HUMW 011: Critical Reading and Writing
Weak/Strong Defense of Rhetoric

The Basics
First introduced by Richard Lanham in his essay “The ‘Q’ Question,” the binary of the strong and the weak defense of rhetoric charts two perspectives on rhetoric, one productive and one reductive. In doing so it compares and contrasts two long-standing traditions in Western thought that have informed the modern university. Briefly described, the *weak defense* supposes that rhetoric is either good or bad depending on what it represents. In this view, rhetoric is a value-neutral tool that can be used for good or bad causes: good rhetoric represents good causes, and bad rhetoric represents bad causes. This view treats rhetoric as purely ornamental.

The *strong defense*, however, takes issue with key assumptions built into the weak defense. Namely, the assumption that “good” and “bad” are judgments that exist independent of human rhetorical action: that “good” and “bad” are not themselves arguments or rhetorical positions. The strong defense asserts that rhetoric is the means by which we decide, in the first place, what “good” and “bad” are. This defense is seen as “stronger,” not simply because it “likes rhetoric more,” but because it allows us to better examine and understand what rhetoric is and does.

As the visuals below (should) indicate, the strong defense of rhetoric asserts that “good” and “bad” are themselves rhetorical rather than arhetorical. Rhetoric, then, can certainly be used in advancing “good” and “bad” causes, but the *goodness* or *badness* of a cause is itself rhetorically determined (through argument, through persuasion). While this certainly complicates matters, the strong defense’s biggest strength is the pressure it puts on us to re-assess our assumptions about basic categories such as good and bad. It also, incidentally, places rhetoric much nearer to the heart of human experience. Rather than merely ornamental, rhetoric is essentially creative.

**Small Group Discussion:** Spend a few minutes coming up with examples in American life and popular culture of weak and strong defenses of rhetoric (you will want to refer back to “Antidosis” and the “What is Rhetoric?”).

**Applications: Technology**
Not only does Lanham’s binary help us to understand and appreciate rhetorical action, the weak/strong distinction can be used to assess different perspectives on a variety of important issues. For instance, technologies are often seen as value-neutral tools that can be used for either good or bad ends. This we can easily see as a *weak defense of technology*. The *strong defense of technology*, instead, could go like this: technologies are value-laden and, like frames, make arguments about what we can and should do (that is, set patterns of behavior and ethical norms). For instance, how we present ourselves on Facebook is, in part, shaped by the constraints *built into* Facebook. The strong defense of technology calls us to question and understand how all technology works in these ways.

**Class Discussion:** How does Facebook go about creating a version of us? What arguments does it make about what is important and what is not? What values are built into the technology? How does a strong defense of technology inform a strong defense of rhetoric?

**Applications: Education**
We could also easily imagine weak and strong defenses of education. Weak defense: education adds skills to individuals who can then use them to achieve great or terrible things. Strong defense: education works to create particular kinds of people by stressing certain forms of knowledge and knowledge-making over others. Thus, different schools and models and approaches to education cultivate (or serve) different kinds of people.