What does it mean to say that rhetoric and democracy have an “ethics”? Traditionally the answers fall into one of two categories. On the one hand Kantian rationalism dictates that persuasive and political acts must follow from universal moral principles. In rhetoric one finds this ethics expressed most fully by Richard Weaver, for whom an “ethics of rhetoric requires that ultimate terms be ultimate in some rational sense” such that they achieve “an ordering of our own minds and our own passions.”¹ For Weaver the worst sin of rhetoric is to exploit circumstances through use of charismatic terms, and the worst sin of democracy is to slip into thoughtful demagoguery based on desire for short-term gratification. On the other hand Benthamite utilitarianism recommends that we judge the worth of any public behavior on the basis of its cumulative results, regardless of the motive. In rhetoric this attitude finds a home in the neo-Aristotelian tradition that grew out of Herbert Wichelns, in which rhetoric is “not concerned with permanence, nor yet with beauty. It is concerned with effect.”² From the effects perspective, universal principles are elusive and motives are hard to determine; better that we bracket such “idealistic” categories and get to work on the hedonistic calculus that measures the total sum of pleasures and pains.

Not surprisingly, these competing ethical standards are but further manifestation of the classical binaries between idealism and materialism, rationalism and empiricism, and realism and nominalism. Whereas one side denies the reality of flux and puts faith in the eternal, the other side dives headlong into the river in the belief that even the stability of the banks is but an illusion. The problem with such extremes is that they produce deafness and blindness respectively. To always act from principle, regardless of the circumstance, is to march steadfastly ahead despite cries of pain and appeals for sympathy. Yet to plunge into circumstances is to risk losing oneself in the swirl of motion and emotion such that the horizon never comes into focus. Ironically, then, both ethical perspectives are equally unethical insofar as they remain incapable of placing means and ends into a meaningful relation. By valorizing ends, the former keeps saying the same thing, but by denying ends, the latter has nothing to
Rhetoric and the Ethics of Democracy

17

say. Meanwhile the operation of technological means continues its domination of society unabated.

If neither side provides a sufficient interpretation of ethics, they both grasp some aspect of necessity. For Dewey a more functional ethics requires the application of charitable continuity. “The theoretical value of the utilitarian position consists in the fact that it warns us against overlooking the essential place of the intellectual factor, namely, foresight of consequences,” he writes. “The practical value of the theory which lays stress on motive is that it calls attention of the part played by character, by personal disposition and attitude, in determining the direction which the intellectual factor takes.” Successfully combining these insights requires more than simply saying “both/and.” One must set them within a methodological whole. For Dewey that requires viewing ethics from the perspective of the entire act as it occurs as a process of judgment in which aspects of character, both individual and social, interact with environmental conditions over time. These acts must “involve awareness of what one is about; a fact which in the concrete signifies that there must be a purpose, an aim, and end in view, something for the sake of which the particular act is done.”

For Dewey, then, ethical acts occur as a voluntary and purposive choices made in situations of doubt and crisis by agents who possess a relatively formed and stable character.

This definition incorporates but significantly alters the principles of the rationalistic and utilitarian positions. One the one hand, like the rationalist tradition, Dewey’s pragmatic ethics recognizes the importance of defining and seeking an ideal of the good. However, the good is defined not in terms of transcendent goals or fixed principles, but flexible ends and guidelines that grow out of situational conditions and are reflective of personal attitudes. On the other hand, like the utilitarian position, it measures the virtue of an act by its cumulative consequences. Yet it neither assumes a fixed “measure” of those consequences on an objective scale of pleasure or happiness, nor does it limit consequences to immediate gratifications. A genuine good is thus one that produces long-term beneficial consequences as measured by the needs and desires of a shared historical community. To possess a moral will is thus to possess “an active tendency to foresee consequences, to form resolute purposes, and to use all the efforts at command to produce the intended consequences in fact.”

In other words a moral will is the ability to define a fitting end and determine the means that contribute to its consummation without undermining its long-term stability.

Only from a means/ends analysis can one distinguish the ethics of democracy from any other form of social organization. This is the emphasis of Dewey’s earliest writing on the subject, his 1888 “Ethics of Democracy.” In that work Dewey compared democracy with “aristocracy,” a term he used to characterize
any society that “limits the range of men who are regarded as participating in the state.” The clear reference point for Dewey, at the time, was Plato’s Republic, but today it can equally stand for any regime that would profess noble ends but employ restrictive or oppressive means. His intent was to point out that both aristocracy and democracy in practice seek to achieve a form of social life in which individuals achieve self-realization within the context of a social whole. What makes them different, therefore, is the relationship between means and ends. “Personal responsibility, individual initiation, these are the notes of democracy,” Dewey explains. “Aristocracy and democracy both imply that the actual state of society exists for the sake of realizing an end which is ethical, but aristocracy implies that this is to be done primarily by means of special institutions or organizations within society, while democracy holds that the ideal is already at work in every personality, and must be trusted to care for itself.”

It is vital not to misinterpret Dewey on this point; he is not simply repeating the ethical stance of classical liberalism in which the best society is one free from negative constraints. As he would later make clear, find “a man who believes that all men need is freedom from oppressive legal and political measures, and you have found a man who, unless he is merely obstinately maintaining his own private privileges, carries at the back of his head some heritage of the metaphysical doctrine of free-will, plus an optimistic confidence in natural harmony.” But even in 1888, when writing as a Christian idealist, Dewey still recognized the importance of creating individuals capable of personal responsibility and individual initiation. Democracy thus meant for him that “personality is the first and final reality” at the same time that it “admits that the full significance of personality can be learned by the individual only as it is already presented to him in objective form in society” and that the “chief stimuli and encouragements to the realization of personality come from society.” Dewey would later abandon the idealistic term “personality,” which was linked to a Hegelian teleology, but his basic point remained the same. By making the individual both the means and the end of democracy, it committed itself to investing its energies into creating individuals capable of possessing a moral will that achieves enough autonomy from dominant social forces that it is capable of reacting back upon those forces with intelligence and power.

By 1932, when his final treatise on ethics was published, Dewey had decided that four dominant virtues characterized democratic social life: wisdom, faithfulness, thoughtfulness, and conscientiousness. By wisdom, Dewey means the ability to subordinate the “satisfaction of an immediately urgent single appetite” to a more “inclusive satisfaction” such that, for instance, one does not win the battle and lose the war. By faithfulness, he means the willingness of a self to acknowledge “the claims involved in its relations with others,” thereby recognizing the possibility of indirect public consequences for others in any act...
done primarily to satisfy a private interest. By thoughtfulness, he means being solicitous “in the award of praise and blame” in order that one not snap to quick judgment of another based on isolated acts and limited evaluations. Lastly, by conscientiousness, Dewey means possessing the “active will to discover new values and to revise former notions.” This last virtue is the most challenging and the most democratic. For individuals can be wise, faithful, and thoughtful in most of their everyday dealings with others in any society that has achieved a degree of stability. Yet to discover new values or revise old ones—to enact, in other words, a transvaluation of values—is intrinsically to situate oneself within the realm of moral conflict that is anathema to all forms of aristocracy.

The implications of Dewey’s moral theory go further still; for wherever there is moral conflict, there is rhetoric. Rhetoric and democracy are thus bound together through the fundamental ethical imperative of the ontology of becoming—that the nature of our future selves, as individuals, cultures, and civilizations, is a product of the present choices we make and the future goals toward which we aspire as they have been inherited and altered from the past. Dewey observes:

“Except as the outcome of arrested development, there is no such thing as a fixed, ready-made, finished self. Every living self causes acts and is itself caused in return by what it does. All voluntary action is a remaking of self, since it creates new desires, instigates to new modes of endeavor, brings to light new conditions which institute new ends. Our personal identity is found in the thread of continuous development which binds together these changes. In the strictest sense, it is impossible for the self to stand still; it is becoming, and becoming for the better or the worse. It is in the quality of becoming that virtue resides. We set up this and that end to be reached, but the end is growth itself.

What is true for the self is also true for society. The character of democratic society stands for the thread of continuous development that binds together the growth of individuals toward a common endeavor. What makes this growth democratic is its fundamental rhetorical tolerance for views that may seem, judged by the standards of the present, to be immoral. Dewey notes, for instance, that “history shows how much of moral progress has been due to those who in their own time were regarded as rebels and treated as criminals.” Given this fact, a democracy cannot view toleration as “just an attitude of good-humored indifference. It is positive willingness to permit reflection and inquiry to go on in the faith that the truly right will be rendered more secure through questioning and discussion, while things which have endured merely from custom will be amended or done away with.”
amending, and doing away being a fundamental rhetorical activity, the tolerance of which Dewey speaks can only be a tolerance for rhetoric in all its glory and misery.

We are spiraling toward the basic principle of the ontology of becoming that will structure our understanding of rhetoric and democracy—that we understand the possibility of growth through continuity only by focusing on the moments of discontinuity within a shared environment that both force and allow for the moral choices that determine our future selves. Once again we find a similar emphasis operating in the work of Foucault. For him the history of thought is the history of problematizations—those moments that allow one "to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals." And it is crucial for Foucault, as for Dewey, that these moments of problematization do not simply occur in the mind or come about solely because of language itself. According to Foucault, "For a domain of action, a behavior, to enter the field of thought, it is necessary for a certain number of factors [largely resulting from social, economic, or political processes] to have made it uncertain, to have made it lose its familiarity, or to have provoked a certain number of difficulties around it." The function of philosophy, for Foucault, is thus to bring about and reflect upon these moments of transformation to posit what might be and what might have been.

Clearly, however, this role has traditionally been reserved not for philosophy but for rhetoric. It was its infatuation with moments of crisis and transformation that made it so closely aligned in the Sophistical era of classical Greece with the spirit of *kairos*. Variously interpreted practically as "opportune moment," "due measure," or "right occasion," *kairos*, according to Carolyn Miller, "encourages us to be creative in responding to the unforeseen, to the lack of order in human life. The challenge is to invent, within a set of unfolding and unprecedented circumstances, an action (rhetorical or otherwise) that will be understood as uniquely meaningful within those circumstances." As a god *Kairos* was originally portrayed as a young man with wings on his shoulder and heels balanced on the edge of a knife while holding a pair of scales. For Greeks living in an age in which triumph and disaster equally seemed probable in the next moment and in which their literal fate as victors or slaves might depend on a single decision, their worship of *kairos* was understandable. The rise of democracy simply made this principle applicable to the rhetorical discourse, as timely judgment and action became contingent upon timely advocacy and speech. As teachers of rhetoric, the Sophists understandably became the masters of *kairos*. According to John Poulakos, *kairos* was a "radical principle of occasionality" which emphasized that "speech exists in time and is uttered both as a spontaneous formulation of and a barely constituted response to a new situation
unfolding in the immediate present.”

Being masters of improvisation, the Sophists saw rhetoric a way of reacting almost instinctively to the slightest flux within a situation in order to best set the course of future events.

Attention to kairos makes rhetoric something different than other, more systematic forms of persuasion such as propaganda and discursive forms of power/knowledge, just as the social consequences of kairotic discourse make it incompatible with undemocratic forms of social life. Take, for instance, the following passage created by the Sophist Thrasymachus during the Peloponnesian War: “I wish I had been alive in the old days, when the younger generation could happily remain silent, since matters did not force them to make speeches and their elders were looking after the city. But since it is our fate to found ourselves alive now, at a time when we submit to others ruling the city, but endure its disasters ourselves, and since the greater of these disasters are due not to the gods or to fortune, but to those who are in charge, I have no choice but to speak.”

The simple line “I have no choice but to speak” represents an ethical stance that recognizes both circumstantial conditions and moral responsibilities. Presumably one must speak because no one else has spoken appropriately to overcome the shared problem that faces them in the present. To speak in this situation thus mandates that one not only speak for but speak against—and, most important, that one must speak for oneself. This form of expression stands in tension not only with forms of propaganda, in which the individual only speaks on behalf of an organization and within the limits of a narrowly defined method and goal, but also with more dominant forms of social discourse, in which the individual merely reinscribes conventional power relations by conforming to the patterns of expression that constitute them.

That is to say, rhetoric attends to the particular situation as it relates to a more universal social context always in the process of transition and change. Wichelns is thus correct in observing that rhetoric is “the art of influencing men in some concrete situation,” but so too is Philip Wander correct in emphasizing how rhetoric always occurs within “an historical context” involving “the efforts of real people to create a better world.” Such perspectives are only seen to conflict when viewed through the many-headed dualisms of theory and practice that have ever forced upon us a decision to either stare at our feet or gaze up at the heavens. When viewed pragmatically, however, they each simply highlight differing facets of an action performed in historical time that emerges from the past, speaks to the present, and alters the future. Rhetoric, in sum, always exists in temporal relationship to crisis. It is thus a creature of drama, and as such it makes, dominates, rouses, and molds the personalities, movements, climaxes, spectacles, and actions that constitute the narratives of historical change. Rhetoric’s role in that drama is to harness the energies that
accumulate within moments of tension and then channel a new path for their expression.

The ethics of any rhetorical act is determined neither by conformity to ideals nor crass utilitarianism but by how any rhetorical act directs experience within problematic situations in which long-term happiness is contingent a complete interpenetration of means and ends fitting to environmental conditions. There are thus four major components to any rhetorical action that determine its ethical significance: self, other, situation, and message. This chapter will outline the relationship among the first three terms, while the remaining chapters will explore different facets of last. The overall purpose is understand how rhetoric functions within a democratic context in which citizen and public interact within a shared natural and social environment that encompasses both the particularities of a situated moment and the more universal traits of historical time.

Protagoras and the Ontology of Becoming

Rhetoric is a form of symbolic action that induces movement in the face of recalcitrance. To understand this kinetic function of rhetoric necessitates an interpretation of the human environment in which individuals feel impelled to act, are constrained from movement, and have the power to overcome those constraints. Put another way, the art of rhetoric can only exist as an art in a world of becoming that stands between the block universe of determinism and the vacuum of free will. Any other perspective renders rhetoric not an art of facilitating action but a vehicle of expression that lacks the capacity to affect real change. On the one hand, absent forces with the capacity to both limit and privilege ways of thinking and acting, rhetoric would have no resources upon which to draw to analyze or alter a situation; it could only give voice to the contents of one's solipsistic consciousness. On the other hand, absent the possibility of genuine choice, rhetors would have no reason to adapt to an audience; they would simply represent the state of things to whoever wished to listen. An art of rhetoric thus can exist only when knowledge is possible but contingent, when we can tentatively make judgments about our environment even as we attempt to change the nature of that environment. The world of becoming, which includes both permanence and change, is thus the world of the creative artist, for only as things are capable of change is creation possible, but only as our creations have lasting value and impact are we inspired to invest our energies in bringing them into being.

The connection between rhetorical practice and the ontology of becoming is not a product of contemporary philosophy; it is present at the very origins of rhetoric. Dewey notes that in the original Greek, phusis, the word translated as “nature,” is “etymologically connected with a root meaning ‘to grow.’ Now
growth is change; it is coming into Being and passing out of Being, altering between the two extremes of birth and death.” The split between philosophy and rhetoric was born out of the reaction to this experience of change. The Presocratic philosopher Parmenides viewed the fact of change as a limitation to be transcended. Consequently he sought to see through and beyond the experience of change to the fixed qualities of being. In contradistinction the Sophist Protagoras accepted change as a real part of the world. For Protagoras it was so obvious that “all things are in motion” that he believed that “the verb ‘to be’ must be totally abolished.” What concerned Protagoras was how to manage change: “To the sick man the things he eats both appear and are bitter, while to the healthy man they both appear and are the opposite. Now what we have to do is not to make the one of these two wiser than the other... What we have to do is to make a change from the one to the other, because the other state is better.” For a dualist metaphysician such as Parmenides, the sick man could heal himself by partaking in philosophy, which would help him ignore his body and find oneness in the eternal. For a rhetorician such as Protagoras, the sick man required a dose of rhetoric—if only to get him to take his medicine—to alter his experience for the better so he might get back to dealing more effectively with the affairs of practice.

The inescapable problem with the Protagorean perspective has always been the absence of evaluative standards. In one of Dewey’s early logical essay written in this Protagorean vein, he writes that “the question of truth is not as to whether Being or Non-Being, Reality or mere Appearance, is experienced, but as to the worth of a certain correctly experienced thing.” Yet a Socrates would immediately ask, On what grounds does the ontology of becoming allow one to make a distinction between a merely “experienced” thing and a “correctly experienced thing”? If, as Protagoras states, all that “one is immediately experiencing is always true,” then is not the “thing” experienced by the sick man on equal ontological footing with that of the healthy man? Moreover, by what criteria do we judge what is “better”? Without absolute standards of good, are not all experiences equally better and worse? Pressed in these ways, what initially appears to be a progressive and pragmatic orientation toward language and truth dissolves into an irresponsible relativism that licenses any sort of behavior as long as it brings about some momentary experience of pleasure. Rhetoric becomes not the means of advancing civilization but the tool for its manipulation and exploitation.

It does not require a great leap of the imagination to see how one might read this attitude as culminating in dystopian visions such as Plato’s Callicean tyranny. As Hauser explains, this dystopic vision results from spinning out the negative consequences of opening “the Pandora’s box of persuasion, which may lead to manipulation for personal gain under the guise of the common good.”
The traditional solution to this problem, of course, has always been to make persuasion subordinate to some a priori rationalistic ideal that makes it a vehicle for transmitting only the good, the beautiful, and the true. In other words persuasion becomes the partisan of being in a world of appearances. In Plato’s *Statesman*, for example, an effective state based on knowledge is achieved when “that part of rhetoric which in partnership with kingship persuades people of what is just and so helps in steering through the business of cities.” The ideal *politikos* is portrayed as a ruler who weaves the social fabric from numerous strands of expertise and employs the art of rhetoric to huddle the masses under its protective cover. The rationalistic view of society admits the practical nature of rhetoric and the possibility of growth, but it interprets rhetorical practice as applied philosophy and interprets progressive growth only as it exists in relation to a predetermined end. Becoming is thus not seen as “real” but as transitory. The only reality exists in being, and once rhetoric helps actualize being, it is as a ladder than can then be thrown away.

Despite the clear philosophical problems with this proposal, it was directed toward resolving a very real problem. After all, the threat posed by a contemporary “democracies” is that the breakdown of tradition combined with the new freedom of movement in act, idea, and expression will produce two related tendencies. In the first case it might rapidly descend into a Hobbesian war of all against all. In the words of James Madison, “Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.” In the second case it might lead to a mere mechanical uniformity in which genuine individuality is suffocated. The result is the production of the “lonely crowd” characterized by “isolation in the mass” and guided by the cool and systematic hand of mass propaganda. Of course, these two tendencies are mirror images of each other.

What remains prescient in Plato’s discourse, then, is not his appeal to absolutes but his insight into the dangers of democracy and willingness to take the long view on matters of social practice. What he had witnessed was the end of the age of the Older Sophists and the beginning of the age of demagoguery. In the three decades of the Peloponnesian War, the population of Athens had been reduced to something of a mob, with decisions being made based on immediate fears and desires as they were exploited by rapacious orators. The age of Thucydides, writes Edith Hamilton, was an age in which vices “were esteemed as virtues,” when “deceit was praised as shrewdness, recklessness held to be courage, loyalty, moderation, generosity, scorned as proofs of weakness.” It was precisely Plato’s willingness and ability to directly confront these social challenges that led to Dewey to advocate a “Back to Plato” movement in
philosophy; only for him, “it would have to be back to the dramatic, restless, cooperatively inquiring Plato of the Dialogues, trying one mode of attack after another to see what it might yield; back to the Plato whose highest flight of metaphysics always terminated with a social and practical turn.”

The task for the rhetoric of becoming, in other words, is to incorporate this long view without slipping back into the arms of the idea.

Perhaps, however, Dewey might have equally recommended a “Back to Protagoras” movement. Of all the Older Sophists, after all, it was Protagoras who came closest to developing a framework that would accomplish the ends of Plato but through rhetorical and democratic means. The key insight of Protagoras was that truth, beauty, and goodness were not only relative to experience and to practice but also were products of time and community. For Protagoras truth claims are not simply expressions of personal whim; they also exist as shared constitutive components of nomos, the norms, conventions, laws, and beliefs of a larger cultural system. Hence we find Protagoras arguing in Plato’s Theaetetus, “Whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable is just and admirable, in that city and for so long as that convention maintains itself.”

Yet conventions change as the environment changes. Unexpected challenges make old conventions obsolete and new conventions necessary. It is in that moment of change, then, that rhetoric demonstrates its progressive value. Hence, for Protagoras, “wise and efficient politician is the man who makes wholesome things seem just to a city instead of pernicious ones.” What we find in Protagoras, then, is an attempt to moderate and control the pace of social change through a rhetorical sensibility that considers both the appropriate and the possible simultaneously. As Poulakos describes it, a Sophistic rhetor must first address an audience “as they are and where they are” but subsequently must “lift them from the vicissitudes of custom and habit and take them into a new place where new discoveries and new conquests can be made.”

Protagoras recognizes the importance of reaffirming the truths present in a culture before then attempting to transcend them toward better and more “wholesome” states of being in which the nature of “wholesome” is determined not by a fixed ideal but by the qualities of experience itself. Protagoras expresses a diachronic view of truth that perceives it as a process of growth and experimental development over time and within a shared community, and it is in this way that his thought can be said to embody the spirit of rhetorical democracy.

Even if we accept the basic premises of Protagoras, however, the Platonic questions remain before us: What kind of art is possible in a world of becoming? And what kind of future does it promise? These are the very questions that Dewey dedicated his life’s work to answering. Like Protagoras, Dewey believed that arts which embrace the ontology of becoming have always been the driving
force behind the growth of civilization. For only in a world in which human agency can productively interact with and influence the forces of permanence and change can we genuinely find meaning and value in our relationship to our environment. As Dewey explains, the “the significance of morals and politics, of the arts both technical and fine, of religion and of science itself as inquiry and discovery, all have their source and meaning in the union in Nature of the settled and the unsettled, the stable and the hazardous. Apart from this union, there are no such things as ‘ends,’ either as consummations or as those ends-in-view we call purposes.”

In other words only insofar as the world presents actual problems to be solved and the possibility for their creative reconstruction and resolution in experience is art as a form of productive transformation genuinely possible. Attending to the conditions that improve the state of the art is the primary function of theory in a democracy.

**Finding the Rhetorical Situation**

Considering Dewey’s emphasis on the relationship between art and the environment, particularly within problematic contexts, it is hardly surprising that his work was highly influential in the development of the contemporary notion of the “rhetorical situation.” Proposed by Lloyd Bitzer in his 1969 article of the same title, the concept of the rhetorical situation was developed in large part to defend a definition of rhetoric as a discursive solution that comes into existence in response to an objective problem, an “exigence,” that makes rhetoric more than mere “persuasion” that can happen at any time. Although unacknowledged in his original essay, it was Dewey’s pragmatism that had informed much of Bitzer’s approach. In a later essay he corrects this absence by explicitly citing Dewey’s *Theory of Valuation*, quoting the passage “Valuation takes place only when there is something the matter; when there is some trouble to be done away with, some need, lack, or privation to be made good, some conflict of tendencies to be resolved by means of changing conditions.”

The idea of the rhetorical situation emerges once we identify those situations in which resolutions require rhetorical persuasion to produce a collective valuation that facilitates practical judgment. Thus, for Bitzer, the “practical justification of rhetoric is analogous to that of scientific inquiry: the world presents objects to be known, puzzles to be resolved, complexities to be understood. . . . Hence the practical need for rhetorical intervention and discourse.” Consistent with Dewey, Bitzer ultimately justifies rhetorical practice by placing it within a democratic framework. Rhetoric is not simply a way of persuading people to think what we want them to think, it is a practical art that helps us solve problems in a changing and contingent social world.

Yet Bitzer’s tendency to speak of rhetoric “scientifically,” as a means by which independent agents respond to observable, objective, and “real” exigencies,
opened him up to the criticism that his approach relies on the metaphysics of epistemological realism and the values of Enlightenment rationalism—or, as Richard Vatz pithily characterized it, a “Platonist Weltanschauung.” The concept of the rhetorical situation has come to represent a philosophical battleground on which arguments over the metaphysics and ontology of rhetoric are fought. Bitzer emerges not as a pragmatist who embraces the ontology of becoming but as a realist locked within the rationalistic metaphysics of being. Vatz, for instance, mocks Bitzer’s account of rhetoric as an “academic exercise of determining whether the rhetor understood the ‘situation’ correctly.” Such an approach, for Vatz, begs the question. The issue is not whether one understands a situation correctly but whether a “situation” actually exists at all before rhetoric gives it definition. Vatz bases his criticism on the principle that any observation is merely “a fitting of a scene into a category or categories found in the head of the observer. No situation can have a nature independent of the perception of its interpreter or independent of the rhetoric with which he chooses to characterize it.” Consequently, rhetoric does not respond to situations; rather, “situations obtain their character from the rhetoric which surrounds them or creates them.” For Vatz, rhetoric creates the world in which we live and to which we react.

Furthermore, as other critics argue, not only does it create the world, but it creates the selves who live and act within that world. Thus Bitzer assumes both an objective reality and an autonomous ego. For instance, Barbara Biesecker, drawing on Derrida’s theory of difference, then suggests that we should view rhetoric as constitutive of subjects implicated in the creation, reception, and application of discourse. According to Bieseker, “Derrida underscores the radically historical character of the subject” by showing how (here quoting Derrida) that “an element functions and signifies, takes on or conveys meaning, only by referring to another past or future element in an economy of traces.” She concludes that if “the subject is shifting and unstable (constituted in and by the play of différence), then the rhetorical event may be seen as an incident that produces and reproduces the identities of subjects and constructs and reconstructs linkages between them.” Biesecker thus defines an individual as a constructed subject that is a product of identities whose meaning is, in turn, produced and reconstructed by rhetoric.

Put in more general terms, one sees in the reaction to Bitzer’s original definition the rejection of the neo-Aristotelian desire for objective grounding in favor of the neo-Sophistical embrace of the fluid and ineffable nature of discourse. Yet both perspectives are equally insufficient to stand on their own. Bitzer’s important accomplishment was to apply to Dewey’s pragmatic interpretation of techne in defining rhetoric as an art—as “a mode of altering reality, not by direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse
which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action.” Regretfully, Bitzer did not fully embrace the implications of this perspective. Instead of exploring all the ways in which rhetoric alters reality, he eventually retreated into a dualist language that distinguished between “genuine rhetorical situations” and “sophistical and spurious ones” whose determination appeared to be the responsibility of the empirical sciences. Despite the valuable focus on rhetoric’s practical and situational character, Bitzer’s conception ultimately made rhetoric the handmaiden of knowledge. The possible lines of inquiry opened by his original essay were thus shut down by a neo-Aristotelian ideal that insisted that we must know before we act.

The various neo-Sophistical responses to Bitzer rightly challenge his hierarchical structure by emphasizing the genealogical and relativistic character of knowledge that makes rhetoric a constitutive component of what we believe to be the case in any particular context. Yet this effort often results in the evaporation of the situation itself. Ironically many critics challenge epistemological dualism with dualism of their own—a mind/body dualism that turns the mind into a cognitive machine whose purpose is primarily to perceive or observe stimuli that come from the bodily senses. Instead of a shared problem to which people collectively respond, one has a disconnected assortment of “perceptions” that exist only in the “mind.” The prominent use of the term “perception” is often indicative of these types of interpretations, used as a term of opposition to “reality.” Thus one commentary on Bitzer’s essay argues that “the exigence generates perceptions within the mind of each potential auditor and rhetor” while another states that “the goal of rhetorical discourse is consensus, the transformation of issue perceptions, bringing about a realignment and reconciliation between perceptual disparities.” Both of these essays define language in terms of cognitive “perception” that can do no more than seek perceptual consensus among a group of solipsistic minds, a consensus that may have little or no connection with “real” situations. The best one can achieve is consensus about perception. The “situation”—including the selves participating within it—is just another meaning in the mind.

However, to say that the goal of rhetoric is to create uniformity in perception is to confuse the functions of rhetoric and logic. Rhetoric does not seek perceptual consensus; it seeks coordination of action in a situation fraught with conflict and burdened by the essentially moral question “Why should I act thus and not otherwise?” In other words the defining characteristic of a rhetorical situation is not in the “mind” but in our total experience, which demands of us to make a real choice, here and now, that requires some deep commitment. But what is the nature of “choice?” Dewey answers: “Simply hitting in imagination upon an object which furnishes an adequate stimulus to the recovery of overt action. Choice is made as soon as some habit, or some combination of elements
of habits and impulse, finds a way fully open. Then energy is released. The mind is made up, composed, unified. As long as deliberation pictures shoals or rocks or troublesome gales as marking the route of a contemplated voyage. Deliberation goes on. But when the various factors in action fit harmoniously together, when imagination finds no annoying hindrance, when there is a picture of open seas, filled sails and favoring winds, the voyage is definitely entered upon.”

It is in this interpretation of choice as imaginative deliberation intended to aid in the recovery of overt action in the face of constraint and obstacle in which we find the meaning of the rhetorical situation. The function of rhetoric with respect to choice is thus twofold; not only must it paint a picture of open seas, but at times it must also stir the waters of habit and belief that make us desire to journey into strange waters.

To take a paradigmatic rhetorical example, Joseph McCarthy could not prosecute Communists until he created a situation in which Communist infiltration was an immediate crisis. But as Darsey has shown, McCarthy’s rhetoric stopped at the point where he had to fill the sails; he derived his power only within the rhetorical moment of crisis, and hence his rhetoric was a never-ending sequence of shoals and rocks and troublesome gales. For Darsey, McCarthy’s rhetoric thrived within the “fantastic” moment, by which he meant a “celebration of ambiguity, something indefinite, a moment of hesitation and indecision.” Consequently McCarthy never proposed any solutions or advocated any ideas. His sole purpose was sustaining the sense of fear and mystification that lent credence to a politics of suspicion and paralysis. Thus whereas the “traditional response of great leader in times of crisis is to judge . . . Joe McCarthy’s response to chaos was not certitude, but incredulity.” McCarthy thus demonstrates a rhetoric that only goes halfway—that creates a real sense of moral crisis and epistemological uncertainty only to let those energies fester and turn back on themselves. Great rhetoric, by contrast, not only generates the tension of the rhetorical situation, but then uses that tension for productive ends by the means of directing choice.

Given the inherited wisdom that McCarthy was a huckster, attempts to treat his discourse as something other than a spectacular illusion, and his loyal followers as something other than dupes, requires great exertion of the counterfactual imagination. Usually McCarthy is pointed to as an example of how rhetoric creates perceptions that lack empirical validity, such as when Smith and Lybarger argue that “Joseph McCarthy’s ‘list’ of subversives in the State Department created the perception of an exigence that required action, even though the exigence was exaggerated at best and completely contrived at worst.” Their conclusion, once again, seeks to contradict Bitzer’s notion of exigence, disproving the idea that “there is uniformity of perception within the observers of a rhetorical situation due to the nature of the situation itself” while
revealing how rhetoric contributes to the “social construction of reality.” For Smith and Lybarger, to put oneself in the shoes of the participants, and to consider the possibility that Communists were infiltrating the State Department, is a priori to explore what it means to be a victim of “deliberate deception.” From their enlightened position writing in 1996, they are thus licensed to draw conclusions about what the rhetorical situation really was, regardless of how people experienced the situation at the time.

The simple fact is that rhetoric will always remain under the cloak of epistemology so long as it is understood primarily from the perspective of an “outsider” with the benefit of critical distance and reflective analysis. As an art that inhabits a particular moment within the flow of becoming, rhetoric lives only within the situated experience of those it touches. As people’s experience shifts, so does the meaning of any particular rhetorical artifact as well as the meaning of the situation in which it is implicated. What never happens is that rhetoric “distorts” the “perceptions” of “observers” to a rhetorical situation. Indeed nothing is more telling in Smith and Lybarger’s account than the transformation of rhetorical actors into “observers.” The American citizens who were frightened by McCarthy’s assertions, inspired by his courage, pulled before his committee, intimidated into silence, or ruined by his ambition were not “observing” a situation, they were participating in one. And McCarthy’s rhetoric itself did not create the situation ex nihilo. His discourse came about in the context of a long historical development and within a situated moment of political uncertainty that gave the discourses of suspicion, threat, and crisis particular power. To say that McCarthy’s exigence was “contrived” may help us feel superior to the poor souls caught up in the Red scare, but it does little to facilitate the understanding of how the rhetoric of that historical moment functioned. To understand that we must attend not just to language and the “mind” but also to experience.

**Experience and Nature**

The great merit of Dewey’s naturalism is that it encourages us speak in the language of experience that accepts the reality of becoming. To accept the reality of becoming does not mean to be a realist; it means to accept the fact that change is real insofar as it is experienced as real. Dewey’s “naturalistic humanism” transcends the binaries between the subject and the object, the self and the world, the mind and the body, the individual and the social, not by metaphysical gymnastics but simply by treating experience as the only way in which we establish any sort of relationships within an environment. Experience and nature thus interpenetrate one another; as Dewey writes, “Experience is of as well as in nature.” The switch of the preposition from “of” to “in” effectively embodies the whole of Dewey’s naturalism. To be “in” nature means that we are no longer “observers” of something external; we are ourselves parts of nature.