Dialectic, Rhetoric and Contrast

The Infinite Middle of Meaning

Richard Boulton

St George's, University of London;
Kingston University

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Introduction

This book is the result of a thought experiment inspired by the methods of dialectic and rhetoric. The experiment takes the meaning of singular words through a repeating pattern, firstly a word is opposed (through antonym), and then the two words are synthesised together into a middle word between the two, then the synthesised concept is opposed, and the pattern repeats. Rather than continuing endlessly, or becoming exhausted, I argue that the meanings of the words uncovered become recursive. The words that I have experimented with can be traced through up to 12 iterations before returning to their original meaning. This is not to suggest some sort of constant or absolute principle, but rather as a means to demonstrate how meaning can be understood as recursive by using dialectic on a manageable number of concepts up to 12. The book speculates on the consequences that this conjecture may have for metaphysics and current theories of meaning.

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The discord between dialectic and rhetoric has perpetuated throughout the ages from classical philosophy into our current epoch. Plato's (2004) adoption of dialectic pits Socrates as heroically countering the evils of sophism, relativism and self-interest, by adopting dialectic; a form of reasoning based upon a dialogue of arguments and counter-arguments to bring about a reasoned resolution of the argument or improvement of the dialogue. At first, it would seem as if the benefits of dialectic were obvious, that dialectics offers a way to assert 'reason' as superior.

In such a process, however, with the hindsight of a history of problematic idealistic examples, and the albescence of a fully accepted complete and coherent encyclopaedia of categories (such as the one attempted in outline only by Hegel, 2015), no one end point can ever be asserted with confidence. For as soon as one dialogue has concluded there is nothing inherent to the process to stop another opposing dialectic becoming ready to take its place. Consequently, as dialectical debate unfolds it unavoidably employs rhetoric as its medium to reason a debate into more or less persuasive arguments. This means that dialectic can never fully forefront rhetoric, as at its most rudimentary rhetoric demonstrates that any one reason must always have an alternative or exception.

This implies that the conclusions reached by either dialectic or rhetoric are just as relevant yet unresolvable today as they have always been. Neither one

is closer to being superseded when Aristotle first asserted that 'rhetoric is the counterpoint to dialectic' in the opening to his treatise on rhetoric (Aristotle, 2012). However, if both methods are coherent as well as contradictory they each pose a problem to the result of the other. Either rhetoric/dialectic are part of a bigger set of guiding principles we do not yet know, or dialectic and rhetoric are both in some way inaccurate and do not point to any one consistent 'reason' at all. In some ways, the problem between the two reflects the problems of the assertion of all knowledge.

The history of philosophy is littered with such arguments that, when aggregated, resort to such simple dualisms (e.g. rhetoric v dialectic, or mind v body; subject v object; man v nature). When discussions become polarised, they demand the same conclusion as that above; either to find an alternate solution or to abandon the initial argument altogether. The act of refuting or affirming dualisms cannot avoid forming another a dualism even when aware of the process and expressly trying not to do so. For example, if one side argues against the simplification of dialogue into dualisms, it enables an opposing position eager to discover exactly how much can be represented dualistically through binary. With the advent of the digital revolution contemporary thought has little choice but come to terms with the ability of binary algebra to represent all information in simple Boolean, binary mathematics (for examples see Gunkel, 2007; Hui, 2016; Burckhardt and Höfer, 2017). Attempts to counter the effects of binary fit into a longer lineage of traditions in cultural theory that seek to counter the reduction of knowledge to hierarchical dualisms. Eminent examples such as Baudrillard's (1994) Simulacra; or Derrida's Deconstruction; or Deleuze's (1983) Rhizome present concepts exemplifying the dangers of dualisms in the study of culture. Post-structuralism more generally can be typified as the attempt to allay the binary reductions caused by scientific cultures (and an explicit denial of dialectic). In their antagonism however, interpretations following in the footsteps of these theories have been helpless to perpetuate the same dualistic and reductive approach against the natural sciences that these theories have sought to counter.

Running counter to these movements, McLuhan's (2001) famous euphemism that 'the medium is the message' has demonstrated and expertly developed sophisticated understandings of rhetoric, but full employment of rhetoric as a rigorous and scholarly method has always been subject to some caution. This is because at its most extreme, rhetoric represents purposeful manipulation. The task of contending the effects of rhetoric has been indispensable to resisting religious dogma since the renaissance (as can be seen in the accounts of Valla and Agricola discussed in Mack, 1993). Nevertheless, the formal study of rhetoric still continues to evolve and recent

developments like the philosophy of communication serve to demonstrate its relevance (see Mangion, 2011; or Chang and Butchart, 2012). In some shape or form, the existence of rhetoric in any discourse is unavoidable. The persistence of rhetoric has resulted in a variety of disparate attitudes towards truth across the entire human sciences, and the inability to resolve such controversies has been used to corroborate claims affirming the superiority of the natural sciences as beyond such questions of rhetoric (see Pickering and Guzik, 2009). In response contemporary movements in contemporary human sciences have little choice but to defend some sort of partial position towards the natural sciences, initiating questions as to whether they cumulatively build towards a distinct disciplinary logic or are simply reactionary to other more dominant forms of knowledge production (Mannheim, 2015; Scheler, 2013). This has produced a number of well-versed dialogues in contemporary theory between endorsements or denouncements of modern science and culture or some position between the two thereby re-initiating dualism on top of dualism in a back and forth fashion (the "science wars" is a good example of this, see Labinger and Collins, 2001). In all these disciplinary dynamics, all sides employ dialectic and rhetoric, but the exact line between where each one would fall is highly contested.[1]

Of great requisite therefore would be a method that could consolidate dialectic and rhetoric equally without resorting to one side of a dualism or disavowing oppositions and distinctions between categories altogether (i.e. a commonality that doesn't invite any further schism between dominating disciplines). The reason why these discussions are so insurmountable is because their controversies reflect the root of logic itself. It would seem that on some scale, all creation can be represented to be within a binary of 0 (nothing) and 1 (everything). This presents a (negative existential) problem because when presented in extreme terms they are in opposition, yet how can nothingness and everything really be opposed without each cancelling out the meaning of the other? If either everything or nothing were on their own true, either concept would obscure the other and all other meanings. Put another way, if everything can be represented by a 0 or a 1, then nothing else apart from 0 or 1 would really mean anything. This means that considering either nothing or everything as inherently true is problematic. Inherited from classical logic (via Aristotle) are the three Laws of Thought; two of which are important here: the law of non-contradiction and the law of the excluded middle (Hamilton et al., 1860). They state that contradictory propositions cannot both be true in the same sense at the same time. There are a number of possible options for resolving the negative existential proposed above (for example antimony, unity of opposites, perspectivism or dialetheism). However, as any refutations still lead back to contradiction at some point, the interpretation of these principles still preoccupy contemporary thought as a

result. Classical examples such as the Liar's Paradox or Epicurus's trilemma pose as much fascination today as they always have done.

In contrast, as physics proposes ever more advanced theories of relativity, uncertainty, chaos; or as Gödel's (1931) Incompleteness theorem, or modal logic demonstrate their importance in mathematics and computing, none of these theories has proven to be strictly bound to classical logic as they demonstrate logical contradictions and inconsistencies. Consequently, contemporary thought wishing to stay abreast of such innovations have found it difficult to find a position between classical logic and scientific advancement. For any philosophical perspective to overcome this would require a way to access the meaning of a contradiction beyond the contradiction it poses to itself, or put another way meaning beyond logic, or a meaning beyond its own meaning (see "meaning" as presented by Arnett and Holba, 2012). Both rhetoric and dialectic engage with contradiction by presenting a way to conceive of something outside of the opposition contradiction poses to itself. This means that opposition is key to both methods but is used to different ends; if dialectic uses opposition to prove the point, rhetoric uses opposition to prove the exception (a point raised in both Jeffries, 2011; and Davies, 2014). The development of this line of enquiry requires a more thorough investigation of the meaning of opposition. Consequently, the account here seeks to explore oppositions meaning at its most direct and elemental. In language, the formal expression of opposition is in the form of antonym and many lexical categorisations exist around the specific features and uses of antonym (see Cruse, 2001 for a good overview). What is harder to demonstrate however, is how the opposition in antonym is sensed, experienced and constituted. For instance, from what sense does the appreciation of opposition derive, is opposition located independently to individual experience, or is it dependent upon it?

This feeds into a familiar theme in philosophy attributed to Kant's (2001) demonstration of the impossibility of detaching appearance from 'things-in-themselves'. Since publication (almost 250 years ago) this theme has been central to the development of philosophy. Rather than tread this very well-worn philosophy towards idealism, however, I wish to divert it to argue that antonym represents something extra-ordinary to any interpretation, logic, reason or sense. For example, antonym can be considered as both a reference to something else whilst at the same time always its own unique kind of thing. In other words, each antonym is specific to the concepts it represents whilst being identical in some sense to all other antonyms. As a result, an antonym is both doing the job of referencing whilst also constituting the object that is being referenced. This means that antonym is directly related to the experience of relationality itself (which is significant because relationality is

the conduit of meaning, thought and experience). This points to some kind of apeiron behind antonym we could call opposition. However, the concept of opposition applied to antonym is only one expression of a much more meaningful experience. To conceptualise such an apeiron requires an acknowledgement of opposition that spans many distinctions and meanings, not only directly as in contradiction but the condition with which all things perceivable contrast in general, so cannot be represented accurately so narrowly defined. This means that the method can be used to develop meaning that is extra-linguistic.

This point can be further demonstrated by considering contrast; i.e. the state by which one thing stands out from another. Without contrast, the awareness of any object, thought, feeling or state would be indistinct and non-experienceable, and so knowledge of all things relies upon contrast in some way. All things measured must refer to contrast as their medium. However, when considering the location of contrast, an infinite scale is evoked as contrast shifts dependent upon the scale used to measure the contrast. The exact point where two objects meet is impossible to define exactly. As a result, contrast does not get entangled in the same difficulties of defining 'things-in-themselves' as it is at the cusp of perception, neither fully part of the perceiver nor fully external (or independent), rather it is in an infinite abstraction between the two, and across all the senses (contrast demonstrates an intimate infinity we can access but never entirely possess). When considering the relationship between things as relative, the contrast is absolute and vice versa. Contrast has no lack of coverage, for example, it was the basis of Locke's (1998) Essay Concerning Human Understanding (most specifically in reference to 'the paradox of the basins'), published in 1689 and vital to the development of philosophy and empiricism in all sciences. However, most (Locke included) would consider contrast as a point of passage – in Locke's case to argue the emptiness of mind without experience – and not a destination. In reference to Locke, once contrast is considered as both innate to mind whilst also external it denies a full gone conclusion on the origin of perception, and so here I propose to shift focus to investigate the contrast itself. The sticking point therefore, is that once identified, how can contrast be distinguished to account for all of its many manifestations? Contrast can be compared to the concept of the infinite which is contradictory from a finite perspective. Even though the distinction between things can be labelled as contrast, it would be reductive to reduce it just to that alone, as from contrast all known differences emanate. For the sake of argument here I will describe this apeiron[2] as contrast, but it can also be closely related to antonym and contradiction (as more symmetrised), or opposition more generally (but should represent just about anything that can be made distinct even categories that are complementary to each other). The

challenge therefore, is to devise a method to explore this notion of contrast without forcing contrast to take on any one concept in particular.

As dialectic and rhetoric represent two attitudes towards looking at the opposition, I propose that combining the two will serve to provide a more ingrained meaning of contrast. I will refer to this combination as simply the method of rhetoric dialectic. Such a name is constituted because the method I will propose resembles dialectic, but wishes to exemplify the aspects of rhetoric most often obscured by strict adherence to dialectic. Specifically, this will mean averting the assertion that dialectic has an end state, pointing instead to an adoption of dialectic in continuum. Such an understanding of dialectic must concede that any conclusions (or synthesis) reached has an exception and within that exception lies rhetoric (my account also doesn't consider dialectic as being driven by any absolute concept such as reason, contradiction, nothingness or negation which are integral to interpretations of idealism and Hegel, instead the concept of contrast is used as a means to avoid posing a force at the centre of dialectic). For this reason, if the style of method employed has to have a specific referent it should avoid being categorical. In keeping with long-established traditions, the method could be named the rhetoric dialectic method or even rhetorical dialecticism. However, it is imperative to emphasise here that neither one should hold rank over the other. Rhetoric dialectic, dialectic rhetoric in effect it matters not which way around they are as (will be argued) they are an opposite direction towards the same solutions (Eemeren, 2002). Therefore, the title of 'rhetoric dialectic' should offer reference to both traditions whilst not overemphasising its position or originality. The name serves to both place the method proposed in a tradition whilst conceding that its definition and meaning should remain in contention and open to challenges.

This is not to suggest, however, that the method proposed does not have some specificities and differences concerning both rhetoric and dialectic. Most specifically, its focus is on the concepts behind individual words as the smallest unit of meaning and the building blocks of argument rather than on the resolution of whole arguments (or histories as in Hegel). Defining what constitutes a concept is as contested as the study of the mind itself, as concepts are an integral component to the study of mind (see Margolis and Laurence, 2015). Rather than affirm any one specific definition I wish to maintain a degree of scepticism towards the way that the word 'concept' is evoked to fulfil empirical or rationalist agendas. From an empirical standpoint, the general thrust of these debates argue that the mind is a blank slate, conversely, debates from a rationalistic standpoint argue that there is some internal force or impulse guiding sense. There is no end of mediated approaches to language acquisition which could also be cited here.[3] But any

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