Jun 6th, 9:00 AM - Jun 9th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on van Rees

Ruth Amossy

Commentary on M.A. van Rees: "Dialectical and Rhetorical Effects of Dissociation"

RUTH AMOSSY

French Department
Tel-Aviv University
Ramat-Aviv, 69978 Tel-Aviv, Israël
amossy@attglobal.net

Agnes Van Rees's paper on dissociation follows previous investigations into the subject based on Perelman's chapter called "*La dissociation des notions*". Her main objective is not only to develop the study of dissociation as launched by the new rhetoric, but also to adapt it to pragma-dialectics and thus provide the theory with an additional analytical tool. Agnes Van Rees is a proficient pragma-dialectician and has participated in most of the Amsterdam group's collective publications (Eemeren & al. 1996, 2005). She is more than well-acquainted with the theory and her paper on dissociation is, from this point of view, an excellent piece of work unfolding the various functions dissociation can perform at every step of a critical discussion. The demonstration is clear and well-structured, and each step is illustrated by examples taken from previous papers on the subject and re-examined in the light of a new assignment.

This is to say that in the perspective chosen by van Rees, namely, in an inner examination of the subject matter, there is probably not much to add, and a discussion on some minor point or specific example would not throw much more light on the question of dissociation. She advances a standpoint and develops it in a rational and meticulous way.

Rather than working from the inside, that is, in the pragma-dialectical framework, I would like to adopt here an external perspective and raise some questions concerning the treatment of dissociation dictated by pragma-dialectical concepts, the relation of these insights to Perelman's pioneer views, and finally the possible benefit of approaching the subject in another, integrative and non-normative, way.

The first problem seems to be the rigid framework in which the notion of dissociation is examined. Of course, it allows for rigor and precision in the description. But it is not without raising some difficulties. It imposes on the audience a system of categories presented as an accepted set of truths. The principles of pragma-dialectics are taken for granted – they are the premises on which the whole enterprise is built. In other words, the idea that argumentative discourse is aimed at resolving a difference of opinions, that it consists of a critical discussion based on rationality (the parties have to reach agreement about the acceptability of the standpoint at issue), and that there is an ideal model specifying the various stages in the resolution process, are asserted from the start and have to be admitted unconditionally. They are premises that cannot be discussed. When Van Rees writes: "dissociation may be used for strategic maneuvering in all the stages of a critical discussion, the confrontation stage, the opening stage, the argumentation stage, and the concluding stage" (p.2), she summarizes an impressive

amount of work already published by the research group. Like any scientific research, she tries to make some progress by relying on accumulated results. However, this means for the reader that he is either inside, or outside, the system. If you work within the limits of the theory, you can see how one more stone is brought to the overall building. But if the reader is an outsider, will he not be discouraged by the necessity to accept without further thought such an elaborate and closed set of rules and precepts?

Now we can argue that this is the price to pay: any theory that develops within a structured conceptual space presents the same problem, and Agnes Van Rees can rightly claim that her principles are justified elsewhere, in other books and articles, and that she takes up at the last stage of the theory, trying to elaborate the missing points. The members of the research group consider they have to develop the theory as fully as possible by dealing with numerous and diverse internal issues. However, an external observer might feel that they are merely filling in the places left empty in a preexisting, ready-made scheme.

At this point, you can ask whether I consider myself to be within or without, and in the final analysis – if I am entitled at all to be Van Rees's respondent. I suppose that to deny it would mean that only pragma-dialecticians can be interested in this kind of work, and be judged competent to talk about it – which would be unfair to this stimulating paper and to the whole enterprise. The paper does raise interesting questions in relation to the very notion of dissociation and to the functions it can play in argumentative discourse. I would like to examine or at least to raise one or two of these questions.

The first one is related to the use Van Rees makes of the notion of dissociation borrowed from Perelman. It is an argumentative technique appearing when a speaker splits up a notion considered a unity, in order to resolve some kind of incompatibility. In the split up notion one aspect will be valued at the expense of another, rejected or undermined. Now Van Rees, following Perelman, has previously worked on "Indicators of dissociation" (*Argumentation in practice*, 2005) – Perelman mentioned tautologies, paradoxes, negation as well as adjectives (real, authentic, etc.) or definitions. This is an important point – since the analyst must be able to pinpoint the dissociation in the discourse and find material proof for it, which Van Rees does in a quite precise and meticulous way.

Once the methodological framework is set, it appears however that the examples analyzed are quite different from each other, and that some of them barely match Perelman's definitions. On a synchronic level, disconnected from the various stages of a critical discussion, it turns out that some dissociations discussed by Van Rees are superficial and rather formal, while others meet the requirement of conceptual re-ordering formulated by the New Rhetoric. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca give as an example **of** the notion of "MAN" split up in two: man as created by God, and Man after the Fall, trying to solve the incompatibility between God's goodness and the existence of Evil. They see in dissociation a powerful philosophical tool, since conceptualization often derives from a dissociation of notions leading to problem resolution.

Now we can ask ourselves whether the example "In this time, in which the country appears to have an urgent need for comedians, real originality is absent", the split between real/ apparent originality meets the requirement of notional re-ordering. It rather seems to be a vague distinction allowing for easy criticism – what would be "real" originality, and how would it be defined? Unless, of course, the examples that follow in

the text clarify this point – but we do not get them (which, by the way, shows the difficulty of the de-contextualization here practiced by Van Rees). Similarly, admitting that one has acted out of greed, but asserting "yes, but I am not a greedy person", thus dissociating the act from the person, is not a dissociation implying a notional reordering (to say nothing about the fact that it is a poor refutation). In both cases, we can ask how the dissociation tries to solve an incompatibility, and how it succeeds in achieving a notional reordering.

As a result, we can ask whether one should not distinguish between weak and strong dissociations, based on the criterion of notional re-ordering and incompatibility solving. Does Van Rees's work diverge from Perelman's, suggesting that his criteria do not hold, and that we should indifferently apply the notion of dissociation to vague and sometimes inconsistent distinctions even if they blur notions rather than re-ordering them in another integrated system? Or is it simply an aspect that she did not have time to deal with? Although directly related to its allegiance to Perelman (on whom the author claims to be drawing), the question is obviously of general interest for the examined paper. How can we deal with the role of dissociation on the level of dialectical reasonableness, and even of rhetorical effectiveness, without accounting for the power and depth of the dissociation – or, to be faithful to the subject, without dissociating vague and ungrounded distinctions from true notional dissociations?

Another point derived from Perelman's presentation is the question of categorization. The New Rhetoric suggests a classification of argumentation by dissociation based on different criteria. In this perspective, the analyst has to check if argumentation relies on dissociations already accepted by the audience, or on dissociations created by the speaker, or on dissociations accepted by other audiences, or on a dissociation that the audience might have forgotten" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1970, p. 569) The notion of old/new is crucial: it is important to see whether the dissociation relies on an existing doxa and calls for recognition on the basis of existing beliefs, or creates another order and opens up new venues of thought. The pole of the audience is here essential: it is possible to classify dissociations according to their status in relation to the audience – old and accepted or new and surprising ones, accepted by the actual audience or accepted by other, different audiences, forgotten or remembered, etc. This means that the familiarity or the novelty of the dissociation plays an important role – and that we have to examine dissociations from the perspective of the addressee chosen as a target. One can then investigate the effectiveness of innovative dissociations that create a new conceptual framework or, on the contrary, of well-known dissociations endowed with the charm of familiarity. In terms of rhetorical effectiveness: it is not enough for the speaker to present a particular state of affairs in a light that is favorable to his interests (as van Rees puts it, p. 2), he also has to secure the audience's adherence to this presentation by making the distinction acceptable on the basis of consensual opinions, values ands beliefs. In the Montessori's example, one has to see what vanity and ambition mean for the target audience (which is not specified by Van Rees), and see how their negative connotations, especially when applied to women supposed to be vain and systematically attacked when ambitious, can be erased for the benefit of other notions positively valued in public opinion such as "drive" and a legitimate care for esthetics. Of course, the dissociation has to be replaced in the context of Montessori's life enterprise and the image of her person as known to the audience.

In other words, my contention is that Van Rees's analysis of rhetorical effectiveness, while closely examining the maneuvering of the speaker, does not pay enough attention to the audience and to the way in which it can be persuaded on the basis of its set of opinions and beliefs, and of its cultural background.

One more remark to this effect. Should we really examine the treatment of dissociation on two separate levels: dialectic and rhetorical, the first accounting for the rationality and acceptability of the argument, the other accounting for its efficiency in terms of persuasion? This, again, is the core of the pragma-dialectic theory, and Van Rees does not care to justify it here, taking it for granted. I would like to argue that in this case, this distinction does not hold and that it should be replaced by an integrated rhetorical view in which logos cannot be dissociated from ethos and pathos. I would thus suggest not to de-contextualize the dissociation but to replace it in the actual dialogue and in the intertext (what is said and written at the time), taking into account the situation of discourse (who speaks to whom, when, where, in what circumstances), the genre of discourse, the image of the audience built up by the orator, the rational arguments developed by the notional split as they are displayed in close connection to the audience's beliefs and expectations, but also in relation to the speaker's ethos and to the addressee's feelings. But this might be another discussion on the respective merits of pragma-dialectics and an approach drawing on (new) rhetoric and discourse analysis (Amossy 2006) – hopefully in some other conference.

link to paper

REFERENCES

Amossy, R. (2006 [2000]. *L'argumentation dans le discours.* Paris:Colin
Eemeren, F.H van & Houtlosser, P. (Eds.). (2005). *Argumentation in Practice*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
Eemeren, F.H. van., Grootendorst, R., Snoek Hoekemans, F. (1996). *Fundamentals of Argumentation Theory*. Mahwah, NJ:Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
Perelman, Ch. & Olbrechts Tyteca, O. (1970 [1958]). *Traité de l' argumentation. La nouvelle rhétorique* .Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles.