UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Power: A Response to Critics

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6kb8p7ns>

Journal

Rethinking History, 42

Author

Bevir, Mark

Publication Date

2000

Peer reviewed

Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Power: A Response to Critics

By Mark Bevir

I. CONTACT INFORMATION

Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720-1950,
U.S.A. Tel.: 510 642 4693. Fax: 510 642 9515. Email: mbevир@socrates.berkeley.edu

II. BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Mark Bevir is a member of the Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley. His recent publications include The Logic of the History of Ideas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

ABSTRACT

The paper distinguishes Mark Bevir's logical approach to the theory of history from the historiography of Hayden White and the sociology of Michel Foucault. Rather than seeing these approaches as inherently contradictory, it suggests that historiography and sociology must rest on some kind logical assumptions. An adequate logic provides the necessary context for both a sociological study of power and a historiographical study of rhetoric. Against this background, the paper considers the comments made by Professors Ankersmit, Megill, Palonen, and Stuurman on Bevir's work. It shows how properly understood Bevir's analyses of intentionality and rationality provide a necessary basis for the study of power and rhetoric.

KEYWORDS: hermeneutics, intentionality, philosophy, power, rationality, rhetoric

Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Power: A Response to Critics

I would like to thank Professors Ankersmit, Megill, Palonen, and Stuurman for their generous responses to my work. They have characterized my arguments fairly and commented upon them perceptively. My deepest gratitude, however, comes from their having encouraged me to think more about the key role my work ascribes to the concept of logic (Bevir 1999). Our discussions have emphasized for me the extent to which I am proposing a particular approach to thinking and writing about the relationship of history to theory. The concept of logic makes philosophy, rather than rhetoric or power, the focus of that relationship. It embodies an attempt to take historical theory away from the strands that have come to dominate it in recent years, notably the emphases on poetics and rhetoric associated with Hayden White (1973, 1978, 1987) and the emphases on sociology and power associated with Michel Foucault (1977, 1978-85, 1980). As I hope will become clear, I do not ignore the topics of rhetoric and power. Rather, I want to suggest that we should explore these topics in the context of a suitable philosophical or logical analysis.

Professors Ankersmit, Megill, Palonen, and Stuurman have posed a number of important questions, to which I could respond in several different ways. One appealing way of responding would be to take up the challenge proffered by Ankersmit and Megill of juxtaposing my logic with examples of historical practice. However, because all four of them raise issues that relate to my concept of logic with its apparent downplaying of power and rhetoric, it is through addressing these issues that I will try to respond to the questions they have raised. I hope to clarify my notion of logic and its importance so as to

progress to an examination of how my logic deals with rationality in relation to power and with intentionality in relation to rhetoric.

I. ON PHILOSOPHY AND THEORY

My logic is a second-order study of a first-order discipline. It operates through an exploration of the implications of the concepts we deploy within that discipline. Hence, it demarcates those aspects of Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of philosophy as a grammar of our concepts that address the forms of reasoning appropriate to other disciplines. The use of the word grammar in relation to philosophy should not mislead us into adopting the postmodern gesture of treating logic as metaphor or rhetoric. Wittgenstein certainly seems uncertain about, or even hostile to, the possibility of our grounding knowledge on pure experience or pure reason. This postfoundationalism before the letter inspired in him, moreover, both a profound interest in the diverse roles language plays and an overt rejection of the Augustinian model of language as based on substantive definitions. To suggest that words play multiple roles such that their meanings are established only when they are used is not, however, to conclude with postmodernists that meanings can never be fixed adequately since language entails a perpetual deferral of meaning that renders its use inherently metaphorical.¹

Wittgenstein labeled philosophy the grammar of our concepts in the context of a rejection of the then prevalent distinction between synthetic and analytic propositions. Synthetic propositions were true or false depending on whether or not they were verified by empirical facts – they arose in the empirical sciences. Analytic propositions were true or false depending on whether or not they could be proved from definitions using only

the laws of formal logic – philosophy, like mathematics, involved the analysis of a series of tautologies. Wittgenstein, along with other postanalytic philosophers, challenged this dichotomy by insisting that truth always depends on a context. A synthetic proposition cannot be true or false simply through being verified by the facts since what we accept as a verification must depend on the way our other beliefs stabilize our definitions of the terms of that proposition. An analytic proposition cannot be true or false simply through definitions since how we define something must depend on our other beliefs and these might alter as a result of further empirical investigation. All our knowledge arises, then, in the context of a web of beliefs or language game. Wittgenstein's notion of a grammar of our concepts thus evokes the idea that philosophy, logic, or an analytic proposition is not true for us by virtue of definitions and universal logical rules, but rather by virtue of its relation to the beliefs in the particular web of beliefs, or the concepts in the particular language game, that we have adopted. Within a web of beliefs or a language game, we accept certain meanings or truths, so philosophers can draw out the logical implications of these meanings or truths, where in so far as we accept the antecedent, we will recognize the force of the consequent.

Philosophy uncovers truths that are true for us by virtue of their meaning within our wider set of concepts. Logic, so conceived, stands apart from other forms of historical theory. For a start, it differs from a historiography concerned with the actual suppositions and practices of historians. Whereas logic is a normative study rooted in our concepts, historiography is an empirical study rooted in others' practices. It is, therefore, the nature of logic that defines the role I ascribe to examples of historical practice in The Logic of the History of Ideas. As Megill recognizes, the normative nature of logic precludes a

naïve empiricism that merely adds up examples of supposedly good practice. Rather, examples enter into logic either to illustrate an argument about what should count as good practice, or more usually to substantiate an argument about the nature of our concepts and what they imply. Megill fears that this treatment of historical practice risks being a naïve theoreticism within which the normative recommendations derive form outside of the field of history. However, a logic based on our concepts does not really stand outside of the discipline of history. Given that historians share our concepts, they should accept the logical implications of these concepts, so these implications are things they should take account of in their historical practice. Logic does not seek to impose alien theories upon historians. It seeks, rather, to remind historians of the theories entailed by meanings and truths they themselves accept. We can take a logic thus based on our concepts to stand outside historical practice only if we erect a barrier between our life as historians and our everyday activities. Once we accept that our lives interact with our historical practice, we should allow that because logic is informed by the beliefs and language of the former, it constitutes a guide to how we should undertake the latter.

Ankersmit worries, however, that by relying on the everyday to guide historical practice, I ignore the distinctive qualities of the past conceived as a foreign country. He is quite right to recognize that I want to suggest that everyday life provides a source for redeeming historical knowledge and theory. But I do not see any viable alternative to this position. Once we accept postfoundationalism, we have to grant that our accounts of the past are always informed by our historically specific theories and concerns. As such, we pose the question of how we can accept as legitimate accounts of the past that far from being pure always embody our perspectives. One response would be to throw up our

hands and declare the whole business of history to be impossible. Beyond such defeatism, we need to find a way of considering which theories may play an acceptable role in our construction of the past. Some theorists appear to appeal to poetic or moral criteria to demarcate acceptable theories. Surely though we want to justify our constructs of the past in epistemic terms as valid narratives rather than just as beautiful or ethical ones? Surely, moreover, we would still need a justification of the relevant poetic or moral criteria, so these appeals do not resolve the epistemic problem but only push it back? An appeal to poetics serves as a useful reminder of the fact that we necessarily construct the past through our creative imagination, but it does nothing to distinguish epistemologically legitimate and illegitimate ways of doing so. In contrast, I appeal to our everyday activities and the knowledge they embody to identify acceptable theories with which to construct the past. Because our daily lives commit us to taking the relevant theories to be true at least provisionally, we reasonably might accept them as ways of accessing the past.

Logic also differs from a historical sociology concerned with the different forms of life that have appeared within a past that we understand through the categories of our ordinary language. Because logic proceeds through an analysis of the implications of our concepts, it deals with universals. Of course, as a postfoundationalist I cannot mean to evoke here universal truths that everyone should accept: as I said above, if someone does not share the relevant concepts, they need not accept the logical implications of those concepts. I mean to point out instead that logic concerns implications that we should accept universally whenever we use the relevant concepts. An example will make things clearer. In the chapters of The Logic of the History of Ideas that deal with synchronic and

diachronic explanation, I argue that subjects are agents capable of modifying their inheritances, but they are not autonomous agents so they necessarily set out against the background influence of a tradition. As a logical argument, this implies that we should always conceive of subjects in this way, even though the traditions and agency we study can take a variety of forms. Even when we find a peculiarly rigid tradition within which people scarcely appear to innovate at all, we still should ascribe the capacity of agency to these people. Historical sociology, in contrast, characteristically seeks to theorise the different forms taken by things such as tradition and agency over time. It might explore, for example, the circumstances under which there emerge and thrive different types of tradition that provide varied degrees of encouragement to innovation.

The nature of logic leads me to avoid certain topics in The Logic of the History of Ideas. As Palonen and Stuurman suggest authors will express their beliefs differently depending on their view of the social context: people might hide, rephrase, or overstate certain beliefs to have a particular political effect or to avoid censorship and persecution. I suggest that we understand this process in terms of the impact on the beliefs people express of their pro-attitudes, that is, their preference for the relevant effect. Yet Palonen and Stuurman appear dissatisfied with the way I evoke the political and social context here as part of an inner, individualistic process. Once again, however, I do not see any viable alternative to my position. As a postfoundationalist, I do not think people have pure experiences of the social world, so the way they moderate the beliefs they express always will depend on their perception of the social world and their desires, not on the social world as it is and their allegedly given interests. No doubt historical sociologists can examine how different political systems and forms of censorship have influenced the

ways people express their beliefs. But the historical sociologist can do so only through an empirical study. A logical study of our concepts cannot uncover actual historical processes. It can identify only the forms of reasoning appropriate to such processes. Nonetheless, we should not assume logic is irrelevant to historical sociology. On the contrary, the historical sociologist can not ask about the different resources for agency provided by various traditions, or the different effects of various political systems and forms of censorship, without relying on logical theories that give them both the category of agency and a form of explanation appropriate to the ways in which people might hide, rephrase, or overstate certain beliefs.

Logic should be distinguished from both historical sociology and historiography. Yet neither sociology nor historiography can proceed without at least tacitly making a series of logical assumptions. Neither of them can take the past as given. They must rely on a set of categories to construct it. Historical sociology presupposes a logical analysis of the general nature of the objects or concepts that it seeks to differentiate or classify. Historiography presupposes logic in the very way it postulates, explains, and justifies the assumptions and practices of historians. Having grasped the importance of logic, we are well placed now to explore the way in which my analysis of rationality relates to a concern with power and the way in which my analysis of intentionality relates to a concern with rhetoric. Power might dominate contemporary historical sociology, but we can explore it only on the basis of a suitable logic, including, I believe, a certain analysis of rationality. Rhetoric might dominate contemporary historiography, but we can explore it only on the basis of a suitable logic, including, I believe, a certain analysis of intentionality.

II. ON RATIONALITY AND POWER

The Logic of the History of Ideas defends presumptions in favour of sincere, conscious, and rational beliefs. For Stuurman, these presumptions cause all sorts of problems, from insensitivity to the incoherencies in people's thought to a neglect of the role of power in history. These problems disappear, however, once we recognize my arguments as contributions to logic rather than historical sociology. I overtly contrast a presumption, conceived as the product of a logical analysis of our concepts, with an expectation, conceived as the product of empirical investigations of the past. Against the background of my presumptions, then, historians can postulate insincere, unconscious, and irrational beliefs, and even come to expect to find such beliefs in a particular author, type of work, or historical period. The purpose of my presumptions is not to fix the sort of beliefs historians ascribe to people. It is to identify the norms that govern the process of ascribing beliefs and thus to distinguish between forms of explanation. So, while my logic is rationalistic in that it gives a role to consistency in the ascription of beliefs, this does not entail a sociological theory according to which people are almost wholly conscious and rational. Here my logic seems to me to reflect the way we operate in our daily lives. If people tell us that their primary political value is social order and they think anarchism corrodes social order, then in the absence of evidence to the contrary, we will take them to oppose anarchism even if they do not explicitly say they do. However, while we thus ascribe beliefs using a principle of consistency, we do not assume everyone has perfectly conscious and rational beliefs.

We should accept a presumption in favor of the rational without taking an overly rationalistic view of the actual formation of ideas. Our concepts require us to deploy one form of explanation for sincere, conscious, and rational beliefs, and others for insincere, unconscious, and irrational ones. In saying this, I make a logical point about how to explain the beliefs we postulate as historical objects, not a sociological one about the prevalence of particular types of historical objects. Hence, I readily would allow that a historian might choose to focus on insincere, unconscious, or irrational beliefs. Let me add here that we should define rationality solely in terms of consistency, and we should define the conscious to include those preconscious beliefs people hold without reflecting upon them in contrast to those unconscious beliefs that conflict with conscious or preconscious ones. Hence, I readily would allow that people take many of their beliefs for granted without consciously reflecting on them. Let me add also that my presumptions set the scene for my analyses of various forms of explanation, including those appropriate to distorted beliefs. Hence, my logic provides historians with forms of explanation appropriate to insincere, unconscious, and irrational beliefs.

Far from privileging a rationalistic view of the actual formation of beliefs, I try to avoid telling historians what objects they should find in the past, and to concentrate instead on the forms of reasoning they should adopt with respect to whatever objects they do find. Maybe this is the problem. Within the complaint of excessive rationalism, there lurks a worry that I do not allow for the constitutive role of power in the objects for which I offer forms of explanation. The worry seems to be that a focus on individualistic explanations of the formation of beliefs provides insufficient resources for exploring power. One response to this worry would be to restate the role of logic. Whereas

sociology can explore changing regimes of power and the ways they have influenced beliefs, logic unpacks universally applicable forms of explanation for beliefs.

A further response to the worry about a neglect of power would be to highlight the role of logic in the study of power. Historical sociologists should explore the operation of power in terms of both my analysis of tradition and my analysis of distorted beliefs. For a start, the analysis of tradition provides a way of conceptualizing power as a form of social influence that works through the individual. It asserts that individuals, far from being autonomous, always come into being in a social context, including relations of power, and this context influences the beliefs they come to hold. We inherit concepts, values, and practices from society, and while we can go on to reflect on this inheritance and even to modify it, we can do so only in the context of other beliefs we adopt against the background of our social inheritance. My logic thus provides a framework in which to explore the way social power operates on us with our own collusion. In addition, the analysis of distorted beliefs provides a way of conceptualizing the more direct ways in which power effects the beliefs people express. It proposes that we explain why people express beliefs they do not hold by reference to their preference for a state of affairs they expect to follow from such dissembling. People express beliefs they do not hold, and act in ways they do not believe in, as a result of the actual or implicit offer of all sorts of inducements and pressures, including violence and the threat of violence. Power can take the form of bribes, threats, and violence, all of which can set up preferences for obtaining a thing, such as office, or ending a thing, such as violence, and where these preferences then can motivate people to express certain beliefs. For example, we might explain why

Hobbes disguised his religious beliefs by reference to his preference for avoiding the social consequences of being an avowed atheist.

Although logic cannot give us a sociological account of changing regimes of power, it does provide a necessary analysis of the forms of reasoning appropriate to such an account. So, on one hand, we might suggest that despite some significant disparities, my analysis of tradition stands as a kind of logical counterpart to Foucault's sociology of pastoral power, and my analysis of distorted beliefs as a kind of logical counterpart to his sociology of discipline. On the other hand, however, we might argue that Foucault's sociology confronts various problems – such as the apparent impossibility of accounting for change without postulating a type of subjectivity to which he often seems opposed – precisely because he does not locate it within a suitable, logical analysis of rationality. Instead of contrasting the sociological study of power with the logical analysis of rationality, we should recognize that the former can proceed only in relation to the latter.

III. ON INTENTIONALITY AND RHETORIC

The Logic of the History of Ideas defends an intentionalist theory of meaning. For Ankersmit, such an appeal to intentions is redundant. In order to explain why I think we need to evoke intentionality, I need first to reiterate that whereas strong intentionalists regard intentions as conscious and prior to utterances, my weak intentionalism consists of a principle of procedural individualism according to which historical meanings exist only for specific individuals whether authors or readers – historical meanings are the beliefs specific people express. Hence, weak intentionalism does not require us to adopt any particular position within philosophical psychology: we might take belief and intention to

refer to genuine mental states, or to be functional concepts, or to be concepts defined solely by reference to behaviour. For myself, I am sympathetic to the suggestion that meanings, beliefs, and intentions only appear in utterances and other actions in a way that makes largely redundant debates about what goes on in the head. Yet while I side-step debates in philosophical psychology, I still think that we need a term such as ‘intention’ to establish that meanings only exist for specific people.

Weak intentionalism specifies the objects to which historians should tie meanings. It stands for the arguments by which I try to establish that these objects must be specific individuals, not texts in themselves. If we say that Hobbes’s Leviathan meant x, we must be able to say for whom it did so, whether for Hobbes, his contemporaries, a later reader, or us today: we should not imply that Leviathan has an intrinsic meaning. So, I would be reluctant to declare the concept of ‘intention’ redundant in case we thereby reified texts. If we lost sight of the fact that historical meanings only exist for specific individuals, we might mistakenly begin to postulate meanings that no historical figure had held and even to suggest these meanings are intrinsic to a text. Although we can treat as redundant questions of philosophical psychology, this does not seem to be so of the question of the nature of the objects to which historians should tie meanings. After all, if historians failed to specify for whom a meaning had existed, they would leave that meaning up in the air in a way that would suggest it was either their own invention or intrinsic to a falsely reified text. Even as we can bracket-off issues about the metaphysical nature of intention, so we need to retain a procedural individualism to fix the objects to which we tie meanings.

A suitable analysis of intentionality serves almost solely to tie the meanings of utterances to the expressed beliefs of specific individuals. Palonen and Stuurman suggest that this itself might be a problem. Their worry seems to be that if we equate intentions with beliefs, we will neglect the rhetorical aspects of speaking and writing. Once again, one response to this worry would be to restate the role of logic. Whereas historians such as Quentin Skinner and historiographers such as White can explore the ways in which political theorists or historians have tried to persuade and impress others, logic unpacks universally applicable forms of explanation for beliefs.

A further response to the worry about a neglect of rhetoric would be to highlight the role of logic in the study of aspects of rhetoric such as hyperbole, irony, tongue-in-cheek, and mock innocence. Historians or historiographers should explore the rhetorical aspect of an utterance using the forms of explanation I identify as appropriate to past intentions or beliefs. When people deploy a pattern of rhetoric, they typically do so because they believe it will help to promote an appropriate response to their ideas, perhaps bringing about suitable actions. Hence, the historian can explain their rhetoric in terms of the relevant beliefs together with their pro-attitude towards the relevant response. The historian should evoke people's conscious, preconscious, and sometimes unconscious, beliefs about different patterns of rhetoric, their appropriateness, and also their probable effectiveness. Here logic highlights the importance of locating people's beliefs about rhetoric within their wider webs of belief, and then of relating these wider webs of belief to appropriate traditions and dilemmas. In many ways, Skinner does just this in his study of Hobbes (Skinner 1996). He suggests that Hobbes' beliefs led him to reject classical theories of eloquence as inappropriate to his concern to advance scientific

reason over passion. Thereafter he shows how this concern informed the reconsideration of rhetoric embedded in Leviathan. Hobbes' beliefs about the role of reason posed a dilemma for his inheritance of Renaissance eloquence thereby prompting him to develop a new mode of expression as appropriate to his commitment to scientific rationalism. In so far as the study of rhetoric thus appeals to beliefs and intentions, it requires a logical analysis of belief and intentionality.

Although logic cannot give us a historical account of changing rhetorical or poetic practices, it does provide a necessary analysis of the forms of reasoning appropriate to such an account. So, on one hand, we might suggest that despite significant disparities, my analysis of intentionality and belief provides the beginnings of a kind of logical counterpart to White's historiographical study of the poetics of history. On the other hand, however, we might argue that White's historiography confronts various problems – such as the apparent impossibility of relating poetic choices about historical construction to epistemic criteria – precisely because he does not locate it within a suitable, logical analysis of intentionality and belief. Instead of contrasting the historiographical study of rhetoric with the logical analysis of intentionality, we should recognize that the former can proceed only in relation to the latter.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the conclusion of The Logic of the History of Ideas, I apply the forms of explanation I advocate to myself. In doing so, I catch my logic between the jaws of a pincer, with one jaw being a committed repudiation of foundationalism and the other a social idealism, or perhaps humanism, associated with T. H. Green, R. G. Collingwood,

and Wittgenstein. To conclude this essay, I might catch my reflections on philosophy, rhetoric, and power in this same pincer. When I press on the postfoundationalist jaw, I say that Foucault and White have inspired a valuable rupture within historical theorizing by undermining scientism and returning history to the humanities. Perhaps though we have learnt what we usefully can from their approaches, which, as an increasing number of commentators argue, ultimately lead to blind alleys (Lorenz 1998; Taylor 1985). Here my logic deploys a flexible postfoundationalism so as to maintain a space for interests in rhetoric and power while opening paths into other areas of historical theory. When I press on the social humanist jaw, I say that Wittgenstein and others were well aware of many of the problems with foundationalism and also of the distinctive qualities of the human sciences. Perhaps though we need to revise social humanism properly to accommodate postfoundationalism, and then to explore its implications for history in more detail. Here my logic draws back from the blind alleys of postmodernism to remind us what social humanism has to offer.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bevir, Mark (1999) The Logic of the History of Ideas, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Foucault, Michel (1977) Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Foucault, Michel (1978-1985) The History of Sexuality, 3 vols., New York: Pantheon.

Foucault, Michel (1980) Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977, ed. C. Gordon, Brighton: Harvester Press.

Lorenz, Chris (1998) 'Can Histories be True? Narrativism, Positivism, and the "Metaphorical Turn"', History and Theory 37: 309-29.

Skinner, Quentin (1996) Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, Charles (1985) 'Foucault on Freedom and Truth', in Philosophical Papers, vol. 2: Philosophy and the Human Sciences, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 152-84.

White, Hayden (1973) Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

White, Hayden (1978) Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

White, Hayden (1987) The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

¹ It is worth recalling that Wittgenstein suggested the Augustinian model applied to parts of language, even though language exceeds this model. ‘Augustine, we might say, does describe a system of communication; only not everything that we call language is this system.’ L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), #. 3.