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REAKCJE/REACTIONS

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On tradition, criticism, and green marketing

O tradycji, krytycyzmie i zielonym marketingu

Abstract

Reviewer Frederik Appel Olsen takes issue with the approach we present in *The Virtues of Green Marketing: A Constructive Take on Corporate Rhetoric* (Palgrave Macmillan). In this response, we point out three aspects where Appel Olsen paints a misleading picture of our book. They concern a) the role of history in contemporary thinking, b) the role of Aristotle in our argumentation, and c) the legitimate place of rhetorical criticism. Thus, our response treats fundamental questions for the field of rhetoric.

Key words

green marketing, Aristotle, Plato, classical rhetoric, climate transition

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On tradition, criticism, and green marketing¹

1. Introduction

When *The Virtues of Green Marketing: A Constructive Take on Corporate Rhetoric* was published, we speculated on what potential reviewers might say. Erik Bengtson, who most clearly belongs to the field of rhetorical studies, suggested that, 'someone will surely be provoked and accuse us of having a problematic economically liberal view of society and Habermasian tendencies.' This puzzled Oskar Mossberg, who as a Swedish legal scholar noted that the same research had led more than one of his legal colleagues to, at least partly seriously, accuse him of having tendencies towards climate activism.

It is perhaps an example of situational irony that our first reviewer, who accuses us of working with an economically liberal view of society, based on a naive understanding of the norms of bourgeois discourse, is a rhetorical scholar specializing in researchers that are climate activists, albeit of a different sort.

Indeed, reviewer Frederik Appel Olsen's observation that the book is based on a liberal understanding of market economy is entirely correct (provided that such a perspective allows for significant regulation).² However, as Appel Olsen mentions, this does not mean that we push a specific ideological agenda. Instead, market economy serves as a premise. The study explores how rhetoric (within the framework of a state-regulated market economy) could contribute to a situation where green marketing supports climate transition. While we acknowledge the value of systemic criticism of a more fundamental kind, in this particular study, we wanted to explore the possibility of working towards change within the framework

1. This authors' response is essentially a translation of a Swedish language article published in *Rhetorica Scandinavica* 2024 (no. 88). Some edits and clarifications have been made for the non-Scandinavian readers of *Res Rhetorica*. The review to which we respond was also published twice. Once in English in 4/2023 *Rhetoric in Scandinavia* issue of this journal (see: Appel Olsen 2023) and once in Danish in *Rhetorica Scandinavica*.

2. Which it does. Indeed, any market presupposes a regulatory framework (cf. Mossberg 2022).

of the current system's logic and norms, attempting to harness its internal driving forces.

Our reviewer takes issue with this approach. While his view is entirely legitimate, we wish to clarify that an exigence for our study is the genuine desire of students to help various actors in society to stop greenwashing, as well as the expressed interest from climate- and environmentally-engaged individuals within the business sector who are working to improve their organizations' communication. Climate transition is not just about rhetoric, but rhetoric is still important. The framework of the virtues of green marketing aims to provide communication professionals with tools to make a difference. In these cases, we see merit in the framework being "constructive" rather than "negative" (to use the terms of the dichotomy Appel Olsen deconstructs). In consultancy roles, or as employees, it may be more effective to present a vision, and to identify areas for improvement in relation to that vision, rather than to simply find faults. That said, the ambition of the book is in no way to dismiss other perspectives. We merely seek to add another, possible, and possibly fruitful, perspective.

Below, we point out three aspects where Appel Olsen's review paints a misleading picture of our book. In short, we argue that there are elements of straw man logic in his criticism. The three aspects are:

- a) the role of rhetorical history in contemporary thinking,
- b) the role of Aristotle in our argumentation, and
- c) the legitimate place of rhetorical criticism in the field of rhetoric.

Thus, the discussion revolves around fundamental questions for the field of rhetoric, perhaps especially in its Scandinavian form. We object to the misleading presentation of our position in relation to each of these points. The reviewer's prejudiced view of our position seems, at least partly, to be based on a misunderstanding. Namely, that our book is meant to launch a new dogma for the field of rhetoric. This view overlooks the fact that we have a much more limited purpose. Finally, we address two aspects where Appel Olsen's review provides valuable perspectives.

2. The role of rhetorical history in contemporary thinking

The review frames the book as aligning with what Appel Olsen describes as a Nordic "traditionalist" approach to rhetorical scholarship. Appel Olsen claims rather dismissively that "traditionalist" scholars turn to "the wise men of Athens and Rome" and argue that "classical rhetoric" holds "timeless potential

for understanding and improving society.”³ – even though the researchers study contemporary phenomena these men “could never have imagined.” It is correct that a rhetorical-historical grounding has a strong position in the Nordic field, and that it can be problematized.⁴ Appel Olsen’s dismissive view of historically anchored research also partly corresponds to the criticism that, for example, Kathleen Welch (1990) has directed towards what she calls “the Heritage School.” However, we argue, just like Welch, that it is not necessarily problematic to do contemporary scholarship in relation to a classical heritage. There are other ways in which a tradition can be used in contemporary work than the approach the reviewer ascribes to us. One such alternative approach involves understanding the “tradition” as a contemporary construct; then the value of grappling with tradition lies not in long dead, wise mens’ potentially timeless insight. Instead, working with history becomes a way of negotiating present-day frameworks.⁵ Indeed, this is how the rhetorical tradition is used in our book. We employ three paradigms in the rhetorical tradition – criticism (associated with Plato), situationally bounded, ethically neutral rhetoric (associated with Aristotle), and the *vir bonus*-oriented *exemplum* pedagogy (associated with Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian) – to engage in disciplinary self-reflection and negotiate which narratives and perspectives are included in this tradition. This way of using the intellectual heritage within the framework of critical thinking is clearly in line with a continental philosophical, humanities tradition. This need not be a method of theoretical reflection that everyone has to like, but it is more intellectually well-reasoned than the polemically inclined reviewer presents it to be.

3. The role of Aristotle in the argumentation

In the book, we discuss how companies’ efforts to construct a green ethos can be conceptualized rhetorically. In this context, we contrast an Aristotelian understanding of ethos with an understanding of ethos in the tradition of Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian. We highlight valuable aspects of the Aristotelian approach, but we also emphasize some shortcomings and mention the need for theory

3. If no other sources are mentioned, see: Appel Olsen 2023.

4. Regarding problematic features in Scandinavia, as concerns the use of classical rhetoric, see e.g. Buhre (2014) on how an explicit use of classical rhetoric in the students’ bachelor theses were used as criteria to evaluate the quality of entire BA programs by the academic reviewers engaged by the Swedish Higher Education Authority, or Bengtson (2024b) on how claims regarding the nature of classical rhetoric were repeated in Swedish handbooks and came to shape the Swedish upper secondary school curriculum while, in reality, they were not anchored in classical sources.

5. On using the rhetorical tradition in contemporary rhetorical studies, see Bengtson (2015), and (2024a), in particular pp. 10–16 with references.

development. We are by no means alone in this, not even in the Scandinavian field.⁶ The specific deficiencies we highlight are that the Aristotelian paradigm lacks concepts to conceptualize credibility over time, and that this, combined with its separation of ethics and rhetoric,⁷ provides a poor foundation for conceptualizing the type of ethical green marketing that our project explores. The tradition of Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian is more useful for our purposes, as it integrates the *vir bonus* ideal into the understanding of rhetoric. Appel Olsen, however, thinks that we are “unfair” in our account of the Aristotelian paradigm, which is “oversimplified” and “misrepresented”. It is not entirely clear what it is, exactly, that Appel Olsen finds incorrect in our discussion of the Aristotelian understanding of ethos, but it seems our portrayal of Aristotle is perceived as being too negative. We are charged with failing to acknowledge the “strong tradition of a democratic and constructive version of Aristotle’s rhetoric” in Scandinavian rhetoric, and our criticism of Aristotle is said to lead us to “disregard” Olbrechts-Tyteca and Perelman’s new rhetoric, as we “problematize” their audience conception.

However, Appel Olsen seems to misinterpret our stance. Firstly, our argumentation concerns the specific research task in the specific book, i.e., developing a conceptualization of virtuous green marketing (the word “virtuous” should here of course be understood in the technical sense of the book). Our criticism of the Aristotelian paradigm is that it is *insufficient* for the specific purpose of the book, and that there are other perspectives that are more conducive to our objectives. We have never claimed to present a new meta-theory for the entire rhetorical field (in a 173-page book, focusing on something else). If we had done so, it would no doubt have been reasonable to demand that we consider more of the research where Aristotle has been used in various commendable ways. Further, it is simply incorrect to suggest that we “disregard” Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s *New Rhetoric*. On the contrary, we are explicitly inspired by it in our conceptualization of the audience. However, in relation to our aims, we do have some reservations about aspects of their audience conceptualization, and thus make some adjustments to avoid certain problems, in accordance with what is indeed developed in the book. In no way do we outright reject all use of Aristotelian rhetoric – for other tasks, or even for studies of green marketing (as is indeed exemplified by the fact that one of us has just published an analysis of green marketing based precisely

6. The need to go beyond an Aristotelian conception of ethos has been discussed by others in the Scandinavian field. It was for example a point reiterated during a panel on “The limits of ethos” (“Grænser for etos”) during the Nordic Conference on Rhetorical Research (NKRF8) in Swedish Örebro in October 2022. During the panel, Norwegian Kristian Bjørkdahl argued for a wider conception of ethos, while Danish scholar Hanne Roer discussed the moral dimension of ethos with Augustine as the point of reference. Norwegian Iben Brinch’s (2024) presentation, later published in *Rhetorica Scandinavica*, explicitly problematizes the Aristotelian conception of ethos.

7. Note that Aristotle’s separation of ethics and rhetoric must not necessarily be seen as a failure, or even a problem. On the contrary, e.g. Barbara Cassin (1990) has hailed it as a strength. However, in relation to the specific purposes of our book, it does become a problem, as developed in the book.

on Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's perspective).⁸ It is also somewhat ironic that the reviewer criticizes our book for being "rhetorically traditionalist", while at the same time in effect scolding us for being insufficiently respectful of the modern Scandinavian field's Aristotelian tradition. For us, however, the book has never been traditionalist. On the contrary, it is partly subversive in relation to some established notions and norms, which Appel Olsen somewhat unexpectedly rushes to defend. What is more, our discussion of the limits of the Aristotelian concept of *ethos* is not at all at odds with current developments in the Scandinavian field of rhetorical studies – quite the opposite.

4. The legitimate place of criticism – and why we don't talk about it

Appel Olsen's other major objection to how we present our results is that the book entails an "unfortunate misrepresentation" of the critical position, which he argues is "largely dismissed" in "just four pages" and portrayed as "purposeless." We strongly object to this description of our position. Indeed, after having described the dominant tradition in rhetorical research on green marketing, i.e. greenwashing criticism, we immediately affirm that: "To us, such critical approaches seem legitimate due to the innate problems of green marketing as a part of today's unsustainable form of capitalism" (Bengtson, Mossberg 2023, 15) We then emphasize that manipulative green corporate rhetoric is a significant problem and that exposing manipulative attempts is justified. In the chapter on the rhetoric of the clothing industry, we ourselves engage in criticizing greenwashing in H&M's marketing. Beyond the current book, we have produced research that clearly belongs to a critical tradition, one example being Mossberg's critical study of how certain naturalized notions in private law discourse effectively counteract sustainability interests.⁹ Evidently, we should have put more emphasis on this point, in order to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings. That said, what primarily seems to concern Appel Olsen is our connection between criticism and Plato, where we imply that the latter is a rhetorical critic *avant la lettre*. Our connection between them seems to have been read as a guilt by association argument. This is unfortunate.

Our connection between Plato and modern rhetorical criticism is not intended to undermine the legitimacy of rhetorical criticism. On the contrary, we believe the connection implies that Plato deserves more recognition within the critical rhetorical tradition. There are also several attempts at more sympathetic readings of

8. See Bengtson, Lord (2024). In his previous research, Mossberg (2020) has drawn on the New Rhetoric, utilizing it for "law and rhetoric" purposes and introducing it to a legal readership.

9. Mossberg (2022). Cf Mossberg (2020), pp. 88 et seq., especially pp. 98–110, and p. 730.

Plato in contemporary rhetorical research.¹⁰ The way we see it, Plato's discussions of deceptive public speech and its relationship to publicly disseminated truths can be seen as a form of ideology and discourse criticism. This dimension of his writings should not be dismissed just because Plato, in some works, puts an emphasis on transcendental truths.

The constructive turn in rhetorical studies that we situate the book within, is not intended to replace the dominant criticism; we can explore new forms of climate transition rhetoric and still value greenwashing criticism. What we problematize is only the *dominance* of traditional criticism.¹¹ Thus, anyone who exalts the value of criticism does not object to our position, as this is a view we gladly subscribe to. Instead, those wishing to argue against us must assert that criticism should rule alone, and that constructive studies (in the sense of studies aimed at proposing improvements) lack legitimacy. The reason we do not more extensively discuss the value and function of rhetorical criticism for climate transition, is that we see them as already established within the field and that it is not the subject of our contribution. Had we written a broader rhetoric book and claimed to more comprehensively describe rhetorical theory around green corporate rhetoric, many more perspectives would have needed to be covered. However, our book does not make these claims. Its contribution is precisely what we write in the book, namely a draft framework for the virtues of green marketing – which should be understood as one possible perspective among several legitimate alternatives.

5. The value of constitutive rhetoric and rhetorical research on the climate crisis and consumer society

Finally, we wish to acknowledge two legitimate criticisms. The first point, which we clearly sympathize with, is that the book would have benefited from incorporating more perspectives from “modern rhetorical research dealing with consumption, climate, global markets, and similar contemporary topics” in an “affectively charged consumer society in a climate crisis.” We agree that it would have been interesting to incorporate more of such contemporary research. However, it was not necessary to include it to make our point. Nonetheless, it is a reasonable observation, and we hope to have the opportunity to revisit topics such as those mentioned by Appel Olsen. In addition to being interesting in themselves, a continued discussion could contribute to further developing the virtue perspective.

10. See e.g. Kastely (2015), Bjork (2021), and Bengtson (2024b). The latter treats the epistemology of rhetoric, with a particular focus on Plato.

11. Here we sympathize with Felski (2015), who, while neither wanting nor attempting to supplant critique, as a form of scientific discourse, has pointed out its limits, and problematized its dominance.

The second point is a more significant shortcoming related to the book as a coherent whole. Appel Olsen states that what we say about constitutive rhetoric is not developed in such a way that it definitively contributes to the framework. This criticism is reasonable. We argue that constitutive rhetoric has a place in the framework, and we point out where this place is, but it is true that we do not develop the reasoning in detail. Appel Olsen also has a point when he argues there are tensions between different audience conceptions used, and that some of our “audience reasoning” seems to contradict our objections in relation to the Aristotelian paradigm. There are indeed reasons for this apparent contradiction. The primary one is that the book concerns both a culturally oriented notion of rhetoric’s function in society over time, and with the more legal/qualitative assessment of rhetorical acts that must always delineate its object in order not to violate fundamental legal safeguards. These differences and tensions between rhetoric and law – as inviting broader and narrower framings respectively – do deserve an in depth discussion. We acknowledge this, and while we did not fully explore these aspects within the scope of this book, navigating them is part of what we are currently working on – not only in relation to constitutive rhetoric, but as a key interdisciplinary challenge in Law and Rhetoric research.

In conclusion, several of Appel Olsen’s objections seem to be based on a wish that we had done more; nuanced further; incorporated more perspectives. We take this as confirmation that our object of study – corporate green rhetoric – warrants more research. And we wish to continue contributing. At the moment, we are working on more delimited case studies of commercial rhetoric, as well as on analyses of both case law and legislation. Hopefully, more rhetoricians – with different approaches – will join us.

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