

The Rhetorical Situation

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WE CAN study different examples of rhetoric, ranging from ancient oratory to modern advertising, slanted news, and (I would like to include, as we shall consider later) areas that I would lump under the heading of "Administrative Rhetoric." Or we can study various writers on the *subject* of rhetoric, including the many works that have classified particular rhetorical devices. Here also would belong tracts concerned with the place of rhetoric in the curriculum as a whole. Much that anthropologists and sociologists now treat in terms of "myth" and "magic" and "charisma" could properly be considered as further extensions of persuasive processes belonging ultimately in the field of rhetoric.

But by "the rhetorical situation" I have something slightly different in mind. For some time, when confronting the vast range and variety of expressions and speculations that, for one reason or another, could be classed under this head, I have been looking for a kind of summarizing statement. For instance, the people living in one particular region at one particular time may, for all the diversity of their circumstances, be viewed as participants in some common situation, as all of us in the United States today share, however variously, the situation characterized by the present conditions of technology, finance, and socio-political unrest. Or the more philosophically-minded might move to a still higher level of generalization and speculate on the nature of the "human situation" in general.

It is much in this sense that I would try to talk about what I would take to be the essential attributes of "the rhetorical situation."

Unfortunately, at the very start, there is a bunglesome complicating factor. My problem does not allow me to make a flat distinction such as that, say, between the *words* one is using and the nonverbal circumstances in which one is using them. The resources of rhetoric itself are part of the rhetorical situation, though the concept of a "rhetorical situation" could not be confined to such elements.

At this point in my quandaries, I hit upon a subtitle. And promptly thereafter, for better or worse, a whole series of observations began lining up. Doubtless, if I had hit upon some other subtitle, everything would have turned out differently. But be that as it may, my title, with subtitle, runs thus: "The Rhetorical Situation: Congregation and Segregation." If a poor mathematician may borrow a formula used with reference to mathematical equations: I "idealized" the situation thus. And, even if you don't agree with my thesis, you might find some interest in noting how things more or less follow of themselves, once the title got the kind of *pointing* that is implicit in the subtitle: "Congregation and Segregation."

The subtitle suggests the ingredient of partisanship that comes so natural to rhetoric, partisanship that sometimes is reinforced, sometimes truly or falsely transcended. A typical aspect of the rhetorical situation in this sense is a presidential election. During the campaign, the contestants stress their divisiveness, notable respects in which each differs from his opponent. After the election, the winner promptly stresses his role as chosen representative of the nation as a *whole*. In this respect, obviously, the concepts of congregation and segregation shade into such concepts as cooperation and competition.

But how far back should we go in tracking down the implications of our subtitle? Let's go to the roots. And if this search takes us too far afield, we can narrow things down later. The farthest I ever ventured, I guess, is in this passage, which I quote from my *Rhetoric of Motives* (p. 146):

Ideology cannot be deduced from economic considerations alone. It also derives from man's nature as a "symbol-using animal." And since the "original economic plant" is the human body, with the divisive centrality of its particular nervous system, the theologian's concerns with Eden and the "fall" come close to the heart of the rhetorical problem. For, behind the theology, there is the perception of generic divisiveness which, being common to all men, is a universal fact about them, prior to any divisiveness caused by social classes. Here is the basis of rhetoric. Out of this emerge the motives for linguistic persuasion. Then, *secondarily*, we get the motives peculiar to particular economic situations.

In parturition begins the centrality of the nervous system. The different nervous systems, through language and the ways of production, erect various communities of interests and insights, social communities varying in nature and scope. And out of the division and the community arises the "universal" rhetorical situation.

This passage was originally written in connection with some pages on the maxims of La Rochefoucauld. With regard to his great stress upon the principle of "self-love" (interest, pride, *amour-propre*) as a

basic human motive, I further commented (p. 147): "There are the incentives to individual advantage (and its corresponding rhetoric) indigenous to the 'centrality of the nervous system,' and to the ambiguously divisive and unitary conditions that go with it." It is not necessary for me to explain in detail here how his approach to thoughts on self-love gets colored by aristocratic values (and in that sense is much less individualistic, more class-minded, than might at first appear to be the case).

As regards the sheerly verbal aspects of the matter, we might note that Aristotle calls rhetoric the counterpart (*antistrophos*) of *dialectic*. And in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates professes his great love for the "processes of division and generalization," saying he usually classes as "dialecticians" those skilled in the art of seeing unity and plurality in nature.

Surely here is the point at which rhetoric merges into dialectic, and dialectic merges into the very nature of things. Just as we put things together and take things apart, so there are words that put things together and words that take things apart (as similarly there is a mathematics of the discrete—particles—and a mathematics of the continuous—wave-theories).

Perhaps we have said enough about this aspect of our subject. Yet the very failure to be sufficiently exacting in examining the dialectics of such considerations can itself have important rhetorical effects. I might point out that I shall keep coming back to variations on this theme, namely: the rhetorical force of sheerly dialectical operations if these are not clearly recognized. For instance, I have been at conferences in the social sciences where many speakers stressed the thought of the individual as dissolving into a general context. And I submit that an observation of that sort needs the kind of corrective I would situate in such a "principle of individuation" as is empirically provided by the centrality of the nervous system. True, we all merge into our environment, the circumference or scope of which can be extended to the farthest limits of "nature" (and beyond, to the "supernatural," if you are theologically-minded). Even when considered close up, the identity of the "self" or "person" becomes part of a collective texture involving language, property, family, reputation, social roles, and so on—elements not reducible to the individual; and the same is true of our physical nature. But there is the one notable exception I have referred to: physiologically, the centrality of the nervous system is such that, although I as a *person* may sympathetically identify myself with other people's pleasures and pains, in my nature as a sheer *body* the pleasures of *my* food and the pains of *my* toothache are experienced

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by me alone. Thus, although even as a body I merge into my environment, there is this physiological condition (in the realm of sheer "matter" or motion) that serves as a rudimentary "principle of individuation," the grounds for a purely empirical distinction whereby, however social our nature in other respects, we are born and die one by one, with certain pleasures and pains experienced immediately, bodily, and not identically experienceable by others.

This physiological differentiation is gradually developed during gestation. It is "traumatically" completed at parturition (the circle of protection having become a circle of confinement). After birth, the *identity* of each separate human organism then undergoes various modes of identification, first with mother, nurse, immediate surroundings, toys, etc., then developing out of infancy into identification with family, friends, church, nation, etc.

Some of my remarks on the bodily "principle of individuation" were lifted from a review I did, a while back, on a somewhat dithyrambic by Norman O. Brown, entitled *Love's Body*. Brown went as far as possible (certainly much farther than logically possible) in trying to outlaw all division and to stress only unity. Insofar as he succeeded with his readers, he thus persuaded them to try getting along with half a dialectic, stressing the merger side of the merger-division pair, blithely unconcerned with the fact that even his term "unification" implies the unifying of a *diversity*. He would equate "union or unification" with eros, and "separation or division" with "the death instinct," thereby setting up a distinction in the very act of denouncing distinctions. In fact, once you start that kind of maneuvering, other marvels of similar quality are likely to turn up. For instance, he tells us that "there is no literal truth." The sentence, on its face, is in dire trouble, since there would be no point in his making the statement unless he wanted it to be taken literally, as "true." Yet it could be true only by being false. (Incidentally, as regards Brown's celebrating of unity, I wrote him, proposing to go along with him by sharing in his royalties. But in keeping with his sweeping doctrine of universal love, he answered, not without charm, "No eristics, just erotics.")

In any case, somewhat this side of speculations about the ultimate relationships between individual symbol-using bodies and the possible scope of their physical or symbolical identifications with real or imaginary entities contextual to them, there is Aristotle's observation concerning the great effectiveness of *antithesis* as a rhetorical device. Thus, although given the great complexities that the present state of technology imposes upon us, a candidate for office may have difficulty

in telling us just how he can go about carrying out the policies that he is *for*, but he can at least recommend his position antithetically by saying what policies he is *against*. And that's a big step towards identification, if enough voters are similarly inclined.

Before proceeding, perhaps I should try to place this with regard to my theory of *symbolic action* in general. The two summarizing pieces, as regards our present inquiry are: in *Language as Symbolic Action*, my essay "Definition of Man"; in the *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, my article on "Dramatism."

The position centers in a distinction between motion and action. Action involves the ability to acquire conventional symbol-systems. The realm of motion comprises what would be left if all such organisms were destroyed.

The distinction is epitomized in these three basic propositions:

There can be motion without action.

There cannot be action without motion.

Action is not reducible to motion.

The sheer processes of the body are in the realm of motion. However, endow such an organism with powers of symbolicity, and such motions involve action.

An aside here might be helpful, by viewing the implications of the action-motion pair from the standpoint of contemporary interest in the computer as a model of human motivation. There are two minimum conditions for "action": (1) ability to feel pleasure and pain; (2) actualizing of the potentiality for learning conventional symbol-systems (as per tribal language). In connection with the conference I mentioned, I specifically asked that the participants decide whether my distinction between motion and action was real or merely verbal. A writer who reviewed the discussion afterwards decided that the distinction was merely verbal. I wrote asking if there was no distinction between a smashed-up machine and a smashed-up driver (one, by my scheme, would be in the realm of mere motion, the other in the realm of action-and-passion). He said he was busy, but would answer later. (That was nearly three years ago. I guess he's still busy.)

Implicit in the powers of symbolicity are the resources of identification; the simplest example: that of communication made possible by the sharing of a tribal idiom in common, as in poetry, drama, narrative, oratory, etc.

As regards our speculations on the rhetorical situation, I must rely considerably upon the term *identification*. When working on my *Rhetoric of Motives* I ran into considerations that didn't seem to be handled

directly enough by the classic concept of "persuasion." Not that I would reject the classical study of persuasion. On the contrary, I never cease to marvel at the systematic treatment of "persuasion" in the *Rhetoric* of Aristotle. I have in mind his way of listing the "places" (topics, *topoi*) which a speaker can utilize in the attempt to persuade or dissuade, to praise or blame, to build up a character or to smear him, and the like. But the whole process was so deliberate it didn't seem to cover kinds of situations which were not characterized by the clear, formal purposiveness that classical books on rhetoric were primarily concerned with. Thus, a person may think of himself as "belonging" to some special body more or less clearly defined (family, race, profession, church, social class, nation, etc., or various combinations of these). In brief, he may *identify* himself with such bodies or movements, largely through sympathetic attitudes of his own. And for associations of this sort I proposed to use the term "identification." We might sum things up this way: one's notion of his personal *identity* may involve identification not just with mankind or the world in general, but by some kind of congregation that also implies some related norms of differentiation or segregation.

The subject takes on many dimensions, but for present purposes we might consider "identification" under three main heads:

1) There is its use merely as a way to establish rapport with an audience by the stressing of sympathies held in common. This comes quite closest to downright persuasion. And perhaps its simplest example is the baby-kissing politician who would make himself popular with the voters by kissing women on their babies. Its more spontaneous aspects are to be glimpsed in the kind of temporary friendliness that a traveller may feel when he is far from home and meets a stranger from his same town, or perhaps meets someone in his same profession or line of business. Far too often, analysts who in their own ways apply the concept of "identification" have in mind this kind of rapport. But we'd never get to the depths of the rhetorical situation if we stopped there, as many who use the term often have.

2) There is identification by antithesis, the most urgent form of congregation by segregation. Here is union by some opposition shared in common. Temporary alliances in wartime are obvious examples, as is racism, particularly some distressing expressions of the black-white issue that have come to the fore, along with earlier morbidities that were latent in our social structure. (Incidentally, in the Feb. 27, 1965 issue of the *New York Review of Books* there is an omnibus review, "White Racism and Black 'Emancipation'," by C. Vann Woodward.

Its data on the history of laws against freed black men in the North and West will astound you.)

We see deeper into the underlying rhetorical situation when we note how an antithetical focus upon the integrating force of any "external" foe, or scapegoat, *also serves to deflect attention from possible malefactors within one's own camp*. Indeed, as regards the conflicts of world politics today, the resources of an antithetical situation are such that any objections to the faults of one's own side are liable to attack on the grounds that they give comfort to the enemy, or even betray a secret alliance with the enemy. As a mild variant of this predicament, I cite from *The Nation*, Feb. 24, 1969, regarding Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird:

Mr. Laird is no lion tamer when it comes to keeping the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Pentagon's industrial beneficiaries under control.

When Bernard Nossiter asserted in *The Washington Post* (January 26) that the highest profits in the aerospace industry seem to accrue to the poorest performers, and analyzed thirteen aircraft and missile systems built at a cost of \$40 billion, Laird called the *Post* in an effort to stifle further criticism. He argued that public discussion of unreliable weapons could weaken American negotiations in the forthcoming arms-reduction talks with the Soviet Union.

If you raise an objection against *our* side and it's like a criticism levelled against us by the other side, you can be accused of being on *their* side.

3) If we called the first kind "identification by sympathy, actual or simulated, enduring or transitory," and the second "identification by antithesis" (the clearest instances of congregation by segregation), we find that there is still need of a third kind, which I would tentatively call "identification by inaccuracy" (or "by unawareness"? One member of an audience suggested: "identification by false assumption"). This brings us to the very roots of the rhetorical situation.

Let's get at the matter by a kind of parable. Some time ago I wrote an article entitled "Uneasy Thoughts on Automotive Man." It was based on an observation of this sort: to walk faster, or run faster, one works harder. Similarly, to drive faster on a bicycle, one works harder. But when I learned to drive a car, I suddenly found myself confronting a quite different realm of motives. For I needed but press down the gas pedal the slightest bit more, and the car could pick up terrific speed, with no more work at all on my part. Here was a fantastic coefficient of power. And surely, I thought, here is a fundamental *moral* problem. It seemed to me that we, as individuals, are easily tempted to mistake these mechanical powers for our very own. Give

a man a few dollars to spend in a supermarket, and he might spontaneously feel superior to some primitive tribesman who could make a living in a wilderness, whereas under such primitive conditions this self-adulating idiot would purely and simply starve to death. Such thoughts concern man's *identification* with his machines in ways whereby he mistakes *their* powers for *his*, and loves himself accordingly.*

There is also the kind of deceptive identification whereby an individual who may be personally modest and unassuming becomes deceptively aggrandized by thoughts of his citizenship in a powerful nation. On its face, this is but the kind of identification by sympathy that I put first in this list. But once you look more closely, you can glimpse the third kind, which I have called "identification by inaccuracy." For, only too often, such identification is but the failure to distinguish between one's country and the decisions of certain politicians who happen to be in a position to get the nation into foreign embarrassments that are by no means causes for rejoicing. Look more closely, and you see that the embarrassment is not really the nation's but that of certain officials whose interests are not necessarily identical with the nation's interests. Our identification with these two great unwieldy leviathans—technology and the state—is central to the rhetorical situation as we now confront it.

* I restated this in a kind of verse, thus:

How walk faster, except by working harder?
Likewise how run, or speed up a bike,
except by greater effort? . . .
Ever so lightly press the pedal down a fraction farther
And your massive technologic demon
spurts forward like a fiend.

Tell them that.
Talk of such brutal disproportion
between decision and the consequences.
"Might we not here, my friends,
confront the makings of a madness,
an unacknowledged leap
from *This is mine*
to *By God, this is ME!* . . . ?

Might our mechanic boastfulness
contain, in this quick easy magnifying of the self,
(to match industrial wastefulness)
a fatal moral canker?
Is it all over,
already at the start?"

(From "Tossing on Floodtides of Sinkership: A Diaristic Fragment," *Collected Poems, 1915-1967*, by Kenneth Burke, University of California Press, 1968, p. 282).

In the religious frame of reference, there was a certain categorical dignity, got by identification with some transcendent principle. With the rise of nationalism, there gradually arose a more secular kind of categorical dignity, defined by identification with one political power or another.

Machiavelli's book, *The Prince*, was a notable step along the way. In the Renaissance, he was usually thought of as a devil. For whereas, according to the universal notion of religious motives, a man's private virtues would be the traits of character which, if cultivated in each individual, would be most beneficial to *mankind* as a whole, Machiavelli was concerned with a kind of conspiratorial condition whereby even the *personal vices* of a ruler or of his representatives might be of benefit to the *empire* as a whole.

In Hegel, such factional kind of identification became systematically sanctioned by his glorification of the Prussian state. (But perhaps an aside is in order here. Religions, in the most vigorous stages of their development, tend to develop identification *antithetically* to some other current *ism*; and similarly, though nationalism was often *theoretically* liberal [as with a kind of picture gallery in which there would be room for many different kinds of portraits], the conditions were always present for an invidious emphasis whereby a cultural *difference* could be interpreted invidiously as a cultural *superiority*.)

(An aside-within-an-aside would be possible here. Thus, in his book on race theories, Jacques Barzun makes a basic contribution to thoughts on the rhetorical situation as we are now considering it when he recalls that the doctrine of Nordic superiority began with Tacitus, who idealized the Germanic tribes as a rhetorical device to assist him in the liberal criticizing of decadence in Rome.)

But the essential point is this: with regard to all such conditions, the poignancy of the rhetorical situation attains its fullness in spontaneously arising identifications whereby, even without deliberate intent upon the part of anyone, we fail to draw the lines at the right places. In effect the situation is thus as though there were two salads, side by side. They look alike, and we call them both by the same name, though unbeknownst to us one happens to be wholesome, the other contaminated. The rhetorical situation, as I see it, comes to a head in faulty identifications of that sort.

Along these lines, here might be the place to track this aspect of the rhetorical situation down to its most succinct form. Thus: surely first prize for the vagaries and vaguenesses of identification must go to that tiny first-person plural pronoun, "we." A few years ago, when the Dodgers won a ball game, all Brooklyn proudly proclaimed that

"we" had won. Now this purely private corporation is in Los Angeles, operating on a quite different identification. "We" as a nation advance funds to foreign countries from which "we" as private business enterprises receive money back in payment for exports. By this ambiguity of identification, as a nation we become "idealists" while some of our nationals are involved in transactions that are, to say the least, quite realistic. Or whenever "we" fight a war, the range of identifications under the one head extends from men in combat to Wall Street gamblers who make a killing in war stocks.

Yes, the marvels and mysteries of identification come to an ultimate focus in that scarcely noticeable, workaday pronoun, "we." A recent Mauldin cartoon shows a G.I. fording a stream, up to his neck in water. A South Vietnamese soldier, sitting on the G.I.'s head, is saying, "We're in this together."

It is hard to know just where one should draw the lines. To what extent, for instance, were ex-president Johnson's policies in Vietnam purely decisions of his own, and to what extent were they based upon advice he received from "experts" whom he considered best qualified to tell him how things were most likely to turn out, if he increased our invasionary force by a few thousand men? Surely, neither he nor anyone else would have undertaken the present adventure in Asia had he or his "experts" expected that such a large force would be needed, with so great a number of killed and wounded resulting, and at the cost of so fantastically many billions of dollars (particularly, since on this last point, we might well recall that the McNamara test for all such campaigns was to be "cost effectiveness"). Not knowing for sure with just which advisers the ex-president identified himself, I have ventured a quatrain about his disappointments in office along these lines:

He got entangled in a situation
That would defy the best of us,
Through having access to misinformation
That was denied the rest of us.

Consider an implicit identification of this sort: Theories of autonomy may be approached two ways—the one, technical, methodological; the other, socio-political. As I stated the case in *A Rhetoric of Motives* (p. 27):

The shepherd, *qua* shepherd, acts for the good of the sheep, to protect them from discomforts and harm. But he may be identified with a project that is raising sheep for market.

I assume that, although some aspects of antithesis and the congregation-segregation pair may be stated in so highly generalized terms that they apply to human relations in all ages, there are also respects in which observations about the Rhetorical Situation should change with the times. And I take it, owing to the nature of what Ex-President Eisenhower called the "military-industrial complex," and its bearing upon problems of world order, we should particularly puzzle over issues of that sort.

Here's a case I'm not quite sure of, but I offer it since at least it is a perfect instance of the issues we should think about particularly now.

My speculations run along these lines, as regards USA-USSR relations: It has been said that, in the war against Hitler, the destruction in Russia was as great as though everything in our country from the East coast to the Mississippi had been annihilated. Thus, after the war had ended, there were obvious incentives for the West to keep up war production, since it would put a maximum strain on the economy of the Soviet Union. For all during the time that we had been contributing to the destruction of Europe's productive plant, we had been building up our own. Such has been true of all recent wars, the first World war, the second, our campaigns in both Korea and Vietnam, and our minor skirmishes. We may help rebuild afterwards, but all throughout such enterprises, we have gone on increasing our own productivity without the slightest interruption through destruction by invasion. For we have been fortunate enough to fight our later wars abroad.

Given such a situation, what of the conflicts as regards our relations to the "Eastern" and "Western" powers in Europe following the defeat of Hitler? Since our leaders' policies in general were set up in line with the "Western" powers, was a corresponding politico-economic policy to be expected? And how might that be carried out? The shrewdest procedure might be (and I think it was the one that Chancellor Adenauer in Germany persuasively advocated) for the "West" to maintain a high level of production in the *military* segment of the economy. For, particularly if the U.S. shouldered the major costs of such a policy, the "Western" economies would suffer much less than the "Eastern" ones, since the U.S. could bring to this contest the tremendous resources of our felicitously uninterrupted and thus ever-mounting productivity.

Underlying such a policy would be the likelihood that, given the amount of destruction that had been visited upon Russia, the Soviet economy would be under a great strain. (For clearly, all during any

Russian administration's attempts to recover, the great resources of the U.S. productive plant would have all the advantages, even to the extent of increasing the production of commodities for peaceful consumption, sold by advertising to the public, along with a high production of weaponry, sold to the government mainly thanks to the unadvertised machinery of lobbies in Washington.) But first of all, given such attitudes on "our" side, the advisable course would be to make the Russians expend as much of their substance as possible on the production of economically worthless war-goods. And there was a reasonable likelihood that they would collapse under the attempt to build a powerful war machine while the citizens were suffering great shortages in even the bare rudiments of a livelihood.

It so turns out that they didn't collapse. And even while we were being assured that they were still floundering in a wheel-barrow economy, they turned up with *Sputnik*.

Thereafter, "we" started redoubling our efforts, and the arms race was on with a vengeance. But a vague possibility suggests itself, namely that our system lacks the Russian dictatorial control over prices; nay more, our rationale of production is based on a free economy that makes our war production much more costly to us than theirs is to them. It further adds to inflation by bidding for executives in competition with the peace-time economy.

Under the circumstances, could it be possible now that, given the altered economic conditions, it might be in the U.S.S.R.'s best interests to keep us going full scale on war goods, as in Vietnam? Only a few gestures on their part would be enough to keep alive our current disastrous over-spending on war-goods. For not only does such mal-proportion have the best chance of getting through Congress, thereby making for maximum disorder in our own economy, which is so greatly in need of truly economic rehabilitation; it also handicaps us in our foreign relations. For the more you spend on war, the greater the tax revenues that will be needed. And the greater the taxation, the poorer our power as regards relations abroad (either as regards the prices we must charge for our exports, or as regards the amounts available for building up our influence by foreign aid).

Is it possible? I don't profess to know. But such are the speculations that occur to me once I start tracking down the implications of what the expression "The Rhetorical Situation" might mean to me at this particular stage in our history. And possible considerations of this sort are behind the efforts of those Congressmen who are starting a drive against our present excessive expenditures on armament.

But such thoughts bring up a related set of possibilities. These concern paradoxical possibilities latent in what is called the "Gross National Product." The term "Gross National Product" identifies our whole economic structure in sheerly monetary terms. Probably, in the next few years, you will see many indications that here, too, is an essential aspect of the Rhetorical Situation in which we find ourselves. The very profusion of sheerly monetary transactions will force us to realize the ways in which the identifying of an economy in monetary terms can be illusory. (The most obvious example is in the fact that mere *inflation* shows up as a corresponding increase in the G.N.P.)

In the meantime, among the most influential rhetoricians of our world today are surely our experts in the manipulation of monetary terms. Thus, accountants can show things at their worst, if it's taxes you would avoid. Or they can show things at their best, if you would promote stock sales on the basis of reports listing profits present and prospective. High among such masters of unsung eloquence are those legalists who, on behalf of their clients, deliberately add loopholes to tax laws, a form of inducement so quietly persuasive that invention of this sort is totally alien to the stylistic excesses of what was once called Asiatic oratory. Indeed, it is couched in language as severe as a medical diagnosis or a laundry list; yet when the address is over, lo! an individual or even a corporation with earnings up into the millions need pay less taxes (if any!) than the lowliest of wage-earners.

But hold! Once we started to track down the foibles of legal corporations in their roles as "persons," we'd find a whole new set of persuasive marvels opening up. So I desist.