May 15th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

The Role of Rhetoric in Rational Argumentation

Nicholas Rescher
university of Pittsburgh

THE ROLE OF RHETORIC IN RATIONAL ARGUMENTATION

Nicholas Rescher
Department of Philosophy
University of Pittsburgh

Abstract:
The structure of this discussion will be tripartite. First it will set out a way of distinguishing between rhetoric and strictly rational argumentation. Next it will consider some of the ramifications of this proposed way of looking at the matter—in particular what its implications are for rationality and for rhetoric, respectively. Finally it examines how this perspective bears on the project of philosophizing. The paper's ultimate aim, accordingly, is to consider what light such an analysis can shed upon philosophy and philosophizing.

***

PART I: THE GENERAL SITUATION

Rhetoric vs. Argumentation

The structure of this discussion will be tripartite. First it will set out a way of distinguishing between rhetoric and strictly rational argumentation. Next it will look at of the ramifications of this proposed way of looking at the matter—in particular at its implications for rationality and for rhetoric, respectively. Finally it will examine how this perspective bears on the project of philosophizing. The paper's ultimate aim, accordingly, is to consider what light such an analysis of rhetoric/argumentation can shed upon philosophy and philosophizing where—so it will emerge—these two processes are rather more closely intertwined than one might expect.

In these deliberations, the term "rhetoric" is going to be used in a rather special sense. It will *not* be used to mean the theory or practice of language-deploying exposition in general. Instead it will function as a contrast term to "argumentation"—which in its turn is here understood as the project of seeking to elicit the acceptance of certain contentions by means of substantiating reasons. The work of rhetoric, by contrast, will here be construed as one of inducing agreement by representing certain contentions in a favourable light, seeking to elicit their acceptance by one's interlocutors through noting their *intrinsically* appealing features, rather than through substantiating them on the basis of their relationship to *other* propositions that are intended to provide probative or evidential grounds for them. Thus while argumentation deploys the resources of inferential reasoning (be it inductive or deductive) in order to substantiate some claims on the basis of others, rhetoric is seen as a matter of *noninferential* substantiative appeal. Accordingly, when one seeks to *motivate* the acceptance of claims by drawing attention to such positive attributes as these claims may exhibit on their own by placing them in a favourable light in the sight of one's interlocutors, one is proceeding rhetorically. Rhetoric, in sum, involves the endeavour to induce acceptance of propositions through bringing to notice some feature or other of the condition of the contention at issue that has a substantial impetus.

This means that certain dialectical moves are available to the rhetorician that are unavailable to the reasoner. The reasoner must relate the *assertoric content* of the proposition to that of those other, substantiating propositions. The rhetorician, by contrast, has the option of abstracting from a claim's specific content altogether, addressing himself to its source or its nature rather than to its assertoric substance. Thus the fact that a proposition issues from a *reliable* source can bring grist to the rhetorician's mill, although it clearly involves no reference to the *content* of the proposition at issue, and *a fortiori* no inference to this content from the asserted content of otherwise available information.

This use of the term rhetoric may perhaps seem somewhat idiosyncratic but it nevertheless has certain significant merits.

If dictionaries can be believed, general usage understands "rhetoric" as something like "the art of speaking or writing persuasively." But this seems altogether too wide since overtly demonstrative discourse can also serve the interests of persuasion. Aristotle, on the other hand, construed rhetoric as *imperfect demonstration*, construing it as specifically enthymematic reasoning. But this seems too narrow. But rhetoric as we generally understand it is clearly something very different from incomplete demonstration. The best compromise seems to consist in viewing rhetoric as a matter of non-demonstrative (or more generally) non-inferential persuasion. This enables us at once to understand the enterprise as a persuasive endeavour and to contrast it with specifically demonstrative argumentation in the inductive and deductive modes. This at any rate will be the line we shall take in these present deliberations.

An Uneasy Union

Interestingly enough, this perspective on the matter leads to the rather startling conclusion that reasoned argumentation is ultimately dependent on rhetoric. Let us consider how this comes about.

It is a fundamental fact of rational—as also of practical—life that *ex nihilo nihil*: in human affairs, intellectual and practical alike, you cannot make something from nothing. Be it in written form or in verbal discourse, to secure something by rational argumentation we must ultimately proceed from conceded premisses. And here inferential rationality is of no further avail, given its indispensable recourse to premisses.

After all, abstract rationality does not tell us what we must unconditionally accept, but only what we must or must not accept if we accept certain other things. Here the role of conditionalization becomes crucial. But to engage the wheels of inferential reason we need inputs—unconditional commitments that can turn our *if-thens* into *sinces*. And while these inputs can be, and generally are, themselves discursively grounded—that is, obtained by rational inference from elsewhere—they cannot be so "all the way down." All these are matters that Aristotle already saw as clearly as anyone, recognizing that reasons must proceed from prior concessions in attaining their purposes. And this state of affairs at once leads to the question of how such requisite concessions are to be obtained?

In any dialectical situation we can *reason* only from what is available—and this ultimately means proceeding from claims that have been conceded. The regress of rationally justified conclusions will and must always come to a stop at some point in unreasoned premisses. Reason's inferential *takens* must end up in conceded and uninferred *givens*. And here rhetoric comes to play an important and indispensable role. For one of its salient tasks is to secure such givens.

It is clear that in certain contexts of discussion various claims may be taken for granted. They come free of charge, so to speak, as commonplaces of the domain-presumptive truths that hold by the topically prevailing conventions. Definitions and traditionary usages afford one example, and the realm of familiar fact and accepted knowledge yet another. But this sort of thing does not take us very far. The range of the non-inferential inputs into our inferential argumentation must clearly be expanded beyond the sphere of local commonplaces.

Like most workmen, the rational dialectician needs materials with which to fashion products, and in this case it is the rhetorician that can provide these requisite inputs. The key work of rhetoric in rational dialectic is accordingly to elicit from our interlocutors a variety of concessions on whose basis the work of actual inference can come into operation. At this point we must make the transit from reason to judgment and from demonstration to motivation. That is, we must proceed by way of reminders and appeals that amplify the minimal range of locally unproblematic givens.

Here, as everywhere the issue of normative propriety crops up. Beyond concerning oneself with what people *do* accept (a strictly factual issue) one can turn to the matter what they *should* accept (a distinctly normative one). Conscientious rhetoricians will accordingly endeavour to awaken his interlocutors to a proper sense of what they should accept.

And so one important point must be stressed. There is nothing to say that rhetoric, as here understood, must focus on an established beliefs and preexisting opinions rather than play an active role in the formulation and shaping of beliefs and opinions. But of course the epistemically *conscientious* rhetoricians will make appeal to cognitively based—that is, *experientially* based—rather than appeal to emotions or prejudices.

And so the lesson that emerges from these deliberations is that the probative structure of the situation is such that rational dialectic cannot dispense with rhetoric. In the overall setting of rational argumentation, it is not the *presence* but the *extent* of a recourse to rhetoric that is at issue: the only question—the pivotal issue, so to speak—is not *whether* but *how much*.

This being the situation in probative dialectics in general, I propose now to consider the lay of the land specifically in my own field of professional concern, namely philosophy. The issue that will preoccupy the rest of this discussion is that of the issue of philosophical methodology resolving about the question: How can (and should) philosophers go about making out a convincing case for the positions they would induce their readers to accept?

PART II: THE SPECIAL CASE OF PHILOSOPHY

The fact is that philosophy cannot provide a cogent explanation for *everything*, rationalizing all of its claims "all the way down." Here as elsewhere the process of explanation and rationalization must—to all appearances—sooner or later come to a halt in the acceptance of at least locally unexplained explainers. Given that explanation is—as Aristotle already stressed—a process that proceeds linearly, in the manner of logical derivation, by explaining *A* in terms of *B* which is in its turn explained in terms of *C*, and this in turn referred to *D*, then of course we must accept some inexplicable ultimate—unless we are to descend into an infinite regress, a process that is not particularly satisfying, and especially not so in philosophy. At some point, then, we must turn from the discursive to the rhetorical mode. And so there are two very different modes of philosophical proceeding—the *evocative* and the *discursive*, respectively.

Discursive philosophy pivots on inferential expressions such as "because," "since," "therefore," "has the consequence that," "and so cannot," "must accordingly," and the like. Evocative philosophizing, by contrast, bristles with adjectives of approbation or derogation—"evident," "sensible," "untenable," "absurd," "inappropriate," "unscientific," and comparable adverbs like "evidently," "obviously," "foolishly," "ill advisedly," and the like. To be sure, this rhetorical process is also a venture in justificatory systematization—just like inferential reasoning. But it is one of a rather different kind. Discursive philosophizing relies primarily on inference and argumentation to substantiate its claims; evocative philosophizing relies primarily on the rhetoric of persuasion. The one seeks to secure the reader's (or auditor's) assent by inferential reasoning, the other by an appeal to values and appraisals—and above all by an appeal to fittingness and consonance within the overall scheme of things.

Consider as a paradigm of evocative philosophizing the following passage from Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (with characterizations of approbation/derogation indicated by being italicized):

> It is in the sphere of contracts and legal obligations that the moral universe of guilt, conscience, and duty—*sacred duty*!—took its inception. Those beginnings were *liberally sprinkled with blood*, as are the beginnings of *everything great on earth*. (And may we not say that ethics has never lost its *reek of blood* and torture—not even in Kant, whose categorical imperative *smacks of cruelty*?) It was then that the *sinister knitting together* of the two ideas guilt and pain first occurred, which by now have become quite inextricable. Let us ask once more: in what sense could pain constitute repayment of a debt? In the sense that to make someone suffer was *a supreme pleasure*. To behold suffering gives pleasure, but to cause another to suffer affords an *even greater pleasure*. This *severe statement* expresses an old, powerful, *human, all too human sentiment*—though the monkeys too might endorse it, for it is reported that they heralded and preluded man in the devising of *bizarre cruelties*. There is no feast without cruelty, as man's entire history attests. Punishment, too, has its *festive features*.[1]

Note now this highly evocative passage is replete with devices of evaluative (i.e. positive/negative) characterizations. But observe too the total absence of inferential expressions. We are, clearly, *invited* to draw certain unstated conclusions on an essentially evaluative basis. But the inference, "Man is *by nature* given to cruelty, and therefore cruelty—being a natural and innate tendency of ours—is not something bad, something deserving condemnation," is left wholly implicit as an exercise for the reader. This unasserted conclusion at which the discussion aims is hinted at but never stated, implied but never maintained. In consequence, reason can gain no fulcrum for pressing the plausible objection: "But why should something natural thereby automatically be deemed good: why should the primitiveness of a sentiment or mode of behaviour safeguard it against a negative evaluation?" By leaving the reader to his own conclusion—drawing devices, Nietzsche relieves himself of the labour of argumentation and the annoyance of objection. Not troubling to formulate his position explicitly, he feels no need to give it *support*; he is quite content to *insinuate* it. Here, as elsewhere, he is a master practitioner of evocative philosophizing.

By contrast to the preceding Nietzsche passage, consider the following ideologically kindred passage from Hume's *Treatise* (with evaluative terms italicized and inferential terms capitalized):

> Now, SINCE the distinguishing impressions by which moral good or evil is known are nothing but particular pains or pleasures, IT FOLLOWS that in all inquiries concerning these moral distinctions IT WILL BE SUFFICIENT TO SHOW the principles which make us feel a satisfaction or

> uneasiness from the survey of any character, IN ORDER TO SATISFY US WHY the character is *laudable* or *blamable*. An action, or sentiment, or character, is *virtuous* or *vicious*; WHY? BECAUSE its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind. In giving a reason, THEREFORE, for the pleasure or uneasiness, we sufficiently explain the vice or virtue. To have the sense of virtue is nothing but to feel a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character. The very feeling constitutes our praise or admiration. We go no further; nor do we inquire into the cause of the satisfaction. WE DO NOT INFER a character to be *virtuous* BECAUSE it pleases; but in feeling that it pleases after such a particular manner we in effect feel that it is *virtuous*. The case is the same as in our judgments concerning all kinds of beauty, and tastes, and sensations. Our approbation is IMPLIED in the immediate pleasure they convey to us.2

Observe how this passage bristles with the terminology of ratiocination. What we have all too clearly here is not the stylistic modality of insinuation and evocation but that of argumentation and demonstration.

To be sure, the doctrinal nature and even the ideology of the two passages is not all that different. With Nietzsche, cruelty is something of a virtue—but only because people are held to be generally pleased by engaging in its practice. With Hume, it is something of a vice—but only because people are generally displeased by witnessing it. The positions differ but their ideological kinship is clear; both writers agree that cruelty is not something that is inherently bad as such—for them the pro— or con—reaction by people is all-determinative.

But be this as it may, it is strikingly clear is that these kindred positions are advanced in very different ways. In the Nietzsche passage, the "argumentation ratio" of inferential to evaluative expressions is 0-to-12, in the Hume passage it is 9-to-6. Hume, in effect, seeks to *reason* his readers into agreement by presenting a putative a deduction from "plain facts"; Nietzsche seeks to *coax* them into it by an appeal to conceded suppositions and prejudgments.

These different approaches reflect larger issues. Reflection on the contrast between the discursive and the rhetorical modes of philosophical exposition points to a recognition that these two styles are congenial to rather different objectives.

The inferential, argumentative mode of philosophical exposition is by nature geared to enlisting the reader's assent to certain theses or theories by way of reasoning. It is thus most efficient for securing a reader's assent to certain claims, on the basis of the evidential or predictive relations among one's *beliefs*. It is coordinated to a view of philosophy that sees the discipline in *information-oriented* terms, as preoccupied with the answering of certain questions: the solution of certain cognitive problems.

By contrast, the rhetorical, evocative mode of philosophical exposition is by nature geared to securing acceptance with respect to *evaluations*. It is preoccupied with forming—or reforming—our sensibilities with respect to the *value* and, above all, with shaping or influencing one's *priorities and evaluations*. It is bound up with a view of philosophy that sees the discipline in *axiological* terms. It does not proceed by reasoning from prior philosophical givens, it exerts its impetus *directly* upon the cognitive values and sympathies that we have fixed on the basis of our experience of the world's ways.3 Only indirectly—that is only insofar as our beliefs and opinions are shaped by and reflective of our values—does the rhetorical mode of procedure impact upon beliefs.

As these considerations indicate, the rhetorical method comes into its own by enabling an exposition to make an appeal to—and if need be influence and modify—the recipient's preestablished outlook in order to induce a suitable adjustment of evaluations. In thus appealing to an interlocutor's evaluative sensibilities, the rhetorician

must enlist persuasive impetus of this person's body of experiences—vicarious experiences included. Here providing information can help—but only by way of influencing the sensibility, the reader's established way of looking at things and appraising them. There are, of course, many ways to pursue this project. A collection of suitably constituted illustrations and examples, a survey of selected historical episodes that serve as instructive case studies ("History teaching by examples"), or a vividly articulated fiction can all orient a reader's evaluative sentiments in a chosen direction—as Voltaire's *Candide* or the philosophical methodology of Ludwig Wittgenstein amply illustrate. And, of course, pure invective can also prove rhetorically effective if sufficiently clever in its articulation. What matters is that agreement is elicited through a contention's being rendered plausible and acceptable by its consonance with duly highlighted aspects of our experience—so that the course of our experience as a preestablished given itself becomes the determinative factor.

It is somewhat surprising that there should be so little connection in philosophy between one's ideological orientation and one's expository style. Thinkers of a distinctly scientistic orientation often resort to the tempting appeal of the rhetorical mode (as the Spinoza of the *Ethics* breaks the chains of his *more geometrico* exposition and cuts loose in the scholia). And philosophers who adopt highly normative/evaluative positions sometimes advocate them by very argumentative means that give the impression of close reasoning. (Frances Herbert Bradley for example.) In philosophy, doctrinal tendency and expository mode are less closely conjoined than one might will expect.

None the less, because markedly distinct views of the mission of the enterprise are at issue with the discursive and evocative approaches to philosophizing, any debate over the respective merits of the two modes of philosophical exposition is by this very fact rendered inseparable from a dispute about the nature of philosophy. The quarrel is ultimately a contest of ownership: to whom does the discipline of philosophy properly belong, to the argumentative demonstrators or to the evocative rhetoricians? Whose approach is to be paramount?

This turf war over the ownership of philosophy has been going on since the very inception of the subject. Among the Presocratics, the Milesians founded a "nature philosophy" addressed primarily at issues we should nowadays classify as scientific in a more or less demonstrative manner, while such thinkers as Xenophanes, Heraclitus, and Pythagoras took an evocative—evaluative and distinctly "literary"—approach to philosophy, illustrated by the following Pythagorean dictum:

> Life is like a festival; just as some come to the festival to compete, some to ply their trade, but the best people come as spectators, so in life slavish men go hunting for fame or gain, the philosophers for the truth.[4]

In 19th Century Germany philosophy, Hegel and his rationalizing school typified the scientific/discursive approach, while the "post-moderns" who were their opponents—Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche—all exemplify the axiological/rhetorical approach. In the 20th century, the scientistic movement represented by logical positivism vociferously insisted on using the methodology of demonstration, while their anti-rationalistic opponents among the existentialists resorted extensively to evocative literary devices to promulgate their views—to such an extent that their demonstration—minded opponents sought to exile their work from philosophy into literature, journalism, or some such less "serious" mode of intellectual endeavour.

In this connection, we see as clearly as anywhere the tendency among philosophers towards defining the entire subject in such a way that their own sort of work is central to the enterprise and that their own favoured methodology becomes definitive for the way in which work in the field should properly be done. The absence of that urbanity which enables one to see other people's ways of doing things as appropriate and (in *their*

circumstances) entirely acceptable is thus perhaps the most widespread and characteristic failing of practicing philosophers. But the fact remains that while individual *philosophers* generally have no alternative but to choose one particular mode of philosophizing as focus of their allegiance, *philosophy* as such has to accommodate both of these discordant emphases. Philosophy as such is broader than any one philosopher's philosophy.

But be this as it may, the irony of the situation is that philosophers simply cannot simply dispense—once and for all and totally—with the methodology they affect to reject and despise. Even the most demonstration-minded philosopher cannot avoid entanglement in rhetorical devices. For even the most rationalistic of thinkers cannot argue demonstratively for everything, "all the way down," so to speak. At some point a philosopher must invite assent through an appeal to sympathetic acquiescence based on experience as such. On the other hand, even the most value-ideological philosopher cannot altogether avert all argumentation insofar as his work is to be done thoroughly and well. For a reliance on certain *standards* of assessment is inescapably present in those proffered evaluations, and this issue of appropriateness cannot be addressed satisfactorily without some recourse to reasons. This important point deserves due emphasis. For the fact is that a means for appraisal and evaluation is a fundamental precondition of rational controversy. Without the existence of objective *standards of adequacy*, rational controversy is inherently impossible. Argumentation is pointful as a rational process only to the extent to which the claim that a "good case" has been made out can be assessed in retrospect on a common, shared basis of judgment. Without the guidance of an assessment mechanism for evaluating relevancy and cogency—one whose appropriateness to the discussion at hand is, if not preestablished at any rate capable of being rationally validated—the whole enterprise of deliberation and discussion becomes futile. The upshot of these considerations, then is that while rhetoric without reason is indeed unphilosophical, nevertheless in philosophy reasoning itself becomes impracticable without some rhetorically provided starter-set of input materials.

Ironically then, the two modes of philosophy are locked into an uneasy but indissoluble union. While neither the discursive (inferential) nor the rhetorical (evocative) school can feel altogether comfortable about using the methodology favoured by its rival, it lies in the rational structure of the situation that neither side can manage altogether to free itself from entanglement with the opposition. The practice of philosophy is ultimately a matter of striving for a smooth systemic closure between the cognitive projections of reason and the value-formative data of experience—a harmonization in which these two competing modes of philosophizing have to come into a mutually supportive overall harmonization.

Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Geneology of Morals*, Essay II, Sect. 6.

2. David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk. III, Pt. I, Sect. 2.

3. Compare Henry W. Johnstone, *Philosophy and Argument* (State College, PA; 1959).

4. G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), frag. 278.

View Index of Papers and Commentaries

Return to Main Menu