

University of Windsor

## Scholarship at UWindsor

---

OSSA Conference Archive

OSSA 12: Evidence, Persuasion & Diversity

---

Jun 4th, 10:00 AM - 11:00 AM

### Persuading and convincing

Adelino Cattani  
*University of Padua*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>



Part of the [Philosophy of Language Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric Commons](#)

---

Cattani, Adelino, "Persuading and convincing" (2020). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 11.  
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA12/Thursday/11>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Conference Proceedings at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact [scholarship@uwindsor.ca](mailto:scholarship@uwindsor.ca).

# Persuading and Convincing

ADELINO CATTANI

*Dipartimento di Filosofia, Sociologia, Scienze dell'educazione, Psicologia Applicata – FISSPA*

*University of Padua*

*Piazza Capitaniato 3*

*Italy*

[adelino.cattani@unipd.it](mailto:adelino.cattani@unipd.it)

**Abstract:** I'll propose a distinction based on historical, theoretical and linguistic considerations between: (1) two different ways of inducing a change of mind, persuading and convincing; and, (2) two different ways of proving, rhetorical argumentation and logical-experimental demonstration. There is a tendency to keep a distance from persuasion in favor of conviction. In everyday language, the difference between the two terms appears clear, and it is a distinction developed theoretically by many authors from Plato and Kant to Perelman. In particular:

1. Persuasion is centered chiefly on the speaker: it enhances one's will and ability to modify other people's opinions and behavior; conviction is centered chiefly on the addressee and focuses on one's capacity of being convinced and of evaluating rationally. The convinced addressee is more active and enterprising than the persuaded addressee, who remains more passive and receptive.
2. The act of *persuading* should be basically connected to the idea of a *process* and of *belief*, while the act of *convincing* should be basically connected to the idea of a *product* and of *evidence*.

**Keywords:** Argumentation, conviction, logic, persuasion, reasoning, rhetoric

## 1. Introduction

Logic is usually considered as being the *science* of the *correct* reasoning. Rhetoric is commonly considered as being the *art* of *persuading*. On the mere basis of these two definitions, logic and rhetoric appear to be opposite notions and faculties: first, because science and art are very different practices; and second, because the notion of 'correctness' highly differs from the notion of 'persuasion.'

This opposition *logic/rhetoric* represents a fundamental cultural antagonism, that separates the "family" of concepts revolving around the ideas of *truth*, *science*, *certainty*, *reality*, and *demonstration* (a category which can be identified with logic), from the "family" of concepts concerning *falsehood*, *plausibility*, *appearance*, *opinion*, *argumentation* (a category which can be associated with rhetoric).

Logical demonstration and rhetorical argumentation have two features in common: the same (inferential) nature and the same function (the purpose of proving). But they also bear important differences: they have different subject matters, different addressees, different guiding principles, different languages, different contexts of use and different evaluation standards.

## 2. Logic and rhetoric

According to these premises, logic and rhetoric can interact with one another on the basis of four different categories: exclusion, complementarity, partial overlap, and inclusion. The first case, that of exclusion, does not allow you to use rhetorical argumentation in logic or in science, because it has a negative function. In the second hypothetical situation, that of complementarity, argumentation is possible in logic and science, but its function remains marginal and occasional, that is not relevant. As for the third case, that of partial overlap, argumentation is useful, relevant, and holds a heuristic function. In the fourth and

last case, that one of inclusion, argumentation is essential and plays a crucial role also in logical and experimental evidence (cfr. Cattani, pp. 184-85).

Negative and positive characteristics of the art of rhetoric can be schematically displayed in the tables below:

**Table 1**

Negative and positive traits of rhetoric

RHETORIC	
NEGATIVE TRAITS	POSITIVE TRAITS
«Empty rhetoric, vacuous speech»	« <i>Vir bonus dicendi peritus</i> »
Stylistic art	Argumentative art
<i>Elocutio</i>	<i>Elocutio + Inventio, Dispositio</i>
Practice of persuasion	Theory of persuasion
Manipulation, suasion	Persuasion by argumentation
Discursive technique	Global strategic behaviour
Natural talent, un-teachable ability	Teachable ability

**Table 2**

Fault and value of rhetoric

RHETORIC		
	FAULT	VALUE
<i>COGNITIVE</i>	Vicious reasoning because groundless or based on a-rational/irrational elements. Empty verbalism. Figures of speech.	Argumentative schemes heuristically valid and apt to grasp the manifold aspects of reality. Educational value. Reasoning.
<i>METHODOLOGICAL</i>	Fallacious method, based on superficial, enthymematic and aphoristic formulations.	Critical open-mindedness.
<i>ETHICAL</i>	Rhetoric is blameworthy for being deceitful and responsible for simulating pseudo-truths.	Rhetoric is associated to prudence, anti-authoritarianism, and challenge.
<i>SOCIAL</i>	Rhetoric is dangerous because of its partiality, demagoguery, and seductive tendency.	Rhetoric represents and promotes broad-mindedness, anti-dogmatism, and democracy, tolerance.

From a theoretical point of view, logic appears to be the most powerful resource; but from a pragmatic point of view it is not so, because even logic is not exempt from insidious fallacies. In debate, the problem does not concern the use of rhetorical moves (which seems to be unavoidable), but the fact that people attending the debate can possibly risk not detecting and counterbalancing intentional and/or unintentional fallacies, mistakes and tricks: if, using logical and rhetorical tools, we succeed in counteracting and neutralising them from a purely theoretical point of view (that is, in terms of purely intellectual categorization of strategies and techniques), we would greatly improve dialogue analysis and practice.

Using the words of Snider & Schnurer (p. 43):

Debaters become inoculated against the use of persuasive techniques in exchange for good arguments because they are aware of the tactics that persuader use to win the mind of their audiences. More important...along with these skills emerge defences against being persuaded and an ethical understanding of the possible negative elements of persuasion. These methods can have negative effects and thus the debaters may gain a realization that “cheap” avenues of persuasion should be avoided.

Provisionally and questionably, I would suggest that we should use two categories, i.e., 1) “to convince” and 2) “to persuade” to differentiate two different kinds of effectiveness. The *persuasion dialogue*, the “dialogue in order to persuade”, aims at modifying people’s opinions and behaviours while the “dialogue in order to convince” aims at gaining the intellectual approval of the interlocutor(s).

### 3. Persuasion and conviction

We tend to keep distance from *rhetoric*, especially from *rhetorical moves* in favour of *logical rules*. In logical terms, we prefer to speak of “rules”, while in rhetorical terms we prefer to speak of “moves”. Logical rules are clear and universally approved, while rhetorical moves are questionable and debatable.

We tend to keep distance from *persuasion*, in favour of *conviction*. Conviction and persuasion appear different; Plato, Kant, and Perelman agree on this. Let me quote a passage from Jean-Jacques Rousseau in which he focuses on this substantial difference:

Il est aisé de convaincre un enfant que ce qu’on lui veut enseigner est utile: mais ce n’est rien de le convaincre, si l’on ne sait le persuader. En vain la tranquille raison nous fait approuver ou blâmer; il n’y a que la passion qui nous fasse agir.  
(Rousseau, livre III, pp. 237-38).

It is easy to convince a child that what you want to teach him is useful: but it is useless to convince him if you cannot persuade him. In vain the quiet reason makes us approve or blame; it is only passion that makes us act.

Simply considering the two English terms “to convince” and “to persuade”, we easily realize they are not synonymous. As a matter of fact, we can say: “It is difficult to convince someone that my statement is true,” or “It is almost impossible to convince a prejudiced person that her/his opinions do not tally with the facts,”<sup>1</sup> even though there is no linguistic structure sounding like: *convincing someone to do something*. However, it is possible to *persuade someone to do something*. The verb “to convince” is used only in the sense of *convincing someone of a fact*, or to state “that a fact is what it is.” If you aim to induce somebody to do something, you will better use the verb “to persuade.” The verb “to convince” seems referring to the realm of thinking, not that of doing; it does not serve to induce somebody to act but to gain intellectual agreement and assent.

Also in Italian we find lexical evidence for a difference between the two verbs. For example, the expression “logica della persuasione” (“logic of persuasion”) is admitted, while the expression “retorica della convinzione” (“rhetoric of conviction”) is very unconventional. Terms like “rational,” “reasoned,” and “logical” are hardly ever associated with “persuasion,” while terms like “emotional,” “passionate,” and “rhetorical” do not fit to “conviction.”

We tend too to keep distance from *polemic* in favour of *dialogue*. In terms of discursive exchange, dialogue and polemic bear some mutual similarities, but from a social and ethical point of view they appear to be exact contraries.

Nevertheless, in a dialogic exchange, if the interlocutors are firmly convinced of their own opinions, they easily use rhetorical, persuasive and polemical tools. The study and the practice of debate – meant primarily as *public debate* –, has to deal with certain opposite, essential conditions: co-operation and conflict, plain dialogue and crude polemic, friendly conversation and quarrel. Is a good discussion compatible with polemic, persuasion and rhetoric, or not? In other words: is it compatible with the desire to win, or not?

Since “good” means basically ‘honest’ and ‘logic,’ we should determine if ethic and logic on one hand and rhetoric on the other hand are in conflict; if conviction and persuasion are really such different things; if the apology of dialogue (which seems to get along with logic) and the apology of polemic (which seems to get along with rhetoric) may coexist.

I would try to answer these questions starting from another question, concerning persuasion and conviction. The question is: why does the term *dis-suasion* exist while there is no entry for *\*dis-conviction*? We can persuade or convince somebody of something. On the contrary, even though we can dis-suade somebody, we cannot *\*dis-convince* him/her. Why do we lack of a lexicographic entry indicating the antonym of the act of “convincing”? This anomaly tells us a lot, and it is equally noteworthy that it does not exist the antonym of the verb “to dedicate,” which should hypothetically sound like *\*to dis-dedicate*.

Let’s say that rhetoric is the art of persuasion; we could not say that it is the art of conviction. Persuasion and conviction are not interchangeable words/concepts. And the reason why they are not interchangeable can be explained stressing an odd and interesting lexical phenomenon: the antonym of the verb “to persuade” is “to dissuade”. So, what is the antonym of “to convince,” a verb which is often used (improperly), as synonym for “to persuade”?

Checking the synonym and antonym finder, we can see that the antonym of “an act aiming at convincing or persuading someone” is explained through a word/verb which bears the idea of “diverting,” “urging,” “exhorting someone against (someone else),” or “persuading not to do something.” But the antonym of the verb “to persuade” is the verb “to dissuade,” while looking for the antonym of “to convince” we do not have a symmetrical correspondence.

Consequently, admitting the significance of the common language, we end up wondering why does the word “dis-suasion” exist, while we do not have any entry for “\*dis-conviction,” that is the equivalent antonym of the semantic family including “to convince” and “conviction.” The situation can be represented as follows:

to persuade / to dissuade  
to convince / to \*dis-convince

In everyday language, the difference between the two terms appears clear, and – as we have already explained – it is a distinction developed theoretically by many authors. It can be summarized as follows:

1. Persuasion refers primarily to the realm of actions; conviction refers primarily to the realm of thoughts.
2. Persuasion concerns mainly manipulation, it has to do with the idea of “mastering” which seems absent in conviction.
3. Persuasion is an act, which makes use of emotions, while conviction does not involve any *pathos*.
4. Conviction appears to be stronger and more powerful than persuasion.

5. Unlike “to persuade,” the verb “to convince” is synonym for “to demonstrate,” “to prove,” “to verify,” and “to induce someone to do/think something by means of verification.”
6. Unlike conviction, persuasion has sophistical nature.
7. Persuasion is centred chiefly on the speaker, it enhances his/her will and ability to modify other people’s opinions and behaviour; conviction is centred chiefly on the addressee, focuses on his/her capacity of being convinced and evaluating rationally. The “convinced” addressee is more active and enterprising than the “persuaded” addressee, who remains more passive and receptive.

In short: conviction is a more crystalline, more rationally supported and more firmly guaranteed notion. The standard exemplification of the persuasion/conviction dynamics, according to the way they are used in English and Italian<sup>2</sup>, is clarified in the following table:

Table 3  
Persuasion/conviction dynamics as used in English and Italian

PERSUASION	CONVICTION
Action	Thought
Manipulation	No manipulation
Pathos, ethos	Logos
Weakness	Strength
Uses any means	Relies on proof and evidence
Sophistry	No sophistry
More speaker’s action / less addressee’s involvement	More addressee’s action / less speaker’s involvement

This elementary linguistic test and this rough comparison suggest that the verb “to persuade” should be basically connected to the idea of a *process*, while the verb “to convince” should be basically connected to the idea of a *product*. A process is adaptable (like any work in progress), while a product is a result, a halt (like any acquired or vested right). Even democracy falls into the category of the “processes”; it is not a “static condition,” because it is to be acquired rather than simply transferred or exported.

However, this opposition between “conviction” and “persuasion” has to be seen as the normal juxtaposition between demonstration and argumentation: we usually employ argumentation, relegating demonstration to very few and specific cases. Consequently, our persuasion can become conviction only within a narrow range of specific situations: for example, when the subject matter or the method is appropriate, i.e., when we can apply the principle of non contradiction.

Let us consider the following example: a judge said that mafia is not going to be defeated through the simple appeal to morality; it is mandatory to make people understand that this “rebellion” to the mafia-culture can be useful and profitable, that legality would bring profit, combining logic with interests, rationality with benefits. Blaise Pascal said something similar about the idea of “necessity” to demonstrate, first, that religion is a good thing, and then that religion is true.

In a letter to Ferruccio Rossi Landi (January 20, 1960), Norberto Bobbio writes: “An order is an order even if it is not obeyed; an advise is an advise even if it is not taken; a medical instruction is a medical instruction even if it is not followed” (cfr. Quaranta: pp. 94-95). A convincing speech is considered so even if the addressee is not convinced. This is one reason why there cannot be, in my opinion, an act called: *\*dis-conviction*.

#### 4. Aristotle's and Lausberg's persuasion

Aristotle's definition of rhetoric is “*dúnamis perì ékaston toû theorêsai tò endekómenon pithanón*” namely “the faculty of discovering any available mean of persuasion for/in every situation” (Aristotle, 1355 b 25-26). Heinrich Lausberg's definition of rhetoric is “the system of rules that assures the success of persuasion” (Lausberg, § 92).

Aristotle defines rhetoric as “*dúnamis*”, that is a faculty or a “theoretical” activity aiming at digging up all the available means of persuasion: “the task of rhetoric is not to persuade but to identify what is apt to persuade in every field” (Aristotle, 1355 b 11).

Heinrich Lausberg (confirming the ordinary sense of the common idea/concept of rhetoric) includes the idea of success among the goals of the art of rhetoric, in the same way as you would include the recovery of a patient among the goals of medical sciences.

These two definitions seem similar; indeed, they are extremely different. Aristotle's definition deals with the concept of *value*, while Lausberg's deals with the concept of *danger* (the dangerous potential of rhetoric).

This *danger* occurs normally when someone is firmly convinced of something and firmly believes in something. Conviction is a primary power. Conviction is a product. The non-irrelevant way to gain conviction (i.e., to get this “product”) is a process that involves and combines logical and rhetorical moves.

#### 5. Conclusion

We can persuade somebody to believe or to act. However, even if we can *dis-suade*, we cannot *\*dis-convince* him or her. It is, practically and theoretically, noteworthy that there is no a thesaurus entry indicating the antonym of the act of *convincing*, that seems related more to a logical-experimental evidence and is centred more on the addressee, while *persuading* refers more to a rhetorical argumentation and is centered chiefly on the speaker.

The *vir bonus dicendi peritus*, the honest man able to speak, neither restricts herself to theory, indicating values, declaring principles and asserting ideals, nor confines himself/herself to pure action, managing reality unaware of principles, values and ideals. Similarly, the good “discussant” neither uses merely logical tools, nor uses merely rhetorical moves.

Persuasion is a key element in debate process that ultimately is persuasive in nature, because its goal is to persuade the audience or the judge to vote for your argument or proposal. Certainly, the tone of voice can be persuasive. Appeals to emotional responses, emphasis, stressing key phrases, words can be persuasive. Saying the words correctly, saying the words clearly, emphasizing the right words can have a persuasive impact. Persuasive speech may include rhetorical structures (repetition examples, paradox...) and irony/humor. Confidence and calmness are positively persuasive techniques.

But the central part of any debate are good arguments, that appeal to intellectual means and responses: the sound reasoning, the evidence, the examples are convincing.

Briefly, the training in argumentation and debate can be a good defence against persuasion and ethical issues of persuasion. The “duties” (i.e., the duty to respect logical rules) and “rights” (i.e., the right to use rhetorical moves) are not necessarily in conflict. The good arguer knows and employs both logical tools and rhetorical moves: he is both convincing and persuading.

## References

- Aristotle. (1924). *Rhetoric*. W.D. Ross (Ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Cattani, A. (2011). Where the arguments of William Harvey convincing to his contemporaries? In: M. Dascal, & V. D. Boantz (Eds.), *Controversies Within the Scientific Revolution* (pp. 171-186). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Kant, I. (1787<sup>2</sup>). *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. (Critique of pure reason, English Translation, 1933). N. Kemp Smith (Ed.). London and New York: Macmillan and St Martin Press.
- Kant, I. (1799<sup>3</sup>), *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (English Trans, 1952). In J. C. Meredith (Ed.), *Critique of Judgment*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Kimball, B. A. (1955). *Orators and Philosophers*. Ohio State University: College Board.
- Lausberg, H. (1967<sup>2</sup>). *Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik*. München: Max Hueber Verlag.
- Perelman, Ch., & Olbrechts-Tyteca, L. (1958). *Traité de l'argumentation*. Paris: PUF.
- Plato (1953). *The Dialogues of Plato* (B. Jowett, Trans.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Quaranta, M. (Ed.) (2005). Carteggio inedito Norberto Bobbio-Ferruccio Rossi Landi: due filosofi a confronto (parte seconda, 1956-1961). *Foedus*, 13, 65-105.
- Rousseau, J. J. (1966). *Emile*. Paris: Edition Garnier – Flammarion.
- Snider A., & Schnurer M. (2006). *Many sides. Debate across the curriculum*. New York: Idebate Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> I have found this warning in the dictionary edited by Virginia Browne, *Odd pairs and false friends* (1987).

<sup>2</sup> The distinction between two kinds of beliefs is also in Kant's vocabulary: *Überzeugung* (more objective) and *Überredung* (more subjective), whose translation by Giorgio Colli and others corresponds respectively to "convinzione" and "persuasione" (see: *Critica della ragion pura*. Milano: Adelphi, 1976, pp. 797-798). Cf. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1787<sup>2</sup>. Part II, Chapt. II, Sect. III.) Cf. also *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 1799<sup>3</sup>, § 53, where *Überredung* is connected with *Überlistung*.