Composition, Philosophy, and Rhetoric: The “Problem of Power”

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In the preface to *Composition as a Human Science: Contributions to the Self-Understanding of a Discipline*, Louise Wetherbee Phelps states that the work is “inherently schematic and programmatic, and invites others to take it up more fully and more concretely” (xii). Furthermore, she acknowledges a missing part to the work: “What is missing, however, is the problem of power. . . . If rhetoric is a set of relations among language, power, and knowledge, I have neglected power and the political dimension of composition and its praxis” (xiii). I will respond to Phelps’ invitation to further self-understanding by addressing the “problem of power” in three parts.

Since this article is conceived in the conversational metaphor initiated by Phelps, the first and most extensive part of the essay will remark moments in her text where the absence of power presents a problematic for composition. In effect, the reading here will at once continue and disrupt Phelps’ own project. As she states, “The critique of positivism deconstructs scientism rather than simply circumscribing it. It requires us to redescribe the scientific project itself in terms that reverse its primary assumptions” (12). The first part will lead to an isocolon responding in backward dancing antistrophe: the critique of power deconstructs composition rather than simply circumscribing it. It requires us to redescribe the composition project itself in terms that reverse its primary assumptions.

The second part of the essay will briefly present Habermas (for and) against Phelps, noting the gestures of both authors against scientism while drawing on several of Habermas’ basic concepts: the distinction between praxis and *techne* and the distinctions between strategic action and communicative action in conjunction with systematically distorted communication and the validity claims of truth, rightness or appropriateness, and truthfulness. Introducing such concepts offers a counterstatement to Phelps and keeps composition open to considerations of power.

Habermas’ concepts provide a theoretical base for reconstructing Aristotelian rhetoric, retranslating it, as it were, from a strategic action instrumenting social behavior (back) into a communicative action of political praxis. Thus, the third part will conclude the article by proposing to reread
Aristotle's \textit{Rhetoric} from an explicitly postmodern position that recognizes an unstable and destabilizing text as a possibility for richly multiple readings rather than a barrier to the essential truth of the text and what rhetoric means. Central to such a reading is the \textit{Rhetoric}'s multiple categories and allegiances, on the one hand, to art and \textit{techne} and production and, on the other hand, to politics and \textit{phronesis} and action. By reading \textit{Rhetoric} in both categories at once, rhetoric can be reconstructed as communicative action where the narrative of power emerges from its silence as a missing part of composition and its praxis.

\textbf{Composition—The Problematic of Missing Power}

Phelps sets herself a demanding task when she undertakes to conceptualize composition as a human science. Much of what she does in the course of her work is admirable and necessary: disrupting reflectively such virtually axiomatic concepts as natural literacy, the process/product dichotomy, and coherence. She is right to see composition's state of affairs in conjunction with postmodern conditions, and she is right to submit notions of composition to theoretical critique. But while there is much to admire in Phelps' work, the bracketing of power is a rhetorical gesture itself that requires rhetorical analysis—a sort of \textit{tmesis} under erasure that requires the reinsertion of power and a breaking in two of the discourse of composition that can flow over and immerse at will the problem of power.

I wish to manage my analysis of Phelps by considering some themes that emerge from the logos of her discourse—not the logic of her statements \textit{per se}, but rather the thematic accounts of states of affairs that become the ground of action. In these themes, motif displaces motive in a subversive antistoecon. Explicit motives to acknowledge the political dimension of discourse, and thus power, are displaced by motifs of life-world, context, and praxis articulated in such a way that they systematically preclude power as an inherent element of discourse.

\textbf{Theme 1: The Life-World}

Phelps draws heavily on the phenomenological/hermeneutic tradition, particularly as it is played out in Ricoeur. Thus, \textit{Lebenswelt} or "life-world" becomes a key term for Phelps: "As Edmund Husserl defined it, the life-world is the domain of common sense, everyday experience into which we are all born and live prereflectively, before science or philosophy. The distinctive quality of the life-world is to be 'pregiven' to consciousness as the natural, inevitable surround of the lived body, taking its situational structure from human activity" (110). Against this prereflective life-world is the world of reflection, the world of science and philosophy, which breaks our "natural," prereflective experience. Consequently, as Phelps puts it, there is an "ambivalence and conflict inherent in the human attachment to the natural, which embodies a nostalgia for the immediate that is constantly undercut by the critical, reflective impulse" (110). Here we have both theme and the
The sub-theme of nostalgia, or loss and desire for recuperation, is expressed early on and reappears a number of times throughout the book: "The story I want to tell in this introduction is one of loss and recuperation" (4). Phelps does not limit the story of loss and recuperation to the introductory chapter. In the second chapter, she speaks of "the effort of praxis to resist the alienating potential of self-conscious inquiry" (49), and in making a distinction she states that "Bakhtin's dialogism is a 'merry science' that does not regret the loss of Edenic wholeness" (57). In the third chapter, she states, "The passage from naivete to critical consciousness, however, may be read not only as an ascent to reason but also pathetically, as a fall from grace" (88). To compensate for this fall, Phelps turns to Ricoeur, who posits a "second naivete" or 'postcritical faith,'" by which "humans can reappropriate experience, meaning, history, understanding, or the self while retaining the values of critical thought" (92). The fifth chapter concludes with this challenge: "After analysis, the challenge remains: how—in a spirit of hope, if not of innocence—to find, or perhaps merely to seek again and again, that fragile and fleeting balance whereby we can surpass the natural attitude and yet reclaim it?" (127). The eighth chapter states that "the hope is to recover or reappropriate the sense of participation in the life-world that is primevally given, yet appears lost to humans with the first moment of reflective consciousness" (193). This subtheme of loss and desire for recuperation creates a problematic as far as power is concerned, but to understand how it is problematical, we need first to return to the primary theme of life-world. Then we will be able to consider together the implications of life-world and the desire to return to it.

As already noted, the first feature of the life-world is its naturalness, a situation before philosophy and science. Elsewhere, Phelps draws on the work of Calvin Schrag, stating that "this state of immersion in a pregiven world precedes any questions of method or critical thought, though this is not to say that it is totally unreflective: comprehension is already at work in a world that presents itself as a field or horizon of human concerns" (22). Quoting Schrag, Phelps further characterizes the life-world as

the interweaving of experience and interests in everyday life. In this domain, configura- tive "world-facts" of perception and human action present themselves to human consciousness "not as discrete data but as experienced totalities in which figure and background are interwoven." The self is not marked off from and against this world but is inseparably embedded in it. Similarly, facts and meanings are not distinct; the facts of perception, practical activity, and sociopolitical action are already ways of comprehending the world. . . . [T]he life-world is not . . . purely perceptual and emotive, but generates all philosophical and scientific meanings. The life-world is cognitive and reflective. . . . Our understanding and comprehension of the experiential field, expressed in ordinary language, underlie the ability of more methodical reflection to create human self-understanding. (23)
A brief way to summarize this passage is to state simply that the life-world is not only "natural" but also bears the potential for science and philosophy. But I quote Phelps at length here because I want to capture something in the words that is more nuanced than propositional. Specifically, "practical activity" and "sociopolitical action" are designated as "already" existing in a way that "methodical reflection" is not. Thus, it is science and philosophy that are portrayed as growing from the prereflective life-world, while "practical activity" and "sociopolitical action" are always already remaining within it. This is an imbalanced picture where the practical and political remain in an undeveloped, immature, or naive state. The life-world is a bed from which scientific rationality can grow and develop but from which the political and practical can only exist in an undeveloped quasi-natural state or are simply weeded out. Although the theme of praxis will be discussed more at length later, it is worthwhile to note here that praxis can only be in its quasi-reflective state; if anything becomes, it becomes method or science. Thus, as we have already seen Phelps note, "the effort of praxis [is] to resist the alienating potential of self-conscious inquiry" (49).

The theme of life-world in conjunction with the subtheme of calculated naivete and recuperative desire presents an account of the world in such a way that simply adding power back into the equation becomes virtually impossible. In a technocratic culture such as ours, a basic issue of power is the power of science over the life-world, the ability of science to dominate powerfully all forms of knowledge—this is what scientism is. That we now believe such power is homegrown, if you will, rather than imposed from on high is no guarantee that scientism will be curtailed. Technocratic power, for example, might be superficially dispersed rather than centralized, but, even so, its domination can remain pervasive: one need only to consider the effects of an abstracted, ubiquitous free market played out in a "decentralized" eastern Europe. Power of any sort is a political issue that requires political thought and action, which are not identical with the thought and action of either reflective method or prereflective activity. Thus, if one wants to consider power and its discursive formations in a historically and technologically advanced society, one needs a politically conceived critical theory of discourse that is as advanced as the rationalistic and scientific discourse that it sets out both to comprehend and to argue with. And while such a critical theory would grow out of the life-world, just as science and philosophy grow out of the life-world, critical theory would no more yearn for the life-world than science does nor act less reflectively than philosophy.

It would be unfair to characterize Phelps as oblivious to either the possibility of or need for critical theory politically conceived. If Phelps were indeed oblivious, she would not have raised the issue of power in the first place, nor would she repeatedly invoke the critical dimensions of Ricoeur's work, nor would she approvingly present Freire, for example, as one who both theorizes and practices literacy as critical/political action (88). But it is
precisely at this moment where critical possibility emerges in Phelps that it is immediately immersed in language of Edenic desire: “The passage from naivete to critical consciousness, however, may be read not only as an ascent to reason but also pathetically, as a fall from grace” (88).

Theme 2: Contextualism and the New Physics

In Phelps' logos, the life-world is not the only account of existence. Phelps also sets out to construct an “ecology of composition” within a contextualist system. “Contextualism” is a term Phelps borrows from Stephen Pepper, who, according to Phelps, “develops a conception of root metaphors as the basis for general ‘world hypotheses’ within which philosophical and scientific questions are framed” (31). The four root metaphors that Pepper identifies are form, machine, organism, and context. Phelps, following Pepper, finds contextualism the most compelling metaphor and characterizes it thus:

Contextualism ... frames the world as event. Pepper and his interpreters develop the concept of event in two basic categories: (1) process or change, and (2) context. Context (also system, field, whole, ecology, relation) refers to the total set of relationships from which particular entities and qualities derive. This whole is, by virtue of the principle of change, in a constant state of flux, a dance of information/energy patterns that underlies all the apparent stabilities, structures, and laws we experience in nature or society. Local events, or experiences, reflect these qualities in the system as a whole in being temporal and configured as fields within fields, their elements context-dependent, their meaning inexhaustible and subject to endless interpretation from different perspectives. ... A contextualist theory is one in which all parts are not only interdependent but mutually defining and transactive, so that through their shifting relationships they continually constitute new parts or elements as well as new structures. This premise holds for the system in general, and specifically for the relationships between subject and object, observer and observed. Neither is fixed. ... Further, transactions in a contextualist system are both horizontal and vertical. All levels are embedded, that is, reciprocally related to all others, so that change spreads through the whole system from any given level. At the same time, change in entities or units on any given level enters into transactional patterns with other units (and changes) on the same level. This is the full measure of an ecology: a total interrelatedness and reciprocity of change for all parts and all levels. (32-33)

I have quoted Phelps at length because it is important to catch the account that comes through the connotations of the language that is actually used: the text needs to be interpreted rather than simply related. In this passage, the compound image of flux/dance signals in synecdoche an organizing principle that is reiterated and amplified throughout Phelps: physics (or perhaps more accurately biophysics or ecophysics) and aesthetics in dialectical tension. In the passage under consideration, however, physics tends to dominate. Ironically, there’s something Hobbesian about the emphasis on flux: “For Nature worketh by Motion” (Leviathan 686). And from that state of flux and motion, or “holomovement” (54), as Phelps calls it elsewhere, borrowing from the physicist Bohm, come the “laws” (55). Of course, Phelps cannot through ahistorical conjuring be reduced to Hobbes, for unlike those
operating under the conditions of Cartesian philosophy, Phelps does not look for a fixed relation between observer and observed, living comfortably instead in the world of Heisenbergian uncertainty. Yet even though Phelps' image of physics is a postmodern one, partial and discursive, it is a turn to physics nonetheless. Images of process and system, field and motion, and energy patterns blithely coordinated in the phrase “stabilities, structures, and laws we experience in nature or society” suggest a parallel between nature and society that can be problematic vis-à-vis the issue of power, for it is such an equation of society with nature that enables scientism to act as an instrument of social regulation. Consider the last paragraph from the passage cited above. Here, although the metaphor is weighted toward ecology rather than physics and we move from the dance of energy patterns to the discourse of “transactional patterns,” as with the physics imagery, all human agency and institutional structures of power are absent, replaced with “entities or units” transacting with “other units.” Moreover, this happily republican ecology (units only transact horizontally with units on their own levels; only levels interact vertically with other levels) is completely free of power relations: there is “a total . . . reciprocity of change for all parts and all levels.” Such a world view makes trickle-down economics a perfectly reasonable proposition, and also suggests that the local will effortlessly affect the global: Gee, a thousand points of light really will cast into outer darkness the systemic production of poverty or the systemic destruction of ozone.

Again, it would be completely unfair to characterize Phelps as oblivious to the political. Shortly before her presentation of the contextualist hypothesis, she includes in her ecology of composition “phenomena at many ecological levels, including political and social institutions” (29). But at the same time she moves to “blur” the “sharp division between human and natural science” (29). Thus, she cites first Radnitzky, who “envisions a dimensional system with naturalistic and hermeneutical principles as the two poles within which specific sciences are located, depending on the practice by which they mix the two approaches,” (29-30) and then Toulmin, who “suggests the sensitivity of objects to disturbance and interaction” (30). The manner in which Phelps presents these two positions works as a leveling force to create a lowest common denominator in which one can simply mix science and practice: choose $X$ method(s) from range $S$, $Y$ method(s) from range $P$. While this stage still maintains enough of a distinction to posit a dialectic where science and practice limit one another, the leveling is complete in the next stage with the prosopopoiea of Toulmin’s suggestion. Here the common denominator is no longer a range; it is, quite simply, physics à la Heisenberg. In the theoretical, general language that Phelps uses in her paraphrase, human and non-human, animate and inanimate, are leveled into not the neutral term, but the scientistic term, “object.” Similarly, human action is leveled to behavior: “sensitivity . . . to disturbance and interaction.” With such an articulation, one can equalize, in principle, the physicist
studying sub-atomic matter with the woman watching the Senate's confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas—both are sensitive to disturbances. With this logos as a ground for action, composition theorists simply make "discriminations and choices ... depend[ing] on a variety of factors: the object of investigation, the instruments or media of observation, accessibility of meaning" (30). Under such conditions, the language of science, no matter how dynamic and humanesque in its dance of discourse, speaks with force, as it always has, against the recognition of power and human interest as a central characteristic of its own formation. And against such force, power cannot be easily or simply added back into the conversation as if it had always been there, a welcome but coincidentally silent guest who could speak and be gladly listened to at its own convenience.

At this point, we can see the complex state of affairs that emerges thematically in Phelps' logos: on the one hand there is the life-world—at once prereflective and prefigurative of reflective science and philosophy, a sensual place of activity, experience, and meaning; an Edenic world whose feeling, at least, we yearn for and wish to recuperate in a postmodern gesture against the alienation of critical consciousness. On the other hand, there is the dynamic structure of all enveloping context whose holomovement generates and embraces all existence as we shall ever partially know it in its momentary stabilities and laws; human and non-human, animate and inanimate join in a dance of energy that suggests an ecophysics of systems embedded in systems where distinctions between ways of knowing all blur only to be sorted out in particular reflective and critical moments, seeking, at any given time, any of a number of various objects with which we participate and observe in any number of ways. To negotiate these world views in the complexity of their dialectic between felt experience and reflected-upon event requires a complex notion of praxis.

**Theme 3: Praxis**

Part of what Phelps sets out to do, admirably, is to break the spellbinding authority of theory over practice conceived as technical applications of theory—an aristocratic arrangement where theory proposes and application disposes. The particularly manifested institutional revolution that Phelps backs, again admirably, is the authoritarian domination of theory over what the teacher practices. The concept of praxis, then, needs careful consideration, for it serves as a ground for depicting how we think and act, and in this capacity, the concept of praxis presents the third instance in Phelps where an innocent bracketing of power becomes problematic.

A key principle of Phelps' concept of praxis is that there are two types of praxis: a praxis of reflection, which is science and philosophy, and the praxis of daily life, which is prereflective (70). "Both," says Phelps "are discursive (i.e., rhetorical), but their discourse is different" (70). Thus, claims Phelps, although reflection conceived rhetorically "brings it closer to ordinary
human experience,” reflection still remains something to be “distinguished” from ordinary experience (70). Along with two types of praxis, Phelps posits two types of consciousness, the practical consciousness of experience and the discursive consciousness of systematic reflection (73). Quoting Anthony Giddens, Phelps defines practical consciousness as “the vast variety of tacit modes of knowing how to ‘go on’ in the contexts of social life.” (73). Phelps makes a point of noting that “experience is not unreflective but prereflective, prefiguring tacitly in practical consciousness the systematic reflections of discursive conscious” (73). What Phelps is trying to establish at this point is the inherent interrelatedness of theory and practice, making them “coprinciples of inquiry” (73). This idea is fine as far as it goes, but there is nonetheless a limiting dualism at work here that would have a difficult time accounting for power, for the accounting of power is as much a practical issue if not more than it is an issue for philosophical and scientific reflection.

The everyday world of ordinary experience requires a critical capability beyond tacit modes of knowing that is not at the same time philosophical and scientific reflection. Only this sort of praxis, critical and political in its reflection rather than philosophical and scientific, can take systematic reflection to task, disciplining it, as it were, from ethical and political perspectives. Again, Phelps is aware that systematic reflection must be held accountable to human interests rather than left on its own to assert and value itself; this is, after all, where the Enlightenment goes particularly awry. However, positing a prereflective human praxis against a systematic reflective praxis already builds in an uneven distribution of power that is quietly glossed over, a move that is typical when power sets out to reaffirm itself.

To discipline reflection or theory or science, Phelps introduces the concept of phronesis as a guiding principle of praxis. As Phelps points out, phronesis is an Aristotelian concept, which she defines as “knowledge directed toward right conduct” (215). As such, it is a type of know-how, which, like techne, or know-how “directed toward the production or making of objects” (215), is distinct from episteme or “knowledge for its own sake” (215). For Phelps, both phronesis and techne are “oriented toward experience. Their goal is application of the universal or general to the specific case, as means to end” (215). But Phelps does not adopt Aristotelian phronesis with its emphasis knowledge directed toward ethical action. Instead, she adopts Gadamer’s whose discussion of phronesis “modulates from type of knowledge as determined by object (phronesis as knowledge about ethical action) to form of reasoning as determined by the situation of application, where phronesis becomes, as practical reason, the prototype for a certain relation between knowledge and action, general and particular” (215-16). Under such circumstances, phronesis becomes a type of reasoning that requires judgment and deliberation to apply rules in a given situation. Phelps, following Gadamer, sees phronesis thus articulated as counter to one-directional, scientific reasoning: “In contrast to the situation of (techno-
logical) application wherein a particular is subsumed under a general law by virtue of its regularity (predictability) according to that law, ... [i]n practical reasoning, neither the means nor the ends nor their relation is fixed" (216). Thus, "the problem of application identifies in praxis itself a reflective moment, since practical reasoning involves judgment" (216).

Now, while such a rendition of *phronesis* certainly does maintain on the level of application what Phelps sees as the important distinction between *phronesis* and *techne*, on another level that distinction is utterly lost. The key change in Gadamer and Phelps' "modulation" of *phronesis* is greater than it would first seem, for transposing *phronesis* explicitly from "knowledge about ethical action" to "reflective application" undermines considerably, if not quite entirely, the critical potential of *phronesis* and turns it simply into a dynamic form of what it was to be clearly distinguished from---*techne*, knowledge about effective means of production. In retrospect, such a reduction of *phronesis* is implicit in Phelps' identification of the "goal" (singular!) of both *phronesis* and *techne* as means-to-end application. The reduction of *phronesis* to *techne* is explicit in the example of *phronesis* that Phelps offers: "Epistemic knowledge about the physics of bicycles or bobsleds and the physiology of humans that ride them is subjected to practical reasoning when it is brought to bear strategically in racing" (217-18). While such an example represents what Phelps has defined formally as *phronesis* (that is, practical reasoning) insofar as judgments are made after deliberating what of physics and what of physiology to apply strategically in a particular race, it fails utterly as an example of *phronesis* as deliberation about ethical action, for such deliberation would not consider means-to-ends applications but rather ethical and political dimensions of the bicycle or bobsled race itself. For example, *phronesis* may ask to what extent does this particular bobsled race, in the winter Olympics, say, represent the ideology of an advanced capitalist economy and its colonization of spirit? The successful strategic application of physics and science has nothing to do with the matter, although the American penchant to reduce sport to strategic applications of physics and physiology may figure strongly in such substantially ethical, practical reasoning. (Such a theme, incidentally, played out in the sport of track, makes the film *Chariots of Fire* an interesting case in point for distinguishing between practical reasoning as means-to-end-application and practical reasoning as deliberation about ethical understanding.) Phelps does acknowledge that strategic questions of means can be inextricably related to ethical and political questions of ends, but such an acknowledgment is undermined by conflating both *phronesis* and *techne*, practical reasoning and technical or instrumental reasoning, with the common denominator of means-to-end application.

Although Phelps has presented the possibility of rhetoric as a "set of relations among language, power and knowledge" (xiii), her manner of developing the themes of life-world, context, and praxis indicate a conceptual
framework that precludes considering power as an inherent part of communication. The thematic language that holds ethical and political action in a prereflective life-world while at the same time raising systematic reflection, science, out of the life-world is a way of articulating the human world in such a way that power is neutralized before science. Similarly, contextualist metaphors centered on physics and ecology present the world as system, which cannot clearly account for power relations that result from human interest and that may be challenged and changed on grounds of principle arrived at through deliberation. Finally, reducing praxis and *phronesis* to strategic action and strategic reason precludes the possibility of the sort of judgments necessary to even articulate issues of power and thereby address them adequately. These motifs of Phelps' logos undermine any motive to consider power in relation to language and knowledge. Phelps states that “the critique of positivism deconstructs scientism rather simply circumscribing it. It requires us to redescribe the scientific project itself in terms that reverse its primary assumptions” (12). But closely examining that element of Phelps' logos impeding the consideration of power leads to a counterstatement, an isocolon that identifies with Phelps' project at a basic level, yet also an antistrophe that dances backwards across Phelps' stage: the critique of power deconstructs composition rather than simply circumscribing it. It requires us to redescribe the composition project itself in terms that reverse its primary assumptions. To aid in such a redescription and for a conceptual framework that articulates relations among language, knowledge and power without nonchalantly bracketing off power, we can turn to Habermas.

**Philosophy—Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action**

As a point of departure into a discussion of Habermas' theory of communicative action, we can turn to a chapter in an early work entitled, appropriately enough for our circumstances, “Some Difficulties in the Attempt to Link Theory and Praxis” (*Theory and Practice* 1-40). In social philosophy, Habermas, comparable to Phelps, opposes a “monological form ... no longer capable of essentially relating to praxis” (3). Indeed, a problem Habermas sees is that “modern social philosophy can assert its claims ... to be taken seriously from a scientific viewpoint, only at the cost of a separation from that connection with experience which practical philosophy maintains” (2-3). In short, Habermas takes an antipositivist stance that counters separation and reconnects the realm of knowledge to the realm of experience. Also like Phelps, Habermas turns to “the Aristotelian distinction between *praxis* and *techne*” (2), but unlike Phelps, Habermas maintains a sharp distinction between the two:

Technical questions are posed with a view to the rationally goal-directed organization of means and the rational selection of instrumental alternatives, once the goals (values and maxims) are given. Practical questions, on the other hand, are posed with a view to the...
acceptance or rejection of norms, especially norms for action, the claims to validity of
which we can support or oppose with reasons. (Theory and Practice 3)

In maintaining this distinction, Habermas can define praxis negatively as not
“merely... goal-directed purposive action guided by social-technical recom-
mandations” (Theory and Practice 3), which is precisely the way Phelps
represents praxis in the example of the bicycle/bobsled race and the appli-
cations of physics and physiology. By not collapsing praxis and techne, Habermas
can sustain as always present, implicitly or explicitly, the issue of norms and
the ability to submit them to critique. Indeed, his critical stance, which he
posits as a guard against hermeneutic idealism and its privileging of cultural
tradition, allows him to question “what lies behind the consensus, presented
as a fact, that supports the dominant tradition of the time, and does so with
a view to the relations of power surreptitiously incorporated in the symbolic
structures of the systems of speech and action” (Theory and Practice 12).
Thus, a concept of praxis based on Habermas’ theory emphasizes critique
rather than application. Moreover, such a critical praxis rests on the fact that
power is something that cannot be bracketed out but is embodied, incorpo-
rated, in speech and action.

Also embedded in speech is the goal of understanding. Indeed, for
Habermas “in every speech act the telos of reaching an understanding is
already inherent” (Theory and Practice 17). We need to pause for a moment
to discern an important distinction that runs throughout Habermas, that
between strategic action and communicative action. At the same time, we
can turn to a much more recent text, Moral Consciousness and Communica-
tive Action, where Habermas does an excellent job of highlighting and
summarizing some of his key concepts. Here he states “that for the model of
strategic action, a structural description of action directly oriented toward
success is sufficient, whereas the model of action oriented toward reaching
understanding must specify the preconditions of an agreement, to be reached
communicatively” (134). For Habermas, reaching understanding grows out
of “a lifeworld that not only forms the context for the process of reaching
understanding but also furnishes resources for it” (135). But these resources
neither yearn for naivete nor evolve into science; reaching understanding
“about something in the world” (135) is not reducible to acceptance of simple
propositional statements, but rather revolves around the principle that every
speech act raises a set of validity claims that articulate relations to the
world—truth, rightness or appropriateness, or truthfulness—and that in
principle are always criticizable. “In the attitude oriented toward reaching
understanding,” says Habermas,

the speaker raises with every intelligible utterance the claim that the utterance in question
is true (or that the existential presuppositions of the propositional content hold true),
that the speech act is right in terms of a given normative context (or that the normative
context that it satisfies is itself legitimate) and that the speaker’s manifest intentions are
meant in the way that they are expressed. (Moral Consciousness 136-37)
Because every intelligible utterance raises these three validity claims, Habermas argues that there is a decentered understanding of the world insofar as the speaker has a choice among three basic attitudes, each entailing a different perspective on the world [cognitive, interactive, and expressive]. In addition, the decentered understanding of the world enables him to confront external nature not only in an objectivating attitude but also in a norm-conformative or an expressive one, to confront society not only in a norm-conformative attitude but also in an objectivating or an expressive one, and to confront inner nature not only in an expressive attitude but also in an objectivating or a norm-conformative one. (Moral Consciousness 137-38)

In short, the validity claims inherent in all speech acts present the possibility for reflection from different perspectives—decentered understanding—and for critique—the criticizability of validity claims. Thus, communicative action grows out of the lifeworld without turning into science or theory on the one hand or techne on the other. Instead, I would argue, communicative action can be seen as phronesis that remains committed to deliberation about ethical issues rather than translated into formal deliberation about application. Such phronesis does not seek to discipline knowledge, as Phelps would have it, so much as to make it ethically and politically accountable, which brings us back to that form of action that Habermas distinguishes from communicative action: strategic action.

As suggested by the citations above, strategic action can be associated with techne in that both are “goal-directed purposive action” and action “directly oriented toward success.” But Habermas further identifies subcategories of strategic action: the “openly strategic” and the “covertly strategic.” Under covertly strategic actions fall, again on the one hand, “conscious deception” or “manipulation,” and on the other hand, “unconscious deception,” which results in “systematically distorted communication . . . [where] at least one of the participants is deceiving himself or herself regarding the fact that he or she is actually behaving strategically, while he or she has only apparently adopted an attitude orientated to reaching understanding” (“A Reply to my Critics” 264). Habermas’ distinction between communicative action oriented toward understanding and strategic action oriented toward success is an important one for the issue of power, keeping it always present, always unbracketable. For just as one can always, in principle, say yes or no to the validity claims raised in every instance of language use, so too can one raise the possibility of systematically distorted communication. One can read mainstream press accounts of presidential candidates, for example, as being openly strategic: are they successful in the two basic ways that news stories need to be successful—that is, are they modestly objective, and do they meet market demands of interest sufficient for selling papers or programs? Or one can read the same accounts as instances of systematically distorted communication where the media impose upon their readers and viewers the clandestinely strategic reduction of politically moral action to terms of sexual
fidelity as spelled out in heterosexual marriage contracts conceived in Judeo-Christian religious traditions, a move that undermines critical political debate and serves to solidify the power of what Gore Vidal repeatedly dubs the National Security State—all in the name of reaching understanding. The point is that if there is going to be any communication, one must be aware that both communicative and strategic forces of language are always at play, whether or not in any given situation they remain implicit and potential or are realized and made explicit.

In analyzing Phelps, I argued that aspects of her logos systemically excluded the possibility of simply adding power back into discussions of language and knowledge. Her leaving of sociopolitical action in a non-developed, prereflective state in the lifeworld from which only the praxis of science and reflection can grow, her transforming of praxis and phronesis into strategic terms of application, and her apolitical, scientistic presenting of a “world hypothesis” in the neutral sounding language of event systems all work to reduce power from an inherent element of communication into an element that may or may not be present. In contrast, Habermas’ theory of communicative action presents a logos that articulates a different view of the world and provides a different ground for action. By positing criticizable validity claims that arise in everyday language, Habermas draws from the resources of the lifeworld the possibility of critical, reflective discourse that moves beyond the tacit without being reduced to the scientific. Terry Eagleton so aptly summarizes Habermas on this point: “For the life-world to act as radical political resource, its inner logic must . . . be disengaged from this tacitness and theoretically formalized” (403). At the same time, the distinction between openly strategic action and the covertly strategic actions of manipulation and systematically distorted communication provide a critical dimension to praxis and phronesis, allowing the realm of practical reasoning to remain ethical and political without reducing it to the realm of the strategic or positing it only as a prelude to the theoretical. Finally, by virtue of the fact that Habermas grounds his social philosophy in terms of communicative action where human beings inherently work toward understanding in the midst of interests and power, there is an implicit organizing principle counter to Phelps’ depoliticized context: the public sphere, a motif that runs throughout Habermas’ work. Unlike context (or any of Pepper’s other root metaphors for “world hypotheses”) the concept of the public sphere does not sublimate political and ethical action into some other kind of behavior. Ironically, we could argue that Habermas turns to one of the oldest Occidental metaphors for articulating a world hypothesis, a metaphor explicitly political: the identification of the universe as cosmos, governing in accordance with law. The universe, in short, is modeled on the polis, not vice versa. We would do well not to depoliticize and reverse the original metaphor, doubling it back upon ourselves, one of the more favorite past-times of the West throughout the millennia.
Presented in this manner, Phelps' logos could be characterized as emphasizing the generative; Habermas', the critical. For Phelps, the lifeworld is generative in its state of grace, as is contextualism with its inexhaustible meanings and dancing flux of energy patterns; and with praxis and *phronesis* cast in the light of *techne*, they become primarily productive. For Habermas, the lifeworld presents at every instance validity claims, allowing for critical speech situations that can be imagined only in a public sphere of ethical, practical, and political interaction that exists critically if it is to exist at all; praxis and *phronesis* remain oriented to the critical task of understanding and judging ethical dimension of actions.

Phelps' emphasis on generation permeates her notion of composition:

> The semiotic flux... continues ceaselessly throughout the entire organism-environment system, which is a symbiotic unity. We assume the natural entry of human individuals into this flow at birth and their ability to develop powers within it as part of their normal growth. Composition separates out a strand of that growth and semiosis... asking what interferes with or distorts the flow of communication and the movement of development. (53-54)

Elsewhere, Phelps defines writing as "a type of discursive practice whereby individuals compose meanings in relation to (1) the correlative composing of meanings by significant others and, (2) concrete situations in semiotically constructed worlds" (65). Now, I am not about to argue against the generative capacities of language, but the apparently universalistic terminology, "organism-environment," strikes me as disturbingly incomplete, immersing as it does the critical element. The only counter to the composing of meanings are interferences or distortions (hardly positive actions) or the correlative composing of meanings, which suggests more constraint than critique. Indeed, embedded in Phelps' vision of the semiotic flux is an economy that would do free-marketeers (and rhetoricians) from Adam Smith to Donald McCloskey proud: meaning-makers would make their meanings without constraint and be held in check only by the invisible hand of correlative meanings; meanings are made valuable in their market transactions but never in submission to critiques of validity; such critiques would smack of government interference and distort the market. With its heavy emphasis on the generation of meaning, Phelps' language remains completely silent about validity. Yet it is claims to validity that Habermas sees as inherent in all speech and, I would argue, it is validity that enables us to understand power in relation to language and knowledge.

It is a habit of our tongue to roll off meaning and validity as if they were a single totality, but that is not the case. Validity is a complement to meaning, just as the critical is to the generative. Without validity, there is a problem regarding accountability. As Habermas puts it in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, if there is "no room for an intersubjective praxis for which socialized individuals are accountable, ... social praxis disappears in the anonymous hurly-burly of the institutionalization of ever new worlds
from the imaginary dimension" (Philosophical Discourse 330). Under such conditions results an “ironic inversion of praxis” where individuals “support
the world-disclosing productivity of language . . . [that] fits with the personifi-
cation of society as a poetic demiurge that releases ever new world-types
from itself” (Philosophical Discourse 333). Habermas’ description of praxis
disappearing in the hurly-burly and world-disclosing productivity of lan-
guage could just as easily describe Phelps’ reduction of composition to the
composing of meaning in relation to the correlative composing of meanings
by others. The semiotic flux seems nothing if not a poetic demiurge releasing
ever new world-types in which individuals themselves support the world-
disclosing productivity of language in their own composing of meanings. For
Habermas, world-disclosing language is attributed to literary speech acts,
which are “illocutionarily disempowered” (Postmetaphysical Thinking 222).
That is to say, Habermas continues,

In everyday communicative practice speech acts retain a force that they lose in literary
texts. In the former setting they function in contexts of action in which participants cope
with situations. . . . In the latter setting they are tailored to a reception that removes the
burden of acting from the reader. . . . Literature does not invite the reader to take a
position of the same kind that everyday communication invites from those who are
acting. Both are caught up in stories (or histories), but in different ways. One angle from
which this difference can be made clear is the connection between meaning and validity.
(222)

Habermas then argues that the validity claims of everyday life—that is, truth,
rightness, and truthfulness—do not hold between author and reader: “The
transfer of validity is interrupted at the boundaries of the text”
(Postmetaphysical Thinking 222). I would argue that Phelps’ articulation of
a semiotic flux into which writers are born to compose meanings is really a
universalization of the literary, where validity is interrupted insofar as it is
immersed in correlative composing of meanings. (Phelps would likely resist
such a characterization, for she writes that “The political structure of English
departments . . . valorizes poetic language . . . over ordinary language . . . [45].)
Indeed, there is nothing in the correlative composing of meanings acknowledg-
ing either that validity claims exist or, if they do exist, that they can be
criticizable. What does exist is a constant generation of meanings that need
never face the possibility of questions about truth, rightness, and truthfulness
that claims to validity offer us, unless such questions are seen in terms of
constraint or distortion (which is, I suppose, the sophisticated position
George Bush once took when he whined about Dan Rathers’ questions
constraining his message to the people on the evening news). Such privileg-
ing of meaning over validity does little more than sanction the society of the
spectacle and reduce discourse to the hurly-burly of meanings bought and
sold in ever multiplying transactions. Under such conditions, where validity
is immersed, issues of power cannot be addressed, for addressing power
requires an ability to say yes or no to claims of validity, to claims of truth,
rightness, truthfulness. Without such an ability, all discourse is reduced to
the poetic; ethical and political discourse is reduced to the aesthetic.

Habermas’ theory of communicative action resists such a tendency to
reduce discourse to only the composing of meanings by holding before us at
all times the notion of validity claims. Thus, I would argue that Phelps, in her
attempt to outline the self-understanding of composition, as the subtitle of
her book indicates, undermines and even subverts her own project by
emphasizing meaning at the expense of validity. For by emphasizing only
meaning, one cannot have a full grasp of what it is to write. Phelps’ vision is
incomplete, and it is this incompleteness, I would argue, that makes her
omission of power less voluntary than her language suggests. Indeed, to
accommodate coming to terms with power requires a concept of validity that
cannot simply be tacked onto a notion of writing that is conceived exclusively
in generative terms. As a suggestion for a concept that can accommodate
both generation and critique, meaning and validity, I would like to turn
tentatively and in closing to Aristotle.

Rhetoric—A Strategy for Rereading Aristotle
While Habermas is neither a rhetorician in particular nor an Aristotelian in
general (neo or otherwise), he does early on draw connections between
Aristotelian rhetoric and praxis: “Rhetoric indeed served the end of effective
recommendation and warning; it aimed at decision, at the action of citizens
. . . the orator was engaged in the philosophical transaction of practical
prudence within the specific sphere of Politics” (Theory and Practice 80). I
would like here to focus on the implications of Habermas’ statement as a
point of departure for rereading Aristotle as suggestive for a reconstruction
of rhetoric as communicative action that can accommodate both meaning
and validity as well as power in relation to language and knowledge.

Habermas’ association of rhetoric with prudence, action, and politics
directs our attention away from typical pairings of rhetoric with either logic
or poetics to pairings with ethics and politics, a link that Aristotle makes in
both Politics and Rhetoric. In Politics he states that “why man is a political
animal . . . is clear. . . . [M]an alone of the animals possesses speech . . . [which]
is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also
the right and the wrong . . . [H]e alone has perception of good and bad and
right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these
things that makes a household and a city-state” (1253a). In Rhetoric he states
that “Rhetoric is as it were an offshoot of Dialectic and of the science of
Ethics, which may be reasonably called Politics” (1356a). The significance of
these two statements, along with Habermas’ observation, is that it allows us
to see rhetoric not only in the productive terms of techne, the making of
successful arguments, but also in the critical terms of praxis and
phronesis—knowledge directed toward right conduct.

Now, in Theory and Practice Habermas does not present rhetoric as
particularly critical, even though rhetoric does serve effective warning, for, as Habermas puts it, rhetoric takes "as its point of departure something familiar to us, such as traditionally or authoritatively legitimized and accepted points of view" (Theory and Practice 80). As noted previously, Habermas insists that tradition and authority be subjected to critique, which hermeneutic idealism cannot carry off. Yet, I would argue that in a reconstruction of rhetoric, Habermas' validity claims, inherent in all speech acts and providing for the critical dimensions of speech, provide an underpinning for the Aristotelian pisteis of ethos, pathos, and logos, where logos is comparable to the claim of truth, pathos to rightness, ethos to truthfulness. With such a link between universal validity claims and rhetorical proofs, we can imagine a rhetoric that is critical, fulfilling the demands of communicative action—reaching understanding—and countering covertly strategic actions of manipulation and systematically distorted communication. Rhetoric may start in tradition and authority but carries within its pisteis the possibility for reflection and critique of tradition and authority. As Grimaldi argues, Rhetoric is Aristotle's "study of language as discourse" (11) whose focus on the enthymeme "incorporates ... all of the elements demanded by language as the vehicle of discourse with another: reason [logos], ethos, pathos" (16-17). Such a comprehensive view of rhetoric and the rhetoricality of all human discourse enables us to reconstruct rhetoric as a praxis that allows rhetoric to move beyond a precritical reflection into a critical reflection in an advanced society without reducing that reflection to one absorbed by science or poetics or a simple dialectical synthesis of the two, for there is no guarantee that science in dialectical relation to poetics will result in the practical. Indeed, it is a brave calculus that asserts that this can be so. Moreover, such a reconstruction of rhetoric would allow us to deemphasize its character of techne in blunt productive terms. Such a move in rhetoric would bear similar results to those Habermas sees in casting praxis as something other than production:

As soon as we drop the paradigm of production, we can affirm the internal connection between meaning and validity for the whole reservoir of meaning. ... In communicative action, which requires taking yes/no positions on claims of rightness and truthfulness no less than reactions to claims of truth and efficiency, the background knowledge of the lifeworld is submitted to an ongoing test across its entire breadth. To this extent, the concrete a priori of world-disclosing language systems is exposed ... to an indirect revision in the light of our dealings with the intramundane."

(Philosophical Discourse 321)

Critically conceived rhetoric can carry out a similar project of submitting utterances from the lifeworld to ongoing tests and instigating revisions based on yes/no positions vis-à-vis the various validity claims in a way that the simple composing of meaning cannot. It is a critically conceived rhetoric, with its ground in the validity claims of all speech acts, that enables us to "affirm the internal connections between meaning and validity for the whole reservoir of meaning."
It is not my purpose here to engage in a rereading and reconstruction of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. But such rereading and reconstruction could well provide a basis for a conceptualization of communication, written or oral, that goes beyond the composing of meanings to include at the same time the raising and questioning of validity claims at once universal and rhetorical. By taking such a rhetorical turn, we can move toward a greater self-understanding of our praxis and face, not only in disciplinary terms but in ethical and political ones as well, what Habermas calls "the real difficulty in the relation of theory to praxis, [which] does not arise from ... [the] function of science as a technological force, but rather from the fact that we are no longer able to distinguish between practical and technical power" (*Theory and Practice* 255). Only with a turn to critically conceived rhetoric can we make such a distinction, and only then can we truly face the problem of power.

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**Works Cited**


