It is wrong to imagine that social forms merely distort our consciousness of reality and cut us off from knowledge of the objective nature of things. . . . Still less do they "construct" their own merely mental and subjective world. . . . Quite the contrary, it is only by social means—and especially through the use of the language—that we can gain a knowledge of objective reality, beyond the most basic and elementary level.

—Sean Sayers

RHETORICAL THEORY has long evidenced interest in articulating the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric. Although thinkers from at least the time of Plato have considered this relationship, recent approaches urge that rhetoric be "resituated" at what has been proclaimed "the end of philosophy." Some theorists, such as Calvin Schrag, presume that philosophy has been suitably "deconstructed"—philosophical problems literally "dissolved"—from within philosophical circles. Moreover, as John Nelson and Alan Megill put it, a conceptually adequate and pragmatically useful replacement for foundationalism and objectivism is rhetoric or, more precisely, a "rhetoric of inquiry." This essay challenges claims that philosophy, conceived by Richard Rorty as "systematic" or by Schrag as "a special body of knowledge, a formalized epistemological discipline programmed to represent reality," is either dead or infirm. In critiquing current conceptions of philosophy as rhetoric we support both a version of foundationalist epistemology and an objectivist ontology. We seek to examine critically the current trend of elevating the status of rhetoric at the expense of diluting the epistemological significance of philosophy.

Central to our argument is the contention that the rhetoric of inquiry is grounded on erroneous and inconsistent assumptions. We believe these assumptions entail consequences defeating the very advantages claimed by rhetoric of inquiry theorists, and that present formulations of the rhetoric of inquiry prevent an adequate account of past progress in the sciences, philosophy, and the arts. We examine the presumption that only by abandoning traditional conceptions of epistemology can a meaningful role be assigned to rhetoric in the generation of knowledge, taking issue with the notion that competing views relegate to rhetoric an inferior role.

To be clear, our objective in this paper is not to reject wholesale the claims of the rhetoric of inquiry, many of which enlighten our understanding of communication, especially at the level of praxis. We seek instead to challenge the basic presuppositions of the rhetoric of inquiry, in the spirit recently suggested by Herbert W. Simons. The alternative we develop, based on a view termed "rhetorical realism," accounts for progress in the arts and sciences, and secures as well a disquisitional role for rhetoric with powers at least equivalent to those of the rhetoric of inquiry.

At the same time, adopting realism as a foundation for a theory of rhetoric will not,
we argue, authorize rhetoric with the power to determine ultimate, objective truth. Our position is tempered against the susceptibility of human judgment to error and bias and is not inconsistent with contemporary fallibilist epistemologies. We do, however, contend that aspects of the world exist independent of human knowers and can, at least potentially, be discovered, described accurately, and known through communication. On this analysis, many of our assertions about the world are maximally justified, and we have every reason to suppose they are true; we recognize, however, that some of our knowledge claims are surely mistaken. Some features of the world may be very different from our linguistic descriptions of them. As Popper indicates, "this, indeed, is the main source of our ignorance—the fact that our knowledge can only be finite, while our ignorance must necessarily be infinite." We defend what might be called a "minimal objectivism"—minimal because it tempers dogmatism with fallibilism and invites critical appraisal. We also seek to demonstrate that, difficulties with foundationalism and objectivism notwithstanding, a realist version of rhetorical inquiry avoids many of the problems inherent in the amalgam of views we call the rhetoric of inquiry, and is ontologically, epistemologically, and pragmatically preferable.

Believing that the rhetoric of inquiry must be understood against the background of a general dissatisfaction with objectivism, we begin by summarizing current attempts to link rhetoric with philosophical inquiry and the philosophical deconstruction of traditional epistemology. We then critique these trends in view of the recent reemergence of realist epistemology. Finally, we show how realism secures important epistemic and pragmatic functions for rhetoric and philosophy—how philosophy and rhetoric share complementary roles in the search for foundational truth and objective knowledge in the sciences and the arts.

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF EPISTEMOLOGY AND OBJECTIVISM AND THE ATTEMPT TO RESITUATE RHETORIC AT THEIR END

Recently a number of theorists have sought to reassess the relative merits of philosophy and rhetoric. These theorists critically inspect, and eventually reject, objectivism and foundationalism. For the purposes of this paper, we define objectivism as the view that many objects of reality exist independent of human beliefs, attitudes, values, and symbolic interaction. On this view, the various furnishings of the world exist now, many existed before there were any humans to communicate about them, and many will exist long after humans disappear from the planet. Foundationalism is the view that knowledge claims can be grounded in one or more judgments about the world in which the knower has confidence, that is, confidence such judgments correspond to veridical aspects of the world. This definition of foundationalism is to be distinguished from: (a) the view that knowledge systems are built up from a few propositions that form axioms for a larger system; and (b) empiricism, positivism, and other doctrines that are often termed foundational because they are based upon observations, sense data, and kindred concepts.

In axiomatic systems, such as geometry, the discipline operates on the basis of a number of foundational axioms that are "assumed" to be true, generates the remainder of the system in what might be described as a "bottom up" fashion, and comprises truths that are never questioned, and which in pure theoretical geometry have no necessary connection to the "real" world.
By contrast, what we take to be foundational is always subject to critical assessment and reassessment, operates at all levels, not simply as a bottom-up system, wherein the foundations may be soon ignored on the grounds that they are infallible, and is continually checked for veracity by the impingement of the world it purports to describe. Foundational claims in this sense are assumed to be true only insofar as they have yet to be invalidated by testing them against features of the world.

Regarding empiricism, positivism, and the like, doctrines are foundational to the extent they hold observation of (physical) phenomena as the sole legitimate arbiter of truth. Positivism, in its original formulation, is perhaps the best example of this version of foundationalism. On this view, theoretical coherence is judged adequate only if confirmed by observational data.

We reject such thorough-going observation-dependence, opting for a more encompassing definition of foundationalism. In the version we propose, the contributions of an expatiatory rhetoric are as central to the quest for knowledge as scientific—or any other—observations.

Of what relevance are these definitions and the arguments they generate to our critique of the rhetoric of inquiry? It appears that many theorists in the rhetoric of inquiry share our view regarding objectively existing entities in the world. Disagreement arises in the process by which we come to know these entities. Many theorists claim that objective knowledge of independently existing entities is impossible because all human knowledge is symbolically or otherwise mediated. This position is called “representationalism,” a view we dispute later. Such mediation, it is argued, entails that our linguistic descriptions can never “mirror” the world as it exists objectively. Therefore, the argument concludes, the best humans can do is to gain knowledge at the level of praxis, abandoning hope of knowing the objects of reality that are the source of our representation. Indeed, as we show, representationalism leads inexorably to the same skeptical outcome found to plague representationalist theories from Locke on. Our claim in the remainder of this paper is that rhetoric operates at levels additional to that of praxis, that indeed rhetoric can often penetrate whatever ontological opacity is caused by symbolic or other mediation. Baldly put, we can transcend our representations, symbolic and otherwise, and come to know objective features of the world. Moreover, rhetoric is instrumental in attaining such knowledge. In critically assessing the claims of the rhetoric of inquiry, then, the theoretical stakes are considerable, both for rhetoric and philosophy.

The Attack on Epistemology and Objectivism

Claims like those of Hamlin to the effect that “the attempt to find ... foundations [for human knowledge] is ... not only hopeless, it is also undesirable” have invited rhetoricians to reinspect philosophy’s traditional claim as the master discipline in the search for ultimate truth and objective knowledge. However, the major actor in this drama is Richard Rorty. In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Rorty offers a historically-based critique of foundationalism. He seeks to explode as more myth than fact the claim that the philosophical enterprise has successfully provided us with standards of knowledge or that it may potentially sort out knowledge claims that are accurate reflections of objective reality from those which are not. Following Nietzsche and James, Rorty notes that any claims about securing absolute truth or objective knowledge are misguided, “that even in science, not to mention philosophy,
we simply cast around for a vocabulary which lets us get what we want.\textsuperscript{14} In Rorty's view, philosophers should dismiss traditional epistemology as a search for truth and become "edifying philosophers." Influenced by thinkers like Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, Rorty describes edifying philosophers as those who "refuse to present themselves as having found out any objective truth."\textsuperscript{15} Instead, philosophical discourse should be seen as merely expressing an attitude about a subject, as "participating in a conversation rather than contributing to an inquiry."\textsuperscript{16} Under Rorty's constraints, the goal of edifying philosophy is to:

Keep the conversation going rather than to find objective truth. Such truth, in the view I am advocating, is the normal result of normal discourse. Edifying philosophy is not only abnormal but reactive, having sense only as a protest against attempts to close off conversation by proposals for universal commensuration through the hypostatization of some privileged set of descriptions.\textsuperscript{17}

We are warned of the "dangers" of "normal discourse":

The danger which edifying discourse tries to avert is that some given vocabulary, some way in which people might come to think of themselves, will deceive them into thinking that from now on all discourse could be, or should be, normal discourse.\textsuperscript{18}

Many theorists have accepted Rorty's critique, assuming it represents an adequate deconstruction of traditional epistemology. Based on this critique, several scholars—among them Schrag, Nelson and Megill, and Simons—have gone on to fashion what they call a "rapprochement" between philosophy and rhetoric.\textsuperscript{19}

The "Rapprochement" Between Philosophy and Rhetoric

The rapprochement has two emphases, one more properly identified as hermeneutical, the other as epistemological. The hermeneutic argument begins from Rorty's assumption that traditional epistemology, insofar as it makes claims to certify judgments as objectively true, is not a philosophically viable enterprise. A close look at the record of philosophy, according to this argument, shows that epistemology's payoff in terms of truths discovered has been paltry. The argument continues: epistemology is no longer a viable enterprise of truth-seeking, therefore its task should be one of interpretation.\textsuperscript{20} As it turns out, this task of interpretation must, by definition, be a rhetorical one. Hence, philosophy and rhetoric converge at the point of edification; that is, they must share what Schrag calls a "common hermeneutical space, a space beyond epistemology and tropology," and beyond conceptions of rhetoric as mere technique—"a space anterior to the congealing of the 'subject matter' of philosophy and rhetoric alike."\textsuperscript{21}

What sort of features does this notion of edification or hermeneutical space entail? What kinds of rhetorical features does it exhibit? According to Schrag, edifying philosophy and rhetoric are both concerned foremost with "communicative praxis," where we are thrown into the presence of "the other." Philosophy, now a companion of rhetoric, "descends into the contingency of social practices and the conversational voice of mankind." The other, we are told, "we encounter in our speaking and acting." Schrag continues:

This is the rhetorical moment: the co-disclosure of self and other in a hermeneutic of everyday life textured as an amalgam of discourse and social practices. . . . Rhetoric, thusly
understood, is the directedness of discourse to "our hearers" in our concern with "whatever it is we have to expound to others." ... Within this space of dialogue, public addresses, deliberation and collaboration, both self and other are disclosed and the meanings embedded in our social practices are made manifest.  

Schrag refines Rorty's critique by locating it within the traditional debate about what philosophy and rhetoric ought to do or ought to be. For Schrag, a distinction is to be made between rhetoric and philosophy as practiced in such endeavors as argument, debate, persuasion, and the pursuit of rationality—what can generally be called the practice of traditional epistemology—and rhetoric and philosophy as they may be conceived as operating within the hermeneutic space. In traditional epistemology, a philosophical argument was rhetorical insofar as it coerced an opponent to accept a competing position: "the telos of argumentation is reduced to the winning of points in a dispute, without regard either to the contents of discourse that are to be made manifest or to the self-understanding of the rhetor and the interlocutor in their joint endeavors."  

Rhetoric and philosophy in this view are prejudiced since they assume grounding in a sort of "controlling knowledge which finds its center in an abstracted, rational, epistemological subject." In contrast, the move to edification—to the hermeneutic space of communicative praxis—requires a decentering of the epistemological subject:

Rationality is disseminated into the discursive practices that make up the republic of mankind. Rationality is seen as an achievement of communicative praxis rather than as a preexistent logos that antedates and governs it. Rationality is illustrated in the struggle for agreement and consensus on what it is that is made manifest in the hermeneutic of everyday life, and persuasion and argumentation stand in the service of achieving such agreement and consensus. The uses of persuasion and argumentation are transfigured against this backdrop of a broader and non-epistemological notion of rationality.

Thus, in the hermeneutic space where philosophy and rhetoric converge, rationality no longer corresponds to the pursuit of objective knowledge but to communicative praxis, mutual understanding, and evocation. These activities, in turn, entail a host of other ethical, aesthetic, and social practices. It is important to realize, though, that this overall hermeneutic process is still, according to its proponents, philosophical because it attains a purportedly new and richer level of rationality. It is rhetorical because actualizing this rationality in the course of everyday human events requires communicative praxis and a uniquely rhetorical attitude. This rhetorical attitude, it is asserted, permits interlocutors to move beyond their own egocentric prejudices in discourse to achieve the goals of self-understanding and evocation, not control of knowledge and coercion.

The second part of this new program, what we have called the epistemological argument, also finds its origins in Rorty's critique. The claim here is that there simply is no objective knowledge, no objective truth. The attempt to elevate beliefs to the status of knowledge, and supported by sufficient justification, is displaced by a pragmatic conception of truth. On the pragmatic model, argues Schrag, "beliefs and knowledge are reclaimed as inhabitants of the terrain of praxis and take their place among the citizenry of affects, habits, skills, and institutional practices, with which they comingle in the adventure of making sense together." In other words, once the search for objective knowledge is abandoned, then all knowledge and belief takes on what Farrell calls a "social" or "rhetorical" character. As Farrell explains, "whereas
technical or specialized knowledge is actualized through its perceived correspondence to the external world, social knowledge is actualized through the decision and action of an audience.” Such social knowledge is always in a state of “potential”—it is “functionally a covert imperative for choice and action”; thus, by its very indeterminacy, such knowledge cannot be objective. Yet Farrell’s analysis, by drawing a distinction between technical (scientific) knowledge and social knowledge leaves open the possibility that objectivity may yet lurk in the technical realm. Such a possibility is, of course, antithetical to the stance of the new rhetoric of the human sciences, since the new approach contends that scientific inquiry, as well as philosophical inquiry, are at base rhetorical in much the same spirit. Carleton responds to Farrell’s bifurcation of knowledge, urging that the concept of social knowledge be expanded to embrace all human knowledge:

We may retain Farrell’s phrase “social knowledge” as the label for knowledge legitimated through the decision and action of an audience—so long as it is recognized that no typically human knowledge is possible outside the framework such phrases denote. That is, the genus term, “knowledge,” is properly understood as “social knowledge,” or knowledge made possible through “the decision and action of an audience.”

If Rorty and Carleton are correct, then even the most esoteric scientific knowledge is rhetorical because it is produced through the deliberations and actions of specialized scientific audiences. One consequence of this position is that truth results from the struggle for agreement and consensus on what is made manifest in the discursive hermeneutic. Nelson and Megill approve of Rorty’s “turn away from certain truth.” The demise of the concept “truth” can be seen clearly in Carleton, who argues that all knowledge is “social” and “normative.” According to him, “a proposition is true only to the extent that what it asserts of a thing is part of the affirmable concept of that thing at a given moment in time and space (‘affirmability’ being dependent upon socially acceptable forms of verification which are, of course, symbolic).” That any notion of objective truth has succumbed to thoroughly symbolically-mediated praxis seems clear, given Carleton’s claim that truth is analytic, not synthetic. Hence, he argues, even the claim that “The American flag is red, white, and blue,” is true only in virtue of the concept “American flag.” On this view, then, truth is rhetorical not because a set of beliefs and knowledge claims correspond to a hypothesized empirical world, but because these beliefs and knowledge claims constitute the achieved consensus of an audience. In this way, rhetoric is resituated at the end of philosophy, replacing previous epistemic methodologies in philosophy and the sciences.

A CRITIQUE OF ANTIFOUNDBATIONALISM AND ANTIOBJECTIVISM

In this section we shall offer a critique of the new rhetoric of inquiry. Our arguments will exhibit two emphases. First, we shall offer objections relevant to specific claims of the school. Second, we shall suggest some arguments that we believe cast doubt on the school’s larger program.

A Critique of Specific Tenets of the Rhetoric of Inquiry

The first observation to be made in critiquing the rhetoric of inquiry is that the rejection of foundationalism and objectivism—in philosophical, scientific, and even
rhetorical scholarship—is not nearly as complete as the enthusiastic esprit of the new
view’s expositors suggests. Reading their essays, one is left with the impression that
the new view has entirely displaced the traditional one. The fact that there exists
considerable allegiance to the traditional view, even in light of recent criticisms such
as those of Rorty and Kuhn, is never mentioned; nor are dissenting views critically
examined. 34 Before the new rhetoric of inquiry can displace either the traditional
views of foundationalism and objectivism, or new formulations of realism, it must
meet such views on their own terms, addressing more recent objectivist/
foundationalist/realist theories. Similarly, one would expect to find the rhetoric of
inquiry commenting on the fact that a significant arena of communication scholar­
ship—communication research or interpersonal communication—is largely engaged
in traditionally grounded empirical research. 35

Another problem with the rhetoric of inquiry focuses on its contention that the
only criteria for evaluating discourses in struggle for consensus are those arrived at
by the audiences involved. No a priori set of epistemological standards (a “preexis­
tent logos”) can be admitted. In effect, this is what Schrag holds when he calls for the
adoption of Fisher’s narrative paradigm as opposed to the traditional epistemological
paradigm: “The narrative paradigm . . . solicits the resources of a ‘narrative
rationality,’ which proceeds not by way of an epistemological criteriology but rather
by way of the manifest meanings in the social practices of public life.” 36 We do not
wish to develop a full-blown critique of Fisher’s narrative approach; such discussions
are available elsewhere. 37 We only wish to comment on the narrative paradigm as it
relates to the rhetoric of inquiry because Fisher’s work is often mentioned as
something the rhetoric of inquiry is moving toward.

First, narrative rationality is vulnerable to the same critique leveled against
traditional epistemology—it makes its own claim to epistemic priority. To say that
narrative rationality proceeds “by way of the manifest meanings in the social
practices of public life” is simply to relocate epistemic authority in social practice
rather than in objective criteria. The flaw in this reasoning is not unlike the flaw
found in arguments in support of relativism. Relativists claim that all beliefs and
claims are at most only relatively true. Therefore, no epistemic system (narrative or
otherwise) can claim superiority over any other. Yet the relativists are, by making a
claim for relativism, also commanding it with epistemic priority. These theorists sow
the seeds of their own deconstruction, for relativism itself, being a belief or claim,
can be only relatively true, that is, true for relativists. 38 Thus, accepting narrative
rationality in the theory of knowledge and/or argument, like accepting relativism,
“involves prior commitment to non-relativistic interpretation of at least some
judgments concerning matters of fact.” 39

Even more problematic is the assumption that social practices are in some way
made “manifest.” This claim is unclear insofar as it does not indicate how “manifest
meanings” are disclosed through narrative devices. It merely asserts that they are.
And it is never shown what makes social practice inherently better than traditional
epistemology except that it protects argument from controlling influences, allowing
for full participation among rhetors and audiences. But this problem is ideological,
not epistemological. 40 That is, arguers are often guilty of entering debate with the
assumption that since they possess objective truth, all disputants should therefore
defers to their authority. But advocating rhetorical realism does not necessarily
commit one to this sort of dogmatism. Rhetorical realists are their own worst critics.
While making claims to know objectively at least some things, they recognize that any given item of knowledge may be cast aside tomorrow as better theories and methods for approximating reality develop. In many areas, though, our stock of knowledge is in general veridical. On this analysis, knowledge is held to be cumulative and epistemic progress ongoing. Commitments to Kuhnian paradigm shifts and reference to instances where science was mistaken simply do not make the case for anti-realism in the face of scientific achievements over the past two hundred years. Mistakes are made and scientific theories are reformulated, but in the larger context of the scientific enterprise, it is Quixotic to deny the accumulation of a central core of reliable, objective knowledge.

Indeed, to abandon the notion of progress in the physical or social sciences is to invite a Pandora’s Box of conundrums, including not only the skeptical critique we have developed in this paper, but a contumelious host of pseudoscientific lore as well. As Radner and Radner put it, “the pseudoscientist declares, ‘There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy, and I am going to write a book about them!’ Such people presume that because there are questions about the universe not answered by current scientific theories, there is a vast domain in which they can cavort unhindered by the restraints of reason.”41 It is our position that there are numerous truths in which we can reasonably place our confidence, such as: “The earth is roughly spherical,” “The planets revolve around the sun in generally elliptical orbits,” and “Some microorganisms cause disease.” Even such ethical judgments as: “The Mi Lai Massacre is morally abhorrent,” and “Adolph Hitler was a wicked man”—though disputed by relativists as merely situationally “true”—we would argue are defensible as true. Moreover, our knowledge of these truths—and all others—must be the product of systematic critical inquiry. Part, but only part, of this process will involve the edifying narrative discourse which is at the center of the new rhetoric of inquiry. As we have indicated, all this does not mean we must be dogmatic about even our most secure knowledge claims, for even the most careful science makes mistakes. But, of course, the very notion of “making mistakes” in science strictly entails that there is a correct answer. “The universe is indeed turning out to be queerer than hitherto imagined—what with quarks and black holes and the like—but not so queer that arguments and evidence, the mainstays of science, cannot serve as reliable guides.”42

Moreover, good argument—regardless of whether it proceeds on realist epistemological grounds or any other—attempts to persuade according to generally acceptable rules, not of an epistemic or foundational nature, but of a purely procedural kind. Such rules are formulated for the express purpose of avoiding the sort of coercion or subversion in argument Schrag and his colleagues are concerned about. The procedures we are referring to have at their heart the very same motivation, so far as edification is concerned, claimed by expositors of the new rhetoric of inquiry. In the words of philosopher Henry Johnstone, philosophical argumentation and criticism is conducted “con amore.” It is offered with the express intention of improving the “standards of the manufacturing process,” the product of that manufacturing process being as much edifying enlightenment as truth, though at times the two concepts will surely be contiguous.43 As for the specific concerns Schrag and Fisher express regarding coercion or subversion, these have occupied the attention of rhetorical theorists operating on the “old” model for some decades. Specifically, argument theory has offered a number of standards of disputation that seek to meet Schrag’s
complaint. Perhaps most notable among the procedural elements designed to preclude discursive hegemony are those suggested by Ehninger, including "self-risk," "bilateralism," and "correction."44

Admittedly, the notion of conventions or rules in argument of any kind raises tremendous philosophical difficulties for realists and anti-realists alike. It would seem, then, that the discussion about conventions and rules might also portend major implications for the rhetoric of inquiry as we and its adherents conceive of it. It can be maintained by anti-realists, for example, that because scientific conventions and argumentative standards are created by people, we can never separate something we know from the process through which we came to know it. In science, this criticism is especially trenchant, since it can be argued that all scientific observation, filtered as it is through human-made conventions and symbolic systems (including words, tropes, narratives, and so on), is in some important way cut off from the way the world really is, or worse, systematically distorts the world, rendering objective knowledge impossible. Hence, it is claimed, all science is really about what people do when they explore the world rather than about the world they are exploring. Physicist John Wheeler has summarized this position, generally known as "the value-laden hypothesis," concluding that there is "No physics without an observer."45 Many philosophers of science admit that there is a sense in which Wheeler's phrase is true, but only trivially true. Of course our knowledge of the world is gathered up through observations, and its sum total is the system of human knowledge. But rhetorical theorists have taken this position to suggest that reality is in some way dependent on observation and on the consciousness that makes observation possible in the first place, so that it is self-contradictory to refer to objective entities. As Brummett argues:

I will defend the thesis that reason and the scientific method, or any method whatsoever, will impede the direct observation of any objective reality. Therefore, no science can possibly directly observe absolute nature.46

When this argument was originally raised in the philosophy of science in the 1960s, it prompted much discussion. The doctrine that observation is "value-laden" and its variants continue to exercise great influence in fields like our own, in literatures such as the rhetoric of inquiry, and, before that, the intersubjectivist school of rhetorical epistemology.47 Unlike many philosophical arguments, this one is quite clearly stated, and as such it is, qua argument, subject to what most philosophical arguments are not—a decisive refutation. As an argument, the doctrine commits a fallacy of relevance; it is a non sequitur. The fact that observation is conducted by people who have beliefs, attitudes, and values in no way entails that observation is systematically or necessarily distorted, or otherwise rendered opaque to understanding. Indeed, this conclusion is merely assumed to follow by most who rely on the argument.

The value-laden hypothesis might succeed as an inductive argument if it could be demonstrated not that all cases of observation are value-laden, but that value-ladenness in every instance necessarily and systematically distorts reality. This, of course, is not merely a difficult task, it is one rendered impossible by the very thing the proponents of the value-laden theory are out to show. The point, among others, was succinctly and carefully explored by Nagel some years ago and must be met if the argument is to succeed.48 In a similar vein, realists like Trigg find the implications of the value-laden hypothesis virtually incoherent. As he puts it, the proponents’
constant reference to consciousness makes it appear as if sciences about people must undergird any understanding of "the world. Yet even these sciences will presumably depend on man's consciousness." A regress results as we move from one layer of consciousness to the next, rendering the most trivial perceptions problematic and cognition itself meaningless. The important point, argues Trigg, is to remember that observation does not take place in an objectless vacuum. Scientists (and arguers) are constrained in their observations by reality working on us. Frequently, the world acts in ways that are intractable, in ways that cannot be ameliorated through rhetoric or any other means. If scientific "discovery" were as human-centered as some social constructivists claim, then clearly our scientific "discoveries" would be more systematically felicitous.

It is Sayers who most forcefully meets the value-laden argument. Sayers is willing to admit, as are we, that human consciousness at times distorts reality; but this, of course, is a much weaker claim than that reality is always, necessarily, and systematically distorting—so much so that we are always barred from apprehending objective reality:

Human thought and human consciousness are essentially social. Our concepts and categories, our theories, our "ways of seeing things," are social and historical products. . . . All these propositions are true; but there is nothing in them that entails that we are therefore isolated and walled off from objective reality. Social relations are . . . both the medium and the instrument through which we interact with the world.50

Indeed, the existence of consciousness and individuals' symbolic capacities are, on our view, themselves objective matters. As Johan Van der Auwera puts it, "it is obvious that language reflects both mind and reality." And as Trigg suggests, we can have confidence that consciousness and language may "embody a correct theory of reality."52 Sayers goes on to construct an epistemology wherein occasional distortion of reality is accommodated, yet so too is objective knowledge. Sayers compares consciousness to a refracting medium, namely, a lens:

A lens alters and transforms the image of the object transmitted to the eye. In that sense, one can say that the lens "distorts" the image. But in saying this, the fact must not be forgotten that a lens also transmits the image, and does not create it. The image that is transmitted may indeed be a distorted one, but it is nonetheless an image of the object, both transmitted and transformed. The object, that is to say, is refracted in the image, but not created in it.53

Even if one were to believe, as Sayers does, that some minimal amount of distortion occurs in this refraction process, the value-laden doctrine still falls far short of its conclusion. To continue the lens metaphor, "some lenses can, of course, obscure and cloud vision; but on the other hand, the use of lenses has also enormously deepened and extended our knowledge of nature." He concludes, "our concepts and categories, our 'world-view,' our 'way of seeing things' . . . do not act as barriers between us and reality. Our ideas and beliefs are not cut off from the world."54 When one combines the foregoing analysis with the unassailable fact of scientific and technological progress, the burden of proof is once again on those who advocate versions of the value-laden doctrine to reestablish its coherence.

From the realist point of view, then, reality presents itself, largely en effet. Consciousness does not typically "produce" the patterns of objective reality that
subsequently influence the structure of our theories and arguments, it can and often does discover them.

Another criticism of narrative rationality is that the view seems not to recognize that, under certain conditions, preexisting structures for determining consensus during public moral argument might be inherently better (however one construes the meaning of the term) than the one(s) already operating in the manifest meanings of the culture. In short, the new view is somewhat descriptive but only vaguely prescriptive at the level where prescription seems to be ultimately not just desirable but indispensable. Thus, Lyne's complaint against Rorty's edifying discourse seems equally applicable to the narrative paradigm. In both cases,

there is little to be said on what makes arguments better or worse without resort to absolutes, on the one hand, or simple persuasion on the other. If there is something in between, it is at least not noticeable in these discussions. This suggests a conversation [or narrative] anemic in its separation from genuine discovery, and wholly parasitic, it would appear, on "social practices." How one determines which practices govern in a pluralistic society (or in overdetermined situations) is not explained, since there are no critical frameworks that may transcend a particular conversational frame or assist its mediation with other frames.55

We assume that Schrag and others would agree that historical instances exist where one form or type of communicative praxis was or would have been better than others. Examples might include ways of deciding how to deal with Hitler's Germany prior to 1939 or deciding to launch the space shuttle Challenger on January 28, 1986. In one way or another these are all social questions involving public moral argument. Yet it appears to us that lurking behind their social facade is an objectively knowable reality that will impinge upon us, perhaps with unhappy consequences, if a more-than-merely-edifying discourse is not provided in an effort both to prescribe discursive method and elevate certain of that method's outcomes to the status of objective truth.

In other words, we are claiming that in the realm of public moral argument, a prescriptive orientation frequently presumes an objective reality. Interlocutors deciding public policy issues may dwell in the hermeneutic space created by their discourses, but ultimately their decisions impact upon an objective reality, just as objective reality impacts upon their decisions. Public moral argument is fundamentally a goal-oriented activity, with consequences that can be measured in objective terms. We may debate the merits of sending manned shuttle missions into orbit, but these discussions must be tempered against what is objectively known about the effects of cold weather on protective seals and bring about changes in objective reality, such as structural adjustments on shuttles to protect against failure of seals in cold weather.

Of course, a materialist/structuralist may argue that the Challenger example demonstrates that social interests play a predominant role in "science." Such interests allowed the shuttle to be launched when, according to the standards of objectivity we recommend, its launch should have been postponed. In fact, so goes the argument, no merely procedural prescription would have been able to result in better decision-making, since the resolution to launch was determined by a combination of short-term economic, military, and political interests. Even if we agree that decision-making was in this case constrained by economic or other social conditions,
we note that one of the major purposes of the narrative approach, and perhaps the entire rhetoric of inquiry program, is to construct argumentative situations where prejudices such as those just mentioned can be either minimized or brought to the attention of responsible sources. We share the same goals and the materialist complaint is, on the face of it, just as applicable to the rhetoric of inquiry as it is to rhetorical realism. We, of course, in no way suggest that providing objective, prescriptive standards for policy implementation will prevent all disasters; but the materialists’ charge only heightens the need for stricter objective controls over at least some areas of public and private dispute.

More importantly, the materialist complaint fails to note that the launch of *Challenger* was postponed several times before the fatal flight for technical and safety reasons. Likewise, Alan Shepard’s first sub-orbital flight and the first American orbital flight—that of John Glenn—were postponed numerous times for similar reasons. In the case of these last two examples, the delays occurred during historical periods when the sort of pressures focused upon by the materialists—structuralists—pressures political, economic, and military—were far greater than when *Challenger* met disaster.

It seems to us that the *Challenger* example supports the realist position: twenty-four successful shuttle flights within the context of a space program that successfully landed humans on the moon and landed unmanned probes on Mars, among many other successful explorations of reality. Certainly the economic and ideological (and even value-laden) factors identified by the anti-foundationalists played a part in all these explorations. But within the overall backdrop of the space program, and in the case of the *Challenger* disaster, they are one piece of the explanatory puzzle, neither more nor less important than other objectively occurring and potentially knowable aspects.

That the rhetoric of inquiry’s prescriptive communicative structures are troublesome suggests a final line of critique. Since it seems to be the case that we can point to examples where decisions to employ one argumentative mode over others would result in superior human decisions or natural consequences, the question “Why?” arises. That is, why are some argumentative procedures and decisions clearly more fruitful than others? Most expositors of the rhetoric of inquiry can only contend that such differences are the result of contextual social differences. On occasion, this may be true. But this explanation appears untenable when applied to some of the examples just cited. Again, the conclusion to be drawn is that extrarhetorical factors must frequently be involved in argument, factors in an objective world existing apart from the world of communicators, which can be assessed, and which are frequently not malleable when certain communication strategies are applied to them.

“*In Principle*” Problems Inherent in the Rhetoric of Inquiry

We have critiqued what we consider the specific tenets of the rhetoric of inquiry. We shall now examine the “in principle” difficulty with this view, contending that the rhetoric of inquiry abandons the distinction between epistemology and ontology, resulting in untenable consequences. Recall, according to this view, that audiences decide upon their own standards of discovery and decision-making, and what counts as “true” for such audiences is whatever they agree upon by consensus; that is, truth
becomes intersubjective. With the dissolution of objectivist ontology comes the kindred dissolution of any external standards by which to evaluate—pragmatically, ethically, aesthetically, or otherwise—the beliefs of rhetorical communities as "false." On this view, the rhetorical "truth" of the Flat Earth Society, that the earth is indeed flat, must rank with equal veracity alongside the "truth" that the earth is an oblate spheroid. Likewise, the child's beliefs, shared among a community of other children, that Santa Claus slides down the chimney at Christmas time to deliver presents must rank, epistemologically, at the same level of veracity as the view that loving parents leave the presents under the tree while their children are asleep. This is clearly an unacceptable state of affairs. As Orr has suggested, an intersubjectivist epistemology like that of the new rhetoric of inquiry "lacks the basis for a consistent critique of rhetorically sustained false consciousness."56

Of course, it might be objected that in the world of children, there is a Santa Claus, but Santa Claus dissolves as children encounter adult conceptions and as the interaction of subjective worlds is challenged by other subjective worlds. As the process unfolds, another intersubjective reality emerges. This view is generally known as the "intersubjectivity" approach to rhetorical epistemology, the view that linguistic interaction among and between individuals results in intersubjective agreement through the mediating process of discourse. Reality, in essence, is something that is created in the rhetorical discourse that leads to intersubjective agreement. While this view provides a sociological explanation for how children come to know, it does not address the fact that at all stages of the epistemological process, Santa Claus does not exist, even if children believe him to do so. That is to say, while it is important to account, sociologically, for how people define and redefine what is or is not real, it should be kept in mind that the ontologically objective state of affairs at any given time is what it is. People may debate the existence of Santa Claus, but their arguments will not bring him into existence.

Here we should pause to identify one of the major confusions of rhetorical theorists concerned with philosophical, and especially epistemological, dimensions of human communication. Theorists who may be described as constructivists have long grounded their view in the authority of Berger and Luckmann's seminal work, _The Social Construction of Reality_. As if taking the title of the work literally, the theorists to which we refer have elevated a sociological theory to the status of an epistemological/ontological, that is, to a _philosophical_ paradigm. This would, of course, be excusable, were it not for the fact that Berger and Luckmann expressly warn against such an interpretation of their work:

> It is important that we clarify at the beginning the sense in which we use these terms ['reality' and 'knowledge'] in the context of sociology, and that we immediately disclaim any pretension to the effect that sociology has an answer to these ancient philosophical preoccupations [namely, "questions about the ultimate status of . . . 'reality' and . . . 'knowledge'"]. If we were going to be meticulous in the ensuing argument, we would put quotation marks around the two aforementioned terms every time we used them.57

Berger and Luckmann go on to indicate that their analysis should not be taken to have philosophical import but "falls somewhere in the middle between that of the man in the street and that of the philosopher."58 Orr has alluded to the trouble rhetoricians have gotten themselves into by failing to draw a distinction between the
sociological explanation of rhetorical knowledge and a philosophical explication of the same concept.59

It is also important to acknowledge that although adult communities may reach intersubjective agreements that correspond with reality, there are instances where agreement is mistaken. Members of the Flat Earth Society, for example, have achieved intersubjective agreement on matters concerning the earth’s shape. Yet astronomers maintain a different view, also arrived at through intersubjective processes. If there is really no difference in the epistemic or ontological outcomes of these two intersubjective communities, then clearly intersubjectivity must invariably collapse into subjectivism—for the Flat Earth Society’s intersubjective agreement is no better or worse than the subjective views of its individual members. This is the consequence Trigg laments when he notes that, in the absence of objectivity, people, whether they operate individually (subjectively) or as whole societies (intersubjectively), effectively decide what will count as true and what will count as false: “Neither allows for the logical possibility that the beliefs of an individual . . . or of a society . . . can be judged by measuring them against anything external to the beliefs.”60

Advocates of the rhetoric of inquiry may object that our criticism illustrates one of the very problems the new view is designed to meliorate, namely, an intellectual intolerance—if not plain arrogance—couched in claims that some privileged group has a corner on certain knowledge. But such a reaction is unwarranted, for it fails to distinguish between intellectual tolerance and social tolerance. Hence, both the Flat Earth Society and little children have an inalienable right to believe whatever they choose to believe and, insofar as their beliefs are harmless, they also have a right to act in accordance with them. But that does not preclude both the right and the responsibility of others of us to engage in debate, in accordance with the accepted standards of scholarly disputation, with the Flat Earth advocate. We have also the right, at the appropriate time, to disabuse our children of errors that are the product of a gentle childhood. If we cannot have confidence that certain of our beliefs rest on firm foundations, including correspondence with objective reality, the consequences portend not edification but chaos.

A study of the communicative practices of a society (say, the Flat Earth Society) may tell us much about its epistemological presumptions and standards of justification and action. Yet, according to the rhetoric of inquiry, such a study could, in principle, tell us nothing about the society’s ontological views, for ontology is dissolved as uninteresting and unprofitable. Hence, neither we nor the Flat Earth advocates could potentially enlighten each other, ontologically. This state of affairs we hold to be both unacceptable and subject to remedy. It is the latter task to which the next section of the paper is devoted.

ATTENUATING THE CLAIMS OF THE RHETORIC OF INQUIRY

In this section, we will be concerned to reformulate the claims of the new rhetoric of inquiry. This reformulation will seek to preserve the supposed advantages of the original view, while at the same time retaining both a version of epistemological foundationalism and ontological objectivity. To be clear at the outset, we view the project of this section of the essay as largely independent of our criticism of the rhetoric of inquiry in the last section. Here, our purpose is not to refute the new view,
but merely to render plausible a foundationalist/objectivist rhetorical epistemology that accrues advantages similar to those claimed for the new view.

Preserving Foundationalism and Ontology: The "New Realism"

As Carroll Arnold has observed, realism is "a theory long in eclipse at the hands of representational theories and phenomenalism." Yet, there has recently been a reemergence of realism, a number of theorists finding the consequences of any anti-realist position unacceptable, still others pointing to the solution of heretofore unsolved problems with the realist approach. We shall summarize two aspects of the new realism—the consequences of anti-realist approaches and new answers to traditional complaints against realism—before adopting a realist position for rhetoric.

In the history of philosophy, there exists a long series of traditions that are, for one or another reasons, antithetical to a realist approach. Here we are using the term "realism" to cover a collection of philosophical theories that all, at base, retain at least some place for the view that there exists a reality independent of human attitudes, beliefs, values, or communication behavior, that is, independent in the sense that humans do not participate in either the complete distortion of such reality nor wholly in its creation. Additionally, realism holds that the elements comprising this reality are, in one way or another, accessible to humans as those elements are, in themselves. Historically, the most famous advocate of the realist position is Thomas Reid, associated with the "common sense" school of Scottish philosophy.

Anti-realist approaches invariably suggest either that what humans are confronted with are such things as ideas, representations, phenomena, or sense data, or by categories and other cognitive processes resulting from an "active" mind. An overarching problem with these views is the claim that, at best, our perceptions of reality are representations of the thing-in-itself or, at worst, that our perceptions are mere ideas, with no connection whatever to an objective world. Sayers articulates this problem clearly, as in this attack against idealism:

The theory of ideas, the view that we are immediately aware of ideas and not of objects in themselves, creates an absolute and unbridgeable gulf between our experience and the material world. Our knowledge is confined to ideas—we are trapped within the realm of appearances and can never know anything beyond them.

As Hegel notes, "the affliction of the reader can scarcely be blamed when he is expected to consider himself hemmed in by an impervious circle of purely subjective conceptions."

To see the world from any representational purview is to become inextricably mired in a skeptical quagmire that calls into question the veracity of all human knowledge. Why? Because experiences that form the base of all cognition are, on this view, notoriously unreliable. Any anti-realist view, that is, any view that puts mediating influences between the knower and the known, eventuates in this problem.

We have made a point of critiquing the representational approach because it contains elements analogous to contemporary trends in rhetorical theory, in particular the foundations of the new rhetoric of inquiry. How this is so is the subject of the following subsection.
Representational Characteristics of the Rhetoric of Inquiry

If any one trend in contemporary rhetorical theory is characteristic of the discipline in recent years, it is the tendency to view the foundations of discourse as inherently symbolic. Theorists such as Carleton and Richard Gregg describe the recent trend in language similar to that of the new rhetoric of inquiry. As Carleton puts it:

Since Kant exchanged the structure of the world for the structure of mind, and C.S. Lewis exchanged the structure of mind for the structure of concepts, a third exchange, that of the structure of concepts for the structure of symbols, has turned traditional metaphysics and epistemology upside down. It is now apparent that rhetorical practice need not be functionally subsumed under other practices which necessarily define its nature and effects, nor placed under ontic structures supposedly prior to its own. Thus, the way is open to conceive of rhetoric itself as generative, both of “what is,” and of what is “known.”

The argument posed by Gregg and Carleton is that the neurophysiological processes of the brain governing perception are inherently “symbolic” and therefore creative, and that these decidedly human processes govern or determine what is perceived. Even in the physical sciences, this argument continues, the same position holds. Quantum mechanics (specifically, Heisenberg’s “uncertainty principle”) suggests that any act of perception alters how a phenomenon exists or the way in which a phenomenon behaves. We do not have the space here to develop a complete critique of this argument. However, in response to the first part of the Gregg/Carleton thesis, there is considerable current philosophical, psychological, and neurophysiological literature arguing that human perception grasps the world as it really is, not merely symbolically. More substantively, to evidence (as opposed to assert) that human perception influences its object is to launch an objective statement that assumes knowledge of how the object appears and how the object should appear. If the distortion claim in subatomic physics is more than idle theorizing, it must itself be a realization of an objective state of affairs grounded in objective knowledge. Of course, we do not contend that distortion in the sciences never occurs. Our point is that if it were systematic and thoroughgoing so as to defeat realism, then the very notion of distortion itself would make no sense and could never be applied. For to know that something is distorted, one must know what that something is like when it is undistorted, otherwise there are no grounds for applying the term “distorted” in the first place. Any distortion argument must admit of instances where the world is known free of distortion. For this reason we, like others, view the Heisenberg example as simply one more difficult methodological issue to be overcome by the advance of science. To argue, as some do, that the problem is an “in principle” one that cannot be overcome is really a prediction of the future course of science in disguise. The fruits of such prediction are, historically, fraught with both danger and embarrassment for the seer. Moreover, it courts an attitude running counter to the spirit of both the rhetoric of inquiry and our own minimal objectivism. At worst it portends that subatomic reality requires other than presently-available description. The uncertainty principle does not warrant or evidence reality as symbolically constructed or unknowable. It establishes only that there are, presently, observa-
tional hurdles to be solved, as have been solved in the past. As physicist Karl Haag observes:

The assumption of a real outside world and the possibility of describing it are not contradicted by the laws of quantum physics. The question is only how the outside world may be carved up into pieces to which one may still attribute an objective individuality and real attributes.69

Trigg makes a similar point:

Once we recognize that classical concepts [like waves and particles] may not provide adequate descriptions for the whole of material reality and we prise the notion of material reality apart from the world as described in classical physics, we are free to recognize that reality may take forms which our present conceptual scheme cannot describe. . . . Disputes about which classical concept is most appropriate become somewhat fatuous if reality is non-classical at the microscopic level.70

Nonetheless, it is clear that the rhetoric of inquiry has substituted the symbolic in place of the directly known (realism) or the indirectly known (representationalism). This substitution is the most basic catalyzing element in the new view. Schrag, for example, explains that the new rationality is in accord with Fisher’s narrative paradigm.71 Fisher, in clarifying the very concept “narration” makes this clear: “By ‘narration,’ I refer to a theory of symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them.”72 And in the words of Nelson and Megill, “our world is a creature and a texture of rhetorics… . Ours is a world of persuasive definitions, expressive explanations, and institutional narratives. It is replete with figures of truth, models of reality, tropes of argument— and metaphors of experience. In our world, scholarship is rhetorical.”73 When Nelson and Megill write, “we have experienced the extent to which all orders—economic, political, social, scientific, artistic, religious—are governed by symbols, stories, traditions, and persuasions,” it is not in any sense inaccurate to view this last phrase as a sort of hierarchy, with the most encompassing term being “symbols.”74

The new rhetoric of inquiry, like the rhetorical tradition that is its progenitor, is thoroughly symbolic.

Now the very same problematic that plagued the more traditional representational views explored earlier must necessarily affect the new view, for the new view is equally representational. That is, instead of placing ideas, phenomena, or sense-data between the human knower and the objects of knowledge, the new view interjects the symbol. What the new view fails to appreciate, we believe, is that the same skeptical quagmire that must inevitably confront the knower in all other representational theories will likewise haunt the knower in the rhetoric of inquiry.

It will not do for the expositors of the new view to retort simply that the objection is otiose on the grounds that they cling to no notion of “reality” to begin with. For indeed there are a number of basic elements that, even in the anti-objectivist worldview of the rhetoric of inquiry must have status independent of concepts like “meaning” and “the symbol.” These include rhetors, audiences, messages, objects of discourse, and goals of edification. Yet the status of all these elements is immediately called into question when it is realized that the symbolic view is inherently representationalist. So thoroughgoing is the skepticism resulting once this realization
obtains, that the new view devolves into a *solipsistic* conundrum. Not only can we not be secure in asserting the existence of the aforementioned elements, we cannot even include the concept of other minds, that is, other persons, in our worldview. This is precisely the kind of skepticism many rhetoric of inquiry advocates use as ammunition against realist views of science and epistemology. Yet if they hold to skepticism, one wonders why they attempt to construct messages to be interpreted by others in ways reasonably similar to the ways in which the messages were intended. After all, if we hold the skeptic to his/her assumptions, no audience can ever possibly comprehend the intent of the expositor’s discourse, and no expositor can ever hope to successfully gauge the audience’s reasons for interpreting his/her message as it does. Communication appears hopeless. Obviously, skeptics must be making some tacit, if not a priori, assumptions about the objective nature of rhetorical situations; otherwise one would expect them to forego public discussion of their views. There is, in short, no consistent way for such a position to give an account of language and communication that does not simply undermine its own rejection of objectivity. For example, scholars have at times questioned the objectivity of some of the concepts just enumerated. Yet such attempts have been focused on specific elements of the rhetorical situation, and have not tended to threaten, in a systematic way, the very notion of communication itself, by denying all objectivity. Thus, Ellingsworth and Clevenger critique the notion of audience, claiming that, as an abstract communication concept, it does not enjoy objective existence. But these authors do not question that there really are such things as individual human beings who exist objectively and are the objects of persuasion, even though these human beings (individual members of the “audience”) interpret messages in different ways.

Toward a New Realism

We suggest that the only way to preserve as meaningful and useful such seminal communication concepts as audience, speaker, message, and rhetorical environment is to renounce representationalism in all its forms, including idealism, phenomenализm, the sense-data approach, and what we shall now call “symbolism”—the view that perception, cognition, and communication itself are mediated by (or composed wholly of) symbols, symbols operating in a way that masks (or “creates”) reality.

To achieve this catharsis requires that we suspend past prejudicial attitudes toward “traditional” views, whether these include realism, foundationalism, objectivism, or any other “isms,” and entertain the possibility that the rhetoric of inquiry might be grounded in a number of unnecessary assumptions.

The first assumption that must be suspended is the widely-held judgment that the objects of reality—things-in-themselves—are necessarily opaque to human understanding. As we have seen, to subscribe to this commonly-held position puts one in league with a long line of notable thinkers, including Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Heidegger, Cassirer, Wittgenstein, and Langer. Recent denials by theorists in both rhetorical epistemology and in the new rhetoric of inquiry to the effect that somehow viewing language as inherently symbolic avoids the skeptical critique are simply unconvincing when the representational character of symbol-mediated meaning is recognized. Indeed, one could argue that a symbol-mediated episteme not onlybeckons the skeptical critique, it does so in a more thoroughgoing manner than has, historically, any other representationalist view.
In place of the pervasive view of symbol-as-representational, and in an effort to avoid the skeptical critique, we have urged a reconsideration of realism. The reformulation of realism we have in mind is not akin to the old notion of direct realism, where it is held that the objects of reality are presented whole, immediately, and wholly unproblematically to the knower. As Sayers accurately observes, such a view entails a vicious reductionism wherein, for example, appearance is reduced immediately and completely to reality and, in the case of some recent formulations of the doctrine, the mental is reduced wholly to the physical. Such a radically realistic view invites the very critique motivating much of contemporary rhetoric. In place of such an unacceptable formulation of realism, we suggest one that recognizes past and present objections to direct realism and seeks to mollify many of the same problems addressed by the new view. The groundwork for the version we seek to develop in place of current symbolist views is provided by Evander Bradley McGilvary's work in "perspective realism."

Perspective realism seeks to account for the plethora of changes inherent in the perceptual world. It also seeks to make sense, from a realist point of view, of such familiar phenomena as error, illusion, hallucination and, most notably, human disagreement.

In summary, perspective realism holds that what humans are presented with is the real world, largely as-it-is-in-itself. However, potential knowers are never presented with all of reality at any given time, nor are they presented in any given instance with all the myriad aspects of reality that might be revealed, even in relatively simple objects of knowledge. Rather, humans at any moment are confronted with limited "portions" of reality. These portions are a function of the unique perspective in which, figuratively and at times literally, the perceiver stands to the object perceived.

Perspective realism should not be confused with the term "perspectivism" as it has been used by some scholars in communication. A few theorists contend that we can and should entertain more than one competing view of particular objects of inquiry. The claim is that mutually exclusive views on an issue are potentially acceptable. The version of perspectivism we are now discussing is antithetical to this more relativistic formulation of perspectivism (a view based more on social tolerance than on theoretical insight). Just why this is so turns on an analysis of "perspective."

According to the perspective realist, while things may appear different to individuals from different perspectives, that appearance is not the product of subjective or intersubjective processes (at least not entirely). Instead, it is the outcome of the relationship in which the perceiver stands to the object perceived. Thus, realism is preserved and subjectivism/relativism avoided, since individuals standing in the same perspective would see the same real properties of the object perceived.

An example will serve to illustrate our point. One can imagine two campers lost and separated in a forest. The only communication the two have with one another is by walkie-talkie. In an effort to join one another, camper "A" asks camper "B" to look for a high hill—the only hill in the area—that is covered with pine trees. "B" replies that he can see the hill, but that it is covered with deciduous trees, not pines. Because it appears to be the only hill around, "A" suggests that "B" climb to the crest of the hill and "A" will do the same, so that the two may together find their way out of the forest. The two lost campers meet at the crest of the hill and, anxious to determine the source of their earlier disagreement as to what type of trees the hill is
covered with, look around them. At once it becomes apparent that camper “A” was to the west of the hill, the west face being covered with pines. Camper “B,” who was to the east of the hill, saw the same hill, but its east face was covered with deciduous foliage.

In this example, it is apparent that both parties to the dispute were correct, that is, both accurately and truthfully described the object of perception. Yet there is neither a logical problem involved (such as a violation of the law of noncontradiction) nor an ontological problem (we need not posit any ephemeral pseudo-realities nor any representational difficulties as lying at the heart of the dispute). Nor is there present an epistemological problem. Both epistemic judgments (“There are pines on the hill” and “There are deciduous trees on the hill”) are true. Moreover, if we tuned carefully to the hypothetical conversation between the two campers, we would come to understand that the way in which the dispute was solved was in large measure the result of communication: “A” communicating with “B” regarding issues such as direction, approach, and so on, permitted both parties to the dispute to “stand inside the other’s perspective.” Once this had been done, the apparent problems of epistemology and ontology disappeared.

The example of the two campers illustrates perspective realism of the sort we are advocating in terms of visual perception. The view, however, is not limited to such instances. All of us can probably call to mind such experiences as learning to appreciate certain dimensions of a work of art or music by soliciting the expertise of an individual possessed of considerable critical skill. Thus one who approaches a painting of the impressionist school for the first time may not “see” in the work of art anything approaching the levels of understanding that are revealed when the artifact, and the tradition it represents, are explained by the art critic. In this case, through communication, we are put into a perspective that permits us to “see” things we could not before see. Are we to suggest that these dimensions are wholly created symbolically through the discursive interchange of novice and critic? We suggest this is not the case. Rather, it is our contention that the aesthetic dimensions of the painting that suddenly “jump out” at the rendering of the critic are part of the reality of the painting all along. To occasion their saliency requires only the ability, through language or otherwise, to put the viewer in a perspective similar to that of the critic who can “see” more clearly and fully methodological and aesthetic dimensions of the artistry. On this analysis, perspectivism challenges the familiar notion that “meaning is in the person,” when such a pronouncement is raised to the level of an axiom of epistemology or communication.

Cases like the apprehension of a work of art are also important because they illustrate how rhetoric works within non-scientific contexts normally considered by rhetorical scholars. In the realm of aesthetic and moral values, achieving perspective is perhaps more difficult than in scientific investigations. Nevertheless, through argument, the objective features of the aesthetic object—its author, its formal patterns and their effects on the senses and on one’s psychological disposition—can be estimated and incorporated into particular aesthetic perspectives. Even subtle cultural factors that impact upon viewer interpretation can generally be catalogued in order to help analysts explain why certain aesthetic objects evoke particular reactions. Consistent with minimal objectivism, we are not suggesting that one correct perspective can ultimately be determined, just as our perspectives are often found wanting in science. However, the goal of rhetorical inquiry from the realist
point of view is to narrow the possible range of perspectives from which any aesthetic object or moral act can be judged and to explore the source, character, and implications of those perspectives.

The perspectivist account, then, is designed to meet classic objections to realism. If the account is applied systematically, its cumulative effect is to blunt such criticisms as are assumed by those arguing against objectivism. Error, illusion, hallucination, and disagreement—all are to be analyzed as the product of perspective. When this is done, the way is opened for a preservation of what lies at the heart of human social interaction, including communicative praxis, namely, the assumption that we humans are part of a natural world filled with objectively existent, and frequently interacting, entities—entities that can be known because, to quote Sayers's paraphrase of Hegel, "all that reality is it imparts and reveals."82

Where we believe philosophy and rhetoric have run into trouble is in looking upon the results of perspective as confirming evidence for a world constructed symbolically through language-mediated meaning. Combined with their acceptance of the Kantian critique of empiricism—that reason is active and it is the human categories of the mind that shape and, a fortiori, distort reality—it is easy to see how theorists could arrive at a juncture where objectivism and foundationalism become taboo. Yet when the notion of perspective is understood as an ontological concept, we may reassess the contemporary rhetorical attitude in much the same way Hegel reassessed the Kantian movement:

"Thoughts, according to Kant, although universal and necessary categories, are only our thoughts—separated by an impassable gulf from the thing, as it exists apart from our knowledge. But the true objectivity of thinking means that the thoughts, far from being merely ours, must at the same time be the real essence of the things and of whatever is an object for us."83

And further:

"To regard the categories as subjective only, i.e. as part of ourselves, must seem very odd to the natural mind. . . . It is quite true that the categories are not contained in the sensation as it is given to us. When, for instance, we look at a piece of sugar, we find it hard, white, sweet, etc. All these properties we say are united in one object. Now it is this unity that is not found in the sensation. The same thing happens if we conceive two events to stand in the relation of cause and effect. The senses only inform us of the two several occurrences which follow each other in time. But that the one is cause, the other effect—in other words, the causal nexus between the two—is not perceived by sense; it is evident only to thought. Still, though the categories such as unity, or cause and effect, are strictly the property of thought, it by no means follows that they must be ours merely and not also characteristic of the objects. Kant however confines them to the subject-mind."84

What Hegel urges us to see is that even if Kant is right in claiming that the mind actively categorizes our experiences, it does not follow that those experiences are necessarily distortions of objective reality.

Hegel's critique of Kant challenges a second major assumption of contemporary theories of rhetoric—the view that meaning is "in the person," or is exclusively the product of human symbolic interaction.85 To hold the meanings-are-in-people position is, of course, to locate oneself squarely in the center of the symbolist tradition and to invite objections raised earlier against representationalism. It is clear that, to avoid the radical skepticism and solipsism symbolism entails, one must reject the fundamental premise of human-centered meaning.
Rejection of the meaning-as-human-centered thesis is accomplished by developing a theory of meaning grounded in perspective realism. The rhetorical implications of realist philosophy become conspicuous when it is realized that meaning is a function of "embodiment." Embodiment asserts that language does not stand as a distorting intermediary between the rhetor/knower and the object of discourse/knowledge. Instead, language serves as an interface, making possible a linkage between consciousness and the furnishings of the external world.

A realist theory of meaning permits the development of a rhetorical theory wherein the function of discourse (rhetoric, communication), conceived epistemically, is to differentiate among the multivarious dimensions of experience presented to us. Because reality can not be grasped "all at once," but instead is revealed to us in terms of the aspects we are at any one time situated to "see" (recall the examples of the two campers and the work of art), no vicious reductionism of the kind feared by so many contemporary rhetoricians occurs. Quite the contrary, the possibilities for rhetoric become expansive. Rhetoric, conceived in this way, becomes "more than a vehicle of transmission. Part of rhetorical functioning can be and often is exploration." Here, "epistemologically productive rhetoric must make conspicuous the relations obtaining among rhetor, extralinguistic phenomena, and tacit audience." It does so through a process of discovery, including tasks that have been described as differentiative, associative, preservative, critically evaluative, and perspectively revealing. In carrying out these tasks, epistemologically productive rhetoric conceived as communicative praxis operates to explore the perspectives presented to us by the objective world and articulates those perspectives for the understanding and edification of others. For this reason, the view we have arrived at is appropriately described as "rhetorical perspectivism."

Implications

Rhetorical perspectivism, which was initially a development of the rhetoric as epistemic doctrine, may now be extended in scope to illuminate issues in the rhetoric of inquiry and to advance debate between realist and anti-realist. For example, we are now in a position to reconsider, in accordance with the perspectivist view, the nature and scope of the rhetoric of inquiry. Such a reconsideration retains many of the visions of the old view, such as Nelson and Megill's proclivity to see "every enterprise of research as a rhetorical project," and, importantly, Schrag's concern that the new view be sensitive to communicative praxis, to pedestrian affairs as well as specialized concerns, and that it accommodate "the contingency of social practices and the conversational voice of mankind." At the same time, the reformulation we have in mind preserves a place for objectivism and a revised foundationalism. On our view, we can retain the world all of us so assuredly and, for the most part, successfully negotiate every day—the world of real tables and chairs, beliefs and values, accomplishments and disappointments.

Our position also acknowledges Bernstein's recent attempts to move "beyond objectivism and relativism." He argues that "What we desperately need today is . . . to seize upon those experiences and struggles in which there are still glimmerings of solidarity and the promise of dialogical communities in which there can be genuine mutual participation and where reciprocal wooing and persuasion can prevail." The present essay has been one attempt to move beyond relativism, and beyond a
conception of objectivism rooted in static referential views of rhetoric. Our view attempts to preserve confidence in an objective world that is tractable from the standpoint of revealing aspects of itself and its possibilities. But it also retains a useful notion of foundationalism—not the pure rationalist notion of foundationalism wherein, from a few certain and immutable propositions, all that can be known is revealed a priori upon reflection, but a view of foundationalism that is uniquely rhetorical in nature—one that recognizes rational and systematic avenues of inquiry as the result of the embodying function of language. This approach permits judgments, judgments which serve as the foundation, not of immutable truths that close off inquiry, but of truths nonetheless—truths that point us toward ever deeper and richer understandings of the great relational complex that is our world. From this purview, our attenuated rhetoric of inquiry is seen to be dialectical in the sense that, out of linguistic interaction, and the opposition of thesis and antithesis, new syntheses may evolve. If such dialectic is conducted according to the principles of epistemologically productive argument, where argument is conceived as a self-risking, cooperative, bilateral, truth-seeking mode of discursive inquiry, new knowledge may be attained. It is at this point that rhetoric reassumes its ancient Greek affinity with dialectic, and reestablishes the priority of a richly endowed canon of invention. The view we are espousing is, in many respects, not unlike traditional versions of critical rationalism. Yet it takes us beyond critical rationalism in at least one important respect. Whereas critical rationalism offered little advice as to the best methods of conducting inquiry, the view we have described (rhetorical perspectivism) elaborates specific criteria that, when followed consistently, facilitate epistemologically productive discourse. Rhetorical inquiry can be productive if rhetors: (1) differentiate the relations obtaining among rhetor, extralinguistic phenomena, and tacit audience; (2) draw valid associations between first-person epistemic judgments and derived knowledge; (3) expose their arguments to critical evaluation. Moreover (4) epistemic judgments must be dialectically secured, where rhetors are afforded equal initiative and control over lines of influence (bilateralism); (5) are willing to correct their views, harboring the assumption that the clash of differing ideas is the best means of exposing error and yielding truth; and (6) are willing to risk the possibility that their views (and selves) will be altered as a result of argument.

It is argued by the theorists we have critiqued that rhetorical inquiry which reduces epistemology to praxis can be both epistemically and pragmatically productive. This contention must, we have seen, be significantly attenuated. At the level of praxis, rhetorical inquiry assumes that all claims are open to discussion, including whatever may be taken as "objective" or "foundational." But, on our view, this does not preclude the possibility that certain claims can be taken to be true, in an objective or foundational sense. On our model, the direction discussions take, either to apply some standard or to question it, can be a practical matter, not strictly a logical, theological, ideological or philosophical one. But the focus on pragmatics reminds us that often decisions have to be made. And although we make them "the best we can," we frequently assume that our decisions are rational—that they can be measured against standards of rationality and the results they achieve in an objective world. As a result of our decisions, the real state of affairs in an objective world often becomes either painfully or happily conspicuous, because we are fallible beings who sometimes make mistakes.

A realist view of rhetorical inquiry might also impact upon rhetorical criticism by
furnishing a kind of "meta-rhetorical" perspective from which to understand how persuasion operates. Criticism from the rhetorical perspectivist's point of view walks a tenuous line between description, evaluation, and prescription. This is because, as opposed to anti-realists, we make certain (albeit limited) ontological claims about the way the world is. We also cast judgments about the rationality of argument, something we suspect anti-realists would be willing to do as well. Nevertheless, we are claiming for rhetorical critics a kind of objectivity that many anti-realists would no doubt be uncomfortable with. Rhetorical critics, in our view, can help "keep the conversation going" by critiquing instances where overt or covert attempts are made to close off conversation. But rhetorical critics can move beyond description and evaluation to offer insights into how the conversation may begin anew, or into how, under certain circumstances, it might itself lead to productive decisions. By critiquing rhetorical standards of the day, rhetorical critics in a sense reaffirm or remake those standards. We think this role—one which inevitably brings the critic into contact with both objective and social reality—is one rhetorical critics working from any framework within the rhetoric of inquiry ought to take seriously.

CONCLUSION

The doctrines explored in this paper suggest a complementary relationship between rhetoric and philosophy, as between rhetoric and all the other arts and sciences. This relationship fulfills the aims of the rhetoric of inquiry "to show how the sciences and professions rely not less but only differently on rhetoric than do the humanities." Yet we make no pronouncement regarding a demise of philosophy, nor the need to "resituate" rhetoric at philosophy's "end." Too frequently in the long history of ontology and epistemology, beginning with Gorgias's famous argument against knowledge and reality, have those philosophical subdisciplines survived to bury their undertakers. Current calls for interment are at best premature.

In this essay, we have attempted to elevate the status of rhetoric, not by diminishing the epistemological and ontological traditions in philosophy so that rhetoric could be resituated at their "end," but by recognizing that the two disciplines are indeed complementary. They are so because they share a common ground. It is a ground in language—in communication. And it is a ground in objective reality and knowledge as well. The philosopher will probably be more interested in objective reality and the rhetorician in language and communication. But if our analysis is correct, each must at times touch on the domain of the other. By doing so, a genuine rapprochement between rhetoric and philosophy may be cultivated. Rejoicing in this realization, we can then all celebrate John Dewey's poignant observation in *Experience and Nature*:

> Of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful. That things should be able to pass from the plane of external pushing and pulling to that of revealing themselves to man, and thereby to themselves; and that the fruit of communication should be participation, sharing is a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales. 95

NOTES

James W. Hikins is assistant professor of communication at Tulane University; Kenneth S. Zagacki is assistant professor of speech communication at Louisiana State University. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Temple Conference on the Rhetoric of the Human Sciences, Temple University, April 1986.
Sean Sayers, Reality and Reason: Dialectic and the Theory of Knowledge (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 132–133. Sayers’s book is a lucid treatment of fundamental issues in the history of epistemology. In addition, it develops and defends a sophisticated realist approach to objectivism and foundationalism. While we are in fundamental agreement with Sayers on most issues, we do not endorse his specific formulations of realist issues wholesale. The reader will note departures from his view at a number of junctures in this essay.


Schrag, 164–166.

1 John S. Nelson and Alan Megill, “Rhetoric of Inquiry: Projects and Prospects,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 72 (1986): 20–37. While it may be premature to speak of the rhetoric of inquiry as a “school of thought,” this group of theorists is fast moving in that direction. In addition to a number of journal articles cited throughout this paper, there have been conferences devoted to the topic, as well as panels at the Speech Communication Association’s 1986 national meeting in Chicago. Although the theorists we describe as belonging to the rhetoric of inquiry diverge at points in their thinking, they share a significant number of characteristics, justifying our discussion of them under a single rubric.


The phrase “rhetorical realism” refers to a theory of rhetoric consistent with contemporary philosophical realism. Rhetoric based on rhetorical realism shifts from a constructivist position to a disquisitional one, wherein rhetoric operates dialectically to explore, illustrate, and illuminate perspectival stances so others can view the world from the perspective of the rhetor. For the philosophical roots of this position see Brand Blanchard, The Nature of Thought (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940) and Evander Bradley McGilvary, Toward a Perspective Realism, ed. Albert G. Ramsperger (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1956).

We call attention to frequent misinterpretations of objectivist rhetorical theories. The view we proffer does not entail either dogmatism or intellectual/ideological hegemony. Our view not only permits critical inspection, it invites it, not as a mere ancillary feature of the doctrine of perspectivism, but as a tenet central to the theory. We hold that it is only after the widest possible critical discussion that one can be confident that all perspectives relevant to any issue have been discovered, and only by permitting continual reinspection of the most secure knowledge claims can one be confident error has not occurred.

Fallibilism is a doctrine advanced by Charles Sanders Peirce, who contended that “we can never be sure of anything.” Peirce characterizes inquiry as in a state of unease, aiming toward a state of rest as the result of attaining certain knowledge. Yet, because one can never know what new evidence might be discovered to invalidate one’s position, a state of rest or absolute certainty is never attained. See Charles S. Peirce, Collected Papers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931–1953), v. 1: 347.


Richard Rorty, Mirror of Nature, 370.

Rorty, Mirror of Nature, 371.

Rorty, Mirror of Nature, 377.

Rorty, Mirror of Nature, 377.

The “rapprochement” appears to us one-sided. On the new view, it is only after philosophy has been largely venerated—assuming that ontology and epistemology lay at the heart of traditional philosophy—that the rapprochement takes place. In other words, rhetoric seeks to gain much, and philosophy stands to lose much, on the analysis of the new rhetoric of inquiry.

Of course, the conclusion does not follow. One could just as well argue that philosophy should be entirely dismantled as a distinguishable discipline in light of the new view.

Schrag, 170.
with those who argue that all observation is value-laden, we resist the tendency to label all human issues.


42Radner and Radner, 102.


sense that, as Schrag and others might point out, few average citizens have acquired skills necessary to engage in
trenchant and sophisticated public debate; others may be simply uninformed, or what Aristotle and Fisher refer to as
however, that this objection prohibits us from striving toward what we consider an objectivist model for resolving or
at least mediating public disputes. We cannot be so provincial as to maintain that present-day science, philosophy, or
argument theory have defined the outermost boundaries of knowledge or the ultimate criteria of good argument. But
we can have confidence that current models will in the long term provide good grounds for rational decision making,
including the decisions that will result in their ongoing self-improvement.

43Roger Trigg, *Reality at Risk: A Defense of Realism in Philosophy and the Sciences* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and
Noble Books, 1980), 158.

44Barry Trigg, "Some Implications of 'Process' or 'Intersubjectivity': Postmodern Rhetoric," *Philosophy and

45See Brummett, "Some Implications of 'Process,' ” 28–30.


47Trigg, *Reality at Risk*, 150.

48Sayers, 133.

49Johan Van der Auwera, *Language and Logic: A Speculative and Condition-Theoretic Study* (Amsterdam: John

50Trigg, 160.

51Sayers, 133.

52Sayers, 133.

53Lyne, 205. Richard Bernstein, another philosophical progenitor of the rhetoric of inquiry school, leans toward
but never enunciates objective standards for engaging in public persuasion. To Bernstein's credit, he critiques various
tests to derive such standards in the work of Gadamer, Habermas, and Arendt. But he never decides upon which
standards, or which combination of them, are to be employed in a culture that has moved beyond objectivism and
relativism. See Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*

54Orr, 270.

55Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday &

56Berger and Luckmann, 2.

57Orr, 268–269.


59Carroll C. Arnold, foreword, Cherwitz and Hikins *Communication and Knowledge*, ix.

60See especially Sayers and Russman. The strategy of both these thinkers is twofold: first, to deny the premises
upon which anti-realist (anti-objectivist and anti-foundationalist) attacks are based; second, to show that alternatives
to realism are inferior.


62Thus, for example, John Locke, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,
1975), IV.1.1, contends that human beings are presented with ideas and not things themselves. George Berkeley, in *A
Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, ed. Colin Murray Turbayne (Indianapolis: Bobbs-
Merrill, 1970), argues that "to be is to be perceived and to perceive" (esse est percipi et percipere), 247. More
contemporary representational accounts include the sense-data theories popularized during this century by
philosophers such as A. J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956) and the symbolic

63Representationalism has been highly influential in contemporary neuroscience and recent attempts to link
neuroscientific principles to rhetoric. See, for example, Michael S. Gazzaniga, Diana Steen, and Bruce T. Volpe,
*Functional Neuroscience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) and Richard B. Gregg, *Symbolic Induction and

64Lyne, 8.


66Walter M. Carleton, "On Rhetorical Knowing," rev. of *Symbolic Induction and Knowing*, by Richard B.

67See, for example, Stuart Katz and Gordon Frost, "The Origins of Knowledge in Two Theories of Brain: The
Theory of Perception* ( Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986); John C. Eccles and Daniel N.
Referral of the Timing for a Conscious Sensory Experience: A Functional Role for the Somatosensory Specific
Subjective Referral of a Sensory Experience Backwards in Time: Reply to P. S. Churchland," *Philosophy of Science*
60Quoted in Trigg, *Reality at Risk*, 171.
62Schrag, 173.
63Fisher, 2.
64Nelson and Megill, 36.
65Nelson and Megill, 36.
68See Sayers, 58-63.
69Sayers, 33-34.
70McGilvary.
73Sayers, 57.
74Hegel, sec. 41z.
75Hegel, sec. 42z.
76See, for example, Brummett, "Some Implications of 'Process,' " 29-33.
77Cherwitz and Hikins, 83, 86-88.
78Cherwitz and Hikins, 110. Emphasis in original.
79Cherwitz and Hikins, 109-110.
80Nelson and Megill, 35; Schrag, 166.
81Bernstein, 228.
82See Orr, 271-274.
83See Ehninger, 104-108.
84See Ehninger, 102-105; see also Cherwitz and Hikins, 92-111.