



For just as all kinds of produce are not provided by every country, and as you will not succeed in finding a particular bird or beast, if you are ignorant of the localities where it has its usual haunts or birthplace, as even the various kinds of fish flourish in different surroundings, some preferring a smooth and others a rocky bottom, and are found on different shores and in diverse regions . . . so not every kind of argument can be derived from every circumstance, and consequently our search requires discrimination.

—Quintilian,  
*Institutes* V x 21

## THE COMMON TOPICS AND THE COMMONPLACES: FINDING THE AVAILABLE MEANS

PERHAPS THE SYSTEM of invention most often associated with ancient rhetoric is the topics (Greek *topos*, “place”) or commonplaces (Latin *locis communis*). The word *place* was originally meant quite literally. Lists of topics were first written on papyrus rolls, and students who were looking for a specific topic unrolled the papyrus until they came to the place on the roll where that topic was listed. Later, this graphic meaning of place was applied conceptually to mean a linguistic or intellectual source or region harboring a proof that could be inserted into any discourse where appropriate. Even later, the terms *topic* and *place* referred to formal or structural inventive strategies, like definition, division, or classification (see the chapter on sophistic topics for more information about the formal topics).

Ancient rhetoricians often described the places as though they were hidden away somewhere. Quintilian, for example, defined the topics as “the secret places where arguments reside, and from which they must be drawn forth” (V x 20). Just as hunters and fishermen need to know where to look for specific kinds of prey, rhetoricians need to be skilled at tracking down suitable proofs. Quintilian’s students must

have used the topics much as hikers use trail markers—to point them in the right direction through the wilderness of all possible proofs. As Cicero wrote to his friend Trebatius, “It is easy to find things that are hidden if the hiding place is pointed out and marked; similarly if we wish to track down some argument we ought to know the places or topics” (*Topics*, I 7).

There are two ancient terms for these features of ancient rhetorical theory because ancient rhetors spoke both Greek and Latin. We will take advantage of this duality by using the terms *commonplace* and *topic* to mean different things, even though the terms were used interchangeably in ancient thought. We use the term *commonplace* to refer to statements that regularly circulate within members of a community. We adopt the term *topic*, on the other hand, to refer to any procedure that generates arguments, such as definition and division or comparison and contrast. For ancient rhetoricians, commonplaces and topics existed in the issues that concerned the community and in the structures of the languages they spoke. That is why the places were called *common*—they were available to anyone who spoke or wrote the language in which they were couched and who was reasonably familiar with the ethical and political discussions taking place in the community. And because the commonplaces yield propositions and proofs drawn from daily discussion and debate—the common sense of a community—they cannot easily be separated from consideration of political, ethical, social, economic, and philosophical issues.

### ARISTOTLE’S TOPICAL SYSTEM

The topical system delineated in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* is tightly bound to the system of logical proofs that he erected in his treatises on logic, dialectic, and poetry as well as those on rhetoric and the topics. These treatises taken together reveal in great detail his assumptions about how language can be put to work as a heuristic, a method of finding proofs to use when debating any issue. Like the sophistic topics, Aristotle’s topics comply with intellectual assumptions that are far distant in time and space from our own. Thus they display the foreignness of ancient rhetorical thought more graphically than many of its other features. Nevertheless, Aristotle’s topical system is still useful when it is updated to account for the commonplaces used in contemporary ideologies.

One of Aristotle’s contributions was to devise a classification scheme for rhetorical topics that had been in circulation for many years. He divided them into two kinds: those that were suited to any argument at all (the *koina* or **common topics**), and those that belonged to some specific field of argument (the *eide*, or **special topics**; *Rhetoric* I ii 21). Aristotle thought that the common topics were universal; that is, they could be used to ferret out arguments about anything whatever. The special topics, on the other hand, dealt with specific arts and sciences. Aristotle delineated a great many special topics belonging to fields of discourse such as politics, ethics, and law. The special topics of politics, for example, are “finances, war and peace, national defense, imports and exports,

and the framing of laws" (*Rhetoric* I iv 7; Kennedy 1991, 53). We postpone our discussion of the special topics until later in this chapter.

## THE COMMON TOPICS

Aristotle's three common topics are

1. Whether a thing has (or has not) occurred or will (or will not) occur
2. Whether a thing is greater or smaller than another thing
3. What is (and is not) possible

For simplicity's sake we refer to these topics here as **conjecture, degree, and possibility**. You will note some conceptual overlap with the questions of stasis. That is not surprising because ancient teachers of rhetoric were eclectic; they adopted any useful teaching tactic that came to hand without being careful to distinguish the several sophistic traditions from each other or from Aristotelian thought. We thought it important to retain the term *conjecture* even at the risk of some confusion between systems of invention, because it best conveys the specific meaning that ancient teachers conveyed when speaking about things or events perceived in the world—that they are guesses or surmises rather than empirically verifiable facts.

For purposes of demonstration, in what follows we use the common topics as heuristics to discover the wide range of arguments that are available on any issue. Our analysis will demonstrate that if rhetors examine all available arguments raised by the topics, they will come across arguments that follow from their position that may be distasteful to them. In other words, rhetors who use the topics vigorously and thoroughly must be prepared to turn up arguments they do not like. Warning: thorough examination of an issue has been known to cause rhetors to change their minds.

### The Common Topic of Past and Future Fact (Conjecture)

The English word *fact* is ordinarily used to translate the Greek term for *conjecture*. However, the facts that can be uncovered by this commonplace are not irrefutable physical facts in the contemporary sense; rather, they are educated guesses about something that probably took place in the past or present or about something that will take place in the future. For example, when the *Farmers' Almanac* predicts a cold winter, that is a future conjecture; history is past conjecture. All science fiction is conjecture, whether it is set in past, present, or future. The topic of past conjecture is useful in courtrooms, where it is often necessary to speculate about whether something happened or did not happen, whereas the topic of future conjecture is often used in deliberative assemblies, such as state legislatures, which have the responsibility to make policy that will be binding

Contemporary rhetors resort to the topic of conjecture to describe the way things are: how people typically behave; what communities believe; how the world works. Such conjectures may include portraits of a community's history (past conjecture), as well as pictures of its future (future conjecture). Proponents of a given political position can use this topic to argue that certain features of a given society exist, whereas others don't. For instance, proponents of the current state of economic affairs can conjecture that even though the national economy is not as strong as it previously was, it is still functioning: the stock market has not closed, and inflation has been held at bay. Critics of the current state of affairs, on the other hand, can conjecture that the stock market is not the best predictor of economic health and that the level of unemployment, which is a more accurate indicator, is high.

Here are some questions to consider about the conjectures that motivate arguments in which you are interested:

### The Common Topic of Conjecture

What exists?

What does not exist?

What is the size or extent of what exists?

How did things used to be (past conjecture)?

How will things be in the future (future conjecture)?

Strange as it may seem, rhetors often disagree vigorously about what exists and how extensive it is. For example, in 2010 the U.S. Congress debated passage of a health care reform bill. Arguments about the proposed bill were lively, to say the least. Sarah Palin, a former candidate for the vice presidency of the United States, posted the following note on Facebook:

The America I know and love is not one in which my parents or my baby with Down Syndrome will have to stand in front of Obama's "death panel" so his bureaucrats can decide, based on a subjective judgment of their "level of productivity in society," whether they are worthy of health care. (<http://www.factcheck.org/2009/08/palin-vs-obama-death-panels>)

Apparently, Palin referred to section 1233B of the legislation, which permits Medicare to pay for end-of-life counseling once every five years. A few days later, President Barack Obama said the following:

The rumor that's been circulating a lot lately is this idea that somehow the House of Representatives voted for "death panels" that will basically pull the plug on grandma . . . this arose out of a provision in one of the House bills that allowed Medicare to reimburse people for consultations about end-of-life care, setting up living wills, the availability of hospice, et cetera. So the intention of the members of

Congress was to give people more information so that they could handle issues of end-of-life care when they're ready, on their own terms. It wasn't forcing anybody to do anything. (<http://www.factcheck.org/2009/08/palin-vs-obama-death-panels>)

So here we have two very different conjectures about the very same proposal. As we said, rhetors often disagree vigorously about what exists and what it means.

From an ethical point of view, it is important to determine which of these conjectures is more accurate. A reading of the actual bill supports Obama's claim; in fact, there are specific provisions in section 1233 noting that the health care reform act does not require anyone to do anything regarding advanced planning care, whereas another provision forbids doctors to counsel suicide or assisted suicide ([http://docs.house.gov/rules/health/111\\_ahcaa.pdf](http://docs.house.gov/rules/health/111_ahcaa.pdf) [643–44]). Sad to say, though, the truth status of conjectures is often beside the point for people who accept them. People believe conjectures are true because they fit into, and affirm, a worldview—an ideology or system of beliefs. What is important for rhetors, then, is (a) to understand the commonplaces deployed in a conjecture and how they are implicated in ideological positions, and (b) to determine the actual or potential effects of each conjecture to decide which causes the least public harm.

Oddly enough, past conjectures are often hotly debated. For example, two versions of the Civil War are in circulation—the one accepted by most historians, and one called the Lost Cause. People who accept the Lost Cause reading of the Civil War call that conflict “The War of Northern Aggression” or “The War Between the States” to deny the claim of the competing conjectures that the South began the war by firing on Fort Sumter and that the war was fought to hold the federal union together. Historians claim that the war was caused by a disagreement over slavery; proponents of the Lost Cause say the war was fought to ensure states' rights.<sup>1</sup> The conjecture put forward by historians blames the southern states for seceding from the union to preserve slavery, whereas the Lost Cause narrative puts the blame for a costly civil war squarely on the northern states' insistence that federal laws and the union itself take precedence over the desires of individual states.

### The Common Topic of Greater/Lesser (Degree)

Aristotle anchored his discussion of the topic of greater and lesser in his notion of the golden mean. We know that which is great, he wrote, **when it is compared to the normal; likewise for that which is small (I vii 1363b). “Greater” and “smaller” are always relative to each other: greatness can be measured by the fact that it exceeds something else, whereas smallness is always exceeded by something else.**

The relation of these terms is easy enough to illustrate with examples from the physical world: if the average person is about five feet four inches tall, then the average basketball player will be taller because this class of people is marked to some extent by the requisite of tallness (the average height in the NBA is six feet, six inches; in the WNBA the tallest players average around six feet, five inches).

More difficult, and more interesting, applications of the topic of degree occur when we move to the realm of values. To call someone “a great leader” implies a norm against which greatness is measured—the average or middling leader and the bad leader. That these are conjectures, as well, is indicated by the controversy they can engender. Historians and media pundits often debate into which of these categories former American presidents fall. Polls of ordinary American citizens generally rank President Ronald Reagan as a good or great leader, whereas historians, on the other hand, rate his presidency as middling ([http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544\\_162-20009531-503544.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20009531-503544.html)). President Jimmy Carter's stock was very low when he left office, but it has risen in recent years, so much so that currently there is general agreement that he was at least an average leader. Usually President Richard Nixon is ranked as a bad leader, although he has his defenders. More often we hear presidents of other countries conjectured as bad leaders—Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Muammar al-Gaddafi of Libya are currently in bad odor among American media pundits, for example.

Ancient Athenian citizens apparently agreed on a list of common public values. **At any rate, ancient rhetoric texts regularly list goodness, justice, honor, and expediency as important values.** Although these terms obviously do not mean the same thing to us as they meant to ancient rhetors and teachers, we can still use them to name values that are commonly cited in our own public discourse. Certainly, contemporary rhetors often try to establish that their position is good, just, honorable, or expedient. These values can be phrased in terms of their opposites, as well—what is bad, unjust, dishonorable, or inexpedient. Using the topic of degree, rhetors can conjecture something as less good, less honorable, less just, and so on. Or, rhetors can weigh values against one another; although something may be good or just, it may not be expedient. We saw an example of this in the chapter on stasis, where the people of Florida were asked to weigh better educational outcomes against economic good sense.

**We included a list of contemporary values in a rhetorical exercise in the chapter on stasis. They are** beauty, bravery, courage, discipline, efficiency, excellence, fame, fitness, friendship, generosity, race, happiness, honesty, independence, industry, integrity, kindness, liberty, loyalty, maturity, originality, popularity, preparedness, respect, selflessness, self-reliance, tolerance, trustworthiness, wealth, wisdom, and zeal. **Of course, these are not the only values that are widely held today, but because they are commonly held to be worthy, contemporary rhetors can appeal to them to support arguments.** For example, rhetors can attribute courage and loyalty to people who agree with them, and at the same time attribute cowardliness and disloyalty to their opponents. Or, using the topic of degree, rhetors can conjecture that some person or group is more loyal, or more honorable, than some other person or group. Or, rhetors can argue that some state of affairs is better, more just, more honorable, or more expedient than another, or less so. Using the topic of degree they can also argue that changes in these values have occurred over time: some state of affairs is less good than it used to be, or will deteriorate in the future.

To return to an economic example we used in discussing conjecture: Using the topic of degree, all parties in a discussion may argue that it

economic situation is not good compared to that of the recent past; however, they may disagree about whether or not this is relatively a good, just, honorable, or expedient state of affairs. For example, a proponent of the current state of affairs can argue that a recession is better than a depression because most people are still employed and can feed and clothe their families, thus stimulating the economy by spending. A critic of the current state of affairs, on the other hand, can use the same topic to argue that anything good that results from economic decline is negatively offset by the fact that the very rich profit far more in periods of decline than do the poor and middle classes.

As this example demonstrates, the topic of greater/less can be applied generally or selectively: a rhetor can argue that what is good for one segment of the community is good for all; or he can argue that what is good for one group isn't necessarily good for everyone, or isn't good for other groups in the community.

### The Common Topic of Degree

- What is greater than the mean or norm.
- What is lesser than the mean or norm.
- What is relatively greater than something else.
- What is relatively lesser than something else.
- What is good, just, beautiful, honorable, enjoyable, etc.
- What is better, more just, etc.
- What is less good, less just, etc.
- What is good, etc. for all persons.
- What is good, etc. for a few persons or groups.
- What has been better, etc. in the past.
- What will be better, etc. in the future.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton adopted the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," policy, which mandated that gay men and lesbians could serve in the U.S. military only if they kept their sexual orientation secret. Clinton installed this measure as a compromise with an older regulation that denied gay people the right to serve in the military altogether. DADT was itself repealed by the U.S. Congress in 2010.

Using only a few of the topics yielded by degree, we quickly came up with propositions concerning this issue. A rhetor who wished to support repeal of DADT could argue as follows:

- More gay people will want to serve in the military if they can serve openly (greater than the norm).
- DADT is bad for national security because gay soldiers can be blackmailed if they are forced to keep their orientation a secret (what is bad).
- Forcing people to deny their identities is not just (what is worse).

A rhetor who opposed repeal could argue from the following topics of degree:

- Straight people in the military may feel less secure if they know they serve with gays (what is less good for a group).
- Although DADT was unjust, it was less unjust than the total ban that preceded it (what was less good in the past).
- In the military, unit cohesion is more important than individual security; cohesion would be threatened by the repeal of DADT (what is more important).

As you can see, the topic of degree is extremely flexible, and hence, it is useful as a heuristic.

### The Common Topic of Possible/Impossible

Rhetors resort to the topic of possible/impossible to establish that change either is or isn't possible, now or in the future. For example, proponents of the current economic state of affairs might use this topic to argue that it is impossible for inflation to occur during a period of gradual economic decline. Critics can argue the opposite position—that it is possible for inflation to occur at such times. Rhetors using this topic can argue that it is impossible for the economy to become unstable today, but it might become so in six months or a year. A critic, on the other hand, can argue that it is entirely possible that current economic strategies will bring about instability in the marketplace. Use of this topic also admits degrees of possibility or impossibility. Although it may not be possible to stabilize economic prosperity for all groups, it may be more (or less) likely that this can be done in the future.

Strange as it may seem, rhetors can also argue about past possibilities: anthropologists do this when they argue about whether it was possible for some hypothetical set of events to have occurred in the past—Was it possible for *Homo sapiens* to have developed a larger brain without an opposable thumb? Without an upright posture? Writers of popular nonfiction are especially fond of the commonplace of the past possible: Is it possible that an extraterrestrial vehicle crashed in the desert around Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947? Is it possible that President John F. Kennedy was killed not by a lone assassin but by a band of conspirators?

### The Common Topic of Possibility

- What is possible.
- What is impossible.
- What is more or less possible.
- What is possible in the future.
- What is impossible in the future.

What was possible in the past.

What was impossible in the past.

There are, no doubt, other ways to pose questions under the topic of possibility, but these should suffice to get you started.

Let's use a relatively simple issue to illustrate how this topic might work for a rhetor who wishes to generate an argument that his favorite NFL team—say, the New York Jets—will go to the Super Bowl.

It is possible that the Jets will get to the Super Bowl because their quarterback is finally healthy, and they have a great defense (what is possible).

It is impossible that they can be beaten by the three remaining teams on their schedule, all of whom have terrible records (what is impossible).

It is possible that the Jets could be overtaken by the Ravens, who are also 10–4, but the Ravens play a very difficult schedule from here on out (what is more or less possible).

It is possible that the Jets' star receiver will recover from his injuries in time for the playoffs, and if he does, the Jets will be very hard to beat (what is possible in the future).

It is not possible for the Jets to lose once they get into first round of the playoffs because they beat the other teams playing in that round during the regular season (what is impossible in the future).

It is possible that the Jets will make the playoffs, because they are currently 10–4, which in the past has been good enough gain a wild card berth (what was possible in the past).

The topic of the possible and impossible is particularly useful with issues that depend on the outcome of current debate, such as energy policy, gun laws, gay rights, environmental legislation, Social Security, and yes, the Super Bowl.

## COMMONPLACES AND IDEOLOGY

Contemporary rhetoricians have a way of speaking about **the *sensus communis*, the common sense that is shared among members of a community: they call it ideology.** As we suggested in the first chapter of this book, ideologies are bodies of beliefs, doctrines, familiar ways of thinking that are characteristic of a group or a culture. They can be economic, ethical, political, philosophical, or religious. When we call someone a capitalist or a socialist, we assume that she subscribes to a set of coherent beliefs about the best way to structure an economy. If we say that someone is a Christian, Muslim, or Jew, we imply that he holds a recognizable set of religious values. If we describe someone as a conservative or as a liberal, we imply that her political practices are guided by a distinct set of beliefs about human nature. If we refer to someone as a feminist or an environmentalist,

**we imply that his ethical, economic, social, and political practices are governed by a coherent philosophical position.** Capitalism and socialism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism, conservatism and liberalism, feminism, and environmentalism are examples of ideologies.

As the preceding examples illustrate, some ideologies are more sweeping than others, some are highly respected in given cultures, and some are older or more powerful than others. In rhetoric, the power of an ideology is measured by the degree to which it influences the beliefs and actions of relatively large groups of relatively powerful people. Ideologies that are subscribed to by large groups of people are called "dominant" or "hegemonic" (from Greek *hegemon*, "prince" or "guide"). Ideologies subscribed to by small or marginalized groups are called "subordinate" or "minority." The relations between dominant and subordinate ideologies are complex, and they change over time. Fifty years ago, for example, environmentalism influenced the discourse and practice of only a few people; it was a distinctly subordinate or minority discourse in America. In the process of gaining wider support, environmentalism has challenged the hegemony of other, far more powerful discourses—chiefly those of individualism and capitalism. It has not yet succeeded in becoming a dominant ideology precisely because it calls into question hegemonic discourses that are central to American thought. Environmentalism has not had much impact on the discourse of individualism, for example, as is attested by the resistance Americans have shown to buying smaller, energy-conserving vehicles and to cutting back on the amount of driving they do. This too is changing rapidly, however, now that Americans are beginning to realize that earth's remaining sources of oil are buried beneath countries that are not always friendly toward the United States.

Even more confusing, several ideologies can be referred to by a single term: there are varieties of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, just as there are different kinds of feminism and environmentalism. All are subscribed to with varying degrees of faithfulness by people who are influenced by them. Some ideologies are so pervasive, or have been in place for so long, that the people who subscribe to them seldom actually articulate the beliefs that constitute them. "To articulate" can mean both "to speak" and "to connect to nearby things or concepts," and we hope that our readers will keep both meanings in mind when we use this word. As a general rule, the need to articulate deeply held ideological beliefs comes about only when some new ideological construct challenges an older one. Such is the case currently with sustainability, which, as we suggested earlier, has begun to challenge the importance of some American dietary, consumption, and travel practices.

To add to the confusion, commonplaces that make up an ideology sometimes contradict one another. How can Americans be persuaded to go to war, for example, where chances are good that the lives of loved ones will be put in danger? In this case, a belief in maintaining American military supremacy may conflict with a belief that troops should be put in harm's way only for the most serious reasons. So the rhetor who urges war must somehow erase this contradiction. Sometimes circumstances cause a contradiction between ideas and practices to become glaringly apparent. During the period of American

history called “The Great Awakening” in the 1740s, for example, people who were converted or reconverted to Christianity began to wonder how it was that Christians could countenance the practice of slavery.

Ideologies can be held by a small groups or an entire culture. No doubt the ideology held by each person results from life experiences and education. Because ideologies grow out of experience, each person may hold a system of beliefs that is unique to him or her. However, our experiences, and especially our memories of them, are influenced by prevailing cultural attitudes to such an extent that it is doubtful that anyone ever has a totally original idea. As we know from science, discoveries are always based on previous work by others; scientific discoveries are also made possible by sets of habits and practices and assumptions that are commonly shared among members of the scientific community. More broadly, communities share beliefs about how the world works, what is valuable and what must be avoided, and what is possible (you will recognize Aristotle’s common topics in this list). Communities also share beliefs about ethnicity, gender, class, appearance and occupation, among a host of other things. Shared belief, in fact, marks the boundaries of a community, ideologically speaking.

Groups often coalesce around ideologies such as environmentalism (Greenpeace, The Sierra Club) or fascism (American Nazi Party, skinheads). Groups also coalesce around specific issues: members of the Tea Party are united by worries about the national deficit, whereas members of a group called “No Labels” want people to put aside names of their political affiliations, such as Democrat or Republican, and “do what’s right for the country” (<http://nolabels.org/home>). Members within each of these groups may or may not share the same ideologies, however. Some Tea Partiers, for example, appeared to oppose health care reform because they believed it would raise the national debt, whereas others feared the imposition of government into private decisions about their health. And if their comments on the site’s blog entries are a fair indication, members of No Labels often disagree not only with those who post on the blog, but with other commenters.

Can an entire country adhere to a set of commonly held beliefs? After all, American coinage says “In God we trust”; our elementary schoolbooks tell us that “all men are created equal”; our national anthem tells us that America is “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” No doubt these commonplaces are unacceptable to a few Americans, but whether we believe them or not, they provide the terms within which American discourse works. Rhetors cannot escape the commonplaces of American public discourse, and they overlook them at their peril.

Linguist E. D. Hirsch once claimed that there is a perceptible American ideology that centers on values embedded in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. Hirsch described America’s “civil religion,” as he called it, as follows:

Our civil ethos treasures patriotism and loyalty as high, though perhaps not ultimate, ideals and fosters the belief that the conduct of the nation is guided by a vaguely defined God. Our tradition places importance on carrying out the rites and ceremonies of our civil ethos and religion through the national flag, the national holidays,

and the national anthem (which means “national hymn”), and supports the morality of tolerance and benevolence, of the Golden Rule, and communal cooperation. We believe in altruism and self-help, in equality, freedom, truth telling, and respect for the national law. Besides these vague principles, American culture fosters such myths about itself as its practicality, ingenuity, inventiveness, and independent-mindedness, its connection with the frontier, and its beneficence in the world (even when its leaders do not always follow beneficent policies). It acknowledges that Americans have the right to disagree with the traditional values but nonetheless acquiesce in the dominant civil ethos to the point of accepting imprisonment as the ultimate means of expressing dissent. (98–99)

Did Hirsch capture Americans’ commonplace sense of what it means to be an American? Did he leave anything out? Remember that commonplaces are not necessarily true—the distinguishing mark of a commonplace, rather, is that it is widely believed. Remember too that the commonplaces that make up an ideology sometimes contradict one another.

Take the value called “patriotism,” for example. During the Vietnam War, those who opposed the United States’ participation in that war were widely castigated as unpatriotic. A simple slogan was in wide circulation: “Love it or leave it.” This commonplace suggested that anyone who did not support the war did not support America and hence was not wanted in the country. Those who opposed the war, however, thought of themselves precisely as patriots—as people who loved their country and showed as much by dissenting from its foreign policy (an act that is quintessentially American, according to Hirsch).

For rhetoricians, the point of this example is that although Americans may disagree about what counts as a patriotic act, the value of patriotism—love of country—circulates in American discourse with such power that it affects lives and actions. Disagreements about what patriotism is or about the specific acts that can be classified as patriotic (Voting? Serving in the military? Supporting the military? Speaking well of friends and ill of perceived enemies?) are arguments; that is, they can be subjected to invention (conjecture and definition in these examples), and rhetors can work toward achieving agreement about them. Patriotism itself, on the other hand, has a second important status in rhetoric if it is a fundamental tenet of American ideology—that is, if it is a commonplace value in that ideology.

People do not generally make arguments about values that are so fundamental to their belief systems that they literally “go without saying” or can be “taken for granted.” Both phrases in quotes are shorthand ways of describing an interesting feature of commonplaces, which are so basic to a mode of thought and behavior that people who subscribe to them may remain unaware of their allegiance to them. Commonplaces are, literally, “taken for granted”: they are statements that everyone assumes already to be satisfactorily proven. Thus few people bother to articulate them. For example, most people assume that quiet and subdued behavior is appropriate to those attending funerals. Or, to give a more complex example: many Americans believe in American exceptionalism,

although they might not even be aware that this set of beliefs has a name. *Wikipedia* defines exceptionalism as follows: "American exceptionalism refers to the opinion that the United States is qualitatively different from other nations. In this view, America's exceptionalism stems from its emergence from a revolution, becoming the 'first new nation,' and developing a uniquely American ideology, based on liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism and laissez-faire" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_exceptionalism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_exceptionalism)). People who subscribe to this commonplace believe that America is the best and strongest country in the world, and that politicians' first duty is to preserve that place for America in global politics. Although the belief itself is not often articulated, it is at work when citizens claim that the American military must be stronger and technologically more advanced than that of any other country, or when they denigrate the customs and beliefs of other countries, as happened during the run-up to the Iraq war, when some owners of restaurants renamed french fries as "freedom fries."

Superstitions provide good examples of commonplaces that are practiced but not articulated. People avoid stepping on cracks in the sidewalk, or throw salt over their shoulders, or shudder when a mirror is broken. No one needs to articulate the folk beliefs that motivate these actions because everyone knows they supposedly ward off bad luck.

An understanding of ideology, of the common sense of a group or a whole culture, is important to rhetors because people do not respond to a rhetorical proposition out of context. Their responses are determined by the ideologies to which they subscribe. Your response to Sarah Palin's coinage of the term "death panels," for example, may be positive or negative. Your response depends on your political ideology—the set of beliefs you construct and share with communities of which you are a part.

Interestingly enough, commonplaces are subject to the workings of *kairos*. The Arizona state legislature cut funding for Medicaid in 2010; as a result, people who had no other insurance and who were waiting for organ transplants did not have the funds necessary to pay for the operations. Two such people died, and subsequently the media began to refer to the state legislature and the governor of Arizona as "death panels" (<http://www.myfoxphoenix.com/dpp/health/brewer-on-transplant-cuts-1-7-2011>). Although this use of the phrase has an utterly different referent than that forwarded by Palin, it has caught on because the phrase itself was already in common use. The media are also aware of an irony inherent in this new usage: in 2010, Arizona's governor and legislature for the most part shared Sarah Palin's political ideology.

As this example suggests, people use commonplaces to express ideological positions. Contemporary commonplaces range from well-worn slogans ("the global economy," "Main Street vs. Wall Street," "Drill, baby, drill!") to beliefs drawn from sophisticated texts that encapsulate key beliefs of a given ideology (the Bible, a constitution, the platform of a political party). The persuasive power of rhetorical commonplaces depends on the fact that they express assumptions held in common by people who subscribe to a given ideology.

For example: a first principle of environmental philosophy is preservation of the earth's ecosystem. Within the environmentalist community, people have

developed commonplaces that express this principle: "Earth first"; "Good planets are hard to find." These slogans represent the received wisdom of the environmental community in a shorthand that reminds its members of their shared beliefs. They can be deployed whenever the group needs to be energized or reminded of their ideological commitments. Environmentalists have also developed slogans to persuade others to adopt their ideology and/or practices: "Hug a tree!"; "Give a hoot, don't pollute." These slogans can be displayed on T-shirts and coffee cups, and they remind everyone who sees them of the importance of conserving Earth's resources.

**Rhetorical commonplaces have heuristic potential** as well because they give rise to an inexhaustible supply of proofs. They can be used as major premises for arguments (see our discussion of **enthymemes** in the chapter on reasoning), and, like all rhetorical proofs, they can also be used to persuade others to join the community and to accept its commitments. Take "Drill, baby, drill!" for example. This commonplace urges Americans to drill for oil on our own soil. It was apparently first coined by a conservative blogger, Eric Rush, but the slogan got its first national exposure when Michael Steele, then chair of the Republican Party, chanted it at the Republican convention in 2008. It has since become a conservative commonplace. Blogger Seth Godin composed an apt analysis of the power of "Drill, baby, Drill," which he saw on a bumper sticker attached to a large Humvee:

Slogans are fabulous when they use few words (two! one used twice) to unite, energize and signify a tribe. You're either an insider or an outsider, but there were no fence sitters on this one. The slogan captured a can-do, engineering-centric, please-get-out-of-my-way, anti-intellectual, regulate-industry-less mindset that this driver (and presumably others in his tribe) could broadcast and be motivated by. In three words! A key part of the slogan is the extraneous word "baby," which reinforces the informality, the certainty and the impatience with bureaucracy. Support it or not, you have to agree that it was a great slogan. (Until it wasn't). ([http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths\\_blog/2010/06/drill-baby-drill.html](http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2010/06/drill-baby-drill.html))

The final parenthetical expression ("until it wasn't") refers to the Gulf Oil spill, a domestic drilling accident that spilled tons of polluting oil into the Gulf of Mexico during the summer of 2010.

Rhetors need to learn how to unpack such commonplaces, as Godin has, to understand how they function within a system of belief. The chant of "Drill, baby, drill" recognizes the need for sources of energy that are not located in nations that are hostile or potentially hostile to America. But at the same time its use may discourage attempts to adopt alternate sources of energy, such as wind or electric power, because it assumes that there are sufficient quantities of oil within the geographical limits of the United State to serve our immediate and future needs.

The power of ideology and commonplaces stems from the fact that they reside in the very language we speak and the symbols we rely on. For that



The answers given to these questions by individuals or groups give clues about the ideologies to which they subscribe, although these clues are not infallible.

Two ideologies have in the recent past dominated contemporary American political and discourse: liberalism and conservatism. There are fascists, anarchists, libertarians, social democrats and socialists in America, but their views are generally not sufficiently widespread within mainstream American discourse to generate national commonplaces. In what follows, we attempt to describe commonplaces that are generally accepted by persons who subscribe to liberalism or conservatism. This task has become increasingly difficult, however. In the early years of the twenty-first century, the national House of Representatives and the Senate were nearly evenly balanced between Republicans and Democrats. But the commonplace assumption that Republicans are conservative and Democrats are liberal has become much more difficult to maintain. In the last years of the twentieth century, mainstream Democrats moved to the center of the political ideological spectrum, adopting some conservative positions—particularly with regard to economic issues—whereas many Republicans moved further toward the right. Poll data bear out this rightward trend: in 2010, Gallup released a poll that suggested 42% of Americans identify themselves as conservative, whereas only 20% identify as liberal (the rest fall into the “moderate” category; <http://www.gallup.com/poll/141032/2010-conservatives-outnumber-moderates-liberals.aspx>). Hence a more accurate depiction of the contemporary political spectrum might name two poles in commonplace American political thought as “conservative” and “progressive.” This assessment must immediately be complicated by two observations. First, conservatives profess many beliefs that are products of liberal thought. This is so because the founding documents of America were written by people who wove liberal beliefs into them. Historically, the belief that all human beings have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was a liberal notion. It has since been adopted by conservatives, and Americans who think of themselves as conservative can, and do, hold this belief as a commonplace. Second, not all liberals think of themselves as “progressive,” although from the point of view of a conservative, liberals may certainly look as though they belong in the progressive camp.

One more qualification: the lists that follow are not meant to imply that all persons calling themselves “liberal” or “conservative” subscribe to every commonplace named in those categories. Nor are they meant to imply that someone who subscribes to one or more liberal or conservative commonplaces is perforce a liberal or a conservative. In short, “conservative” and “liberal” do not refer to identities; rather they depict positions on an ideological spectrum. That is to say, what follows is a series of conjectures about contemporary American political discourse.

Contemporary American liberalism tends to support capitalism, but people who subscribe to liberal politics usually feel more secure if business can be regulated by government. Sometimes people who accept liberalism will support policies that lean toward socialism—for instance, some argue that there should be free health care for all citizens who cannot afford it. Liberalism tends to be internationalist insofar as its supporters want to maintain good relations with

other countries. Those who subscribe to liberalism may, in fact, oppose war of any kind—that is, they may be pacifists. The core of American liberalism, however, is support for individual freedom and privacy plus an advocacy of social and economic equality for all. Liberalism promotes a positive view of human nature; its proponents believe that human beings are naturally good or at least tend toward good action. If people do not behave well, the liberal assumption is that there is or has been some impediment or lack in their lives and surroundings that have kept them from fulfilling their potential. Liberalism tends to be skeptical of authority (this is in keeping with the high value that it places on individuality). Those who accept liberalism usually advocate government intervention in social and economic issues to correct what they perceive as unfair distribution of wealth, but they generally resist intervention by any authority into moral choices. They tend to characterize moral choices as “private” matters, in keeping with their emphasis on individual freedom.

People who accept the tenets of contemporary American conservatism part company with liberals on most of these issues. Support of capitalism and business are important conservative values. Conservatism tends to be nationalist insofar as its adherents want the United States to be the most important nation in the world, and people who accept conservatism will support military intervention in the affairs of other nations in order to further the goal of U.S. supremacy. People who subscribe to conservative commonplaces support personal freedom, but they care less about individual rights than liberals do because they think that the greater good of the group is more important than individual desire. This is in keeping with conservative respect for tradition and authority, especially that of the family and of religion. Conservatism is skeptical about the perfectibility of human nature—its adherents generally do not assume that everyone is naturally good or capable of moral improvement. Nonetheless, a central tenet of conservatism is that people must take responsibility for their actions. Conservatism also assumes that people who do not take such responsibility must accept the community’s decisions regarding their actions. People who subscribe to traditional conservatism do not care for government intervention in social or economic matters, arguing instead that free enterprise will take care of poverty and social inequality. At present, however, people who subscribe to the ideology forwarded by social conservatives do advocate government intervention in moral matters.

The positions we ascribe to conservatives and liberals are commonplaces within those discourses. Thus, in conservative rhetoric, appeal to traditional values is a commonplace, whereas appeal to personal freedom for individuals is a commonplace in liberal rhetoric. For heuristic purposes, we now explore how people who accept liberal and conservative commonplaces, respectively, would answer the questions named earlier as major issues in American rhetoric. Remember that we are operating on the level of the commonplace. The positions we delineate are positions that follow ideologically from liberal and conservative rhetoric. That is to say, we are working out their **ideologic** (for more on ideologic, see a later section of this chapter). Because commonplaces do change, sometimes relatively rapidly, our conclusions may not apply at all times and in all places to people who identify themselves as liberals or conservatives.

1. What is the appropriate foreign policy? Generally, liberalism favors peaceful interaction with other countries. Liberals ordinarily support the United Nations and other global political organizations. Conservatism is not so inclined to favor global diplomacy and intervention, especially if these efforts are perceived to interfere with America's political preeminence in the world. A few conservatives, though, are isolationist, believing that Americans must look out for their own interests before those of other nations. Liberalism is not inclined to support military intervention into the affairs of other countries, whereas conservatism will support military intervention into foreign affairs if such intervention can be characterized as necessary to the preservation of America's position as a world leader. There are exceptions, of course, as there are to any commonplace. Liberals in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations maintained and escalated the Vietnam War, for instance.

2. What is the role of the federal government in making legislation as opposed to the roles of state and local governments? The question of the appropriate relation of the federal government to the states has been central to American politics ever since members of the Constitutional Convention met in 1787. Currently, people who describe themselves as conservative say they are opposed to "big government," and during the last years of the twentieth century, conservatives in the U.S. Congress supported legislation that passed fiscal responsibility for social programs such as welfare onto state and local governments. Conservative rhetoric typically depicts liberals as favoring federal intervention into many aspects of cultural and social life. Conservative rhetors have argued, for instance, that liberals saddled Americans with restrictions on their right to personal freedom when they imposed affirmative action and environmental regulation. Conservative rhetors would prefer that individuals and corporations undertake such initiatives as are necessary to protect the environment and to help those who cannot advance by themselves; conservatism assumes that market pressures will urge individuals and corporations to see to it that these things happen. Liberalism, on the other hand, typically supports legislation that is intended to correct what its adherents perceive as social wrongs, and they tend to resort to the federal government to do so. Social Security, civil rights legislation, affirmative action, health care reform, Medicare, and Medicaid were all sponsored by liberals.

3. What level of fiscal responsibility do citizens bear toward federal, state, and local government? Currently, rhetors who subscribe to conservatism argue that the tax burden borne by citizens should be lessened, whereas rhetors who accept liberal beliefs argue that certain initiatives are so important to social and economic progress that taxpayers must continue to shoulder the burden of financing them (hence the conservative commonplace once used to describe liberal administrations: "tax and spend.") Rhetors who accept liberalism generally argue that these social initiatives should include at least social security and Medicare.

4. What social and economic relations should appropriately maintain among citizens? The rhetoric of liberalism champions social and economic equality.

In fact, the American doctrine that "all men are created equal" is borrowed from eighteenth-century liberal thought. Given its distrust in the perfectibility of human nature, conservatism is not sure that all people are created equal to one another in intelligence and ability. However, contemporary conservatism sometimes does defend the fundamental American principle that all citizens are equal before the law.

5. What levels of political and legal equality should exist among genders, races, classes, sexualities? In keeping with their faith in equality, those who accept liberalism profess that all citizens—no matter their gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, or age—should be treated equally, at least in law. For those who accept conservatism, on the other hand, and especially for those who respect tradition and authority—equality among genders, races, and sexualities is a more complicated and troublesome issue. Strict adherence to traditional beliefs requires an American social conservative to assume that men best fulfill their social and moral duties, if not their nature, when they take care of and protect women. Social conservatism assumes further that heterosexuality is a norm. Hence people who accept these positions are not always ready to extend full equality to women or to homosexuals.

6. What is the appropriate relation to authority? In keeping with their respect for instituted authority and their emphasis on personal responsibility, conservative rhetors tend to take tough stands on crime and punishment and on enforcement of the law. In keeping with their respect for individual rights and the potential perfectibility of human nature, liberal rhetors, on the other hand, tend to advocate prevention and rehabilitation rather than punishment for offenders. People who subscribe to liberalism are more skeptical of received religious wisdom or traditional notions about family structure than are those who subscribe to conservative positions.

7. What is the appropriate role for government to play in legislating moral issues? People who subscribe to liberalism tend to resist government intervention into realms that they define as "private." This is why liberal rhetors generally support abortion rights as well as gay rights, and why many persons of liberal persuasion think that the use of marijuana and perhaps other proscribed drugs should be legalized. These days conservative rhetors, if they share conservatism's elevation of the good of the community over individual rights, tend to support legislative intervention into realms that liberals define as "private." Hence, they are generally opposed to the legalization of drugs and abortion on the grounds that drug use and abortion negatively affect the community at large. Liberal rhetors tend to argue against censorship on the grounds that censorship is a restriction of the right to free speech. Conservative rhetors, on the other hand, tend to support censorship on the grounds that the circulation of some materials—pornography, for example—is deleterious to the public good. It is not always easy to predict liberal and conservative positions on moral issues, however. Despite their support for the right of freedom of assembly and the personal freedom to indulge habits of choice, for instance, liberal rhetors tend to support restrictions on the sale of some types of weapons because they perceive

such restrictions as serving the public good. Conservative rhetors, on the other hand, tend to oppose such measures on the grounds that private possession of firearms is constitutionally protected by the Second Amendment.

8. What is or should be the relation of human beings and governments to the environment? The term *conservation* is etymologically related to the term *conservative*, which suggests that the desire to conserve or preserve natural phenomena is or should be a conservative position. Protection of the common good is also a conservative goal, and preservation of the environment would seem to serve that goal as well. However, in today's political economy, environmentalists tend to be liberal or left of liberal. Conservative disinterest in this issue may have to do with conservatism's general support of business, which often finds itself at odds with environmental protection. Liberal rhetors, on the other hand, have traditionally favored legislative intervention to correct what they perceive to be wrongs, and so it is they who have typically proposed environmental regulations. However, support for environmentalism can place liberals in difficult rhetorical positions because environmentalists would like to limit the use of automobiles, thus restricting the individual right to freedom of movement. Environmentalists would also like to place limits on human reproduction, thus restricting the freedom of individuals to have as many children as they wish.

### USING COMMON TOPICS AND COMMONPLACES TO INVENT ARGUMENTS

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As we suggested earlier, ideologies vary and change over time because people are differently located in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, class, economic situation, religious beliefs, education, and the political or cultural power they possess. A rhetor who uses the common topics should take careful account of whether or not her arguments will be well received by an audience whose ideological affiliations may prescribe very different versions of what exists, what is good, and what is possible than those espoused by the rhetor. This holds doubly for rhetors who want to use commonplaces to build arguments. We are treating the commonplaces as equivalents of the topics that Aristotle called "special," by which he meant topics that circulate within specific sorts of rhetorical discourse such as that used in legislatures, in courtrooms, and at community events. Aristotle insisted that use of special topics required rhetors to be knowledgeable about the history, practices, and values important to that community. We agree.

To use commonplaces as means of invention, it is helpful to think of them as statements that form bits or pieces of ideologies. In the chapter on reasoning, we employ a term from logic, the **premise**, to talk about general statements that govern the generation of other related but more specific statements. A **major premise** is any statement that is assumed or supposed prior to the beginning