

## Contributions to a Formal Taxonomy of Antimetaboles

Stephen J. Sullivan, Ph.D.

Department of English and Philosophy  
Edinboro University  
Edinboro, PA 16444, USA

An antimetabole is a well-known rhetorical device in which a phrase, clause, or sentence is uttered and then its word order reversed, typically for emphasis or memorableness. (I shall not pause to distinguish between this device and its close cousin, chiasmus; nothing I say depends on choice of terminology.) There are commonplace examples, such as “Say what you mean and mean what you say” and “We’re not better because we’re bigger, we’re bigger because we’re better” (Filter Fresh Coffee slogan). There are also literary ones, such as “Fair is foul and foul is fair” (Shakespeare, *MacBeth*) and “Women forget all those things that they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget” (Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*). There are scriptural ones, such as these two: “Ah, you who call evil good and good evil...” (*Isaiah* 5: 20, NRSV) and “So the last will be first, and the first will be last” (*Matthew* 20: 16). And there are political ones in abundance, including the following classics: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country” (John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address) and “We didn’t land on Plymouth Rock, Plymouth Rock landed on us” (Malcolm X, Ballot or the Bullet speech). (Mardy Grothe’s *Never Let a Fool Kiss You or a Kiss Fool You* [Viking, 1999], though by no means a scholarly book, is one useful source of many more examples of antimetabole. Lucy Ferriss’s “Antimetabole Season” contains a good discussion of the popularity of antimetaboles in political rhetoric [<http://chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2016/08/03>]. I have borrowed several examples from them.)

Rather than classify antimetaboles by variety of source or subject matter, however, I’d like to explore the possibility of dividing them up on the basis of *structure*. Even a partial formal taxonomy such as the one I will sketch may be not only intrinsically interesting but also useful in generating some tentative conclusions about the underlying purpose and comparative rhetorical effectiveness of different types of antimetaboles. In Section 1 I will examine what I call Confucian antimetaboles, along with two related kinds involving comparative value judgments and analogies respectively. In Section 2 I will cover what I call Socratic antimetaboles as well as a closely related variant. Finally, in Section 3 I will offer some brief, concluding reflections.

### Section 1

Let me start by observing that many important antimetaboles explicitly or implicitly take the form ‘A without B is C, and B without A is D.’ (Note that C may or may not be identical to D, and both may be conjunctive in which case we have ‘A without B is C and D, and B without A is E and F’, as in the Johnson and King examples that follow). For reasons soon to be made clear, I will call them **Confucian** antimetaboles. Here is a generous sampling, in roughly chronological order, of ones that explicitly take this form:

“Learning without reflection is a waste, reflection without learning is dangerous” (Confucius, *Analects*). “Justice without strength is helpless, strength without justice is tyrannical” (Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*). “Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless, and knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful” (Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas*). “Concepts without percepts are empty, percepts without concepts are blind” (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*). “Action without study is fatal. Study without action is futile” (attributed to Mary Ritter Beard). “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind” (Albert Einstein, letter to Eric Gutkind). “Liberty without learning is always in peril, and learning without liberty is always in vain” (John F. Kennedy, Vanderbilt University convocation). “Power without love is reckless and abusive and...love without power is sentimental and anemic” (Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here?*).

Since Confucius was to the best of my knowledge the first to use this kind of antimetabole, I suggest we name it after him. I indicated in the preceding paragraph both that some Confucian antimetaboles have the requisite form only implicitly and that sometimes C and D are identical. Let me now proceed to give some examples in which these two conditions are met together.

“Fear cannot be without some hope nor hope without some fear” (attributed to Baruch Spinoza). This can be paraphrased in explicit Confucian form as follows: fear without hope is impossible, hope without fear is impossible. “In our kind of society liberation cannot come without integration and integration cannot come without liberation” (Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here?*). That is, liberation without integration is impossible and integration without liberation is impossible. “[Y]ou cannot have ideas without persons or persons without ideas” (Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*). That is, ideas without persons are impossible, and persons without ideas are impossible. “There is no freedom without equality before the law, and there is no equality before the law without freedom” (Vaclav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless”). That is, freedom without equality before the law is nonexistent/ impossible, equality before the law without freedom is nonexistent/impossible. “Freedom requires religion, just as religion requires freedom” (Mitt Romney, Faith in America speech). That is, freedom without religion is impossible, and religion without freedom is impossible.

At the outset I mentioned that emphasis or memorableness is typically the purpose of antimetaboles. It should be fairly clear from the examples I have supplied that Confucian antimetaboles are often used to give emphatic or memorable expression to what the speaker takes to be **essential interdependence or inseparability** of A and B. (In her important book *Rhetorical Figures in Science* [Oxford University Press, 1999] Jeanne Fahnestock makes this point about the Burke example given above.) But there are notable exceptions; consider, for example, this implicit Confucian antimetabole from Benjamin Disraeli: “Action may not always bring happiness, but there is no happiness without action” (*Lothair*). The explicit form would be something like “Action without happiness is possible, but happiness without action is impossible”; and in this case only a one-way dependence or inseparability is affirmed.

The dependence relationship between A and B may be causal or conceptual or metaphysical, though which of these categories an example fits or is supposed to fit into may be unclear. The Burke example and others in my list of implicitly Confucian antimetaboles in which C=D each seem to belong to one of these three categories. But the dependence relationship is *evaluative* in the examples I have provided of explicitly Confucian antimetaboles in which C and D are distinct, though this was by no means my intention. That is, A and B are each said to be *flawed* in some way in the absence of the other. Recall Confucius’s own example: “Learning without reflection is a *waste*, reflection without learning is *dangerous*” (emphasis added). Let me suggest another tentative conclusion: that explicitly Confucian antimetaboles in which C is not identical to D are more felicitously--and so probably more memorably--expressed than ones in which C is identical to D. Compare, for example, the following two examples: “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind” (Einstein); fear without hope is impossible, hope without fear is impossible (Spinoza paraphrase). The repetition of the C and D term, ‘impossible’, in the second example, is somewhat jarring, as it is in all the paraphrases from the list of antimetaboles in which C=D. But there are easy fixes: in the Spinoza example, we can say “fear without hope is impossible, and so is hope without fear” (which is close to explicitly Confucian form), or we can revert to Spinoza’s original wording (“Fear cannot be without hope nor hope without some fear”). In some implicitly Confucian antimetaboles (such as the King and Romney examples), the original wording lacks the distinctive preposition ‘without’ that is so characteristic of explicitly Confucian ones. But that needn’t diminish their rhetorical effectiveness, although it will tend to make them harder to recognize as Confucian. I should add that there are non-Confucian kinds of antimetaboles which likewise make use of ‘without.’ One kind explicitly or implicitly takes the form of a comparative value judgment: A without B is superior (better, etc.) to B without A.

For instance, “It is better to deserve honors and not have them than to have them and not deserve them” (Mark Twain, 1906 autograph aphorism), which can be paraphrased as follows: deserving honors without having them is better than having them without deserving them. A second kind is analogical in form: A without B is like (similar to, etc.) C without D.

For example, “Capitalism without failure is like religion without sin” (attributed to Allan H. Meltzer) and “A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle” (attributed to the lesbian feminist movement). Note that the first member of this pair of analogical examples affirms the interdependence of A and B while the second denies it, indeed affirms their complete separability.

## Section 2

Let me introduce Socratic antimetaboles by locating them in a broader category. Consider Cicero's antimetabole "you should eat to live, not live to eat" (often attributed to Socrates and so common now that it is sometimes granted proverbial status!). Clearly the two clauses negate by each other, and for this reason such antimetaboles have been treated in classical rhetoric as a kind of antithesis (Fahnestock, p. 129). But Fahnestock prefers to call them "a special class of 'corrective' or 'refutative' antimetaboles" (p. 150). However we label them, they include instances of the form "A because B, not B because A" or "Not B because A but A because B". Sometimes they're phrased as a disjunctive question covering both possibilities: "A because B or B because A?" It is these antimetaboles that I wish to call Socratic, for a reason to be explained shortly.

As with Confucian antimetaboles, we can distinguish between explicit and implicit forms of Socratic antimetaboles. One example of an explicitly Socratic antimetabole was given in the opening paragraph of this paper (the coffee slogan); here's a sampling of others in roughly chronological order: "Do the gods love what is holy because it is holy, or is it holy because the gods love it?" (Socrates in Plato's *Euthyphro*; philosophers know this as the Euthyphro Question or Dilemma, usually modernized to concern the relationship between God's commands and what is right).

"But suicide is not inadmissible and abominable because God has forbidden it; God has forbidden it because it is abominable..." (Immanuel Kant, *Lectures in Ethics*). "We do not stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing" (variously attributed to Benjamin Franklin, Herbert Spencer, Oliver Wendell Holmes, George Bernard Shaw, and Anonymous). "Persecution is not wrong because it is cruel, but it is cruel because it is wrong" (Richard Whately, *The Kingdom of Christ Delineated*). "Some contend that I disapprove of this plan because it is not my own; but it would be more correct to say, that it is not my own because I disapprove of it." (19<sup>th</sup>-century British politician named Wyndham, quoted by Richard Whately in *Elements of Rhetoric*) "Do I love you because you're beautiful? Or are you beautiful because I love you?" (Oscar Hammerstein III, "Do I Love you because you're Beautiful?") "Some have an idea that the reason we in this country discard things so readily is because we have so much. The facts are exactly the opposite—the reason we have so much is simply because we discard things so readily." (Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., *My Years with General Motors*) "...East and West do not distrust each other because we are armed; we are armed because we distrust each other." (Ronald Reagan, Remarks at the Brandenburg Gate) "I drink because I am unhappy.... Maybe, just maybe, I'm unhappy because I drink." (Caroline Knapp, *Drinking: A Love Story*)

Because Socrates was—so far as I know—the first to use such anti-metables explicitly, and because the Euthyphro Question is so well-known, I propose naming them after him. Let me now offer examples of implicitly Socratic antimetaboles: that is, ones that can be paraphrased so as to take the explicit form "A because B, not B because A" or "Not B because A but A because B" (none of the following examples are questions).

"It is not the oath that makes us believe the man, but the man the oath" (Aeschylus, Fragment 385). Paraphrased in explicitly Socratic form: It is not that we believe the man because of the oath he took, but that we believe the oath he took because of the man. "Geniuses are commonly believed to excel other men in their power of sustained attention. But it is their genius making them attentive, not their attention making geniuses of them" (William James, *Principles of Psychology Part I*). That is, it's not that people are geniuses because they're attentive, but that they're attentive because they're geniuses. Edward Arlington Robinson was once asked whether his sense of humor had helped him to live longer. He replied, "I think my life has lengthened my sense of humor" (Daniel Gregory Mason, "Early Letters of Edward Arlington Robinson: First Series", *VQR*). That is, it's not that his long life was lengthened because of his sense of humor, but that his sense of humor was lengthened because of his long life. I should mention that there is a variant of Socratic antimetaboles that explicitly or implicitly takes the form "A because B and B because A." Consider the following example concerning politicians: "Our cynicism begets their fakery and their fakery begets our cynicism" (Paul Taylor, "The Talk of the Town," *New Yorker*). The relevant paraphrase is something like this: politicians are frauds because we are cynical about them, and we are cynical about them because they are frauds. The examples I have provided of Socratic antimetaboles suggest that they are designed to express emphatically or memorably what the speaker believes to be a relationship of *one-way dependence* of A on B. In this regard they resemble the Disraeli example of a Confucian antimetabole mentioned earlier. By contrast, near-Socratic antimetaboles of the form "A because B and B because A", which are illustrated by the Taylor example in the preceding paragraph, assert the interdependence or two-way inseparability of A and B, and so resemble most of the examples I provided of Confucian anti-metables.

Near-Socratic ones, however, may have an initially paradoxical ring to them in virtue of their apparent circularity: we may wonder, for instance, how political fakery can both cause and be caused by political cynicism. So the speaker will need to have some explanation at hand, in this case presumably one appealing to a feedback loop.

### ***Section 3***

Let me make two final points in this exploratory effort at providing the beginnings of a formal taxonomy of anti -metaboles. The first is that even if my accounts of Confucian and Socratic antimetaboles are acceptable, there remains an enormous amount of work to be done in the way of identifying and explaining other formal types of antimetaboles. I know of no better method in this connection than that of examining large numbers of independent examples and looking for structural patterns in them. The second conclusion is that Confucian and Socratic antimetaboles, like all clever rhetorical devices, should be used sparingly or very selectively. Indeed, nowadays those who use them outside of speech giving contexts run the risk of appearing pretentious: hardly a desirable rhetorical effect! But as I have learned more about them, I have found myself adding a new item to my personal “bucket list”: namely, devising and using in some public context a Confucian or Socratic antimetabole that is original, memorable, and unpretentious. I hope others may be inspired to do likewise.