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In Response to: V. Mendenhall's *When It's Not Just Rhetoric*

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Professor V. Mendenhall's dense and stimulating paper can be read in two ways:

- as a contribution to the analysis of philosophical argument;
- and as an essay on the status of the expression “rhetorical proof”. As he nicely puts it, is “rhetorical proof” an “oxymoron” (10) or a “pleonasm” (13)? That is, is it an alliance of incompatible terms (rhetoric comes into play when no proof is available), or a vain repetition of the same meaning (all proof expressed in ordinary language is basically rhetorical)?

(Note : references are quoted from Professor Mendenhall’s manuscript)

I. On rhetorical proof and the ornamental function of rhetoric

Prof. Mendenhall adopts a complex concept of rhetoric. If I understand him correctly, four functions of rhetoric are discussed.

- 1) In what is generally considered to be its highest function, rhetoric plays a role in the construction of a certain category of truth, “in the order of human affairs” (11, 12). This is the basic Aristotelian lesson, taken up by Ricœur, and substantiated by Prof. Mendenhall.
- 2) Rhetoric as a way to knowledge : rhetoric “sets things up, builds bridges, and smoothes over rough patches” (1)

Facilitating the access to truth is no minor achievement. Nonetheless, the fields of truth are variegated, as well as the will for truth, or the need for truth, or the circumstances in which one appeals to truth, as well as the semiotic registers in which truth is embodied... . Rhetoric is a way to take into account the “sublunar”, negotiated, co-constructed social life of truth in general. That is to say:

- 3) Rhetoric is instrumental in managing interpersonal relationships (8)

Under its classical definition, rhetoric implies conscious planning and an asymmetrical communicative setting (orator to audience). This concept has to be reshaped to fit the variety of situations of interaction and communicative situations in which human affairs are effectively dealt with. In all cases, the distinction between the referential, emotional and interpersonal dimensions remains essential.

- 4) As an ornament: a “cosmetic” “feather-bedding” (1), a way to “enliven” texts (2) (12-13). Ornaments come last, and seem to appear when truth is missing. I quote from page 12-13

“But it is possible too that we get carried away by our eloquence or the magic of words and allow them to carry the burden without the proof. In either case the tension between persuasion and proof is broken and we get *just rhetoric, feats of prose, ornament*” (emphasis in the text)

Everyone, including Mendenhall and Ricouer, seems to agree to debase this vision of rhetoric as ornament. I confess I don't. I do know that in some cultures ornaments are to be avoided, and consequently that the idea of ornament is pejorative. Against this view, a case should be made for the vital function of ornaments, rituals and ceremonies. That is, in my opinion, the study of rhetorical argument needs an *esthetic* no less than an *ethic* or a *logic*.

From an historical point of view, the ornamental/pejorative vision of rhetoric seems to be derived from a vision of the development of rhetoric stemming from the earlier work of Gérard Genette, on the supposed restriction of rhetoric in 19th century France. This interpretation relies on an overestimation of the significance of Fontanier's treatises on tropes. It has been outdated, on strictly historical grounds, by F. Douay-Soublin field-work investigations on the reality of the rhetorical practices in France during the 19th century.

DOUAY-SOUBLIN, Françoise 1999, "La rhétorique en France au XIXe siècle à travers ses pratiques et ses institutions : restauration, renaissance, remise en cause". In Marc FUMAROLI (dir.) *Histoire de la rhétorique dans l'Europe moderne 1450-1950*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1999.

FONTANIER, Pierre 1821, 1827 /1977 "Les figures du discours". Paris : Flammarion.

GENETTE, Gérard, 1970, "La rhétorique restreinte". In *Communication* 16.

(Concerning Ricouer on rhetoric, see the references in VM).

II. On philosophical argument

This point brings us to the core of Professor Mendenhall's paper, where he shows how Ricouer's truth — or thesis — concerning "the ethic of translation" is rhetorically built.

First, Mendenhall looks closely at Ricœur's words, to show that every nuance of expression makes sense (§ 1).

Second, an essential step in this demonstration is the moment when Mendenhall shows how Ricouer "builds an enigma" (§2 and 3), that is, when he, Ricouer, brings us to an unseen problem, or if I dare say, without malicious intention, *creates a problem where there was none*. Rhetoric is a problem-generating device.

In § 2, "Getting us to see differently", Mendenhall shows in a perfectly concluding manner how this job is done. This raises a number of questions.

Mendenhall's thesis is that "[Ricœur's] argument, [Ricœur's] evidence is to be found in the drawing of contrast [...]. Take the figure away and there is no evidence or, more exactly, there is only an outline, a shadow of [Ricœur's] argument" (p.10). Mendenhall insists on the difference between "[telling]" the reader that there is an opposition and "[getting] the reader to see" this opposition (10); a rhetorical argument not only tells a truth, but shows a fact.

To substantiate this proposition, VM proposes a "description" of Ricouer's text, that is a version of this text (p.9), in which rhetoric has been "taken out".

I intuitively agree with the opposition between telling someone and getting someone to see; but I find the description/transcription given on page 9 of PR's text rather good and suggestive. It is certainly useful to have both texts at hand. Moreover, I think a precision is needed: this "description" is certainly not in Ricœur's favorite style or rhetoric, but it indeed has a rhetoric of

its own. In fact, it is written in the Toulminian analytical style, that is, in agreement with the theoretical rhetoric of the argumentation study discipline. In other words, I think that we cannot suppress the rhetoric (there can be no linguistic expression / communication without rhetoric; this is an analytical truth). We can only shift from one rhetorical style to another.

The analysis of individual arguments in debates shows how repetitive they are. Arguing is to repeat, reformulate, adapt general lines of argument to specific circumstances (just like jazz). As a consequence, argument analysis has to account for these individual, context-dependent variations.

Mendenhall takes the idea of contradiction as the basic rhetorical-argumentative feature. I do agree with this point: the best way to allocate a substantial field to argumentation studies is to ground them in conflict studies.

In monological texts the contrasting ideas are attributed to competing “enunciators” (as Oswald Ducrot would say), and an “enunciative” approach is clearly in order. When individuals confront their points of view in a face to face situation, dialectical or interactional methods are indispensable tools for the analysis of argument. When they confront through texts, being freed from the constraints of face to face situations, the intertextual phenomena comes into the foreground.

A terminological point. Should we establish a difference between “discourse analysis” and “rhetorical analysis”? That is, should we distinguish between *rhetorical analysis* oriented towards philosophy and logic and *discourse analysis* referring to the field of linguistics?

Concerning the rhetorically built variety of truths, I think they have a basic characteristic: their virtue is to stimulate controversy — for example, many aspects of Ricœur's original position could be discussed, but this comment will not address them.

Now, Mendenhall shows how Ricœur's explicit vision of rhetoric is in harmony with his rhetorical practice. I confess I'm not familiar with the deconstructionist view of philosophical texts; as far as I understand, they get their nihilistic flavor by pointing out the contradictions and hiatus in texts. If this is more or less correct, Mendenhall's analysis could be read as an anti-deconstructionist essay, conferring more substantial meaning to its object.

I'd like to come back to the “logic” (“just the fact, mind the p's and q's” (1)) *versus* rhetoric (“ornament”) opposition — Actually I think it is a “rhetorical” opposition itself.

It would be a healthy exercise to analyse this opposition, even in theoretical texts, just as an example of what Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca call an “antagonistic pair” [couple antagoniste], on a par with the prototypical pair “appearance / reality”. It shares all the characteristics of such rhetorical pairs: a positive value is attributed to one member, a negative value to the other; there is a possibility of reversal, that is to pronounce a eulogy of appearances or of rhetoric (“so human”!) versus a criticism of “low-brow” logic.

When we argue theoretically, how different are our theoretical tools from the tools used by lay people when they discuss everyday matters?

Taking the text literally [“à la lettre”], considering rhetoric as a coherent set of discursive strategies aimed at building a problematical truth, doing philosophy by analyzing the argument of the philosophers; this is what Prof. Mendenhall does in this paper. For me, it is one of the

most attractive ways to revive the old relations of rhetoric and philosophy — and this assertion is *not just rhetoric*.