

Thomas S. Kuhn and POROI, 1984

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On March 28, 1984, Thomas S. Kuhn presented a paper titled “Rhetoric and Liberation” at the University of Iowa Humanities Symposium on the Rhetoric of the Human Sciences. Kuhn’s paper was a ten-page response to a panel featuring papers by Richard Rorty (1989), Philip J. Davis and Reuben Hersh (1987), and the symposium organizers, John S. Nelson, Allan Megill, and D. N. McCloskey (1987). Kuhn regarded the paper as a draft, and it was marked as such with the notation, “Not for quotation or paraphrase” on the first page. As a result, though the paper has been available in the Kuhn collection held by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Institute Archives and Special Collections, it has never been published.¹

Kuhn’s “Rhetoric and Liberation” adds to the historical record of an important moment in rhetorical and humanistic scholarship. The Iowa Symposium in 1984 signaled the start of the Project on Rhetoric of Inquiry (POROI). The Symposium was an unprecedented gathering of scholars from a variety of disciplines and produced the important book, *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Argument in Scholarship and Public Affairs* (Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey, 1987). The scope of the three papers to which Kuhn responded was quite broad. Rorty’s paper argued that solidarity rather than “objectivity” should be understood as the goal of intellectual inquiry (Rorty, 1989). Davis and Hersh produced what would become a canonical paper on “Rhetoric and Mathematics” (1987). The presentation by Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey was an expansive view of “Rhetoric of Inquiry” (1987). Collectively, the papers represent the ambitions and enthusiasm associated with the “Rhetoric of Science” (Gross,

¹ Copies of Kuhn’s paper are filed in at least three locations in the MIT Kuhn Archive (MC 240): “Publications” in Box 23, folder 20; Letter exchange with Richard Rorty in Box 22, folder 14; and folders associated with the Iowa Conference in Box 13, folders 9 & 14. One copy in Box 13 has minor corrections marked presumably by Kuhn himself.

1990, 1996), “Big Rhetoric” (Gross and Keith, 1997; Schiappa, 2001), and the “Rhetorical Turn” (Simons, 1990).²

Kuhn initially agreed to the publication of “Rhetoric and Liberation” as part of the book planned by Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey. However, the paper presented by Rorty, “Objectivity or Solidarity,” had been committed for publication elsewhere and could not be included in the book featuring the Iowa Symposium. Instead, Rorty and the book’s editors agreed to substitute “Science as Solidarity” for the volume. Though the arguments in the two Rorty papers overlapped to a certain degree, Kuhn felt that the differences were large enough to require greater revision to his response than he had time to do. Accordingly, he withdrew his paper from the book. It has remained unpublished until now.³

Kuhn’s paper will be of interest to philosophers, historians, language theorists, and scholars of rhetoric. “Rhetoric and Liberation” reflects the unease Kuhn felt with being identified as an inspiration to those who equate the rhetorical turn with liberation in Rorty’s sense. At the same time it gestures toward an understanding of scientific and mathematical language that is rhetorical through and through.

It is hoped that the publication of Kuhn’s “Rhetoric and Liberation” facilitates the work of scholars interested in the historical development of rhetorical scholarship on inquiry, as well as those interested in exploring Kuhn’s incomplete project on scientific language and rationality.⁴

² Arguably, the roots of the “rhetorical turn” can be traced to Kenneth Burke and Chaïm Perelman, whose works were described as representing a “New Rhetoric” that was influential in English, Philosophy, and Communication Studies beginning in the 1950s. Burke and Perelman largely exempted science from their descriptions of rhetoric, but after the publication of Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in 1962, a growing number of rhetoric scholars began to explore the idea that all human knowledge is rhetorically constituted, including scientific knowledge.

³ The narrative provided in this paragraph was constructed based on letters by Kuhn, Rorty, and Nelson found in the Thomas S. Kuhn papers, MC 240, box 13, folder 9, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Institute Archives and Special Collections, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

⁴ At various times in the 1980s and 1990s, Kuhn refers to a book in progress that he hoped would update and develop his views on scientific language, realism, and truth (see, for example, Kuhn, 1991). That book was never completed.

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