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Commentary on Todd Battistelli's "Rhetoric, Dialectic and Derailment in Church-State Arguments"

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In "Rhetoric, dialectic and derailment in church-state arguments" Battistelli discusses a topic that is of vital importance to the study of argumentation: the extent to which dialectical and rhetorical approaches can be reconciled. After reviewing some conceptions of rhetoric in modern argumentation theory he proposes an alternative conceptualization based on classical sophistic tradition that exceeds the bounds set by the pragma-dialectical notion of strategic manoeuvring. Before commenting on Battistelli's alternative, it may be helpful to provide some background information concerning my own view on the matter.

The issue of the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric is an old one and the discussion and about this issue can easily be prolonged to become an eternal one. A precondition for coming to any conclusion is, of course, that it is first made clear what exactly is understood by "dialectic" and "rhetoric." And this is precisely where the difficulties start. I think that two general approaches to this question can be distinguished: first, an approach that has primarily an empirical-historical basis; second, an approach that is in the first place theoretically-systematic.

In the empirical-historical approach, which may easily acquire essentialistic traits, the definition of dialectic and rhetoric is made dependent on what a certain historical source understood dialectic and rhetoric to be. When it comes to rhetoric, this source may, for instance, be Aristotle, Hermagoras of Temnos, Cicero or Quintilian — a new tendency is to go back all the way to the sophists. In any case, as regards their definition of rhetoric there are considerable differences between the various potential sources and it is hard to make out on empirical-historical grounds which choice is the best. All the same, this does not seem prevent some scholars from declaring their favoured choice sacrosanct.

The standardized version of classical rhetorical theory that is nowadays generally taught in rhetoric classes has blurred the existing diversity among rhetoricians regarding the definition of rhetoric. Since no one has taken out a patent for the use of the term *rhetoric*, a choice can be made freely and because of the incongruities between the definitions such a choice *has* to be made. In the absence of any further explanation one gets the impression that more often than not the choice that is made just depends on what

the theorist concerned suits or likes best. An additional, “technical” problem of the empirical-historical approach is by the way that the conceptions of rhetoric developed in antiquity are not always fully clear to the modern mind so that a philological clarification is required—and even after this clarification is provided they may still not fully cover modern argumentative reality.

In his essay Battistelli shows himself to be, *grosso modo*, a representative of the empirical-historical approach to rhetoric. Before explaining what he thinks rhetoric is, he stresses after all that it is a drawback of the conception of rhetoric adhered to by modern argumentation scholars such as Jacobs, Rescher, and Slob that it “is not consonant with the full range of rhetorical theory available.”

The theoretically-systematic approach to dialectic and rhetoric, which is chosen by argumentation theorists such as myself, is guided by theoretical considerations concerning what conception of dialectic and rhetoric is most constructive for realizing the analytic and evaluative objectives of their research program. Rather than being a philologist, I am an argumentation theorist who tries to make good use of historical and philological insights to enrich his theory. The pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation we have developed in Amsterdam starts from a critical rationalist idea of reasonableness and in building this theory we paid tribute (like Popper did before us) to our source of inspiration in classical dialectic as portrayed in Plato’s Socratic dialogues and described by Aristotle.

When pragma-dialectics started in a later stage of its development to involve effectiveness next to reasonableness in its theorizing through the notion of strategic manoeuvring we realized immediately that vital insights concerning the effectiveness of argumentative discourse could be derived from rhetoric — starting with classical rhetoric. In pursuing this endeavour we started from the division of labour between dialectic and rhetoric that can be found in Aristotle’s work but soon enough we realised that an integrated dialectical and rhetorical approach was due. Most important, however, for these comments, is that we concentrated on rhetorical insights that can play a role in the pragma-dialectical theorizing concerning argumentation.

From the outset we have made it clear that, rather than special ways of conducting argumentation, dialectic and rhetoric are to us theoretical perspectives that can be used in analyzing and evaluating argumentative discourse, which may complement each other. As far as rhetoric is concerned, our point of departure has always been that the rhetorical effectiveness of strategic manoeuvres is not just determined by the presentational choices that are made (“stylistics”), but also by the adaptation of the manoeuvres to the (primary or secondary) audience that is to be convinced (“audience management”) and the way in which the available topical potential is exploited in accordance with the dialectical and rhetorical requirement of the argumentative situation (“topical invention”). These three aspects are in our view (as expressed in the “strategic manoeuvring triangle”) inextricably united in the argumentative moves that are made and they are only distinguished from each other for analytic reasons.

In his essay, Battistelli makes a major issue of distinguishing between “unilateral” and “multilateral” views of rhetoric. I wonder, to be honest, whether Battistelli is right in suggesting that unilaterality was the focal point of the critique of rhetoric delivered by Plato *cum suis*. Battistelli is certainly right however in observing—in a completely different vein—that rhetoric was to Plato’s Socrates “an art of appealing to appetites and

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appearances quite distinct from a dialectical process of reasoning that uncovers substance and truth.” In any case, as regards multilateralness, I see eye to eye with Battistelli, because I too prefer a multilateral view of rhetoric, if only because this fits nicely with our conception of strategic manoeuvring as always involving simultaneously a dialectical dimension and a rhetorical dimension. The more parallel the two theoretical perspectives (are made to) run the easier it will be to put the insights their combination provides to good use in analyzing and evaluating strategic manoeuvring in argumentative discourse. “The rhetorical mindset is always inhabiting an unspoken dialogue,” Battistelli contends. I surely hope this is true because it agrees very well with the approach to argumentative discourse promoted in extended pragma-dialectics.

I cannot find fault either with Battistelli’s view that rhetoric is more than just style. This is in fact what we emphatically claimed when talking about the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring and this is also why I reject Battistelli’s allegation that we start from a definition of rhetoric which “remove[s] rhetoric from any role in the process of generating and exchanging viewpoints.” Not only does the pragma-dialectical view of rhetoric through its association with dialectic in the notion of strategic manoeuvring not at all presuppose the “passive audience” denounced by Battistelli, because both parties can influence the progress of the argumentation process at every point (so much for viewing rhetoric in terms of “a static set of expectations concerning the audience”), but also does the pragma-dialectical view of rhetoric explicitly include a creative dimension of *inventio* by incorporating for both parties making topical choices as a third aspect of strategic manoeuvring.

Another important point to note is that pragma-dialecticians do indeed think that from rhetoric insights can be derived regarding the effectiveness of argumentation, but that this claim cannot be reversed: we do not say that rhetorical insights are always necessarily insights regarding effectiveness. It might even be true that Battistelli is right in suggesting that rhetoric offers useful insights “outside strategic manoeuvring” for making clear how certain verbal or non-verbal moves may be helpful in establishing or restoring the fulfilment of what pragma-dialecticians call “higher order” conditions for conducting a critical discussion. Minister Scott’s appeals to pathos which, according to Battistelli, “aim to serve another role in [his] attempt at furthering the discussion” seem a good example. Just before Battistelli states his general conclusion, he makes another relevant observation: “[O]nce argumentation has derailed, rhetoric can provide the means for opening up solidified attitudes through appeal to the ambiguity and plurality of opinion existing in a given rhetorical setting.” Battistelli’s observations resemble those of Jacobs, and it becomes clear that rhetoric as he views it has an important role to play in indicating how to promote reasonableness in argumentative reality.

Although—as should be clear by now—I like the constructive thrust of Battistelli’s expose, I also think that in pushing his point he sometimes exaggerates a bit so that he proves himself guilty of moving his portrayal of argumentative reality too much into his own direction at the expense of remaining credible to the unconverted. A striking example is: “In a sense, neither the rhetor’s nor audience’s ideas are their own but are instead an inchoate amalgam of each other’s.” Another implausible exaggeration is “[O]ne’s own point is never truly one’s own but emerges from one’s enmeshed position in the network of social discourse.” Eventually, however, both Battistelli and I agree with Cicero that, in spite of the Ciceronian wisdom that the identities of rhetor and audience

“are not easily separable,” an arguer must “deal with people as they are” and has to find arguments and appeals “he knows are likely to appeal to his audience.” The problem is that we have only just entered a new stage in the development of argumentation theory in which dialectical and rhetorical insights are brought to bear together in systematically analyzing and evaluating situated argumentative discourse and that we still have to find out how exactly the question of how to trace such arguments and appeals can be tackled.

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