

Perelman's Rhetorical Foundation of Philosophy

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Philosophical argumentation, like juridical argumentation, constitutes applications, to different domains, of a theory of argumentation which we consider as a new rhetoric.

By identifying this theory with the general theory of persuasive speech, which seeks to obtain the intellectual as well as the emotional adherence of an audience, no matter which, we state that all speeches which do not aspire to an impersonal validity proceed from rhetoric. (Ch. Perelman, *L'empire rhétorique*, p. 177).

But, if one does not admit that the philosophical thesis may be founded on evident intuitions, it will be necessary to recur to argumentative technics to make them prevail. The new rhetoric then becomes the indispensable tool of philosophy. (Ch. Perelman, *L'empire rhétorique*, p. 21).

ABSTRACT: This article is a Gadamer-Perelman's debate. The author points out the limits of the gadamerian's hermeneutic conception of philosophy and criticizes this conception from Perelman's new rhetoric point of view. Instead of speaking of truth as an ontological originary experience, the rhetorical foundation of philosophy allows us to say that in philosophy the important is the contrastation and the confrontation of criteria and that, for that reason, philosophy is above all characterized by discussibility.

KEY WORDS: Reasonable, discussibility, experience, philosophical questions, rationality, rhetorical foundation, philosophical taking of position, hermeneutics, phenomenology, new rhetoric.

1. TOWARDS AN ENLARGED CONCEPTION OF RATIONALITY

The development of Perelman's thought is based on the idea that it is necessary to constitute a methodology and a philosophy of the reasonable. This need imposes itself through the recognition that the entire occidental philosophical tradition, nurtured by an absolutist vocation leads only to impasse and aporia in what concerns matters related to domains where we must apply reason to values, and where preferring is the point. The great question for Perelman was that of knowing whether the axiological structures through which our preferences are organized somehow possess a logic, and, if so, what kind of a logic it is.

Since the act of preferring is linked to the exercise of freedom – only one who can choose prefers, and only one who has the possibility of opting can choose – it soon became clear that, if it exists, a “logic of the preferable” could never be a logic of inferences characterized by necessity. A logic that deals with analytic and necessary reasoning, and in which the reasoning process assumes the form of demonstration, is incompatible with the idea of preference: in a formalized logical system the validity of the reasoning does not depend on adherence or on assent given to conclusions. It depends solely on the correct application of inference rules to the set of axioms from which one proceeds. Given the axioms and inference rules, reasoning becomes mechanical and mechanizable, and the system's internal coherence makes it necessary. Inside a formalized logical system, if everyone reasons correctly, everyone will necessarily reach the same conclusions: in this case nothing points to the possibility of opting or induces a personal opinion. And, if that were the case, one must say that the formal system or the artificial language that formalizes it is inappropriately built.

The constitution of modern logic as theory of demonstration and, more accurately, as the study of the means of demonstration used in mathematical sciences, caused all that was ignored by mathematicians to be considered as alien to formal logic and, in this sense, devoid of logic. The authors of *Traité de l'argumentation* state that this resulted in “an undue and perfectly unjustified limitation of the domain where our faculty of reasoning intervenes.”¹ It was as a reaction against the identification of the logical with formal logic – which incorporates a narrow concept of reason – that Perelman developed investigations with the aim of showing the existence of an informal logic, of assessing the possibility of considering the notion of proof in a wider sense and, consequently, of making it possible to proceed towards an enlargement of the concept of reason itself. So, it is from his dissatisfaction with the limitations of logic as theory of demonstration, and his reaction against formal logic's claim to possess a monopoly on rationality,² that Perelman will be led to thematize a new rationality, capable of comprehending not only the formal and abstract use of reason but also – and especially – its informal use (that is, the one linked to the use of natural language) and its concrete use (that is, in its application to questions of a practical order, where it is necessary to establish aims, to assess situations, to organize preferences and to deal with values).

However, a new thematization of rationality presupposes the discussion and

the deconstruction of the presuppositions of the traditional conception of reason and, since the notion of reason is central to philosophy, and to the review the status of philosophy itself – its methodology as well as its intrinsic possibilities. Besides, one aspect cannot be disassociated from another, and the assertion that “there is a solidarity between the kind of questions and the type of arguments that make it possible to supply a solution”³ enables me to anticipate the idea that philosophy, although not being reduced to a methodology, cannot, however, disassociate the raising of questions and the formulation of problems from the methods that will enable them to be “solved” (let me say this without yet defining this term). This is why Perelman defends “the impossibility for a philosopher to escape questions by saying that the methods do not allow him to solve them; that is precisely what distinguishes the philosopher from the scientist. The scientist can renounce, not the philosopher.”⁴

What, then, are the means the philosopher has at his disposal to “solve” questions, knowing beforehand that the proposals presented by him can be neither arbitrary, nor inexpressible, nor necessary, so that it will be possible to speak of rationality in an enlarged sense?

2. UNDERSTANDING PHILOSOPHICAL ACTIVITY

Before trying to answer this question, and before being led to the core of what I intend to approach in this article – the rhetorical foundation of philosophy – let us dwell on the strange inversion that all this may imply regarding the traditional characterization of philosophical activity. For this purpose, let us consider Gadamer's hermeneutic thought, since it agglutinates (due to the phenomenological basis from which he departs and his universalist presumptions) the great motives of the occidental philosophical tradition. It is certain that the phenomenology claimed by gadamerian hermeneutics is no longer phenomenology in the husserlian sense, but phenomenology as it stands particularly after heideggerian criticisms,⁵ that is to say, a phenomenology that does not stand by itself, but always includes a hermeneutic presupposition. However, this does not mean that phenomenology and hermeneutics exclude each other; as Ricoeur⁶ pointed out, on the one hand phenomenology cannot be constituted without the hermeneutic presupposition; on the other hand, phenomenology remains the unsurpassable presupposition of hermeneutics. It is this last point that, from Perelman's thought, makes it possible for hermeneutics to be highly polemicized. So, just as the “hermeneutical turn” was considered to be the one that most strongly forced the review and transformation of husserlian phenomenology, from now on it will be from the “rhetorical turn” (this is the argument I sustain) that we will be able to question phenomenology, either in its husserlian version or in its hermeneutic version. Furthermore, since all of the conceptions of phenomenology mentioned above carry with them the ambition of truly realizing philosophy, or, at least, of defining the originary and true experience from which they arise, the criticism of phenomenology that I will

develop from the “new rhetoric” position is also the criticism of a certain way of philosophizing and of understanding philosophy. It simultaneously constitutes the proposal of a new understanding of philosophical activity, and it is exclusively in this sense that I speak of “rhetorical foundation of philosophy.” It is left to the reader to decide if it is a more reasonable one, as I believe it to be.

Why, then, this interest in gadamerian hermeneutics? In the first place because, like Perelman’s new rhetoric, it emerges as a critical thought on the absolutist philosophical tradition. Second, because if hermeneutics criticized husserlian idealism or the husserlian interpretation of phenomenology, it is the very idea of phenomenology, regardless of the version, that may be questioned if looked at from the perspectives opened by Perelman. Finally, because hermeneutics, as well as Perelman’s new rhetoric, offers a new way of conceiving philosophical activity.

3. THE HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

What is the great question of phenomenology, regardless of the version? To put it bluntly: the great question of phenomenology lies in the phrase “To the Things” (*Zu den Sachen*).⁷ Nevertheless, the return to the things may be made through different paths, as a comparative study of the concepts of phenomenon and phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger, for example, may prove. J.-L. Marion commented that in Husserl “returning to the things means returning to the evidence given by intuition in conscience”⁸ and that for this reason “husserlian phenomenology goes back to things, up to a certain point. This point has a name: the being of consciousness as such.”⁹ For Heidegger, the attempt to face the phenomenological maxim more radically led to the consideration that “taken in its contents, phenomenology is the science of beingness (*Sein des Seienden*) ontology.”¹⁰ Thus, J.-L. Marion made this observation about Heidegger: “the ultimate task to which the return to the things should be addressed has a name: the phenomenality of Being itself.”¹¹

Even though this is not the occasion to explore this subject, let me nevertheless underline something essential for the development of my thesis. Heidegger appropriated phenomenology to accomplish a Dasein analytic that serves as the background for the question of the meaning of beingness (*Sein des Seienden*). What this analytic will reveal is the very hermeneutical nature of Dasein. This became the starting point of Gadamer’s efforts to build a philosophical hermeneutics. Ricoeur has rightly written that “the most fundamental phenomenological presupposition of interpretation philosophy is that any question on any being whatsoever is a question on the meaning of this ‘being’” and that consequently “the choice through meaning is therefore the most general presupposition of the whole hermeneutics.”¹²

4. THE "RHETORICAL TURN"

Meaning, states Gadamer, is always the orientation of a possible question.¹³ In fact, from the perspective of the author of *Wahrheit und Methode*, the dialectic of question and answer best characterizes the essence of hermeneutic experience and makes it possible to assert its universality. That is why the analysis of comprehension and interpretation ascends to, and finds its true nucleus in, the logic of question and answer.¹⁴ Interpreting and comprehending are always pass through the explication of the question that the text answers. To have access to comprehension is, first of all, to understand the meaning of the question and, with that understanding, to establish the horizon of meaning through which the answer itself becomes susceptible to comprehension.

But in gadamerian hermeneutics the emphasis with which the question's predominance as to the essence of knowledge is asserted leads the philosopher to disassociate *radically* the act of questioning from method. He therefore states that it is the question's predominance that better and more originarily enables him to see the limits imposed on knowledge by the idea of method. If I wanted to summarize *Wahrheit und Methode's* leitmotive in a sentence, I would unquestionably say: "there is no method that teaches how to ask, how to see what is questionable."¹⁵ And, from what was said previously, it becomes clear that this will also be the target of my criticism. Let me anticipate a little: why would the assertion of our hermeneutic condition justify, and thus pass without the legitimation of question and answer logic? J. Greisch pertinently observed that: "Gadamer's hermeneutics acquires its universal dimension at the cost of renouncing normative exigency so that the 'critical' questions familiar to the interpretation expert do not derive from philosophical hermeneutics' competence. The hermeneutic constitution of our being-in-the-world does not need legitimation. If it possesses a 'logic' this logic works behind reason, as in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* a 'logic' works without being transparent to consciousness."¹⁶

Indeed, for Gadamer the asking, when true asking, and not mere pedagogic or rhetorical asking, *suspends* the pros and cons. It intitates a space previous to decision or position and therefore previous to the means by which an answer could be elaborated, where there would be room for only "possibilities of meaning." In this act of suspending lies the true original essence of questioning.¹⁷ However this presupposes the possibility of thought being exercised in a register of pure analyticity of possibilities that, coming from who knows where or how, interpellate it in a space previous to choice and appropriation of the possibilities of meaning that will later penetrate our opinion.¹⁸ What seems doubtful and artificial is precisely this distinction between the level of *pure possibilities of meaning* as if they were an autonomous sphere attainable only by a true asking that would aim at *nothing but* interrogation¹⁹ and the level of opinions and decisions as a register of appropriation and answer to the question that *occured in us*. Because, keeping to Gadamer's words, it is said of questions that they occur *in us*, that they rise and emerge through us, and not that they are

produced or placed *by us*.²⁰ M. M^a Carrilho observed that “to Gadamer the main difficulty in this transition between knowing and not knowing lies in the resistance of opinion. To overcome it he suggests that the access to the question be considered as if it were a *finding* coming to one’s mind, that is to say, that this is not the case of a method nor of a strategy.”²¹ But why not see in this resistance of opinion – considered in perelmanian terms as a principle of inertia and of stability regulating our spiritual life – the guarantee of a *continuity* without which one will not be able to speak of rationality?²² And why not state that between truth and opinion there is not a difference of nature but only of degree,²³ that truths are nothing but our best and most well-founded opinions,²⁴ and that “it is because an opinion has been admitted that it is reasonable to maintain it, that is not reasonable to put it aside for no reason?”²⁵

In the process of asking, as Gadamer conceives it, it seems that questions occur in us as in a dream, as if they were an experience beyond our will and doing.²⁶ And, according to his views, that is exactly what happens: asking is suffering (in the *paschein* sense) more than it is doing.²⁷

Though admitting that questions are essential to the constitution of any philosophy, I will say, as Perelman did, that “if someone should elaborate a philosophy that had nothing in common with our world, that would be a dream, not a philosophy. Every philosophy should be capable of integrating our convictions concerning the world we live in. In order to state that some of these convictions are valid, the others being nothing but illusions, each philosophy must take a position regarding all pre-philosophical convictions which constitute the philosophical raw material, so to speak. There lies, then, a feature of every philosophy: the world of commonsense cannot be neglected.”²⁸

Thus Perelman states that it is by means of reference to common reality that the philosopher disposes of a certain freedom, that it is in relation to common thinking that he should prove his rationality,²⁹ and that philosophical proof is rhetorical in nature, its reasonings being linked to commonly admitted theses, that is to say, to common principles, common notions and commonplaces.³⁰

By following this line of considerations, we are led to state that asking is not gauged only in terms of meaning, because it does not aim exclusively or originarily to disclose “possibilities of meaning,” but especially in terms of pertinence, since with it *positions* are suggested, insinuated or proposed. And let me add immediately that – outside of the parameters of formal thinking, where logical nexus becomes independent and autonomous – suggesting, insinuating or proposing a position intended to be reasonable is always to submit speech to the need of a recognition and to the manifestation of an adherence or agreement.

Hence philosophical questioning always means discussing the *consequences* that result from what we or others believe and, in this sense, taking a position regarding these same beliefs. Without this discussing and positioning dimension we would have no criterion to distinguish the *specificity of philosophical questions*. Besides, rigorously speaking, I might even say that there are no philosophical questions, only *philosophical takings of position*. When we say “philosophical question” we are actually referring to a question whose

specificity does not come from within itself but from an unavoidable taking of position as to the problematicity the answer to that question involves. "Philosophical question" then means a question whose answer will be discussed and will appear problematic. The question will be philosophical or not depending on the discussibility and problematicity of an answer that is always the result of an option. What characterizes philosophical activity is the discussion and the attempt to thematize this problematicity – instead of trying to dissolve it – by taking a position. Since any position can only be discursively elaborated by means of argument, we could say that if there were a motto for philosophical activity, it would be: "To doubt, to decide and to convince."³¹

A question is then an *action* whose pertinence can only be confirmed *a posteriori*, even if we possess *contextual indices* that enable us to assume and to try to show that it is pertinent. But, as it is never totally guaranteed (except if the act of asking could do without legitimation, as Gadamer suggests), asking is simultaneously taking a risk (who can assure us that the pertinence of our question will be recognized?) and accepting the task of attempting to answer the objections and interrogations with which we will be confronted on the subject of our questions and statements being pertinent or not (once we intend them to be pertinent).

The most important lesson to draw from Perelman's thought is precisely that philosophy is not characterized by questionability but by the discussibility and problematicity that is inseparable from a taking of position. Philosophical asking does not necessarily derive from an ineluctably originary hermeneutic experience. It derives from the challenge simultaneously woven and proposed – by means of the word – to those who, putting aside the use of strength, the intolerant scepter of Truth or an ontologization that would turn meaning into a gift which through the power of interpellation/illumination would drag us out of passivity, dare to speak, to have an opinion and to be stubbornly interventive. In the measure of their possibilities and with the risks – relative and ponderable, at least up to a certain point – that they imply.

5. MEANING AND ARGUMENTATIVE STRATEGIES

Perelman seems to exclude deliberately the possibility of considering questions as questions uncommitted to any explicit or implicit strategy. To him a question is always committed to an interest, and that interest is not merely theoretical or contemplative. In several of his writings, he declares that it is fictitious to wish to separate radically theory from practice and that one has to have in mind the exigencies of action in thought. Questions are inseparable from the interest of the one who asks, and for that reason there is no room here for Gadamer's way of placing the terms of this problem. "Rhetorical or pragmatic considerations," observes Perelman, "inevitably influence interpretation problems, that is to say, semantic problems. Wanting to treat the latter impersonally, as if the questions of meaning were independent of the users' intentions and mutual relations, is to

twist hermeneutic reality such as it appears in poetry, theology, law, philosophy, human sciences and day-to-day communication.”³²

It is we who put questions, and if we put them it is because we have an interest and reasons for putting them. If questions occur in us – to return to Gadamer’s idea – one must nevertheless say that this is because there are reasons for them to occur to us and these motives, even though they may not be immediately explicit, should be made patent. Only when we understand and can say what is meant to be induced, suggested or stated through interrogation can we speak of acceding to the “logic” of the question, of that question which we put or is put to us. Interrogativity then appears as thought through *speech* – which is always a form of action, as matter of fact – without which *experience* could not be told and therefore as a manner of expression of thought of considerable rhetorical importance. “The question supposes an object on which it converges, and *suggests* the existence of an agreement, as to that object’s existence. Answering a question is to *confirm* that implicit agreement [...]”³³ From this perspective, questioning must be inserted in the “argumentative negotiation”³⁴ through which one aims to regulate a differendum.

6. “THE THINGS THEMSELVES”: IS THERE A VISION WITHOUT A PERSPECTIVE?

To return to the things themselves is always to return to the person who thinks them, to the contexts in which he thinks them, to the way he thinks them, to the language in which he thinks them and to those in function of whom and to whom he thinks them. And if as J. Derrida concluded, in a study on Husserl – “contrary to what phenomenology [...] tried to make us believe, contrary to what our desire is forcibly tempted to believe, the thing itself always escapes,”³⁵ it must nevertheless be said that it will not be despite of that (perhaps precisely because of that) that we will stop thinking and trying to organize what – for lack of an absolute guarantee and without recourse to the magical force of the “wavings of the ontological wand”³⁶ that would turn Being into the one condition of all answers – remains and imposes itself as what should be preferred for being considered the most reasonable for each problematic in question.

The rhetorical foundation of philosophy does not give philosophy an absolute and ultimate foundation, but converts it into an eminent way of living our unsurpassably rhetorical condition with the freedom and intelligence that we are led to exercise by renouncing the scope of effective control³⁷ and, consequently, of power as principle (be it the one generated in the claim to state necessary criteria, or the one that results from a claim to state arbitrariness that legitimates everything). As if prudence (*phronesis*) were the virtue that humanizes philosophical reason.

7. PHILOSOPHICAL ACTIVITY AND HUMAN'S RHETORICAL CONDITION

I will conclude by trying to clarify the thesis that I have defended throughout these pages, following Perelman's thought: philosophy is not characterized by the originary experience of questioning but by the discussibility, problematycity and optativity the answer implies. To formulate a question is always to propose or to suggest a particular approach to the real. Just as in philosophy there are no objective descriptions of the real, but only ways of presenting opinions that concern that real, so there are no questions without presuppositions, questions that cannot be questioned in turn. It is the fact of being susceptible of discussion, revealing of the intrinsic problematycity of the question-answer pair, that renders philosophy fertile, creative and responsible, and prevents the philosopher from prematurely detaching himself from the concrete, from nurturing absolutist aspirations or from withdrawal to previous plans of experience self-legitimated by their claim to originaryity.

In fact, discussibility is simultaneously the condition of the exercise of freedom and free examination, and the dialogical principle that perpetuates the opening to alterity, and the denial of all dogmatic authority and ruling of a criticism that postulates appropriation and committed relation as formation criteria of a human competence that cannot be substituted for any acquired knowledge or technique.

Discussibility implies thinking man as a risk and the relation that constitutes him as a situated enigma: on the one hand, to state the possibility of discussion is to state the precariousness of all agreement, to stress the ephemeral quality of all encounter, to deconstruct the utopia of a perfect and completed knowledge; on the other hand, it corresponds to asserting that not knowing is never absolute: the absence of the whole (which is not the absence of everything) is the principle of the quest not for meaning but for pertinence in possible articulations, mediated by a word that gives us reasons for thinking, feeling and speaking to those for whom one thinks. Philosophical thought is not the discovery of the way to a proximity that would culminate in a coincidence. It means devoting one's efforts to the production of a speech that allows the inscription of a community. And it will be from the effort to achieve this community, built around speech, that one will speak of reason, claim to be right, and will be able to elaborate a regulating ideal of rationality.

NOTES

¹ Perelman, Ch. and Olbrechts-Tyteca, L.: 1988, *Traité de l'Argumentation*, 5th ed., Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, p. 4.

² Cf. Loreau, M.: 1965, "La Rhétorique Comme Logique des Sciences Humaines," *Critique* 221, p. 877.

³ Perelman, Ch.: 1990, "L'idéal de Rationalité et la Règle de Justice", *Ethique et Droit*, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, p. 150.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 150.

³⁶ It is Michel Meyer's expression; cf. "Y a-t-il une modernité rhétorique," *De la Métaphysique à la Rhétorique*. Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, Bruxelles, 1986, p. 10.

³⁷ Cf. Johnstone, H. W. Jr., "Some Reflections on Argumentation", *Logique et Analyse* 21-24, 1933, pp. 30-39.