

# DRO

Deakin University's Research Repository

Mackey, Steve 2012, Semiotic, rhetoric and democracy, *Cosmos and history*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 304-322.

Available online from: <http://www.cosmosandhistory.org/index.php/journal/article/view/275>

**This is the published version.**

©2012, Steve Mackey

Reproduced by Deakin University under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No-Derivatives Licence](#)

**Available from Deakin Research Online:**

<http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30046041>

## SEMIOTIC, RHETORIC AND DEMOCRACY

Steve Mackey

**ABSTRACT:** This paper unites Deely's call for a better understanding of semiotics with Jaeger's insight into the sophists and the cultural history of the Ancient Greeks. The two bodies of knowledge are brought together to try to better understand the importance of rhetorical processes to political forms such as democracy. Jaeger explains how cultural expression, particularly poetry, changed through the archaic and classical eras to deliver, or at least to be commensurate with contemporary politics and ideologies. He explains how Plato (429-347 BCE) struggled against certain poetry and prose manifestations in his ambition to create a 'perfect man' – a humanity which would think in a way which would enable the ideal *Republic* to flourish. Deely's approach based on Peirce and Poincaré presents a theoretical framework by means of which we can think of the struggle to influence individual and communal conceptualisation as a struggle within semiotics. This is a struggle over the ways reality is signified by signs. Signs are physical and mental indications which, in the semiotic tradition, are taken to produce human subjectivity – human 'being'. Deely's extensive body of work is about how these signs are the building blocks of realist constructions of understanding. This paper is concerned with the deliberate use of oral and written signs in rhetorical activity which have been deliberately crafted to change subjectivity. We discuss: (1) what thought and culture is in terms of semiotics and (2) Jaeger's depiction of Ancient Greece as an illustration of the conjunction between culture and subjectivity. These two fields are brought together in order to make the argument that rhetoric can be theorised as the deliberate harnessing of semiotic effects. The implication is that the same semiotic, subjectivity-changing potency holds for 21<sup>st</sup> century rhetoric. However fourth century BCE Athens is the best setting for a preliminary discussion of rhetoric as deliberate semiotic practice because this was when rhetoric was most clearly understood for what it is. By contrast a discussion concentrating on modern rhetoric: public relations; advertising; lobbying; and public affairs would open wider controversies requiring considerably more complex explanation.

**KEYWORDS:** public relations; semiotics; rhetoric; cultural studies; philosophy; paideia; Werner Jaeger; John Deely; John Poincaré; Charles Sanders Peirce; public affairs

## SEMIOTIC THEORY

John Deely's major project is about how the philosophical approach called semiosis originated with the scholastics who called it *doctrina signorum*. He explains how this valuable work was eclipsed at the beginning of modernity. He goes on to herald and advocate the resurgence of semiosis as centrally important to the future of 'postmodern' philosophy. In *Descartes and Poinso: The Crossroads of Signs and Ideas*<sup>1</sup>, Deely explicates the semiotics of John Poinso (1589-1644) and contrasts them with the philosophy of Poinso's celebrated contemporary Rene Descartes (1596-1650). Elsewhere<sup>2</sup> Deely explains how two centuries later Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) replicated the semiotic realist theory of Poinso without ever reading his forerunner. For Deely, both Poinso and Descartes lived during a fulcrum in the history of ideas when nominalist thought triumphed. The scales came down heavily against realism and strongly in favour of solipsism<sup>3</sup>. Descartes' idealist philosophy implied that knowledge of the world came only from what was 'imagined' in the mind. There was no way of 'knowing' the world directly in any real way except via a notion of God. Deely suggests many succeeding mainstream philosophers from Hume and Kant onwards have struggled to tie their schema back to the real world. The concept of God or 'Supreme Being' is sometimes resorted to as the only way of filling in the lacuna in these philosophies. Deely's thoughts on the relevance of 'God' to philosophy are given later in this paper. Descartes' God-dependent idealism was adopted as the foundation of modern philosophy despite the fact that while Descartes was alive Poinso finished his rendition of a far superior realist philosophy which was not God dependent<sup>4</sup>. Poinso's *Tractatus de Signis* was the culmination of more than a millennium of developments of thought stemming from professor of rhetoric: St Augustine of Hippo (345-430 CE). Poinso's and Peirce's semiotics posits that thought, like all other behaviours of living things, can only happen in relation to the exterior and interior environment of that life form. Simple beings behave in a simple way in response to what they encounter in their environment. But even those highly complex

---

<sup>1</sup> John N. Deely, *Descartes & Poinso : the crossroad of signs and ideas*, Scranton, Pa. ; London, University of Scranton Press, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> John N. Deely, *Four ages of understanding : the first postmodern survey of philosophy from ancient times to the turn of the twenty-first century*, Toronto ; Buffalo, University of Toronto Press, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> from *solus ipse* – Latin for 'he himself said it alone'

<sup>4</sup> John Poinso, *Tractatus de Signis*, 1632. (Subsequently rendered by John Deely, *Tractatus de Signis*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985.)

manifestations of life: 'people' draw all, including their most abstract forms of thought, ultimately from aspects of how their actual, real world has at some stage been sensed and subsequently conceived and objectified. By 'objectify' Poincaré, Peirce and Deely mean the making of some sort of mental acquisition of an actual or conceptual entity. Fresh mental acquisitions lead to new mental orientations. But new mental orientations, that is the acquisition of potential for new thinking, means that we become different people. We become different people, however slightly, as our subjectivity – i.e. who we are – is able to choose different responses to things and concepts. We are different because we now have a different range of possible conceptualisations. For example if we have learned to fly a plane or if we have celebrated a birthday the acquisition of all the new habits, mental images and incidental thoughts involved in those endeavours enable us to exercise a slightly different totality of mental being. These changes to subjectivity happen as the myriad representations of the new experiences are received and integrated into the previous way we were – into our former subjectivity. This acquisition of new representations takes place via the 'signs' of semiotics. Signs of new external entities and new internal concepts interact with the representations of prior concepts and sensations which already comprise the existing structure of our thinking faculties. This 'interaction' is an 'intellectual sense making' process. In short it is conscious and unconscious 'thinking.' In thinking about something, particularly when something new is encountered, an understandable 'object' – that is a multi-faceted relationship to previously acquired mental representations is produced in thought of what it is that the person is now encountering. This 'object' may be 'like' some other representations already held in thought because this new semiotic stimulus seems to conjure up those similar signs. Or perhaps the objectification is one involving internal signs which involve the representation of dislike, or perhaps of welcome. Here is another illustration: Your mind is constructing mental objects as you read this. Within the primordial limitations of your corporeal, sensate abilities you are seeing marks on a page and comparing what you can conceive of what they mean in terms of the vast repository of formal and informal cultural and educational concepts which are already stored in your mind – which already comprise you as a person. These prior concepts are held in a huge network of mental entities which represent some aspects of your past engagement with trying to make sense of your external and 'internal' – that is your conceptual – world. These are mental entities which have developed since, and perhaps before, you were born. They are entities via which you 'make sense', or try to make sense of everything you encounter. Both these prior existing as well as the new entities which you are encountering internally and externally by

reading this page are known to the semiotic tradition as ‘signs’. The new and the existing ‘signs’ interact as you relate what you are reading here to how you are already semiotically comprised. In this sense you ‘objectify’ ... that is you make a form of internal and external intellectual acquisition and become slightly changed in the process. (For the better we hope!) The most abstract of this sort of sign-produced thought may involve cultural notions many times removed and quite alien to how the external world actual is. But however wrongly and strangely formed those abstractions may be, however jumbled within myriads of elements of cultural conceiving systems, according to *doctrina signorum*, our building blocks of ideas always ultimately arise from signs generated in connection with the real world via the objectification of things which are real: such as aeroplane flying; a birthday; or reading this page. These are all real, actual things which happen in the world, even including culturally inspired birthday celebrations! Consequently semiotic explanations overcome the solipsism manifest in Cartesian philosophy. This solipsism was early brought into stark focus by Bishop George Berkley (1685-1753)<sup>5</sup>. Berkeley’s solution to how we can none the less operate in a world which is only fabricated in the mind, is that we are all infused with the spirit of God who made both us and the world in the first place<sup>6</sup>. For Berkeley it is the workings of God’s spirit in our mind

---

<sup>5</sup> “23. But, say you, surely there is nothing easier than for me to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and nobody by to perceive them. I answer, you may so, there is no difficulty in it; but what is all this, I beseech you, more than framing in your mind certain ideas which you call books and trees, and the same time omitting to frame the idea of any one that may perceive them? But do not you yourself perceive or think of them all the while? This therefore is nothing to the purpose; it only shews you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind: but it does not shew that you can conceive it possible the objects of your thought may exist without the mind. To make out this, it is necessary that you conceive them existing unconceived or unthought of, which is a manifest repugnancy. When we do our utmost to conceive the existence of external bodies, we are all the while only contemplating our own ideas. But the mind taking no notice of itself, is deluded to think it can and does conceive bodies existing unthought of or without the mind, though at the same time they are apprehended by or exist in itself. A little attention will discover to any one the truth and evidence of what is here said, and make it unnecessary to insist on any other proofs against the existence of material substance.” George Berkeley and Jonathan Dancy, *A treatise concerning the principles of human knowledge*, Oxford ; New York, Oxford University Press, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> “29. But, whatever power I may have over my own thoughts, I find the ideas actually perceived by Sense have not a like dependence on my will. When in broad daylight I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or no, or to determine what particular objects shall present themselves to my view; and so likewise as to the hearing and other senses; the ideas imprinted on them are not creatures of my will. There is therefore some other Will or Spirit that produces them. (ibid.)

“146. But, though there be some things which convince us human agents are concerned in producing them; yet it is evident to everyone that those things which are called the Works of Nature, that is, the far greater part of the ideas or sensations perceived by us, are not produced by, or dependent on, the wills of men. There is therefore some other Spirit that causes them; since it is repugnant that they should subsist

which links us to the reality of the nature which ‘He’ made. Like Berkeley, Descartes<sup>7</sup> resorts to God to repair this problem of the lack of connection to the world:

I seem to discover a path that will lead us from the contemplation of the true God, in whom all the treasure of knowledge and wisdom are contained, to the knowledge of the other things in the universe. (Descartes and others, 1968, p. 132)

Any failure of this God-given ability to correctly perceive the world, apparently solipsistically in the mind only arises because:

...my being mistaken arises from the fact that the power which God has given me of discerning the true from the false is not infinite in me. (ibid, p. 134)

Deely elsewhere<sup>8</sup> suggests that what is referred to as ‘God’ should be left to theology and the realm of the mystics as not germane to any serious discussion of philosophy. Deely suggests that Peirce and Poincaré’s closely corresponding systems of semiotics are more credible explanations of how people can stay connected to the world while at the same time being capable of forming new objectivities – new options for how they can think about the world. In terms of semiotics people are subjects who can conceive of how their own subjectivities and the subjectivities of others can differ. In this way semiotics, *doctrina signorum*, allows for a theory of how people can develop and change their own thinking and, crucially for this paper, how they can develop and change the thinking of others.

The forgoing has been an attempt to lay out the theoretical basis for the rest of this article. Semiotics is rather hard to summarise in a few pages. All that can be hoped is that there has been a sufficiently credible description of semiotics to make this theory applicable to what we might call the following ‘case study’ of ancient Greek conceptualisation.

by themselves.... I say if we consider all these things, and at the same time attend to the meaning and import of the attributes One, Eternal, Infinitely Wise, Good, and Perfect, we shall clearly perceive that they belong to the aforesaid Spirit, "who works all in all," and "by whom all things consist." (ibid.)

“147. Hence, it is evident that God is known as certainly and immediately as any other mind or spirit whatsoever distinct from ourselves.” (ibid.)

<sup>7</sup> “...for since it is now known to me that, properly speaking, we perceive bodies only by the understanding which is in us, and not by the imagination, or the senses, and that we do not perceive them through seeing them or touching them, but only because we perceive them in thought, I know that there is nothing more easy for me to know than my own mind.” René Descartes and F. E. Sutcliffe, *Discourse on method ; and the Meditations*, Harmondsworth, England, Penguin Books, 1968, p. 112.

<sup>8</sup> ...particularly Deely, *Four ages of understanding : the first postmodern survey of philosophy from ancient times to the turn of the twenty-first century*, p. 127.

## PHILOSOPHY VERSUS THE SOPHISTS

There has been a tradition of contestation between sophists and philosophers at least since Plato's dialogues criticised sophists and their well known product – rhetoric. This paper joins that contention on the side of the sophists. Plato's, and by extension much philosophy, for instance Descartes', Berkeley's, Hume's and Kant's is about advocating consolidated ways to think. In terms of the concepts described in the first part of this paper much philosophy is about inventing interlocking semiotic schema by which the subject should view the world so that particular types of society, for instance particular types of democracies, might come about. The priority of the sophist on the other hand is to investigate the inventions and the interlocking of discourse itself, not what sort of society the discourse might create. That is, the sophist is primarily interested in intellectual initiatives irrespective of their content. The intention of a *particular* philosophy is a secondary priority. Concern about purpose comes after the imperative to understand individual and communal thinking processes as such. This is one of the reasons why sophistry and rhetoric are attacked. The charge is that they are amoral and to do with the contingent and the fragmentary. They are to do with the operation of thought as such rather than to do with how this or that schema of thought might deliver this or that perspective on the world. As we will see in Plato's words below sophists are accused of lacking moral purpose. Rhetorics may borrow from the ideas of systematic philosophy to align with the views of 'right thinking people' for particular projects. For instance contemporary norms of morality might be enlisted in order to succeed in a court case, or to gain support in a public speech, to seek agreement with an opinion editorial, or to align with presumed constituents' views in a lobbying letter. But rhetoric is never wedded to any fixed way of thinking. The next day the same case may be made using entirely different premises and logic, or indeed the same premises and logic may be used to make quite another argument. We currently live in an era where there is a huge industry dedicated to sophism and the proliferation of public rhetoric. By sophism we mean the impartial and amoral analysis and production of contemporary discourses, theologies, mores and sentiments. These are the inflections of understanding which guide how the world is generally conceived. They are understandings which help to maintain political and economic form. Sophistic research helps a client understand how and why people think what they think. This intelligence is then used as to guide the most effective public affairs and marketing interventions into the thinking of groups identified as important to the client. Interventions by large commercial, or by government interests are often on a scale and to a depth too significant to be referred to as mere 'persuasion'. Such interventions can affect the very nature of social systems. This

paper suggests that we can better understand this activity as a sophistic processes rather than as a clash of philosophies.

### THE MORPHING OF CLASSICAL SUBJECTIVITY

For the reasons outlined in the abstract this paper draws from the writings of mid 20<sup>th</sup> century classicist Werner Jaeger (1888-1961) whose landmark *Paideia* was subtitled in German: *Die Formung des griechischen Menschen*<sup>9</sup> – the formation of the Greek peoples. As we will see Jaeger discusses sophistry and rhetoric, but a large part of this three volume book is about how aesthetic expression, principally poetry and drama, was used to convey and by implication still conveys, the mores, the discourse ... what used to be called ‘the logos’ ... which facilitates mental conceiving. Jaeger does not discuss the notion of semiotics. None of: ‘Peirce’; ‘signs’; or ‘semiotics’ are indexed in the 1,325 pages. However the potential for applying such a theoretical overlay is clear. For Deely, Poinot or Peirce ‘actuality’ can only ever be signified, that is inducted into mental conceiving, via the signs of that actuality... via the objectification of what it is that is encountered. Jaeger’s work spreads before the reader a panoply of the ways the Ancient Greek world conceptualised itself, that is reflected itself back to itself, i.e. objectified itself, by means of cultural production. He goes deeply into the ways the world was represented through media which helped generations of archaic and classical Greeks, particularly the Athenians to apprehend, to mentally absorb, to position themselves in different ways vis-a-vis the cosmos during epochs of radical transformation. In this sense Jaeger’s book can be ‘read’ semiotically as about the ‘morphology’ of the then contemporary types of subjectivity:

The history of paideia considered as the genetic morphology of the ideal relations between the individual and the polis, is the indispensable philosophical background for the understanding of Plato.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of morphology it is perhaps disappointing that *Paideia*’s sub title was given the English translation: *The ideals of Greek Culture*. Surely *Die Formung des griechischen Menschen* is far closer to what the book is about? The German better suits the idea of a changing subjectivity – the creation of different types of people. Jaeger himself seems to hint at an uneasiness with this translation when he feels it necessary to tell us in his own words that this translation was: “...because of the difficulty of rendering the original title literally<sup>11</sup>.” The compromise was perhaps to do with Jaeger’s main

<sup>9</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek paideia*, London, Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 140.

<sup>10</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Paideia : the ideals of Greek culture [Paideia : die formung des griechischen Menschen]*, Vol. II, New York, Oxford University Press, 1944a, p. 84.

<sup>11</sup> Op.cit, pp. 140-141.

concern with the more outer cultural and educational manifestations of the historical drama which he was describing. He was not as concerned with the inner workings of the mind as with how classical cultural media were used educationally to strive for the creation of the most perfect forms of human being – beings with the best possible understandings of their own nature and their world. The ultimate form of this cultural education – more available to the aristocracy and upper classes – was referred to as ‘paideia’. Paideia exploited the rich *signa* of the best poetry, literature, satire and drama. The finest of these creative arts provided the signs and metaphors, the codes and modes of internal and external conceptualisation which led to a civilisation, albeit a patriarchal, slave owning civilisation, which was full of intellectual brilliance. This cultural equipment, these mind-enabling discursive modes differed in different eras. People were limited or enabled to conceive of, and thus operate in their contemporary worlds, in different ways depending on the culture-borne conceiving – the subjectivity creating mechanisms which were available to them. In this sense people were ‘formed’ as historical varieties of archaic and ancient Greeks just as types of discursive resources have enabled the formation of other varieties of people since. The discursively formed peoples of different cultures and eras have different slants on knowledge; ideology; taste; opinion; ontology; critique; common sense and so on. For instance in ancient Greece – slave owning and patriarchy tended to be common sense! This variability of sensibility, this variability of mental possibilities – variability of the tendencies of perception in the perceiving subject – implies a world which metamorphoses from the point of view of subjectivity. Process philosophy might be more sympathetic to this notion. For instance the occasional ‘abduction’<sup>12</sup> aside, a metamorphosing sensibility fits a semiotic approach to how the mind functions in a pragmatic, incremental and adaptive, semiotic manner. But signs of the same actuality can change. It is the role of rhetoric to understand and bring changed signification to bear. A non-process philosophy: – we have mentioned Plato, Descartes, Berkeley, Hume and Kant’s – which insists on a more constant reality, perhaps one ordained by God, would find it difficult to deal with the sort of *Formung*

---

<sup>12</sup> Peirce’s notion of ‘abduction’ might be termed ‘epiphany’ or sudden direct realisation of the reality or actuality of something. Abduction can be explained like this: Already subjectively held signs which are unconsciously or semiconsciously aligned or ‘networked’ together in significantly massive ways are suddenly brought into clear or clearer consciousness by a small sign trigger. That is: A slight external stimulus or a wandering internal thought suddenly fits together as the final piece of an elaborate mental jigsaw. The new sign completes, or brings into being or significantly modifies, a relatively large, whole new network, or sub-network of semiotic relationships. This major semiotic episode manifests as an out of the ordinary acquisition of surely felt understanding. A new line of thought quickly emerges which seems to correspond with or solve a string of other thoughts or puzzles. This is an ‘Ah Ha’ – I’ve got it! moment.

*des Menschen* described by Jaeger. It would imply the marooning of thinkers on archaic conceptual islands where paradigms of thought, for instance certain notions of the environment or politics or justice could never change in any fundamental way. This is because, irrespective of new ‘facts’, irrespective of logical argument, how these issues could be conceptualised would be locked into the ways of thinking – the notionally ‘fixed’ semiotic possibilities available to a particular presumed historic and cultural way of being. It is only when one accepts the plasticity of human conceiving mechanisms – that is the ability to see the same ‘facts’ in different ways that a mature conceptualisation of how the world is really apprehended is achieved. This metamorphosis of conceiving mechanisms, and consequently metamorphosis of how the world appears from the subjective point of view is allowed for in semiotics. Peirce’s semiotics includes a limit notion of pragmatism. For Peirce mental signs of the world can be legitimately invented and rearranged within the limitation that the pragmatic outcomes of different ways of thinking can ultimately be validated in some empirical manner<sup>13</sup>. So for Peirce the semiotic morphing of the subject would not run out of control into a never ending relativism.

#### SOPHISTRY AND RHETORIC

The plasticity of ways of conceiving of the world – the variation of the way ‘facts’ can be apprehended as correct – was originally the domain of the ‘sophist’ as properly designated. Sophists’ mode of operation was and is skilful intervention into the realm of *signa* – the realm of cultural conceiving mechanisms. The early, multi-disciplinary sophists of the Greek Enlightenment invented all sorts of revolutionary ways of conceiving ‘facts’ which had previously had their meanings locked into, that is only available via, always slanted in their meaning by – archaic conceiving systems, i.e.

---

<sup>13</sup> Charles S. Peirce, Paul Weiss and Charles Hartshorne, *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1974. For instance think of some ultimate empirical consequences of learning to fly, or celebrating a birthday, or of reading this article. Vast networks of semiotically produced thoughts to do with flying would ultimately have to correspond to numerous empirical facts, such as the empirical fact that if one lands a plane correctly it settles on the runway smoothly; if one yanks the stick back with the engine turned off at 10 feet one is likely to crash tail first. Semiosis to do with birthday celebrations might for instance be validated with reference to pleasant feelings among party guests; or perhaps to a cessation of birthdays after the normal number. Semiosis to do with reading this article may result in the alignment or the diversity of remarks from those who have read it. All of the latter, and hundreds more potential empirical entities or processes are things in the real world in terms of which the relevance, the utility, the connection however indirect to a quality of actuality of the signs of the semiotic process can be validated or realised, i.e. understood as real and thus constituent of a valid realist philosophy. Anyone with an idealist critique of this reasoning is invited to take up flying.

archaic logos. The sophists built new philosophical, new scientific, new theological, new grammatical and other methods of conceiving and expressing conceptions<sup>14</sup>. This development challenged the relationships of people to: ‘the gods’, to fate, to justice, to courage and so on<sup>15</sup>. New discourse, new ways to achieve and share mental possibility modified or overturned previous ways of apprehending the world. In particular the sophists’ codification of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric provided advanced ways that society could talk to itself and reach communal decisions<sup>16</sup>. Grammar in particular is analogous to HTML code on today’s Internet. This codification – this standardization, i.e. the promulgation and acceptance of the rules of speaking and writing – meant people divided by geography and time could now take part in a massive system of uniform creation and distribution of accurate information. The ‘trivium’ of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric, as the medieval Latins called it, provided a massive boost to the ways people could learn and form themselves, that is develop their subjectivities. The trivium was the backbone of education for millennia. Even ‘rhetoric’ as developed by the Romans and scholastics is still widely studied in US universities. Publications of the 1,700 member Rhetoric Society of America<sup>17</sup> demonstrate rhetoric’s relevance to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Both now and then rhetoric as properly understood involves[d] conceiving the processes of people’s mental conception. It is about theorising and if possible empirically exploring the nuances of the zeitgeist, the intricacies of the media of particular audiences’ minds – i.e. how they think. This is theorising which can of course be approached via a semiotic conceptual schema. The goal, now as then, has always been to blend with and skillfully penetrate pertinent discourses or ‘logos’ while avoiding the dissonance of straying too far from the target groups’ norms, their perceived ‘right ways of thinking’. Now as then the

---

<sup>14</sup> In a footnote to the introduction of the collected works of rhetorician Isocrates (436–338BCE), George Norlin writes: “The term sophist had not until later times any invidious associations. It was applied indiscriminately to all professors of the new learning—lecturers on literature, science, philosophy, and particularly oratory, for which there was great demand in the democratic states.”: (Isocrates, George Norlin and Larue Van Hook, *Isocrates*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1966, p. xii.)

<sup>15</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Paideia : the ideals of Greek culture [Paideia : die formung des griechischen Menschen]*, Vol. I, New York, Oxford University Press, 1944b.

<sup>16</sup> “Before them, [the Elder Sophists] we never hear of grammar, rhetoric and dialectic. They must therefore have invented them. The new techne is clearly the systematic expression of the principle of shaping the intellect, because it begins by instruction in the form of thought. This educational technique is one of the greatest discoveries which the mind of man has ever made: it was not until it explored these three of its activities that the mind apprehended the hidden law of its own structure.” Op.cit, *Paideia*, (Vol.I:p.314)

<sup>17</sup> See the 1,700 member Rhetoric Society of America web site for links to *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* and thousands of current studies and writings on the subject of rhetoric. <http://associationdatabase.com/aws/RSA/pt/sp/rsq>

most effective way of influencing perceptions is to join in the existing discussion in an empathetic manner with the intent of steering ideas gently. The ethics of this activity will be remarked upon in the conclusion to this paper.

### CLASSICAL CONTEST FOR IDEAS

Jaeger's work on how classical Greek culture created and steered thought starts with poetry. He contrasts the poetry of Homer, Hesiod, Solon, Aeschylus, Euripides, Thucydides, Aristophanes and others. Jaeger emphasises the way poetry changes between the archaic and the Greek Enlightenment period. For instance in the *Iliad* of early Homer the human predicament is depicted as helplessly subject to fierce, unjust all powerful gods<sup>18</sup>. Later poets see humans as rational actors who bear more responsibility for their own circumstances. Solon (c. 638-558BCE) was one of the first poets to start this change towards rationality:

[Solon] held that justice was the divine principle immanent in human life, and that if it were transgressed it would avenge itself inevitably...As soon as men recognise this connection between crime and punishment they take on themselves a great part of the responsibility for their own misery.<sup>19</sup>

In the fifth and fourth centuries BCE poetry was fundamental to communal self-understanding in an increasingly rationalising Athens. The great poets both charted the waves of self aware moral and political attitudes and sometimes did their best to influence them. Jaeger explains how author of Pericles' funeral oration, the poet Thucydides (c.460-395BCE) had a profound sense of how the intellectual culture of Athens was setting the logos of the future of the world:

The remarkable composite character which marks all the expressions of the Athenian spirit: literary, artistic, philosophical and moral reappears in Pericles' conception of the state... [Thucydides] therefore makes Pericles describe it as the interaction of delicately balanced opposites: self support and enjoyment of the world's products; labour and recreation; business and holiday; spirit and ethos; thought and energy... Thucydides' creative insight first recognised the fact that Attic culture was to have a far reaching historical influence... The

---

<sup>18</sup>“Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans. Many a brave soul did it send hurrying down to Hades, and many a hero did it yield a prey to dogs and vultures, for so were the counsels of Jove fulfilled from the day on which the son of Atreus, king of men, and great Achilles, first fell out with one another. And which of the gods was it that set them on to quarrel? It was the son of Jove and Leto; for he was angry with the king and sent a pestilence upon the host to plague the people, because the son of Atreus had dishonoured Chryses his priest.” Homer and Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer and the Odyssey*, Chicago, Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952.

<sup>19</sup> Op.cit, *Paideia* (Vol.I:p.256)

Greek ideal of culture...was charged with the utmost possible historical life and meaning.<sup>20</sup>

Not long after this rosy depiction, as Athens declined under the weight of military defeats and political intrigue another great poet painted a different view of Athens:

...the public had never been compelled to pay such earnest attention to its spiritual problems as now; its political implications had never been realised so vividly as when Aristophanes [c.448-380BCE] stressed them by his lament for the disappearance of classical tragedy. At this critical juncture, the greatest of all comic poets once more emphasised the intimate connection between the spirit and the future of the state, and the vast responsibility of creative genius to the community...<sup>21</sup>

Jaeger's discussion of these poets conveys the evolution of discourses or logos. He explains the changes in these fundamental cultural conceiving mechanisms – these works of art which carried the ways people were able to think of themselves – to 'objectify' themselves and to objectify their societies in different eras and different circumstances. Poetry in this sense was eventually superseded by even more discursively potent prose speech and writing<sup>22</sup>. Prose became increasingly predominant as the fifth and particularly the fourth century BCE progressed. The development of prose and the more advanced discourse or logos which it enabled is linked to the sensational emergence of the wide-scale teaching of rhetoric and philosophy, particularly Socratic-Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy. Philosophy and rhetoric both enabled the fourth century to take revolutionary steps forward in the intricacy of the modes of thought by which people could now conceive of themselves and their world. But there is an important difference between these two prose-borne media of the intellect. The difference is illustrated by Jaeger's explanation of the motives behind Plato's attempts to suppress what Plato saw as some of the anarchic potential of both poetry and rhetoric. Plato was constantly afraid of Athens slipping back into too hyper-democratic a political form. His dialogues, particularly the *Republic* advocated a certain approach to conceiving man's nature and position in the cosmos via an 'Idea of Good'<sup>23</sup> – a higher realisation of human purpose. This higher realisation was achieved by thinking and behaving in what we might call righteous or pious moral ways. Jaeger points out that in *Laws*, Plato changes 'Idea of Good' to understanding of and respect for a notion of 'God':

---

<sup>20</sup> Op.cit, *Paideia* (Vol.I:pp.410-411)

<sup>21</sup> Op.cit, *Paideia* (Vol.I:p.381)

<sup>22</sup> Op.cit *Paideia* (Vol.I:p.346)

<sup>23</sup> Plato, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, *The collected dialogues of Plato, including the letters*, New York, Princeton University Press, 2005. *Republic*. (VII: 7:534b, p. 766)

**Athenian:** My friends – this is what I would say to them – God, who as the old *saw* [proverbial saying] has it, holds in his hands beginning, end, and middle of all that is, moves through the cycle of nature straight to his end, and ever at his side walks right, the *justicer* [judge] of them that forsake God’s law. He that would be happy follows close in her train. With lowly and chastised *mien* [bearing], but whoso is lifted up with vanity- with pride or riches or rank or foolish conceit of youthful comeliness and all on fire within with wantonness, as one that needs neither governor nor guide, but is fitted rather to be himself a guide to others – such a one is left alone, forsaken of God. In his abandonment he takes to others like himself and works general confusion by his frantic career.<sup>24</sup>

Here is the Platonism on which Christianity was built. Like Christianity, clearly in original Platonism there is a need for a discourse of supplication. There is a need for a Platonic semiotics, a narrative involving God and how to behave with regard to God. Plato devises an original logos – a new mode of thinking which is necessary in order to *Formung des Menschen* in a way which would precipitate or at least work towards the creation of a utopian Republic. But Plato was concerned that competing logos of archaic theology in the discourse of still powerfully affecting ancient poetry would threatened this project. The notion of humans as powerless before irrational, angry gods for instance did not fit with encouragement for individuals to supplicate themselves to achieve personal spiritual benefits and a wider communal good. Worse still were the critical, discursive effects of some of the teachers of rhetoric. These maestros of agonistic were more interested in deconstructing discourse, in pointing out the failings of rival arguments and using suitable fragments for their own arguments for contingent and mundane purposes. Rhetoricians were not in the business of constructing a particular discourse which might achieve the perfect man and a utopian society. Their work was and is the deployment of discursive tactics which sway minds in the short term for expedient ends. Leading rhetorician Gorgias for instance appears to have achieved celebrity and wealth by displaying his unmatched ability to perform oratory as a form of spectacular entertainment<sup>25</sup>. In Plato’s *Gorgias* in a manner reminiscent of the modern concept ‘moral panic’ Plato attacks both poetic and rhetorical activity which might interfere with the ‘responsible’ narratives of his own philosophy:

**Socrates:** Then poetry is a kind of public address?

**Callicles:** Evidently.

<sup>24</sup> Op.cit *Laws* (IV: 716a, p.1307)

<sup>25</sup> Op.cit *Paideia* (Vol.I:p.347 and Vol.III, p.142)

**Socrates:** Must it not be a rhetorical public address? Do you not consider that the poets engage in rhetoric in the theatres?

**Callicles:** I do.

**Socrates:** Then we have now discovered a form of rhetoric addressed to a people composed alike of children and women and men, slaves and free – a form which we cannot much admire, for we describe it as a form of flattery.

**Callicles:** Certainly

**Socrates:** Well, but what of the rhetoric addressed to the Athenian people and other free people in various cities – what does that mean to us? Do the orators seem to you always to speak with an eye to what is best, their sole aim being to render the citizens as perfect as possible by their speeches, or is their impulse also to gratify the citizens and do they neglect the common good for their personal interest and treat the people like children attempting only to please them, with no concern whatever whether such conduct makes them better or worse?<sup>26</sup>

Plato does not seek to end all poetry. Instead he wants to edit or censor poetry which carries discourse, that is semiotic systems, which were opposed or obstructive to his project and to co-opt poetry where it might be advantageous. This is because of what he acknowledges as poetry's power to influence subjectivity. He says poetry would be of better service if it carried the discourses which he is advocating:

...[Plato] never suggests for a moment that poetry ought to be abolished altogether as an educational force and replaced by the abstract knowledge which is philosophy. On the contrary the bitter energy behind his criticisms arises ultimately from his knowledge that nothing can replace the formative power of the masterpieces of music and poetry...[but]...half [philosophy's] educational task remained unfulfilled until the new truth puts on the vesture of a new poetry, like a soul which gives form to a new body.<sup>27</sup>

In a similar vein, for all Plato's lampooning of rhetoricians in *Gorgias* and *Sophist*, he can see how rhetoric might be used to advocate his views – to further his discourse. In *Phaedrus* Plato has Socrates acknowledge the work of contemporary great rhetorician Isocrates (436–338 BCE):

**Socrates:** It seems to me that his [Isocrates'] natural powers give him a superiority over anything that Lysias [another rhetorician] has achieved in literature, and also that in point of character he is of a nobler composition; hence it would not surprise me if with advancing years he made all his literary

<sup>26</sup> Plato, Hamilton and Cairns, *The collected dialogues of Plato, including the letters*, p. 284. (Gorgias, 502c-e)

<sup>27</sup> Jaeger, *Paideia : the ideals of Greek culture [Paideia : die formung des griechischen Menschen]*, Vol.II, p. 222.

predecessors look like very small fry...For that mind of his, Phaedrus, contains an innate tincture of philosophy.<sup>28</sup>

Jaeger suggests *Phaedrus* was a later work of Plato's and that Plato is here commenting on his peer intellectual rival's mature work and that 'early promise' is used in an ironic and begrudging mood.<sup>29</sup> Jaeger also points out the compliment which Plato pays Isocrates in passages of *Laws*. There the philosopher uses some of the rhetorician's previously published passages<sup>30</sup>. Isocrates' secular, but ethical and educationally oriented rhetoric founded the great rhetorical and educational tradition of two millennia which included Cicero (106-43 BCE) and Quintilian (35-100 CE). As a further endorsement by original philosophers of the importance of rhetoric, Jaeger quotes a tradition that Aristotle (384-322 BCE) announced his own new course in rhetoric while he was still at Plato's academy with the line: "Twere shame to hold our peace, and let Isocrates speak."<sup>31</sup> Aristotle's handbook on rhetoric is still cited by modern textbooks on public persuasion. See for instance the chapter: "How persuasion works: What Aristotle taught," in Thomson (1998).<sup>32</sup> Consequently, whatever the truth of the ancient quotation, rhetoric certainly gained the imprimatur of a legitimate subject of study in the school which founded western philosophy.

## CONCLUSION AND ETHICAL CRITIQUE

The contention of this paper is that when considering initiatives to analyse and influence social and political form it is useful to compare classical and 21<sup>st</sup> century rhetorical activity. A more comprehensive study would need to explain how the more complex modern activities of public affairs are indeed rhetorical in the same or similar sense to rhetorical activities of the classical period. This however must wait for another paper. For some commentators public relations, lobbying, advertising, opinion research and so on are an inevitable aspect of modernity which should be taken at face value as part of the way society is organised. These commentators would have modern rhetoric professionalised so that it conformed to ethical codes. For others these activities harbor sophistic [in the 'evil' sense] Svengalies who seek to

<sup>28</sup> Op.cit (Phaedrus, 279a) ; In *Isocrates* (p.xvi) Norlin writes: "Isocrates took from Gorgias a style which was extremely artificial and made it artistic. In so doing, he fixed the style of rhetorical prose for the Greek world, and through the influence of Cicero, for modern times as well."

<sup>29</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Paideia : the ideals of Greek culture [Paideia : die formung des griechischen Menschen]*, Vol. III, New York, Oxford University Press, 1944c, p. 184.

<sup>30</sup> Op. Cit. p.344

<sup>31</sup> Op. Cit. p.147 [There are different interpretations of Diogenes Laertius on this quote.]

<sup>32</sup> Peter Thompson, *Persuading Aristotle : the timeless art of persuasion in business, negotiation and the media*, St Leonards, N.S.W., Allen & Unwin, 1998.

influencing perception merely in order to extend their self interests. Optimists view 'professionally accredited' insinuation of specific semiotic conceiving mechanisms, specific forms of thinking into particular targeted audiences' minds, as not necessarily a bad thing. Such projects can be seen as in line with Plato's view that the widescale insinuation of certain forms of thought into individuals was essential in order to achieve the best kind of society. The sophists' rejoinder – as explained by Jaeger when explicating Isocrates – is that preaching beneficial forms of thought is all very well. However what is more important is the realisation of a wider self consciousness of how people think – of what 'forms of thought' *per se* actually are. The sophists and their rhetoric were primarily concerned with how forms of thought are inculcated. They were analysts, theorists and production workers in the industry of subjectivity creation. The conception of the world which their rhetoric conveyed, e.g.: a particular aesthetic; God fearing; socialism; or conservatism; was secondary. Consequently higher education in this field should be pitched at showing how to temporarily stand outside of particular philosophies. The initial priority should be to understand how one's own and society conceiving mechanism's might be inculcated with *any* views. Attainment of this sophistic realisation is the best defence against the misuse of rhetoric. Something like this sophistic awareness seems to have been attempted with the 1970s to 1990s, originally left-wing inspired emergence of critical and cultural studies. But the initiative was lost amid a welter of complicated and contested theorisation for theorisation's sake. The loss came at a time when universities became more like businesses. Industry representatives increasingly dominated their governing bodies to draw up instrumental and financially driven mission statements. A new breed of 'academic managers' – as opposed to 'senior academics' – took their cue from strategic priorities which emasculated anything which smacked of philosophical debate. Controversy was contained by the device of having, responsible-sounding 'cultural theory' components in largely instrumental media studies, literary studies, public relations and similar courses. Cultural theory units of study usually give an equal hearing to all sorts of theories, including the impossible to understand and the plainly nonsensical. Theories must be 'learned' rather than used as incendiaries to spark debate. Semiotics is one of the approaches which has been emasculated in this process. Critical and cultural theory taught via this non-controversial orthodoxy becomes a fig leaf pasted over what might otherwise be systematic and potent critique. This diffusion avoids challenges to the current instrumental *raison d'être* of higher education. Potentially potent sophistic and philosophical debate has been bequeathed to the few stalwart, committed educationalists whose career prospects do not look so good.

The response of this paper to the above pessimistic picture is multi-fold. Firstly semiotics, particularly as it is as explained by Deely and his colleagues, needs to be rescued from the theoreticist mire in which it has become stuck. Next another dimension needs to be added to what we might call the two-dimensional way that philosophy is generally handled in universities. By this I mean that it is not enough to simply find, explicate and advocate the right ideas. Instead, like Plato did begrudgingly in relations to poetry, and as both Plato and Aristotle did in relation to rhetoric, the philosopher needs to understand how ideas are inculcated into minds. An amalgam of these two requirements leads to the third response. This is the appeal for recognition that a combination of the proper understandings of both rhetoric and semiotics enables a powerful theory of the creation of subjectivity to be developed. This paper only scratches the surface. For instance the more recent responses of neo-pragmatists needs to be dealt with in this theory building. But that again is a project for a later paper. The main point which is being advanced in the present paper is that currently there is an appalling deficit in academic approaches to understanding today's public affairs communications. There is a need for a far more sophisticated understanding of the objectifying and subjectivity creating processes and effects of public relations, lobbying, advertising and so on. This deficit involves a failure to recognise that just like in Plato's time these media are (1) fundamental to how complex society, particularly complex democracy operates and (2) an understanding of rhetoric offers potential benefits to progressive philosophical projects. It goes without saying that (3) rhetoric can also be toxic to subjectivity. The latter is the default position of incurious academics and public opinion generally. This brings us to the point about contemporary rhetorical activity and ethics. The definition of public relations which I like to advocate is: persuasive activity which deliberately sets out to affect people's views within the bounds of community standards. A discussion of the notion 'community standards' in this formula would clearly be the province of philosophy *per se*. And there would of course be a whole other paper to do with the philosophies which current public affairs practices convey, avoid, distort or oppose. The point being made in this paper however is, as Plato conceded with regard to poetry, that whatever moral codes; whatever reasoning; whatever inspiration is contained in a particular philosophy, putting these notions across, that is, getting people to adopt notions is at least as important as creating and explaining them. Consequently the fecund and challenging field of research which this conclusion suggests is that a far more 'sophisticated' – in its original sense – approach to public affairs media needs to be taken than the presently generally dismissive, even haughty approach in some quarters. The contemporary rhetorical industries produce products which are in some

ways like fissile material. They can do immense damage. But it is because of the potential for damage as well as the potential for usefulness that this potent materials need to be exhaustively examined and intelligently understood.

Faculty of Arts and Education  
Deakin University  
mackey@deakin.edu.au

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Berkeley, George and Jonathan Dancy, *A treatise concerning the principles of human knowledge*, Oxford ; New York, Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Deely, John, *Tractatus de Signis*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985.
- Deely, John N., *Four ages of understanding : the first postmodern survey of philosophy from ancient times to the turn of the twenty-first century*, Toronto ; Buffalo, University of Toronto Press, 2001.
- Deely, John N., *Descartes & Poincaré : the crossroad of signs and ideas*, Scranton, Pa. ; London, University of Scranton Press, 2008.
- Descartes, René and F. E. Sutcliffe, *Discourse on method ; and the Meditations*, Harmondsworth, England, Penguin Books, 1968.
- Isocrates, George Norlin and Larue Van Hook, *Isocrates*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1966.
- Jaeger, Werner, *Paideia : the ideals of Greek culture [Paideia : die formung des griechischen Menschen]*, vol. II, New York, Oxford University Press, 1944a.
- Jaeger, Werner, *Paideia : the ideals of Greek culture [Paideia : die formung des griechischen Menschen]*, vol. I, New York, Oxford University Press, 1944b.
- Jaeger, Werner, *Paideia : the ideals of Greek culture [Paideia : die formung des griechischen Menschen]*, vol. III, New York, Oxford University Press, 1944c.
- Jaeger, Werner, *Early Christianity and Greek paideia*, London, Oxford University Press, 1969.

- 
- Peirce, Charles S., Paul Weiss and Charles Hartshorne, *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1974.
- Plato, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, *The collected dialogues of Plato, including the letters*, New York, Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Poinsot, John, *Tractatus de Signis*, 1632.
- Thompson, Peter, *Persuading Aristotle : the timeless art of persuasion in business, negotiation and the media*, St Leonards, N.S.W., Allen & Unwin, 1998.