

# TWO PHILOSOPHIES OF THE RHETORIC OF ECONOMICS

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## INTRODUCTION

As introduced to the metatheoretical study of economics, the idea of rhetoric has not been, and cannot be, philosophically innocuous. The rhetoric of scientific inquiry necessarily involves philosophical preconceptions of things such as language, knowledge, and human nature. This means that we should take seriously a piece of advice given by a classical figure in the modern resurgence of the study of rhetoric: as I. A. Richards put it, the inquiry into 'how words work', that is, rhetoric, has to be philosophic, that is, 'it must take charge of the criticism of its own assumptions' (Richards 1936: 23). This chapter is an attempt to take partial care of this charge. The focus is on rival conceptions of knowledge, and in particular of truth and justification, in our understanding of economic rhetoric.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, two philosophies of the rhetoric of economics are distinguished, the non-realist and the realist. Donald McCloskey, Arjo Klamer, and others have been inclined towards some kind of non-realist pragmatism in their rejection of the relevance of the realist notion of truth and reality. They are not alone in this, on the contrary, they share a strong intellectual current with many others in a variety of fields. As Alan Gross puts it in his book on the rhetoric of natural sciences: 'We live in an intellectual climate in which the reality of quarks or gravitational lenses is arguably a matter of persuasion; such a climate is a natural environment for the revival of rhetoric that has as its field of analysis the claims to knowledge that science makes' (Gross 1990: 4). Such an anti-realist climate may be suitable for the revival of the study of rhetoric, but I argue that it should not be concluded that rhetoric is inseparably linked to anti-realism. Realist rhetoric is a viable option. We do not have to think that the *reality* of quarks and gravitational lenses is a matter of rhetorical persuasion even if we think that our *belief* in their reality is.

According to my interpretation of the position of McCloskey and those

who agree with him, rhetorical persuasion is an activity directed towards raising (or, alternatively, lowering) the degree of *plausibility* of an economic theory or a statement about such a theory. The realist alternative is to view rhetorical persuasion, in addition, as an attempt to discover and communicate *truths* about the economy which has an objective existence. Whereas plausibility is a pragmatic notion with a coherentist bent, truth in the realist sense is a semantico-ontological notion. Realists are willing to incorporate the notion of plausibility in their epistemology, but not in their semantics and ontology. The non-realist pragmatist tends to conflate these fields and thereby also the notions of plausibility and truth. The realist insists on keeping them separate: while truth is an objective property of statements that can be discovered, plausibility is a subjective property which is subject to creation and re-creation. We can conceive of rhetoric as constitutive of scientific justification and discovery, rather than as constituting the nature of truth.

Holding these old-fashioned distinctions, this chapter argues *against the monopoly of the non-realist understanding of the rhetoric of economics*. It is a popular misunderstanding of the nature of rhetoric to hold that rhetoric and realism are mutually exclusive. I believe that the rebuttal of this view makes the notion of economics or science in general as having a rhetorical character more plausible than is the case at present.

The following four are the major suggestions of this chapter. First, the notion of rhetorical persuasion is analysed in terms of belief, coherence, and plausibility. It is then suggested that the acknowledgement of rhetoric as at least partly constituting scientific rationality leads to a subscription to a coherence theory of justification. Second, it is suggested that some of the fundamental presuppositions of the reigning philosophy of the rhetoric of economics can also be analysed in terms of plausibility and coherence, and that, so analysed, they amount to a version of the coherence theory of truth. Third, it is argued that there is a possibility of developing a rival philosophy of rhetoric, which subscribes to a coherence theory of *justification* without committing itself to an antirealist coherence theory of *truth*. With this alternative philosophy of rhetoric, the notions of plausibility and coherence are retained as part of an epistemological theory of discovery and justification without, however, according them a status in the definition of the nature of truth. This realist philosophy of rhetoric contains a correspondence concept of truth. Fourth, two immanent criticisms are provided against McCloskey's antirealist coherentism. I argue that his views of what economists *do* suffer from serious 'thinness', which violates his own claims of the virtues of 'thickness'. In addition, as suggested earlier (Mäki 1988a: 107–8), I presume that breaking the monopoly position of antirealist rhetoric would lead to an improvement in the rhetorical persuasiveness of the rhetorical approach to studying economics: provided with a choice between more than one narrow and fully packaged philosophical option, a larger

number of economists and others would be prepared to take the idea of economics having a rhetorical dimension more seriously than currently appears to be the case.

### RHETORIC AND ARGUMENT

'Rhetoric' is a multiply ambiguous term. In the present context it seems sufficient and appropriate to characterize its meaning in terms of two other notions, viz., those of persuasion and argument. A minimal account of rhetoric in these terms suggests that rhetoric consists in using arguments to persuade an audience. This is, of course, very much in the spirit of the New Rhetoric. Four elements or aspects of rhetoric, sufficient for our purposes, can be listed:

- (i) Persuader (speaker, writer);
- (ii) Persuadee (listener, reader);
- (iii) The aim of the persuader to persuade the persuadee;
- (iv) Argument as the means to attain the aim.

The latter two elements require a little bit more attention. Let us first look at (iii). Part of the contents of the notion of persuasion can be analysed in terms of *belief*. Persuasion is a matter of influencing the persuadee's beliefs. More precisely, the aim of the persuader is to bring it about that the intensity of the persuadee's belief in a statement (say,  $C$ ) increases. (Very intuitively, intensity may be conceived as a metric attribute with its value ranging from  $-1$  to  $0$  to  $1$ , i.e., from maximal disbelief to total indifference to maximal belief).

Sometimes the concept of persuasion is formulated in terms other than belief, such as *acceptance of*, or *adherence to*, a statement (e.g. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969). There is a difference between these formulations, since acceptance or adherence to  $C$  by a person does not imply belief in  $C$  by that person.<sup>2</sup> 'Belief in  $C$ ' means 'belief that  $C$  is true', while  $C$  can be accepted or adhered to without believing that it is true (cf. Mäki 1989). Yet, I suggest that the notion of persuasion is best understood as involving that of belief. This option appears to be very flexible in that it is capable of encompassing the notions of acceptance and adherence. This is because mere acceptance of or adherence to  $C$  (say, rational expectations macro-economic theory) implies belief in one or another meta-level statement  $C^m$  of the kind, ' $C$  is a good predictor', ' $C$  is useful', ' $C$  is fashionable', 'basing one's inquiries on  $C$  is a prerequisite for successfully pursuing a career in this academic field', or the like. The intensification of the persuadee's belief in either  $C$  or  $C^m$  may be the goal of rhetorical persuasion. In the latter case, the intensification of the persuadee's *belief* in  $C^m$  is accompanied by the intensification of the persuadee's *adherence* to  $C$  as a desired product of

persuasion. In such a case, the truth of  $C$  is not at stake at all. It is the belief in the truth of  $C^m$  that matters.

The distinctions between belief and acceptance and between statements and statements about statements is important, since they enable us to remain neutral about whether economists actually believe economic theories to be true or are persuaded to believe so. An economist accepting a  $C$  (say, the expected utility postulate or the natural rate hypothesis) may believe in it, but if she does not, she nevertheless probably believes in a meta-level statement  $C^m$  (say, that the expected utility postulate is a convenient vehicle which is able to bring about a degree of logical unification in our studies of human behaviour and its consequences).

Let us then clarify (iv), which serves as a key notion in the subsequent discussion. An argument can be understood, in the ordinary fashion, as consisting of a conclusion and a set of premises which are supposed to have some bearing on the conclusion. Let us designate the set of premises by  $P$ , the conclusion by  $C$  (or  $C^m$ ), and their relationship by  $R$ . It is a characteristic feature of a rhetorical argument that it is used by a persuader to bring about an intensification of a persuadee's belief in  $C$  (or  $C^m$ ) by invoking  $P$  of which the persuader assumes that the persuadee believes in or adheres to (and, in the latter case, thereby believes in some meta-level statement  $P^m$ ), and by connecting the two by  $R$  of which the persuader assumes that the persuadee accepts or finds appealing.

It should be clear that no syntactic and semantic analysis of rhetorical arguments suffices to spell out their nature. Rhetorical arguments are essentially pragmatic. They have to be understood in terms of the weak social context characterized by elements (i)–(iii). Rhetoric is a matter of using arguments to persuade an audience.

Now that we are in possession of a relatively clear conception of the simplest elements in the structure of rhetorical persuasion, we can relate it to two other notions that will be used in my formulation of the two philosophies of economic rhetoric. They are the concepts of plausibility and coherence.

### PLAUSIBILITY, COHERENCE, AND JUSTIFICATION

The concept of rhetorical persuasion was characterized above in terms of belief. A belief is a property predicable of human beings in their relation to statements. Human beings have beliefs in the truth of statements. For our purposes, we need a related predicate that can be applied to statements directly. *Plausibility* serves as such a predicate. Statements are more or less plausible. Plausibility is a property predicable of statements in their relation to human beings. This brings out the first sense in which plausibility is a relational (instead of intrinsic) property of statements: *a statement is plausible if a person or a group of persons believes in it*. There is a second

sense in which plausibility is relational: *the plausibility of a statement is conferred upon it by other statements (or, in general, representations) which bear a certain relation to it.* Plausibility is evidently an epistemic and pragmatic notion. Like belief, it comes in degrees.<sup>3</sup>

It can now be easily seen how the notion of plausibility relates to that of rhetorical persuasion. The only thing we have to add to the above account is another agent, the persuader. Then, in the above two italicized sentences, we interpret 'a person or a group of persons' having beliefs as the persuadee; 'a statement' being or becoming believed as the conclusion *C* of a rhetorical argument; 'other statements' as the premises *P* of a rhetorical argument; and 'a certain relation' that *P* bears to *C* as the argument relation *R*. Rhetorical persuasion can now be reconceptualized as *the transference of plausibility by means of arguments.* The persuadee finds *P* plausible, and the persuader makes it that the plausibility (relative to the persuadee) of *P* is transferred to *C*.

The concept of *coherence* fits neatly into this picture. Coherence is a property that characterizes the relation *R* between *P* and *C*. The concept of coherence can be understood narrowly or widely. At one end of the spectrum it is reduced to deductive validity. At the other extreme, an entirely unconstrained rhetorical notion of coherence may be adopted: *P* and *C* cohere (relative to a persuadee), if the persuadee regards *P* as bearing upon *C*.

A rhetorical argument connects a conclusion (the statement that the persuadee is persuaded to believe) to a set of premises (which the persuadee is supposed to believe) so that the conclusion coheres with the premises. The premises have been chosen such that they are believed by the persuadee, that is, are found plausible by him or her. This belief is transferred to the conclusion by presenting an argument. This rhetorical act raises the plausibility of the conclusion relative to the persuadee. The relationship between coherence and plausibility in a rhetorical argument then is this: the increase in the plausibility of the conclusion is worked through the coherence between the conclusion and the premises.

We have now collected all the necessary ingredients for formulating what may be called the *coherence theory of justification.* Negatively speaking, it runs counter to any foundationalist theories of justification which postulate a self-justified (privileged or given or incorrigible, perceptual or a priori) epistemic foundation which confers justification on the rest of the edifice of human knowledge. More positively, let us formulate the following account of the message of the coherence theory of justification.

- (1) All beliefs or statements are justified by their relations to other beliefs or statements with which they cohere.

The coherence theory of justification implies that no set of beliefs can constitute a self-justified epistemic foundation for further justifications or

a foundation which is justified by recourse to something beyond other beliefs. From another angle, the justification of a statement is a matter of raising the degree of its plausibility by relating it to a set of other statements or representations.

There are several versions of the coherence theory of justification, based on different specifications of what coherence amounts to (i.e., specifications of permissible forms of  $R$ ) and on alternative constraints imposed on the set of relevant beliefs that are taken to count in justification (i.e., constraints on the set  $P$ ). Not all relations will do as coherent and not any beliefs will do as the basis of justification. In our terminology, the alternative specified versions can be regarded as *theories of the nature and sources of plausibility*: each of them suggests that it is coherence of a certain sort with beliefs of a certain sort that constitutes plausibility.

It should be obvious that those who advocate the idea that rhetorical persuasion is a real and rational aspect of economics thereby subscribe to some version of the coherence theory of justification. Indeed, this is a shared epistemological element in the two philosophies of rhetoric, the realist and the non-realist. There may be major differences between the advocates of the rhetoric of economic inquiry regarding the proper constraints placed upon  $P$  and  $R$ , but before such differences can reasonably be discussed, we have to take a look at the fundamentals and see where our ways begin to part. We have to enter the conundrums of truth. While the realist and the non-realist philosophies of economic rhetoric share a general view of justification, they contain different concepts of truth.

### CONCEPTIONS OF TRUTH

We are not interested here in the criteria of truth or the means by which we may try to pursue truth or the like. They are matters of discovery and justification. Instead, we are interested in the very concept of truth. What does truth consist of? What do we mean when we say or conjecture that a statement is true or false?

It suffices to formulate two conceptions of truth. The first is a realist conception, while the second is a non-realist one. I characterize both in an abstract and parsimonious fashion so as to make room for different specifications and qualifications which lead to more concrete versions. A minimal account of *the correspondence theory of truth* is a traditional ingredient in realism.

- (2) The truth of a statement  $S$  consists in its correspondence with objective (i.e.,  $S$ -independent) reality.

This is the traditional idea which is more or less in line with people's common-sense intuitions about truth. With the correspondence notion, the truth of a statement is supposed to be something objective, independent

of our beliefs in it and justifications for it. A statement is true or false by virtue of the way the world is, objectively. The concept of truth is here non-pragmatic and non-epistemic. The above formulation is parsimonious in that it keeps silent about how *reality* is to be characterized (it may be variously thought of as consisting of facts, states of affairs, ordered sets of particulars, and so on) and how the relation of *correspondence* is specified (such as in terms of isomorphism or the causal theory of reference, and so on). Several alternatives are possible and I recommend we ultimately make our choice out of available options or create our own version subject to two constraints: first, our understanding of the character of economics and the economy, and second, existing philosophical arguments for and against various versions of the correspondence notion. For the purposes of the present analysis the minimal formulation (2) is sufficient, however.

There are several alternative non-realist conceptions of truth. In our context the relevant option is the coherence notion. A minimal formulation of *the coherence account of truth* is as follows.

- (3) The truth of a statement consists in its coherence with a certain system or set of beliefs or statements.

In general, any coherence theory of truth is an account of the concept of truth, that is, it is a theory of the nature of truth (see, for example, Walker 1989; Rescher 1973; Vision 1988). In the terminology introduced earlier, the coherence theory of truth conflates truth with plausibility. For an advocate of (3), truth simply *is* plausibility of some sort and degree. As with coherence theories of justification, various specific versions of this general idea can be obtained by imposing constraints on the set of *beliefs* that are included in the system and by specifying what *coherence* amounts to. In any case, all such versions provide non-realist accounts of the concept of truth. They are non-realist because in them truth reduces to syntactic and pragmatic characteristics of statements.

Another non-realist line in regard to the concept of truth is to deny truth's existence or at least to deny the relevance of the concept altogether. In the context of the literature on the rhetoric of economics, this line has been represented by Resnick and Wolff with their radically instrumentalist conception of economic theory. They think their view is an implication of the idea of 'overdetermination'.

Theories are not determined by *either* certain facts *or* certain principles of reasoning, but rather by both of these and beyond them by each and every other aspect of society. . . . Theories are stories people tell as one way to cope with their environments alongside other ways, such as housing they build, love relations they enter, and political systems they invent. Each of these is likewise overdetermined by everything else. As it makes no sense to ask which kind of housing,

love, or politics is true, so it makes no sense to ask that of theories either. The truth or falsity of alternative theories is a nonissue. . . .

(Resnick and Wolff 1988: 52)

Much of what I say in what follows is relevant also with respect to such an instrumentalist denunciation of truth, but I do not deal with it explicitly. I concentrate on the two positions which contain, at least implicitly, an idea of the nature of truth and retain the term as a legitimate item in their vocabularies, namely those that contain either (2) or (3). I begin with the vigorously marketed non-realist option, using McCloskey's writing as my main reference.

### **ELEMENTS OF A NON-REALIST PHILOSOPHY OF ECONOMIC RHETORIC**

It goes without saying that McCloskey subscribes to a coherence theory of justification. His account of the grounds that economists have actually had for accepting the law of demand serves as an illustration. Here is his list of these grounds: 'certain very sophisticated statistical tests of the law applied to entire economies'; statistical tests performed 'market by market'; 'experimental tests'; 'introspection'; 'thought experiments'; 'cases in point'; 'the lore of the market place'; 'the lore of the academy'; 'the symmetry of the law'; 'mere definition'; and, 'above all, there is analogy'. He argues that 'These are all good reasons for believing the Law of Demand, but only the first three are scientific by the dichotomous definition of modernism. The other eight are artistic and literary' (McCloskey 1985: 58-60). Whether or not we wish to agree on McCloskey's characterization of economists' reasons as 'artistic and literary', it is clear that, since (a) none of those reasons cites an allegedly self-justified epistemic item and since (b) those reasons are regarded by McCloskey as 'good', then (c) he subscribes to a coherence theory of justification.

It also seems clear that McCloskey takes a step further. He appears to think that coherence not only constitutes plausibility, but that it also either (i) constitutes truth or that it (ii) demolishes any sensible notion of truth altogether. McCloskey is not at all ashamed of using the terminology of veracity, even though he is against what he calls 'Truth'. He believes that in addition to the illegitimate notion(s) of Truth, there is a legitimate notion (or many such notions) of truth. There is a serious problem with this uncontrolled manifold of concepts of truth, but this is not our concern here. McCloskey on his part believes that:

There is a problem with Truth. The problem is not with lowercase truth, which gives answers to questions arising now in human conversations, requiring no access to the mind of God: On a Fahrenheit scale, what is the temperature in Iowa City this afternoon? . . . You



and I can answer such questions, improving our answers in shared discourse. The problem comes when trying to vault into a higher realm, asking whether such and such a methodology will lead ultimately to the end of the conversation, to the final Truth . . . Questions such as 'What will economics look like once it is finished?' are not answerable on this side of the Last Judgement.

(McCloskey 1988c: 248)

I do not intend to engage in a comprehensive analysis of this passage. I discuss the several notions of truth in McCloskey elsewhere (Mäki 1991c). Here I focus on the meaning of 'truth' (with lowercase t) which is characterized by McCloskey in epistemic and pragmatic terms, that is, in terms of beliefs, questions, answers, and conversation. He appears to hold a version of the coherence theory of truth.

- (4) The truth of a statement consists in its coherence with a certain set of beliefs that humans end up within an ongoing conversation before the ideal limit of all inquiry and conversation.

It is clear that (4) contradicts (2). It runs counter to any correspondence notion of truth, since it makes truth epistemic, that is, dependent on beliefs and arguments in a conversation. It is also something that is essentially attainable.

There are other passages which might appear to suggest that the concept of truth is to be replaced by something else.

The very idea of Truth – with a capital T, something beyond what is merely persuasive to all concerned – is a fifth wheel, inoperative except that it occasionally comes loose and hits a bystander. If we decide that the quantity theory of money or the marginal productivity theory of distribution is persuasive, interesting, useful, reasonable, appealing, acceptable, we do not also need to know that it is True. Its persuasiveness, interest, usefulness, and so forth come from particular arguments: 'Marginal productivity theory, for one thing, is a consequence of rationality in the hiring of inputs' (and we think highly of rationality). 'The quantity equation, for one thing, is a simple framework for macroeconomics' (and we think highly of simplicity).

(McCloskey 1985: 46–7)

This passage is revealing in many ways. First, I cannot resist remarking in passing that the passage involves distorting rhetoric on McCloskey's part. He argues that 'we do not also need to know that [the theory] is True', but whom is he arguing against? Few sensible scholars nowadays think that we should *know* that a theory is 'True' in order to be entitled to be persuaded, but many people think that we should *have reasons to believe* that a theory is 'True' (e.g., in the sense of (2)) to accept it. Second,

at the end of the passage McCloskey gives two examples of rhetorical arguments which, he suggests, legitimately serve to raise the degree of the plausibility of marginal productivity theory and the quantity equation, respectively. This implies a subscription to a coherence theory of justification.

Third, and most importantly, the characterization of the concept of Truth in the above passage is illuminating. Truth, McCloskey says, is 'something beyond what is merely persuasive to all concerned'. Now there are many concepts of truth that depict truth as having this feature. The correspondence notion is one of them. Thus, truth (and Truth) in the sense of (2) is to be considered a 'fifth wheel'. The correspondence notion is a persuasiveness-independent and plausibility-independent notion of truth.

It follows that McCloskey is not a realist about truth. This is not a trivial point, since in response to my earlier argument to the effect that, in order to avoid inconsistencies, he had better accept some kind(s) of realism (Mäki 1988a), McCloskey 'declared openly' that he is a realist: 'I am a realist.' (McCloskey 1988a, p. 153). As I tried to show then and as I have tried to argue here, McCloskey is not (yet) a realist, at least as regards the notion of truth.

I said that McCloskey (i) either offers us a coherence notion of truth: truth is 'persuasiveness to all concerned', or (ii) replaces all notions of truth by the notion of 'persuasiveness to all concerned'. The first option would seem more plausible, given his frequent non-pejorative use of 'true'. What is his theory of a usable concept of truth, then? I suggest the following formulation comes close to capturing what is implicit in McCloskey:

- (4) The truth (with small t) of a statement consists in its coherence with a certain set of beliefs that humans end up with in an ongoing conversation before the ideal limit of all inquiry and conversation.

Can we make sense of this version? Let us begin by pointing out its character as a coherence account. As noted on page 29, according to such an account, the truth of a statement consists in its coherence with a system or set of beliefs. Versions of this account can be formulated by imposing constraints on the set of permissible beliefs included in the system and by specifying what coherence amounts to. McCloskey's version of the coherence theory is difficult to specify, since he does not explicitly give his favoured constraints on the admissible belief set and coherence connection. Again, we can do some guesswork.

We can begin by interpreting the notion of 'all concerned' in the phrase 'something beyond what is merely persuasive to all concerned'. In the passage above, it seems to refer to a group of people called 'we'. Furthermore, given that 'we think highly of rationality' and 'we think highly of simplicity', it seems permissible to guess that 'we' are something like *the*

*majority of the present economics profession.* Thus, in the case of economics, the set of beliefs held by this group of people (rather than those held by God or by the very last generation of economists) may be taken to count. For short, let 'economists now' stand for 'the majority of the present economics profession'. Sometimes McCloskey sounds like suggesting that the set of admissible beliefs is restricted to those held by *economists now*. This constitutes what may be called a *social constraint* on the set of *privileged people* whose opinions should be allowed to matter. Let us reformulate (4) by adding the social constraint in general form:

- (4<sup>s</sup>) The truth (with a small t) of a statement consists in its coherence with a certain set of beliefs that a privileged set of humans end up with in an ongoing conversation before the ideal limit of all inquiry and conversation.

We may then ask whether the social constraint sets the necessary and sufficient conditions for the inclusions and exclusions of *economists now*, the privileged set of people. If the conditions were taken as necessary, it would follow that we would have to take economists' beliefs as given: nothing that is not found plausible by *economists now* could be true in the sense of (4<sup>s</sup>). If, on the other hand, they are regarded as sufficient, it would follow that everything that is found plausible by *economists now* is true in the sense of (4<sup>s</sup>). These postulations would, perhaps, serve a theoretical conservative like McCloskey, and sometimes he does appear to hold them.

Consider an example: 'We believe and act on what persuades us – not what persuades a majority of a *badly chosen* jury, but what persuades *well-educated* participants in the conversations of our civilization and of our field. To attempt to go beyond persuasive reasoning is to let epistemology limit *reasonable* persuasion.' (1985: 46; emphasis added). It seems obvious to me that in such statements – which are not rare – McCloskey goes all the time 'beyond persuasive reasoning': he invokes social constraints to delimit the set of coherent beliefs. This implies that the last sentence of the above quotation is simply false, given his understanding of 'epistemology'. In any case, we lack grounds for the social constraints – whence the privileged class of people?

Perhaps the answer lies, at least partly, in the moral qualifications of the members of the privileged class. McCloskey cultivates the terminology of 'good reasons', 'reasonable persuasion', 'good conversation', 'good rhetoric', etc. Good rhetoric might be persuasion based on providing good reasons or arguments for accepting or rejecting a claim in a good conversation. These 'goodies' are then perhaps further analysable in terms of what he calls *Sprachethik*. Here are some of the prescriptions of *Sprachethik*: 'Don't lie; pay attention; don't sneer; cooperate; don't shout; let other people talk; be open-minded; explain yourself when asked; don't resort to violence or conspiracy in aid of your ideas. We cannot imagine good

conversation or good intellectual life deficient in these. They are the rules adopted by the act of joining a conversation . . . (McCloskey 1985: 24; 1988c: 251). Good rhetoric, then, would be persuasion observing these prescriptions. They impose what may be called a *moral constraint* on the coherent set of beliefs. The moral constraint might then be taken as providing at least partial grounds for the social constraints. We can now reformulate (4) as follows.

4<sup>m</sup> The truth (with small t) of a statement consists in its coherence with a certain set of beliefs that a privileged set of humans, obeying the canons of *Sprachethik*, end up within an ongoing conversation before the ideal limit of all inquiry and conversation.

Employing a Habermasian idiom, we may take (4<sup>m</sup>) as providing us with a notion of truth as *herrschaftsfrei* coherence. Coherence truth in this sense is maximum *herrschaftsfrei* plausibility on this side of the Last Judgement. McCloskey seems to think that it is a useful notion, but it is easy to see that it has its problems. This can be pointed out by considering the grounds for his assessment of mainstream economics.

McCloskey has used a loyalty oath to economics (more precisely, the mainstream of economics) to promote the sale of his ideas. He declares that there is nothing principally wrong with the substance of economics as it is: 'the absorption of rhetorical thinking in economics will not precipitate any revolution in the substance of economics' (McCloskey 1985: 174). The critics of mainstream economics have not hit the target, since 'Economics at present is, in fact, moderately well off.' (ibid). Let us interpret this as implying that the major ingredients of the substance of mainstream economics are true in a coherence sense. What grounds could McCloskey possibly have for holding this view? Let us make use of a comparison, employing an idea familiar to economists.

From time to time in the last two hundred years or so, economists have been accused of making unwarranted inferences from their partial and idealized theories to matters of empirical fact or practical policy. The general idea behind such criticisms has been the notion that while economic theories involve strongly idealizing and simplifying assumptions which bring about a kind of purification or perfection in the object depicted, the world of empirical facts and economic policy is 'impure' and full of complexities not captured by the theory. The model of perfect competition is a case in point. Irrespective of whether it is a good idea for theoretical purposes, the critics argue that all practical or empirical conclusions based on it alone are unwarranted, due to the inescapable imperfections of actual empirical situations.

Is McCloskey guilty of the same fallacy on the level of meta-theory? Does he infer from an idealized model of *herrschaftsfrei* conversation to the practical and empirical conclusion that mainstream economic theory is

true, given that it is the most persuasive theory? No such conclusion would be warranted, since we all find it plausible that the ideal condition of *Herrschaftsfreiheit* is not actually met in economics. The complications and imperfections of the actual situation, violating the moral constraint on coherence, should be acknowledged until any conclusions of that kind are suggested.

Perhaps we have misrepresented McCloskey's complacency about the substance of economics? Perhaps he does not mean the mainstream theory, in main outlines, to be true in the sense of *herrschaftsfrei* coherence. Perhaps the notion of truth in the sense of (4<sup>m</sup>) should not be applied descriptively at all, since some of its initial conditions, viz., what I called the moral constraints on coherence, are not fulfilled. If this is the case, we may ask whether (4<sup>m</sup>) gives us a useful concept of truth, after all. Perhaps (4<sup>m</sup>) can be taken to give us a moral imperative, but the concept of truth as *herrschaftsfrei* plausibility can be descriptively applied to nothing actual at present, perhaps ever, at least until a few seconds before the Last Judgement.

Perhaps McCloskey means that the substance of economics is true only in the sense of (4<sup>s</sup>)? Plausibility and coherence in this sense may fail to satisfy the moral constraint. They only satisfy the social constraint. McCloskey might think that the substance of economics is 'well off' in the sense that *economists now* find it plausible. It is no wonder that he is reluctant to use the term 'true' in such connections. Perhaps true in the sense of (4<sup>s</sup>) is what he means by 'right'? This would not change anything in what we have said. (4<sup>s</sup>) gives a concept of truth in the sense of the coherence theory irrespective of what we call it.

We have ended up with a very interesting situation regarding McCloskey's coherence notions of truth. First, the social constraint imposed in assessments of truth or 'rightness' in the sense of (4<sup>s</sup>) is left without theorized grounding, moral or otherwise. The door is open for rightness or plausibility or truth being conditioned by any kind of social factors, pure political power included.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, (4<sup>s</sup>) replaces the classical notion of basing knowledge upon privileged, unquestioned *epistemic* foundations by the idea of basing knowledge on privileged, unquestioned *social* foundations. We may ask whether we are much better off with McCloskey's new foundationalism than with the horrors of classical epistemological foundationalism.

The establishment of the foundations of the non-realist philosophy of economic rhetoric seems to be, as yet, an unfinished project. The same judgement applies to the realist philosophy of economic rhetoric, of which only rudimentary outlines will be given next.

## ELEMENTS FOR A REALIST PHILOSOPHY OF ECONOMIC RHETORIC

Due to our definition of 'rhetoric', anybody endorsing a realist philosophy of economic rhetoric also endorses a coherence theory of justification. A belief is justified by embedding it in a coherent system of beliefs constrained in one way or another. This implies that any realist philosophy of rhetoric is clearly non-foundationalist. There are no self-justified, privileged epistemic foundations for economic knowledge.

It also follows that the realist finds a legitimate role for the notion of plausibility in his or her epistemology. This much of the realist's views is shared by the non-realist of the preceding section. From here on their ways part. The issue is centred on the concept of truth. The realist insists on keeping the concepts of plausibility and truth separate, while the non-realist conflates the two. The realist holds a plausibility-independent idea of the nature of truth: the truth of a statement (for example, the conclusion *C* of a rhetorical argument) is independent of the rhetorical arguments given for or against it in any rhetorical situation. The statement is true or false by virtue of the way the world objectively is – objectively, that is *C*-independently, persuasiveness-independently, etc. This amounts to a correspondence notion of truth.

Truth is a relational property of statements just as plausibility is. However, they are relational in different ways. Plausibility is doubly relational in that it relates a statement to other statements and to human beings with beliefs. The relationality of plausibility is pragmatic and logical. Truth, on the other hand, is relational at least in the semantic sense: it is a matter of the relationship between linguistic items and their objects in reality (in addition, we may add human agents as mediators between language and its referents in reality).

In short, the alternative philosophy of rhetoric I am outlining here drops the coherence theory of truth but retains the coherence theory of justification and combines it with a correspondence theory of truth. It affirms the reality and rationality of rhetoric in economics, but, unlike McCloskey, it *denies that rhetorical persuasion contributes to the truth of statements. Persuasion contributes to the plausibility of statements only.* This view is *non-foundationalist* in containing the coherence theory of justification and it is *realist* in containing the correspondence theory of truth. Those who think that realism somehow entails foundationalism – and McCloskey is sometimes close to holding such a view – are simply wrong.<sup>5</sup>

Let me suggest another way of clarifying the realist view of rhetoric. It is based on a distinction between two functions or aspects of language, the rhetorical and the representational. Language serves a *rhetorical function* in that it is used for persuading audiences to intensify their beliefs. Language serves a *representational function* insofar as it is used to represent facts of the

world. From the point of view of the rhetorical aspect, linguistic expressions are to be appraised as to their persuasiveness and plausibility. From the point of view of the representational aspect of linguistic expressions, the primary interest lies in their truthfulness, in the correspondence sense, about what they represent.

Note that I am talking about 'functions' and 'aspects' of language. This implies that one and the same linguistic expression may have the rhetorical and representational functions or aspects at the same time. This should be contrasted with the idea that *some* linguistic items serve only a representational function while *some others* serve only a rhetorical function, and also with the idea that a given linguistic item may *now* serve this function and *then* the other function, but not both functions at the same time.

This distinction can also be used to rephrase the two rival accounts of the concept of truth. While in McCloskey truth is characterized in terms of the rhetorical aspect of language, I prefer an account of truth in terms of the representational aspect of language. However, irrespective of whether I prefer the realist account or not, the main point I am suggesting here is that *one may coherently think of linguistic items having both the rhetorical and representational aspects at the same time*. Far from excluding each other, rhetoric and representation are consistent with one another.

In defence of the realist philosophy of the rhetoric of economics, I next discuss some other misunderstandings and suspicions. With some reformulation, it is easy to agree with McCloskey on this: 'We have no way to get outside of our own human conversations and get into the mind of God in order to tell whether such and such an argument is True' (McCloskey 1988b: 287). Some reformulation seems to be needed, since arguments are not true or True or false, unlike their premises and conclusions. The agreeable point is that there is nobody else besides we humans in conversation to tell, even to attempt to tell, whether such and such a statement is true or false. In making our judgements about such matters, we rely on arguments for and against the truth of the statement at hand. Hence the coherence theory of justification or knowledge. However, nothing has to follow from this concerning the nature of truth. Truth in the realist sense is not essentially attainable: the ability, for example, to 'get into the mind of God' does not constitute truth. Hence the possibility exists for combining rhetoric and realism.

One common misunderstanding in the rhetoric of scientific inquiry is the conflation of truth and certitude or realism and non-fallibilism. Alan Gross implies this in his suggestion that we should replace the realist idea of scientific discovery by the rhetorical idea of invention.

From the rhetorical point of view, scientific discovery is properly described as invention. . . . Discovered knowledge is certain because, like America, it was always there. . . . The term invention, on the

other hand, captures the historically contingent and radically uncertain character of all scientific claims, even the most successful. If scientific theories are discoveries, their unfailing obsolescence is difficult to explain; if these theories are rhetorical inventions, no explanation of their radical vulnerability is necessary.

(Gross 1990: 7)

Many of these claims are difficult to understand. For instance, why would the radical vulnerability of rhetorical inventions be self-explanatory? Doesn't that smack of foundationalism? Most importantly, the alleged connection between discovery and certainty remains unsubstantiated. Discovery of previously unknown facts, of course, is something that a realist wants to pursue by scientific theorizing. Contrary to what Gross suggests, such realism is unproblematically compatible with fallibilism. Indeed, it is difficult to find a modern scientific realist who would not be a fallibilist. Scientists can be depicted as pursuing discoveries by inventing hypothetical theories and by revising or rejecting them when they fail. If it happens that a hypothesis does not fail, a discovery of a fact has been accomplished. One may *invent a theory* and thereby possibly *discover a fact of reality*. The uncertainty and vulnerability of such inventions or attempted discoveries are not excluded.

Gross seems to have been misled by two unfortunate confusions, namely, that between the discovery of facts and the discovery of 'knowledge' or 'theory', and that between attempted discovery and infallibly substantiated discovery. The realist does not need the notion of the discovery of theory, since theories are invented, and certitude may be safely attributed only to infallibly substantiated discoveries, which do not exist for a fallibilist realist. The basic idea is that invented theories may deliver discoveries of facts and thus be true of their objects even though scientists do not and cannot have evidence for an infallible belief in their truth. With these specifications, we do not have to choose *either* invention *or* discovery, we can choose *both* invention *and* discovery, and *both* truth *and* fallibility.

Here is another example of what appears to be a confusion of truth with certitude:

The postmodern question is not 'Is it true?' but 'What does it do?' This question must be asked of the whole rhetoric of science which is based on truth. What it does is close off options. It seeks to lay down a definitive and 'guaranteed' stopping point for enquiry: 'the world prevents this being discussed further'.

(Tomlinson 1989: 55)

It may well be that the rhetoric of truth, that is, the use of the term 'truth' for persuasive purposes, sometimes or often has such effects. It does not follow, however, that such effects are conceptually linked to the realist



notion of truth. If the statement in fact is true, then it is true in virtue of the way the world is, but the way the world is cannot prevent further discussion. It is people with beliefs who prevent or do not prevent further discussion. A fallibilist realist does not close off options by suggesting that it is plausible that a given statement is true. Correspondence truth may be connected to both fallibilism and non-fallibilism.

The above remarks are related to a recent exchange on the concepts of truth in McCloskey's writing. On that occasion, I suggested a simple clarification to deal with the conundrum regarding the multiplicity of his notions (Mäki 1988a: 97): 'truth' might signify truth as correspondence; 'Truth' might signify truth plus certitude. On this suggestion, truth would be a semantic matter, while Truth would be epistemic. McCloskey explicitly consented to my interpretation: 'Mäki makes a good point about truth's being semantic and certainty being epistemic. He's correct that when talking about Truth with a capital T, I had in mind the certainty part.' (McCloskey 1988a: 152). This response is ambiguous as I have shown elsewhere (Mäki 1991c). In any case, McCloskey would seem to subscribe at least to the following specification:

- (5) The Truth (with capital T) of a statement consists in justified certainty about its truth.

In (5), the term 'truth' is ambiguous and has to be specified. If it is taken to designate a correspondence notion, then the realist has no difficulty in using the two terms 'truth' and 'Truth', and in holding the view that Truth is unattainable. However, if 'truth' in (5) is taken to designate a coherence notion, as seems to be the case with McCloskey, then the realist refuses to follow.

A few remarks are needed to rebut the notion that the acknowledgement of the fact that the concept of truth itself serves a rhetorical function would somehow entail non-realism about truth. It is undeniable that there obtains a 'rhetoric of truth' together with many other rhetorics. The attribution of truth to claims is generally used for persuading audiences to accept those claims and the attribution of falsehood to other claims is used for promoting their rejection. From this some are tempted to draw one of two conclusions. The strong ontological view is that the rhetorical function of truth is all there is to truth, that truth has only a rhetorical existence, as it were, and that truth is not an objective property of statements. Some others hold the weaker, pragmatic position that the persuasive functions of the concepts of truth and falsehood within scientific communities are the only interesting ones about truth to a scholar in the rhetoric and sociology of science. If there happens to be other functions of truth talk, they fall within the purview of other disciplines, such as philosophy. (See, for example, Gross 1990: 201-7; Ibañez 1991.)

The realist has no problem with combining the acknowledgement of the

rhetorical functions of truth talk with the idea that statements are true or false irrespective of whether they are believed to be so by a persuader or a persuadee. This is an implication of the general distinction between the rhetorical and representational aspects of language. It is not incoherent to think of the possibility that a persuadee is persuaded to reject a true statement as false and to accept a false one as true, given the rhetorical conventions of the relevant community. Again, this is because truth is a semantic attribute of statements and acceptance and belief are epistemic attributes of human beings. Moreover, it is this distinction that a realist should use as a basis for developing the idea of *good rhetoric*: rhetoric is good when it leads persuadees to accept true statements as true and to reject false ones as false.

In this connection it is interesting to note that the rhetoric of truth seems to be practised in economics less widely than one might expect from an allegedly 'modernist' discipline. Economists often refer to their theories and models and assumptions as 'valid', 'useful', 'reasonable', 'plausible', 'realistic', and so on. This might be taken as an argument against a realist philosophy of economic rhetoric. Again, the argument fails. The terminology used by economists is a matter of effective rhetorical resources available to them. It is probable that many economists do not have a sufficiently sophisticated idea of truth to be able to persuasively use it in rhetorical situations typical of economics (the same seems to apply to economic methodologists). It does not follow, however, that such a concept of truth cannot be developed and applied to economic theories.

The relative unpopularity of truth talk has its causes. There are some interesting reasons for being hesitant about the relevance of any realist notion of truth in economics, in addition to those mentioned above. I mention briefly three such interrelated reasons. Two of them were employed also by McCloskey (1988a) in his reply to my earlier arguments.

First, it may be argued that, in their theoretical work, economists do not refer to the objective world. 'They are referring to a model, a metaphor, making a blackboard point about it' (McCloskey 1988a: 152). If theories are not about the world, it is of course pointless to discuss their truth and falsity. As I pointed out in my rejoinder (Mäki 1988b: 167), economic theories and the conclusions drawn from them may be thought of as being directly about some other conceptual representations, for example, about models or model-worlds created by economists, and yet, at the same time, as being indirectly about the economic world. The model-worlds play a mediating role and can be conceived as direct representations of the real world. This layered structure of theoretical representations is one reason for acknowledging the complexity of any sensible notion of correspondence truth in economics.

Second, McCloskey wonders whether the term 'true' might better be replaced by the term 'right', which designates a pragmatic concept. A

statement is 'right or wrong, for this or that human purpose, from this or that choice of human perspective' (McCloskey 1988a: 152). Again, some of this insight can be incorporated into a realist idea of truth. All we need is to think of reality itself as extremely varied and complex, as having many faces and many deep structures quite objectively, and then to think of human cognition as paying attention to any one or more of them in turn, depending on purpose or perspective. Epistemic perspectives do not create worlds, but instead possibly help us uncover objective aspects of the one world (Mäki 1990: 298). Each of those objective aspects may, in the best of all possible cases, be represented truly (or else falsely) in the realist sense.

Third, there is a related doubt from a different point of view. The argument goes like this: since economic theorizing distorts reality by theoretically isolating from the whole of it narrow slices which are not in fact materially isolated, the ensuing theories cannot be true. My response to this very popular idea is to try to develop the notion of truth such that we could legitimately argue for or against theories being true or false about those theoretically isolated slices even though the slices are not materially isolated. I have done some work towards this end (Mäki 1991a, 1991b, 1992b).

Truth is a complex creature, but that fact should not scare us. We can still think seriously about the possibility of pursuing truth in economics and about the role of rhetoric in this endeavour. I invite those engaged in the study of economic rhetoric to examine this possibility. McCloskey's view of good rhetoric as one which obeys the rules of *Sprachethik* and contributes to maximizing plausibility is formulated entirely in pragmatic terms. Mine is formulated partly in semantic terms: *rhetoric is good if it helps us discover, justify, and communicate truths about the economy*. While truth here is a persuasiveness-independent notion, good rhetoric takes us closer to it by persuading us to accept concepts and theories that are adequate for this task. The realist has no problems in accepting the list of prescriptions in McCloskey's *Sprachethik*. Even more, McCloskey appears to have the priorities right: the list begins with 'Don't lie', or rephrased in a realist fashion: 'If you have reasons to think that a statement diverges from the truth in sense (2), do not assert it (even though you may use it for other purposes)'

In developing a realist philosophy of economic rhetoric, a major task will be to bridge the gap between the notions of truth and plausibility – without conflating the two, as in the non-realist philosophy of the rhetoric of economics.

**WHAT ARE ECONOMISTS DOING – REALLY DOING?**

I am not going to attack McCloskey's anti-realist coherentism directly from a philosophical point of view, contrasting the rival theories of truth to one another. Instead, I will offer two exercises of immanent criticism against his philosophy, building upon premises that he himself strongly endorses (for other immanent arguments against McCloskey, see Mäki 1988a). The first immanent argument, to be outlined in the present section, relates to the issue of how economics and economists' behaviour are to be meta-theoretically represented. The second immanent criticism, to be given towards the end of the final section, builds upon an assumption of how McCloskey's meta-theoretical campaign has been received by the economics profession.

McCloskey has claimed that his approach is superior to traditional prescriptive methodologies in that it helps us 'see what economists were doing – really doing' (McCloskey 1985: 183). As usual, many unexamined conceptual and other problems are involved in such a declaration. Let us try to see what he is saying here – really saying. First we nail down this principle (where 'DRD' stands for the initials of 'doing, really doing').

(DRD) It is the task of the meta-theory of economics to help us see what economists are doing – really doing.

McCloskey had also argued for a 'thick' rhetorical methodology to replace the 'thin' positivist, Popperian, and other 'modernist' methodologies which do not contain the idea of rhetorical persuasion (McCloskey 1988c). A thick account allegedly reveals 'what economists are doing – really doing'. In this section I will try to see where McCloskey's philosophy of rhetoric might lead regarding these two matters – economists' doings and thickness of meta-theory.

To begin, let us list a few possible answers to the question implied in (DRD).

- (a) All economists are breathing all the time (except the dead ones).
- (b) Almost all economists are often producing sound waves in the air by moving their vocal organs.
- (c) Some economists are singing while running their regressions.
- (d) Economists are following the positivist or Popperian canons of the scientific method.
- (e) Economists are practising rhetorical persuasion to raise the plausibility of their favoured beliefs among their audiences.
- (f) Economists are practising successful rhetorical persuasion in accordance with the canons of the *Sprachethik* to raise the plausibility of their favoured beliefs among their audiences.
- (g) Economists are practising rhetorical persuasion to discover, justify, and communicate persuasiveness-independent truths about the economy.

- (h) Economists pursue socially conditioned aims by socially conditioned means with socially conditioned outcomes.

Each of these possible answers establishes a field of research presumably most appropriate for studying economics. Since all living economists are breathing, and necessarily so, should we think that it is in the physiology of breathing that we should invest our energies in trying to understand economics? Or is it perhaps phonetics which provides the clue for understanding economics? Or the theory of music? Or falsificationist methodology?

It will be obvious that these answers are not acceptable to either McCloskey or myself. Why is this so? In order to understand the situation, I propose interpreting (DRD) in a way of which I suppose is not quite in accord with what McCloskey originally had in mind. It amounts to taking seriously the fact that there are two expressions for economists' doings – 'what they are doing' and 'what they are really doing' – and taking this as suggesting an intuitive distinction. The idea is that it is the 'real doings' of economists instead of their mere 'doings' that should determine our meta-theoretical perspective on economics: it is the 'real doings' which constitute economics *qua* economics.

Furthermore, I would like to suggest another specification which seems to be needed. It seems clear that McCloskey cannot discuss the doings of the economics profession in the aggregate, indiscriminately and without normative presuppositions. Let us therefore make a rough distinction between 'good economists' and 'bad economists', between those who are in some sense scientifically rational and those who deviate from some canons of scientific rationality.

To begin with, it seems obvious that McCloskey and I would regard statements (a), (b), and (c) as *true*, but not as delivering any significant truths about economics. Let us say that we take them as true of *what economists (whether good or bad) are doing*. The statements in this category are varied. While the fact stated truly by (a) is necessary to economics, the truth of (c) is accidental to economics. They belong to the same category, since neither fact is constitutive of economics *qua* economics. There are no specific ways of breathing or singing which would be peculiar to (good or bad) economists and which would have an effect on their beliefs about the economy.

There is another point at which we agree. We both think that (d) is *false* of *what economists (whether good or bad) are doing* and of *what they are really doing*. There are those (such as Mark Blaug) who might be interpreted as thinking that (d), or more particularly its Popperian part, tells us *what good economists are really doing*.

From here onwards our ways part. While I think (e) is true of *what economists are doing*, McCloskey thinks that it is true of *what economists are*

*really doing*. In addition, while I might think (f) is true of *what good economists are doing*, McCloskey thinks (f) is true of *what good economists are really doing*. Furthermore, I think (g) *may be* true of *what economists are really doing* and that it *is* true of *what good economists are really doing*, whereas McCloskey thinks (g) *is* false of *what economists (whether good or bad) are doing* and of *what they are really doing*. In other words, in McCloskey's opinion, good economics is constituted by the fact stated by (f); in my opinion, good economics is constituted by the fact stated by (g).

Let us consider the disagreement concerning statement (g) more closely. For one thing, it has to be specified what I mean by saying that (g) *may be* true of *what economists are really doing*. I mean to imply by this nothing else but the idea that the acceptance of (e) as true of *what economists are doing* or (f) as true of *what good economists are doing* in no way undermines the possibility of (g) being true of *what economists are really doing*. Another specification has to be added. The expression, 'to discover, justify, and communicate truths' in (g) is meant to comprise both 'intentional or purposeful pursuit of truths' and 'unintended ending up with truths'. In other words, regardless of what other obstacles there may be to economists intentionally pursuing or ending up with truths about the economy, the fact that economists practise rhetorical persuasion is not among these.

Now who's got the thicker theory of economics? Let us repeat what McCloskey says about the aims of scholars: 'Truth-pursuing is a poor theory of human motivation and nonoperational as a moral imperative. The human scientists pursue persuasiveness, prettiness, the resolution of puzzlement, the conquest of recalcitrant details, the feeling of a job well done, and the honor and income of office.' (McCloskey 1985: 46). I do not deny that economists pursue those very things that McCloskey lists. I also think that (at least good) economists pursue persuasiveness-independent truth *in addition to* those other things. McCloskey denies this.

Irrespective of whether thickness should be considered a virtue, I am here overbidding McCloskey by suggesting a thicker conception of economic methodology, one that encompasses not only the complexities of rhetorical argumentation, but, in addition, the actually existing, possible, and desirable veristic ambitions and practices of economists.

The issue of thickness is not quite settled yet. I argue that the study of economic conversation has to be thicker in another direction as well. This is related to another problematic feature involved in McCloskey's philosophy of economic rhetoric, namely the imposition of the moral constraint of *Sprachethik* or *Herrschaftsfreiheit* on plausibility. If (f) is true of what good economists are really doing, then we may ask about the conditions of the presence and absence of such goodness. Point (f) may be false about the vast majority of economists most of the time (or about all of them all the time). Likewise, (g) may be false about most (or all) economists. We may surmise that the conditions for the truth or falsity of both (f) and (g) are

at least partly rooted in the specific social organization and social history of economics as an academic discipline. This implies that we are persuaded to accept the somewhat ambiguous statement (h) as true of what economists are doing: economists pursue socially conditioned aims by socially conditioned means with socially conditioned outcomes. Indeed, I do think (h) is true. So does McCloskey, in a sense. The difference between us lies in how we specify *the contents of the concept of the social*.

McCloskey holds a weak or thin idea of economics as social action, namely an idea implied by the concept of rhetoric itself, as analysed on p. 25: rhetoric is situated in a weak social context characterized by a persuader attempting to persuade an audience by using arguments consistent with a given set of rhetorical conventions. This is compatible with (h). So is McCloskey's passing appeal to certain general characteristics of Western society. In a sense, when defending the postulation of *Herrschaftsfreiheit* within economics, McCloskey subscribes to a theory of society: he pronounces his trust in 'an open, plural, and pragmatic society' like ours (McCloskey 1985: 41). I do not think this is sufficient to justify the postulation of *Herrschaftsfreiheit within economics*. He should not be content with a general idea of society at large. He should instead have an adequate sociological analysis of the specific social organization of the discipline of economics and its place in the overall social process. The two social realms are not the same nor is one realm a mirror image of the other. The set of relevant elements in McCloskey's account of economic rhetoric includes (i) the postulation of the ideal condition of *Herrschaftsfreiheit* within economics; (ii) the general reliance on the openness of our society at large; and (iii) identifications of various 'figures of speech' as used by economists for persuading their audiences. What he lacks is a thick social theory of the academic discipline of economics.

In a sense, then, McCloskey agrees with me that (h) is true of what economists are doing, but it is also the case that the contents he gives to the notion of social conditions in (h) are very weak or thin. A thicker social theory is needed whether one holds either (f) or (g) as representations of what good economists are really doing.

These considerations bring out another important reason for thinking that McCloskey's account of economic rhetoric is too thin. It has to be supplemented with perspectives provided by the social studies of science – analyses of the institutional structures and processes of economic inquiry (see Coats 1988; Mäki 1992a, c). A normative ethics supplemented with impressionistic reliance on the blessings of an open society simply will not do as a substitute for an adequate social theory of particular scientific disciplines such as economics.

In conclusion, I would like to call into question two statements by McCloskey: 'Sociology and rhetoric are one' (McCloskey 1988c: 254). 'Rhetorical criticism is the thickest approach' (ibid.: 255). Neither of these

statements seems to be true. As regards thickness, I am doubly outbidding McCloskey. It appears that he has to reconsider either his philosophy of rhetoric or the virtuousness of thickness.

### HOW TO ARGUE ABOUT RHETORIC AND REALISM

Three philosophies of economics have been at stake in the recent discussions of economic rhetoric: 'modernism', non-realism, and realism. Let us give them compact formulations and point out their roles in the debates.

(Mo) Correspondence theory of truth plus foundationalist theory of justification.

(Mc) Coherence theory of truth plus coherence theory of justification.

(Mä) Correspondence theory of truth plus coherence theory of justification.

Both McCloskey and I and most economic methodologists reject (Mo), the 'modernist' position, which appears to deny the reality and rationality of rhetoric in the process of justification. McCloskey seems to think that the rejection of foundationalism implies the rejection of the correspondence theory, which I find a grave error. I think it is possible but not necessary to marry rhetoric to a coherence theory of truth (as in Mc) and also that it is possible but not necessary to connect rhetoric with a correspondence theory of truth (as in Mä). In other words, I am arguing against (Mc) having an exclusive position in the discussions of economic rhetoric. This has required the formulation of an outline of a rival view and to show that it has some initial plausibility.

The plausibility of (Mä) is based, among other things, on the distinction between two functions of language, the rhetorical and the representational function. The suggestion is that language can coherently have both functions at the same time. An economic theory can, without contradiction, serve to persuade audiences to adopt or intensify certain beliefs and also to represent facts about the economy. My argumentative strategy here and earlier (Mäki 1988a) has been to show that (Mä) is coherent, and at this stage to omit the issue of whether the idea of language having a representational function has any other problems. The claim is that language having a rhetorical function in no way undermines it having a representational function. Rhetoric in no way challenges realism. There are other challenges that have to be met, but the claim about rhetoric is not among them. Arguments for or against rhetoric are not arguments for or against realism, and vice versa. Other arguments are needed to deal with the issue of realism versus non-realist pragmatism.

There is another argument against the ruling status of (Mc) which has not been discussed in the foregoing. It is an exercise in immanent criticism in that it is based on a premise accepted by those who are criticized. From their own point of view, we may ask whether the second-order rhetoric of



the combatants of the rhetorical movement in the meta-theory of economics has been good rhetoric. In other words, making the heroic assumption that they have observed the canons of *Sprachethik*, we may ask whether their meta-theoretical rhetoric about the rhetorical character of economics in the form of (Mc) has been found persuasive by the primary audience to which it has been directed, viz., economists. As a result of the marketing campaign, do economists find it persuasive to think of their own behaviour as rhetorical? Do they accept or believe the following statement?

(R) Economics has a rhetorical aspect.

Lacking reliable empirical evidence about the beliefs of economists, let me suggest the inaccurate conjecture that while many economists have been persuaded to believe in (R), many others have not. Assuming that (R) is true, the fact that there are many economists who disbelieve (R) is an indication that the rhetoric offered in its favour has not been entirely successful.

I argue that (Mc) exemplifies unsuccessful second-order rhetoric due, at least partly, to its denial of any correspondence notion of truth. One premise here is that such a denial runs counter to many economists' intuitions. Even though truth talk may not be very popular among economists, many of them still share the common-sense intuition that truth is what the correspondence theory suggests it is, and that it can be legitimately pursued. These economists may object to (R) because it is being marketed to them in the form of (Mc). There may well have been other significant factors at play which have hindered the adoption of (R) by economists. Many economists' subscription to (Mo) might be among them. Yet, I suggest that the marrying of the idea of rhetoric with the coherence theory of truth has not facilitated the promotion of the rhetorical approach and has not been neutral either, but has instead served to decrease its persuasiveness to a degree which is difficult to estimate. From a rhetorical point of view, this marriage is unhappy.

In the previous section I argued that McCloskey's meta-theory is too thin in that it fails to encompass certain semantic and social aspects of economics. I am now suggesting that, viewed from a different perspective, McCloskey's meta-theory is *too thick* in that the marriage of rhetoric and non-realism in (Mc) may create resistance to the idea of rhetoric among some economists. These economists are misled to think that they cannot adopt (R) without having to buy the whole thick package of specific philosophical and sociological assumptions.

I conclude that if our aim is to persuade economists to believe that economics has a rhetorical aspect, we had better market the idea as amounting to no more than a theory of justification,<sup>6</sup> not as a theory of truth. If a theory of truth is attached to a rhetorical theory of justification, we should avoid pretending that the idea of rhetoric fits with only one

theory of truth. We should rather provide our audiences with a choice between (Mc) and Mä) as well as other possible options. Also, if a theory of the social organization of economics is incorporated into a theory of economic rhetoric, we should recognize that there is more than one plausible candidate for such a social theory.

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### NOTES

- 1 Unfortunately, the rhetorical movement in the study of economics (see, for example, McCloskey 1985, 1990; Klamer *et al.* 1988) has not been very successful in reflecting its own philosophical presuppositions, not at least in a sophisticated way. For attempts to remedy the situation, see the symposium consisting of Mäki 1988a, b; Rappaport 1988a, b; Rosenberg 1988a, b; McCloskey 1988a.
- 2 There seems to be a difference between acceptance and adherence, too, in that adherence may come in degrees of intensity, while this is less clear with acceptance. We can ignore this difference here, however.
- 3 For an account of plausibility in a related but narrower sense than the one suggested here, see Nootboom (1986).
- 4 As against this, McCloskey might wish to argue that the postulate of *Herrschaftsfreiheit* approximates the real situation in economics well enough to undermine such conclusions. First, we may ask for a list of (a) the set of privileged people whose beliefs McCloskey would regard as crucial in deciding on the approximate truth of the statement of *Herrschaftsfreiheit* itself; (b) the set of those people whose beliefs matter when deciding whether the beliefs of set (a) have been formed in sufficiently *herrschaftsfrei* conditions, etc. Second, the same 'multi-level decision problem' has to be faced when judging whether the alleged approximation is *close enough* to prevent inappropriate social influences from creeping into the conversations. It *might* be that even very small divergencies from the moral ideal within a discipline can create significant institutional constraints on plausibility, impermissible from the point of view of McCloskey's *Sprachethik*.
- 5 Nootboom (1986: 208), who subscribes to a coherence theory of truth, seems to have a strange or at least outdated conception of what the contrasting correspondence theory holds, viz., 'a correspondence between sensory stimulation and individual, isolated units of knowledge'. This has a foundationalist flavour in it and has nothing to do with the general idea of truth as correspondence presented here.
- 6 As remarked earlier (Mäki 1988b: 169), it is premature to speak about a theory of economic rhetoric. Unfortunately, we still lack serious attempts to construct such a systematic theory.

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