Rhétorique by Chaïm Perelman. Liège, Belgium: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles. ISBN 2-8004-0981-9 (paper)

Review by *Claude Gratton*

Depending on one's cultural bias, one might be inclined to say that Chaïm Perelman is the Stephen Toulmin of the francophone world, or that Stephen Toulmin is the Chaïm Perelman of the anglophone world. In 1958 two important works were published: Perelman's *La nouvelle rhétorique. Traité de l'argumentation*[1], and Toulmin's *The Uses of Argument*. Both philosophers discussed the inadequacies of formal logic in its analysis of arguments of everyday life, and proposed new approaches. Neither book contains any footnote or bibliographical reference to discussions of the previous works of the other. This suggests that both pioneering works were written independently of each other.

This anthology, written in French, will be of some use to those with an historical interest in the development of a non-formal approach to argumentation. It contains all of Perelman's essays and conference lectures related to rhetoric, language, and the theory of knowledge[2]. The time-span of these articles is considerable. Two articles were published in 1949; fifteen in the 1950's; eight in the 1960's; and one in 1970[3]. Some of the articles published before 1958 were previously included in his *Traité de l'argumentation*.

The general goal underlying Perelman's articles is the non-formal study of argumentation: the study of discursive techniques that create or increase an audience's belief in some claim presented to it, or that diminsh its doubts and suppress its hesitation to believe or to act. He names this discipline "the new rhetoric" because its goals are very similar to those of Aristotle in *Rhetoric* and *The Topics*, and *The Sophistical Refutations*.

At various points in the essays Perelman contrasts his new rhetoric to formal logic and to what he calls the classical conception of proof found in Scotus, Descartes, Leibniz, and Locke. According to this sort of proof, knowledge must be founded on self-evident and certain intuitions, and the conclusions of such proofs are never more certain than the least certain of its premises. He sees this latter point as resulting from the reduction of all proofs to formal proofs. In his theory of argumentation, Perelman is interested in proofs that generate probable and plausible beliefs. He comes to the defense of opinion because of its importance whenever self-evidence cannot impose itself. He sees the difference between opinion and self-evidence as being one of degrees of acceptability and not one of nature.

The formal logic with which he contrasts his new rhetoric is described as constraining and certain; it is concerned only with abstract truth; it is independent of interpretation, and its use is limited to formal systems. With such constraints on the scope of formal logic, it is consequently not surprising that it is quite inadequate to deal with real life arguments. It is even more inadequate than the formal logic of standard symbolic logic textbooks where there are interpretations of the formal language. In some articles Perelman does not spell out very clearly what he means by "formal logic" where he should provide some clarification. It is thus at least partly understandable why his theory of argumentation, contrasted to formal logic, is similarly vague in those contexts.

Some of the differences between formal logic and his new rhetoric are quite clear. Justification in argumentation has practical considerations, and it can be based on values. Non-formal arguments are not as binding and constraining because they do not unfold from systems in which premises and rules of inference are univocal and fixed. Thus everything can be questioned in argumentation.

Other distinctions are not very clear. For example, with little explanation or justification, he claims that demonstrations do not have any time constraints. However, he does see temporal constraints in argumentation. As a practical consequence of this, effective arguers rank their reasons according to their likely forcefulness.

Perelman offers an interesting explanation of the reduction of rhetoric to psychological, pedagogical, or literary techniques used to reinforce beliefs that have already been proven. After the religious wars in Europe, proofs in philosophy and science were modeled on the rigour and self-evidence of mathematics rather than on rigourless and uncertain rhetoric because mathematics had been so successful in obtaining unanimity among the experts, and unanimity among the thinkers in theology and philosophy was believed likely to result in greater social harmony. These demands of rigour from Descartes to the neopositivists did not take into consideration what was plausible and probable. There Perelman sees his theory of argumentation as

fulfilling the need to recognize and understand the scope of reason beyond what is self-evident and formal.

His views on argumentation affect his outlook on rationality and philosophy. Rationality is not based on formal rigour, and self-evident, ultimate, irreducible claims, but rather on what is accepted by the universal audience: an ideal audience consisting of all reasonable people. He divides philosophy into two broad classes. There are metaphysical systems claiming to be based on necessary, evident, and absolute first principles that form the foundation of ontology, epistemology, and axiology. And in contrast to these there are unfinished, uncompleted philosophical constructions, the principles of which are open to revision, and which are replaceable.

Dialogue and dialectics is the essential element of this latter type of philosophy, and it is here that he locates his new rhetoric. He traces the historical roots of "dialectics" back to Plato. He sees it as the art of dialogue, the art of question and answer employed whenever there is no ultimate authority to resolve a disagreement. According to Perelman, it is not possible to determine the meaning and scope of founding first principles of philosophical systems independently of their historical context. This is probably why he says that we can have a better understanding of great philosophical debates by interpreting them as dialectical exchanges that encompass not only the philosophers' personal beliefs but also their cultural milieu. Yet he also says that philosophical controversy is better understood within a dialectical and rhetorical perspective where one fails to convince the universal audience which is not subject to the social and psychological conditions of the time and place of the controversy.

Why does no system ever obtain acceptance from all those qualified to judge it? Philosophical proofs do not have the constraints of formal demonstration; they are not entirely detached from the personality of the philosopher. In order to avoid the accusation of arbitrariness in their proofs, philosophers present a vision of reality in which their proofs are superior to those of their adversaries. Their techniques of justification and their vision of reality are intimately enmeshed. There is thus no common ground for discussion. Perelman does not explain how philosophers could avoid the accusation of arbitrariness in their choice of a particular vision of reality.

Just as the analysis of mathematical reasoning has led to important progress in formal logic, Perelman proposes that this new rhetoric should consist of the analysis of arguments, to serve as models of argumentation, taken from law, philosophy, politics, and other social sciences. Unfortunately he fails to analyze such *models* of argumentation in these essays.

What are his criteria for deciding which arguments would be models of reasoning? "What will be the guarantee of our arguments? It will be the discernment of the audience to which the argumentation is addressed" (99). Since, for Perelman, effectiveness is to rhetoric what correctness is to grammar and validity is to formal logic, the argument that will be most effective in convincing the universal audience will be the strongest argument. It seems to be because of this exclusive emphasis on effectiveness that Perelman argues against the distinction between convincing and persuading arguments.

The central concept in the evaluation of arguments in Perelman's theory of argumentation is the universal audience. Perelman tries to draw a parallel between the rational arguer and the moral agent who conforms to Kant's categorical imperative. He does not state his version of the imperative. The closest comparison I can make is the following. An action is morally permissible if its maxim could be universally applied to everyone without resulting in some contradiction, and an argument is rational for Perelman if it could be accepted by all rational, reasonable, competent, knowledgeable persons at all times. The parallel is not very strong. For there is nothing in Perelman's thesis that corresponds to Kant's contradiction; and though they both involve some form of universalization, Kant's is not limited to moral persons alone but rather to everyone, while Perelman limits the universalization to rational persons.

This leads to circularity: an argument is rational if it is acceptable to all rational persons. This flagrant circularity seems to vanish when Perelman rephrases his basic idea as, the greater the rationality and knowledge of the audience the more cogent is the argument that is accepted by that audience. However, we are still left with the problem of identifying the rational people who would constitute such an audience. Perelman does not give any criteria for identifying them. The fuzziness of the criteria for deciding membership in the ideal audience becomes even more evident when he says, "But

what should be done when, on presenting a proposition that appears objectively acceptable ["valable"], and to which all reasonable beings should assent, one encounters a stubborn mind that persist in rejecting that proposition? ... one can exclude the recalcitrants from the set of all reasonable beings" (321). The grounds for deciding whether the recalcitrants have no good reason for rejecting that proposition must not rest on the assumption that the proposition is already worth accepting. Otherwise the charge of circularity is inescapable. Unfortunately Perelman never provides or suggests such grounds. Nor does he explain what would constitute the basis of the "objective" acceptibility that allows him to say that all reasonable beings "should" assent. Here the grounds of acceptability seem completely independent of the universal audience. This manoeuvre seems inconsistent with his claim that objectivity for a person consists of all the propositions that that person would take to be acceptable for a universal audience.

There is a fundamental question that he never raises: on what grounds would an ideal universal audience, consisting of all rational and knowlegeable persons or experts, accept any particular argument? It cannot be on the grounds that this audience's arguments are accepted by some other universal audience because if the first one is trully universal, then there are no rational and knowlegeabe persons or experts left out to constitute another audience. Their grounds must ultimately rest on their arguments. The ability to imagine a universal audience requires one already to have standards for deciding that the audience has sufficient knowledge and that it reasons properly. Since it is not the universal audience that provides the standards of reasoning, but it is rather by means of those standards that one identifies that audience, any appeal to the assent of the universal audience as a way of evaluating the strength of an argument is superfluous. Perhaps Perelman alludes to such standards when he says that "the force

of an argument depends on certain models... accepted by an audience of experts" (465). Unfortunately he never explores nor even identifies these models in his essays.

In undertaking to review this anthology I was hopeful of finding some ideas in Perelman's essays that would help to improve the quality of my courses in informal logic. I have been unsuccessful[4]. If this failure does not rest on my own lack of imagination and creativity, then the readers hoping to obtain new ideas for their courses by reading this collection of essays will probably be similarly disappointed. This is why my emphasis earlier was on the historical rather than pedagogical importance of Perelman's articles.

There are other weaknesses worth noting in this collection of essays. I often found repetition of points instead of their progressive development. The variations on the important concepts in Perelman's theory of argumentation do not have a sense of continuous and gradual deepening as one reads through the book. Perhaps this problem could be partly overcome by reading the articles in their order of publication. But not completely. Some potentially fruitful suggestions are not pursued. For example, Perelman suggests that the way definitions are moulded and used in legal contexts in order to deal with various concrete issues could offer some insights into definitions used in arguments, but he does not follow this up.

In fairness to these pioneering essays, we should keep in mind that their function was mainly that of breaking new ground, and we should not expect them to provide a complete working out of the fundamental concepts in Perelman's theory of argumentation. However, even if we should not expect completed edifices where only a clearing of terrain was intended, we should at least expect the terrain to have been cleared to the point where it would be safe to build a theory. Unfortunately, it is not obvious that the terrain as a whole has been properly cleared.

Notes

[1] *La nouvelle rhétorique. Traité d'argumentation,* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1958): *The New Rhetoric,* trans. J. Wilkinson, P. Weaver (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press: 1969).

[2] All these essays were previously published in other anthologies that dealt with other topics: *Rhétorique et philosophie* (1952), *Justice et raison* (1963), *Le champ de l'argumentation* (1970).

3   Some of these articles were co-authored with
    L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, who also co-authored *La
    nouvelle rhétorique. Traité d'argumentation.*

4   There is a recent textbook, *Good Reasoning
    Matters! A Constructive Approach to Critical
    Thinking* (Toronto, Ontario: McClelland &
    Stewart Inc., 1989) in which its authors, J.F.
    Little, L.A. Groarke, and C.W. Tindale have
    "adopted" Perelman's notion of the universal
    audience for the *assessment* of arguments. Un-
    fortunately they talk about that notion in only
    two short paragraphs (p.39, p.213) and a few
    lines (p. 40, pp. 202-204); and they do not add
    any clarification regarding its evaluative rôle
    that does not render it totally superfluous. Con-
    siderations of the universal audience "has
    greater priority over any specific audience you
    address, *because* the universal audience is
    governed by the principles of good reasoning"
    (p. 213, my italics). This is illustrated on p. 204
    where a universal audience is unconvinced by
    an argument *because* that argument is circular.
    If we know that circular arguments are unac-
    ceptable, what is the pedagogical value of in-
    troducing the nebulous notion of universal
    audience?

    There is an important respect in which this
    textbook distinguishes itself positively from
    standard textbooks in critical thinking. It
    elaborates on the importance of knowing the
    specific audiences to which one's arguments are
    directed in order to increase the effectiveness
    of those arguments. I hope that this important
    but generally neglected practice will continue
    in future textbooks.

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