

Kant and the Promise of Rhetoric

By Scott R. Stroud

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Kant and the Promise of Rhetoric is the first book-length study of Kant's understanding of rhetoric. There are certainly good reasons why this topic has hardly been discussed in the past. Is it not obvious that Kant shows nothing but contempt for rhetoric? After all, he accuses this art of deceiving "by means of beautiful illusion" and deploying "the machinery of persuasion". Kant's writings do everything but invite for an extensive study on rhetoric; and although the subject has been addressed once in a while, scholarship on Kant has for the most part remained faithful to the age old principle that rhetoric is not the business of philosophy.

Scott R. Stroud takes as a starting point that Kant would not have been content with an all-too simple antagonism between philosophy and rhetoric. Instead, he argues that rhetoric indeed plays a vital role in Kant's idea of *moral cultivation*. Decisive for Stroud's account is the presupposition that rhetoric is not concerned with the art of persuasion only but rather with the reflection on communicative practice in a broad sense. Thus conceived, rhetoric implies a culture of speech and a certain communicative experience that supports human moral development. Stroud terms this experience "*rhetorical experience*" and wants his book to serve "as a thorough exposition of rhetorical experience and its connection to morality in Kant's system" (p. 8). Rhetorical experience can be regarded as a linguistic version of aesthetic experience; as such it is part of everyday life and provides a medium of moral perfection as it is the topic of the *Doctrine of Vir-*

tue. Even though, on the surface, Kant is unambiguously hostile to rhetoric as a discipline, he clearly has an idea of an ethical culture of speech that is worth spelling out and that can indeed be spelt out under the heading of rhetoric.

Those who are willing to follow Stroud in his constructive perspective on Kant's thinking – and willing to accept the underlying broad sense of rhetoric – will find his book utterly interesting and in many ways instructive. The value of *Kant and the Promise of Rhetoric* is not restricted to rhetoric and communication studies. It takes an original perspective on Kant's practical philosophy as a whole, the focus being on what is sometimes called his "impure ethics", i.e., the ethical program following the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Such a comprehensive topic demands careful explanation, and it takes the author three chapters to develop his central thesis: In chapter 1 ("Tracing the Sources of Kant's Apparent Animosity to Rhetoric"), he considers why Kant may have "overemphasized" (p. 16) the dark side of rhetoric. For this purpose, Stroud recalls the intricate relation of Kant to Garve and popular philosophy. In chapter 2, the significance of aesthetic experience for a moral outlook in the natural world is spelt out. The parallels between aesthetic and moral judgment are described in detail; and the vital role of the beautiful and of "aesthetic ideas" in moral cultivation is brought into view. On this basis, the author begins to outline his account of Kantian "nonmanipulative" rhetoric. Although it is hardly doubtful that speech always implies purposive use of language it is not necessarily directed at ends in a straightforward way. This is why, according to Stroud, there must be something like a *non-instrumental use* of speech. The careful explanation of this paradoxical idea can be regarded as one of the main tasks of Stroud's book (p. 54). Crucial to his solution is what Kant calls *Gesinnung* and what Stroud describes as the "orientation" of the speaker. The use of language, so he claims,

can be non-instrumental because it is possible “to alter one’s orientation toward linguistic action such that most practical effects are bracketed” (p. 55). Such disengaged communication implies an experience that can be regarded as morally edifying: It “both reflects and affects our orientations, and the intelligent use of [it] can shape the orientations of attentive others toward a fully moralized state” (p. 57).

In chapter 3, Stroud begins to elaborate his account in more detail. On the basis of an extensive presentation of the *Groundwork* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he locates the problem of persuasive speech in Kant’s overall project of moral cultivation. Against this foreground, the question how “allowable persuasion” (p. 59) is possible can be interpreted as belonging to the question how we can make good use of our freedom, i.e., to the topic of the *Doctrine of Virtue*. In this perspective, communication plays a significant role in the formation of our inner freedom and in moral self-perfection. Employed in the right way, speech can strengthen the capacity to withstand “what opposes the moral disposition within us”, as Kant defines virtue. Although speech is, in a certain sense, always strategic because speakers inevitably have communicative intentions and choose linguistic means (p. 99f.), it can nevertheless contribute to the right kind of ethical orientation:

“In the case of manipulative rhetoric, speakers are oriented by their devaluing of others such that they hide some important features of the situation from listeners that such auditors would want to know. [...] Nonmanipulative rhetors do not conceal relevant and important features of what they believe or what they intend precisely because they value the other as moral equals to themselves. A system of such communicators would animate their communicative activities by the guide of the moral law and its various formulations discussed here. In the ideal case, the autonomy of speaker *and* audience would be preserved and promoted in an equal fashion per the ideal of the kingdom of ends [...]”(p. 101)

In other words, persuasive speech is allowable if it is in harmony with the moral law. A speaker can make use of rhetoric as long as he treats his addressees as ends in themselves; this is what distinguishes a “non-manipulative” from a “manipulative use” of language. Stroud considers Kant’s mention of the “art of reciprocal communication of ideas” (*Kunst der wechselseitigen Mitteilung der Ideen*) as a heading for this ethical culture of speech, which he takes as a cornerstone of the Kantian kingdom of ends. Any community of autonomous persons lacking such a culture of speech is doomed to keep silent. But what does such a rhetorical practice look like exactly?

In the following three chapters, Stroud attempts to flesh out his interpretation by locating Kantian eloquence in the three spheres of education, religion and “critical communication” or politics. Each of these spheres provides important examples of how speech can influence others in morally legitimate ways. The paradigm of such a non-manipulative use of language, however, is *educative speech*, which is the topic of chapter 4. For Stroud, the problem both of rhetoric and of education in Kant is how extraneous cause and autonomy can be reconciled. At first sight, the alternative of legality and morality – of coercive “external discipline” and free “self-discipline” – appears to be exhaustive, which makes efficacious speech and autonomy appear to be irreconcilable. This problem turns out to be very similar to the general problem of education: Teachers always have to bridge the “gulf between the internal action of setting the right ends [...] and external actions aimed at influencing the use of such choice, including attempts at habituation and training” (p. 107f.). What is needed, therefore, is “an account of how educational (or external) means can be used to cultivate (or cause) moral ends” (p. 109). Such an account should at the same time provide clues to the Kantian culture of speech.

According to Stroud, the key to Kantian rhetoric is *examples*. The “heart of Kant’s educative rhetoric” is, so he claims, “the directed use, often in educational or religious settings, of linguistic devices to show the real possibility and desirability of *instantiating the moral dispositions*” (p. 125; emphasis added). Kant is, to be sure, insistent that examples can often be harmful in education; they cannot be used to present the principles of morality and under certain circumstances even subvert morality, e.g., when they arouse jealousy or encourage mere imitation (p. 114). Still, he endorses the use of examples insofar as they, as he himself expresses it, do “not serve as a model but only as a proof that it is really possible to act in conformity with duty” (p. 115). What Kant has in mind here, according to Stroud, is a particular kind of stipulated example that aims “at producing an experience through discursive means that motivates or persuades that agent to adopt a certain self-conception” (p. 117). More specifically, such speech persuades the agent to conceive of herself as a *moral self*: Examples have the rhetorical force to make moral reason “comprehensible and palatable to the subject” (p. 119) by presenting the purely conceptual as a concrete “way of thinking”. Thus the “lively presentation in examples” Kant mentions in the *Critique of Judgment* is essential to moral education: It is appropriate to present otherwise non-presentable ideas and to elucidate, by analogy, what itself cannot be an object of the senses. In this way, examples have the force to make the moral law attractive, to train the power of judgment and to support the process of character formation. By “affecting a sort of intrinsic motivation” (p. 130), instantiation provides a middle ground between coercive external discipline and free self-discipline.

The thorough elaborations in the two remaining chapters – the many details of which cannot be reproduced here – prove in many ways how fruitful Stroud’s perspective is

for the interpretation of Kant's writings on Ethics, Religion, Politics or Anthropology. In the realm of religion (chapter 5), Stroud substantiates his general claims by using the cases of religious narratives, myths, symbols, ritual and prayers. Throughout, Kantian rhetoric is presented as a social practice within an ecclesiastical community: Not sermons alone but the vivid communicative exchange of ideas will give rise to the rhetorical experience that supports moral cultivation. Along similar lines, Stroud describes the rhetorical culture of a Kantian political community as being based on non-coercive practices of discussion (chapter 6). In Kant's view, argumentation is basically a public testing of opinions and beliefs and, therefore, has to follow the "maxims of thinking for ourselves *and* from the position of our audience" (p. 216). Such critical communication inevitably implies an ethical dimension: Kantian argumentation demands the speaker to treat an interlocutor not just as a rational person in a formal sense but as a finite human being capable of judgments.

Many of those who find it unlikely that one could ever find the outline of a rhetorical theory in Kant will be surprised how Stroud makes his case. The arguments and the textual evidence presented leave little room for doubt that the subject matter of rhetoric has indeed been one of Kant's concerns, particularly in his later writings. Certainly, the reader will have to accept that the problems of communicative practice and of an ethical culture of speech *are* the subject matter of rhetoric: Stroud describes rhetoric in a way that integrates dialectical elements that many would regard as opposed to rhetoric. But since the time of the Sophists, Isocrates and Cicero, discursive culture has been an essential part of the rhetorical tradition, and there is no need to restrict the topic to techniques of persuasive speech. Kant himself condemns "eloquence" (*Beredsamkeit*) only *in so far* as it takes the form of the art of persuasion, and this calls for examining what

the “good sense” of eloquence in Kant might be. Stroud provides a substantial and lucid answer to this question that merits further discussion.

Certainly, some issues would have to be amplified then: Some would certainly like to learn more about Kant’s relationship to 18th century rhetoric, particularly to Gottsched’s *Redekunst* that Kant seems to allude to when he condemns this discipline in the *Critique of Judgment*. Similarly, many traces leading to classical rhetoric would have to be explored: It could have been expected, e.g., that Stroud take up the topic of the *sublime* that has (as Lyotard pointed out) important sources in the rhetorical doctrine of style. Others might note that Stroud is perhaps underestimating the importance of Cicero for Kantian rhetoric by relating him to “popular philosophy”. After all, Kant not only attributes the label *vir bonus dicendi peritus* (wrongly) to Cicero but also alludes to *De Oratore* (III, 53, 202) in his definition of *hypotyposis* as “sub aspectum subjecto”. – Such details notwithstanding, however, Stroud’s study is an extremely valuable approach to a far-reaching topic. Kant’s conception of communicative practice not only deserves attention in its own right. A thorough understanding of how Kant conceived of speech might also shed new light on his ethical thinking as a whole. Stroud’s investigation points in the direction of a Kantian ethics of communication that will perplex many of those who are used to taking Kant as a paradigm of formal rationality. As so often, rhetoric turns out to be more than a sideline of philosophy.

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