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The virtues of *dissoi logoi*

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ABSTRACT: My claim is that rhetorical training is required to develop citizenship skills. I illustrate this claim by focussing on dissociation of notions, that is, a rhetorical technique that citizens might have to use in their civic life. After distinguishing a rhetorical and a normative approach to dissociation, I argue that *dissoi logoi*, as an exercise invented by the Sophists, offer a relevant training to master this technique.

KEYWORDS: convention, dissociation of notions, *dissoi logoi*, normative approach, rhetoric, semantic, skills, virtues

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Daniel Cohen (2009) “keeping an open mind” and “having a sense of proportion” are virtues an arguer should have in order to maximize “cognitive gain to be had from arguing”. In addition, such virtues would “help to bring an argument to successful closure”. Andrew Aberdein (2010) argued for a much more detailed list of virtues in association with goals one should pursue when arguing. For instance, the “willingness to engage in communication” requires a virtue such as “being communicative” or the “willingness to listen to the others” could be better implemented with a virtue such as “intellectual empathy”. It appears that the method used by Cohen and Aberdein to identify such virtues is to speculate on ideals of argumentative situations. Their inquiry leads to naming virtues that no one would consider as harmful for discussion. Indeed, no one would reasonably argue that “open mindedness”, “sense of proportion”, “being communicative” or “intellectual empathy” would have a bad effect on argumentation. However, when we focus on uses of argumentative techniques, the issue of the virtues of argumentation becomes more controversial. In this paper, I will focus on the technique of dissociation of notions and distinguish two approaches to this technique: the *rhetorical* and the *normative*.

In a first part, I will present the concept of dissociation as described by Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969 [1958]). Their theoretical framework has to do with an Aristotelian conception of rhetoric, which is nowadays notably supported by Danblon (2002), Garsten (2006) and Tindale (2006). I will then illustrate the functioning of this technique by analysing the dissociation on the notion of “war” that was performed by Barack Obama when receiving his Nobel Peace Prize.

In a second part, I will present the normative conception of dissociation. The roots of this approach can be found in Stevenson's article on *Persuasive Definitions* (1938). More recently, Agnes van Rees (2009) dedicated a comprehensive book to dissociation from a normative approach. Rather than revealing an *opposition* on virtues, the comparison between Perelman's approach to dissociation and the normative one will reveal *different hierarchies of priorities* about the virtues an arguer should have in order to successfully perform this technique.

In a third part, I will argue that the rhetorical approach is, in this respect, more realistic. To support my claim, I will show, in line with Dupréel (1948), Pearce (1994) and Danblon (2013), that *dissoi logoi*, as an exercise used by the sophists in their training, might be a required step to the mastery of the technique of dissociation.

2. THE CONCEPT OF DISSOCIATION

According to Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca the origin of dissociation is the need to solve a practical problem:

[dissociation of notions] is always prompted by the desire to remove an incompatibility arising out of the confrontation of one proposition with others, whether one is dealing with norms, facts or truth (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969 [1958], p. 413).

This practical problem can often be described as a perverse incentive (Danblon, 2013, p. 144), that is, the feeling that one is doing wrong while trying to do right. For instance, the need for a judge to dissociate between the *letter* and the *spirit* of the law originates in the feeling that the strict implementation of the law would be unjust in a given case.

To solve this practical problem, the arguer will initiate a semantic work on the meaning of a notion. The result will be a dissociation between some aspects of it that will be negatively valued and some others that will be positively valued :

While the original status of what is presented as the starting point of the dissociation is unclear and undetermined, the dissociation into terms I and II will attach value to the aspects that correspond to term II and will lower the value of the aspects that are in opposition to it. Term I, appearance in the strict sense of the word, is merely illusion and error. (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969 [1958], p. 417)

In this quote, it is worth stressing on the idea that prior to the dissociation, the notion is "unclear and undetermined". Indeed, it is probably on the conception of *clarity* that the difference between Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca approach to dissociation and the normative approach to this technique is the most obvious. Following Danblon (2002, pp. 120-125) I would argue that one should have in mind Perelman's conception of "confused notions" (Perelman, 2012 [1990], pp. 788-818; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969 [1958], pp. 174-190) when studying dissociation. In line with Eugène Dupréel (1939) Perelman opposed to the idea that

the aim of argumentation should be to remove ambiguity and vagueness in notions:

it is precisely because the notions used in argumentation are not univocal and have no fixed meaning that will not change that the conclusions of an argumentation are not binding (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969 [1958], p. 132).

Moreover, according to Perelman, the fringe of indefiniteness surrounding notions might be useful for two reasons: (1) it might be required to deal with new unforeseen uses¹; (2) it might be required for reaching agreement in some situations².

Barack Obama's dissociation on the notion of "war" in his Nobel Peace Prize Speech³ offers a relevant illustration of this technique. Obama opened his speech by pointing a practical problem: how could he accept praises for his achievements in the pursuit of peace while being "Commander-in-Chief of a nation in the midst of two wars"? In order to solve this problem, Obama engaged a semantic work on the notion of war the result of which is the valorisation of "just war" as opposed to unjustified aggression. Now, it is worth stressing that, in support of his dissociation, Obama used well-known rhetorical techniques. He notably used a *paradeigma* (Aristotle, *Rhet.*, I, 2, 1357b): "A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's army", a pragmatic argument (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969 [1958], pp. 266-269): "inaction tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later" and a breaking of connecting links (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969 [1958], pp. 411-415): "no Holy war can ever be a just war".

The need for the orator to use various rhetorical resources in support of his dissociation reveals a crucial aspect of this technique: although the notion of "just war" is the result of a dissociation on the notion of "war", it is still a "confused notion" and, as such, needs to be justified by rhetorical means. And here is the point I want to stress on: this observation does not mean that the dissociation failed. On the contrary, this reveals that dissociation occurs in the realm of *social reality* (Searle, 1995) where the meaning of notions as important as "war", "justice" or "liberty" is a matter of agreement and conventions (Dupréel, 1948, pp. 25-28). As such, it cannot be determined once for all by the identification of a supposedly *essence* of the notion (Popper, 1974 [1963], pp. 97-119). And one could easily imagine how reluctant we would be if a legal expert, a philosopher or a head of state claimed to have found the *true meaning* of the notion of "just war" so that it could be applied to any new case without deliberation.

¹ This view is expressed in the following quote: "to the extent that future experiences and the way in which they are to be examined are not entirely foreseeable, it is essential to conceive even the most precisely stated terms as surrounded with a fringe of indefiniteness sufficient to enable them to be applied to reality. A perfectly clear notion is one of which all cases of application are known so that it does not admit a new unforeseen use" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969 [1958], p. 131).

² Perelman (1990 [2012], pp. 808-809) famously argued that the agreement on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been possible because the signatories had different interpretations of the same notions in mind.

³ Obama gave this speech on December 10, 2009. The transcript is available here: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>

Therefore, it might be argued that, by dissociating a notion, an arguer will not really *clarify* it, he will rather *shape* its meaning for the resolution of a particular incompatibility. This implies that the agreement on the dissociated notion will not only be a matter of semantics: it will also depend on the ability of the arguer to successfully justify it for a given audience. As a consequence, I would argue that one should take three criteria into account for a successful dissociation: (1) the need to solve a practical problem; (2) a work on the meaning of the notion in order to remove the incompatibilities; (3) rhetorical skills to justify the dissociation.

I will now present a different view on dissociation: the normative approach.

3. DISSOCIATION FROM A NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVE

With his concept of “persuasive definition”, Stevenson described a feature of argumentation that is, at first glance, close to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s concept of dissociation. In his 1938 article, Stevenson described persuasive definition as a means for an arguer to redirect his audience perception of a notion by showing some aspects of it “in a poor light” and some others “in a fine one” (1938, p. 332). The main difference is that Stevenson conceived the confusion surrounding the notions as potentially dangerous because it offers room for manipulation of the audience:

Thanks again to vagueness, the change seemed a “natural” one, which, by escaping the attention of the hearers, did not remind them that they were being influenced, and so did not stultify them by making them self-conscious (1938, p. 333).

In other words, while Perelman conceived “vagueness” as a condition for argumentation, Stevenson saw it as a threat.

In the same tradition of thinking, Agnes van Rees defined a “sound dissociation” as a technique that one should only use “for reasons of greater conceptual clarity” and as a means to “generating shared starting-points for presenting and attacking arguments, and to ensuring that the conclusions drawn from the discussion are optimally precise” (van Rees 2009, p. 121). With this quote, it is possible to measure the difference between the normative approach to dissociation and the approach I presented in the first part. From van Rees perspective, the semantic work on the notion is considered as the only acceptable means to reach an agreement: the dissociation has to be made “for reasons of greater conceptual clarity”. This implies that rhetoric should be avoided if it is not compatible with a research of clarification, conceived as the rational aim of any discussion⁴.

Even though the difference between the two approaches to dissociation is here obvious, one might expect scholars from both perspectives to share a same

⁴ Here, I would follow Kock (2009) when saying that one better understands the usefulness of rhetoric, as defined by Aristotle, if one sees it as a tool for the functioning of institutions (the three genres of rhetoric) rather than an analogue to dialectic. In the realm of rhetoric, i.e., the civic sphere, ensuring the efficiency of an argumentative technique might be as a rational goal than ensuring its soundness.

commitment to the need to find ways to ensure rational outcomes to discussions. But I would argue that they would have in mind different hierarchies of priorities in the virtues an arguer should have to do so. If I go back to the example of “just war”, it might be argued that, from a normative perspective, the best way to avoid an abusive use of this notion would be to train arguers to differentiate between sound and fallacious justifications of this dissociated notion. Indeed, the very aim of the pragma-dialectic, the latest development of which is the “strategic maneuvering” approach (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999, 2006), is to identify criteria to differentiate *convincing* arguments from merely *persuasive* ones. From this perspective, the ideal arguer should be, at first, *rigorous* in the application of a normative protocol to test arguments. In the perspective of Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, the best way to avoid manipulation would be to train arguers to keep in mind that no notion can be clarified once for all, that is, withdrawn from the domain of argumentation. Such arguers should be at first *flexible* to manage the subtle relationship between meaning as inwardness of things and meaning as convention.

4. THE VIRTUES OF *DISSOI LOGOI*

The reflexion on the method that would best insure a rational outcome to discussions often revolves around two figures of arguers: Socrates and the Sophists. In his book dedicated to the Presocratics, Karl Popper famously argued:

Critical rationalism is the attitude of the Presocratics. They all emphasized (even Parmenides) that we mortals cannot really *know*, since we can have *no certain knowledge*. This critical rationalism reached its height in Socrates’ method of refutation, the *elenchus*, which Parmenides was most probably the first to use. (1998, p. 275)

Socrates’ method of refutation, consisting in questioning someone in order to test the soundness of his arguments, inspired the normative approach to argumentation. Such a method is, at first glance, a reliable way to avoid dogmatism. But Robert Fogelin clearly identified the limit of this method:

If students become convinced that they can always find something wrong with any (non-trivial) argument presented to them, then the distinction between good and bad arguments is subverted, and the whole enterprise of arguing seems to lose its point. (Fogelin, 1985, p. 2)

The rhetorical approach to argumentation tries to overcome this *aporia* by arguing that the ability to be persuaded is as a useful feature of our rationality than the ability to look critically at arguments (Danblon, 2002).

In this respect, and with regard to the bad reputation of the Sophists⁵

⁵ This bad reputation is mainly due to Plato’s opposition between skills and virtues. He used this opposition as a means to condemn rhetoric. This opposition can notably be found in Plato’s *Apology* in which Socrates begins his speech by explaining that he will only speak the language of truth and, therefore, he will not be as eloquent as his accusers.

(Tindale, 2010, pp. 9-14), Pearce's claim on the virtues of *dissoi logoi* is straightforward. *Dissoi logoi* (or twofold arguments) is an exercise in which a student has to argue successively for opposite, and even contradictory views on a same issue⁶. According to Pearce, such an exercise offers the best training for the developing of citizenship skills. Here, his point is more pragmatic and realistic than philosophical. Indeed, Pearce is concerned with training students to deal with actual argumentative situations and not with ideal of critical discussions. A feature of actual argumentative situations is "the multiplicity of human perceptions of truth" (Pearce, 1994, p. 11). This observation is similar of that of Marc Angenot (2008) according to which philosophical and political controversies often ends into a *dialogue of the deaf: a deep disagreement* (Fogelin, 1985) in which arguers cannot even agree on a method to solve their disagreement. To face such situations, an exercise that trains the arguers to go as far as possible in the defence of a point of view they do not share might prove very useful. This is, in my view, Pearce most interesting claim:

Unrestricted by the rule of non-contradiction, students are better equipped to recognize the merits of an honourable opposition. Such a consideration of multiple perceptions is an approach to invention that allows more latitude for adapting arguments to situational constraints (Pearce, 1994, p. 6).

As a "thought experiment" (Gera, 2000), *dissoi logoi* might offer a practical training for intellectual empathy. As a practice of argumentation unrestricted by normative rules, this exercise also develops the ability to persuade and to be persuaded. And this disposition to persuasion might be as an important skill as critical thinking to insure that discussions do not end into a *dialogue of the deaf*.

5. CONCLUSION

In my first part, I tried to show that the meaning of a dissociated notion, such as "just war" is necessarily the result of an *agreement*: it not imposed by the identification of a supposedly "essence" or "true meaning" of the notion. Such an agreement might be described with Searle (1995) famous formula, X counts as Y in C, in which X stands for a notion, Y for its meaning as the result of an agreement, and C for a given audience to agree on this meaning. As envisaged by Searle, this social reality is continuously under two threats: dogmatism (according to which the meaning of a notion is not a matter of *convention* but of *essence*) and relativism (according to which no good reason could ever be given in support of the meaning of a notion). Therefore, a useful skill for citizens might be to learn not to choose between one of those attitudes, that is, learning to be *flexible* in order manage the

⁶ It is worth stressing here on the difference between *dissoi logoi* and traditional exercises students are used to do. Students are usually trained to find reason in support of an opinion. Psychological studies show that this kind of exercises reinforce our natural tendency to *confirmation bias* (Sperber & Mercier, 2011). On the contrary, the aim of *dissoi logoi* is to train what Danblon calls the suspension of the judgement (2013, pp. 127-148). It is an experience of change of perspective and a training to mind flexibility.

subtle relationship between meaning as inwardness of things and meaning as convention.

Following Pearce (1994) I argued that *dissoi logoi* might be a relevant exercise to train such a skill. Indeed, at the precise moment, when we just gave our strongest argument in favour of one side of an issue, we reverse our perspective and try to represent the opposite side of it, we can experience what Danblon (2013, pp. 127-148) calls the suspension of the judgement. This regular practice might accustom the arguers to a more flexible relation between critical thinking, as a means to avoid dogmatism, and persuasion, as a means to reach agreements.

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VICTOR FERRY

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