In an earlier article in this journal (1990), I argue that the epistemic rhetoric literature is influenced by Cartesian dualist assumptions, and that it addresses issues associated with “Cartesian Anxiety.” I suggest, further, that one way to avoid the problems associated with Cartesian dualism is to move “toward the perspective offered by philosophical hermeneutics,” which “provides a way around the Cartesian Anxiety” (58). My essay does not, however, explain what such a move might look like or justify in detail why philosophical hermeneutics can obviate the Cartesian Anxiety in rhetorical studies. This paper (the second part of which will be published in the next issue of Philosophy and Rhetoric) takes up where my earlier essay left off.

My main goal is to demonstrate how philosophical hermeneutics can provide a non-dualist perspective that is especially appropriate for rhetorical studies. To do this I first reiterate the problem of Cartesian dualism in rhetoric and show how several scholars support the move toward a hermeneutic perspective. This prepares me to demonstrate how philosophical hermeneutics obviates problems of Cartesian dualism in rhetorical studies. Part 2 of this work will demonstrate this more specifically. In that article I will focus on a particularly helpful concept in philosophical hermeneutics: the concept of a hermeneutic “medium.”

In neither of these essays is my goal to explicate the corpus of literature that comprises philosophical hermeneutics. I could not encapsulate the variety of perspectives within that area of study, and a summary of hermeneutics would not prove especially newsworthy to readers of this journal. My goal, instead, is to utilize specific concepts from my reading of philosophical hermeneutics in order (1) to reframe our understanding of rhetoric, and specifically of the relationship between rhetoric and Cartesian dualism, and (2) to offer the “hermeneutic medium” as a framework for conceptualizing rhetoric in a manner that avoids Cartesian dualism.

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The desire to escape from the dualist paradigm

While my earlier essay identifies the influences of Cartesian dualism in the epistemic rhetoric literature, it does not note the Cartesian influences in other areas of rhetorical studies. Stanley Deetz notes that contemporary communication research, in general, is beset by the Cartesian agenda:

Current [communication] research is clearly limited by several overly simple assumptions. The basic logic runs: Whatever happens must happen either inside the subject or outside him. Anything which is not physical is inside him. Thus, communication, through making use of physical signs, tries to bridge the gap between two psychological selves by reconstructing subjective experiences of an external world. (1978, 17)

Deetz identifies clearly the propensity to pattern communication research within the Cartesian dualist paradigm. Communication studies generally presume an internal-external, or mind-body, dualism; the subjective (internal) is separate from the objective (external). This fosters a view of communication in which the primary goal is to represent internal perceptions of external circumstances. Deetz examines communication theories ranging from Berlo’s *The Process of Communication*, published in 1960, to the “transactional” and “rule-governed” paradigms of the 1970s and 1980s. and he argues that these theories of communication are constructed in accord with dualist tenets (1978, 14–17). They presume a clear distinction between the subjective world of values, feelings, and commitments and the objective and ahistorical realm of facts.

That communication research should presume such a Cartesian distinction is not surprising given that common language use also presumes a dualist separation between subjects and objects. When one asks “what really happened,” for example, one seeks presumably for a response that situates an event in objective reality, rather than in subjective perception. Language is used as a tool to report about an independent world. John Stewart states that “one of the most basic beliefs about language and communication is . . . [that] there is a clear distinction between the linguistic and the nonlinguistic worlds and a conviction that the two worlds are representationally related in some way” (1986, 55). Deetz asserts that the prominent views of language are representational and “contain an implicit, alienated separation among experience, thought, and expression. Language as an object out there is simply assigned to
independently existing objectified mental and physical states” (1973, 41). The dominant paradigm, then, characterizes language as a tool for communication about either internal and subjective mental states or external and objective physical states.

This dualist paradigm is often in diametrical tension with the discipline of rhetoric specifically. Because the Cartesian method constitutes a search for certainty, it stands opposed to the probabilities and contingencies with which rhetoric traditionally deals. The Cartesian interest, writes Florescu, is in a method “totally distinct” from the rhetorical, a method devoted not to the probable, but to the exact. Descartes’s method, with its emphasis on clarity and distinctness of conceptions, is premised on “the criterion of self-evidence,” and therefore is not applicable to concerns with deliberation and argumentation (1970, 195). The Cartesian dualist legacy thus stands opposed to the rhetorical tradition.

Descartes himself held rhetoric in low esteem. He criticized it “as trivial or artificial,” and as “less concerned with truthful communication than with sterile word games” (France 1972, 27). Since his rational method would eliminate doubt and controversy in questions of truth, there would be “no need of persuasive rhetoric . . . no need for any particular preparation of the audience or any appeal to the imagination, the passions, or the senses” (France 1972, 48). The Cartesian method would be sufficient to “convince” people of the truth. Though in his later works Descartes recognized rhetoric as a means to overcome “obstacles in the way of reception of the truth,” his predominant notion of persuasion remained one in which the truth, firmly and clearly presented, would gain adherence from everyone (France 1972, 47–49). Rhetoric, for Descartes, was a nonessential commodity.

Warnick (1982) provides an illuminating example of the Cartesian influence on rhetoric. Her account of the “modern critic” in eighteenth-century France reveals a dependence on the Cartesian method that excluded rhetoric. Their philosophy, in her words, was to “trust only what is presented clearly and distinctly to your mind. Distrust rhetoric” (270). The modern critics “believed that the only aid a speaker needed to produce clear, well-ordered discourse was the Cartesian method” (272). Warnick argues that the modern critics’ devotion to Descartes’s method and their corresponding disdain for rhetoric were central factors in the elimination of rhetoric from the French educational curriculum (274–75). Within the Cartesian system, rhetoric was conceived as empty and
manipulative oratory that confounded clear and distinct perception of the truth.

Though this example is three centuries old, it reflects attitudes still prevalent in contemporary society. Grassi states, for example, that the desire to be rational typically consists of “tracing back our assertions to a ‘first truth.’” This Cartesian attitude implies that “emotive elements and with them the influences of images, of fantasy, of rhetoric play no role whatsoever in this rational process. They even appear as elements which interfere with the rational process” (1980, 37). Booth (1974) asserts, as well, that the contemporary disdain for rhetoric is due largely to the continuing influence of Cartesian doubt and the desire for certainty.

Other scholars note the Cartesian influence on rhetoric. John Nelson and Allan Megill (1986) note that the “contempt for rhetoric” has reached new extremes and that this contempt is based on an “absoluted dichotomy between truth and opinion . . . between subject and object” (21). The rigorous distinction presumed between “objective truth” and “subjective opinion” is “supremely un rhetorical,” they state, because it reflects a “radical separation of conviction from persuasion” (21). Persuasion, in this schema, is able to produce only subjective opinion. The Cartesian paradigm makes rhetoric distinct from matters of knowledge and truth.

Robert Hariman notes that this division between knowledge and opinion is “central to the conflict between philosophy and rhetoric,” a conflict in which 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 (1986, 48). Underlying this conflict is the implicit acceptance of Descartes’s dualist rationalism, in which the “ideal of knowledge equates the rigor of objective thought with the provable and excludes every form of figurative, poetic, metaphorical, and rhetorical language form the theoretical sphere” (Grassi 1980, 76).

The Cartesian dualist paradigm challenged

The Cartesian dualist paradigm, its widespread significance notwithstanding, has been challenged. Bernstein notes that many contemporary philosophers are “in revolt against the Cartesian framework” (1983, ix). That revolt, though perhaps not so well pronounced, is evident in the field of communication as well. In his essay on the importance of socially responsible forms of communication, Ben-
nett (1985) asserts the need to obviate the Cartesian dualist agenda: “The strategy that I have outlined here,” he states, “is an attempt to transcend the longstanding but arbitrary division between ‘the scientific’ and ‘the sensuous,’ or the ‘objective’ and the ‘subjective’” (267). How Bennett’s strategy accomplishes that transcendence is unclear, however, for he asserts that “the most important aspect of language use” is representation; that there are distinctions between words and the things they represent (260); and that people can “look beyond the words that frame a situation and notice sense-data or facts” (269). These statements presume the division Bennett wants to overcome.

Fisher’s articles on narrative rationality voice this same desire to abandon Cartesian assumptions. “The [narrative] paradigm,” he writes in his first essay, “is a ground for resolving the dualisms of modernism: fact-value, intellect-imagination, reason-emotion, and so on” (1984, 10). And in his second piece, Fisher states explicitly that his narrative view bypasses the Cartesian Anxiety identified by Bernstein (1983, 348). How Fisher accomplishes this task, however, is unclear. Indeed, except for the two citations noted above, Fisher never mentions the Cartesian problem. Bennett’s and Fisher’s essays do indicate, nevertheless, that the dualist paradigm no longer goes unquestioned; increasingly it is prone to challenge.

This challenge was even more evident in a 1985 conference on “The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences.” The conference constituted, in Simons’s words, an “assault on objectivism.” It represented a move to reject the fact-value and subject-object dualisms, and the accompanying assumption “that only facts can be dealt with rationally” (1985, 53). But Simons (1985), in his account of the conference, admits the difficulty of overcoming these Cartesian dualist standards when he expresses fears characteristic of the Cartesian Anxiety. He is concerned, for example, that the rejection of fixed and ahistorical criteria for judgment will lead to “an unfettered relativism, incapable of error correction” (58); and he asks rhetorically, “how can we possibly defend any grounds for evaluating the merits of a narrative [or any intellectual or moral stance] when the very idea of a ground or foundation is seen as untenable?” (60). These types of problems must be addressed if the absolute disjunction between objectivism and relativism is to be displaced, and the Cartesian dualist agenda exorcised from its place as the dominant paradigm for thought and action.
Philosophical hermeneutics: An alternative paradigm

One possibility for an alternative to the Cartesian paradigm is contained in the contemporary strand of anti-foundationalist scholarship represented by philosophical hermeneutics. Philosophical hermeneutics provides a vocabulary for thinking about language that circumvents the Cartesian dualist problems traditionally associated with the Western linguistic heritage. My earlier essay posits that communication scholars interested in matters of knowledge have all too uncritically stepped into an “epistemological tradition” concerned with the Cartesian search for certainty. I have suggested thus far that while scholars are becoming aware of the problems endemic to a Cartesian dualist paradigm, we have yet to map a clear theoretical path that avoids those problems. A fruitful possibility is to move from epistemology and to hermeneutics.

From epistemology

Rorty (1979) argues that the issues and concerns of the Cartesian agenda are not altogether positive. With Descartes, epistemology became “the search for the immutable structures within which knowledge, life, and culture must be contained” (163). That search entailed “learning more about what we could know and how we might know it better by studying how our mind worked”; it proceeded, that is, by understanding how the mind could represent most accurately the fundamental truths of human existence (137). Philosophy-as-epistemology, to use Rorty’s phrase, is set apart from other disciplines because it provides their foundations. To enter this tradition is to imply concern for the questions it asks and the issues it addresses, and those questions and issues are guided both by Descartes’s foundation metaphor and by the commitment to dualism and certain truth that the metaphor entails. Any alternative to the Cartesian system must seek to displace this epistemological tradition.

Calvin O. Schrag (1985) employs the phrase “the end of philosophy” to describe a movement away from the conceptualization of philosophy as a mirror of nature or a search for foundations and toward a task of “thinking beyond” any pure theory of reality or knowledge (166). This task involves an “attack on foundationalism” and the “rupture of the epistemological paradigm,” and it marks the movement away from a Cartesian quest for “incorrigible givens,” such as “physical objects, sense-data, intuited essences,
[or] mental structures,” which might serve as objective foundations for truth (165).

What Schrag describes as “the end of philosophy” is actually a movement not simply against, but beyond the Cartesian epistemological tradition. For to escape the Cartesian framework, one must obviate both the hopeful search for an immutable foundation and the arguments that such a foundation exists but cannot be discovered. To advance such arguments entraps one in the dualist agenda just as surely as if one sought the changeless structures of knowledge. Thus, Schrag suggests a movement away from the Cartesian dualist agenda that formulates philosophy as an epistemological pursuit; he seeks not to solve, but to displace the epistemological problem:

What is at issue here is a shift from epistemological space as a system of beliefs and propositions to the broader and more vibrant hermeneutical space of affect-imbued and praxis-oriented engagements. . . . What is displaced is the philosophically incoherent pursuit of the ‘knowledge of knowledge’ and the sublation of beliefs and knowledge into a theory of justification and cognitive representation. Beliefs and knowledge . . . take their place among the citizenry of affects, habits, skills, and institutional practices, with which they commingle in the adventure of making sense together. (171–72)

For Schrag, therefore, the dualist problem is not which position one takes on the agenda, but entanglement with the agenda in general. The entanglement is pernicious: I have noted that even consensus theorists, who argue that immutable truths are inaccessible to humans, become mired in dualism when they employ a Cartesian vocabulary to address the issues and concerns of the Cartesian agenda (1990, 54). Schrag suggests we need to think beyond epistemology and toward hermeneutics for a non-dualist perspective.

To hermeneutics

The term hermeneutics traditionally refers to the processes and study of interpretation and understanding. It derives its form from the name of the Greek messenger-god, Hermes, who is associated, significantly, “with the function of transmuting what is beyond human understanding into a form that human intelligence can grasp” (Palmer 1969, 13). Hermes, further, was credited by the Greeks “with the discovery of language and writing,” so that language is seen as central to the hermeneutic processes of interpretation and understanding, the processes that render human
experience meaningful (Palmer 1969, 13). Hermeneutics, then, is concerned with the linguistic dimensions of interpretation, understanding, and meaning.

As envisaged by most contemporary scholars, hermeneutics is an anti-Cartesian, anti-dualist perspective. Schrag states, for example, that while the Cartesian paradigm “finds its center in an abstracted, rational epistemological subject,” hermeneutics decenters the “epistemological subject” and situates rationality in the “discursive practices that make up the republic of mankind” (1985, 172). Within a hermeneutic perspective, rationality is a product neither of the individual subjective mind nor of contact with objective reality; instead, rationality is congruent with the social and rhetorical practices of a community. While Cartesian dualism stresses the individual subject, the hermeneutic emphasis is upon the communal. This emphasis undercuts the subject-object dualism of the Cartesian legacy. No longer must debate revolve around issues of subjectivity and objectivity, for the agenda that stresses those concerns is supplanted by an agenda in which the social or communal is primary. Because hermeneutics is an effort to avoid Cartesian dualism, it can serve as the point of departure for development of an alternative to the paradigm that currently guides debate among scholars interested in epistemic rhetoric, the rhetoric of inquiry, and other aspects of rhetorical studies.

To embrace philosophical hermeneutics as an alternative to the dualist paradigm is to displace traditional epistemological concerns and questions. Philosophical hermeneutics primarily is an exercise in ontology rather than in epistemology. Traditional epistemology seeks to explain how people can be certain about knowledge. Hermeneutics, as an ontological pursuit, seeks to explain how people understand and attribute meaning to their experience. It avoids the traps associated with the dualist epistemological system because it does not address the issues with which that system is concerned.

Though philosophical hermeneutics is primarily ontological, it does, nevertheless, have epistemological implications. Indeed, the ontological issues broached in philosophical hermeneutics are inseparable from epistemological concerns. No distinction is posited between ontology and epistemology. This perspective clearly constitutes a movement away from traditional epistemology, but it maintains an interest in issues of human knowledge: it does help to explain how humans come to know.

My goal in the remainder of this paper is to demonstrate how this
move to philosophical hermeneutics can obviate many of the problems associated with Cartesian dualism. In what follows I discuss some specific ontological emphases of philosophical hermeneutics and some conceptual connections between philosophical hermeneutics and rhetoric. This will set the framework for part 2 of this project. In that essay I will posit that one conceptual link between philosophical hermeneutics and rhetoric—the idea that language and tradition comprise an ontological medium of existence—is especially helpful. I will thus explain in detail that concept of a hermeneutic medium. That will prepare me to summarize how the hermeneutic perspective provides an alternative to the Cartesian dualist legacy, especially as it exists in rhetorical studies.

Philosophical hermeneutics and rhetoric

Scholars in both philosophical hermeneutics and rhetoric recognize important and intrinsic links between the two disciplines. Scholars of rhetoric such as Scott (1976), Hyde and Smith (1979, 350), Stewart (1986), and Deetz (1983), among others, have pointed to relationships between work done in the area of persuasion and rhetorical theory, and concepts developed by philosophers interested in the hermeneutic topics of understanding and interpretation. Bernstein writes that a “major theme” in his book on hermeneutics involves “the reclamation and clarification of the interrelated concepts and experiences of dialogue, debate, conversation, and communication” (1983, xv). And Schrag agrees with Heidegger’s description of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* as “the first systematic hermeneutic of everyday life” (1985, 171). Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* assumes a hermeneutic character, for Shrag and Heidegger, because it emphasizes the importance of *pathos*, or affect, in the creation and management of meaning. Aristotle views meaning not as something strictly objective and unprejudiced, but as a matter of interpretation influenced by the “moods” and convictions of an audience (Heidegger 1962, 178).

Gadamer (1976) himself states that rhetoric and hermeneutics “completely interpenetrate each other” (25), and that “convincing and persuading, without being able to prove . . . are obviously as much the aim and measure of understanding and interpretation as they are the aim and measure of the art of oration and persuasion” (24). These statements contain at least two important and closely related implications. First, any rhetorical effort depends for its suc-
cess on the hermeneutic activities of understanding and interpretation. Communication of any sort must find its basis in common values and experiences. This backdrop of values and experiences, of shared understanding and interpretation, makes communication and persuasion possible. Second, both understanding and interpretation depend on the rhetorical enterprise. The most widely accepted understandings and interpretations are those that are most persuasively argued. Communication and hermeneutics, then, share common concerns and aims, and they exist in a reciprocal relationship. The activities of each depend upon the activities of the other.

Gadamer (1985) also argues that because of their common connection to language, “the relationship between rhetoric and hermeneutics is a matter of great interest” (20). Because both disciplines are concerned primarily with the practical uses and implications of language, both emphasize praxis—practical activity or practical conduct—and phronesis—practical reasoning or practical knowledge. “In both rhetoric and hermeneutics,” writes Gadamer, “theory is subsequent to that out of which it is abstracted; that is, to praxis” (21). Bernstein notes, further, that “the outstanding theme in Gadamer’s philosophic hermeneutics is his fusion of hermeneutics and praxis, and the claim that understanding itself is a form of practical reasoning and practical knowledge—a form of phronesis” (1983, 174). The concepts of praxis and phronesis stem from the Aristotelian rhetorical tradition, where they account for the activities and theoretical bases of pragmatic persuasive conduct enacted within a particular community and for specific aims and interests. Gadamer’s appropriation of these concepts locates hermeneutics within a rhetorical tradition (see Hollinger 1985, 114).

The hermeneutic process of understanding can thus be recognized as a rhetorical process based upon rhetorical knowledge. Knowledge no longer is described in the traditional epistemological sense; all knowledge, in philosophical hermeneutics, is practical knowledge. The hermeneutic process of understanding, then, always involves the rhetorical activities of phronesis and praxis. Rhetoric thus becomes an important part of the ontological philosophy offered as hermeneutics.

Conclusion: Prelude to part two

In this paper I have highlighted some specific ideas from philosophical hermeneutics and traced how those ideas are connected
conceptually to rhetorical studies. My specific concern is to suggest that the Cartesian dualist influences in rhetorical studies can most beneficially be redressed through further incorporation of concepts associated with philosophical hermeneutics. Scholars in rhetorical and communication studies have fruitfully incorporated such concepts in the past. Further work in this area, I believe, will prove equally fruitful.

In my next essay I will show in greater detail how a perspective derived from philosophical hermeneutics can provide an alternative to the Cartesian dualist legacy in rhetorical studies. Specifically, I will discuss how the idea of a “hermeneutic medium” provides such an alternative. I will present the medium as a theoretical configuration that emphasizes the ontological force of language and tradition, and in so doing obviates the subject/object dualism bequeathed to us by Descartes.

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Notes

1. This essay is derived from my Ph.D. dissertation (Purdue University, 1986), directed by Barry Brummett. I wish to thank Professor Brummett and Professor R. Bruce Hyde for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Atlanta, 1991.

2. A second example of the Cartesian influence on rhetoric is provided by Kathleen M. Jamieson. “Pascal vs. Descartes: A Clash Over Rhetoric in the Seventeenth Century.”

3. Much of Booth’s book is directed toward this point, but see for example, page 87.

4. Two seminal and central works in philosophical hermeneutics are Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*. Two more recent books that parallel the concerns of this essay are Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and Richard J. Bernstein’s *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*.


A helpful source on hermeneutics in general is Richard E. Palmer’s *Hermeneutics*. Palmer states that hermeneutic scholarship generally emerges from one of two traditions. The oldest of these originates in a concern for the accurate interpretation of biblical texts, and in contemporary thought this tradition is associated with Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and, most recently, Betti. These scholars conceptualize hermeneutics “as a general body of methodological principles which underlie interpretation,” and which, consequently, can be applied to any given discourse in an effort to discover its hidden or intended meaning (46). A unifying theme in these positions is the commitment to the Cartesian system, and especially, to the “ideal of the autonomous subject who successfully extricates himself from the immediate entanglements of history and the prejudices that come with that entanglement.” See David E. Linge’s introduction to Gadamer’s *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, xiv. Central to the work of methodological hermeneutics, then, is the hope for a foundational system of interpretation that could produce objectively valid knowledge.

The second and more contemporary tradition, commonly termed *philosophical hermeneutics*, begins with Heidegger and is developed more fully in Gadamer’s work. While the older tradition seeks to articulate an objective understanding, philosophical hermeneutics asks a far different type of question; its exploration is into “the character and requisite conditions for all understanding” (Palmer 1969, 46). The impetus for this exploration, states Bernstein, arises from the conviction that people enter the world “as beings who understand and interpret—so if we are to understand what it is to be human beings, we must seek to understand understanding itself, in its rich, full, and complex dimensions” (1983, 113). Philosophical hermeneutics, in other words, attempts to account for how understanding is possible. My interest is in this contemporary tradition. In this paper and in the second paper, consequently, the term *hermeneutics*, unless otherwise noted, refers to the “philosophical hermeneutics” associated with Gadamer.

**Works cited**


