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A Path Through the Methodological Divides

by Robert T. CRAIG

To say no more than that our methodological divides in communication studies have enriched my work and made it more rigorous would understate the case. My struggles to find a path through the field's methodological divides have essentially defined my career, and the products, limited as they are, of those struggles have been among my principal contributions to scholarship in the field.

My serious involvement in communication studies began as an undergraduate student majoring in speech at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the late 1960s. There I first encountered the great divide between the humanistic and scientific traditions of speech communication studies (Craig, 1990). The humanists defended an ancient and recently flourishing tradition of philosophical, historical-critical, and practical studies in rhetoric. The insurgent social scientists had, by contrast, the cachet of all that was new and modern, of "science," of "communication," of rebellion against tradition in a rebellious era (a time of political and cultural uprisings on university campuses). Among communication scientists, the whole discipline of rhetoric was often dismissed as an embarrassing anachronism soon to be superseded by modern social-psychological studies. Among humanistic scholars, the advancing social science of communication was often caricatured as intellectually shallow, crudely reductionistic — and yet deeply threatening to the status of humanistic studies. A budding rhetorical theorist who was equally attracted to the social sciences, I was torn between the two sides of this divide and fascinated by the great intellectual puzzle that it presented. The intellectual puzzle, as I later came to understand it, was fundamentally about theory and practice.

What became known in the twentieth century as rhetorical theory derived from a Western tradition extending back to the ancient Greek sophists, teachers-for-hire who espoused relativistic ideas and offered practical instruction in the art of persuasive public speaking (Kennedy, 1980, 1996). The philosopher Plato (1998) mockingly criticized sophistic rhetoric for its disregard for truth and lack of any systematic theoretical basis for its practice. Aristotle (1991), who wrote the first philosophical treatise on rhetoric, addressed these shortcomings, although not in ways that would have satisfied Plato or indeed have satisfied many subsequent philosophical and scientific thinkers down to the present.¹

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Aristotle justified rhetoric on practical grounds, arguing that the kinds of issues usually debated in public discourse are inherently matters of opinion about which the truth cannot be known with absolute certainty. Proponents of various conflicting views do their best to persuade the public, and there is reason to hope that truth will prevail against error if both are defended with equal rhetorical skill. Success in persuasion, as Aristotle pointed out, is partly a matter of luck, but some speakers are consistently more effective than others, so there must be some systematic basis for success that can be discovered, theoretically articulated, and taught as a practical art of rhetoric. However, there can be no scientific guarantee of persuasive success in the contingent world of practical affairs, any more than there can be scientific certainty about the truth on matters of opinion.

This Aristotelian methodology, abstracted from its philosophical context and rendered in up-to-date English as I have done here, is so surprisingly compatible with Deweyan pragmatism as to warrant the suspicion that something important has been lost in translation. Nevertheless, efforts to amalgamate Aristotle with pragmatism have been attractive to scholars (myself included) who have struggled to bridge the divide between the humanistic tradition of rhetoric and modern social science. “Neo-Aristotelian” research that applied concepts from Aristotle’s rhetorical theory in scientifically oriented critical and experimental studies persisted into the 1970s but was finally rejected by humanists and scientists alike (Craig, 1990). A method that reduced rhetorical studies to a causal analysis of persuasive effects made thin gruel for humanists, who preferred to follow other streams of the rhetorical tradition and emerging interdisciplinary critical theory that led to profounder, subtler ways of interpreting and appreciating rhetorical texts. A key problem for social scientists was that rhetorical theory, no matter how you cut it, is not scientific theory. The rhetorical tradition has accumulated over its long history a hodge-podge of practical exemplars and techniques, critical commentaries, and philosophical arguments, but social scientific theory, as it was understood by the mid-twentieth century, requires something quite different: systematic models and causal explanations of phenomena that are empirically testable. If there are systematic principles to be found for practical success in persuasion and other kinds of communication processes, it follows from this view that rigorous empirical study and theory construction are the way to find them.

It was, then, a quest for rigor and enrichment that drew me from rhetorical studies at Wisconsin to the graduate program in Communication at Michigan State University, which was and is a leading center of communication science. I had not rejected rhetorical theory but wanted to gain a solid grounding in communication theory and empirical research before choosing a direction for my academic career. The philosophical background I had developed in rhetorical and political theory as an undergraduate was enriched in graduate school by studies in the philosophy of science, social science metatheory, system theory, social psychology, and advanced

quantitative methods. My dissertation research took me to the antipode, a place at the very opposite end of the theoretical world from my undergraduate studies in rhetoric. Essentially a hi-tech persuasion study (Craig, 1976), it was based on Galileo Theory (Woelfel & Fink, 1980), which, as I only later realized, is ironically the exact antithesis of neo-Aristotelianism.

Galileo Theory models cognitive and communication processes as the lawful motion of concepts in a multidimensional mathematical space. To apply the theory it is necessary to measure the differences among a set of concepts at multiple points in time by means of a metric multidimensional scaling procedure that can, in principle, achieve any desired level of precision. The multidimensional space can represent conceptual structures in human populations or in populations of messages. The ultimate goal in developing Galileo Theory is to discover mathematical equations that can explain the motion of concepts in multidimensional space with degrees of precision approaching that achieved by theories of physics. Not much progress toward these cognitive laws of motion seems to have occurred in the thirty-odd years since Galileo Theory was invented, although the multidimensional scaling technique is still in use (e.g., Doerfel & Barnett, 1999).

The measurement and data analysis procedures developed in conjunction with Galileo Theory work rather well, and the philosophical argument that undergirds the theory is equally sophisticated, however wrong (Craig, 1983). My dissertation study was largely unsuccessful (Craig, 1976), but it took a few years for me to think my way out of its rigorous logic. The path I followed took me from cognitive social psychology to theoretical debates in cognitive science and Artificial Intelligence (Craig, 1978, 1979), and finally back to a reinvented amalgamation of Aristotle and pragmatism, for which I coined the term, “practical discipline” (Craig, 1983, 1989). Continuing the journey under the banner of practical discipline, my methodological stance has become progressively richer and more rigorous as I have struggled on through the field’s methodological divides.

I initially became aware of what appeared to be a critical gap in the logic of Galileo Theory: that it has no rigorous link from cognitive processes to practical activities, no way of describing or explaining how messages are actually produced. Even classical rhetorical theory, with its catalogs of commonplaces and figures of speech, seemingly does a better job of this than Galileo Theory; it describes specific techniques by which ordinary practical activities of speechmaking can be accomplished. Artificial Intelligence (AI), defined as the science of designing computational algorithms that model complex cognitive processes, can be equally as rigorous as Galileo Theory in principle, but in an entirely different way. The most rigorous methodological criterion for AI is that theoretically based algorithms must model in precise detail the cognitive structures and processes that actually generate complex intelligent activities such as conversation in a natural language (Boden, 1987). Proponents of “strong AI” speculate that computers will eventually be

capable of human-like thought and understanding, even consciousness and emotion.² In principle, an AI-based communication theory could progressively merge theory and practice, reducing the fuzzy art of communication to an exact technical science that even a robot could be programmed to learn. Galileo Theory also entailed that the practice of communication could become an exact science, but not by creating precise models of ordinary communication practices as AI might do. Instead, Galileo Theory proposed to *replace* ordinary communication practices with a precise technology based on the principles and methods of Galileo Theory itself (Woelfel & Fink, 1980). In this perspective, there is no critical gap between Galileo Theory and practical activities because *Galileo Theory is embedded in practical activities that can constitute ways of communicating*.

This insight led me to a new understanding of the problem of theory and practice, couched in terms of socio-cultural institutions (Craig, 1983, 1996a, 1996b). All theories are embedded in practical activities. A theory is only “a theory” by virtue of being designated as such and having some role in the practices of some institution. Scientific theories are designated as such within the institution of science and have meaning and value by virtue of the role they play in scientific practices. To “apply” a theory means to abstract certain practices from one institutional context and import them to another context where their role may be quite different. Insofar as the role of theory in scientific practices is oriented to the causal explanation of empirical phenomena, the application of scientific theories in other institutional contexts may involve transferring certain scientific practices (e.g., of categorization, inference, experimental manipulation, measurement, etc.) to nonscientific contexts where they function as instrumental “techniques” that may clash with contextual values and meanings. This would certainly be true of Galileo Theory. Were it to play the sort of role in public culture that its authors envisioned, the imaginable consequences of this “Galilean rhetoric” would be bizarre and unattractive (Craig, 1983). Plato would turn over in his grave.

The institutional interpretation of the problem of theory and practice suggests a rigorous methodological principle: that theories must be adapted to the institutions in which they are embedded, which means they must be evaluated with reference to the specific practices, values, and meanings that have evolved historically within those institutions.³ In communication and other fields of social theory, this methodological principle implies a profound reflexivity of theory and practice. Theories in those fields are *about* social practices. Those theories may be embedded in scientific practices, but they also frequently have roles internal to the nonscientific social practices they are about. For example, theories of media, as available ways of thinking and talking about media, can be embedded in the practices of media sources, critics, and audiences as well as media scholars. Social theories, therefore, are not only embedded in practices, they are often about some of the very practices in which they are embedded, and have the potential to change those practices (Carey, 1989;

Giddens, 1984; Taylor, 1989).

In 1983, I thus arrived at the following problem: What would be the institutional structure of an academic discipline — not a pure science or an applied field but a true “practical discipline” with its own distinct subject matter, theories, and methods — that would address the right kinds of questions to evaluate theories that are reflexively about some of the very social practices in which they are embedded (Craig, 1983, pp. 411-412)? Six years later, my first sketch of a solution was published:

... practical discipline provides a distinctive and appropriate methodological rationale for communication [studies], one that is firmly rooted in the history of the field, that covers the full range of its activities, and that names the central purpose around which those activities, at their best, cohere. ... As a practical discipline, our essential purpose is to cultivate communicative *praxis*, or practical art, through critical study. All of our work does, or should, pursue that purpose. (Craig, 1989, p. 98)

To illustrate the idea of practical discipline, I relied on two exemplars, one the classical art of rhetoric, the other a pragmatist conception of methodology. (Yes, back to Aristotle and Dewey, but how much richer than before!) As elaborated through the exemplars, a practical discipline would:

... cultivate a dialectic between theory and practice ... ground specific practical techniques in more general principles ... offer idealized conceptions of practice that are nevertheless judged finally by their usefulness ... [be] concerned with the ends of practice as well as the technical means ... and ... cultivate an appreciation of the ultimate paradoxes ... that confront practice (Craig, 1989, p. 105).

In attempting to articulate a coherent position, I found it helpful to venture further through the methodological divides to confront a broad array of alternative positions in the field. The idea of practical discipline was enriched and made more rigorous by putting it into dialogue with empirical science, hermeneutics, critical theory, action science, and other views (Craig, 1989, pp. 105-116).

Subsequent writings have focused on particular aspects of practical discipline such as the constitutive role of theory (Craig, 1993), a methodology for constructing grounded practical theory (Craig & Tracy, 1995), the dialectics of theory and practice (Craig, 1996a, 1996b), how various traditions of communication theory can be engaged in dialogue on the practice of communication (Craig, 1999a), and, again, the convergence of the tradition of practical philosophy stemming from Aristotle with contemporary pragmatism — a convergence that I acknowledged has yet to struggle with some of the implications of critical and postmodern methodologies (Craig, 2001a).

The concept of metadiscourse (discourse about discourse, or metatalk) has become increasingly important since the mid-1990s as a way of understanding the

dialectics of theory and practice that opens the process to more rigorous empirical investigation (Craig, 1999b; Craig & Tracy, 2005). How exactly does theory become embedded in practices, how is it adapted to practices, and how does it change practices? Metadiscourse would seem to be a key medium in which theory and practice communicate. Metadiscourse is an intrinsic aspect of all of our communication practices (Craig, 1996a, 1999a, 1999b, 2005, 2006). We talk about our ongoing communication in order to manage and reflect on the process for various practical purposes. Theory becomes embedded in, is adapted to, and changes our communication practices as we import theoretical vocabularies into our practical metadiscourse. For example, concepts from therapy have become deeply embedded in ordinary discourse about communication and are shaping the practice of communication in what Cameron (1999) has described as the contemporary communication culture.

Far from inhibiting or frustrating my work, my struggles to find a path through the methodological divides in communication studies have been, and, I believe, will continue to be, an invaluable stimulus to creativity, and a goad to ever more encompassing rigor, that has more than enriched my work. Indeed, it has largely constituted my work.

NOTES

1. Philosophers by and large have tended to agree with Plato that rhetorical success is empty if not reprehensible unless it is the product of a disinterested effort to discover what is true and right. To think otherwise is mere sophistry, they might say. On the history of conflict between rhetoric and philosophy, see Ijsseling (1976).
2. Although technical AI fields like robotics and natural language processing are apparently doing quite well, critics have decisively refuted the speculative claims of strong AI, which rely on a fundamental ontological error (Dreyfus, 1992; Searle, 1980; Weizenbaum, 1976; Winograd & Flores, 1986). Like Galileo Theory but on a vastly greater scale, AI has persisted as a technology while losing its philosophical punch.
3. This implies that standard criteria of scientific validity may not be sufficient for evaluating theories that are embedded in nonscientific practices (Craig, 1983, 1989, 1993, 2001b). It also implies that theories may be evaluated differently in different cultures. It does not, however, imply that good theories are completely consistent with traditional cultural practices. Theories are useful because they both challenge as well as confirm existing ideas and practices (Craig, 1999, p. 131).

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