

Review*Kant and the Promise of Rhetoric*

by Scott R. Stroud

Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press [ISBN: 978-0-271-06419-2 hb]

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At a time when the lines of demarcation between philosophy and rhetoric are nowhere as clear as they were in the eighteenth century, Scott Stroud has written an impressive monograph mining Immanuel Kant's philosophy for rhetorical gold. Postulating that every philosopher (indeed, every author) has a philosophy of rhetoric, even if only implicit or unconscious, this project resembles the likes of Martin Warner's *Philosophical Finesse*, Jeff Mason's *Philosophical Rhetoric*, Steve Fuller's *Philosophy, Rhetoric, and the End of Knowledge*, Chaim Perelman's *The New Rhetoric and the Humanities*, to name a few. Likewise, Stroud's inquiry is in line with the spirit of *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, a journal that has since 1968 been publishing scholarship on the rhetorical dimension of philosophical works as well as the philosophical underpinnings of rhetorical discourses. Beyond the above two similarities, however, Stroud's work occupies a unique place; no student of rhetoric has delved so deeply into Kant's corpus or advanced so sympathetic an interpretation of "Kantian rhetoric."

Stroud acknowledges upfront that Kant's disparaging remarks against rhetoric are difficult to finesse or explain away. Just the same, he takes on the challenge, seeking to reconcile what Kant says about rhetoric with what he does when he himself puts the *techne* into practice. Readers of this book will recognize the implicit argument at hand — it has been ad-

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KSO 2016: 42-47. Posted March 29, 2016www.kantstudiesonline.net

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vanced by several authors in Plato's case: a singular focus on his explicit indictment of rhetoric renders him an enemy of the art of persuasion; on the other hand, attention to his masterful use of language earns him accolades befitting a consummate rhetor. Stroud, however, does not rest his case on the two solutions afforded by the measure of emphasis. Rather, he insists that if we are to arrive at a more spherical Kantian view on rhetoric, we need to move in the direction of synthesis. Accordingly, he asks that we combine Kant's familiar accusations (rhetoric overpromises and under-delivers; it treats serious human affairs as if they were a matter of play; it robs people of their autonomy, etc.) with examples of Kantian eloquence, to wit, his letter to the grieving mother of one of his former students, Johann Friedrich von Funk. At minimum, such a combinatory undertaking urges us to bracket our dismissal of Kant, or declare it premature. More importantly, it assigns us the same artistic task that he himself has assumed: to bring into a harmonious relationship two seemingly antithetical forms of expression.

Throughout the book, Stroud takes it upon himself to ease the brunt of scholarly attacks on Kant for his antipathy to rhetoric. One such attempt revolves around the observation that Kant's animus against rhetoric does not surface until his later years. If this observation means to suggest that one's tastes in discourse change with age, Stroud is in good company. Isocrates had noted long ago that rhetorical bedazzling and bedazzlement are generally reserved for the youthful types. And David Hume, one of Kant's contemporaries in the circles of the Enlightenment, had expressed the same idea in tersely memorable terms in his *Of the Standard of Taste*: "At twenty, Ovid may be the favorite author; Horace at forty; and perhaps Tacitus at fifty." Another attempt is centered on the historical explanation that Kant may have overstated his case against rhetoric on account of his professional antagonism with one of

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his contemporaries, Christian Garve, a German translator of Cicero and a popularizer of philosophy. Even if hard-liners are not persuaded, they will have to allow for Stroud's softer stance.

Stroud also reads Kant's ridicule of rhetoric in the light of his other works (e.g., *Conflict of the Faculties*, *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*), with particular stress on his moral system of thought and its purported goal: the ideal community. The result of this kind of panoramic reading is that rhetoric is made into one component of a large philosophical system, not the instrumentality proper for addressing the inner workings, the tendencies and reverberations of the whole system. This is not a bad thing but it subordinates the promise of rhetoric to other, presumably more promising promises. The thrust of Stroud's reading is that for Kant there are at least two kinds of rhetoric: that which treats audiences as a means to the orator's end, really as dupes to be manipulated by the machinery of persuasion, and that which treats them as ends in themselves, to be elevated to ever higher levels of self-transcendence. The second kind, Stroud finds, is what Kant has in mind, a rhetoric that can contribute to the moral improvement of humankind by showing its audiences better versions of themselves and shedding light on the path leading to the preservation or reinforcement of their free, that is, autonomous rational will.

It goes without saying that, as a twenty-first century scholar, Stroud is the beneficiary of the "linguistic turn" and the expansion of rhetoric into domains unimagined by Kant. In this regard, he does not share Kant's view that philosophy and poetry are necessarily superior to rhetoric. He also recognizes that rhetoric happens not only in the traditional settings of the political assembly and the bar but also those of everydayness, e.g., the marketplace, the workplace, and the "other" bar, in short, everywhere one encounters and uses language. In the

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same vein, Stroud is quite aware that the goal of rhetoric is not only persuasion — *grace a* Kenneth Burke, rhetoric aims at identification, and, as Maurice Charland has shown, it can constitute an entire people. If we add to this Stroud's theoretical knowledge of linguistic communication, it becomes apparent that his available means of interpretation are considerably more elaborate and sophisticated than Kant's. Paradoxically, however, this abundance of interpretive means and high degree of sophistication make Stroud's project vulnerable. Portraying Kant, if not exactly a friend of rhetoric, at least a supporter of a morally informed rhetoric raises important questions.

One such question is why Stroud sidesteps considering rhetoric in the full light of Kant's aesthetics. Granted, the philosopher from Königsberg puts aesthetics in the service of morality. But if we put most of rhetoric's eggs in the basket of morality, as Stroud does, we risk an unbalanced perspective. Put differently, Quintilian's "good man" cannot be divorced from "speaking well." The fact that most of Kant's thinking on rhetoric appears in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* signals that for him the aesthetic is the domain par excellence for the examination of words as possible instances of beauty (or deformity) or, if Longinus and Edmund Burke be external arbiters, sublimity. Moreover, Kant's own appreciation of eloquence suggests that it is not altogether inconceivable that the artful language of the orator may set the audience's faculties into disinterested "free play."

When we turn from what Stroud does not do to what he does do, we are faced with other questions, most issuing from the logic of Kant's moral philosophy in its relation to rhetoric. If, as Kant asserts, morality is predicated on a standard of rationality according to which our rational will is autonomous, that is, if we are bound to the moral laws that we ourselves have authored, what are we to make of the formative forces of language in the emergence and development of our will?

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Insofar as language comes in from the outside and occupies us early on, and insofar as it subsequently continues to regulate our perceptions and world-making via its grammatical prescriptions, in what way(s) can we be viewed as possessing a will free from external influence? Is it not apparent that before we can even claim autonomy (from the Greek *auto* and *nomos*) we have already been determined to a large degree by the *nomos* of the language we have internalized? If in the interaction between orator and audience the orator always amounts to an external linguistic incursion into our consciousness, is our supposed autonomy always in danger? If so, should our listening be always accompanied by the suspicion that we are about to be hoodwinked? And should such a disposition make us reject Aristotle's observation that rhetoric exists to affect judgments? If we subscribe to Richard Weaver's view that all language is sermonic, in what way(s) do the sermons of poetry (Kant's highest form of art) protect our autonomy? Is it not possible that a veritable poet might be a shrewd, calculating and morally corrupt spirit? Stroud does tackle these and similar questions. If his answers have one weakness, it is that they are so formulated as to keep Kant intact. At no time does he take Kant to task for his shortcomings.

As a German author from the era of the Enlightenment, Kant presents additional obstacles to modern authors and readers. One of them is that his German vocabulary and "key" terms do not have perfect equivalencies in contemporary English. Here Stroud conscientiously explores nuances and approximations of the semantic field of Kant's terms, so as to get at what he might have been trying to convey to his readers. But even where translation is not an issue, the meaning of a particular Kantian term may be. In this regard, there is no better example than the term *disinterestedness*. Here Stroud runs into the same kind of difficulty that other interpreters of Kant before him have. Even if we accept Kant's explanation of this term as purely contem-

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plative pleasure, entirely disconnected from typical mundane goals, what are we to make of contemporary scholarly discussions in which a host of other terms (e.g. *interest*, *desire*, *stakes*, *agendas*) so dominate our thinking as to overshadow *disinterestedness*, or render it untenable? Even if the orator is interested only in the moral cultivation of the audience, s/he is still *interested* if only because all words are semantically charged.

This is not to say that Stroud pays no attention to contemporary sensibilities. Au contraire, he moves from Kant to the present and the reverse. Thus when he discusses ideology as a self-loving orientation interested in causal objects rather than in human agents and their utterances, he is bringing pressure to a fashionable academic topic by means of Kant's conceptual apparatus. And when he says that Kant has "a complex take on the value and use of communicative action" he is taking a well-known phrase from Habermas in order to make Kantian thought more palatable to a contemporary audience. In both cases, Stroud performs a balancing act and asks his readers to do likewise.

In *Kant and the Promise of Rhetoric* Stroud has kept his promise to extract a rhetoric from a philosopher that rhetoricians have long neglected. In doing so, he asks via the power of his example that we reflect on the quality and number of our own promises. Robert Frost would have concurred.

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