

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

Commentary on Skakoon

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Crosswhite, James, "Commentary on Skakoon" (1999). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 111.
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In Response To: Elizabeth M. Skakoon's [Hermeneutics, rhetoric and informal logic](#)

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Elizabeth Skakoon takes on the ambitious and necessary task of finding a way to link the rapidly emerging field of informal logic to a comprehensive philosophical project: Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. One can't help but wonder how informal logic will develop philosophically. One can't help but hope that it will develop in a way that is true to its fundamental but still not fully articulated insight that its issues are not the issues of formal theories of reasoning and yet that its issues are issues of reasoning. One can't help but hope that a project like Skakoon's succeeds.

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics strikes an inspiringly wise balance between a commitment to the idea of truth on the one hand and to the ineluctably kairotic essence of truth on the other. Gadamer refuses to abandon the concept of truth but he refuses to reduce truth to some constant and steady appearance in time--graspable by procedures or standards or method of any kind. Instead, all our formulations of method are after the fact, attempts to recover an experience of truth that did not first show itself as the result of employing a method. Clearly, the reasoning that leads to this truth will not be of the formally controlled sort.

What kind of reasoning or communication will it be? Gadamer links hermeneutics to rhetoric. Skakoon believes that a new method of inquiry has arisen--informal logic--and that this method is a better partner for hermeneutics. There is certainly something intuitive about this link. Informal logic does do much of what a rhetoric of argumentation sets out to do. However, Skakoon believes not only that informal logic has a close link to hermeneutics but that rhetoric should be, so to speak, thrown out of the partnership because of certain essential flaws. Let's look at her case.

Begin with her characterization of the difference between rhetoric and informal logic. Informal logic, she says is aimed at rational persuasion; rhetoric is aimed at effective persuasion. However, the major rhetoric of argumentation of our time offers a theory according to which rational persuasion is a special case of effective persuasion. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's distinction between particular and universal audiences is precisely a way to account for the difference between what they call persuading and convincing, or effective and rational persuasion.

Skakoon also makes a case against rhetoric on the grounds that it abandons any obligation to develop the dialectical tier of an argument--that is, it enforces no requirement that all reasonable objections be entertained and responded to. However, again, *The New Rhetoric* accounts for this obligation in terms of audience. Rhetorical theory is capable of acknowledging the way argumentation functions with "particular audiences," i.e. when the illative core" may be enough to persuade, and with "universal audiences," when a dialectical tier will have to be developed.

The same kind of charge is made against rhetoric when it comes to truth. Skakoon admits that informal logic has not succeeded in developing a concept of truth that can be distinguished from "a deeper understanding of the issue," or "best possible position." However, informal logic is concerned with

truth and not with mere acceptability, while rhetoric is interested only in the latter. Again, the distinction *The New Rhetoric* draws between acceptance by a particular audience and acceptance by a universal audience comes very close to the distinction between acceptance and "the best possible understanding of the issue."

However, there is a more important argument to be considered about truth. Gadamer's understanding of truth is closely related to his teacher Heidegger's. Skakoon mentions that this is not a correspondence theory of truth and this is right. It is a theory of truth as uncovering and this uncovering is a mode of being of human beings. That is, all truth has an eventful nature, and is in fact an event of human understanding. Truth reveals what Gadamer sometimes calls *die Sache*--something. This is a crucial part of his account of art in *Truth and Method*. Art works are about something that is revealed in the work. However, this revealing requires a deep interaction among the work, *die Sache*, the one who experiences it, the ones who discuss it, and the tradition of reception in which the work appears. The truth is understood in kairotic moments in which *die Sache* becomes known.

Formal logic and informal logic have grounded themselves in an attempt to escape rhetoric's essential acknowledgment of the kairotic event of truth by insisting that ultimately truth must be arrived at by determinable rules, procedures, and standards, and that these procedures and rules and standards are not finally in the hands of some human community at some time. In the end, say Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, we imagine some possible human beings as the judges of what is reasonable and true because--Gadamer would say--only human beings experience the event of truth and this event cannot be controlled by method. Madison's attempt to criterialize Gadamer's hermeneutics is understandable, but it is not Gadamer. Johnson's definition of informal logic as "a branch of logic whose task is to develop non-formal standards, criteria, procedures for the analysis, interpretation, evaluation, criticism and construction of argumentation in everyday discourse" is a perfect example of what divides informal logic from hermeneutics.

However, if informal logic and hermeneutics are divided on the connection between truth and method, and not quite as well-met as one would like, Skakoon has pointed out some troubling truths for rhetoric's own hope to find a close connection with hermeneutics. The event of truth is for Gadamer essentially an event of learning. At one point in *Truth and Method* he says that to truly understand the other person is to be at least partly convinced of his or her position. Rhetoric in its traditional and new rhetorical forms is not strongly oriented toward accounting for the way arguers learn and change their minds. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca by no means ignore this, but to explore it more fully would require them to develop a dialogical dimension in their theory. Paul Ricoeur once pointed out that rhetoric seems unable finally to escape its "generative seats" in occasional oratory that has a distinct orientation to the listener. If it is unable to escape this cast, then it will be unable to take up the partnership with hermeneutics that Gadamer thought appropriate.

It is hard not to have an experience of truth in a dialogue with Skakoon's bold argument. My own experience of truth is that informal logic and rhetoric will have to experience each other's truth before they are able to pursue truth with hermeneutics.

