

The Commonplace

A commonplace is simply a statement that is generally accepted by a given audience or community. Rhetoric is sometimes called the art of the commonplace because it uses everyday knowledge and language in order to move common people into action. Like common sense, the commonplace is common because it is shared by a large community of people rather than an individual or a smaller group of people. Hence, the commonplace is the opposite of expert knowledge.

The word *place* refers to the ways in which commonplaces are used; they are seen as the place where arguments reside like markers on the side of a road. Once someone learns where the markers are, they can be recalled and arguments can be made from them.

The commonplace is often confused with the common topics; in fact, they come from the same Greek word *koinoi topoi*. Yet, the commonplace is typically a warrant that proves a claim (it is *part* of an argument, whether implicitly or explicitly stated), while the common topics are typically a means to invent all aspects of an argument (it is not part of the argument but rather a system for inventing them).

In the Renaissance and through the eighteenth century, students (and even ordinary people) would keep commonplace books, notebooks with thoughts, ideas, bits and pieces of discourse, sayings, quotations from others, all of which would be used as a storehouse for commonplaces.

Some examples of the commonplace

Public discourse in the United States is full of commonplaces. Perhaps the most common commonplace is that the United States is the greatest country in the world. Note that this statement is at best probable; ultimately, it cannot be proven. Other commonplaces—like the ideals of freedom, justice, and equality—*can* be proven in a probable sense, but our understanding of them changes historically. What is free, just, or equal now would not have been seen as free, just, or equal just a generation ago.

In *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee list a series of questions that define some of the more controversial commonplaces in the United States:

- What is the appropriate foreign policy (nationalism, internationalism, interventionism, pacifism)?
- What is the role of the federal government in legislation, as opposed to the roles of state and local governments?
- What level of fiscal responsibility do citizens bear toward federal, state, and local government?
- What social and economic relations are appropriate among citizens (more or less personal freedom: more or less economic equality among class, races, and genders)?
- What levels of political and legal equality should exist among genders, races, classes, sexualities (none, some, full equality)?
- What is the appropriate relation to authority (acceptance, questioning, skepticism,

rejection)?

- What is the appropriate role for government to play in legislating moral issues (none, some, a lot)?
- What is or should be the relation of human beings and governments to the environment?

These questions are useful for mapping one's ideological spectrum, from socialism to progressivism to liberalism to conservatism to libertarianism to fascism. A more complicated series of questions and mappings is available on the website, "The Political Compass," which is located at <http://www.digitalronin.f2s.com/politicalcompass/index.html>.

Yet, public discourse is not the only place where one finds commonplaces. Commonplaces can be found in any discourse community. Academia is no different; consider the following academic commonplaces: academic freedom, the marketplace of ideas, objectivity, progress, or social change. In fact, part of learning a new field is learning its commonplaces.

The ideological function of the commonplace

The commonplace is undoubtedly ideological, as ideology is the system of assumptions, values, and beliefs that a community shares. For this reason, it is absolutely essential for people to recognize and reflect on their use of commonplaces. Commonplaces are the storehouse of our deepest assumptions, values, and beliefs; hence, they should be analyzed constantly and refuted when necessary.

The commonplace, the enthymeme, and the warrant

The commonplace is often, though not always, found in the warrant part of an argument (from the Toulmin System). In the Toulmin System, the warrant is the assumptions, values, and beliefs that substantiate the reason. For example, if the claim is that Iraq should be invaded and the reason is because Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, the warrant is that such weapons threaten our national security and that preemptive war is just.

When the warrant is generally accepted, it is typically left unstated. However, when it is not accepted or when it is contested, it is typically stated. In fact, it should be stated, and furthermore it should be proven in the backing (again, from the Toulmin System).