

1-1-1990

Comments on the Rhetoric Project in Methodology

John B. Davis

Marquette University, john.davis@marquette.edu

Comments on the Rhetoric Project in Methodology

John B. Davis

Marquette University, Milwaukee

At the Allied Social Science Association meetings in Atlanta last December Arjo Klamer argued, as he has before, that economics methodologists should pay particular attention to the language economists use and the variety of ways in which they express themselves in argument. He suggested that the usual focus on deductive inference and arguments' logical consistency is unrewarding, since the richness of language in analogy, metaphor, and story are the crucial vehicles for conveying economists' import, and language itself possesses a power to influence and communicate ideas that typically goes beyond an author's more conscious intent. It is not, then, the inherent logic of a given statement or position that is essential in economic argument, but rather the language in which that argument is expressed, together with the circumstances in which this occurs that must be examined to explain the methodological thinking of economists.

Against this, it should be noted that it is hardly clear that argument depends in an essential way upon the language in which it is expressed, or that the logic of an argument is not still something over and above its linguistic representation. Indeed, methodologists less acquainted with the rhetoric project in methodology often take this on faith, though admittedly it is not altogether obvious how one would go about demonstrating that an argument's logic is truly independent of its mode of expression. This would require some conception of a logical apparatus distinct in nature from its linguistic expression, and, as Klamer rightfully emphasizes, we are very much accustomed to thinking of the logic of our thoughts in terms of the logic of language.

Here, however, it is briefly argued that there is a relatively straightforward means of showing that the logic of an argument — as captured in the communication of propositions that are demonstrably non-linguistic in nature — is indeed independent of its linguistic expression. Accordingly, while it cannot be denied that the linguistic form of an argument significantly influences those to whom it is communicated, nonetheless, it is maintained here that it is but a sufficient and not a necessary condition for the understanding of a

proposition that it be expressed in linguistic form. On this view, the rhetoric project still occupies an important role in economics methodology, though what it best focuses upon, it will be suggested, is less the role of language in argument, and more the pure pragmatics involved in the communication of propositions in a disciplinary community.

This latter notion is best introduced by noting that since the rhetoric project relies upon the persuasive character of language to explain the persuasiveness of economic argument, it is first and foremost concerned to understand what makes an argument persuasive. A key determinant in the evaluation of any argument's persuasiveness, moreover, is its believability. Indeed, as Klamer emphasizes, we often suffer a sort of cognitive dissonance upon hearing of a theory's claims, and this experience naturally encourages us to ask what makes a theory believable. The question of a theory's believability, however, raises the classic philosophical problem of intentionality, namely, how mental representation is related to the world. Intentionality, further, possesses two distinct aspects, each of which is essential to its explanation: first, a subjective dimension, as reflected in the propositional attitudes assumed by individuals (e.g., the "I believe" in "I believe that such and such" or the "I desire" in "I desire that such and such"), and second, an objective dimension, as reflected in the propositions that are objects of individuals' cognitive or affective acts (such as that which is believed or that which is desired). Accordingly, a full account of a theory's believability would seem to entail some explanation of both propositional attitudes and propositions themselves.

The rhetoric project seems to have focused almost exclusively on the subjective dimension of intentionality, arguably because of its consistent interest in the beliefs and intentions of economists in particular disciplinary communities in their publications and discussions with one another. What opinion, then, would the rhetoric project have about the nature of a proposition? It seems fair to say that on Klamer's view a proposition would inevitably be a linguistic entity. That is, when an economist asserts a proposition or belief, namely, that such and such is the case, she or he has in mind some particular

set of words structured in some particular fashion, which then influences others precisely in virtue of the way in which the language expressing that proposition is composed. Or, the economist might be said to have in mind a number of different ways of possibly wording a belief or proposition, but still that belief necessarily would ultimately need to take on some particular linguistic form in order to be communicated. In either case, it is the multiplicity of these linguistic forms which a proposition must assume that is of interest to the rhetoric project, since their color and texture, as it were, is the substance of individuals' communication with one another, and thus an indispensable focus in an account of theory believability.

Such a view of propositions, however, creates significant difficulties for the ascription of beliefs to individuals — certainly a central issue in the explanation of communication. Quite simply, individuals can be said to hold many beliefs which they have not only never put into words, but of which they are often altogether unaware. For example, it is probably fair to say of most people that they believe the moon is bigger than an apple. Yet at the same time, it is unlikely that many of us have ever said such a thing or have had words to such effect run through our minds. Moreover, it would be wrong to say that an individual's failure to have ever worded a proposition such as this one implies that such a belief or proposition cannot be attributed to that individual. Though it were never to have occurred to most of us to think that the moon is bigger than an apple, that we would assent to such a proposition when first asked as to its truth or falsity nonetheless implies prior belief in that proposition, since the query by itself cannot produce that belief. A proposition believed, then, is not invariably linguistic, and, because many things may thus be believed without having been articulated, much disciplinary communication may well trade upon an often implicit non-linguistic understanding.

Chomsky's research into deep grammatical language structure might be thought to have suggested as much. That is, the irony of the search for a deep grammatical structure to explain the versatility and novelty of linguistic expression is that the idea of an underlying structure of language implies an extra-linguistic grounding for language. Of course this all makes an account of the nature of propositions especially difficult, since the very idea of a non-linguistic logical structure requisite to communication seems to connote the idea of something essentially inaccessible. However, other themes in Klammer's characterization of disciplinary communication offer promise here. For example, Klammer suggests that economists, upon being

confronted with ideas they do not find familiar or conformable to their existing thinking, often react by exercising a sort of analogical reasoning concerning those ideas. That is, they ask how new ideas in new contexts may function similarly to old ideas in altogether different contexts, and thus operate with what Klammer terms a reasoning in terms of possibilities.

This notion is provocative. In drawing an analogy one detects similarity in dissimilar contexts, and embraces a proposition that is linguistically distinct from the one upon which it depends. If one says, for example, that the moon is bigger than an apple, because one thinks — and might well say — that a house is bigger than a microbe, then the new assertion about the moon and apple depends upon setting aside the linguistic resources embodied in the view of the house and the microbe. Indeed, one asserts that the moon is bigger than an apple, because one has the conviction that one knows something not communicated linguistically, that is, that the logical similarity-dissimilarity relationship holds between the two comparisons. On this view, then, when one economist persuades another that some matter unfamiliar to one should be looked at in the manner of some other matter familiar to both, the success had in persuasion is first and foremost explained by the aptness of the comparison, and only secondarily by the language employed.

This does not imply that language is an unimportant dimension of disciplinary communication. It does imply that an exclusive focus on language in argument is a misleading emphasis in the study of rhetoric, since theory believability and persuasion arguably operate via a logic of argument that is largely independent of linguistic form. This conception of rhetoric in a disciplinary community is not, of course, altogether absent from Klammer's thinking, since he recognizes the important role that such devices as analogy, metaphor, and story play in reasoning. However, Klammer also seems to confuse the underlying logic of communication, as it is captured in these devices, and its linguistic representation. This makes it difficult to appreciate the characteristically non-linguistic, more properly pragmatic dimensions of argument that are fundamental to theory adoption, adaptation, and rejection, which should be the focus of the rhetoric project in methodology.