

I recall my first encounter with the works of Richard Weaver. It was marked by a sense of overwhelming exhaustion—as though I had been given a task that must be done, but was overwhelming in its breadth and extension. Perhaps, it was even that sense of dread referenced by the theologian Werner Elert which he called the “primal experience” that God holds us responsible to do that which He makes it impossible for us to do. For reading Weaver is, really, a religious experience. It is, finally, the old struggle between law and gospel that constitutes the substance of the really great sermon whose purpose is not to inform, reconcile or explicate, but to kill and bring to rebirth.

For what is one to make of a writing that claims we “ignore the deep sources of tendency” (what is a “tendency” and how can it have a “source”?) How is one to make sense of a goal which is “to bring a rhetoric along with a proof”? Isn’t “rhetoric” simply the process of proving? And is it really sensible to speak of “rhetoric” as a count noun? In another context he advises us to “divest rhetoric of all the notions of artifice which have grown up around it . . . “ didn’t Aristotle himself declare rhetoric to be simply a tool which could be used for good or ill?” Could a modern academician seriously suggest that we live with two selves—one of which “he somehow evolves from his spirit”—is he seriously suggesting that we have a spirit? Where is the possible proof for that? And finally, is there any way in which rhetoric could be, really, “the intellectual love of God?”

Weaver’s writing is shot through with such puzzles, but the attentive reader understands that they are neither perverse nor the product of clumsy expression. Rather, one gets the distinct impression that the confusion emerges from some flaw in the reader rather than the manuscript. Weaver’s ultimate goal is to “bring sinners to repentance.” In the Greek that word was “metanoia” and it suggested a notion of “seeing in a different way.” The full conspectus of the Weaverian project can be adumbrated by the fact that most modern readers would understand “repentance” to mean a sense a shame in having broken laws and a determination to stop doing the bad things he had been up to. But true repentance involves the recognition that ones very grounds for distinguishing good from bad are hopelessly flawed, and one could never recognize that on the basis of the false grounds he uses in his judgments.

Operating from the most profound grasp of rhetoric the world has ever seen, Weaver took up his scalpel and functioned as the doctor of culture. For him, rhetoric was no bag of tricks—it was not a means of altering a person’s behavior while leaving the personality in tact. Aristotle understood rhetoric as tool of persuasion and recognized that its form was the enthymeme—the syllogism with something left out. Thus, he taught us how to use rhetoric, but never told us what it is. Weaver, on the other hand, saw rhetoric for what it was. Rhetoric is not the enthymeme—rhetoric is what the enthymeme leaves out: all those taken-for-granted notions of how the world is, what makes something valuable or despicable-how one should live one’s life. In short, to study rhetoric is to study what makes man function.

One must not underestimate the significance of the previous claim. The Weaverian view is not simply a research paradigm differing from others within an academic tradition in matters of focus or depth. It entails a radically different understanding of the universe from what has been blithely, nonconsciously and unintelligently accepted since at least the time of Bacon (or the rise of nominalism to be true to Weaver's own analysis.) His living word constantly and ineluctably drags one back to the "cosmos" of the classical-Christian synthesis.

To the discerning ear, Weaver is clear in his goal:

The modern world has a terrific momentum in the direction in which it going, and many of the words of our everyday vocabulary are terms implicit with approval of modern tendencies. To describe those tendencies in the language that is used most widely is to endorse them, whereas to oppose them is to bring in words that connote half-forgotten beliefs and carry disturbing resonances.

For my part, I spent three years of my life in a focused study of Weaver's view and expended 450 pages in its explication. Anyone wanting a detailed, scholarly defense of that position is invited to read my dissertation, A Weaverian Interpretation of Richard Weaver submitted to the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana in 1981. For the rest of this presentation, I will summarize that view as succinctly as possible.

Against the modernist/scientific view which necessarily has to discount the very notion of mind and all that it entails, the first assumption of the Weaverian system is that the universe is fundamentally, ontologically rhetorical. Brought into being de novo by the Logos the universe had meaning before anything existed to be meaningful.

His anthropology (view of the human) follows directly from that. Quite simply, man lives by his meaning, which can be most easily explicated through language. Fundamentally poetic, we encounter the universe metaphorically. To really "see" something is to encounter it through the lens of theoria, which specifies the grounds of relevant similarity. Thus, an item is recognized as a chair because it satisfies the necessary and sufficient characteristic of "chairness": It is designed for one person to sit on, has a back, etc. It is the definition, then, that is the carrier of meaning to us.

Of course, that approach only works for what we call "positive" terms. When we look to terms like "above"—"dialectical" terms, we are frustrated in offering definition. We simply cannot provide necessary and sufficient characteristics for them. Most thinkers seem satisfied with the approach of Kenneth Burke who would claim that such terms are defined via their privations or opposites. Thus "dark" means "not light"; "above" means "not below" and so forth. Of course such an approach is laughably circular, but it is generally accepted, I suppose, because the modern cartographer has looked at the quandary and emblazoned on it, HERE BE DRAGONS! And, indeed, here they be.

Such terms are popularly denominated "relative" terms which comfortably fits what we take to be the most arcane and hence authoritative pronouncement of science and modern

ethicists. Thus, “above” simply expresses a relationship between two objects. I strongly suspect that the genius of the Weaverian view was in his recognizing (as did Augustine) the utter absurdity of the notion that two items could be in a meaningful relationship with each other simply. On the contrary, for me to assert that one item is “above” another requires that I assume both objects are in relationship with a third item which **absolutely** anchors the series being referenced. Thus, for me to claim that A is above B I must assume some point (in this case, the center of the earth) **below which is nothing**. The proper formulation for dialectical meaning, then, would be “A is \_\_\_ B **with respect to** C.

The formulation appears throughout Weaver’s work under many names. Respecting the rhetorical enterprise, it is the “metaphysical dream;” as the stuff holding culture together, it is the “tyrannizing image.” Generically, I call it the “criterial absolute.

As I said earlier, this notion is the genius of the system. It is so because, in the first place, it explains the terms of tendency that most clearly characterize the rhetorical act. Man lives by his meaning and so by his choices. But “choice” is inherently tendentious; for me to say “I did A” is to say, “I chose A” in the sense that all actions occur in the context of options. But to say “I chose A” is to say I believe, all things considered, that A is **better than B** where “A” stands for the elected option and “B” stands for all the options that are unavailable to me since I chose “A.” Here are the dragons. All human action requires choice, and all choice is predicated on the notion of the “better.” But “better” is clearly a dialectical term. Since all dialectical terms require the acceptance of a criterial absolute for them to be meaningful (and they must be meaningful); for me to believe one thing could be “better” than another, absolutely requires my accepting that there exists a criterial absolute grounding the series. I must in other words accept, however nonconsciously, that there exists in the universe “that better than which nothing could be imagined.” And that is the very definition of God. Dragons indeed!

The matter becomes more clear and coherent when we observe that the difference between positive and dialectical terms is, really, simply a matter of form. For me to say “that is a chair” is really for me to say, “that item is like other items I call a chair with respect to “chairness.” Thus, positive terms participate fully in the metaphoric dynamic explicated regarding dialectical terms which can be formulated “**A is like B**” **with respect to C**.

One can easily see, then, how Weaver could seriously claim that “language is sermonic.” All knowing, all acting, all speaking depend upon God concepts—ultimate notions of how the world is. Since this is the case, human action itself provides a very strong proof for the existence of God. As CS Lewis pointed out, we can imagine a creature who is hungry but who has no food. We could not, however, imagine a hungry creature who was produced by a universe that, inherently, produced no food. We could make no sense of a creature having a sex drive that reproduced asexually. Similarly, we cannot make sense of a creature whose every action inherently paid obeisance to a God but who was produced by a universe that had no God.

This anthropology is grounded on two presuppositions: All thought is syllogistic and all normal talk is enthymematic. Thought and language, if not identical, are certainly highly analogous. As Noam Chomsky so decisively demonstrated, the human being is hardwired to acquire and use a human language. Thus, at their roots--their "deep grammar"—all languages are the same. Of course, not all languages are the same. In their empirical manifestations as English, Greek, etc. they are the gifts of their culture.

So it is with rhetoric. Every normal person is born with the ability to reason—to employ syllogisms. One does not, in any sense, "learn" that, if all men are mortal and Socrates is a man, then Socrates must be mortal. Nor could one give an adequate, non circular explanation of why that is so. It just is. Deriving a conclusion from premises is a matter of first principles or, in Thomas Reid's formulation, "common sense." If that process were not trustworthy, no thought would be trustworthy. Thus, the skeptics who blithely assert (as legions of professors do) that "there is no truth," are immediately, obviously, and hilariously out of court. For since "there is no truth" is itself a truth claim, if it is true, it is false. No one needs to have learned the laws of non-contradiction or the excluded middle to sense the utter absurdity of the claim.

More than a capacity, though, the ability to think in syllogisms is an imperative. We are inherently meaning making creatures and meaning is inherently a matter of building syllogisms. The enthymeme "Socrates will surely die because he is a man" is not just not compulsive, but meaningless unless the auditor is willing to add "all men are mortal." This imperative to unconsciously complete enthymemes accounts for the development of a particular rhetoric.

In the natural course of events, we take every claim we encounter as prima facie authoritative. In other words, it does not occur to us to doubt it. That is generally true, though it is obviously more pronounced when the claims are coming from someone we grant some form of legitimate authority—parents, teachers, pastors, physicians, etc. Of course, those claims are not meaningful in themselves. Even the most rampant dogmatist will not understand the claim in isolation. Mommy says, "You should not touch the stove." The child adds, "Whatever Mommy says is true." Mommy says "Do not touch the stove" Therefore, it is true that I should not touch the stove.

I intend the previous comments only in a strictly descriptive sense and do not mean to imply that people are inherently gullible. To refuse reliance on authority—to believe only that which one directly established for himself—would be utterly crippling. My point is simply that our deepest convictions are not taught in the sense of being the object of instructions. Rather they are, as Aristotle would say, "caught." They enter our nonconscious minds as the necessary implication of accepting lower order claims.

As we develop, we accumulate a large number of such claims because the culture is virtually unanimous in employing them. "Science has proven ..." for example, takes its probative force from the idea that science cannot be wrong. The fact that no respectable scientist would make that claim has no impact on the scientism which emerges from its continual employment. Taken together, those claims form what I call the "**enthymematic**

**base**” of the individual and his culture. It is this that Weaver referenced in his claim that “the optimists” (the enemies of true rhetoric ) “have the rhetorician’s advantage of a language in circulation and a set of ‘prejudices’ in the mind of the majority.”

Thus we see that a culture’s rhetoric develops via a phenomenological circle. It’s members advance enthymemes (the empirically available “surface rhetoric”) which the auditor renders meaningful by nonconsciously providing the missing parts of the implied syllogism. Those premises ultimately constitute that individual’s taken for granted view of the world (his deep rhetoric) which then serves as the theoria or perceptual screen through which he encounters the world and through which he reports it via his own enthymemes.

Of course, this whole process is not random. At its root is what Weaver called “the tyrannizing image”—a vision of the good and the true that filters the claims and excludes those positions that do not fit it. For example, the claim that the New Orleans flood was God’s will would be largely rejected by the American culture, whereas the claim that human activity is causing global warming would be accepted with no more serious evidence. According to our tyrannizing image, the world was created and is sustained through blind processes of material causation. After all, if the scientist is understood to have unique insight such that we would label his observations “facts” and all others “opinions,” it would necessarily follow that the universe was so constructed that his particular truth seeking technique—the experiment—is appropriate.

Only when one grasps this vision in its totality can he have a sense of the overwhelming task confronting the Doctor of Culture. There can be no help within the culture itself, for it is immune to attack through its enthymemes.

So the doctor of culture breaks the phenomenological circle and seeks aid through the dialectic which—relying on first principles—is not subject to the vagaries of cultural inferences. From that vantage point he can critique the culture and forge a rhetoric reflecting it.

Such a rhetoric would use a totally different style. At the level of its **argument bases** it would employ principles rather than circumstances. Principles resonate only in the mind. To employ them is to endorse the existence of mind—not merely as the accidental workings of the individual brain but the universal mind of the Greek Cosmos and the Christian Logos. It will employ different **ultimate terms**, which call things what they are. It will value “excellence” rather than “diversity.” It will identify behavior as “bad” rather than “inappropriate.” When it speaks of learning, for example, it will use words carrying human **resonances** like “education,” and not those terms redolent of the maze like “training” or “reinforcement.” Finally, such a rhetoric will attend to different **pertinences**. To speak, for example, of “gay” rights is to insist that rights apply properly to demographic groups and that justice is a matter of balancing interests.

Most importantly, perhaps, we need to educate people to be alert to just what world view their rhetoric projects.

The task is monumental. No wonder Weaver died at 53. But the labor is worthwhile even if it impacts no but the self, for in the final analysis our rhetoric dictates who we are. It is the carrier of the meaning we live by, and as Weaver put it, "If the world is to remain a cosmos, we shall have to make some practical application of the law that in the beginning was the word."