

Rhetoric: The Power of Persuasion

I am fascinated by the study of rhetoric. I love understanding the many ways to manipulate others to feel that which they otherwise would not. I nurture this hobby of mine out of self-defense, for the past century of marketing has brought a variety of rhetorical tricks to the forefront of our lives. The use of manipulative language and images is so pervasive that there can hardly exist a person who is unaware of the rhetorical trickery employed by big name brands to convince you to buy, buy, buy.

Some tricks are more effective than others. Associating sex with a product works well, because it bypasses critical thought. Through the clever use of images, it can be implied that if one buys this product, then one will have fantastic sex! This trick is so effective, it can be used to boost the sales of things like [men's underwear](#), or [cappuccinos](#), products no one could ever honestly believe would increase their chance of having sex with an attractive partner.

What makes this form of advertising work is the viewer's willingness to sub-consciously believe what they know is false. Asked straight up, a man would admit that he doesn't believe buying a new pair of underwear will in any way result in him having sex with a supermodel. And yet, these advertisements boost sales.

People can be subtly manipulated to behave 'as if' a falsehood were true. This is what rhetoric and advertising is all about. Subtly deceiving others in order to persuade them.

Many advertising techniques work like this, but their effect is limited. For example, asking someone to explain why they want a product can cause them to realize they want the product because of the pleasing falsehoods implied in its advertising: it'll make me 'cool' or 'popular' or 'attractive.'

But there is a far more powerful method for manipulation. One uniquely resistant to efforts to counteract its effects.

The Misery of Manipulation

In 1949, George Orwell wrote [1984](#) and struck at the heart of rhetoric. Orwell identified the most powerful and enduring method of branding known to man, but it is not new. It is a technique that has been understood and used for thousands of years.

It is nearly unshakable, once its viewer has bought the message.

Let me show you.

In [1984](#), a man named [Winston](#) resists the rhetoric of the totalitarian government [Big Brother](#). [O'Brien](#), an agent of the Party, is determined to make of Winston a believer in Big Brother, and O'Brien understands the foundation of manipulation. Of persuasion. Of power over others.

Using images and language to establish subtle connections between unrelated things, like buying underwear and sleeping with supermodels, is amateur work. There is a technique which can convince anyone to believe in anything. Even Big Brother.

Watch.

"You believe that reality is something objective, external, existing in its own right. ... Do you remember," [O'Brien] went on, "writing in your diary, 'Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two makes four'?"

"Yes," said Winston.

"O'Brien held up his left hand, its back toward Winston, with the thumb hidden and the four fingers extended. "How many fingers am I holding up, Winston?"

"Four."

"And if the Party says that it is not four but five--then how many?"

"Four."

Winston is tortured at this point, for he has given the wrong answer. Orwell understands that the surest defense against being manipulated to believe that which one would not otherwise, is to 'believe that reality is something [objective](#), external, existing in its own right.'

Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities, as Voltaire says.

Following the torture, as the pain recedes from Winston's mind, he cries out,

"How can I help seeing what is in front of my eyes? Two and two are four."

"Sometimes, Winston. Sometimes they are five. Sometimes they are three. Sometimes they are all of them. You must try harder."

Winston is tortured unmercifully for another 22 pages. His belief that reality is something objective is attacked by O'Brien's [naked assertions](#) that whatever he says is true, is.

Winston loses.

Orwell illustrates for us the breaking point of Winston. It is the moment when he rejects reality, which has become uncomfortable, for a comforting lie. This is the moment when the crudest, most basic form of manipulation triumphs over man.

It is a painful moment for us to watch because...

[Winston] sat down on the plank bed, his back against the wall and the slate on his knees ... the pencil felt thick and awkward in his fingers. He began to write down the thoughts that came into his head. He wrote the first in large clumsy capitals:

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY.

Then almost without a pause he wrote beneath it:

TWO AND TWO MAKE FIVE.

But then there came a sort of check. His mind, as though shying away from something, seemed unable to concentrate. He knew that he knew what came next, but for the moment he could not recall it. When he did recall it, it was only by consciously reasoning out what it must be; it did not come of its own accord. He wrote:

GOD IS POWER.

He accepted everything. ... The arithmetical problems raised ... by such a statement as "two and two make five" were beyond his intellectual grasp. It needed also a sort of athleticism of mind, an ability at one moment to make the most delicate use of logic and at the next to be unconscious of the crudest logical errors.

...because it is familiar. We can recognize it. In our own lives.

Religious Rhetoric

You may be thinking of the capuccino ad, but that's small potatoes. Implying a known falsehood is nowhere near as effective as explicitly asserting one, and then having it believed. I could boost the sales of coffee by making one subconsciously *entertain* the belief that coffee will get one laid, but why stop there?

If I can get one to accept any absurdity (such as two and two make five), then my power is limitless. I can take one's money, life, and happiness; and I can mercifully bestow those gifts as well. If it is accepted that two and two make five when I say it does, then there will be no reason to deny that when I say it is best to [murder one's children](#), [it is](#).

The most powerful method for persuading another person is to convince that person that reality is not real. Once a man or woman accepts a single thing that they know is unacceptable, they become incapable of effectively resisting any rhetorical suggestion.

The world is filled with ordinary people who are no different from what Winston becomes. There are many who accept without hesitation that the arithmetical problems raised by such a statement as 'two and two make five' are beyond their intellectual grasp. Except for them, to be specific, the arithmetical problems are raised by the statement one is equal to three, and three equal to one. The O'Brien behind this manipulation is not a corporate advertiser, and it isn't the government.

It is Christianity which makes this statement.

Father, Son, and Holy Ghost -- three distinct persons who are simultaneously one God (Christianity is monotheistic, right?)-- the Holy Trinity. This is the [Christian doctrine](#) which appears to lie at the foundation of the Christian church. As it says in the Bible,

For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. ([John 5:7-8](#))

and,

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. ([John 3:16](#))

Father and his only begotten Son, two separate entities, as well as the Holy Ghost! and yet these three are one.

Newcomers to Christianity are told that the divine truth of the Holy Trinity is difficult to grasp because of man's limited nature. God is mysterious and beyond comprehensibility. Those who have a hard time accepting that one is equal to three, in short, are told that the arithmetical questions raised by the assertion are beyond their intellectual grasp.

This is not a new realization. Even before Orwell's *1984* the reality-denying tactic of manipulation practiced by religion was well understood. In the late 1800s, [Ivan Turgenev](#) wrote:

"Whatever a man prays for, he prays for a miracle. Every prayer reduces itself to this: Great God, grant that twice two be not four."

Torture

No sane person accepts with ease the proposition that one is equal to three. Very few will willingly give up their sense of an objective reality external to themselves without some coercion. Winston was tortured by a machine for a full twenty-two pages before he agreed to concede. If it's so hard to convince someone reality is not objective, how does Christianity do it?

The same way O'Brien does it.

One who disbelieves the assertion that one is three is assured:

But the fearful, and **unbelieving**, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death. ([Revelation 21:8](#))

Facing this torture, one may ask, as Winston does, "How can I help seeing what is in front of my eyes?" One is not three, and three is not one. But no less an authority than Jesus Christ himself, speaking his message of love, instructs us that it is better to self-mutilate a body part which causes disbelief in Him than risk Hell:

And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that **never** shall be quenched ([Mark 9:43](#))

Christianity hides nothing. You can practically hear O'Brien's voice as he agrees, it *is* better to go into life maimed, with a mutilated sense of reality.

A mere twenty-two pages of burning pain was enough to break Winston. It is no surprise that an eternity of burning flame is enough to break most Christians.

Variations on a Theme

To be fair, not all Christians trade their reality for the absurdity of the Trinity.

There are sects of Christianity which variously deny the divinity of Jesus Christ, rate him as a lesser divine being, or understand that he is merely an incarnation of God. However, in Christianity the Holy Trinity is not the only gross manipulation of the same type as "two and two make five." Christianity would not be so persuasive if it had but one method for denying an objective reality.

Belief in a virgin mother carrying a child to term requires the belief that a woman can get pregnant without being impregnated. Belief in original sin, and therefore the need to be forgiven and accept Christ as savior, requires the belief that a man is responsible for things which happened before he was born. These beliefs, and others, are internally inconsistent. They are the equivalent of saying a round square is triangular. Or two and two make five. Grammatically, they are sensible, but to accept what they say one must give up reality.

The coercion is not limited to threat of hellfire. In considering whether a belief in the Christian God is a good choice, one will encounter shocking psychological abuse.

The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good.
([Psalm 14:1](#))

An unbeliever who finds him or herself considering Christianity will find it made clear in no uncertain terms that atheists are corrupt, abominable, [incapable of doing any good](#). If a mother were to use these words on her child in an effort to bully him into agreeing with her, she would be accused of emotional abuse. And rightly so.

Why is it tolerated in the Bible?

These rhetorical tricks, among others, are found in most religions. Religion masks nothing in its explicit request that its audience give up the belief "that reality is something objective, external, existing in its own right." And when that happens, it becomes impossible to distinguish reality from deception. When it is accepted that one equals three *when the Church says it does*, then it is also accepted that any reality may be false when convenient for the Church.

It is exploitative when cappuccino advertisers expect you to implicitly accept that drinking their beverage will have any impact on your sex life. It is immoral when O'Brien expects Winston to say two and two make five.

It's no different when religion does it.

The True Power of Rhetoric

To a person who is like Winston before his tortures, what has been written here may seem simple and straightforward. In a storybook like *1984* it is clear that two and two make four, and O'Brien is being a manipulative jerk. Likewise, the parallel between Big Brother and Christianity is apparent. The fact that Christianity cites divine mystery as the reason for the violation of reality is not a difference -- O'Brien does the same thing. "GOD IS POWER," and all that.

The power of this rhetorical trick is only fully realized when a person who is like Winston *after* the tortures reads something like this. For such a person, it will still be simple and straightforward that two and two make four, and that O'Brien is a manipulative jerk. That isn't difficult.

The difficulty will come in recognizing the parallel to their own situation. Because such a person has already denied an objective reality external to themselves, because such a person has already accepted that sometimes one is equal to three, this person will believe *their* belief is not as flawed as Winston's. After all, they have a *good* explanation for why one is equal to three. God said so. A personal revelation proved to them, subjectively, that reality can be violated at will, in spite of the lack of any objective, external evidence. For such a person, what is true for them is different from [what is true for anyone else](#). Objective truth is contingent on what God says. Or as O'Brien puts it, sometimes two and two make five. Sometimes.

The mental convictions of such a person are identical to [doublethink](#). In short, doublethink is:

Holding two contradictory beliefs simultaneously and without contradiction.

This is the "mental athleticism" Orwell refers to in describing Winston's new state of mind. It is

an ability at one moment to make the most delicate use of logic and at the next to be unconscious of the crudest logical errors.

Doing this is not contradictory if one accepts that there is no objective reality. Thus one is able to both sincerely understand that O'Brien's assertion that two and two make five is absurd and harmful to Winston, and simultaneously sincerely understand that the Church's assertion that one is equal to three (or any other absurdity) is perfectly reasonable, true, and beneficial.

Revelation

I hope you will not be surprised to find that an essay about the powers of rhetoric in advertising is, in fact, trying to sell you something. I am not opposed to a belief in a Deity or a Creator -- so long as one has empirical, objective evidence.

It is possible to be deeply religious and spiritual in a beautiful, [atheistic tradition](#) thousands of years old -- so long as one rejects the empirically unsound beliefs. It is possible to believe in a Creator or multiple Gods without sacrificing the freedom of reality, although these gods would likely be metaphorical in nature, like Spinoza's god.

I want others to have the strength to choose an uncomfortable truth over a comforting lie. I am selling the [red pill](#). I am selling the self-awareness to identify manipulative rhetoric, and to know how it affects you. I want to [learn more about reality](#), and I need help. [G.K. Chesterton](#) wrote,

There is a thought that stops thought. That is the only thought that ought to be stopped.

That thought is the thought that denies the existence of an objective reality. I will stop that thought.

I stand opposed to any organization, without exception, which employs dehumanizing manipulation to coerce belief. I oppose this prophecy:

If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face--forever.

and wherever I see a stamping boot, I will set myself before it.

Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows.

Some reference information:

The scenes quoted from George Orwell's *1984* can be found on pages 205-228. The final two sentences of this essay is a quote from *1984*. It is what Winston wrote in his diary that marked him for destruction.

Of course, just because a grossly unethical and manipulative tactic is used to argue a point does not mean that point is wrong. Just because a religion asks you to play Winston to their O'Brien, that doesn't mean they are necessarily wrong. It makes the speaker awfully suspect, but is a [belief in God](#) nonetheless desirable?