

## A Nonviolent Rhetoric

*The Western rhetorical tradition stems from Aristotle, who defined rhetoric as “the art of persuasion.” But that definition may be grounded in an inherently aggressive stance that is ethically questionable. Alternative modes of rhetoric, such as nonviolent communication and rhetorical listening, may offer ways of speaking and listening that are less combative and more generative and humanizing.*

### Rhetoric as Violence

In *Rhetoric*, from the mid-fourth century BCE, Aristotle defines rhetoric as the “art of persuasion” and then gives an exhaustive account of the various means of persuasion that effective speakers and, later, writers could use to persuade people of the rightness of their views or suggested course of action. That view of rhetoric, as essentially persuasive, formed the basis of rhetorical work and theory for centuries and continues to inform the communicative arts today.

But in that definition of rhetoric may lie a problem. If the function of rhetoric is to persuade, a few things have to be assumed. First, a speaker must assume they have the right to change another person’s thinking, opinion, or behavior. But what gives the person that right? Is there some essential order of existence or social structure that grants any speaker the right to change another person’s mind? Is that right embedded in the very act of speaking? Such an assumption seems hardly tenable.

Second, to assume a person has the right to change another person’s mind or behavior requires the belief that the other person *should* be changed. But on what grounds does a speaker assume that they know enough about the other person’s world, about what is right and good for that person, to assume that they should be changed? Isn’t there something troubling about such an apparently arrogant assumption?

There should be something troubling. Because in these assumptions lies an essentially dehumanizing belief. The belief is that “I” know better than “you” and that “you” should be changed.

“You,” then, are inferior or defective in some way, whether it is something as minor as believing that the café we’re looking for is over there when it’s actually over here, or something more major, such as believing that an economic policy is or isn’t racist or sexist. Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher, defines the relationship in which the speaker sees the other person as a thing to be changed or used or manipulated, as an “I-It” relationship. A truly humanized and humanizing relationship, by contrast, is described as “I-Thou,” wherein the speaker sees the other person as equal to themselves, free and independent, not as an object to be manipulated or controlled.

Can there be a rhetoric that is *not* based on the presumption of persuasion? Can there be a nonviolent rhetoric, one that creates an I-Thou relationship? If so, it would likely be based on two principles: nonviolent communication and rhetorical listening.

### The Principles of Nonviolent Communication

Nonviolent communication is a principle developed mainly by Marshall B. Rosenberg. Rosenberg has published many books and articles and founded the Center for Nonviolent Communication, through which he and others offer workshops and trainings and produce nonviolent communication materials. Nonviolent communication is based on a set of four beliefs:

1. *All human actions are based on needs that people are seeking to meet.* So, for example, asking your roommate to pick up something at the store is an action designed to meet your needs, but so is protesting for the right to vote or even voting itself.

2. *At the level of needs, our similarities far outweigh our differences.* All human beings, for example, need food and water, but also shelter, safety, community, education, health care, etc. These needs are common to all human beings.
3. *Clearly articulating our needs will allow another to see us as similarly human, which leads to compassion.* This belief rests on the fact that human beings are essentially compassionate and want to help one another, a view supported by evolutionary psychology and other disciplines within the social sciences.
4. *Compassion for another fosters community and, thus, peace.* The word “compassion” literally means “to suffer with.” When we feel compassion for another, we sense the unmet need of the other as we would feel our own, and we wish to help, which is the opposite of violence.

Given these beliefs, Rosenberg explains what nonviolent communication would look like. It would be grounded in needs, in the understanding that we all share common needs, and in the idea that in understanding the needs of others, we feel compassion.

In practice, what this means is that we can look at any situation in which we want to take action through communication—Tweet something, text someone, write a long Facebook post about a recent Supreme Court ruling, write an angry email to a professor—and go through a series of moves to arrive at a nonviolent communicative act.

The four moves of nonviolent communication are these:

1. *Observe the event.* First, we must observe what we are responding to, often emotionally, and separate the event from our judgments of the event and any corresponding feelings. Let’s say you are in class and, as you are speaking, someone else begins talking right over the top of you. You might immediately have an emotional response and then leap to a judgment. You might even vocalize that judgment in an attempt to change the person’s behavior: “That’s rude,” you might say.

But nonviolent communication would ask you to observe the thing you are responding to: a person has spoken over the top of you, interrupting and stopping you from speaking. That is a fact. Stating that fact nonviolently, and separate from the emotion, might begin like this: “When you started to talk while I was still speaking . . .”

2. *Recognize feelings.* Feelings are what we experience in response to a stimulus. In the example we’re looking at, the stimulus is the classmate interrupting you. What is the feeling that goes with that? You probably felt hurt, belittled, disrespected. If you’re a person of color or otherwise identify as non-mainstream, you may have experienced the event as a microaggression, a small but no less painful prejudicial attack. To express that feeling nonviolently, you might say, “When you interrupted me and started to talk, I felt hurt and disrespected.” This statement recognizes feelings that correspond to the observation.
3. *Recognize needs.* Needs are what all human beings have and share at the deepest level, and when those needs are not being met or are being threatened, they give rise to feelings. In the example we’re looking at, what is the need? You may need to feel respected in the class, a community of students. Historically, human beings have not been safe when they have been excluded from communities. And historically, women and people of color have been excluded from political and social communities as a matter of course. To continue our example, you might express this need nonviolently like this: “When you interrupted me and started to talk, I felt hurt. I need to be respected—listened to—as part of this class.”
4. *Make requests.* Requests are the key to nonviolent communication and are how we express our needs and feelings in a nonviolent way. By recognizing our needs and feelings as they are tied to a stimulus, we can then express what we require to have our needs met in a way that can be heard and understood by another person. We can now return to the judgment statement we began with—“That’s rude”—and contrast it with how a rhetoric of nonviolent communication might speak to the situation.

“Excuse me, but when you started to talk while I was still talking, I felt hurt and disrespected. I need to be respected—listened to—as part of this class. Would you be willing to wait until I finish speaking before you speak?”

Notice in this example that there is no violence—no assumption that the speaker has the right to change the other person. By contrast, the assumption is that the other person is fully human, as is the speaker. It is also assumed that the other person has the same needs and, thus, can respect them. What is requested is a behavior to be changed, not the person's mind nor values. And note, too, that the statement is only a request—not a demand—and that distinction is vital. The person to whom the request is made is under no obligation whatsoever to accede. They have just as much right to say no as to say yes.

And that's an important litmus test.

As a speaker, if you are truly making a request, you must be equally okay with either no or yes as the answer to your request. If you are hurt by your request being turned down, then you are still clinging to the assumption that the other person *should* change to meet your needs. In other words, just because a statement is framed as a request does not mean it is a request. Only you know for sure. You might still be making a demand in the guise of a request. (Just imagine someone saying, "Will you please not talk so much?" That is hardly a request!)

Nonviolent communication rests upon a belief in the similarities of all people at the level of needs and a belief that expressing those needs nonviolently can give rise to compassion and, thus, peace.

## The Principles of Rhetorical Listening

Rhetorical listening, as a concept and practice, has been developed mainly by Krista Ratcliffe, now a professor at Arizona State University. In her 1999 article, "Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and a 'Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct'" and in her 2005 book *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, Ratcliffe developed the principles and practices of listening as a generative and humanizing rhetorical act, filling a gap in Western rhetoric which, she claims, has ignored the role of listener in making meaning to the detriment of civil discourse.

Rhetorical listening posits listening not as a means of gathering information and ideas to strengthen the speaker's own argument—to help in the art of persuasion—but as a means to help speakers and listeners identify how cultural logics inform arguments so that the logic of an argument can be understood and appreciated, not merely dismissed as wrong, stupid, bigoted, or biased. As such, rhetorical listening is an antidote to the toxic rhetorical climate that seems prevalent today.

Rhetorical listening operates within four moves:

1. *Promoting an understanding of self and other.* Listen *not* with the intent to merely understand the other's point but with the intent to stand *within* the thinking of the other person, to let it "wash over" us, to let ourselves be bathed in the ideas of the other without resistance.
2. *Proceeding within an accountability logic.* Consciously choose to recognize and believe that each of us is accountable to and for the other, as well as ourselves. Listening with this logic requires that we choose to see a connection among each individual person, to see that every action we take may have consequences for every other person.
3. *Locating identifications across commonalities and differences.* First, find commonalities in shared assumptions or beliefs: "Everyone needs to feel safe" or "Everyone needs to be loved and respected." Second, identify hidden differences, as it is these differences that give rise to clashing logics of our positions. Rhetorical listening challenges us to probe further. What "safe" means for one person in one social setting may be very different from what it means for another.
4. *Analyzing claims as well as the cultural logics within which these claims function.* Identify the thinking of the other as operating within a cultural and political worldview. As Ratcliffe says, "By focusing on claims and cultural logics, listeners may still disagree with each other's claims, but they may better appreciate that the other person is not simply wrong but rather functioning from a different logic" (26-33).<sup>1</sup>

But how do we do this? How do we actually go about listening rhetorically?

First, in order to understand the "cultural logics" of our beliefs, we have to have two more terms: syllogism and enthymeme. These, Ratcliffe borrows from classical rhetoric.

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<sup>1</sup> Ratcliffe, Krista. *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, pp. 26-33.

A **sylllogism**, technically, is any form of reasoning in which a conclusion is drawn from two or more given or assumed premises. The premises share a term with the conclusion. Here's a famous and perhaps obvious syllogism:

Premise 1: All human beings are mortal.

Premise 2: Jay-Z is a human being.

Conclusion: Therefore, Jay-Z is mortal.

The claim is the conclusion—that Jay-Z is mortal—and is “proven” through this syllogism by the agreement of the middle term—human being, in this case.

An **enthymeme** is simply a syllogism in which one or both of the premises are unstated but implied. The claim stands alone or is coupled with one of the premises. For example, saying “Jerome must be ill since he’s not at the meeting” provides the claim—“he must be ill”—as well as a premise—“he’s not at the meeting.” We can turn this enthymeme into a syllogism by providing the implied but missing premise:

Premise 1: Jerome only misses meetings if he’s ill (implied).

Premise 2: Jerome is not at the meeting.

Claim: Therefore, Jerome must be ill.

This kind of enthymeme is common in popular and especially political discourse. For example, if a critic were to say, “Senator Jones is a typical leftist; she wants to destroy American individualism,” with emphasis on the word “typical,” the critic is relying upon the audience to supply the missing premise:

Premise 1: Leftists want to destroy American individualism (implied).

Premise 2: Senator Jones is a typical leftist.

Claim: Therefore, Senator Jones want to destroy American individualism.

Here, the critic is relying upon the audience to share their belief (or bias) that “leftists” want to “destroy American individualism.” The critic truncates the second premise and conclusion into a single statement.

However, sometimes the enthymeme goes further, calling on the audience to supply two of the three parts of the syllogism, sometimes even including the claim. For example, a critic might simply say, “Representative Ortiz is a typical feminist.”

What is being stated here?

Premise 1: Feminists are [something bad] (implied).

Premise 2: Representative Ortiz is a typical feminist.

Claim: Therefore, Representative Ortiz is [something bad] (implied).

Here, you can see that the *claim itself* is implied—that Representative Ortiz, apparently, is something bad because she is said to be “a typical feminist” (a premise). This is how name calling functions: It states one part of a syllogism and asks the audience to fill in the rest of the negative sentiments.

## How Rhetorical Listening Might Work with a Current Issue

In looking at the above enthymemes, I purposely chose samples that might evoke some emotional response. If you identify along the political spectrum where “leftist” and “feminist” are terms with positive or at least non-negative connotations, you may feel some desire to resist or counter the claims made. If you identify along the political spectrum where those terms are seen negatively, you may have felt some defensiveness, feeling that some unseemly political position is being unfairly assigned you.

That’s part of the point that Ratcliff wishes to make. Because our discourse relies heavily on enthymemes as, too often, a mode of attack that ultimately divides us, we are unable to separate from our emotional responses and engage in any kind of civil discourse. Enthymemes like the ones I supplied above dehumanize the targets. But just as importantly, they

dehumanize both the speaker and the audience, since they are creating an I-It relationship, as the discussion of nonviolent communication above explains.

Rhetorical listening acts as an antidote.

To see how it might work, let's try a common refrain from a recent issue. Donald Trump calls himself a "law and order" president. For some, that is a good thing. For others, it is not. If a Trump supporter and a Trump detractor were to try to engage in any kind of discussion about this, they would likely end up in a shouting match or angrily walking away from each other.

But rhetorical listening asks for more.

If Trump says that he "stands for law and order," a supporter, hearing this, would likely fill in the premise and the claim in a way similar to this:

Premise 1: "Law and order" are needed to maintain the structure of society (implied).

Premise 2: Trump "stands for law and order."

Claim: Therefore, Trump is maintaining the structure of society (implied).

When a Trump detractor hears the same statement, they will likely fill in the premise and claim in a different way, perhaps like this:

Premise 1: "Law and order" are code words for protecting White supremacy (implied).

Premise 2: Trump "stands for law and order."

Claim: Therefore, Trump protects White supremacy (implied).

Here, we can see that there's a cultural logic at work in both statements. If you're from a relatively conservative culture, which believes that laws protect us from chaos and violence, then the former statement is logical. If you're from a culture that views laws as having oppressed people for centuries, to the benefit of White people, then the latter statement is logical.

And that's the key. By understanding—*standing within*—the logic of another person, we can accept them as fully human, a person for whom we may feel compassion even if we cannot agree with their claim.

We can see, too, that with difficult issues, like the "law and order" example, we still have a lot of work to do if we want to get to peace. We would have to look at the cultural logics that give rise to the premises to unpack the phrase "law and order" and connect it to evidence. That would require some very careful thinking and a lot of goodwill.

Ultimately, what Ratcliff and other rhetorical theorists who study listening and conversation show us is that the intent to understand others in a humanizing way can lead to a common understanding of differences that do not lead to discord and violence. We can ask, with goodwill and the intent to understand, question after question to develop a fuller picture, for both ourselves and the speaker, of the cultural logics that makes a statement such as "Trump stands for law and order" mean two diametrically opposed things at the same time and of how both can be reasonable and understood by people of goodwill.

## In Sum

Rhetoric, since Aristotle, has often been defined as "the art of persuasion." But persuasion rests upon assumptions about the speaker's role and rights relative to the other person, assumptions that seemingly dehumanize the listener, an act of violence. Nonviolent communication, by contrast, seeks to express a speaker's understanding of a situation, demanding action by observing the stimulus, recognizing a feeling, understanding the need, and making a request. The result is a nonviolent rhetorical act that allows the listener the freedom to comply or reject the request freely, thus preserving the inherent humanity of both speaker and listener. Rhetorical listening posits listening as a generative act that bridges the gap between speaker and listener by identifying commonalities and differences to uncover the cultural logics of belief systems, often expressed as enthymemes. Both nonviolent communication and rhetorical listening seek to humanize the

speaker and the listener, promoting understanding and compassion, inherent human virtues that traditional rhetoric may too often undermine.

## Extending The Conversation

### Activity 1

Talk back. Take a look at some of the key terms and practices described here and do a bit of research, possibly starting with classical rhetoric and peace. What did I get right? What did I get wrong? What do you now understand about rhetoric and your individual rights and responsibilities?

### Activity 2

Rhetorical listening requires a lot of practice to get good at—most of us do not have much experience uncovering the implied premises that lie behind a claim. A good place to start is with some of our own belief statements. For practice, write out a statement that summarizes your belief about any controversial issue and see if you can identify the implied premises and/or claims. In other words, turn the enthymeme into a syllogism. Then, explain your syllogism to a friend or classmate. Ask them to fill out the syllogism on the same issue and together discuss the differences and commonalities.

### Activity 3

Nonviolent communication (NVC) is not beyond critique. Read “Nonviolent Communication is for the Privileged” by Raffi Marhaba, who argues that NVC is victim-blaming and classist, among other things.

<https://www.collectivelyfree.org/nonviolent-communication-privileged/>

### Works Cited

Center for Nonviolent Communication. <https://www.cnvc.org/>

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