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Bruno Latour – Special Issue

Bruno Latour's Detour: From Relativist Rhetoric to Realist Philosophy

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Abstract:

In this article, I argue that the work of Bruno Latour has straddled two conflicting intellectual traditions: the relativism of 20th-century postmodernism (which deconstructed the realist pretensions of scientism) and the realism of 21st-century New Materialism (which seeks to sublimate the postmodern linguistic turn and embrace science alongside critical theory). I connect these twin tendencies to their ancient precursors among the Greek sophists and presocratic philosophers and argue that Latour's strange position between relativism and realism recalls the historical tension between the philosophical and rhetorical traditions. Latour has embodied both of these intellectual currents, shifting only his focus but never his commitment to deconstructing the distinction between nature and culture. By connecting the conflicting tendencies of postmodernism and New Materialism back to the ancient sophists and presocratic philosophers, I argue that Latour effectively ontologizes rhetorical persuasion as the 'language' of every being, human and nonhuman alike.

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Keywords:

Latour; Rhetoric; Realism; Postmodernism; New materialism

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Introduction

The twin discourses of philosophy and rhetoric share a complex history extending from antiquity to today's intellectual culture. As Bruno Latour writes, "The ancient version of this battle is renewed from one century to the next through formulas, different every time, that always revive the same split: on one side the indisputable demonstration based on facts that are themselves indisputable; on the other, eloquence, rhetoric, propaganda, communication" (Latour 2013, 131). In this article, I will trace the similarities over time between the postmodernists and the sophists in the rhetorical tradition on the one hand, and between the New Materialists and the pre-Socratics in the philosophical tradition on the

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other.² I will conclude by examining the work of Bruno Latour, whose complex figure straddles both of these intellectual currents and whose highly nuanced project might trouble the typical distinctions between philosophy and rhetoric.

Postmodern Sophistry and Classical Rhetoric

In the past half-century, post-Kantian Continental philosophy has revealed the deep connections between power, knowledge, and communication. The postmodernists (like the more radical sophists in the classical rhetorical tradition) highlight the primacy of *nomos* or convention, stressing that the artificial and constructed nature of the human lifeworld(s) goes 'all the way down.' Like scholars in other humanistic disciplines, postmodern philosophers navigated the ever-accelerating 'linguistic turn.' In this paradigm shift, philosophers came to recognize that language is performative as well as propositional, that language discloses and delimits a community's epistemic access to its shared "world", and that the differences which carve up reality into an intelligible and navigable matrix are largely due to distinctions made (not discovered) in and by language (Lafont and Medina 2002, xii).

However, the model of a linguistic turn remains largely *descriptive* of the nature of language; I suggest that the term "rhetorical turn" denotes a *prescriptive* practical dimension alongside a descriptive theoretical one. It is not only the case that language *does* (re)constitute the reality of human lifeworlds, but also that the power of language *should* be used in beneficial, peaceful and just ways instead of malevolent, ideological, and unjust ways. (One need not look even so far as Derrida or Foucault or Butler to observe this phenomenon, but only to observe the popular-level—although sometimes unpopular—rise of "politically correct" or "woke" language since the 1970s, which can more charitably be described as a hope in the constructive use of language's power to re-construct reality [Andrews 1996, 389]). Thus, the 'rhetorical turn' may be a more accurate description than the 'linguistic turn' to describe the simultaneity of both descriptions and prescriptions concerning discourse.

Like other postmodern humanities disciplines which partake in Franco-Germanic literary style and content, continental philosophy can be validly situated within such a rhetorical turn—a "Third Sophistic" wherein the affect of rhetoric overturned the cultural dominance of philosophy (particularly its modernist offspring, foundationalist science). This postmodern "Third Sophistic" echoes the premodern First and Second Sophistics, eras of oratorical excess fixated on style over content, political *praxis* over scientific *theoria*, and contingent probabilities over necessary certainties. For Victor Vitanza and Michelle Ballif, the 20th century Third Sophistic is both an era and a disposition which not only opposes foundationalism and totalization, but also stresses that *all* language is fundamentally rhetorical, and is therefore fundamentally deceptive and mischievous (Vitanza 1991, 118-9, 131; Ballif 1998, 59-60). Whereas the ancient Greek First Sophistic and the classical Roman Second Sophistic were both "political" only insofar as they were *particular* regions of public discourse involving the power of the law, the Continental Third Sophistic is "political" insofar as it (linguistically) turns every type of language into a power-seeking speech-act. Postmodernists within this Third Sophistic recognized theoretically that the world—and knowledge of it—is (to a large degree) structured and mediated by the persuasive force of language (Derrida 1997, 158; Berger and Luckmann 1967, 40-1). Further, such sophistic postmodernists have participated practically in the ongoing (re)construction of the world by

² The historiographical risks of drawing parallels through and within intellectual history are clear: there is always the temptation to hypostatize a tradition out of superficial similarities among thinkers, to essentialize thinkers as representative of and allied to a given tradition, and to treat thinkers' concepts anachronistically or ahistorically. However, this paper undertakes said risks because of the assumption that the postmodern era (a "Third Sophistic") has overemphasized difference and disruption to the exclusion of identity and continuity.

signifying performatively as well as representationally (Butler 1993, 13), by politicizing supposedly “unpolitical” discourses (Foucault 2009, 390), by producing novel concepts (Deleuze and Guattari 1992, 2), and by deconstructing texts in the pursuit of justice (Derrida 2002, 243).

In the final decades of the last millenium, Bruno Latour's work in science studies situated itself rather easily among these postmodern literatures. He published a number of works examining the social construction of scientific facts (which “appear... unconstructed by anyone”), thereby emphasizing the rhetorical power wielded (however dissimulatively) by scientists (Latour and Woolgar 1986, 240). Latour likens the tension between scientific realism and rhetorical constructivism to Janus's two faces: “On the left side rhetoric is opposed to science just as authority is opposed to reason; but on the right science is a rhetoric powerful enough, if we make the count, to allow one man to win over prestigious authorities” (Latour 1987, 32). The Third Sophistic enveloping Latour and his postmodern peers highlights the anarchic condition of this rhetorical dimension (that is, the performative, powerful, and persuasive dimension) of *all* types of language, including philosophy. To historically contextualize this Third Sophistic, I will now examine its forebears in the ancient First Sophistic.

In the fifth-century Greek democracy, Athenian citizens were expected to represent themselves in court. As anyone familiar with Plato knows, a group of orators known as the Sophists took it upon themselves to teach citizens how to speak persuasively in political settings (Kennedy 2009, 15-16). In particular, the sophistic pedagogy of the rhetors Protagoras, Gorgias, and Isocrates created a theoretical culture which shaped the socio-political culture of the day (Kennedy 1999, 50-51). Protagoras infamously claimed that “Of all things the measure is man, of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not” (Williams 2009, 53). Gorgias was skeptical about the possibility of reality, knowledge, and communication, as shown in his hypothetical kettle logic: “[N]othing exists... even if it exists it is [not] apprehensible to man... even if it is apprehensible, still it is without a doubt incapable of being expressed or explained to the next man” (Williams 2009, 59). And Isocrates emphasized the power of language upon ethical and political *praxis* and *theoria*: “in all our actions as well in all our thoughts, speech is our guide” (Isocrates 1968, 257).

Because of the Sophists' political ability to invert the balance of weak arguments against strong ones, philosophers have often regarded them as epistemological relativists. This relativism typically took the form of a de-emphasis of any universal truth claims and a cynical emphasis on how localized practical claims could both cohere with and manipulate the *endoxa* (conventional wisdom) of a particular culture (Kennedy 2009, 7; Williams 2009, 51; Gagarin 2002, 32). Despite this relativism—or perhaps because of it—sophistry presented itself to Greek culture as a *humanism*, an anthropocentric discourse which put knowledge to work in the sphere of human action (Williams 2009, 22). Unlike the cosmological cloud-headedness of the presocratic natural philosophers, the Sophists concerned themselves first and foremost with the affairs of human culture. Western intellectual thought, as mediated through Socrates and Plato, is arced along this anthropocentric turn, which does not reduce wisdom to knowledge so much as it reduces knowledge to human wisdom. In many ways, the rhetorical tradition was the historical fountainhead of humanism (literary, pedagogical, and existential) because of its political functions. Conversely, the philosophical tradition, despite its reputation for being the love of wisdom, must be characterized primarily by the love of knowledge: its goals tended toward the theoretical as opposed to the practical, the world beyond the human rather than the world of and for humanity. The primary characteristic demarcating the discursive region known as “philosophy” from that of “rhetoric” is—or perhaps, should be—*de-anthropocentric realism*. Whereas rhetorical relativism localizes all knowledge to (all-too-)human correlations, philosophical realism seeks theoretical knowledge silhouetted by an interpretive horizon wholly unconcerned with human subjectivity.

New Materialism and Presocratic Philosophy

Just as the ancient First Sophistic was challenged by the Socratic/Platonic tradition of philosophy, a recent reaction to such rhetorical Continental anti-realism has been generated in the form of a 'new materialism,' which can be read as a return to philosophy's metaphysical speculations. The surprising development of a school of realism within Continental philosophy itself amounts to a return with a vengeance of the deepest chthonic roots of the philosophical tradition. Speculative realists such as Ray Brassier, Quentin Meillassoux, and Graham Harman have sought to rewind the linguistic turn and its attendant politicization, relativization, and anthropocentrization of every sector of human lifeworlds, over-and-against "correlationism" or "philosophies of access" which presuppose the interdependence of human consciousness and worldly material being (Meillassoux 2008, 5; Harman, 8). Brassier views the nihilism nurtured by de-anthropocentric philosophy as a "speculative opportunity," proposing that "[t]hinking has interests that do not coincide with those of living" (Brassier, xi). Brassier sorts 21st-century philosophers into two varieties: "those who want to explain science in terms of human experience" and "those who want to explain human experience in terms of science," positioning himself in the latter category (Brassier 2009). Meillassoux similarly endows "science" with "the power to decentre thought" (Meillassoux 2008, 121). For Meillassoux, post-Kantian philosophy has not been a Copernican revolution, but a Ptolemaic one: far from challenging humanity's ostensible central role in the cosmos, Kant and his successors managed to rebuild the cosmos entirely around human consciousness and language, the "two principal 'media' of correlation" (Meillassoux 2008, 6, 119-20). According to Graham Harman, "The mainstream in both analytic and continental philosophy still regards 'language' as the Big Man on Campus... Still, this is not to say that the linguistic paradigm deserves an infinite lifespan" (Harman 2002, §16). Tracing a constellation of diverse yet similar philosophies, Harman (along with Nick Srnicek and Levi Bryant) proposed "'The Speculative Turn', as a deliberate counterpoint to the now tiresome 'Linguistic Turn'" (Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman 2011, 1). Although this term quickly gave way to the broader concept of a "New Materialism," the paradigm represents a return with a vengeance of the realist philosophical tradition over-and-against the relativistic rhetorical tradition which informed the linguistic twists and turns of the postmodern Third Sophistic.

Latour's critics among the New Materialists, particularly the speculative realists, have read his corpus as perpetuating anti-scientific, rhetorical relativism. For instance, Brassier critiques Latour's "dissolution of the distinction between logic and rhetoric" (Brassier 2011, f.n. 12). He charges Latour and his irreducible ilk with sophistry as well as correlationism:

The distinction between philosopher and sophist is already precarious. And it is precisely the sophist who knows how to stave off his own philosophical identification as an imitator of wisdom by denying the possibility of distinguishing between the true and the false, essence, and appearance, philosophy and sophistry. (Brassier 2013, 177)

Harman is likewise aware of philosophy's complex entanglement with rhetoric, claiming that "[r]hetoric is the art of the background" and that "philosophy is... the science of the background" (Harman 2012, 18). And Meillassoux puts their connection most ominously: "Philosophy is the invention of strange forms of argumentation, necessarily bordering on sophistry, which remains its dark structural double" (Meillassoux 2008, 76). The New Materialism of the speculative realists and others amounts to a reversal of the sophistic humanization of philosophy. This seems to follow Karl Popper's advice to go "back to the Pre-Socratics" and their cosmos-centered philosophizing (Popper 1958, 1-7). I suggest that New Materialism amounts to a retrieval of the philosophical tradition's original demythologizing and de-anthropocentric project (especially as exhibited by the Ionian

presocratic philosophers).

The presocratic philosophers of the Ionian school (Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, and—arguably—Xenophanes) nurtured an anti-traditional tradition, encouraging not deference to doctrine (as with the Pythagorean school) but instead applauding critique, debate, and disagreement with one's teachers (Popper 1958, 20). Unlike the more mystical Pythagoreans, the monist materialists of the Ionian school emphasized that the *arche* (the basic metaphysical principle or substance underlying all reality) is *only* matter (McInerny 1963, 18). Of course, as Aristotle records, the precise mode of that matter was up for debate among the Ionians, and each of the four classical elements (earth, wind, fire, and water) was in turn, considered for the status of *arche* (Curd 2011, 15). Thales, one of the Seven Sages of ancient Greece and (traditionally) the first of the natural philosophers, proposed water as the fluid principle of origination, preservation, and motion of all things: all of nature flows like the seas (Curd 2011, 15; McInerny 1963, 18). Later, Anaximenes (who studied under Thales' student Anaximander) posited air as the basic metaphysical element or *arche* (Curd 2011, 31). Proposing that density is the spectrum by which to measure the differences in reality, Anaximenes suggested that air formed all other physical elements (earth, water, fire, etc.) by *condensing* to a greater or lesser degree (Curd 2011, 19-20). Elsewhere in Ionia, the philosophical poet Xenophanes waged a demythologizing campaign against the “anthropomorphic and anthropocentric” tendencies of Greek religious culture (Curd and Graham 2008, 136, 149). In so doing, he proposed yet a third material mode of the *arche*, stressing soil as the fundamental “ground” of the cosmos: “For all things are from the earth and all return to the earth in the end” (Curd 2011, 35). According to Curd and Graham, in Xenophanes' examination of natural phenomena, he “did not limit himself to a purely phenomenological reduction...he provided a comprehensive speculative theory” (Curd and Graham, 137). The ancient materialists and the New Materialists share not only a propensity for naturalistic demythologization and metaphysical speculation, but also for a deanthropocentrizing realism: neither school is as interested in manipulating human lifeworlds as in speculating about the world's life beyond the merely human.

***Kairos*: Bruno Latour's Timely Shifts and Opportune Alliances**

Finally, the time has come to examine *kairos*, the rhetorical tradition's virtue of sensing a persuasive opportunity. The rhetorician Isocrates highlighted the persuasive significance of *kairos*, claiming that the “opportune moment must be chosen for a particular treatment of a theme” (Isocrates 1929, 335-36). On occasion, rhetors and rhetoricians (e.g., Aristotle, Cicero, and Augustine) have found it necessary to highlight their philosophical dimensions over their oratorical backgrounds. One branch of the philosophical tradition has responded to such shifts not by rejecting rhetorical discourse per se, but by sublating the purpose and practice of rhetorical language in the direction of realism (Cicero 1949, I.xxxi.51; II.iii.9-10; Augustine 1999, IV.ii; IV.vi; Kimball 1986, 27). I propose that such *kairotic* moves find a contemporary parallel in the career of Bruno Latour, whose work straddles the (de)constructivist rhetorical school and the New Materialist philosophical school.

The later (i.e., 21st century) Latour has worried that his earlier research has aided and abetted a postmodern propensity for conspiracy theories, pseudo-science, and ultimately anti-scientific skepticism:

While we spent years trying to detect the real prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements, do we now have to reveal the real objective and incontrovertible facts hidden behind the *illusion* of prejudices? And yet entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated,



unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives. Was I wrong to participate in the invention of this field known as science studies? Is it enough to say that we did not really mean what we said? ...what were we really after when we were so intent on showing the social construction of scientific facts?" (Latour 2004, 227)

As Latour reminds his readership, "The question was never to get away from the facts but closer to them" (Latour 2004, 231). Such a shift in Latour's persuasive tactics in light of his audience's changing social situation can only be regarded as displaying the timely wisdom of rhetorical *kairos*. Latour is careful to note, "This does not mean...that we were wrong, but simply that history changes quickly and that there is no greater intellectual crime than to address with the equipment of an older period the challenges of the present one" (Latour 2004, 231).

Thus, Latour has not changed his mind so much as his focus from relativism to realism. After all, even in his earlier work, Latour challenged the easy relativism that characterizes (or perhaps only caricatures) the postmodernists of the linguistically-turned Third Sophistic: in the 1980s, he wrote: "If all discourse appears to be equivalent, if there seem to be 'language games' and nothing more, then someone has been unconvincing" (Latour 1988, 69). Elsewhere, he noted that, "When we are dealing with science and technology it is hard to imagine for long that we are... a discourse that is speaking all by itself, a play of signifiers without signifieds" (Latour 1993, 64).³

However, instead of utterly rejecting rhetoric for a philosophical reason (as Brassier counsels), Latour re-describes "Reason and Rhetoric" as two separate modes of existence, "two forms of veridiction, each of which misunderstands the other by translating it into its own terms" (Latour 2013, 136). In his irreducible ontology, he renders rhetoric in the mode of "Politics" [POL], which is practical and performative "circular" talk, and he renders reason (philosophical or otherwise) in the mode of "Double-Click" [DC], which is (the pipe dream of) purely informative "straight" talk (Latour 2013, 132-4). By interpreting rationalistic philosophy and political rhetoric as two of fifteen unique modes of existence, Latour proposes that the respective veracity of each discourse is accountable only to its own internally-developed discursive criteria. Thus, Latour sees some moments as calling for relativism, and others calling for realism (Latour 1987, 99).⁴ Therefore, it seems as though Latour might reject the possibility of describing his entire intellectual project as a hybrid "philosophical rhetoric," because he views rational philosophy and political rhetoric as distinct, irreducible modes of being.

However, I argue that Latour might ultimately agree with such a hybrid characterization of his project: by describing the act of persuasion as the fundamental activity of every actor (human and nonhuman) toward other actors, Latour effectively *ontologizes* rhetoric as his root metaphysical metaphor. Latour's actor-network theory portrays all actors (both human subjects and nonhuman objects) as exhibiting rhetorical power-plays: not only do actors build rhizomatic connections with other actors and mediate

³ He elaborates that "rhetoric... changed its meaning entirely when it had truth and proof to absorb instead of conviction and seduction... It is hard to reduce the entire cosmos to a grand narrative, the physics of subatomic particles to a text, subway systems to rhetorical devices, all social structures to discourse" (Latour 1993, 64).

⁴ Latour stresses that he is not talking *merely* about politics, power structures, or rhetorical discourse, but actually also referring to things-in-themselves: his project examines (or enacts) a "simultaneous impact on the nature of things and on the social context, while it is not reducible to the one or the other" (Latour 1993, 5).

“translate” existence between them, but they actively create reality-as-relations by exerting persuasive power on one another. Reality is the reified net effect of the transformations caused by communication between actors seeking allies for their own projects (Latour 1988, 167; Latour 2005, 129). For Latour, it is precisely the concrete relations between these actors which constitute the length and breadth of reality, and the actors which can persuade others to rally as allies in pursuit of goals must be considered more real. The ontological resistance rallied by such projects allows Latour to be read as a certain type of realist, assuming an independent reality which transcends the lifeworld of the individual actor (Latour 1988, 159).

Yet I argue that Latour does not thereby oppose the linguistic (or “rhetorical”) turn, but he actually deepens and widens its implications (that communication is inherently performative and formative) beyond the human world to the world of nonhuman objects. Commenting on the Third Sophistic’s problematic “tendency to privilege language,” Latour laments that figures such as Lacan, Barthes, and Foucault attempted to “reduce all other forces to the signifier”; however, he stresses that language should not be privileged above all other kinds of actants populating the cosmos: “Everything that is said of the signifier is right, but it must also be said of every other kind of entelechy” (Latour 1988, 184-5). Inverting J.L. Austin, Latour demonstrates “How to do words with things,” and he drives the force of rhetoric deeper than the anthropic world of verbal language down to the tectonic fluctuations of his polymodal metaphysics (Latour 1991, 1). By turning the persuasive force of inter-actor communication into a metaphysical principle, I claim that Latour ontologizes rhetoric.

Latour’s strange position between relativism and realism recalls and radicalizes the hybrid discourse of philosophical rhetoric embodied by Aristotle, Cicero, and Augustine. This stance reinforces his search for a *via media* – “a good balance” – between relativism and realism, and it is in line with his exploration of hybridizations between nature and culture (Latour 1987, 100; Latour 1993, 30). Latour laments modernity’s false dichotomies: “[D]o we have to pretend that everything is rhetorical, or that everything is natural, or that everything is socially constructed?” (Latour 1993, 89-90). I interpret this posture as *philosophical rhetoric*, an alliance between the realist philosophical and the relativist rhetorical traditions (Kennedy 1999, 14-15). Latour may be speaking out of both sides of his mouth like the two-faced god Janus, but perhaps that is because reality itself is always speaking—or perhaps *being spoken*—in two rhetorical languages: the human and the beyond-human.

Conclusion

The 21st century has witnessed a resurgence of metaphysical materialism and epistemological realism, albeit severely chastened by two centuries of continental philosophy which has stressed how deeply the lifeworld of appearances is conditioned by *a priori* structures of thought and language. However, several of the leading philosophers of this New Materialist wave have explicitly posited a distinction between their own projects and prior generations of such idealist, phenomenological, and post-structuralist philosophers whom they associate more with the rhetorical tricks of ancient sophists than with the presocratic speculations of the ancient Ionian materialists. However, Bruno Latour has rejected such positioning as a false dichotomy. His own speculated framework of reality is one in which the human practice of rhetorical persuasion is simply the most visible (or audible) example of how all types of actors (from cancerous cells to cosmic radiation) inform and transform each other within networks of concrete communication. The postmodern insights into the relation between power and discourse remain true, but not because signification and the thought-world which it conditions transcend and supervene upon material bodies; rather, signification (which enables persuasion) is one more aspect by which

entities can relate to one another. And because such networked relationships condition or even constitute the identities of the actors involved, any realist account of the facts will functionally be relativist – not only because of the contextual situatedness of the knowing subject but also because of the contextual situatedness of the knowable object. So, when global material conditions changed later in Latour's life (after spending the height of his career undermining the easy certainties of the technocratic end of history in the eighties and nineties), he responded to compounding ecological, economic, and epidemiological crises not by fanning the flames of anti-scientific skepticism but by shifting epistemological tactics. Emphasizing that one's truth procedures must be sophisticated even if they are inescapably sophistic, Latour changed sides in the realism-relativism debate—or rather, he turned a one-sided truth around to reveal its other side. After all, philosophy and rhetoric have never been two isolated ways of thought, but they have instead weaved and crisscrossed throughout intellectual history. And from time to time, one must re-route simply to remain true to one's path.

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