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Plato/Freud
IDS 365

Step-by-step

Socrates claims that to be a persuasive rhetorician, you must know the truth in order to create a plausible likeness to it, that your audience will take as the truth instead. He describes the process to create a plausible likeness is through small, unnoticeable steps. I will first explore Socrates' explanation on this topic, and show how he uses that very technique while discussing that technique. Having shown that it is indeed a successful form of rhetoric, I will apply it to Freud's writing, and note how he uses language in this style to create compelling arguments, despite having little scientific evidence to back it up. I will also, finally, attempt to show how an argument ultimately falls short if any part of this style is skipped or left out.

Socrates presents his argument that persuasion must be taken in small steps and likenesses, in four consecutive and logical claims, which is what makes it a convincing argument. His first claim is that with "passing over by little steps" you will go toward what you are saying is the truth "without being noticed more than by big steps" (262a). Essentially, if you take small steps in your arguments, your listener will understand each step, and not notice the end to which you are trying to lead them, but they would if you take large steps and skip crucial explanations. Socrates next explains that for you to "deceive" another (which I interpret to mean "persuade" in this context, because they are discussing the technique of rhetoric and debate), and not be persuaded yourself, you must "precisely distinguish likeness and unlikeness of beings" (262a). Socrates is saying to persuade someone else, and not be persuaded yourself, you must be

able to recognize the likeness or the unlikeness to the “beings” – the truth of the issue in the debate – so as to know if your argument is being led astray in the debate. His third point comes as a question to Phaedrus, which he says, “will he who ignores the truth of each thing be able to distinguish the small or great likeness, of the thing that he ignores, in other things?” Interpreting “things” as “arguments” here, because they are discussing the techniques of rhetoric and debate, the question is asking will he who ignores the truth of each argument be able to recognize how other arguments either have small or great likenesses to the one that he ignores. Phaedrus answers the logical answer, which is no.

To this point, Socrates has led the reader to accept that to be persuasive, an argument must be taken in small steps that go unnoticed rather than large steps that draw attention to themselves. He then makes the claim that to persuade another, and not be otherwise persuaded, you must understand how the truths, the steps, are like or unlike the actual truth. He then implies, through a question, that if the truth is ignored, it is not possible for you to recognize other truths that are like or unlike the one that concerns you. From this sequence, he arrives at the logical conclusion that “those who form opinions contrary to the beings and are deceived, it’s clear that this experience slipped in through certain likenesses” (262b). His conclusion, in other words, given the above is true is that those who are persuaded to believe a contrary argument to their own, are clearly led to that belief through like truths that are “slipped in” through small steps. Understanding that this is Plato’s character Socrates’ truth of how effective rhetoric is applied, I will attempt to show this technique is how Freud not only provides a compelling argument,

despite his lacking scientific research to back up his findings, but how he debunks scientific beliefs using language, rather than scientific data.

In his initial discussion of inversions of sexuality, Freud uses this step-by-step technique to explain how an invert is not degenerate, despite the fact that homosexuals were commonly believed to be degenerate in the medical community. His first step is to establish the claim that inverts are degenerate is based in the scientific community. According to Freud, this term was devised by doctors who observed inversion in those who appeared to suffer from “nervous diseases” (Freud 4). He then proceeds to define what degeneracy is, in a numbered order. He says that degeneracy first must be based off several significant “deviations” from the normal, and second, “the capacity for efficient functioning and survival seem to be severely impaired” (Freud 4). Having established that inverts are degenerate is considered true in the medical community, and explaining what degeneracy is then proceeds to counter each definition in biological terms, followed with a third point discussing inversion with sociological terms. His first address is that inversion is found in patients that suffer no other deviations from normal states. Secondly, he contends that inverts’ “efficiency is unimpaired” (Freud 5) and indeed are found to have “specially high intellectual development and ethical culture” (Freud 5), using the example the spokesmen of ‘Uranism’ are “justified in asserting” that some of the most prominent historical men have been inverts, and “perhaps even absolute inverts” (Freud 5).

After refuting the two points from a biological perspective, Freud uses a sociological view to show how inverts are not degenerate people. First he argues that in ancient civilizations

inversion was a frequent occurrence and even “an institution charged with important functions” (Freud 5). Freud’s point here is that from a different perspective, inversion is treated with reverence, and uses that as proof that inversion is not an illness that is detrimental to an individual. His second point is that like ancient societies, inversion is quite common among contemporary primitive societies, and they do not consider it degeneracy like the “high civilization” of Europe, making the conclusion that it is “climate and race [that] exercise the most powerful influence on the prevalence of inversion and upon the attitude adopted towards it” (Freud 5).

Freud first identifies the link between degeneracy and inversions as a medical term, which leads him to define degeneracy. He does this in two bullet points, and proceeds to refute them in two consecutive bullet points. Finally he brings up sociological perceptions, and how it is merely Europeans’ way of looking at inversions that considers them degenerate. Through taking these small steps, Freud is able to carry the reader through his argument, and understand the logic. This is the same technique Socrates argues makes for persuasive rhetoric, and Freud uses it to get the reader to the same understanding that he has, even if he fails to convince the reader to see the argument the way he does. There is one other example of Freud’s work that I would point to, that is compelling rhetoric, though it does indeed fall short of fully convincing the reader.

Freud makes clear that “sexual” and “genital” are two terms that are often confused but quite different. Regarding the fact that thumb sucking is classified as “sexual naughtiness”

among other behaviors in day-care, Freud admits that pediatricians and other specialists often disagree, but that is “due to a confusion between ‘sexual’ and ‘genital’” (Freud 46).

Distinguishing between these two words is a subtle but crucial observation of language, upon which rests the basis of his argument for infantile sexuality. Freud identifies three distinct sexual areas within infantile sexuality, including oral, anal and genital (genital being related to sexual, though not having an exclusive relationship with it). It is the oral sexuality that I will discuss, which Freud presents as thumb-sucking.

To Freud, thumb-sucking originates in the pleasurable sucking motion the baby experiences when breast feeding. In this example, the lips are the erotogenic zone, the area which is sexually stimulated, and the milk nourishing the baby is the stimulus. The thumb-sucking is then an attempt to recall the pleasure that sucking provided (Freud). This argument may seem outrageous, especially if told out of context of his initial claim, but if you remember his initial claim that genital is not synonymous with sexual – that subtle distinction of language – you begin to see the realistic possibility of this argument, in terms of being logically valid, though perhaps not truthfully sound. The flaw Freud fails to address is the truth which he is basing this whole argument on, which is proving beyond a doubt that sexual is not just genital. If you do not buy that statement, no matter how convincing the next steps are, they will not persuade.

Socrates’ criticism would likely be that after making a claim like ‘sexual’ versus ‘genital’, Freud fails to take small steps and small likenesses to get the reader to see this is a likeness to the truth that they do believe.

Ultimately the scope of this paper has not been to convince you that all of Freud's successful use of rhetoric is based off Socrates' model of small steps and likenesses, or that even all of Freud's rhetoric *is* successful. I have set out to prove that this model does indeed work, and that there are moments that Freud uses it, and while using it, creates a compelling argument. One example selected showed that a successful use of rhetorical speaking challenged and debunked scientific understanding of its time, without scientific data. The other example showed that a compelling argument can be made through that same rhetoric style, though that it ultimately falls short of being convincing if small steps and likenesses to the truth are not used. It is easy to see then, that this mode of persuasion can be used both successfully and unsuccessfully and that the two are not mutually exclusive.