

---

## Lecture 5: The Enthymeme

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is John Shand's *Arguing Well*.

We have looked at structure, and we have seen how different structures are appropriate for different occasions and different arguments, and that part of the art of rhetoric is figuring out when to use what structure in what circumstances. Now we turn to the internal construction of arguments and, in the next two lectures, we are going to examine how to put things together piece by piece. Our real focus is going to be on *logic*, the third element of the Trivium (remember that the first element was grammar, the second rhetoric, and the third logic, but all three of these disciplines are really essential for effective rhetoric). So in this lecture we will talk about the starting points of logical arguments, and in the next lecture we will examine the different paths you can take from those starting points.

### An Essential Piece of Knowledge

This entire lecture is focused around one particular technical term, but it is so important that I think it is worth a lecture. That term is one that you very well may be hearing for the first time today, although it is an essential piece of knowledge about rhetoric: *enthymeme*.

I think so few people ever speak about enthymemes or are taught about them is because enthymeme is a scary-looking word whose pronunciation is not obvious. But it is enormously important, and because this is a Recorded Books course, you can hear the proper pronunciation in the audio version of these lectures.

At this point it is necessary to give just a little jargon from the field of logic. We will talk about this material in much more detail in the next chapter, so I will only give the bare minimum here.

Logic relies upon what are called syllogisms; think of them as chains of logical statements:

Vegetables cannot speak.

Lima beans are vegetables.

Therefore lima beans cannot speak.

That is a syllogism, and it is one of the fundamental building blocks of all arguments. Chain enough syllogisms together, and you can lead your readers where you want them to go. The official definition of an enthymeme is "a syllogism with the first major premise implied or suppressed."

Vegetables cannot speak.  
Lima beans are vegetables.  
Therefore lima beans cannot speak.

If we “suppress” the first premise of the preceding syllogism, we get:

Lima beans are vegetables.  
Therefore lima beans can’t speak.

Suppressing that particular first premise does not weaken the argument in this case. But that is true only as long as the suppressed first premise is something that we can all agree on. In fact, by suppressing it, we are saving ourselves and our audience time and energy, and audiences like that. However, trying to keep in mind “an enthymeme is a syllogism with the first major premise implied or suppressed” is, in itself, bad rhetoric because it is difficult to remember. So let us rephrase the definition: An enthymeme is the point of the argument where you lean forward, look the other person in the eye and say:

“Can’t we at least agree that . . .” and then go on from there.

“Can’t we at least agree that lima beans cannot speak.”

Yes we can, as long as you have chosen your enthymeme carefully and your audience does in fact agree with it. In rhetorical studies, much attention goes to the figures of speech, the clever witticisms and the soaring cadences of sound. These things are very rewarding to discuss (and will be taken up in subsequent lectures), but the most important thing you can do in constructing your argument is the creation of an effective enthymeme. Without an enthymeme, no real argument is possible. With the right enthymeme, you can get someone to agree to pretty much anything you want. If you have defined the starting point properly, and if you use your logic correctly, your reader or hearer will *have* to arrive at your conclusion because it will be forced upon him or her by the logic.

### Failed Enthymemes

But picking an effective enthymeme is a *lot* harder than it seems at first. In fact, a great many (maybe even most) major political rhetorical arguments, including some that have been going on for vast periods of time), are so contentious exactly *because* we cannot find a shared enthymeme. In the most bitter ongoing political arguments in America today, the pro-life people lean forward and in their most reasonable tones of voice say, “Can’t we at least agree that all human life is worthy of protection?” and the pro-choice people say, “No.” Why? Because underlying the attempt at an enthymeme is the suppressed premise that a fertilized egg or an embryo is a human life. And obviously a lot of people refuse to accept that enthymeme. Pro-choice and pro-life people have been arguing for over thirty years and they have been unable to find an acceptable enthymeme. It may be (in fact, it probably is) the case that no shared enthymeme is possible, that the argument is inherently unsolvable. The missing enthymeme is not missing for lack of trying, as thousands of essays and speeches on each side have been written, some intended to convince, others just to inspire those who already believe. But they have not had a common enthymeme.

---

Failed enthymemes underlie arguments about war, inequality, taxes, the size of government, the appropriate ways of raising children and the acceptable range of personal and sexual freedom. In all of those cases, if you look carefully, most of the arguments are going right past their intended receivers because what is being assumed to be agreed upon is not agreed upon. So the argument cannot ever move forward.

### **Working from Shared Assumptions**

The utopian solution would be for each side to try to work backward to some point at which we actually could all agree on something and then develop the arguments from there, but this is really, really, really hard. Russell and Whitehead tried to do something like this for mathematics, bringing everything back to simple, agreed-upon concepts like sets and then building things up from there. It was immensely difficult for mathematics (and has problems there) and is probably impossible for concepts that are much less clean and distinct than mathematics. One notable attempt at finding enthymemes in the face of intense disagreement is John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls' creation of "the veil of ignorance" is a very obvious attempt to say, "Can't we at least agree that . . ." Unfortunately for Rawls, even the "veil of ignorance" was unable to bring about much agreement from those with fundamentally different starting points.

However, there are very successful enthymemes in American political discourse, and you can even see these carrying the day in areas in which previous opinion was viciously divided while contemporary opinion is not (or is much less so). If you read the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., you will see that, unlike many contemporary politicians, he was a brilliant chooser of enthymemes. King had the great benefit—though it was also his great challenge—of knowing that a great many people in his audience were either skeptical or outright hostile to his claims. He thus was required to bring these people along, step by step. One way to do this is to figure out where your shared assumptions are and work from them. Let us look at his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail." In this letter, King is taking to task fellow clergymen from Alabama who had suggested that he and the people he led were moving too quickly in their efforts to end segregation. King begins with some warm-up that is not really relevant to our argument. Then, in his third paragraph, he gets down to business:

"But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid."

The enthymeme underlies the first sentence. "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here." This sentence cannot be put into a logical argument unless the reader supplies the suppressed premise "I should be where injustice is." Then the syllogism is complete:

I must go where injustice is.  
There is injustice in Birmingham.  
Therefore I am in Birmingham.

Why is this enthymeme so brilliant? Because for King's primary audience (and he was well aware that he was composing the letter for a wider audience as well), that first, suppressed premise of "I must go where injustice is" is in fact shared. And so they were from the very beginning forced to start walking down the path that King wanted them to, and therefore they would end up where he wanted them to end up. And as we might expect, they did. King's use of the enthymeme here is also very effective because it pushes his reader right past the possibly more difficult problem of showing that there was "injustice" in Birmingham. To us, after King's victory, that fact seems obvious, but it was not to everyone in King's audience. However, because that assumption (that there really *is* injustice in Birmingham—and note that King gives copious evidence for this later in the letter) is supported by a shared enthymeme, the audience was willing to accept it.

This is not to say that all enthymemes are used for good purposes. In fact, because all arguments rely upon enthymemes, there are tricky and devious ones as well as brilliant ones (and part of the way we judge is to rate the argument as a whole, not just the enthymeme). "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit" is actually an enthymeme. It presupposes a longer chain of logic:

The murderer wore the glove found at the crime scene.  
If it was the murderer's glove, then it would fit the murderer.  
My client's hands do not fit in the glove, so he cannot be the murderer.  
Because he is not the murderer, you must acquit him.

All of that chain of reasoning—with all kinds of logical gaps—is summed up by "if it doesn't fit, you must acquit." And, as testament to both the power of the enthymeme and the ineptness of the prosecution, it worked. We can admire the rhetorical facility of the lawyer who came up with "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit," but we can also (or many of us can) rue the fact that it was put toward an evil purpose. That is the two-edged sword of rhetoric, and of the enthymeme. The power of logic, the subject of our next lecture, is somewhat harder to subvert.

---

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

---

1. Why is the enthymeme such an essential piece of knowledge about rhetoric?
2. Why was the enthymeme in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" so brilliant?

### Suggested Reading

---

Shand, John. *Arguing Well*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

### Other Books of Interest

---

Aristotle. *The Art of Rhetoric*. Trans. J.H. Freese. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926.