

Developing Culture Through “Sapientia cum Eloquentia”: Philosophy With Rhetoric

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ABSTRACT: Education in our time holds philosophy rather than rhetoric, holds Socrates-Plato rather than Isocrates and Cicero as its model. The oratorical tradition and the philosophical tradition, speech and reason, *oratio* and *ratio*, remain two contending approaches. And we tend to keep our distance from rhetoric. But the wedding of knowledge to oratory-eloquence in the debate process dialogical or polemical debate should restore the ancient chiasmus *sapientia cum eloquentia/eloquentia cum sapientia*, artificially divorced. Debating is a totally liberal art – and a liberating art. The person “polished in all those arts that are proper for a free citizen” (Cicero, *De oratore*, I, 16, 72) has the freedom to think, freedom to say and, more importantly, freedom to reply, in order to maximize independent thinking and tolerance and in order to arrive at the best which has been thought and said in the world. Perhaps no study equals debate in the acquirement of the power of logical thinking combined with clear expression and social skills, necessary especially in the increasingly globalized world.

We all know that the Greek term *logos*, a key term in our cultural history, means both *reason* and *speech*. On the one hand, *logos* in times past signified both “reason” and “speech,” that is, it stood for the faculty and the act of thinking, and for the faculty and the art of communicating.

Despite this fact, between philosophers and orators-rhetoricians¹ there is an ancient confrontation and fight, because of their rivalry and inability to communicate. Plato *vs.* Isocrates, Boethius *vs.* Cassiodorus, Thomas H. Huxley *vs.* Matthew Arnold, and John Dewey *vs.* Jacques Maritain all represent different, contending points of views – the oratorical and the

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¹ *Oratoria* was the Latin translation – “not appropriate nor fine” – for the Greek word *rethoriké*; cf. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, II, 14, 1-3, who preferred *eloquentia*.

philosophical, that have controversially interacted and shaped the debate about education from antiquity to the present.

“The standard rendition of the conflict, which tend to denigrate the oratorical perspective, runs as follows. Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian are held to be critical of the speculative and endless pursuit of truth defended by Socrates and Plato... Conversely, Socrates and Plato are rightfully regarded as critical of the orators for their lack of speculative acumen and their pragmatic outlook”.²

Both Isocrates and Plato opposed the sophists, but they were scarcely less critical of each other. “Isocrates was profoundly skeptical of the dialectical search for truth, the central pillar of the Socratic-Platonic education. He scoffed at the distinction between *sophia* and *philosophia* and chided those who would waste time in endless speculation to arrive at wisdom... he claimed for the orator the title ‘philosopher’ because the height of philosophy was, in his view, attained in oratorical eloquence: ‘to speak well and think right’. To all this Plato replied... that rhetoric is mere sophistry if it is divorced from truth, which can be ascertained only through philosophical dialectic” (Kimball 1995, p. 18).

Despite the fact that Rome owed more to orators than to philosophers and, despite the opinion of many scholars,³ “the victor, generally speaking, was Isocrates, and Isocrates became the educator first of Greece and then of the whole ancient world.” Education in our time holds Socrates-Plato rather than Isocrates and Cicero as its model. The oratorical tradition and the philosophical tradition, speech and reason, *oratio* and *ratio*, remain two contending approaches. And we tend to keep our distance from rhetoric.

Certainly “the orator of antiquity were dogmatic: they believed that the task of education was to impart the truth, not to help the students seek it” (Kimball 1995, Foreword, p. XIX). The rhetoricians encourage the pursuit of truth via free research by members of a social community, all equal.

Certainly the scholastic disputation deteriorated to sophistry.

Certainly rhetoric gradually became a void formulaic *ars*.

All this justifies the problematic relationship, testified by the judgments usually pronounced by philosophers about rhetoric, considered intrinsically vicious in his *epistemic*, *methodological*, *ethical* and *social* grounds. Namely:

- A vicious reasoning because it is groundless or based on a-rational/irrational elements.

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² As says Kimball (1995, p. 33).

³ Cf. Marrou (1956, p. 194); Jaeger (1944², vol. 3, pp. 46-47); Gwynn (1926, pp. 40-41); Smail (1938, p. XVII).

- A fallacious method based on superficial, enthymematic and aphoristic formulations.
- Blameworthy for being deceitful and responsible for simulating pseudo-truths.
- Dangerous because of its partiality, demagogy, and seductive tendency.

Furthermore, when rhetoric applies to the debate, many people fear that the debate creates very smart persons who have always an answers for all questions and in every circumstance, namely someone who is able to find argumentations and untruths, who knows always how to answer and how to lie.

But since a philosopher asks himself about the truth (if any) and since a rhetorician cultivates the “dialectical gracious gifts”, and not only the “rhetorical gracious gifts,” something changed in their relationship.

In particular, since philosophy must deal seriously with and allow for language, the “how to say something” (the nice form), it is no more in conflict with “what to say” (the sound content).

Finally, since philosophy settles accounts with controversy, philosopher must to call disputation too to account.

So today we can say that, beside his faults, to a rhetorician are attributed the following values:

- From an *epistemic* point of view, it can offer argumentative schemes heuristically valid and apt to grasp the manifold aspects of reality.
- From a *methodological* point of view, it is associated with critical open-mindedness.
- From an *ethical* point of view, it is associated with prudence and anti-authoritarianism.
- From a *social* point of view, rhetoric represents and promotes broad-mindedness, anti-dogmatism, democracy and tolerance.

Negative and positive characteristics of the art of rhetoric can be schematically displayed in the tables below:

RHETORIC	
NEGATIVE TRAITS	POSITIVE TRAITS
«Empty rhetoric, vacuous speech»	« <i>Vir bonus dicendi peritus</i> »
Stylistic art	Argumentative art
<i>Elocutio</i>	Elocutio + Inventio, Dispositio
Practice of persuasion	Theory of persuasion
Manipulation, suasion	Persuasion by argumentation
Discursive technique	Global strategic behavior
Natural talent, un-teachable ability	Teachable ability

RHETORIC

	FAULT	VALUE
<i>COGNITIVE</i>	Vicious reasoning because groundless or based on a-rational/irrational elements. Empty verbalism. Figures.	Argumentative schemes heuristically valid and apt to grasp the manifold aspects of reality. Educational value. Reasoning.
<i>METHODOLOGICAL</i>	Fallacious method, based on superficial, enthymematic and aphoristic formulations.	Critical open-mindedness.
<i>ETHICAL</i>	Rhetoric is blameworthy for being deceitful and responsible for simulating pseudo-truths.	Rhetoric is associated with prudence, anti-authoritarianism, and challenge.
<i>SOCIAL</i>	Rhetoric is dangerous because of its partiality, demagoguery, and seductive tendency.	Rhetoric represents and promotes broad-mindedness, anti-dogmatism, and democracy; tolerance.

1. The three dimensions of debate

In debate we can usefully distinguish at least three different and very general dimensions: 1) the logic and epistemic dimension, 2) the rhetorical and dialectical dimension, and 3) the behavioral and moral dimension.

– *Logic and epistemic requirements and implications.* There are two theses and two opponents confronting a rational investigation. We apply the rules of convincing-demonstrative reasoning. Confrontation occurs at the epistemic level.

– *Rhetorical and dialectical requirements and implications.* There are two parties, both employing all their reasoning tools to win the debate. We apply the rules of persuasive reasoning and argumentation. Confrontation occurs at the dialectical level.

– *Behavioral and moral requirements and implications.* A debate takes place in conformity with specific behavioral rules. We apply the code of politeness and the so-called “golden rule” of universal moral validity which says to “Treat others as you would like to be treated”⁴. The confrontation occurs at the ethical level.

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⁴ This rule has been formulated as positive (“Do to others what you would have them do to you” or as negative (“Do not do to others what you wouldn’t the others do to you”).

We have rules of fair disputations and moves of clever polemicists. And we have two different levels of analysis of the debate: the *normative* level and the *descriptive* level.

The descriptive level offers us a realistic representation of a concrete situation, with all the related rhetorical moves and rights. The prescriptive level gives us a code of behavior to obtain the best or the maximum result from a debate, and it bears on rules and duties.

Actually, the most suitable solution should promote the amalgamation of rules and moves, and duties and rights, in order to develop a final spectrum of usable, non-utopian discipline-tools for debating people.

Before getting to the core of the problem, I would like to quote two passages taken from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: the advice given by Polonius (in character of both wise Counselor of State and good father) to his son Laertes on the verge of leaving, are complementary to one another. The first says: «This above all: to thine own self be true, / and it must follow, as the night the day, / thou canst not then be false to any man» (I, 3, vv. 78-80); and the second is: «Beware / of entrance to a quarrel, but being in, / bear't that th'opposed may beware of thee. / Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice; / take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment» (I, 3, vv. 65-67).

In this same spirit, I would try to present some customary rules/duties and some objectionable rights/moves of debate.

2. "Philosophical" (logical and ethical) rules and duties of debate. The normative level summed up in the classical decalogue

1. We should not think that we are infallible, that we do not make mistakes, that our ideas are untouchable, or our arguments indisputable. We should remain open to doubt, be open-minded, and willing to recognize the value of our opponent's arguments.

2. We should look for a common starting point. It is essential to identify some shared premises; we would not be able to measure anything if we use two different rulers. No conclusion is possible if we start debating according to different judgment parameters, especially if we are unaware of this difference.

3. We should conform to what we believe is true. We should not make it seem that our affirmations are true if we know they are false or purely subjective.

4. We should give our counterpart the evidence and proof he needs. If our interlocutor asks us to demonstrate our thesis, we must do it, or at least demonstrate that his questioning is pointless or absurd.

5. We should not avoid objections nor beat around the bush. The possibility and the promptness to accept and to deal with criticism are the so-called “raison d’être,” the quintessence of debate; refusing this interaction goes against the purposes of debate itself.

6. We should not put the burden of proof on the opposite party without justification.

7. We should be relevant, the contrary (irrelevance and impertinence) being one of the main causes of fallacies and failure in discussion.

8. We should be clear. Ambiguity is a great resource for comedians, not for the arguer, who is a reasoning subject.

9. We should not distort our opponent’s position. In reporting on the facts and rephrasing other people’s words, we should apply the so-called “principle of charity,” that forces us to be benevolent in our interpretation of other people’s assertions and to avoid misrepresentation. Always try to get the best possible interpretation out of other people’s positions.

10. We should, if an impasse occurs, suspend our judgment, unless this suspension causes greater damage.

11. We should accept proposals to re-open and reconsider the case, should we obtain new information.

Among these rules and duties we find Grice’s four cooperation maxims (quantity, quality, relevance, manner), some of the pragma-dialectical principles and precepts for critical discussion introduced by Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, and the so-called “principle of charity.” Those who violate these rules also violate the integrity of the debate (a minor problem for those who aim at showing off their dexterity in debating) and can be reproached for fallacious behaviors (because we know that fallacies are often behavioral faults rather than logical and cognitive weaknesses).

But what if the opponent does not respect these duties and precepts? The hypotheses entailed by this answer have not yet been satisfactorily considered in the educational process.

3. “Rhetorical” rights and moves of debate. The descriptive level. Not a counter-decalogue, but an integrative one

One of our questions was whether a good discussion is compatible with the will to win or not. This brings up another question: whether ethics and logic on one hand, and rhetoric on the other hand, are necessarily in conflict or not; this is related to the question of whether the apology of dialogue (that seems to concern the logical and ethical aspects of debate) and the apology of polemic (that seems to concern the rhetorical aspect of debate) can coexist.

A possible answer to this dilemma should take into account – besides logical and rhetorical rules – the behavioral rules of debate, including duties and rights, the quiet power of logic, and the passionate power of rhetoric.

We often appeal to the ethics of the debate and its complex of rules. A suitable and familiar example is the decalogue or “Ten Commandments” of critical discussion. However, the code tends to remain practically unapplied and theoretically inapplicable.

We would like to try to examine and combine the normative rules of a perfect discussion with the descriptive moves of factual exchanges, keeping in mind Martin Luther King’s statement on civil rights: «What is troubling is not the cry of brutal people, but the silence of the honest people». Consequently, a serious problem in a debate context is not the infringement of the decalogue, but the fact that the participant do not succeed in detecting, and is not able to oppose any logical, rhetorical or behavioral transgression against the system. Here is a provisional list of rights and moves for debating, whose points are, needless to say, debatable:

1. We have the right to cast doubt on everything, because nothing is unquestionable. This right is also a duty and a pleasure – the pleasure of replying just for the sake of replying.

2. We have the right of telling “our truth”. This implies the idea that truth (or the best available option) comes out of a confrontation of two one-sided perspectives openly defended or supported, as happens in trial.

3. We have the right to elude our interlocutor’s game plan. We have room for freedom in replying, which allows us to reply in many different ways, going from the perfect and perfectly appropriate answer to the perfectly inappropriate answer.

4. We have the right to defend ourselves and our positions, using passive and/or active tools. The right to defend oneself at trial or in debate is absolute and mandatory.

5. We have the right to finish our discourse. It is an elementary right, but not always guaranteed.

6. We have the right to pursue victory, or a successful result. Moreover, as a corollary: we have the right to be co-operatively competitive.

7. We have the right to use “our” arguments. Since the people involved in debate must be at least two, the counterpart can choose to veto his/her opponent’s unacceptable or precisely “debatable” moves.

8. We have the right to turn to a third party, an audience, or a judge.

9. We have the right to be judged for what we say and think, but not for what we did or we do. It is not fair to solely criticize behaviors when we are debating ideas and opinions. The judge must condemn the guilty,

not the guilt; on the contrary, in logical and argumentative contexts we must attack fallacy, not the fallacious man.

10. We have the right to change rules and rights of debate, and we can even do this during the debate. People involved in cooperative debate can reformulate the existing rules, revise debate procedures, define what is allowed and what is not, and agree or disagree on the organizational aspects. One of the debate points is *how* to debate, which does not guarantee the truth of the conclusion, but at least a certain procedural correctness, that is the formal and basic truth condition.

The process of discussion/debate is one of the most multifaceted human activities. We may even say that any perfect discussion, like any perfect society or perfect language, is not *possible* or *necessary*, and perhaps not *desirable*. Debate is a third option between monologue and dialogue, between a cruel duel and an indulgent duet; our ping-pong of reasons appears to be an honorable and appropriate alternative. In the debate, logic and rhetoric, demonstration and argumentation get together.

Logical demonstration and rhetorical argumentation have two features in common: the same (inferential) nature, and the same function (the purpose of proving). But they also bear important differences: they have different subject matters, different addressees, different building principles, different languages, different contexts of use, and different evaluation standards.

Quintilian wrote that “Philosophia... simulari potest, eloquentia non potest” (*Institutio Oratoria*, XII, 3, 12); that is, philosophy can be feigned behind a reflective posture, but eloquence cannot.

Similarly, we can say that orator and “discussant” have to be gifted with logical and rhetorical tools, but the first has not necessarily to be clever in disputation, while the debating person has to be a good orator.

In debate, the problem does not concern the use of rhetorical moves (which seems to be unavoidable), but the fact that people attending the debate can possibly risk not detecting and counterbalancing intentional and/or unintentional fallacies, mistakes and tricks. If, using logical and rhetorical tools, we succeed in counteracting and neutralizing them from a purely theoretical point of view (that is, in terms of purely intellectual categorization of strategies and techniques), we would greatly improve “dialogue analysis and practice” (cf. Cattani 2006, Cattani 2012).

Certainly, as Cicero stated, the marriage of expression and comprehension, “sapientia cum eloquentia,” is the best: “docto oratori palma danda est” (*De Oratore*, III, 19, 143), but “In oratore perfecto inest illorum omnis scientia, in philosophorum autem cognitione non inest continuo eloquentia; quae quamquam contemnatur ab eis, necesse est tamen aliquem cumulum illorum artibus adferre videatur” (*De Oratore*, III, 19, 143).

The marriage of *ratio* and *oratio*, reason and speech – “dicendi et intelligendi mirificam societatem” (*De Oratore*, III, 19, 73) – would restore the original meaning, function and power of *logos*: a crucial and ambiguous term. Not reason *or* speech, but reason *and* speech, that is *logos* “which enabled us to perfect almost everything we have achieved in the way of civilization. It was this which laid down the standards of right and wrong, nobility and baseness, without which we should not be able to live together. It is through *logos* that we convict bad men and praise the good ones. By its aid we educate the foolish and test the wise... With the help of *logos* we dispute over doubtful matters and investigate the unknown. If we sum up the character of *logos*, that *logos* is the leader of all actions and thoughts and that those who make most use of it are the wisest of all humanity” (Jaeger 1944², vol. 3, pp. 89-90, quoting Isocrates, *Antidosis*, 254-257).

“The proper use of language is the surest index of sound understanding” said Isocrates. The proper use of debate is the surest index of sound society, we could say. “Because Socrates was right about the truth, the orators were right about the society” (Kimball 1995, Foreword, p. XIX).

The wedding of knowledge to oratory-eloquence should restore the ancient chiasmus *sapientia cum eloquentia / eloquentia cum sapientia*, artificially divorced. Debating is a totally liberal art - and a liberating art. The person “polished in all those arts that are proper for a free citizen”⁵ has the freedom to think, freedom to say and, more importantly, freedom to reply, in order to maximize independent thinking and tolerance and in order to arrive at “the best which has been thought and said in the world”⁶.

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⁵ (“omnibus iis artibus, quae sunt libero dignae, perpolitus”: *De Oratore*, I, 16, 72).

⁶ The expression is used by Matthew Arnold, one of the supporters of a liberal education and culture (Arnold 1885, pp. 79-101).

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