The Body as a Measure of All Things: 
An Elaboration on the Rhetorics of Normalcy

Some time ago, the class was asked to compose a MicroResponse to the question “How is taste rhetorical?” I gathered some thoughts from Hypothes.is users ahegado2 and sophist_monster to compose this answer:

“On the one hand, taste is subject to the individual, based on one’s own sensory experience and opinion. On the other hand, taste is an objective feature, something inherent in the object. For Hume, taste, "good" taste, is a function of a trained/receptive critique in relation with a thing that has particular features. Taste then emerges through that relation rather than being either subjective or objective, terms that do a lot of work behind the scenes.

In other words, taste depends not only upon the senses, but also upon established standards. Thus there is a social aspect here as well, which is one of the ways that taste is rhetorical – it is a product of the dynamic relationship between the self and the world.

There is another rhetorical concept to consider here, though: how does disability fit in with this? Illness comes up A LOT in Hume’s writing, even in calling art that has some sort of problem deformed or defective. But how can understandings of delicate taste and judgement incorporate people with varying degrees of sight, hearing, taste, smell--people who surely have a "delicacy of imagination" but encounter art differently?

I think one of the ways to consider this question would be to keep in mind the Lemos piece on norms and normalcy (as it bears upon bodies). According to Hume, “In each creature, there is a sound and a defective state; and the former alone can be supposed to to afford us a true standard of taste and sentiment. If, in the sound state of the organ, there be an entire or a considerable uniformity of sentiment among men, we may thence derive an idea of perfect beauty” (833). Much like Aristotle’s “Golden Mean,” or da Vinci’s “Vitruvian Man,” there is a standard for which a sensory experience can be judged. It can be deficient or excessive, working or not. The rhetorics of normalcy are not restricted to size and proportion, but here are expanded to bodily sensations and, consequently, judgments.”
It is that last sentence I’d like to elaborate upon here, as I am coming to understand the rhetorics of normalcy as the history of rhetoric. It should be noted that I do not define “the rhetorics of normalcy” as the norms and standards that are constructed and imposed, although that is not an unusual or unproductive way to interpret the phrase. Instead, I mean “the rhetorics of normalcy” as the messy process through which norms and standards have been constructed and imposed. In attempts to define normalcy, scientists, philosophers, and rhetoricians (everyone, really) have only introduced more questions about what we consider the be natural values, bodies, and realities. For every attempt to establish a norm, there is an equally divergent exception that must be considered. This process is, in many ways, as chaotic as the human body. So, the history of rhetoric is not the history of the normalized body, but the history of the errant body – the body as naturally fallible, aberrant, and chaotic.

In “Norm, Measure of All Things,” Sofia Lemos uncovers the process of bodily normalization as it determines architectural dimensions. The standards by which the human body has been conceptualized are always working toward the average – the normal. So, throughout history, the “anomaly is thus a mere difference in degree for which the norm will serve as metric” (Lemos). This centering of the normal calls upon the statement that “man is the measure of all things”: “Throughout history man used his own body as metric for the instruments of service to him and his built forms” (Lemos). But all of this talk about norms and bodies and anomalies and metrics assumes one thing: there is a normal against which an abnormal can be judged. There is a natural form, and therefore an unnaturalness can be determined accordingly.

This supposed discernment applies to how we conceptualize something like rhetoric, too. From the Enlightenment to the nineteenth century, thoughts on rhetoric seem to revolve around the concept of an objective “norm” or “natural.” For some, such as Locke and Hume, deviations in language and knowledge can either be corrected or disregarded. For others, particularly Nietzsche and Willard in the nineteenth century, the objective norm or natural never existed to begin with. Already, the rhetorics of normalcy are manifesting as the body in chaos. By that I mean the body of rhetorical theory – the rhetorical tradition – is not, historically, a linear response to how the body and language should be normalized. It is not a
consistent progression toward what should be determined as normal. Instead, it is spiral that unravels the layers of what it means to establish and enforce “normal.” Thus the rhetorical tradition embodies the ways the human in most naturally in a state of error.

To think through this argument, it is useful to begin in the Enlightenment. In John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Book III, “Chapter IX: Of the Imperfection of Words,”* he continues his treatise on the psychological distinction between knowledge and belief, which is “opposed to the traditional doctrines of received truth, innate ideas, and the presumption that direct knowledge is available through revelation or perception” (814). *Book III* is where he fully takes on words, criticizing the seemingly disorganized ways we use words to signify ideas and share those ideas with others: “The chief end of language in communication being to be understood, words serve not well for that end” (817). The ideas we establish are universal, because our sensory perceptions are universal. It is only when we use words incorrectly that communication breaks down.

Accordingly, his five points on the “natural causes of their imperfection” suggest that words are constantly subject to nature in one way or another. First, ideas sometimes are, by their very nature, so complex that there is no way to adequately articulate them. Second, sometimes things have no direct correlation in nature, which makes them difficult to describe. Third, the lack of natural standards keep us from regulating meanings. Fourth, words will not suffice when we can not distinguish the essential nature of a thing. And, last, when someone, by nature, does not have the sensory ability to perceive an object, they are of no concern. Already, the idea of “natural” is becoming divergent. Imperfection is natural to words.

One point of immediate importance is the disembodiment to Locke’s thinking. We can’t necessarily know an objective world; we can only know our ideas about the world, so our bodily relations with the objects we attempt to define are of no epistemological concern. Instead, to have any real and efficient knowledge, we must understand the process through which we come to understand and communicate about the world. This process begins with universal sensory perceptions and ends with determining a universal idea of the thing in question, e.g. “Tree refers not to a particular tree but to the idea we retain from reflecting upon many instances of seeing particular trees and abstracting their common features” (798). These
claims are indicative of the Enlightenment as an era characterized by revolutions in science and philosophy – revolutions that value the “natural” separations between seemingly dichotomous concepts – body and mind, subjective and objective, belief and knowledge. In the above example, there is an objective tree, and we develop ideas about it through seeing trees in order to get closer to the truth of what “tree” means. For Locke, then, subjectivity based upon bodily, sensory perceptions must be regulated to develop the most complete and efficient idea of something.

Thinkers like Locke maintain that bodily error, including sensory perception, is the exception; some people, like the deaf or blind man are abnormalities who “need not here be mentioned.” Otherwise, sensory perception is universal. We all see, hear, taste, feel, and smell the same simple objects in the same way, and we create identical ideas about these objects. It is the words that are, by nature, wrong. It follows then that Locke blames rhetoric for the mistakes; ambiguity and figurative language are the main causes for our inability to communicate efficiently. But our bodies, and our sensations, are likely to err. Our mental processes and development of ideas, then, are likely to err. And the words we use to describe these ideas are likely to err. It is not the exception, but the rule that the human body and mind will perform in a way Locke might consider “unnatural.” Perhaps, then, it is not words that are subject to “natural causes of imperfection.” Perhaps what is subject to “natural causes of imperfection” is us.

It is one thing to read Locke’s essay as an attempt to standardize language simply because our words are inadequate and our material relations to those things are irrelevant. It is another to read his Essay as a treatise setting the stage for thinking about the body as naturally aberrant, which could have significant (and productive) effects on language. One way consider this possibility is to examine how thinkers who came after Locke, such as Nietzsche, follow up on Locke’s ideas. Broadly concerning the ability to “know things,” Nietzsche seems to reiterate Locke’s assertion that we cannot “know the thing”: “The ‘thing in itself’ (which is precisely what the pure truth, apart from any of its consequences, would be) is likewise something quite incomprehensible to the creator of language” (1173). But Nietzsche’s echo abandons Locke’s search for truth. Instead of repeating the call to simplify language for
truth-telling, Nietzsche focuses in on the social operations of knowledge and language creation. He is not concerned with the search for truth, but the process through which we discern truth as a reality.

This deviation shifts Locke’s epistemological argument into an ontological investigation, but not without carrying the baggage of sensory perception. Locke’s logical process of knowledge discernment starts with the objective world, which is then understood through nerve stimuli, which is then used to create an idea, which is then arbitrarily assigned a word. Nietzsche’s *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* disrupts this logical process:

What is a word? It is the copy in sound of a nerve stimulus...To begin with, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image; first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound; second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overleaping of one sphere, right into the middle of an entirely new and different one. (1173)

Here, the process Nietzsche suggests leaves the world out altogether, instead jumping from metaphor (sensory perception (image)) to metaphor (sensory perception (sound)) and landing somewhere in the middle of a word. And this word, which is a metaphor of a metaphor of a nerve stimulus (which is a metaphor) in no way represents the thing it attempts to describe. While Locke says this is because the word is subject to “natural causes of imperfection,” Nietzsche says this is because the thing itself was never an objective reality to begin with. There was never an ideal – a normal or a natural – to measure the word against. The very first nerve stimulus was already subject to the metaphors previously assigned to it.

The absence of an objective reality here is not merely skepticism. It is in fact the acceptance of truth, but only on the condition that truth is understood as a lie built upon metaphors of metaphors of metaphors. There is no deciding between one word or another to describe more adequately the essence of a thing; there is only deciding which fiction more appropriately serves the social processes of knowledge and language creation. We do more harm, then, in assuming that we are never subject to metaphors (lies): “At bottom, what the investigator of such truths is seeking is only the metamorphosis of the world into man...His method is to treat man as the measure of all things, but in doing so he again proceeds from the error of believing he has these things [which he intends to measure] immediately before him
as mere objects” (1175-6). The belief that the world is a set of discoverable truths makes the
dangerous assumption that we, as human minds and bodies, are any stable guideline to
discover them.

Nietzsche, like Locke, presumes a certain disembodiment through his metaphorical
spiral. This is not necessarily because the body is not important, or because it bears no weight
on the meanings we create, but rather because it is unknowable:

What does man actually know about himself? Is he, indeed, ever able to perceive
himself completely, as if laid out in a lighted display case? Does nature not conceal
most things from him – even concerning his own body – in order to confine and lock
him within a proud, deceptive consciousness, aloof from the coils of the bowels, the
rapid flow of the blood stream, and the intricate quivering of the fibers! (1172)
The anonymous and autonomous functions of the body keep us from a comprehensive
understanding of what is real. So, just as we should be wary of using our ideas, values, and
truths to determine what is natural, we should also be skeptical of using our bodily operations
as a measure for what is normal.

This decentering of standardized truth or bodies makes knowledge and language
creation – rhetoric – chaotic and messy business. We can continue to work through thinkers
like Locke and Hume work to establish standards; and we can continue to assume that
Nietzsche and Willard are working to dismantle those standards. But what if we suspend the
notion that the “rhetorics of normalcy” are the standards constructed and imposed? What if
we start to understand the “rhetorics of normalcy” as the actual process through which
rhetoric itself works through/around/beyond/against/amidst/within/without the standards
and concepts of “normal” and “natural”? We don’t necessarily have to stop using man to
measure all things. We just have to understand what that process actually looks like.
Works Cited


