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Otto Weininger and the Manosphere:
Rhetorical weapons of mass destruction

*"Just as we **love** in others only what we would like to be completely but never are completely, so we **hate** in others only what we never want to be, but always are in part." - Otto Weininger*

Abstract

While living amidst a pandemic, surrounded by political upheaval and economic distress, it is easy, perhaps even cathartic, to get lost in the "unprecedented" nature of the world around you. Through the advent and popularization of advanced mobile technology and social media, isolated individuals are finding comfort in online communities which popularize other "unprecedented" ideas of the world. One such online community, known as the manosphere, has collectively developed a reactionary theory of the sexes against third-wave feminism. These "radical" beliefs, however, are not so much unprecedented as they are a reflection of the anxieties and change occurring within modern society. While the manosphere has thrived amidst the fears and fury that plague our plague-ridden times, radical philosophers have always been a conduit for analyzing those same insecurities. Otto Weininger, an Austrian philosopher during the Viennese *fin-de-siecle* similarly lived during a time of social upheaval—a time where heavy inflation, dramatic human migration, and novel feminist theory threatened to upend traditional Viennese way of life. In both cases, Weininger and the manosphere were able to draw large audiences to their work through dramatic assertions which spotlighted modern cultural debates. Both Weininger and the contributors in the manosphere leveraged rhetorical devices to convert followers to their unconventional philosophies. In this essay, I will try to understand how both Weininger and the people of the manosphere use the basic rhetorical principals of ethos, logos, and pathos to advance anti-womanist narratives to their large audiences.

Background

Otto Weininger was a 23 year-old PhD graduate when he shot himself in the same home Beethoven died in (Genecov 2018). Weininger had, within the prior year, published *Sex and Character*, his dissertation which sought to provide a unified theory of gender by abstracting male and female into the ideal man, M and the ideal woman, W. Weininger purported that each individual human could and did hold aspects of both M and W, but hypothesized that the feminine traits of W were non-moral and that femininity should be rejected in favor of more rational masculinity. A substantial portion of Weininger's dissertation focuses on drawing parallels between W and Judaism, and as a gay Jew himself, there has been a lot of speculation as to how Weininger's personal identity shaped his rhetoric (Genecov 2018). This essay will not continue to focus on this connection between Weininger's personal crises and his writing, but on why Weininger's writing (based on that foundation of self-loathing) grew to be so influential.

One piece to the puzzle of Weininger's fame lies in the historical context of the Viennese *fin-de-siecle*. In the late 19th century, Vienna was experiencing a massive social upheaval caused by major economic developments as the Hapsburg empire began the process of capitalist modernization (Achinger 2013, 7). This economic crisis was compounded as a large influx of migrants over-doubled the city's population within half a century, creating a massive underclass with a disproportionate number of Jewish immigrants (Achinger 2013, 7). This city, primed with the kind of economic crisis that breeds xenophobia, was also witnessing the birth of suffrage and early feminist movements (Sengoopta 1996, 461). Most Viennese philosophers subscribed to the strict gender roles established in the 18th century, and the social rejection of those roles was leading to a

Viennese “crisis of modernity” (Sengoopta 1996, 462; Achinger 2013, 5). It was within this social framework that Weininger’s philosophy got published and recognized as a paradigm by which to evaluate the Viennese society.

The manosphere, like Weininger’s *Sex and Character* has developed during a time of massive social upheaval. The manosphere consists of men who have “taken the red pill,” but what this means for them depends on who you ask (Cunha 2020). In general, it refers to the idea that “women run the world without taking responsibility for it, and that their male victims are not permitted to complain” (Marche 2016). The community was formed as a reaction against third-wave feminism in which the men in the manosphere blame feminists for usurping social control for their own personal gain (Van Valkenburgh 2021, 85). But, perhaps more broadly, the manosphere is a collection of men seeking to reconcile their place in the technological era with their place in a rapidly morphing society. The manosphere has been shaped and formed, much like the culture of the Viennese *fin-de-siecle*, as a reaction against prevailing philosophies and changes that have led to a crisis of modernity.

Ethos

Both the manosphere and Weininger’s rhetoric is characterized by a perversion of scientific discourse used to establish authority. Weininger’s writing appeals to logic and prevailing scientific theory (Weininger 2005, 13; 14; 17; 25). In *Sex and Character*, Weininger’s word choice often seeks to emulate that of a scientific report and the first half is littered with bizarre formulas for the feminine/masculine traits of any individual

(Sengoopta 1996, 457). Weininger's theories often follow a similar logical flow, which begins by referencing an unrelated scientific theory, and then using that theory as the basis for his philosophies on gender and sexuality. When he first begins to delineate his theory on the ideal woman and the ideal man, for example, he links his law to prevailing law in physics:

Just as physics talks about ideal gases—i.e., those that precisely follow Boyle-Gay-Lussac's law (in reality none obeys it)—before proceeding to note divergences from this law in concrete cases, we can also posit an ideal Man M and an ideal Woman W, neither of whom exists, as sexual types (3)

In associating himself logically with the hard sciences, Weininger tries to propert his theories as fact. Indeed, even when he acknowledges the logical inconsistencies in his own arguments, he will double down by claiming that his observations are simply common sense:

We may thus arrive at the following notion, which is hypothetical from the point of view of logic, but which is raised almost to a level of certainty by the sum total of the facts: every cell of the organism (as we will provisionally say) has a sexual character, or a certain sexual emphasis. (17)

Weininger's two-part approach to establishing an ethos—first by aligning himself with the prevailing scientific theories of the time, then by dismissing any critiques of his lacking common sense—leverages him into a position of authority on the subject at hand.

Similar to Weininger, the manosphere establish themselves as the principal authority when it comes to objective analysis of gender roles in modernity. In one popular subreddit within the manosphere, The Red Pill (hereafter, r/TRP), a sidebar links to a series of articles designed to educate newly-initiated men on the philosophies of the

manosphere (Van Valkenburgh 2021, 4). One such article, entitled “The Rosetta Stone of Women’s Behavior,” mimics Weininger’s deferral to scientific parlance. In describing a recent revelation he made regarding the nature of women, the anonymous author writes, “Like all truly great discoveries, such as $E=MC^2$ or $F=MA$, what I found that explains the unified field theory of women’s behavior is elegantly simple.” The article goes on to describe a postulate which outlines how women manipulate and dictate the relationships they have with men. The carefully chosen diction in this article(*i.e.* using phrases common in scientific communication such as “grand unified theory,” and, later, adding “corollaries” to his law) create a verbal connection between the philosophy and scientific logic. In this way, both Weininger and the philosophers of the manosphere borrow authority from leading scientific minds in order to advance their beliefs.

This pseudo-scientific approach emboldens the men who subscribe to these theories and builds an anti-feminist, anti-woman framework that follows philosophical ideals of the time. In his exploration of the scientific, philosophical, and cultural theories of the Viennese *fin-de-siecle*, Chandak Sengoopta places Weininger’s philosophy squarely within the neo-Kantian German philosophy,

Two prominent centers of neo-Kantian thought. . . . asserted that proper object of philosophical investigation was the logical structure of knowledge and rejected all kinds of empiricism, biologism, historicism, and psychologism. For them, the rational *Geist* was beyond all external influence. Weininger aligned himself wholeheartedly with this general program: his goal was to resurrect Kant’s concept of noumenal, undemonstrable [*sic.*], but intelligible self as the unchanging basis of psychological knowledge. (1996, 461)

Weininger strode to establish himself among the leading philosophers at the time by weaponizing this fetishization of logic in favor of his xenophobic ideology. Similarly, in Shawn P. Van Valkenburgh's quantitative analysis of r/TRP, Van Valkenburgh notes that the sidebar posits itself as the source of empirical truth:

The sidebar insists that its philosophy is quasi-positivist. In attempted alliance with the scientific community, the sidebar declares that the The Red Pill is about pragmatism and truth based on observation. In other words, r/TRP should not discuss values or ideals but should focus on "what works" (90)

By framing their philosophical objectives within a positivist framework, both the manosphere and Weininger feel entitled to make larger and bolder claims on the premise of scientific rationality. This approach allows both actors to benefit from enlightenment and post-enlightenment faith in scientific reasoning while subverting the need for the rigors of the scientific process.

Finally, while both Weininger and the individuals in the manosphere establish ethos by connecting themselves with scientific rationalism, they also leverage the inverse logic—that their critics are incapable of rational thought—to pre-eminently discredit any opposition. Weininger delineates this line of thinking through the nature of his work. Since he is working to define and undermine feminine traits in society, he argues that, based on his model of the human psyche, no woman would be able to logically assess her own sexual being:

As the sexuality of the male is an adjunct to his life, it is possible for him to keep it in the physiological background, and out of his consciousness. . . . A woman has not her sexuality limited to periods of time, not to localized organs. And so it happens that a man can know about his sexuality, whilst a

woman is unconscious of it and can in all good faith deny it.
(Weininger, 236)

Weininger's own thesis serves to undermine the arguments of his critics precisely because he develops his own alleged credibility in order to posit an argument about the nature of women. Similarly, the manosphere defines feminists and feminist theory to be the antithesis to the logic of the men's rights community, "the sidebar [of r/TRP] construes feminism and gender studies as the polar opposite of r/TRP, precisely on the grounds that the former's positions seem shaped by opinion and values, rather than empirical evidence" (Van Vaulkenburgh 2021, 7). In discrediting their opposition while presenting their ideas as provable fact, these methods of establishing ethos invite extremism into their ranks

Weininger's work was a prime starting point for fascists because it seeks to justify ethics, politics, and aesthetics in metaphysics. It first presents bigotry as a benign, ancillary aspect of its grand perspective—one philosophy among many vying for currency—and then, once in power, obviates any disagreement; all other opinions and people are inferior and therefore incapable of presenting valuable arguments (Gencov 2018).

The discrediting of opposition, while simultaneously bolstering themselves as the voice of reason amidst the fray, establishes both the men's rights movement and Weininger's philosophy, not just as *an* authoritative source on their respective topics, but as the only source to find appropriate information for the case.

Logos

After *Sex and Character* and the men's rights subreddits construct their own pseudo-scientific models for the world, they use that model to advance philosophical theories

rooted in their understanding of the world that they build. For both Weininger and the manosphere, this means deconstructing their perceptions of femininity and evaluating those theories against the prejudices that they hold. In Weininger's case, this means pathologizing femininity by claiming that all femininity exists on a non-moral spectrum from mother to prostitute. Whether a feminine person is a mother figure, seeking to breed and take care of children like any other animal, or a prostitute, seeking sexual fulfillment without any other pursuits, according to Weininger, there is no way to fulfill that portion of oneself in a moral or decent manner. Similarly, the manosphere uses their narratives on female sexual drive to postulate about how women are controlling society itself (Marche 2016). By building their authority on a pseudo-scientific world of their own curating, both Weininger and the MRA redditors can construct misogynistic narratives within the framework of their imagined scientific method.

One of the more vivid similarities between the logic of Weininger and the manosphere is their obsession with ascribing psychological characteristics to perceived physiological traits. In one pertinent example, many men's rights bloggers have galvanized around a 2017 meta-analysis of sperm counts in thousands of men which found that sperm counts were falling precipitously over time (Levine, Jørgensen. Martino-Andrade, et. al, 2017). While ignoring the myriad of potential epidemiological and biochemical causes for this conclusion, men's rights activists jumped on this study as proof of how modern western culture is feminizing and degrading masculinity, "Rollo Tomassi. . . who runs a site called The Rational Male. . . said the sperm count study last year was a watershed moment. To his mind, it showed definitively that modern society was weakening men" (Bowles 2018). Weininger, similarly, dedicates the second chapter of *Sex and Character* to a long-

winded tangent on the biological variation between sexes. From analysis of his (self-defined) arrhenoplasm and thelyplasm, Weininger concludes that, “*The occurrence of intermediate sexual forms is **determined** by the different degrees of original sexual characteristics in conjunction with the inner secretions* (which probably vary in quality and quantity in each individual)” (25). While Weininger does not elaborate on the potential ramifications of modifying these plasma, the division of the sexes into biologically distinct entities serves to further establish the distance between masculinity and femininity, which he perceives as an immutable characteristic intrinsic in one’s biological composition. By elaborating on their prejudices through biological argumentation, both Weininger and the manosphere satisfy their need to root their misogyny in scientific theory, while still developing a narrative that subverts previously established scientific thought.

One final line of logic that both *Sex and Character* and the manosphere share perhaps most quintessentially demonstrates each of their respective ideologies—the shared belief that women use their hyper-sexuality to establish a feminine hegemony over masculine individuals. In *Sex and Character*, Weininger postulates that the mother-prostitute dichotomy allows for women to gain positions of power across society. He maintains that the concepts of virginity and modesty are fronts, built by women, to manipulate men into falsely believing that men are the sex-crazed individuals who need women when, in fact, Weininger believes the opposite is the case:

Women are equipped to a high degree with the art of creating the illusion that . . . their sexuality is only a concession to Man. . . . However, with the support of men who have believed them, women today have almost succeeded in persuading the opposite sex that the most important, most characteristic, need

of Man is sexuality, [and] that he can expect the fulfillment of his truest and deepest desires only from Woman (301)

In this way, Weininger argues, women are able to subtly elevate their position in society by maintaining a façade as pure, asexual beings which hides their true character as ravenous individuals who will only be satiated through limitless intercourse. This logic mimics the assertions of the manosphere, where individuals claim that third-wave feminism has elevated women and their sexuality above those of men, creating a dynamic where women can manipulate their way into sex at will, while they feed men the narrative that their life is unfulfilled without that of a woman. The aforementioned anonymous Reddit post entitled “The Rosetta Stone of Women’s Behavior” explains this concept through what they call Briffault’s Law:

BRIFFAULT’S LAW:

The female, not the male, determines all the conditions of the animal family. Where the female can derive no benefit from association with the male, no such association takes place.

There are a few corollaries I would add:

1. Past benefit provided by the male does not provide for continued or future association.
 - Any agreement where the male provides a current benefit in return for a promise of future association is null and void as soon as the male has provided the benefit (see corollary 1)
 - ▪ A promise of future benefit has limited influence on current/future association, with the influence inversely proportionate to the length of time until the benefit will be given and directly proportionate to the degree to which the female trusts the male (which is not bloody likely).

Briffault’s law is an exemplar of the conclusions that men’s rights activists draw having perceived the shift in power dynamics that have come with the feminist movement. As reddit user pk_atheist asserted:

Feminism is a sexual strategy. It puts women into the best position they can find, to select mates, to determine when they want to switch mates, to locate the best dna possible, and to garner the most resources they can individually achieve.
(2019)

In these ways, the course of Weininger's logic demonstrates that he is the prototype for the MRA movement. The way Weininger draws the line from female sexuality to female liberation to female dominance becomes the basic cornerstone of MRA argumentation. Weininger and MRA otherwise and demonize femininity by casting female sexuality as the means to the female domination of society.

Pathos

The final piece of the rhetorical puzzle clicks into place as the MRA and Weininger catastrophize the conclusions of their logical problems, and, in so doing, demonize entire populations of people. Weininger's conclusion that femininity exists to be fulfilled through sexual gratification is materialized through a radical call to action—that men need to stop having sex in order to avoid manipulation, and women must abstain sexually in order to reject their womanhood (294-296). While there are too many splinters and subgroups within the manosphere to create a full picture of this pathological argument in that community, it is precisely in this call to action where MRA groups diverge the most radically. Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), in keeping with Weininger, pledge to sexual abstinence in order to reject a perceived gynarchy (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019). Incels, on the other hand, try to master game, the pick up artist's term for manipulating women into relationships and sex. Some splinter groups seek to undermine and subvert

feminism as a calls, while others actively promote the use of violence against women (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019). While these reactionary movements differ in objective, they all share a focused hatred of the women they demonize, and the seek to remedy that hatred through real-life intervention.

While their calls to action may be different, both the manosphere and Weininger's philosophy thrived in an era of extreme polarization, economic distress, and social upheaval. The men of the manosphere seek an explanation when they can no longer follow historic gender roles amidst the new feminist regime (Marche 2016). They scapegoat women who they perceive as part of the feminist movement in order to balm their own insecurities relating to sex, love, and their station in society. Weininger, similarly, saw no place for himself as a gay, Jewish man with "female" traits during the Viennese *fin-de-siecle* (Achinger 2007, 5). It appropriately follows that his writing reflects the mind of an individual trying to find understanding about his insecurities by pathologizing the traits he hates most within himself. In this way, Weininger and the manosphere do not just draw on a pathos of hate but encourage their readers to do something darker—to externalize their self-loathing to salve their own sense of crisis.

Conclusion

And so, the cycle of leveraging rhetorical tools against xenophobia concludes for this round. Beginning with the construction of a pseudo-scientific world the misogyny perpetuated by Weininger and the MRA movement reel new followers in through

positivistic nods to the scientific community, allowing both schools to claim legitimacy in a post-Enlightenment era. They then continue to build on their society-imagined to develop postulates and conspiracies regarding the true nature of femininity and power. Finally, these thoughts turned theories turn action, and both Weininger and the manosphere call on their readers to act on their new-found understandings of the world. In so doing, they encourage a cycle of hate and disdain which drives others towards the radical fringe and discourages the acceptance of difference.

Otto Weininger-- the philosopher, the student, the tragedy-- was raised in a world where he had no vocabulary to discuss the dualing dichotomies he hated the most about himself. So, instead, he started thinking. And the culmination of his 23 years of philosophy were bound into a book as desperate for a coherent sense of purpose as he was. Not unlike Weininger's tragedy, it is hard not to feel bad for the men who have fallen deep enough down the rabbit hole that their worldview is entirely shaped by the insecurities fostered by modern society. However, Weininger and the manosphere perpetuate this cycle by advancing a rhetoric that further divides and demonizes the subjects of their disdain. In the end, it is not the rhetorical devices themselves that make these arguments popular. As Daniel Steuter explained regarding Weininger's lasting social impact, "In his time, no one had internalized the spirit of the age as comprehensively, and his writings are the pandemonium of an epoch" (2005, 31). The rhetorical patterns of persuasion are simply the tools that these radicals use to synthesize and reflect the existing fears and prejudices within society.

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