

RICHARD WEAVER ON
RHETORIC AND DIALECTIC¹

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I will begin briefly with Richard M. Weaver's first and best known book, *Ideas Have Consequences*.² In this work Weaver contrasts Plato's world of stable universals, and thus of epistemological, logical, and moral certainty, with the morass of decline, decadence, and ethical and epistemological relativism he finds characteristic of the modern West. In his foreword to the paperback edition, written in 1959, a decade after its original publication, Weaver explains that he "was attempting a rigorous cause-and-effect analysis of the decline of belief in standards and values" (v). On the surface of his argument, his chief culprit—or "best representative of a change which came over man's conception of reality" during the medieval period—is William of Occam, "who propounded the fateful doctrine of nominalism, which denies that universals have a real existence" (3).

According to Weaver, this is the point at which, "Like Macbeth, Western man made an evil decision, which has become the efficient and final cause of other evil decisions" (2). The history of the West from this point on is one of decline, the domino effect on a large scale—"real universals" fell first, and thus began a series of intellectual and moral collapses which seem, in Weaver's telling, to be almost totally deterministic in nature. The final result is that, "For four centuries every man has

¹ Prepared for "The Ethics of Rhetoric in a Digital Age" Regional Meeting of the Philadelphia Society, September 24-25, 2010, Atlanta, Georgia. Dedicated to the memory of Ted Smith III, friend, member of the Philadelphia Society, and tireless scholar and promoter of the study of Richard Weaver.

² Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948; "Phoenix Books" paperback edition, 1960). References to the Phoenix Books edition parenthetically inserted in text.

been not only his own priest but his own professor of ethics, and the consequence is an anarchy which threatens even that minimum consensus of value necessary to the political state" (2).

The real culprit behind this precipitous decline, however, is not William of Occam, but is revealed much later—and only in passing—in *Ideas Have Consequences*. In the chapter entitled "The Spoiled-Child Psychology" Weaver states, "The way was prepared for the criterion of comfort and mediocrity when the Middle Ages abandoned the ethic of Plato for that of Aristotle." While Plato—and Christianity, also, Weaver adds—argued for "pursuing virtue until worldly consequence becomes a matter of indifference," Aristotle (and, Weaver suggests, Thomistic Christianity which is influenced by Aristotle) took a less transcendent approach. For Aristotle, "the virtuous life was an avoidance of extremes, a middle course between contraries considered harmful. Such a doctrine leaves out of account the possibility that there are some virtues which do not become defective through increase, that virtues like courage and generosity may be pursued to an end at which man effaces himself" (119).

For Weaver, "Aristotle remains a kind of natural historian of the virtues, observing and recording them as he observed techniques of the drama, but not thinking of a spiritual ideal. A life accommodated to this world and shunning the painful experiences which extremes, including those of virtue, entail was what he proposed for his son Nicomachus" (119).

I began with *Ideas Have Consequences* because it provides the intellectual backdrop and foundation for Weaver's *The Ethics of Rhetoric*,³ published in 1953, and because this initial evaluation of Plato and Aristotle must be seen in order to understand a later modification in Weaver's thought. I will touch on two chapters in *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, "Edmund Burke and the Argument from Circumstance" and "Abraham Lincoln and the Argument from Definition." In these chapters Weaver asks and offers an answer to this question: "What can be inferred from the aspect of any argument or body of arguments about the philosophy of its maker?" (55) Weaver maintains that "the rhetorical content of the major premise which the speaker habitually uses is the key to his primary view of existence." In addition to its role in the logical structure of an argument, the major premise is "expressive of values and a characteristic major premise characterizes the user" (56). A few pages later Weaver makes an even stronger claim: "A man's method of argument is a truer index in his beliefs than his explicit profession of principles" (58).

Weaver here identifies three sources of argument: 1) The Argument from Genus, "based on the nature of the thing," and he concludes "that those who habitually argue from genus are in their personal philosophy idealists" (56). 2) The Argument from Similitude, which "invoke[s] essential . . . correspondences," and which "expresses belief in a oneness of the world." Speakers who predominately argue from similitude "look toward some final, transcendental unity" (56-57). 3) The Argument from Circumstance, which Weaver asserts is "the nearest of all arguments to purest expediency," "savors urgency rather than perspicacity," and "is

³ Richard M. Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953; "Gateway Edition," 1965). References to the Gateway Edition parenthetically inserted in text.

the least philosophical of all sources of argument, since theoretically it stops at the level of perception of fact” (57).

Because Weaver is generally seen as a Southern apologist, almost everyone who reads these chapters is surprised, and some are offended, that Weaver proceeds to praise Lincoln and to criticize Burke. Weaver charges that Burke had “a strong addiction to argument from circumstance,” an approach that is, according to Weaver, “fatal to conservatism” (58). Weaver turns to Lincoln “to find what Burke lacked,” and what Lincoln discovered and Burke did not is that “political arguments must ultimately be based on genus or definition” (84). Therefore, in *The Ethics of Rhetoric* Weaver concludes that Lincoln rather than Burke offers a model for the contemporary conservative.

In his chapter on Lincoln, Weaver makes the claim that “the true conservative is one who sees the universe as a paradigm of essences, of which the phenomenology of the world is in sort of continuing approximation. Or, to put this in another way, he sees it as a set of definitions which are struggling to get themselves defined in the real world” (112).

Now, while William F. Buckley, Jr., would at times quote this first sentence as a valiant effort at characterizing the conservative, I’m not so sure about that. Even if one sees “the universe as a paradigm of essences,” one of conservative temper may believe that human will and agency is such as to drive a wedge between the eternal *eidos* and the reality of life on earth. One of Augustinian temper may believe that Adam’s sin was so deep as to shake the structure of God’s creation. If one reads the next sentence—the universe “is a set of definitions which are struggling to get

themselves defined in the real world”— through Voegelinian eyes one might at least consider the possibility that this comes perilously close to an effort aimed at the “immanentization of the eschaton.” Voegelin, we know, was no happier with an idea or vision of a conservative heaven on earth than with a gnostic one.

I will not pursue these possibilities here, but want to turn to another work by Weaver, his last book, *Visions of Order*,⁴ published posthumously in 1964, and suggest that with this work we get a modification in Weaver’s approach to the issues I have been discussing. In his preface to the paperback version of this work Ted Smith argues that *Visions of Order* “mark[s] a retreat from the pure Platonism of *The Ethics of Rhetoric* to a more organic view of language and culture and a more explicitly Christian conception of reality” (xiv). Again, I will focus only on a part of this book, the chapter on “The Cultural Role of Rhetoric.” Here Weaver contrasts rhetoric with dialectic as alternative approaches to investigating, understanding, and acting in the world.

First, rhetoric: Weaver opens with the claim that “Rhetoric depends upon history.” He continues, “All questions that are susceptible to rhetorical treatment arise out of history, and it is to history that the rhetorician turns for his means of persuasion” (55). Let me pause here look back to my earlier discussion, and ask a question: If rhetoric “depends on history” and if “it is to history that the rhetorician turns for his means of persuasion,” isn’t it unavoidable that rhetoric is intimately related to circumstance?

⁴ Richard M. Weaver, *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Time* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1995). References parenthetically inserted in text.

Second, dialectic: According to Weaver, “Dialectic is abstract reasoning upon the basis of propositions” (56). Later in the chapter Weaver tells us that “dialectic is epistemological and logical; it is concerned with discriminating into categories and knowing definitions” (64). While dialectic is necessary for “promoting understanding in the realm of thought,” Weaver insists that “by its very nature [dialectic] does not tell man what he must do.” Let me pause here, look back to my earlier discussion, and ask a question: What is the relationship between the argument from definition and dialectic?

Weaver seeks to avoid a confrontation—dialectic versus rhetoric—which requires the acceptance of one and rejection of the other. Rather, he maintains that “States and societies cannot be secure unless there is in the public expression a partnership of dialectic and rhetoric” (56). If, however, Weaver were forced into a corner and had to choose, I think it is fairly clear that his preference would be for rhetoric, not necessarily because of the greater strengths of rhetoric but because of the greater dangers posed by dialectic operating by itself. Weaver writes, “too exclusive reliance upon dialectic is a mistake of the most serious consequence because *dialectic alone in the social realm is subversive*” (57; emphasis in original).⁵

I am not sure that the word “daring” is one that many readers would use to describe Weaver’s thought—or that Weaver himself would appreciate having applied to his thought—but he does take a daring turn at this point in his essay. To

⁵ Writes Weaver, “The point of this chapter will be . . . to give up the role of rhetoric and to trust all to dialectic is a fast road to social subversion” (57).

illustrate how “one can become too committed to dialectic for his own good and the good of those whom he influences,” Weaver examines the trial of Socrates (57).

In this discussion Weaver appears to be a reluctant prosecutor. He admits that “It would be blasphemous for anyone to suggest that the Athenian assembly did not commit a dreadful injustice.” Nevertheless, he muses that, “since the condemnation occurred, there must have been some cause.” With these hesitant first steps Weaver then moves swiftly, arguing that “the cause lies much deeper” than Alcibiades or other of Socrates’ students having gone astray or personal resentment of those embarrassed in conversation by Socrates. According to Weaver, it was not a small cabal that railroaded him, but it was “the people of Athens [who] had a case against Socrates” (57).

Weaver reminds us that Socrates was not only “one of the greatest ethical teachers of all times” but also “the greatest dialectician of his time.” The importance of these two aspects of Socrates’ practice may be weighed differently from different vantage points:

We who study him at this remote date are chiefly impressed with the ethical aspect of his teaching, but those who listened to him in Athens may have been more impressed by his method, which was that of dialectic. By turning his great dialectical skill upon persona and institutions, Socrates could well have produced the feeling that he was an enemy of the culture which the Greeks had created. He was, in one sense of course, the highest expression of it, but the kind of skill he brought to a peak of development needs

harmonizing with other things. When a dialectic operates independently of the concrete facts of a situation, it can be destructive. . . . A dialectic which becomes irresponsibly independent shatters the matrix which provides the base for its operation. In this fact must have lain the real source of the hostility toward Socrates. (58)

Weaver then provides selections from Plato's *Apology* and offers a commentary on Socrates' defense. I will highlight key points in Weaver's discussion.

1) "The way in which Socrates chose to meet [the charge] was exactly the way to exacerbate the feelings of those whom he had earlier offended" (59). 2) Socrates' argument with Melitus concerning whether Socrates believes in the gods

shows in a clear way the weapon that Socrates had wielded against so many of his contemporaries. It is, in fact, a fine example of the dialectical method: first, the establishment of a class; then the drawing out of implications; and finally the exposure of a contradiction. As far as logic goes, it is undeniably convincing; yet after all, this is not the way in which one talks about one's belief in the gods. *The very rationality of it suggests some lack of organic feeling.* [my emphasis] It has about it something of the look of a trap or a trick . . . (60-61)

Weaver allows that Socrates employs other modes of argument in his defense also, but "there is in the *Apology*, as a whole, enough of the clever dialectician—of the man who is concerned merely with logical inferences—to bring

to the minds of the audience the side of Socrates which had aroused enmity” (61).

Throughout his career,

Socrates rarely lost an opportunity for a sally against speechmakers. The result of his procedure was to make the dialectician appear to stand alone as the professor of wisdom and to exclude certain forms of cognition and expression which have a part in holding a culture together. It is not surprising that to the practitioners of these arts, his dialectic looked overgrown, even menacing. (61)

At the conclusion of his discussion of the trial Weaver offers his own reflection on Socrates: “In truth it does require an extreme stand to rule out poetry, politics, and rhetoric. The use of a body of poetry in expressing the values of a culture will not be questioned except by one who takes the radical view presented by Plato in Book III of the *Republic*” (61-62). Whether or not poets can withstand a frontal assault from Socratic dialectic, Weaver concludes, “if they are good poets, they show reasoning power enough for their poetry and contribute something to the mind of which dialectic is incapable: feeling and motion” (62).

These elements may also be supplied by rhetoric, Weaver suggests, because “Rhetoric is designed to move men’s feelings in the direction of a goal.” In contrast with dialectic, rhetoric “is concerned not with abstract individuals, but with men in being,” and thus it “must be concerned with real or historical situations” (63). At the heart of rhetoric is the ability of the rhetorician to enter “into a solidarity with the audience” through tacit agreement with its perception of reality, founded on

“matters that everyone has in a sense participated in” (63). This also contrasts with dialectic, which seems to (and in Socrates’ case this is made clear by Socrates himself) emphasize the distance between the dialectician and his listeners.

Summarizing the effects of dialectic, Weaver identifies a number of its weaknesses from the perspective of society. First, “by its very nature it does not tell man what he must do.” Second, it seems to truncate life: dialectic “would be sufficient if the whole destiny of man were to know. But we are reminded that the end of living is activity and not mere cognition” (64). For Weaver, “The individual who makes his approach to life through dialectic alone does violence to life through his abstractive process” (64-65). Third, the dialectician “makes himself antisocial because his discriminations are apart from the organic feeling of the community” (65).

Weaver concludes from the foregoing discussion “that a society cannot live without rhetoric. There are some things in which the group needs to believe which cannot be demonstrated to everyone rationally.” Acceptance of these beliefs “is pressed upon us by a kind of moral imperative arising from the group as a whole,” but the dialectician is resistant to this pressure, and to put these matters “to the test of dialectic alone is to destroy the basis of belief in them and weaken the cohesiveness of society.” Here we seem to be at the heart of the matter for Weaver: “The crucial defect of dialectic alone is that it ends in what might be called social agnosticism” (65).

What does society do with the “social agnostic”? It may not know what to do with him, even though “his very existence is a kind of satire or aspersion upon its necessity to act.” If society is uncomfortable but uncertain what to do it may isolate him so that he can’t corrupt the young, or it let him alone to pursue his dialectical investigations, perhaps in a university, or, if it is a very progressive society, it may give him his own talk show on MSNBC or Comedy Central. Perhaps, however, a society may “know what to do with him, in a very crude and unpleasant form: it will put him away. Those who have to cope with passing reality feel that neutrality is a kind of desertion. In addition to understanding, they expect a rhetoric of action, and [Weaver concludes in a chastened tone] we must concede them some claim to this” (65).⁶

We all know how the actual trial of Socrates before the Athenian jury turned out, first with Socrates being found guilty of the charges, and then being condemned to death. But how does the trial of Socrates at the hands of Richard Weaver end? As I have already suggested, Weaver is a reluctant prosecutor, so along the way he recognizes evidence for the defense: there is a certain ambiguity in Socrates’ discussion of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* (61, 62), Socrates was not totally isolated from Athenian society (he served in the army honorably, he abided by the sentence

⁶ I should note in passing that at this point, if he is still sitting at Weaver’s bar, John Stuart Mill will hurriedly scribble “there needs protection also against the tyranny of prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them” (see *On Liberty*, chapter 1) on a napkin, raise his hand rapidly and yell, “Check, Please!” and head for the nearest exit.

imposed on him by the court), and at the end of his life Phaedo discovers him writing poetry in his cell (65-66). But how do things finally end in Weaver's retrial?

In Weaver's hands the indictment against Socrates has been transmuted into the charge that Socrates is "too much of a dialectician" (66). Earlier in the essay Weaver has told us that "The trend of Socrates' remarks," taken as a whole, "is that dialectic is sufficient for all the needs of man" (62). At this point, with gavel in the air, Weaver hesitates, because he cannot bring himself to declare Socrates guilty. Rather than issuing a verdict, Weaver finds that the indictment "has not been quashed" (66) and he leaves it to another jurist and another jury to finally bring the case to a conclusion.⁷ And everyone who has ever read a Socratic dialog, or heard his story told, has received a summons to serve on that jury.

Even though Weaver has not resolved the case against Socrates, I think it clear that he has found monomaniacal dialectic guilty of subverting the social realm. "In a summing up we can see that dialectic, when not accompanied by a historical consciousness and responsibility, works to dissolve those opinions, based partly on feeling, which hold a society together. It tends, therefore, to be essentially revolutionary and without commitment to practical realities" (70).

⁷ Throughout this essay Weaver presents the following *amicus curiae* brief on Socrates' behalf: 1) "The dialectician knows, but he knows in a vacuum; or, he knows, but he is without knowledge of how to act. Unless he is sustained by faith at one end or the other—unless he embraced something before he began the dialectical process or unless he embraced it afterward—he remains an unassimilable social agnostic" (65). 2) "Socrates was saved from trivialization . . . by his initial commitment to the Beautiful and the Good. He is also saved by the marvelous rhetoric of Plato." Weaver's brief concludes, "These were not enough to save him personally in the great crisis of his life, but they give high seriousness to the quest which he represents" (70).

In the end, however, Weaver still sees the need for rhetoric and dialectic to work together, as can be seen in his summary remarks on rhetoric: "Rhetoric, on the other hand, tries to bring opinion into closer line with the truth which dialectic pursues. It is therefore cognizant of the facts and situations and it is at least understanding of popular attitudes" (70).

Let me briefly conclude this cursory survey of rhetoric and dialectic in Weaver's thought by pointing to an unfinished work by Weaver related to my theme. Growing out of his analysis of dialectic and rhetoric in "The Cultural Role of Rhetoric," Weaver came to see rhetoric and dialectic as not merely different modes of argument but as different models for life. Weaver thought that these different approaches were instantiated in the practical life of the American North (or more accurately, New England), which was dialectical in outlook, and the American South, which was rhetorical in outlook. He had completed three chapters in his projected book, and published one of them before his death; each chapter contrasts a Southerner and a New Englander who is representative of the cultural differences between the two regions. In "Two Types of American Individualism,"⁸ published in *Modern Age* in 1960, Weaver contrasts John Randolph of Roanoke and Henry David Thoreau. The two posthumously published essays are "Two Orators,"⁹ which deals with the famous Webster-Hayne debates, and "Two Diarists,"¹⁰ which examines the lives of Cotton Mather and William Byrd of Virginia. It will surprise no one who has

⁸ Reprinted in George M. Curtis, III, and James J. Thompson, Jr., eds., *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987): 77-103.

⁹ Originally published in *Modern Age* (1970) and reprinted in Curtis and Thompson: 104-133.

¹⁰ Published for the first time in Ted Smith III, ed., *In Defense of Tradition: Collected Shorter Writings of Richard M. Weaver, 1929-1963* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000): 720-48.

followed me thus far that Weaver remains critical of the dialectic approach to life and supportive of the rhetorical. But in important ways Weaver's conclusions are less important than his analysis, and it remains an area worthy of exploration and reflection to consider rhetoric and dialectic not merely as modes of communication but as modes of thought and action, and for that reason I recommend these articles to you.

I conclude with a concern I have been puzzling over for some time. Had Weaver had the opportunity to revisit Edmund Burke and Abraham Lincoln after his turn from Plato to Aristotle, how would he have rewritten those early chapters from *The Ethics of Rhetoric*? The key question, of course, is not what his evaluation of Burke and Lincoln would have been, but what his revised evaluation of the argument from circumstance and the argument from definition would be. Lincoln was no Socrates, driven by dialectic alone—as a rhetorician Lincoln could pluck “the mystic chords of memory”¹¹ in ways that touched and moved souls (either toward or away from himself), so I'm not sure Lincoln would have fallen in Weaver's estimation. Weaver himself might have come to express some concerns with the notion of the universe “as a set of definitions which are struggling to get themselves defined in the real world,” and he might rethink his understanding of conservatism based on this view. He might also have provided an altered evaluation of the strengths and value of the argument from definition alone. Perhaps the later Weaver would have been more sympathetic to argument from circumstance, and seen in

¹¹ See Lincoln's First Inaugural Address.

Burke intimations of natural law or other signs of transcendence that he had originally missed.

From our perspective today, one might conclude that both as rhetoricians and as political actors either Burke or Lincoln would be preferable to any of the alternatives now before us. That comment, of course, is but an invitation to let the arguments begin. Thank you for your kind attention.