The Cartesian Anxiety in Epistemic Rhetoric: An Assessment of the Literature

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Since Robert L. Scott’s seminal article in 1967, forays over the extent to which “rhetoric is epistemic” have been fairly commonplace in communication journals. Recently those concerns characteristic of the epistemic rhetoric “debate” have been translated into concerns for how rhetoric influences “inquiry” in the human and natural sciences. Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey’s book, The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences, contains essays that examine rhetoric’s place in the inquiry of several diverse disciplines: biology, mathematics, anthropology, psychology, economics, political science, history, theology, law, and women’s studies. But even these “new directions” for the study of epistemic rhetoric reflect concern for some basic philosophical issues that have been central since 1967.

At base, Scott’s assertion that “rhetoric is epistemic” implores scholars to rethink the relationship between discourse—or in broader terms, symbolic action—and the processes and substance of knowledge. Epistemic rhetorical theory, therefore, advances propositions about both how people know and the nature of what they know. It has, in sum, epistemological and ontological implications. Brummett notes this dual concern.

The proposition that “rhetoric is epistemic” asserts a relationship between knowledge and discourse, between how people know and how they communicate. The proposition also asserts a relationship between reality, or what there is to know, and discourse. That statement implies what the world is like such that we can know it through communication.

The epistemic rhetoric literature, to a large extent, involves various attempts to articulate the relationships among communication, knowledge, and reality.

My goal in this paper is to compare and assess the four major positions articulated in the epistemic rhetoric literature. For conve-
nience I have labeled these positions as (1) The Objectivist Thesis, (2) Critical Rationalism, (3) The Social Knowledge Thesis, and (4) Consensus Theory. The important differences among these positions can be identified through an examination of how they conceptualize rhetoric, knowledge or truth, and reality. But these positions also exhibit some overarching similarities. Those similarities can best be recognized through an assessment of how the various positions address issues related to what Richard J. Bernstein calls “Cartesian Anxiety.”

Cartesian Anxiety is the assumption that only two options are available for those who inquire into matters of knowledge and action: either some ultimate ground for knowledge and action exists, some objective and ahistorical foundation against which claims to know can be measured and the utility of actions ascertained, or we are beset by relativistic skepticism and are unable to speak of knowledge or “justified action in any meaningful sense.” We are enveloped, in the latter case, by a moral and intellectual chaos that stems from an ever-expanding plurality of positions. This opposition, states Bernstein, includes “a variety of other contrasts that indicate the same underlying anxiety: rationality versus irrationality, objectivity versus subjectivity, realism versus antirealism.”

Several scholars note this Cartesian influence in epistemic rhetoric. Brummett states, for example, that “Cartesian dualism pervades our philosophy, almost forcing us to think in terms of physical experience vs. reason, subject vs. object, mind vs. matter, and thought vs. nature,” and that, consequently, “many epistemic rhetoricians seem to view the subjective and the objective as the only ontological options.” Scott writes that his work is motivated by his objections to two popular beliefs that pervade philosophy, common sense in general, and the epistemic rhetoric literature specifically. He objects first to the belief “that some privileged sort of knowing founds correct thinking,” and second to the corresponding implication that “we can dispense with belief [or ‘mere’ opinion] altogether if we follow the priority of knowing well enough.” And finally, Cherwitz and Hikins identify the “Cartesian dichotomy between mental entities and physical entities” as the “source” of the “theoretical disparities” found among rhetorical epistemologies. They argue, further, that the positions taken on this issue are attempts to account for the mutual influence of “mental occurrences” and “physical events” on one another. Brummett, Scott,
and Cherwitz and Hikins all note that issues of Cartesian Anxiety are addressed in rhetorical epistemology.\textsuperscript{11}

This paper, then, demonstrates the differences among the four major positions by examining how they conceive of rhetoric, truth, and reality. It also demonstrates the similarities among the positions by examining how they address issues related to Cartesian Anxiety. I now turn to the examination of the four positions.

\textit{The Objectivist Thesis}

This view, argued primarily by Richard Cherwitz and James Hikins, is generally taken to assume a positivistic epistemology.\textsuperscript{12} This view restricts rhetoric to a method by which truth is refined and communicated. “Through rhetorical activity,” writes Cherwitz, “subjective perceptions collide with one another and are exposed to man’s faculty of critical reflection. In this sense, rhetoric functions intersubjectively, dispelling error in the face of truth.”\textsuperscript{13} Once such truth is secured, rhetoric can disseminate it to others, for rhetorical discourse is “the description of reality through language.”\textsuperscript{14} Rhetoric functions, therefore, to refine and disperse truths discovered through the clash of subjective perceptions or through some other more objective means.

The notion of intersubjectivity maintained within this perspective merits further attention. For Cherwitz and Hikins, when “subjective perceptions collide with one another,” an intersubjective position results.\textsuperscript{15} These scholars thus begin with the subjective and solitary knower, so that “all knowledge is ultimately grounded in first person epistemic judgments.”\textsuperscript{16} Intersubjectivity, then, entails an a priori apodictic knowledge of the self. This Cartesian possibility of conceptual certainty leads Cherwitz to articulate an epistemological proviso that also is definitively Cartesian: “the philosopher’s quest for knowledge or truth rests upon a crucial epistemological condition: that knowledge resides within the person.”\textsuperscript{\textcircled{17}} The implications of this provison for rhetoric’s epistemic function are important and far-reaching. “Intrapersonal discourse” becomes the “paradigm of epistemic rhetoric.”\textsuperscript{18} Rhetoric, in this view, is deprived of its traditional persuasive design; any notion of social influence is undermined because rhetoric, like knowledge, is grounded in the solitary, subjective, and introspective knower.

For Cherwitz and Hikins, knowledge consists of truth, belief, and
Justification. For something to count as knowledge it must be true; it must correspond to some “state of affairs” external to the knower.¹⁹ The “standard for accuracy” is “a realm of basic, uninterpreted, hard facts which serves as the foundation for all empirical knowledge.”²⁰ Knowledge also entails belief: “to say that one has knowledge of any truth, X, X must not only be the case, but in addition, one must believe that X is the case.”²¹ And finally, anyone who makes a claim to knowledge must have sufficient justification—i.e., evidence—for doing so.²² The presence of these three criteria makes for certainty with regard to issues of knowledge. Indeed, Cherwitz and Hikins make the extreme claim that if one possesses these three criteria on any matter, “then it is impossible to have erred.”²³ Knowledge, within this perspective, is always absolute and definite. It is grounded in a clearly Cartesian foundation: correspondence with reality (truth), and the subject’s rational certainty of that correspondence (belief and justification).

At this point these scholars must confront the Cartesian problem: how is the subjective knower to accord the status of certainty to truths, beliefs, and justifications about the external and objective world? Their solution is as Cartesian as the problem: they establish a method. Croasmun and Cherwitz write that any consideration of epistemology must begin “by delineating those criteria which, if met, would allow us to confer the status of knowledge on a select few beliefs.”²⁴ Cherwitz states that such criteria must establish that rhetoric “operates epistemologically only when it addresses the critical, reflective properties of man’s mind.”²⁵ These criteria are developed in various other essays by Cherwitz and Hikins, and they serve to delineate the method by which rhetoric can be epistemologically productive.²⁶ The method is grounded, significantly, in the properties and activities of the individual subject’s mind.

Given the above, these scholars’ adherence to an independent reality is not surprising. The first postulate of Cherwitz and Hikins’s “perspectivism” reads, for example, that “in experience there is presented to us, directly, a world of phenomena largely independent of our attitudes, beliefs and values.”²⁷ Indeed, knowledge is accorded such high status because of this independent reality. Croasmun and Cherwitz state that “all reality, whether social or empirical, [exists] independent of discourse and thought,” and that any proposition is measured by how it compares with the “impinging data of reality.”²⁸ There exists, therefore, an indepen-
dent and absolute reality that can be known objectively. This position results in the elimination of probability. No “degrees of knowledge” exist, for one is either right or wrong; one’s position either corresponds to objective reality, or it does not. Rhetoric, then, is deprived not only of its traditional persuasive function, but of its traditional subject matter, the probable, as well.

Cherwitz and Hikins present their position as one that avoids dualism. But they are firmly entrenched within a dualist paradigm. Their position asserts the existence of an independent reality which impinges upon both physical and social affairs. As such it maintains a distinction between subject and object. The separation, indeed, is relatively unproblematic, for the objective world is presented directly to subjective minds. The objective data of reality can function, therefore, as an epistemological foundation. When knowledge is problematic, they advance a method by which subjective conceptions can be clarified and refined, and result in objective truth. Cherwitz and Hikins’s epistemological system is dualist in its notion of truth, its advancement of a method, and its foundationalist premise. And their system is clearly motivated by the Cartesian Anxiety. Indeed, Hikins and Zagacki state this explicitly. They justify the objectivist thesis by asserting that “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.”

Critical Rationalism

This position, articulated by C. Jack Orr, is premised on the critical rationalism of Karl Popper. Orr argues that because the “knowledge by which we live” is contingent, rhetoric is granted a central place in its production. Discourse is a crucible by which to test and refine various and competing knowledge claims. The critique of different perspectives can lead a society closer to objective reality, even though that reality can never be known with certainty.

An important point in Orr’s position is his contention that knowledge claims are “criticized in the name of absolute truth.” Thus while human knowledge is recognized as contingent and uncertain, the concept of an objective truth is maintained, as is the possibility that progress toward it can be made. “We require a perspective,”
states Orr, “which affirms absolute truth but recognizes the contingent character of knowledge.” The same is said for reality. In Orr’s words, “we do not acknowledge objective reality by perceiving it in and of itself, which is impossible; but, by recognizing its logical place in our quest for truth.” Objective reality, then, is beyond human apprehension, but exists in an independent and objective manner and is useful for the critique of socially constructed symbolic universes.

Orr’s thesis invites some troublesome queries. Is it not a delusion to postulate an objective reality that can never be experienced, tested, or observed? On what basis might such a postulation be made? How can one claim that knowledge approximates objective reality if one can never know that which one is attempting to approximate? These quandaries arise from Orr’s distinction between epistemology and ontology. At the epistemological level, Orr maintains that “knowledge claims are contingent upon the framework of the knower.” But ontologically, truth is objective, absolute, and exists “apart from mind.” Indeed, Orr states that this “concept of objective reality. . . is at stake” in his essay. Orr’s epistemology, in other words, diverges from his ontology.

Once Orr embraces this distinction between epistemology and ontology, assumptions evident of Cartesian Anxiety naturally follow. Bokeno notes, for instance, that “Orr’s unwitting advocacy of both a realist View of facts and a correspondence theory of truth” leads him to maintain that “we are not justified in saying that the knowledge we have is true unless that knowledge is justifiable by reference to an a priori standard of truth.” For Orr, facts exist only in an independent objective world, and any conception’s truthfulness is measured by how closely it corresponds to that world. While one may embrace beliefs and opinions that are contingent, one’s knowledge claims must be warranted by appeal to an apodictic foundation. To justify knowledge, then, the epistemologist must seek to answer the question, “are our agreements about the truth true?” Orr thus embarks upon “the traditional epistemological quest . . . for the foundations of knowledge, something that would show, once and for all, the indubitable basis upon which knowledge could be grounded.”

Because he argues for the existence of an independent reality against which both social and empirical claims can be judged, Orr maintains a distinction between subject and object. His assertion
that this dualism prohibits any certain knowledge would seem to free him from the snares of Cartesian Anxiety. For Orr is willing to live with doubt without predicting chaos. But his commitment to an ontological foundation does substantiate his thesis, and that commitment at least implies that if no absolute basis for truth exists, the ability to judge knowledge and belief claims is undermined.

Celeste Condit Railsback’s “structural-material model of truth and objective reality” is similar to Orr’s variant of critical rationalism in that it is based on the conviction that objective reality exists and exerts fundamental constraints on human language and action. Though at one point she states that objective reality is “only postulated,” she asserts elsewhere that it is “nonhumanly generated,” that it is often “physiological” in nature, and that it consists of “external material conditions." Each of these postulates assumes a separation between subject and object much like that articulated by Orr.

Within this conception, rhetoric operates to mediate between language and objective reality, or “external material conditions.” When rhetoric “adjusts the linguistic structure to match material conditions,” she writes, “we call it inquiry or the expression of truth.” Material conditions function as an objective, independent, and therefore apodictic foundation against which claims to truth can be measured. Although Railsback questions the notion of objective reality and truth, she eventually falls back into a traditional understanding of these concepts.

The Social Knowledge Thesis

This third distinctive position is embraced most explicitly by Thomas B. Farrell. His conceptualization of rhetoric, knowledge, and reality hinges on a reassertion of the Aristotelian distinction between social and technical knowledge. This distinction is asserted on two bases: (1) the type of consensus conferred, and (2) the nature of what is known. I will touch briefly on each of these.

Farrell affirms that “all knowledge is grounded in consensus,” and asserts that “the criteria for distinguishing knowledge relationships” is “the type of consensus” involved. The consensus that creates social knowledge does not adhere in an objective fashion; it is not a certain or obvious state of affairs. Social knowledge, for Farrell, “rests upon a peculiar kind of consensus . . . a consensus
which is attributed to an audience rather than concretely shared."\(^{47}\)
This type of consensus is *presumed*.

In technical knowledge, however, consensus does adhere objectively. Such knowledge is "the outcome of an actual consensus on specialized modes of inquiry or procedures of research."\(^{48}\) This consensus is "removed from public scrutiny."\(^{49}\) Since the consensus is taken as certain, so is the attendant technical knowledge. That knowledge is neither probable, nor something about which we debate; it is, rather, specialized and certain.

Given this distinction between types of consensus, Farrell is prepared to assert that the difference between social and technical knowledge is not premised upon "some synthetic property of 'the facts themselves.'"\(^{50}\) Close inspection of his position, however, reveals otherwise. Social knowledge, he writes, "comprises conceptions of symbolic relationships among problems, persons, interests, and actions," and is the "kind of knowledge particularly appropriate to the art of rhetoric."\(^{51}\) The nature of the objects known, in other words, is such that, because their symbolic or rhetorical dimensions are granted significance, they cannot be embraced with certainty. This knowledge, then, is not premised upon "the facts themselves."

Technical knowledge, on the other hand, "will acquire its character as an object through the general patterns which are found to inhere in the natural environmental process."\(^{52}\) This specialized knowledge is based on universal principles, absolutes that are not arguable, but are presupposed. One measures technical knowledge by its "perceived correspondence to the external world."\(^{53}\) In this case, then, knowledge is a product of "the facts themselves." The objects known are presumed to exist independently and to present themselves for objective examination. In sum, the bifurcation of reality into the social and the technical leaves one area in which knowledge is relative and contingent upon rhetorical discourse, and another in which knowledge is absolute and can be known with certainty.

Within the social arena, Farrell attempts to avoid problems of Cartesian Anxiety, such as objectivity and foundationalism, by arguing that no a priori standards exist by which to judge matters of value and belief. Rather than posit that people should seek objective truth on social issues, he argues that such truth is always contingent upon social groups. His concept of technical knowledge, however, especially emphasizes a subject-object distinction.
People acquire knowledge about technical or specialized facts which exist in the external world. Farrell links his concept of technical knowledge specifically to Descartes and the “traditional scientific method,” which emphasizes “the ‘objective’ detachment of knowers from the object of their knowledge.” The concept of technical knowledge, then, depends upon the presence of a foundation against which that knowledge can be measured.

Farrell’s essays are clear and succinct examples of what I have called the social knowledge thesis. Others also defend this thesis. Bitzer’s essay entitled “Rhetoric and Public Knowledge,” for example, assesses the nature and character of a public, the constitution of public knowledge, and the relationship between rhetoric and public knowledge. Bitzer seeks to develop that conception of a public which he says is essential to any rhetorical theory “that regards collective human experience as the legitimate source of some truths and, thus, the authoritative ground of a class of decisions and actions.” For Bitzer, this collective and authoritative foundation is premised upon the ability to distinguish between knowledge and opinion, between truth and mere belief. Indeed, he sees these distinctions as “fundamental and real.” Knowledge is true, indisputable, and attained through correct “methods of inquiry and confirmation”; opinion is potentially false, disputable, and often attained through methods that are incorrect.

Bitzer further distinguishes between private and public knowledge. This distinction is premised on the assumption (very similar to that made by Farrell) that some truths exist independent of human activity while others come into existence because of human activity. Bitzer states: “There are in the physical world literally billions of factual condition—bare fact—which, when known to us, do not engage our interested participation.” And indeed, the public itself is a “real, concrete” entity. So, in addition to distinctions between public and private, subjective and objective, there exists in Bitzer a propensity for foundationalism, a belief that physical facts, at least, can be measured by how accurately they correspond to the indubitable data of reality.

A final example of the social knowledge thesis is Brinton’s essay on William James. Brinton’s intent is “to identify a conception of truth which provides objectivity and constraints on belief while at the same time allowing that truth in general is a function of rhetorical activity and intersubjective agreement.” He conceives of intersubjectivity, however, as the clash of subjective perspectives,
and thus begins with the subjective mind. Brinton also relies on James for the concept of an a priori “flux” which provides, for humans, a relation of sensational and conceptual “givens” that are unchangeable and “discovered by ‘direct inspection.’” Brinton explicitly equates his belief in determinate and objective truths which “exist independently of human thinking” with the positions espoused by Farrell and Biker.

Consensus Theory

The consensus theory of epistemic rhetoric is associated primarily with Robert L. Scott, Barry Brummett, and Walter Carleton. These authors assert that rhetoric is a central participant in the creation of all knowledge.

Consensus theorists part noticeably from the classical conception of rhetoric as unidirectional and purposeful persuasive messages. Consensus theory, in Brummett’s words, “posits rhetoric as a dimension of all activity rather than as an activity in its own right.” Rhetoric is associated with social influence in general, and any activity, event, object, or concept is rhetorical insofar as it is somehow rendered meaningful. Carleton substantiates this view when he notes that “whatever is made, said, or done . . . is rhetorical by virtue of its having been treated, shaped, and given meaning by one or a combination of the faculties of invention, interpretation, sequencing, and explanation.” He writes, further, that “rhetoric is universal in scope,” and is best “viewed as permeating all knowledge.” Scott notes, finally, that there are “rhetorical potentialities” in any circumstance. This broadened conception of rhetoric has implications for the nature of knowledge and reality.

Consensus theory’s account of human knowledge begins with the proposition that people are unable to experience raw sensation. All sensation is perceived and interpreted simultaneously, so that the interpretation is a major component in what is called knowledge. Any perception of the world is influenced by values, beliefs, attitudes, motives, and other social factors. To interpret is to attribute meaning to sensations as the sensations are experienced. Meanings thus engage perceptions; they precede and form what is perceived.

These meanings through which sensations are experienced are themselves created rhetorically. As such they are also rhetorically
malleable, and they are open to debate, argument, and change. Those meanings which do not seem arguable have been reified over time; but like all meanings, they were initially agreed upon through rhetorical argument. Meanings are thus accepted by consensus within any particular community. Different communities, therefore, may validate different meanings. Similarly, meanings may change over time as communities continually discuss them. Knowledge about what is true, consequently, becomes a concern relative to the rhetorical discourse of a particular community.

Brummett articulates this perspective most clearly when he writes that knowledge, or truth, is measured by “the extent to which the meanings of experience (that is to say, reality) of [an] individual are shared by significant others. Truth is agreement.” The “validity” of knowledge and truth clearly hinges on the presence or absence of a rhetorically created consensus among a community of significant others. Scott makes this same point when he argues that truth is always “the result of a process of interaction at a given moment,” and Carleton urges that knowledge is always social; it is always “made possible through ‘the decision and action of an audience.” Within this construct truth is created intersubjectively; it is not the product of the individual, subjective mind. Different social groups, further, may know different truths; for within this system knowledge and truth are relative and multiple, not absolute and single.

Though the above treatment of rhetoric and knowledge sets consensus theory clearly apart from the other rhetorical epistemologies examined thus far, the point at which this position most notably breaks from traditional epistemologies is in its ontology, or its conception of reality itself. Reality, for consensus theorists, is created by the same rhetorical processes through which it is known. “Discourse creates realities,” writes Brummett, because “reality is what experience means. This meaning is taken from personal experience and communication about it with others, the sharing of meaning.” The centrality of meaning is important because it ties reality inexorably to rhetoric. Since rhetoric manages meanings, it is fundamentally concerned with the “advocacy of realities.” Scott asserts, along these same lines, that “the claim of knowing rhetorically is that of creating actuality.” To claim rhetorical knowledge, for Scott, is to claim that “reality is socially constructed.” Within this perspective no one true or certain reality exists because reality is constituted in the images evoked by rheto-
ric. Reality, like knowledge and truth, is relative, multiple, and changeable.

Consensus theory represents the most concerted effort to avoid the problems of Cartesian Anxiety endemic to the positions examined thus far. Because the social is primary, the neat divisions between internal and external or mind and matter are denied. Because meanings are intersubjective rather than subjective phenomena, and because “objects” are not said to exist unless they are meaningful, the distinction between subject and object is avoided. Consensus theory thus rejects the premise of the Cartesian Anxiety—that is, the notion that only two options, subjectivism or objectivism, are open to us—and seeks to alleviate the fear that if an absolute standard does not exist, then intellectual and moral chaos necessarily reign.

Even this position, however, suffers from the vestiges of a nagging dualism which leave it open to charges that stem from the Cartesian “either/or.” In consensus theory, for example, shared meanings are said to “present external stimuli as knowable forms.” Yet the very term “external” connotes an inner-outer dualism. Further, along these same lines, Brummett’s definition of reality as “physical sensations + meaning” implies a separation between the two. When he states that rhetoric “creates the meanings that are reality, and does so as much as or more than does physical reality,” he admits the possibility of an impinging physical realm that could be just as influential as the social or rhetorical. Though, for Brummett, “external stimuli” or “physical sensations” do not possess any objective or absolute meaning, he recognizes the contradiction in claiming on one hand that “the social, the intersubjective, is ontologically primary,” and on the other that reality is “a mixture of the social and the physical.” The conundrum of dualism catches consensus theory in a contradiction.

This contradiction is most important at those points where consensus theory is left open to charges premised upon the assumptions of Cartesian Anxiety. One place where this is most evident is in consensus theory’s concept of “intersubjectivity.” An intersubjective position traditionally is assumed to result from the collision and consequent refinement of two subjective positions. The subjective mind thus becomes primary in importance. Cherwitz, as noted earlier, embraces this traditional notion of intersubjectivity, but of more importance at this point, he attributes this view to consensus theorists as well. Once intersubjectivity is understood
in this manner, consensus theory is subject to charges that stem from the Cartesian Anxiety. Croasmun and Cherwitz state, for example, that if “intersubjectivity involves a comparison of subjective beliefs and a choice of a consensus viewpoint,” then “one of two things” must be true. They hold that “either this intersubjective choice is rooted in something or it is arbitrary.” The choice must be grounded in something external and thereby certain, or it is simply solipsistic and the product of individual whims. Appropriating the concept of intersubjectivity opens consensus theory to charges of solipsism that stem from the fear that a lack of objective standards leaves no standards.

Carleton, at one point, seems to stumble toward this dilemma. He proposes epistemic rhetorical “methods” (specifically: invention, interpretation, sequencing, and explanation) that “denote those faculties of mind whose powers are such as to bring to consciousness, and to structure in awareness, the relatively undifferentiated matter of experience.” Note, first, that Carleton refers to a mind-matter dichotomy, and situates his methods within the mind. Though he later argues that the self, or individual mind, is always socially shaped and, therefore, never purely subjective, the statement cited here points to the ease with which even consensus theorists are led toward conceptualizations that imply dualism. And second, note that Carleton’s espousal of a method for knowing, which he elsewhere equates with the “fundamental operations of mind,” reveals a Cartesian desire to provide a framework for epistemology based upon understanding how the mind works. Such an agenda presumes concern for the individual mind. Even consensus theory, then, contains dualist problems and, as with the other positions, directs itself toward issues given by the Cartesian agenda.

**Conclusion: Rhetoric and Cartesian Anxiety**

Both intellectuals and non-intellectuals have tended to assume that “everybody has always known how to divide the world into the mental and the physical.” But the very notion of a mind-body problem, as Rorty notes, “originated in the seventeenth century’s attempt to make ‘the mind’ a self-contained sphere of inquiry.” Cartesian dualism must be recognized as the product of a historical context and a way of thinking peculiar to Descartes.
This dualism, nonetheless, has bequeathed to twentieth century thinkers a variety of implications and consequences. Perhaps the most obvious and important of these is the Cartesian Anxiety. Bernstein describes this “opposition between objectivism and relativism” in a manner that makes its relevance to the epistemic rhetoric literature particularly clear.

With a chilling clarity Descartes leads us with an apparent and ineluctable necessity to a grand and seductive Either/Or. Either there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, or we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelope us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos.86

Cartesian Anxiety is but one result of Descartes’s legacy. Its articulation does clarify this legacy’s power to formulate the questions, the definitions, and the terminologies of contemporary philosophy in general and the epistemic rhetoric literature in particular.

Bernstein draws attention to this anxiety by identifying its presence in different thinkers. Kant, for example, based his effort to establish a foundation for morality on this anxiety: either there is a universal, objective moral law, or the concept of morality is groundless and vacuous.”87 Habermas’ communicative rationality “still seems to be haunted by the dichotomy of objectivism and relativism”: either there is a communicative ethics grounded in the very structures of intersubjectivity and social reproduction, or there is no escape from relativism, decisionism, and emotivism.”88 Even in Rorty, Bernstein finds, “lurking in the background,” the Cartesian dichotomy: “either permanent standards of rationality (objectivism) or arbitrary acceptance of one set of standards or practices over against its rival (relativism).”89 These examples are not meant to demonstrate that the Cartesian Anxiety is universal or that its influence establishes the research, agenda for literally every philosopher or epistemologist who works within the Western intellectual tradition. They are meant, rather to assert the pervasiveness of Cartesian dualism, and to demonstrate that this paradigm dominates philosophical thought with a force unparalleled by other paradigms.

An evaluation of this influence in epistemic rhetoric helps us to clarify the presence of the Cartesian Anxiety within the epistemic rhetoric literature. Though the four major positions examined in this paper exhibit definitive differences, they all address issues
made important by the influence of the Cartesian Anxiety. Indeed, even reviews of the epistemic rhetoric literature situate the various positions in the categories offered by that Anxiety. Cherwitz and Hikins, in two essays, and Orr, in another, state that the only choice available is between subjectivism and objectivism, or between “subjectivist-based theories of knowing on the one hand and objectivist-based theories of knowing on the other.”90 Bokeno asserts, as well, that the epistemological theses advanced by Scott, Brummett, and Carleton, derive from “relativism,” while those advanced by Cherwitz, Hikins, and Croasmun, and by Orr, derive from “foundationalism.”91 The positions themselves are located within the options presented by the Cartesian Anxiety.

This survey and assessment of the epistemic rhetoric literature is not intended as wholesale condemnation of that literature. Scholars clearly have mapped some distinctive positions that identify many important intellectual, social, moral, political, and theological issues and implications. The trend within contemporary philosophy, nonetheless, is to search for positions that obviate the Cartesian Anxiety so prevalent in the epistemic rhetoric literature. Let me close by suggesting two possible directions for work in epistemic rhetoric.

One possibility is to direct concern away from ontological statements and toward epistemological statements. Richard Crable’s essay on “Knowledge as Status” illustrates this direction. For Crable any knowledge claim is accorded status through “the consensual, but not timeless, acceptance by the most competent judge(s) of the claim.”92 Knowledge is measured not by how closely it corresponds to an objective reality, nor by whether it appeals to a conceptual foundation of some kind. Instead, knowledge is judged by the degree of social consensus achieved within specific communities or epistemic courts, which, Crable emphasizes, constantly change over time. Crable thus rejects the quest for “timeless, immutable models, theories, and devices to establish that which is known.”93 Neither subjective knowers, irrefutable methods, apodictic foundations, nor dreams of certainty or objectivity plague Crable’s position.

But perhaps the main reason Crable is able to avoid the problems associated with the Cartesian Anxiety is his primary, if not exclusive, concern for epistemology rather than ontology. He simply does not address whether an independent and objective reality exists apart from that which is known. This strategic “omission”
enables Crable to obviate or work around the issues of Cartesian Anxiety. He refuses to address the Cartesian agenda.

A second possible direction is toward the perspective offered by philosophical hermeneutics. Stanley Deetz notes that hermeneutics provides “a legitimate mode of thinking and working which denies the battles between subjectivity and objectivity and between idealism and empiricism.” As such, hermeneutics provides a way around the Cartesian Anxiety. The move to philosophical hermeneutics is endorsed by scholars from a variety of disciplines, but most important for my interests is Scott’s ten year retrospective on epistemic rhetoric scholarship in which he dismantles the “epistemological model” raised in his initial essay and cites Gadamer to “effect a turn to rhetoric as hermeneutic.” This hermeneutic framework presumes an eternally ongoing cultural “conversation” within which different perspectives and beliefs are advanced, but which never secures a “foundation” or provides a metaphysical essence in which final agreement can be grounded.

The different positions articulated within the epistemic rhetoric literature yield many positive insights. Those insights can best be salvaged and expanded upon if the differences among these various positions are recognized clearly, and if future work in this area is directed away from those issues endemic to Cartesian Anxiety.

Notes

5. These “major positions” are derived from examination of several reviews of the epistemic rhetoric literature. These include Michael C. Leff, “In Search of Ariadne’s Thread: A Review of the Recent Literature on Rhetorical Theory,” *Central States Speech Journal*, 29 (Summer 1978): 73–91; Brummett, “Three Meanings”; Richard A. Cherwitz and James W. Hikins, “Rhetorical Perspectivism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 69 (Aug. 1983): 254–260, hereafter cited as “Perspectivism”; and R. Michael Bokeno, “A Critique of the Rhetoric and Epistemology Relationship and a Reinterpretation from the Perspective of Habermas’ Critical Social Theory,” unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Purdue University, 1985, pp. 42–167. Though these authors do not use the same labels as I do in this paper, there seems to be general agreement that these are four (if not the four) major positions.
11. The broader Cartesian influence in various areas of communication studies has been documented as well. Stanley Deetz argues that communication theories ranging from Berlo’s The Process of Communication (1960), to the “transactional” and “rule-governed” paradigms of the 1970s and 1980s conceptualize communication as the use of signs “to bridge the gap between two psychological selves by reconstructing subjective experiences of an external world.” See “Conceptualizing Human Understanding: Gadamer’s Hermeneutics and American Communication Studies,” Communication Quarterly, 26 (Spring 1978): 14–17. Nelson and Megill note that the “contempt for rhetoric” has reached new extremes and that this contempt is based on an “absolutized dichotomy between truth and opinion . . . between subject and object.” This distinction presumes persuasion is able to produce only subjective opinion. See “Rhetoric of Inquiry: Projects and Prospects,” Quarterly Journal of Speech, 72 (Feb. 1986): 21. Robert Hariman notes that this division between knowledge and opinion is “central to the conflict between philosophy and rhetoric” because rhetoric traditionally has been relegated to affairs of opinion, appearance, and probability, while philosophy deals with the more esteemed concerns of knowledge, reality, and certainty. See “Status, Marginality, and Rhetorical Theory,” Quarterly Journal of Speech, 72 (Feb. 1986): 48. And finally, William L. Nothstine has examined the Cartesian influence on contemporary rhetorical theory and criticism in “‘Topics’ as Ontological Metaphor in Contemporary Rhetorical Theory and Criticism,” Quarterly Journal of Speech, 74 (May 1988): 151–163.
15. Cherwitz, “An Attenuation,” 211. Also see 212; “From the clash of subjective realities resulting from the rhetorical encounter involving at least two people there emerges an intersubjective reality.”
17. Cherwitz, “An Attenuation,” 214, emphasis added. Also see Hikins, “Plato’s Rhetorical Theory: Old Perspectives on the Epistemology of the New Rhetoric,” 166, where he states that “humankind can be certain of their selves and attain apodictic knowledge by confronting the self.” Hereafter cited as “Plato’s Theory.”
20. Bokeno, 107, emphasis added.
26. They state, for example, that there must be “(1) free access for countervailing opinion, (2) defense of one’s ideas against the onslaught of such competing rationales, and (3) profiting from such defense through the correction and completion of one’s opinions.” See Cherwitz and Hikins, “John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty: Implications for the Epistemology of the New Rhetoric,” 16. Hereafter cited as “On Liberty.” Cherwitz states these same methodological criteria in “An Attenuation,” 217–218, and Hikins sets forth conditions for a “method” of epistemic rhetoric in “Plato’s Theory,” 164–165 and 169. Brummett, interestingly, calls this position “methodological,” see “Three Meanings,” 1–3.
27. Cherwitz and Hikins, “Perspectivism,” 251. They make virtually the same statement in “Rhetorical Epistemology,” 140: “there exists a reality independent of individual—i.e., private—attitudes, beliefs, and values,” 28. Croasmun and Cherwitz, 3. Also see Cherwitz and Hikins, “On Liberty,” 23, where they state that “generally reality per se will impinge upon” socially constructed reality; and their “Rhetorical Epistemology,” 156, where they argue that one may with confidence move “closer to the objects of reality per se.”
31. Hikins and Zagacki, 214.
33. Orr, 273.
34. Orr, 273.
35. Orr, 271.
36. Orr, 268.
37. Orr, 272.
38. Orr, 265, fn. 17.
40. Orr, 268.
41. Bokeno, 128. Bokeno notes on this same page that this search for foundations ties Orr’s position “to the Descartes-Locke-Hume tradition.”
43. Railsback, 353,355,361.
44. Railsback, 361.
52. Farrell, “Knowledge, Consensus,” 5, emphasis added.
56. Bitzer, 69.
57. Bitzer, 72.
58. Bitzer, 84. Bitzer embraces a patently Cartesian dualism on page 85, where he states that “we stand in a double relation—to the world of facts and to the realm of our mental life.”
59. Bitzer, 78.
61. Brinton, 159.
62. Brinton, 166.
63. Brinton, 165.
71. Carleton, 318.
76. Bineham and Brummett, 7.
79. Brummett, “Ontology,” 3. Croasmun and Cherwitz, 4, critique consensus theory at this point of contradiction. They state, “to speak of the process of attaching meaning to something presupposes that ‘something’ exists. Thus the suggestion that reality can be produced via social consensus presumes the existence of a reality independent of beliefs, attitudes, and values.” This critical statement further highlights the Cartesian nature of the contradiction in question.
80. Cherwitz, “An Attenuation,” 211. More specifically, he attributes this view to
Brummett.
81. Croasman and Cherwitz, 4.
82. Carleton, 319, emphasis added. In fairness to Carleton, he later argues that
the self or individual mind is always social and, therefore, never purely subjective;
see 323–325. The cite noted, nevertheless, points to the ease with which we are led
toward Cartesian conceptualizations.
84. Rorty, 17.
85. Rorty, 126.
86. Bernstein, 18.
88. Bernstein, 194.
89. Bernstein, 68.
90. Hikins, “Plato’s Theory,” 161; Also see Cherwitz and Hikins, “Perspec-
tivism,” 254–256; and Orr, “Communication, Relativism, and Student Develop-
91. Bokeno, 42–43.
92. Richard E. Crable, “Knowledge-as-Status: On Argument and Epistemol-
ogy,” Communication Monograph, 49 (Dec. 1982): 250. The entire quotation is
italicized.
93. Crable, 262.
94. Deetz, 12.