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Commentary on Joseph A. Novak's "Peter Ramus and a Shift of Logical Cultures"

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Although I have never read anything by Ramus, the little I knew about him before reading Novak's paper had convinced me that studying him would be useful from the point of view of argumentation and informal logic. Novak's paper has confirmed this earlier predisposition of mine. Consider, for example, the fact mentioned by Novak that in the century between 1543 and 1650 there were about 800 editions of works by Ramus. Who could fail to be impressed by such a phenomenon? Or consider Francis Bacon's opinion of Ramus, as quoted by Novak:

I have nothing in common with that hide-out of ignorance, that pestilent bookworm, that begetter of handy manuals. Any facts that he gets hold of and begins to squeeze in the rack of his summary method soon lose their truth, which oozes or skips away, leaving him to garner only dry and barren trifles. Aquinas, Scotus, and their followers out of their unrealities created a varied world; Ramus out of the real world made a desert. Though that was the character of the man he has the effrontery to prate of human utilities. I rate him below the sophists. (p. 4)

If someone can elicit such invective from a personality such as Bacon, then I, for one, become intrigued.

Novak tells us that his aim is to give concrete content to several abstract characterizations of Ramus's work that are commonly mentioned. These include: anti-Aristotelianism, anti-Scholasticism, pedagogic revisionism, humanism, and Renaissance character and approach (p. 1), as well as a "shift from logic as deductive to dialectical" (p. 2) and a "shift from logic's employment about abstract ontological/theological issues to its application to applied multi-disciplinary topics" (p. 2).

Let us begin by focusing on Ramus's anti-Aristotelianism. One of Ramus's most basic objections is that Aristotle "simply did not provide an inventive or practical way for the mind" (p. 3). In Ramus's own words (quoted by Novak from *Aristotelicae animadversiones*):

let us look at the categories: do they contain any power of invention (discovery) and some doctrine that is both true and useful? I here see no art, no utility of any art whatsoever, but a most uncomfortable confusion of all arts. (p. 3)

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What does this mean? I wish Novak had provided some elucidation. Is Ramus saying that Aristotle's theory of the categories, even if true, is difficult or impossible to use? But what should it be used for? Should it be usable for the understanding or interpretation of human thought? Should it be usable for the evaluation or assessment of the same? Should it be usable for the discovery or invention of new ideas? Is the last use what Ramus means by the notion of providing "an inventive or practical way for the mind"? Would such a use make it an art? And what does Ramus mean by a "confusion of all the arts"?

Another major objection by Ramus to the Aristotelian account of the categories is that "Aristotle [...] does not treat of the more particularly relevant items and he does not provide examples" (p. 5). What does it mean to "treat of the more particularly relevant items"? And it is really true that Aristotle does not provide examples? And would such examples be examples of the categories or of the use of the categories?

Let me now focus on Ramus's own application of logical principles to multi-disciplinary topics. I shall term this feature "applied multi-disciplinarity" for short. I think I understand this characteristic, and Novak's illustration is clear and informative. The illustration involves the chapter of Ramus's book *Dialectic* that discusses "efficient, procreating and conserving cause" (p. 8).

Novak tells us that Ramus himself provided only three examples, consisting of one quotation from Ovid and two from Virgil. Although Novak gives the precise references for these passages, he does not reproduce the passages, but I wish he had. However, he adds that the editor of the 1574 London edition of the *Dialectic* expanded the examples to include the following (p. 8): "a quotation from Paul's epistle to the Romans"; a text attributed to Pythagoras; "a mathematical generation of a line from a point"; "some remarks on efficient causes that preserve health (taken from Galen)"; a statement from "Aristotle's *Meteorologica* [...] concerning the role of the sun as an efficient cause"; "mention of contract as the cause of legal obligation"; "a reference to Isocrates bearing on the causal role of the kingly office"; "the causality exerted by the laws, citing Demosthenes"; "the causal role that memory plays, citing Cicero"; and "a citation about divine causality from Porphyry's (lost) *On the History of Philosophy*." I get the point. Certainly Novak is right when he ends this illustration of Ramus's applied multi-disciplinarity by saying that "one does see in this huge variety of authors, examples, and disciplines cited that the spirit of Ramus has opened up logic in a way that was not found in earlier texts" (p. 5).

Novak's most sustained analysis involves chapter 21 of book I of Ramus's *Dialectic*, entitled "On Similars." Novak reproduces the chapter in full in Appendix 4 of his paper and has a discussion of it on the last two pages of the body of the paper. The aim of this analysis is again to give concrete content to many of the traits usually attributed to Ramus. Novak's analysis is largely successful with respect to most of these traits, except that the success is limited by the relative lack of clarity of Ramus's passage, as I shall try to indicate in a moment. Moreover there is one trait which I find more problematic. It is the one described by Novak as "a certain scholastic rigor in his presentation of material, but he simplifies the material by presenting it through definitions and divisions, frequently governed by a dichotomizing tendency." I am not sure I see the rigor, scholastic or otherwise; nor do I see the dichotomizing tendency in this particular passage. Let me elaborate (all quotations are from Novak's Appendix 4).

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(1) A preliminary difficulty with the full text of the chapter as provided by Novak is that it is not completely clear whether he has added glosses to Ramus's text, for some sentences read like comments. However, perhaps these are just Ramus's own comments on the examples he is quoting from other classical authors.

(2) It is not clear whether Novak had deleted any parts of the passage, since the whole text suffers from a certain lack of smoothness.

(3) When Ramus says that "those [things] are similar whose quality is the same," I find this definition unclear because it seems to be expressing either one of two ideas: (a) that things are similar when they share a single property; or (b) that things are similar when they share all properties. But neither of these sounds right. In particular, the second relationship would be identity rather than similarity.

(4) When Ramus states that "similar things are proportional," I don't know what this means, even though I think I understand his assertion that "a similitude is said to be a proportion."

(5) The second indicator term is "image." I suppose Ramus means that if a is an image of b , then a is similar to b , although presumably the converse does not hold. Is that correct? If so, then there are problems with Ramus's example of this indicator term. This is the sentence: "Sulpicius was able to leave no clearer monument than the image of his morals, virtue, constancy, piety, genius — a son." If this meant that Sulpicius's son is an image of Sulpicius, it would make sense. But the sentence also suggests that the son is an image of Sulpicius's morals, virtue, etc. And that seems to make no sense.

(6) Regarding the indicator term "likeness," Ramus gives the example of Cicero's statement that "the day I returned to the fatherland" was "to me the likeness of immortality." Here it's unclear what is the other thing to which Cicero is comparing his return. Is it the feeling of immortality? Or is it the state of being immortal?

(7) The indicator term "just as" (*sicuti* in Latin) yields the example, again taken from Cicero, that "all indeed now in these places see [...] Pompey as someone not sent from the city but fallen from heaven." Here we seem to be dealing with the concept of seeing a as b . It seems to me that the meaning of this concept is not that one sees or thinks that a is similar to b , but that a is b . So I am not sure we are dealing with similars.

(8) The last two indicator terms and their corresponding examples raise the following difficulty, in my mind. The terms are "scarcely otherwise" and "not otherwise," and Ramus calls them negations of dissimilitude. Thus, he seems to presuppose that similitude and dissimilitude are contradictories. However, it seems to be that they are merely contraries; that is, many things are neither similar nor dissimilar, but just different. I am inclined to think that perhaps both relationships of similarity and dissimilarity are similar in the sense that they both involve systems of properties which similar things do, but dissimilar things do not, share.

(9) Ramus seems to distinguish disjunctive from conjunctive similitudes. A disjunctive similitude is defined as one "when the four terms are actually distinguished," and illustrated with several relatively clear examples. However, no definition of conjunctive similitude is given, unless Ramus means to imply that it is a similitude which is not disjunctive. Why the oversight?

(10) Ramus points out that "sometimes there is no indicator term at all," and he gives the following verses from Virgil as an example: "O beautiful boy, do not put too

much trust in color: / White privets fall, dark blueberries are selected.” Here the similitude escapes me.

(11) The next concept is clearly defined and clearly illustrated: “A continuous likeness occurs when the first term is to the second as the second to the third.” The example is from Cicero and amounts to saying that “just as the laws preside over the magistrates, so the magistrates preside over the people.” Here my question is, why the term “continuous” is being used. Where is the continuity? In this connection, it should be mentioned that in mathematics there happens to be a concept which is similar to Ramus’s notion of “continuous likeness.” It is the concept of mean proportionality, defined as follows: given two quantities, A and B , their third proportional is a quantity X such that $A:X = X:B$.

In conclusion, I am convinced that Ramus was part of a shift in logic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and that his book entitled *Dialectic* deserves more study. Furthermore, part of this shift was a stress on applied multi-disciplinarity, which I find relatively intelligible. However, it would be valuable to understand more clearly the other aspects of this shift. For example, what exactly was the shift with regard to conceptual framework, logical principles, and method (especially the dialectical approach)?

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