Comprehensive Exam Practice: Rhetoric is Epistemic in Nietzsche, Bakhtin, and Foucault

Audrey Cisneros

The University of Texas at El Paso

Question: Explain the development of a particular theme in the history of rhetoric and its significance across theorists/rhetors, time, and/or contexts.

Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche offers a particularly remarkable theorization of language and knowledge-making which deviates greatly from the 18th century Enlightenment Rhetorics and the 19th century theoretic precursors. In his essay “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” he argues truth is a “lie,” or social construction created through language—which is an imprecise reflection or interpretation the man made fixed convention. Nietzsche claims man inherently seeks to “exist socially and with the herd” and such desire creates a “truth drive” leading to the social construction of designated “truths” created first through the legislation of language. He specifically argues that “a uniformly valid and binding designation is invented for things, and this legislation of language likewise establishes the first laws of truth” (Nietzsche, 1172) which thus creates “relations of things to men” (Nietzsche, 1173). Along this same vein, he states that the “thing in itself” or a “pure truth” is “incomprehensible” and is “something in the least not worth striving for” (Nietzsche, 1173). If language is an imprecise reflection, then so are concepts, as, he states: “a word becomes a concept insofar as it simultaneously has to fit countless more or less similar cases—which means, purely and simply, cases which are never equal” (Nietzsche, 1174)—again noting linguistic imprecision. Finally, he explicitly states that truth then is

a movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short a sum or human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force (Nietzsche, 1174).

He argues that man unconsciously abides by his social norm, and lies accordingly to his socially imposed order, stating that truthfulness “means to employ the usual metaphors…to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie with the herd and in a manner binding upon everyone” (Nietzsche, 1174). Truth thus, is a socially agreed upon opinion constructed though the imprecise social linguistic norm like concepts and perceptual metaphors. He describes an “anthropomorphic truth which contains not a single point which would be ‘true in itself’ or really and universally valid apart from man” (Nietzsche, 1175) in effect arguing that between subject and object, there is no correctness but rather “at most an aesthetic relation…[or] suggestive transference” (Nietzsche, 1176). Nietzsche claims that essence of things does not “appear” in the empirical world due to the thing itself, but rather due to a repetition and “handing down” of an “original nerve stimulus” (1176). His quintessential notion surrounding language revolves around its imprecision, which seeps into his philosophy on reality and knowledge-making, as language reflects opinion, language creates perceptual truth. “T”ruth is thus unreachable as knowledge is created through linguistic imprecision, making reality a socially agreed upon truth, driven by man’s desire to exist amongst his society.

Nietzsche’s position that all language is rhetorical and was viewed as radical in his 19th century context. His theory on truth as social and rhetorically constructed, arguing that language is a rough imprecision and thus communication and existence is a socially agreed upon opinion or “lie,” clearly distinguished him, in a time when rationalism and the search for “T”ruth guided (and many would argue, still does) science and philosophy. While his works have only recently been recognized, many argue that he is among the foundational theorists regarding rhetoric as epistemic, and Bizzell and Herzberg tell us, that his work deeply influenced 20th century philosophers, whom remain to highly influential in Rhetorical and Critical Studies.

Bakhtin

Bakhtin proposes a view constituting language, reality, and knowledge-making as social constructed, wholly contextual, and indivisible from each other, essentially arguing “that language and the forms it takes can be properly understood as dialogue, as utterances that take place within social situation and that at least partly constitute them” (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1206). He states that language, comprised of signs, are a “semiotic assumption [and have] no inherent meaning in the sounds of symbols of language” (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1208). Language thus fails to have meaning outside of a context, and meaning itself has been dialogically constructed. Moreover, Bakhtin argues “the actual reality of language-speech is…the social event of verbal interaction implemented in an utterance or utterances” (1221)…[wherein] “meaning belongs to a word in its position between speakers…[and] it is realized only in the process of active, responsive understanding” (1226). He continues this line of inquiry, going so far as to claiming that “verbal communication can never be understood and explained outside of this connection with a concrete situation” (Bakhtin, 1222) and finally stating “the reality of a sign is wholly a matter determined by that communication [and] the entire reality of the world is wholly absorbed in its function of being a sign” (Bakhtin, 1213). In other words, language and thus reality—by default due to its binding connection to understanding, is a continuous dialogic social collective, reflecting the ideological, social, and physical constructs of the individual and the addressee as well as contextual place and space of their existence, thereby making ideology inseparable from reality, language, and meaning making. Reality/consciousness is social-ideological (Bakhtin, 1211) and social intercourse give rise to meaning making, as he claims “sign bears upon a sign…consciousness itself can arise and become a viable fact only in the material embodiment of signs” (Bakhtin, 1212). He links signs to ideology, stating “wherever a sign is present, ideology is present too” (Bakhtin, 1211), and connecting/intertwining ideology to language and knowledge making: “the ideological...place in existence is in the special, social material of signs created by man [and] can arise only in interindividual territory” (Bakhtin, 1212). Thus, language is given meaning by man’s use (speaker, addressee) and ideology is produced and interpreted through the same dialogic process. Bakhtinian theory foreruns social constructivism through its deeply embedded notions of reality/consciousness, language, and knowledge-making to sociocontextual existence(s).

Influenced and highly critical of the structural linguistic and semantic theories of Peirce and Saussure, Baktin adheres to the notion of language as a sign system. It is through the rejection of the scientific social linguistic position which, he claims, ignores human and contextual interaction that sets Baktin apart. His dialogic theories account the for social and rhetorical constructs of material and ideological reality, and claims consciousness and meaning arrive from social intercourse, charging discourse with social action and constitution of both the literal and interpretive. Bizzell and Herzberg note the Bakhtin’s “fit” within the social turn of Rhetorical studies, making Bahktin’s dialogic theories salient today.

Foucault

In “The Archeology of Knowledge” and “The Order of Discourse” Michel Foucault theorizes “discourse” as a form of action which all together binds language, knowledge-making, and truth as he essentially concludes that “there is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice, and any discursive practice may be defined by the knowledge that it forms (Foucault, 1969 as cited in Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001)…There is no transcendental continuity to knowledge…knowledge is the function of a material discourse in a social order” (Bizzell and Herzberg, 1434). For Foucault, discourse is both legislative and creates knowledge, as he states: “discourse finds a way of limiting its domain, of defining what it is talking about, of giving it the status of an object—and therefore of making it manifest, nameable, and describable” (1437). Furthermore, he describes discursive formations as “a group of relations established between authorities of emergence, delimitation and specification” (1439) positing them at the “limit of discourse” claiming “they offer it objects of which it can speak, or rather…they determine the group of relations that discourse must establish in order to speak… deal.. name… analyze… classify… explain them, etc. These relations characterize…the discourse itself as a practice” (Foucault, 1440). While he agrees that discourses are “composed of signs” he claims that they “do more than use these signs to designate things” (1441) but instead they constitute the knowledge from which it forms. Furthermore, Foucault argues that a subject position is multiple and knowledge is wholly contextual, stating “conceived discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined. It is a space of exteriority in which a network of distinct sites is deployed” (Foucault, 1444). Defining the statement as the “elementary unit of discourse” (1445) Foucault claims the statement itself is “is susceptible to difference of material, substance, time, and place” (1458) and are understood only within its context: “a statement always belongs to a series or a whole, always plays a role among other statements, deriving support from them and distinguishing itself from them: it is always part of a network of statements, in which it has a role, however minimal it may be, to play” (1456). Thus, an act of formulation “exist through one another in an exact reciprocal relationship” (1447) all together binding and contextualizing subject postion(s), language, knowledge-making, truth, and reality. Finally, he enmeshes discourse to a network of social power, claiming “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality” (1461).

Coming from the 1960’s French school of philosophical thought, Foucault is “the champion of postmodern opposition to philosophy’s quest for universals and absolutes” (Bizzell and Herzberg, 1196). Similar to Nietzsche’s notion of an imprecise linguistic system and social constructed truths, and similar to Bakhtin’s notions of dialogic theories accounting for the contextual, ideological, material, and interpretive, Foucault furthers this vein of thought through his theories discourse, knowledge and power. Moreover, his theories on rhetoric (discourse) as epistemic have found a stronghold in rhetorical studies, as “he enriches and complicates the notion of context within a network of archives, disciplines, institutions, and social practices that control the production of discourse” (Bizzell and Herzberg, 1434). These theories, in many cases, both facilitate and align itself with much of the disciplinary goals found in rhetorical studies.

References

Bakhtin, M. (1929). Marxism and the philosophy of language. In P. Bizzell & B. Herzberg (Eds.), The rhetorical tradition (2 ed., pp. 1206-1226). Boston: Bedford/St.Martin's.

Foucault, M. (1969). The archeology of knowledge. In P. Bizzell & B. Herzberg (Eds.), The rhetorical tradition (2 ed., pp. 1432-1460). Boston: Bedford/St.Martin.

Foucault, M. (1969). The order of discourse. In P. Bizzell & B. Herzberg (Eds.), The rhetorical tradition (2 ed., pp. 1460-1470). Boston: Bedford/St.Martin.

Nieztche, F. (1873). On truth and lies in a nonmoral sense. In P. Bizzell & B. Herzberg (Eds.), The rhetorical tradition (2 ed., pp. 1168-1179). Boston: Bedford/St.Martin.