The responses to my paper address a variety of concerns and issues central both to epistemic rhetoric and spirituality. Each of the responses treats both rhetoric and spirituality with seriousness, and I appreciate one point of agreement that seems to emerge from all of the essays: What we say about rhetoric has implications for how we conceive of the spiritual and, indeed, all of life’s central questions. The variety (and urgency) of the issues raised illustrates well the depth of concern for these implications. On the one hand Scott (172) states that “in large part, I agree with Bineham,” while on the other hand Hikins (168) claims that I have plunged “through the looking glass into a world more bizarre than Alice’s.” If for the next few pages I can avoid the wiles of Humpty Dumpty, Tweedledum, and Tweedledee, I will attempt to synthesize what I see as the central issues in this specific interchange. These issues are important not only for the specific topic examined here, but for thinking about rhetoric in general.

Hikins states that “the really crucial issues in the epistemology of rhetoric are not really epistemological at all—they are ontological” (161). Hikins is right on this point. Ontology is a central issue from which many others radiate. In this rejoinder I examine our different ontologies and then discuss several other issues raised in the essays which relate to the relationship between ontology and rhetoric.

THE ONTOLOGICAL QUESTION

Hikins charges that I “downplay” (162) or “disclaim” (162) concern for “theological ontology” and that I “urge” scholars to ignore ontological concerns altogether (164). While avoidance of such questions might be a useful strategy for obviating the dilemmas of Cartesian dualism, I do not take that tack here. Consensus theory does contain ontological implications and it is best to admit them. To broach this issue let us consider Hikins’ explanation of “the ontological status to be accorded God on the consensus view:”

If God is not regarded as an infinite, extra-human, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent entity, then talk of God is, as a strict reading of consensus doctrine implies, just talk. If God is... wholly a rhetorical construct, we have no way to elevate God vis à vis any other mythic construction in terms of God’s efficacy or value. God’s ontological source, God’s entire
being, is thus rendered on a par with fictive entities like Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, and the Wicked Witch of the West. Protestations concerning the sanctity of human religious experience aside, as an entity whose ultimate ontological nature is located in the linguistic fabric from which these other human myths are woven, the Cod of consensus theory has been trivialized and hardly seems to merit much reverence (163).

Brummett has argued elsewhere that the ontology of consensus theory concerns human reality. “[F]or humans,” he states, “meaning shapes the manifestation of the world in the first place. . . . What those objects are for humans always includes what we mean them to be.” But for Hikins, in this and other writings,4 questions of ontology and “reality” refer to objective entities which exist apart from human meanings. Thus he is readily willing in the above quotation to put aside human religious experience. For consensus theorists, however, that experience is central to what it means to be real. So while consensus theory, as Scott notes, grants the possibility of existents independent of oneself, it sees those “existents” as irrelevant to what humans can and do know. For if objective sensations exist (if God exists), they (or God) cannot be known as objective sensations. They become real through the rhetorical processes postulated by consensus theory. My paper, then, does not seek to explain God’s “ultimate ontological nature,” but to explain the manner in which God is real for humans. Within consensus theory ontological statements are always about human reality, because that is the only reality to which we have access.

A second concern expressed by Hikins in the above quotation is that for consensus theorists, God’s ontological status (and all of “reality” for that matter) is “just talk.” God is reduced, consequently, to the level of Santa and the Tooth Fairy. Now, perhaps Hikins never placed cookies and milk on his hearth or fetched a quarter from beneath his pillow, but for several years of my life (and in my children’s lives right now) Santa and the Tooth Fairy are every bit as real as Mom and Dad. For most of us these “fictive entities” assume mythic status when we are convinced that they do not occupy a place in the world of experience we inhabit. This example notwithstanding, we need not assume that within consensus theory all ideas attain the same ontological status. God is “more real” than the fictions cited by Hikins because most people grant credence to the reasons given for God’s existence in a way that they do not for the reasons given in support of Santa or the Tooth Fairy.

Hikins and Zagacki also reduce consensus ontology to “just talk” when they posit that without an objectivist ontology the claim that “the earth is . . . an oblate spheroid.” Certainly an objectivist ontology can help to resolve this problem, but it is not the only ontology which will do the trick; a consensus ontology posits that standards do exist by which to judge between these claims, but that those standards are not objective or absolute.

The desire to posit an objectivist ontology stems at least partly from a need for certainty. For Hikins, consensus theory provides no certainty or confidence because it provides no objective standards by which to judge knowledge claims. He wrongly assumes that according to consensus theory a rhetor can create any reality just by talking about it. But this view reveals a naivete about what it takes to produce agreement. If one believes that simply talking about something will create intersubjective agreement, then a profound problem exists for consensus theorists. If one assents, however, to the proposition that agreement is a product of rhetorical
argument, and of all the hardnosed claims, data, warrants, and good reasons that are elements of such argument, then the possibility of “certainty” is assured.

The “certainty” of consensus theory, however, is not dogmatic adherence to an absolute truth. Indeed, Brummett replaces the term “certainty” with conviction, for the latter term more strongly connotes a sense of persuasion and belief rather than absolute knowledge.6 When evaluating a knowledge claim (which for consensus theory is an ontological claim), one may consider the vitality of one’s belief in the claim, how coherent the claim is, how it coincides with other knowledge one holds, the credibility of the subculture espousing the claim, and even the type of actions the claim might endorse or imply. If after considering such things one is not convinced of the claim’s truth and is, therefore, persuaded not to embrace that particular claim as “reality,” one can still recognize that the knowledge one does have, the reality one does embrace, is produced by consensus.7

The rejection of what one group has validated as “true” is predicated upon another conception of “truth” that is validated by another social group. Whatever is agreed to as “wrong,” is wrong within some social group’s notion of “right.” The question of “certainty,” of “reality versus unreality,” is for consensus theory a question of conviction, and it is independent of whether or not an objective reality exists. Within consensus theory, rhetorical argument leads one to as much “certainty” as is possible.8

A consensus ontology, then, does not necessarily trivialize God by locating God’s “ontological nature” in the same consensual “fabric from which these other human myths are woven.” Within consensus theory God can be as real as our most basic scientific knowledge; for that knowledge too is a product of the consensual fabric within which we live. I do not purport, then, that the natural world is less real than the scientific method renders it (for that method is a system for attaining consensus), but that values and meanings and God can be as real as molecules, amoebas, and gravity.

SOME OTHER ISSUES

To this point I have ignored the essays by Tukey, Scott, and Zarefsky not because I think them unimportant, but because the key issues they identify are understood most easily when seen against the ontological backdrop I have just raised. Certainly a consensus ontology is not free of problems, and other reasonable ontologies do exist, but to understand the issues relevant to my position does require an understanding of the ontology of consensus theory.

Three key issues emerge from the responses to my paper. They concern (1) the nature of rhetoric, (2) the possibility of non-social influences upon human knowledge and experience, and (3) the possibility of rendering ethical judgment. I deal with each of these in turn.

The Nature of Rhetoric

Scott clearly juxtaposes the concepts of constitutive and instrumental rhetoric (172–74). He notes that for Tukey rhetoric is instrumental, “the handmaiden of Truth,” and therefore dispensable; while for me rhetoric is constitutive, productive of truth or reality, and therefore indispensable. This concept of constitutive rhetoric is central to my position on religion and spirituality, and to consensus theory in general.
Rhetoric is conceived traditionally as a sender’s selection of strategies by which to send discrete messages. Such messages may be instrumental (for not all rhetoric is epistemic), or they may be constitutive. But a more uncommon conception of rhetoric, and to me a more important one, is expressed by Scott when he writes that rhetoric “constitutes a community in which the interpretation that comes simultaneously with raw sensation makes experience possible” (173), and that “rhetoric constantly flows and constantly is redirected as a part of the sociality that makes it possible for the individual to be aware as an individual (and to experience faith)” (174). To put this another way: We are born into an ongoing social medium of communication which makes possible the ranges of meanings and experiences realized by those who live within that medium. This rhetorical medium does not stand between us and reality; instead, it shapes reality in the first place. The rhetorical medium constitutes the intersubjective fabric into which we are born and within which we wield whatever influence we might render.

Scott notes that Tukey holds an instrumental view of rhetoric and this certainly accounts at least partially for our different explanations of religion and spirituality. Zarefsky also seems to view rhetoric primarily as a discrete and instrumental type of message. Zarefsky states, for example, that my position suggests “only a loose connection between society and an epistemic rhetoric” (179). His statement suggests that instances of epistemic rhetoric occur within a society, but it does not recognize that the society itself is constituted rhetorically. And two paragraphs later Zarefsky argues that I posit a “two-step process” in which “first one is moved spiritually . . . and then one relates one’s insight to others.” But though that part of my paper may not emphasize the constitutive function of rhetoric, even that initial spiritual experience occurs within the ongoing social medium of communication. I state: “[t]he socially created meanings which make up human nature and shape reality necessarily must impinge upon religious experience and communication about religious experience” (146). The socio-rhetorical influence comes first.

The Possibility of Non-Social Influences

My position on the constitutive (or ontological) nature of rhetoric has obvious implications for the possibility of non-social influences on human experience. Tukey’s major complaint against consensus theory is that it does not leave open “the possibility for non-social influences” (156) and consequently “fails to provide an account of non-social influence upon human action” (158). To the first charge consensus theorists can plead innocent. Non-social influences may constrain us, but if they do we never know what those influences are, or else we do not know that they are non-social. To the second charge, consensus theorists plead guilty. Our central contention being that human knowledge and reality are always social, consensus theorists are most interested in accounting for those social meanings by which we experience reality.

This issue is raised in a similar fashion by both Tukey and Zarefsky. Tukey states that the “crux” of our difference is my contention that “God must be interpreted,” as opposed to his view that “God emerges from the depths of our beings when interpretations are set aside” (157). Zarefsky states that the question “turns” on whether one allows for “an interpretative space” which makes consensus “the truth standard,” or whether one leaves “little room for human interpretation” and thus emphasizes the authority of direct perception (181). Consensus theory posits that interpretations cannot be laid aside. One might exchange one interpretation for
another, or merge various interpretations, but as Scott states, “no one will be able to comprehend anything from some point-of-viewless position” (174).

Several issues noted in the responses to my paper can be clarified at this point. Tukey argues for a distinction between religious belief and spirituality, while I merge the two. For me religious belief (a social phenomenon) provides the very grounds by which one judges himself or herself to be moved spiritually. Tukey’s distinction leads him to claim that because consensus theory does not explain non-social influences it is not a “spiritual” framework. Thus he argues that I posit “a non-spiritual view of the human psyche” (158), and that if Rauschenbusch’s theological concepts are laid to social influence, then his theology “cannot serve as a counter-example because it is not spiritual” (158). Tukey is correct to note that consensus theory cannot account for a spirituality that is devoid of social influence. But one need not define spirituality that is devoid of social influence. But one need not define spirituality in that way. Tukey’s definition of spirituality is at odds with consensus theory, but that does not mean that consensus theory cannot account for spirituality at all.

Tukey’s distinction between belief and spirituality corresponds to the traditional distinction between knowledge and reality. Zarefsky (180) mistakenly identifies this same distinction in my paper and suggests that it “might usefully be emphasized at other points of the paper as well.” But as Hikins points out, I deny this distinction (161-62). In the passage to which Zarefsky refers, I state that “if God is to exist for humans, they must be persuaded that God is real;” and while I do claim that consensus theory can allow for the belief that “God’s existence in and of Himself . . . is beyond the domain of human knowledge and can be described as independent from any consensual validation,” I also note that “such a description . . . would always be made by one who is convinced of God’s existence through the processes postulated by consensus theory” (148). So consensus theory does not postulate a distinction between epistemology and ontology. And while consensus theory does not deny God’s “ultimate” existence, it does posit that for humans, God’s existence always includes a rhetorical dimension; it always involves what we mean God to be.

The Possibility of Ethical Judgment

The final issue I want to address concerns Hikins’ claims that consensus theory portends such “‘anything goes’ consequences” that we cannot render ethical judgment against holy wars, terrorist activities, and Jonestown massacres, and that consensus theory entails intolerance because “the more individuals of opposing beliefs I eliminate . . . the greater the ‘truth’ of my own position” (167-68). Consensus theory, on the contrary, is tolerant and does allow one to render ethical critique.

For the consensus theorist, ethics are created in the same rhetorical manner as knowledge or reality. Because the consensus theorist emphasizes rhetoric’s central place in the creation of ethical standards, he or she is an ethical relativist. For the same reason, however, the consensus theorist parts from other relativists who refute the right to judge ethically other cultures or subcultures. To emphasize rhetoric is to emphasize persuasion. The consensus theorist would be inconsistent to neglect persuasion about ethical issues which occur across cultures.

The “rhetorical relativist” recognizes that a value system other than one’s own may be valid for another culture, but that one’s own value system is equally valid and
may be urged upon the other culture rhetorically. Because ethics are rhetorically
grounded and can be discussed, one has the right to argue for the superior value of a
particular system. The consensus theorist does not acquiesce to the claim that
whatever a culture endorses is “right.” He or she may deem it wrong, but must
recognize that the judgment is rendered from the perspective of one’s own culture’s
ethical system. The “judgment,” then, should be rendered in the spirit of persuasion
rather than dogmatic assertion.

This position allows one to embrace standards that can be argued for on a
universal basis. Consensus theory contains no injunction against championing
ideals. Those ideals are not absolutes—they are not beyond discussion—but they
can be urged upon other cultures and subcultures.

Consensus theory itself suggests ethical standards to those who embrace it. The
standards stem from the concept that knowledge, truth, and reality are created
cooperatively as we communicate together. First, a consensus theorist should
maintain a rhetorical stance which emphasizes the process of mutual inquiry and
exploration through discourse. Though one should not relinquish any particular
position willy-nilly, one must strive for a balance between unrelenting persuasion on
behalf of that position, and an attempt to participate with one’s interlocutors in the
creation of new knowledge. Second, a consensus theorist consistently should call
attention to the rhetorical dimension of knowledge. This is especially true when
coercive or repressive realities assume a false objectivity within any social order. A
consensus theorist should emphasize and act upon the changeable nature of such
realities.

To summarize, Wayne Booth provides a concise guideline that incorporates
these two ethical standards.

> Whenever any person or institution violates the inherent values of free human exchange
> among persons, imposing upon anyone a diminution of his nature as a rhetorical animal, he is
> now shown, in this view, to be wrong—not just inconvenient or unpleasant but wrong.¹²

The standards I suggest here are not definitionally descriptive of rhetoric in general
or of epistemic rhetoric in particular. They are not what makes rhetoric truth-
creative. They are, however, standards which emerge from consensus theory and
that the consensus theorist ought to embrace.

CONCLUSION

The general issues I have identified in this rejoinder—the nature of consensus
ontology, the nature of rhetoric, the possibility of non-social influence, and the
possibility of ethical judgment—contain implications for many more specific issues
and problems associated with epistemic rhetoric. I have discussed some of them, but
others have gone untouched: the issues of social determinism (which Zarefsky notes)
and solipsism (which Scott discusses) are but two examples. The four respondents
have established clearly that the issues in this forum stretch beyond the specific topic
at hand. While I hope this rejoinder has helped further to distill and to extend the
relevant points, I hope also that has illumined more clearly the issue of focus: the
rhetorical dimensions of spirituality and religious belief.

Toward that end, I close with a brief statement of what I hope to have
accomplished in my original essay. Tukey asserts that consensus theory denies
altogether the divine or the spiritual. My contention is that consensus theory can
account for such things. I do not claim that other theoretical explanations of the spiritual are insignificant or unhelpful, nor that all conceptions of the spiritual are consistent with consensus theory. If one takes the spiritual to be a realm entirely untouched by social influence, then one is not a consensus theorist. That view surely is reasonable. But the consensus theorist can retain the right to suggest that spirituality does contain a socio-rhetorical dimension, and that the intersubjectivist view of epistemic rhetoric can account for it.

NOTES

1In fact I do not take that position in the essay Hikins cites. I do state that the omission of ontological statements is one way to avoid problems of dualism, but I also suggest that philosophical hermeneutics can help to achieve the same ends; and philosophical hermeneutics purports explicitly to be concerned with ontology. See ‘The Cartesian Anxiety in Epistemic Rhetoric: An Assessment of the Literature,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 23 (1990): 43-62.  


5Barry Brummett. 213.


8Barry Brummett and I develop this argument in “Some Misunderstandings About Consensus Theory” (Paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Central States Speech Association, Indianapolis, 1985).

9Hikins’ position clearly is based on the possibility of direct perception. Hikins and Zagacki state their position in a way which illustrates the connection between the two issues I have discussed thus far in this section of the paper: “Baldly put, we can transcend our representations, symbolic and otherwise, and come to know objective features of the world. Moreover, rhetoric is instrumental in attaining such knowledge” (203, emphasis added).

10Zarefsky may attribute this distinction to me because he is unclear which position I take on the epistemic rhetoric issue. He claims that my use of the phrase “consensus theory” masks my position. But I do link myself to the position described by Scott and Brummett (see note 3 for example), and “consensus theory” has been used to describe that position in at least three other articles. See Earl Croasmun and Richard A. Cherwitz, “Beyond Rhetorical Relativism,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 68 (1982): 1–16; Brummet, “On to Rhetorical Relativism,” 425–430; Brummett, “Consensus Criticism,” Southern Speech Communication Journal 49 (1984): 111–124.

11Brummett provides a convincing account of how ethics are created rhetorically in “A Defense of Ethical Relativism as Rhetorically Grounded,” 286–298Some of what follows is a synthesis of his position.