-thinking. The goal is rather to encourage the open conversations that lever-thinking, such as that of the rhetorical *topoi*, fosters. There is a conservatism in this stance, which sees the ongoing mission of the humanities as that of supporting an ethico-political conversation. The essay thus positions itself against early OOO claims to have achieved a posthumanism, preferring instead to affirm rhetorical humanism.

Archimedean Points and Levers

According to Pappus of Alexandria, Archimedes boasted to King Hieron, "Give me a place to stand on, and I can move the earth" (qtd. in *The Works of Archimedes*, xix). Archimedes was making a broad point about physics, geometry, and levers.[5] Indeed, his emphasis on the effectivity of levers is striking in much of the direct speech ascribed to him by the Roman chroniclers, as also in their paraphrases. Plutarch, for instance, has Archimedes "declar[ing]" to Hieron "that, if there were another world, and he could go to it, he could move this" (14.7). Archimedes' "place" in Pappus' account gains clarity by comparison with the "another world" of Plutarch's account; in these, the Archimedean point has yet to acquire the firmness that will later come to characterize it. To the contrary, it is only a general "someplace"; Liddell and Scott define ποῦ as "somewhere, anywhere" (ποῦ I). A place, another world: anywhere. Archimedes, in these moments of direct and described speech, emphasizes the concrete, practical power of the *lever* rather than the certainty of the *point*. Plutarch

reports that Archimedes first "wrote to [Hieron] that with any given force it was possible to move any given weight; and emboldened, as we are told, by the strength of his demonstration"—by the force of his own symbols at work (*apodeixeis*, proofs)—then made his famous declaration (14.7). At play here is an interaction of actual forces, with Archimedes being impressed and empowered, "emboldened," by his own demonstration. The demonstration upon which Archimedes pivots when he claims the capacity to move the earth moves him as well, in that the force of his own symbols affectively relocates him in conversation with Hieron. More generally, Archimedes' ποῦ is a component of a powerful lever-assemblage, and symbols have leverage on their users as on their worlds.

Indeed, "our" Archimedes—passed on, as classicist Mary Jaeger notes, by Roman chroniclers chiefly concerned with "explaining Rome's expansion and culture" (9)—is not easy to pin down. Archimedes' speech and self-presentation, as these appear in the Roman reports, are often in tension with the way those same reports frame stories about him.[6] So, for instance, Plutarch's account presents Archimedes' impassioned declaration of the power of mechanical advantage in terms of an indifference toward the world of forces that is at the same time an intense interest in certainty: Archimedes "had by no means devoted himself" to practical mechanics "as work worthy of serious effort"; rather, his lever-assemblages "were mere accessories of a geometry practiced for amusement" (14.4)—where geometry is the figure for abstract thought devoted to certitude.[7] Similarly, Plutarch presents Archimedes as "regarding the work of an engineer and every art that ministers to the needs of life as ignoble and vulgar" (17.4). So devoted was this Archimedes to abstract certainty that in several tellings of his death, he refused to come away from his geometric figurings when hailed by a Roman soldier during the sack of Syracuse, and was run through on the spot. These and other such moments help to clarify how Archimedes, who often seems interested in the practical and contingent when his quotes are stripped of narrative context, came to serve as "a figure emblematic of the stereotypically Hellenic obsession with the abstract" (Jaeger 9). The Romans wanted an Archimedes for whom points of true, worthwhile knowledge would remain detached from the workaday world of forces and levers.

Cicero, to offer a final example, presents his own discovery of Archimedes' tomb in terms of Greek unworldliness: "the most famous city of the Greek world, once even the most learned, would have been ignorant of the memorial of its most keen-witted citizen, had it not learned of it from a man of Arpinum" (qtd. in Jaeger 35). As Jaeger notes, Cicero clearly admires Archimedes, even "cast[ing] himself as Archimedes' heir" (45), but he nonetheless tells a story about Archimedes that emphasizes a

divide between Greek abstraction (implicitly interested in certitudes) and Roman worldliness (the political negotiation of uncertainty that makes practical discoveries possible). Our view of Archimedes and his ποῦ—and of knowledge in general, to the extent that this point still captures our imaginations—remains deeply shaped by the political desires at play when a life of Archimedes was first beginning to emerge in print. The Romans, Jaeger persuasively argues, conscripted the idea of Archimedes into a narrative that could account for and justify their practical, military superiority over a Greek culture they continued to regard as somewhat intellectually superior to their own. In a sense, then, "Archimedes" has relatively little to do with *Archimedes*—he becomes a conveniently ambivalent figure for an impractical sort of point-thinking, making possible (in the case of Cicero, at least), "the appropriation of neglected cultural capital by a worthier heir" (152). And yet, in reported and paraphrased speech and in fending off, even for a time, the superior Roman forces that eventually overcame his native Syracuse,[8] we find an Archimedes concerned with the play of forces, with somewheres and levers, worlds and their movers. This Archimedes, the lever-thinker, is at odds with what has been, since interest in Archimedes began to burgeon among the chroniclers of the Roman Empire, the Archimedes of abstraction and certainty.

The Archimedean point's most significant writing in modernity may have been penned by Descartes. In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Archimedes' interest in levers and effectivity is simply transmuted: out of ποῦ, *punctum*. Descartes invokes Archimedes as the alibi for his own interest in points and certainty, and in so doing discerns in Archimedes a desire little in evidence in the classical sources. As Descartes would have it, Archimedes "sought but one firm and immovable point" (II.1, 17); like Descartes himself, he would seem to have been on the hunt for certainty. However, as we have seen, the moment in question finds Archimedes "emboldened" by practical success to make a general, hypothetical claim, but no more. In Descartes' rewriting, the aim of *actually* moving the world both emerges for the first time and is symbolically transformed into a desire for foundations, for "one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshaken" (II.1, 17). The discovery of this point of certainty, per Descartes, will allow us to expect "great things" (II.1, 17). Motivating Descartes' search for "one firm and immovable point" is the belief that his efforts will *quoque*, "so, too," produce great things (II.1, 17; translation modified). The result is a powerful egotism, a restriction of knowledge's place to communities of one.

As Peter Schouls notes in *Descartes and the Enlightenment*, Descartes' rewriting of Archimedes strongly emphasizes the individual human knower. God is in the background, of course, but the human is in the

foreground—and the knowing of that human foreground rests on an immoveable point, someplace certain and unshaken. Descartes firms up Archimedes' ποῦ and, in becoming a *punctum*, Archimedes' "somewhere" changes its role entirely. No longer a place to be temporarily occupied, one component of a lever-assemblage, it is now a space of subjectivity nearly identical with the knower. To an extent, the thinker herself is identified with an "Archimedean" point, becoming this point in its self-certainty. For Descartes, as Schouls has it, "the Archimedean point is the thinker's recognition of the absoluteness of thought, of absoluteness pushing doubt" (57). It is the human subject's capture of all thought, all knowing, that contemporary posthumanism rejects—and rightly so. In a sense, though, it is only secondarily that Descartes' version of humanism came to rest in the person, in the subject as Archimedean point. Indeed, it is perhaps less the egotism of the human subject than the hubris of the firm point that should worry us.

As quoted by the Roman sources, Archimedes was more interested in lever-assemblages than points of certainty. The trouble with Descartes' version of the Archimedean point has less to do with the elevation of human subject than with the desire for certainty that led him to ignore a minor chord in the historical record, breaking with Archimedean lever-thinking altogether. The Archimedean ποῦ is any place from which one may work a powerful lever. A lever-assemblage relies on several elements working in concert, of which a "someplace" is only one; the one who works the lever (which includes some fulcrum) is just as much a part of the assemblage, although not necessarily in the same way, as are the machine and the place from which it's operated. Although Descartes had some warrant for his conversion of Archimedes' lever to a point, of the ποῦ to a *punctum*—he was well in line with one dimension of the Roman narrative frame—the Cartesian search for a firm and immoveable point seems a sharp departure from properly Archimedean pathways. To make knowledge in the spirit of Archimedes is to seek out contingent places from which to operate simple but powerful machines, ourselves becoming components of knowing assemblages. In this version of Archimedean knowing, the knower is always implicated.

The present moment is marked by a renewal of the Cartesian desire for certainty. While disavowing Descartes, Graham Harman, for instance, describes this desire in "Realism without Materialism." Rejecting materialism as too committed to subjectivity and an outdated humanism, Harman is concerned to establish realism as our best bet for getting at the true nature of being. Realism, in Harman's account, helps bring to the fore "a promising new standpoint in which the jaded and cynical human observer of recent centuries is dethroned in favor of a landscape riddled

with countless mysterious entities" (52). What Harman calls "realism," as an epistemic style, would seem to be anti-authoritarian; it attunes us to a world that owes human subjects no fealty. Its "most important" thesis is that "all relations are on the same ontological footing as the human-world relation" (55). At first glance, this version of posthumanism might seem innocuous, even salutary. Per Harman, "it is easy to imagine that there might be a real world independent of the mind, while also holding that the mind is incapable of modeling that world with any sort of final or even partial accuracy" (53). Surely there is no harm in trusting the world to persist without our thinking of it, and surely Harman is correct that whatever we might know will be partial, contingent, constrained? Indeed, doesn't such a fallibilistic perspective indicate that OOO actually fits rather nicely with what this essay argues to be Archimedean lever-thinking? The trouble with Harman's thesis comes when he starts insisting that things *must* be this way.[9]

Leaving materialism by the wayside, Harman's version of realism takes a dogmatic tone. As he sees it, realism is not perspectival, nor is it a heuristic. Realism entails a real world, a mysterious real comprised of objects, and there are no two ways about it: "it is rather impoverished to speak of 'realism' in cases where a philosophy merely insists that something real might exist outside the human mind" (59). Not only is realism "the true path of philosophy, but . . . the real must be conceived as made up of autonomous individual entities," made up of *objects* (59). Realism is the only correct attitude for one to have, and it anchors its certainty in the immovable necessity of being's being comprised of objects. Echoing Kant's apodictic project, the world simply *must* be this way. The easy objection, of course, is that no way of talking can logically ground itself as *the correct way of talking*. Even if, in some transcendental sort of way, what is being said is imagined to be the case, realistically and absolutely so, "being the case" remains a very human idea, the sort of idea to which symbolic animals seem especially prone, and a somewhat culturally specific sort of ultimate concern to boot. For Harman, though, there can be no room for such doubt.

In other words, even as Harman purports to have lost interest in specifically human subjects, he stakes out an Archimedean point of the most Cartesian sort. Even though the point is the (disavowedly human concept of the) object rather than the human subject, the desire for certainty courses through as strong as ever. In a return of the repressed, then, the Cartesian desire for human certainty surfaces under the banner of a philosophy concerned with proclaiming its independence from the Cartesian legacy: posthumanism. Dispensing (as they imagine) with a particularly human viewpoint, the OOO advocates of this desire hope

to discover for philosophy new *terra firma*, a point upon which to build in full security. Such a point is the "object" of object-oriented ontology, which makes much of its own rejection of Cartesian and Kantian dualisms and old divides between mind and world, ideas and objects. "The object" is the Archimedean point of this variant of posthumanism and, as in Descartes, the Archimedean lever is forgotten. Here, the object is all—or, more carefully, the all is objects and only objects. The aim is to think beyond a merely human effectivity.

The trouble, I argue below, is less with this aim than with its style, the way it also maintains a desire for certainty that shapes the thinkers and texts it rejects. Seeking to know the world without getting hung up on the epistemological and ethical constraints posed by the fact of our being human subjects, these posthumanists end up working with the same search terms as did the humanists they deplore. The end goal of a search for Archimedean points is to discover positions beyond the reach of argument, stances we human discussants could occupy. These are points of certain knowledge, unconstrained by either our own or other symbolic animals' perspectival possibilities. By contrast, Archimedean lever-thinking, an epistemic style found in rhetorical theory (among other discourses), remains committed to the communality of knowing, and it maintains an ethical stance in which the arguments and ideas of others *matter* as much as do one's own.

The Aristotelian Topoi as Places for a Lever

Aristotle's *Rhetoric* followed on a long line of rhetorical handbooks or *tekhnē logōn*, beginning at least with that of Tisias, nicknamed "the Crow," in Sicily around 466 BCE.[10] Although I refer here to "the Aristotelian *topoi*," what is more properly at stake is a way of apprehending the world common throughout the Greek world in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE and thereafter fluctuating in popularity and importance. The *topoi* are literally "places" in language, simultaneously material phonemes or graphemes and ideal themes, ranging from the *topos* of "happiness" (*eudaimonia*) to the *topos* of "from opposites" (*ek tōn enantion*). Like earlier handbook writers, Aristotle presented the *topoi* as aids to both understanding and accomplishing persuasion. The *topoi* thus comprise one of the earlier knowledge-systems to claim for itself the capacity to move human worlds; they designate the matrix of materiality and ideas *par excellence* and unfold in a space of constitutive uncertainty.

The *topoi* can be understood as tools for intervening in a symbolic lifeworld, and this bears on the sort of knowledge made in collecting and examining them. So, for example, when Aristotle discusses the *topos* of *eudaimonia*, "happiness," in the *Rhetoric*, he follows a very different line than

in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where happiness is an object to be understood in itself. Where the *Ethics* would discover the truth of *eudaimonia*, what happiness really is, the *Rhetoric* treats *eudaimonia* as a place in language, for use as part of a lever-assemblage. In the two texts, then, we see urges toward Archimedean points and levers respectively. In the *Ethics*, where *eudaimonia* emerges most clearly as "activity [*energeia*] in accordance with virtue" (1.7-10), Aristotle is concerned to determine what exactly the good life is; happiness is needed as a firm point from which to set out. In wondering what happiness *really* is, he can be seen as searching for an Archimedean point in what would come, much later, to be a Cartesian spirit. If we can find solid footing in the *Ethics*, we can more easily take up politics, for instance, with an expectation of "great things." Knowing what is the proper work of man, the *ergon* of the human,[11] we should be well equipped to re-order the world. Amélie Rorty underscores the goal-directedness of the *Ethics*, which she sees as drawing on "general truths established by reasoned investigations into common beliefs and common practices, along with an understanding of the general constitutions and character of the species," to offer "a solid, though not certain, basis for generalization" (2-3). If not quite certainty, the aim and value of the text is, in this view, the establishment of a solid foundation for knowledge and action. And, indeed, the laboriously defined *eudaimonia* serves as ground for the rest of the *Ethics*.

In the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle is concerned above all with Archimedean levers, *eudaimonia* is pluralized. Here, "happiness" is merely one *topos*, one of a collection of places in language that move people. Happiness in the *Rhetoric* thus receives multiple, potentially conflicting definitions: it is "success [*eupraxia*] combined with virtue," but also "self-sufficiency [*autarkeia*] in life," and at the same time "the pleasantest life accompanied with security" and "abundance of possessions and bodies, with the ability to defend and use these things" (1.5.3). Happiness is a word and is also a variety of ways of apprehending and responding to that word; it is an elementary component of a lever-assemblage. Readers of the *Ethics* or other texts of the Organon might think that Aristotle's aim is most typically to hunt for a firm and immovable point, but in the *Rhetoric* he is more interested in explicating a series of places in language whose uncertain destiny is to be persuasive. *Eudaimonia* is a distinct place in language in the sense that its audience can receive it as phonically or graphically unitary—"happiness" is a word. But not just a word. It is also a chain of equivalences that are not strictly identical. The epistemic style of the *Rhetoric* does not require an immovable *eudaimonia* that could warrant us in expecting great things; instead, it traces out different possibilities that *eudaimonia* presents, as a place both in and out of language,

for serving as a contingently stable element of a lever-assemblage. As such, the *eudaimonia* of the *Rhetoric* is the multiple happiness of multiple audiences, rather than the singular happiness of a knowing subject. As a *topos*, it is not a point upon which to construct an inhuman certainty, but part of a lever with which to move human worlds. And such movement may, indeed, be all that "knowledge" can be.

It is with respect to the lever-thinking of the Aristotelian *topoi* that Heidegger writes, in *Sein und Zeit*, that the *Rhetoric* "must be comprehended as the first systematic hermeneutic of the everydayness of being-with-one-another" (*SZ* 138; *BT* 178). Rhetoric, Heidegger recognized, apprehends a world comprising not only the everydayness of what is present-to-hand, but through that also the possibilities that are ready-to-hand, possibilities we first encounter through our moods: "It is precisely in a restless seeing of the 'world,' which flickers in accordance with our moods, that what is ready-to-hand shows itself in its specific worldliness, which is never the same from day to day" (138; 177). Rhetoric's *topoi* offer a symbolic shorthand for the moods in language that move us toward deeper apprehension of a world in its active worlding. And it is in being moved symbolically, in being rhetorically, that we are with one another, are at all. What is everydayness but a world of moving points, points that act upon and are by virtue of one another? What is being-with-one-another but being subject to movement by symbols, at once productive of and produced by rhetorically emergent forces? "The speaker," Heidegger understood, "requires that understanding of the possibilities of mood in order to arouse and direct it in the right way" (138-39; 178). The "possibilities of mood," part of the material and virtual reality of human experience, can be understood in terms of places in language that, because ideal as well as material, are at the same time places outside of language. These places, in other words, play their role in producing the "distantiality" Heidegger sees as part of the being proper to being-with-one-another (126-30; 163-68). The *topoi* of rhetorical theory are contingent places, "wheres" emerging in and from language and effecting a certain distance; a knower stands upon them and uses a lever to move the world in accordance with the possibilities of mood. This is to say that *topoi* are material-ideal places that are in-out of language, while the Archimedean levers are actual arguments—enthymemes or probabilistic syllogisms and intuitive appeals—with which rhetors reach back from these "wheres" and into a world that they move therewith. The entirety is an assemblage in which the rhetor, too, is moved. The *topos* on which she stands, while firm enough for the work of a moment, itself shifts over time. How happiness will function in the rhetorical future depends not only on how it has functioned in the past, but also on what worlds it is presently helping

to move and on other, emerging dynamics that constellate language in ways that cannot be mapped or modeled in advance. The *topoi*, in other words, emerge contingently within and shift the possibilities of open-ended conversations over time.

The definitions of happiness previously listed work at Aristotle's time of writing because "all people agree that happiness is pretty much one or more of these" (1.5.3). Symbolic efficacy, as Wittgenstein argued, is a matter of (fantastical) agreement not bound by—and not resolving—contradictions between conventions of language and meaning. What this emphasis on an impossible agreement makes clear is that the Aristotelian *topoi* are effective for a time but not for all time. Knowledge of them promises some effectivity, promises a better chance of negotiating local conditions, but it does not promise certainty. As though to underscore the point, Aristotle goes on to list various "parts" of happiness, some of which conflict with others. For instance, he suggests that there is a difference between *eudoxia*, a good reputation, and *timē*, honor, as discrete modes of *eudaimonia*. The one is a matter of respect, the other a sign of a reputation for doing good (1.5.8-9). These different words, in their brute materiality, draw on and evoke different moods. They condition audiences' ways of being primed by the *topos* of happiness differently. My emphasis here is on a way of being in relation to knowledge, a path taken by rhetorical theory from its earliest instantiations. To think with and through a *topos* is to accept that there can be no "flat ontology," that humans—as symbolic animals—cannot really *feel* what it would mean to move in a world of indifferently real objects, where everything that is is of the same basic kind, even if we would dearly like to. The material ideas we use to move one another in making knowledge—"object" very much included—are both subject to change and liable to change us in our use of them. We emerge contingently as elements of the knowledges that we make.

To remain a moment longer with *eudaimonia*, then, what is interesting is that the "parts" of happiness are just as much material as they are eidetic; they are at once concepts—*eudoxia*, *timē*, and a good many more—and resolutely material words and phrases, physical places in language. The *topoi* are in language, but they take us out of the everydayness of our own being-caught-up-in-a-world, allowing us to move the world in which we are habitually caught up (a tendency proper to symbolic beings, generally). The *topoi* associated with happiness are at once the concretely specific words that Aristotle gives us, literal places in the chain of signification, and the shifting clusters of affects, attitudes, dispositions, and practices—the moods—that emanate from those places in language. They are contingent, historical, conversation-bound. Not only is the distinction between a good reputation and honor less obviously substantive for academics today than

it was for Greek citizens in the more martial culture of Athens, but the behaviors and attitudes motivated by appeals to the *topos* of happiness and these, two of its many parts, are substantively different. The *topoi* are paradigmatic of a worldview that looks for contingent places to stand while operating levers, and this is no small part of the fascination that Aristotle exerted on Heidegger.

An emphasis on contingent somewheres, however, does not mean that the *topoi* are the natural domain of advertisers and marketers. Rhetorical humanism, whether we trace for it an Aristotelian, sophistic, or other lineage, is characterized by a self-consciously ethical approach to its own search for effective levers. Consider, for example, modern rhetorical theory's most ambitious return to the *topoi*, the *Traité de l'argumentation* published in 1958 by Belgians Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. Translated into English in 1969 as *The New Rhetoric*, the text is at once striking and characteristic of rhetorical theory in realizing that attention to symbolic efficacy helplessly entangles the attendant in ethical imbroglios. In a world where "the most solid beliefs are those which are not only admitted without proof, but which are quite often not even made explicit . . . recourse to argumentation cannot be evaded" in the face of actual disagreement (*TA* 10; *NR* 8). And if the uncertainty of argumentation cannot be banished from our shared experience, what is at stake is something that "the method of the laboratory" cannot establish, namely, "the *value* of argumentations used in the human sciences, law, and philosophy" (12; 9, italics mine), the value of the *topoi* upon which we stand in moving our world.

Audience and Ethics, the Demands of the Topoi

The New Rhetoric, in English, has a different titular emphasis in the French; it is first of all a "treatise on argumentation" and then, secondarily (on an inside cover page), also a "new rhetoric." Starting with the second edition of 1970 (it is now in its 6th), the text has introduced itself in French as simply a *Traité de l'argumentation*, a treatise on argumentation. What is at stake here? In *L'argumentation*, Christian Plantin argues that the shift foregrounds that it is Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's "theoretical enterprise concerning argumentation" which "constitutes a real innovation," for, "prior to the *Treatise*, no [French-language] text had taken up such a program" (3). "Argumentation," on this view, marks the fact that a *topoi*-centered rhetoric is necessarily, helplessly concerned with the ethics of agreement, with the question of what can and should count as "good" arguments to whom. As James Crosswhite sees it, the focus on argumentation bespeaks "an attempt to explain what makes nonviolent human community possible when we have differences that cannot be resolved by

appeals to absolute or objective truths" (350-51). Perelman presents this concern for what will count as good argumentation in terms of openness and responsibility. His philosophy, he says, should foster in its adherent "a certain modesty in his affirmations: the future does not belong to him, his thought remains open to unforeseen experience" ("First Philosophies" 204). Indeed, per Perelman, rhetorical theory offers "less a completed and perfect system than an understanding that implies the incomplete and unfinished character of every philosophical construction, which is always capable of new developments and new corrections" (196). In this context, the *Traité* examines the *topoi* as a contingent system promoting practical wisdom. Broadly speaking, such is the charge of rhetorical humanism generally—to develop and practice modes of wisdom for making collective decisions in the absence of certainty.

Because rhetorical questions concern the moving of people's worlds, standing upon a *topos* is an effort to secure the adherence of other minds that could just as well *not* assent to one's positions, proposed affects, and propositions. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca describe their theory of argumentation, it involves "the study of discursive techniques permitting the provocation or increase of a mind's adherence to theses presented for its assent" (*TA* 5; *NR* 4). Accepting this means, in turn, taking as real a certain freedom, be it ever so troubled. Audiences must be able to be moved, even as the very somewheres whence their displacement is achieved, the *topoi*, remain susceptible to change and re-figuration. In discussing the *topos* of "the person and his acts," for example, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca present this troubled freedom as a contrast between two dimensions of rhetorical personhood. On the one hand, "the idea 'person' introduces an element of stability. . . . it is assumed when an act is interpreted as a function of the person, and one deplores the failure to respect this stability when reproaching someone for incoherence or unjustified change" (395; 294). On the other hand, however, "the stability of the person is never entirely assured"; it "makes him somewhat resemble an object, with his properties determined once and for all," but "is opposed to his freedom, his spontaneity, his possibility of changing" (396; 294). Unsurprisingly, one thus is "far more inclined to stabilize others than oneself" (396; 294). We stabilize another's person, tying it to her acts, for long enough to stand thereon and move the world, but this stability cannot last. And conversely, although "every dissociation of the act and the person is never more than partial and precarious" (398; 296), we are as concerned to pivot on the instability of our own and others' identities as on the stability. In both cases, a lever-assemblage emerges contingently in time and loses its effectivity over time. Indeed, the very function of the *topos* of "the person and his acts" itself is constantly being re-negotiated. This *topos* names at

once some concrete place in language (in this case, "*you* wouldn't dare!" or "it's *just like* you!", etc.) and a set of undetermined possibilities. Amidst these possibilities of mood, what maintains the indeterminate ideality of the *topoi* (as opposed to their concrete, more or less determinate materiality) is their audience-directedness. Audiences are temporally and locally contingent; *topoi* at once figure general and highly particular places from which to move audiences that, in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's telling, range from the individual to the particular to the universal.

Attunement to the roles of audiences in knowledge-making obliges rhetorical theorists to adopt an attitude of uncertainty regarding their own systems of thought. The contingent, troubled freedom of audiences has consequences for what we can imagine we are doing when we make knowledge. To consider places in but not wholly of language is necessarily to develop some sense of the contingent, local action of other minds, *esprits* that are at once ideal and material. This sense takes form in the *Traité de l'argumentation* as continuous concern for the activity of audiences in co-constructing the possibilities of mood, the possibilities of persuasion. This concern for the activity of audiences in no way lessens the moral seriousness or responsibility of rhetoric's search for somewheres. To the contrary, as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca formulate this crucial point, "From the moment one admits the existence of other means of proof than necessary proof, argumentation addressed to particular audiences assumes a significance beyond mere subjective belief" (38; 29). Wagering on the contingency of knowledge binds us to other possible knowers, rather than to absolute points of certainty.

A *topoi*-oriented vision of the world apprehends persons as emergent elements of emergent assemblages that include their own words and the possibility of those words' changing effectivity—on them themselves—over time. Such persons comprise all audiences for knowledge. Accordingly, every effort to find a *topos* from which to work one's lever is helplessly ethical-political. Rhetoric approaches persons in terms of what Steven Mailloux calls, in a discussion of Ernesto Grassi's rhetorical humanism, "a forceful valuing of the word" (144). Because the *topoi* themselves have force only by virtue of contingent, temporally localized assent, searching them out means negotiating the symbol system from which one is oneself, and only with the consent of others, constructed. In taking the *Traité* as a signal instance of modern rhetorical theory, I want to point up that a *topoi*-centered approach to knowledge cannot, simply because it looks for levers and somewheres rather than for firm and immoveable points, be considered an irresponsible subjectivism or morally indifferent search for advantage. To the contrary, a *topoi*-centered rhetoric

is a self-consciously ethical way of making knowledge in which we are always implicated.

The Firm Objects of Ontological Desire

The phrase "object-oriented ontology" was coined by Levi Bryant for a loose collection of philosophies that all purport to offer access into what *must* be a world comprised of objects. Bryant brings together OOO's various strains in *The Democracy of Objects*,[12] which begins with a provocative promise: to move "towards a finally subjectless object" (13). Bryant is particularly concerned to articulate OOO as a single movement, and so his text is usefully representative of a key difficulty with the ways in which object-oriented ontology conceives of selves, knowledge, and world. Bryant presents OOO as a rejection of all correlationist views of knowledge, which are to have begun more or less with Descartes and proceeded through Hume and Kant alike, and to have continued on to infect virtually all subsequent thought. The critique is a familiar one: to introduce a correlation between word and world is to reduce all that is known to the knowing subject; ontology is thus diminished, no longer the study of being, of what is in that it is, but rather only the more constrained study of how and whether some subject knows what's going on with a world of strictly unthinkable object-ivity (at best; rank idealism at worst). Bryant, Harman, and others would restore to ontology its lost glory, and they see in a posthumanist belief in objects the promise of a thought undiluted by any human thinker. As Bryant has it, OOO is the effort "to think a *subjectless* object, or an object that is *for-itself* rather than an object that is an opposing pole before or in front of a subject" (19). The object serves here as a firm and immoveable point upon which to stand and expect great things. Forget that this view—articulated by a symbolic animal to other symbolic animals—seems quixotic on its face. The object-oriented ontologists present various arguments to render plausible this quixotism, but it is my intent here to engage something prior to those arguments. The point is the point. I want to speak to the ethical stakes of OOO's epistemic style, which traces the contours of a Cartesian desire to set out from some achieved certainty.

Object-oriented ontology, broadly speaking, is a view in which "all entities, including subjects, [are] objects" (Bryant 25), such that "the object" serves to anchor all thinking of the world. An object, as Graham Harman describes it, is "anything that has a unified reality that is autonomous from its wider context and also from its own pieces" (*Quadruple Object* 116). It "can refer to trees, atoms, and songs, and also to armies, banks, sports franchises, and fictional characters" (*Towards Speculative Realism* 147). The

difficulty comes in the assertion that our knowledge of objects is due to the nature of objects as such and in no way a function of the ways of seeing particular to featherless bipeds and other symbolic animals. In short, we are to believe that being is made up of individuated, unitary entities, and we are to believe this with an axiomatic certitude. Such a vision of being, Bryant tells us, is a precondition for all thinking, and thus both precedes and transcends human intellection. The conceptual status of the object, then, is insusceptible of change: "the human-object relation is not a special relation . . . but a subset of a far more pervasive ontological truth that pertains to objects of all types" (282). Neither time nor conversation can reposition this *punctum*.

There are many points of critique here—not least that speculating about how the world must be in-itself on the basis of our experiences of our activities within it has seemed unpromising since long before Kant, since Protagoras, Gorgias, and the older sophists[13]—but I want to question the ethicality of OOO's epistemic style. Bryant, for instance, waxes outraged at humanists who "cry foul, accusing object-oriented ontologists of technological and environmental determinism" (288). But he does not engage or even take pains to represent critics' positions. Rather, as is also characteristic of Harman's responses to critique, Bryant proceeds without quotation or interpretation of his opponents' particular arguments. After some incredulity at the sheer stupidity of his critics' (ventriloquized) misunderstandings of OOO, he asserts that "there can be no question of technological or environmental determinism precisely because objects cannot be determined by other objects" (289). For OOO, everything is an object and every object fundamentally separate from any other. Discursively, then, the object is a firm and immoveable point, and any doubting of this certainty is finally outside the bounds of conversation, is questioning what cannot be questioned, with the result that "conversation" in OOO texts can seem like a bit of an echo chamber. In this instance, Bryant offers as answer to critiques that remain spectral a reiteration of one of his own definitions, foreclosing the very possibility of discussion. The same thing occurs earlier in *The Democracy of Objects*, in which a section on "Objections and Replies" includes no actual objections made by dissenting interlocutors and only such replies as would serve to "dispatch" arguments against Bryant's position (52-57). A philosophy that rests on the unshakeable ground of objects "as they are, quite apart from any relations with or effects upon other entities in the world" (187), should perhaps not be expected to submit its basic theses about objects to the doubt and uncertainty that make open-ended conversation possible. In effect, though, this means that OOO theorists work to place their most basic theses outside the realm of argumentation entirely.[14] But where

argumentation is impossible, so too are other minds. And where other minds fall away, ideas die out.

Rhetorical Humanism and the Idea of the Lever

Where the object-oriented view imagines for itself a point outside human experience, hoping from there to discern the reality of what-is, the *topoi*-centered view of classical rhetoric plays upon an internal/external division within human experience itself, as figured in language. At stake here is the idea of the lever. The *topoi* are contingent somewheres in and reaching beyond language and human experience, points not unshakeable but just firm enough to stand on for a time in effecting the persuasion of audiences (and oneself as well). They are, in short, components of knowledge-assemblages. Operating as ideas external to language in its ordinary usage, the *topoi* are at the same time the base materiality of language, places within the *logos*. They enable effective rhetorical invention precisely because they are internal to everyday language, prompting patterned and habitual attitudinal responses and ideas. A *topos* is effective because, as the idea of a place, it makes available what Kenneth Burke describes as "the *resources* of ambiguity" (ix). "It is in the areas of ambiguity," per Burke, "that transformations take place" (ix). In other words, our moving of the world is accomplished not from some stable, static point outside of all human experiencing, but from points of ambiguity within experience—matrices of ideality and materiality. Where an object-oriented ontology hopes for apodictic certainty, a *topoi*-oriented rhetoric is concerned with the invention of plausible arguments about contingent worlds. And the *topoi*-centered approach helps us accept that a lever-assemblage is just as much its own shifting ποῦ as it is the other elements of the apparatus. This, in turn, brings us face to face with our others, returns us to our responsibility—as ethical agents—in the co-construction of all that will count as knowledge.

The rhetor stands upon contingent places in language in order to move the world, and for this being, in its symbolically structured lifeworld, these points are not firm or immoveable. To the contrary, they are—the rhetor hopes—not moving for now, for long enough to move a world in negotiation with some audience. This insight, long central to rhetorical theory, is at odds with the notion that we humans could discover properly transcendental conditions for our own activity, apprehending the world as if from without. Lever-thinking is hermeneutical even as it seeks advantage and self-interpretive even in its orientation toward audiences; it is this combination I am affirming in urging an attitude of rhetorical humanism. As Mailloux describes it, rhetorical humanism involves a "mixture of interpretive strategy and rhetorical argument—of interpre-

tive performance as rhetorical invention" (143). It emphasizes processes that balance situated searches for advantage with the pressing need to understand others.[15] Rhetorical humanism accepts, from Protagoras forward, that man [*sic*] is the *measure* of all things; it leaves unanswered the impossible question of what "all things" would be if unmeasured by symbolic animals. This does not mean that rhetorical theory denies the existence of something like extrahuman reality. Rather, the question regards the communality of what can count as "measuring," as knowledge. This is a matter of epistemic style: who we are (together) as we go about determining whatever it is we think we know. For the constrained humanism of rhetoric, there are likely no firm and immovable points to be discovered. One is implicated in what one purports to know—and one's ongoing construction of knowledge always owes something to others.

I have argued here, then, that searches for Archimedean levers, as illustrated in the theories of *topoi* propounded by rhetorical humanists, better prepare us to live together than do searches for Archimedean points. My point is not that *topoi* are incontestably better than objects, that the lever is an inarguably superior figure for knowledge-making than the point. Rather, the idea is that, at the current juncture, in the midst of the dehumanitization of universities and other institutions devoted to making knowledge, those of us in the humanities have both more to offer and more to gain by practicing epistemic styles such as that of rhetorical humanism than we do by pressing once more for the certainties of some foundation beyond all argument. Styles of thought privileging Archimedean levers can help us maintain attunement to what we may hope will be an increasingly deeply shared world—even where we would pivot on our own ontological desires.

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Notes

1. For a sympathetic reading of post-relativist desire that remains well within the domain I characterize as Archimedean lever-thinking, see Amanda Anderson's case for a passionate "critical distance" invigorated by *ethos*, in *The Way We Argue Now*.
2. I have no interest in asserting that only humans are symbolic (and hence political) animals—all evidence suggests the contrary. Agamben's *The Open*, for instance, compellingly dismantles that particular mode of humanism, a mode that Chris Danta and Dimitris Vardoulakis dismiss as "the political gaze turned away from the primal scene of violence against the animal" (4).
3. As a philosophical orientation or movement, OOO is at once diffuse and highly specific. Loosely connected with various strands of contemporary thought (speculative realism, new materialism, etc.) and a range of fellow travelers (Quentin Meillasoux, Ray Brassier,

Jane Bennett, etc.) through shared commitments to rethinking realism, object-oriented ontology is chiefly associated with four proper names: Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, and Timothy Morton. This essay is most concerned with the epistemic style of Harman and Bryant, OOO's first expositors.

4. We should attend carefully, by contrast, to ontologies that do think knowing and truth as lever-assemblages. The two most compelling ontological impulses at work today, in my view, are those of Alain Badiou and Karen Barad—detailed, respectively, in the line of works from *Theory of the Subject* to *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds* and in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.
5. I use the term "lever" somewhat loosely. As discussed in Jocelyn Holland's essay in this issue, the differences between levers, pulleys, and other means of deriving practical power from mechanical advantage are not insignificant for our reading of Archimedes. Used here, as a figure drawn from a minor strain in Roman narratives about Archimedes, the term refers broadly to mechanisms for increasing the effectivity of an entity's actions.
6. In *Archimedes and the Roman Imagination*, Mary Jaeger offers an especially rich historiographical examination of this tension.
7. On the Roman view of geometry as a technique for producing certain knowledge, see Quintilian: "Geometry arrives at its conclusions from definite premises, and by arguing from what is certain proves what was previously uncertain" (1.11.37).
8. Plutarch notes, for instance, that all Marcellus' forces "proved to be of no account in the eyes of Archimedes and in comparison with the engines of Archimedes" (14.3).
9. Although "epistemic style" does not equate to "rhetorical style generally," it is noteworthy that Harman presents his speculations in no uncertain terms. For instance, within twenty lines on only one page, we find that "the picture is *exactly twice as* complicated as this," "Husserl's *undeniable* idealism increases," and "it is *absolutely the case that* Husserl distinguishes an object" ("Realism without Materialism" 57, italics mine). On the next page, "*no one* would call Husserl a realist, yet he *undeniably* feels like one" (58, italics mine). It's hard, maybe even undesirable, to avoid the verbiage of certainty altogether, but the frequency with which Harman finds his own perspective undeniable is striking.
10. For one brief overview of early rhetorical theory, see George Kennedy's "The Earliest Rhetorical Handbooks," appended to his translation of the *Rhetoric*.
11. In "The Work of Man," Agamben makes the point that the proper work of man might indeed be no work at all; he sees Aristotle confronting the possibility that to be human might in some sense mean being "a being of pure potentiality, which no identity and no work could exhaust" (2). The fact that such a notion could seem possible, could seem sensical, bespeaks what I have been describing as a constitutive uncertainty in language.
12. Excepting Jane Bennett's work in political theory, which, although it has been claimed for object-oriented ontology, remains far more attuned to uncertainty and to its own effectivity. Indeed, Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* is in many ways exemplary of lever-thinking. Consider also her nuanced response to Harman and Morton in a recent issue of *New Literary History*.
13. On this point, see especially Victor Vitanza, *Negation, Subjectivity, and the History of Rhetoric*.
14. One example of a less closed-off version of OOO, in fairness, is Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects*. Morton identifies with OOO but breaks with the epistemic style of Harman and Bryant in accepting, up-front, the need to "abolish the idea of the possibility of a metalanguage that could account for things while remaining uncontaminated by them" (2). It is worth noting that Morton is a relative latecomer to OOO, bringing with him a "dark ecology" that is simply a much more lever-oriented way of thinking.
15. A complementary perspective, focused particularly on Italian civic humanism, may be found in John Arthos, "A Hermeneutic Interpretation of Civic Humanism and Liberal Education."

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