UNCERTAINTY AND MODERNITY: WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT TO PRACTICE RHETORIC TODAY?

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SUMMARY. This article reveals a new face of the art of rhetoric, which helps to better understand its profound value, but also its power—and therefore, the passion, envy, and interest it continues to generate. My purpose is to relate the practice of speech in its argumentative dimension to the exercise of political freedom. This practice will be seen as a way to free oneself and awaken one’s conscience by taking the risk of leaving evidence and certainties behind. Rhetoric is not only the art of speaking well, and speaking eloquently to persuade: it represents, above all, a certain way of thinking, a journey, a liberating path that we must, I believe, explore anew.

KEYWORDS: rhetoric, argumentation, risks, journey, fuzziness, tools.

For convenience, by intellectual habit or due to a lack of judgment, we often view rhetorical activity as merely providing information successfully, by means of words and sentences. We suppose that the intention would be, for an orator, only to communicate to his audience about things and the world (i.e., weather, combustion of hydrocarbons, conception of beauty, etc.), using the ancient technē of rhetoric. But to reduce rhetoric to a medium to achieve something in words is to ignore completely what is deeply at play in the space of discourse and argumentation. I want to propose that the practice of rhetoric, the path (because this is really a path on which move forward) and the tools it offers, have more thickness, strength, and value that we often say or admit. Rhetoric helps us deal with the uncertainties and undefined spaces of life. It is an art of approximation and a skill for the exercise of political liberty in the flux and fuzziness of life.

For the Belgian philosopher Chaim Perelman (1912–1984), this deep value of rhetoric explains precisely why some people—dictators and propagandists, for example—try to make up a sort of rhetorical “counterfeit money,” and spend a significant energy behaving as if they were arguing according to the rules and codes of the art of rhetoric. This idea, developed at the end of a lecture delivered in 1959 on the “social frameworks of argumentation,” seeks to contradict the position of
his colleague, the French sociologist Georges Gurvitch: “I cannot acknowledge,”
explains Perelman, “for any domain except in the field of Revelation—and should
we still argue about the proper interpretation of Revelation—that we can reduce
[the practice of] argumentation to a mere diffusion of ideas.” Besides, he concedes
that in some cases the effort to argue and to offer proofs about this or that is purely
and simply “a sham” because “the matter is closed” when the orator speaks. There is
in fact nothing to say. Here, the audience is already committed to the “cause”; the
evidence is clear to anyone; there is nothing to explore; criticism is not expected.
However, he adds: “Why should we pretend? The process of argumentation needs
to be of interest and value in many cases, if some people decide to pretend to argue.
It is because a currency is in circulation and has a value that we take the trouble
of making counterfeit money.”1 The practice of argumentation has a deep value
promoting some people to mimic the path it offers and opens, but without really
wanting to take this path and where it may lead.

This paper will proceed in three stages: after a discussion (I) about rhetoric as a
process of discovery and (in my words) a “journey” into uncertainty, we will see (II)
how exploring a fuzzy “space in-between” sets the conditions for a true discovery,
before (III) comparing the mathematical ideal of Modernity with the approximati-
ons of rhetoric and its process.

BENEFITS OF THE JOURNEY: OR, RHETORIC AS AN ART OF NAVIGATION

According to Aristotle, “the function of [rhetoric] is not to persuade but to find out
in each case the existing means of persuasion” (Rhetoric, I, 1355b 9–11). Moreover,
the art itself points to “the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion
in reference to any subject whatever” (I, 1355b 25). In this sense, the work of an
apprentice of rhetoric is not to learn how to persuade, that is to say, how to produce
some effects with words, sentences, and figures of speech, but how to identify or
discover what can motivate a certain audience to be persuaded by a certain cause or
point of view.

To identify or discover something of this order (as we might do in searching for
treasure), it is necessary to develop the capacity to see beyond that which is directly
seeing – to “look beyond the looking glass,” in a certain sense. Actually, Aristotle
begins his reflection with the fact that some people—some speakers—manage to
persuade without method and without art: either by chance or by habit. Then, he

1 Perelman C. Les cadres sociaux de l’argumentation. (Discussion). Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie,
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admits that rhetorical ability, like sight, is widespread in humanity and is perhaps universal. This ability to argue and to persuade comes at first, and precedes the practice of argumentation itself. But if it is not used, worked, tested, exercised, it is as if the ability did not really exist. It remains an unexploited ability. In this way Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* can be approached as an appeal to convert an ability to see into an art of seeing well so as to finally “be able to discover the means of persuasion in reference to any given subject” (I, 1355b 35). Rhetoric is more of an art of seeing well rather than an art of speaking well.

If rhetoric is this art of seeing well, it is above all a journey that can totally change our views. And this is not only a figure of speech. The idea of a journey is essential, and for me categorically in accordance with the Aristotelian tradition. It describes what happens when we argue, and when we try “to discover the means of persuasion.” Aristotle is really explicit about it: practicing rhetoric is an opportunity “to discover” something and not only a means of showing or proving something that already exists—a treasure does not exist before it was discovered. The most important thing about this journey is not so much the end point but rather the course of the journey itself; that is to say, the ideas, problems, questions, difficulties which are discovered along the way of argumentation. To explore this idea, we can use a maritime metaphor. Rhetoric, in a certain sense, is similar to navigation. The orator is like a pilot of ancient times, never knowing completely where he will dock; he drifts and may fail, even though he has a goal, a fixed point in mind, and he tries “to discover the means of persuasion,” the means to get there, with all the risks of the journey, to find arguments for his cause.

We must give back to rhetoric all its seriousness and its political value, which its detractors have always wanted to remove. Rhetoric does not fit in a “vase,” and as beautiful as its “flowers” (i.e., figures of speech, good words) may be, it cannot be reduced to their beauty alone, nor to a set of attractive and deceptive appearances. If rhetoric were only a method for learning to speak, for speaking well, for staging more beautiful “appearances,” one might ask: Why then is it held in such contempt and why is it so frequently attacked? We should be perplexed by the fury and virulence it inspires in its detractors. And if rhetoric were just a grotesque and laughable trap for simpletons, only a way to speak, a medium, then how should we interpret the incredible energy expended by generations of philosophers, clergymen, and scholars to dismantle its functioning and its dynamic, and to decry its teaching? Indeed, that would be very strange. The truth of rhetoric is elsewhere.

I argue here that to practice rhetoric is to learn to mourn illusions and certainties, and to abandon seeing the world of men as totally determined, abandon seeing it as we have always seen. In this regard, Claire Préaux, a Belgian philologist, perfectly summarized the vocation of the ancient *technè* in her review of a collection
of papers published by Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca in 1952. Rhetoric is neither philosophy, nor a formalized doctrine, or even a set of tips and tricks; Préaux writes that rhetoric helps those who practice it “to leave behind the illusory safety of an absolute, to live in the dignity of the obligation to choose, and to ensure that this choice will not be anarchic.” That choice derives its deep value from the embrace of uncertainty. It is not about compliance with the requirements of a pure and disembodied reason. Rhetoric invites us to take risks and to travel the world of words and of possible arguments by adopting an ultimately richer approach, one that embraces uncertainty and fuzziness.

RECOGNIZING THE FUZZY SPACE IN-BETWEEN AS A CONDITION OF TRUE DISCOVERY

Indeed, in the rhetorical journey, we can say that insecurity of meaning, insecurity of speech (by opposition to the safety of truths and certitudes) is like a “space in-between” in the cogs and wheels of a mechanism; that is to say, a fuzzy and dark space, in which it is necessary to grope blindly. If this “space in-between” did not exist, there would be no need “to discover the means of persuasion.” This discovery gains all its meaning in the absence of a single place, a single path where eternal truths can be found, once and for all. Embracing a “space in-between” and its fuzziness forces us to engage with, and to risk choices between, conflicting positions that could be argued in one way or another. Indeed, they could be argued with the same force: God exists or God does not exist; this war is just or unjust; this law is good or bad; this tradition is to be maintained or to be abolished; and so forth. Persuasion and creating adherence come at a price: the permanent discomfort of the rhetorical journey. On this journey, the orator is always obliged to use the means at hand to craft his arguments—he or she has to tinker, to mend, to adapt his or her speech to a certain context, and to a certain audience which is always a judge of his performance. This constant mending indeed symbolizes the rhetorical journey. Whether to defend a cause or to go against it, rhetorical techniques and rhetorical proofs are available to make acceptable the positions of all arguments and counter-arguments. These techniques do not take sides. The human world is open to

multiple possibilities, and therefore, to argumentation and oppositions between two ideas or more. It is a place of commitment and the exercise of freedom.

In fact, argumentative activity is simultaneously an opportunity (to discover), and a danger (linked to the commitment of the rhetorical traveler). It can be both a poison and a remedy; a double-edged sword. The cycle of criticisms and justifications, included in the argumentative activity, always opens a Pandora’s Box. This cycle is very destabilizing for a world where order is deemed immutable, closed, where there is nothing new to discover. Any argumentative approach shows us that the world is not clear or unambiguous. The rhetorical traveler is forced to commit himself to particularly uncertain and dangerous paths—always with freedom and responsibility. On the contrary, when things are self-evident and categorically clear we cannot expect any new journey. Evidence and certainty are already an achievement or an ultimate limit, the end of the road! Faced with this, there is nothing else required except adherence to one truth. Facing this truth, freedom must bow. There is no need for blind groping. That is why, in a strictly closed world or in a closed society itself, the exercise of argumentation is still perceived as a threat because it is precarious and questions the original meanings, values—and sometimes without any possible return.

The rhetorical journey leads those who follow it into the unknown. The danger is in the unpredictable journey, the unpredictable paths that can arise when one goes in search of arguments and counter-arguments, propositions and answers. A journey from which the questions, the doubts, the blur of words and concepts can emerge and grow without any control and limits. It carries with it a set cycle of matters, reasons, unforeseeable oppositions. It unleashes uncertainty against which the old certainties, beliefs, and evidence could be totally ineffective. Indeed, experience tells us that before we go in search of arguments, we always seem to have perfectly “good” reasons. They seem obvious and appropriate to the situation, the context, the world. We believe they are self-evident, and there is no reason to question further.

Before we concern ourselves with a problem or a question, we often tend to think there is no problem or question. It is often in the presence of an adversary, someone who contradicts or interrogates us, or when we find ourselves in front of a skeptical audience, that we realize there is a lack of evidence for our opinion. This obliges us to question the justifications for our adherence to a thesis, and to rethink its implications. When we argue with people who are of the same opinion as us, when we talk only on “conquered ground,” when we preach to the converted, we never take any risks: we are in a safe space. No one obliges us to take a step back; no one asks us to question further and to start the rhetorical journey. There is no need to take this extra step into the unknown—a step that can present difficulties for our
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deepest beliefs and which can even open us to the ravages of doubt. The discovery that can arise is indeed linked to an initial “fuzziness” and the risk that it implies: a risk that can also be an opportunity; the opportunity to stop arguing in a cyclical manner; an opportunity to regenerate ourselves by engaging with uncertainty.

Those who undertake the work of argumentation, which requires a journey beyond the limits of evidence, beyond the world of certainties, beyond our intellectual and social comfort zone,\(^3\) will always arrive at a point where uncertainty becomes evident. In fact, any argumentative approach—whatever its motivations, which may be questionable or harmful, it is a fact—indirectly makes clear that the world is not transparent, not as transparent as one might have thought or wished to believe. This approach is indeed to take the risk that meaning could disintegrate or darken; a risk that evidence (i.e., clarity) could be checked by doubt and criticism.

MATHEMATICAL IDEAL OF THE MODERNITY AGAINST THE APPROXIMATIONS OF RHETORIC

However, as Francis Goyet, in his book Les Audaces de la Prudence, published in 2009, has shown, modern rationality—a mechanical rationality—over reached and tried to remove fuzziness and uncertainty from our human world. From this springs our complete inability to pursue the rhetorical journey. Modern rationality has made uncertainty and risk an impractical way, and a place of perpetual fear. The “prudence” of the Moderns looks like a refusal to take action and to commit oneself. There we are at the opposite end of the Greek phronēsis, which was a “prudence” engaged in action. For sure, I do not deny that the planning and construction of a plane, a ship or a nuclear power plant needs to minimize risk and guarantee certainties. It is difficult to deny that in such cases we need to eliminate “fuzziness” as much as possible. Indeed, could we accept a life where every instant was determined by chance, uncertainty, and approximation? Certainly not! We wish – or we aspire to – follow a path that offers certainty, underpinned by mathematical precision. This precision gives us certainties, and rightly so.

But should the world of humans—the world of politics—be governed by this same aspiration to remove risk and to remove all fuzziness? Should we, or should we not, carry out such and such a reform, conclude such and such an agreement, join a war, or apply a certain sentence for a certain crime? We always need to

commit ourselves and to take risks. We are no longer in the domain of abstract objects and concepts. We have left behind the world of mathematical abstractions. It is no longer a question of the repetition of natural or physical phenomena. We are in a world of actions and human decisions, no less. We are in the domain of fast-moving, incessant flux, even confusion.

Modern rationality, because it has rejected the rhetorical path, has taken political decision-making—and with it the ship of state—into a world order where technical techniques have been elevated as the only path to salvation. The act of deciding is currently completely subject to an implacable mechanism, that of expertise and, even more so, data-driven expertise. The data of expert discourse are considered to be “objective.” They are thought to transmit a knowledge of things that is neutral and disembodied. Data are thought to be able to speak for themselves, without justifications and without rhetorical proof. Data expertise is supposed to allow us to totally safeguard our relationship with the world and with the state. It gives us the complete illusion that the world of men and the big ship of state are really manageable, controllable, quantifiable, and measurable as well. Therefore, the quality of decisions, that is to say, risk management depends, first of all, on the quality of measurements and on the precision of the instruments used to measure. Here, choice is reduced to a succession of calculations, graphs, and statistics, which are supposed to make the right choice evident or necessary. The work of the politician has become that of a manager of everyday issues. He or she must use communication tools to say what (s)he does and to show that (s)he has done what (s)he promised. His or her communication must be cool, neutral, and dispassionate.

Let us be clear: the world of the approximate, the fuzzy, the world of the “almost,” of “more or less” has become insufferable for us or, at less, inapprehensible. We have lost the capacity as well as the creative pleasure of advancing in the partial dark, in the uncertainty of futures—where rhetoric is essential. We are nowadays incapable of seeing the advantage of the approximate. This horrifies us because it is incalculable, unmeasurable. We can appreciate it but we cannot clarify it completely. This is why we try constantly to frame, quantify, and time the course of modern life. We try incessantly to remove fuzziness and flux from the uncertainty that issues from the essence of life. But, in reality, modern life, according to Lucien Febvre, is nowadays entirely “suffused with mathematics. The actions of daily life and human constructs carry the mark of this mathematization, even our artistic joys and our moral life suffer this influence.” But there is a political blindness in

the belief that certain elements of knowledge in the human sphere can be derived from necessary, quantifiable, and eternal truths. This is a way to open the door for dogmatism, inhumanity, and violence.

No doubt the modern wish to see clearly and to leave behind the approximate to enter the world of precision was the fruit of good intentions and noble ideas. The aim was to respond to the complexity and the needs of modern life. In this case, we needed (or at least we thought we did) to constitute the problems of humans, that is to say, the management of the state, as something requiring precision and certainty. We needed to establish political discourse and decisions as measurable objects: Objects that we could submit to rules, protocols, and the words of experts. In such a case, there is no need to be really free. There is no need to be visionary, to have the ability of seeing well despite the fuzziness. There is no need to show prudence as the Ancients understood it. Indeed, the scrupulous respect for procedures and expert discourse based on data is seen to be the natural guarantee of rigorous results and the quality of decisions.

On such a view of rationality, turned as it is towards the domination of nature by the precision of technology, intuitive groping and feeling has become the enemy. We can no longer find a place for the sense of precariousness and fragility. Our rationalist modernity persecutes, without pause, intuitions, as well as the proofs of rhetoric that are not based on repeatable experiments or on rules-based calculation. As a consequence, rhetoric—at least as an authentic journey into uncertainty—has become impossible to imagine and impossible to practice. What advantage, indeed, could we draw from a rhetoric which does not seek to suppress risk, mistakes or errors but, on the contrary, tries to help us master them? As Philippe Muray writes with his characteristic lucidity, our time seeks “to ignore that History [is] a sum of major errors which we call life. It believes that we can eliminate error without eliminating life.”6

CONCLUSION

We need to presently reaffirm—against this modern view of things—that each citizen is able to see our world as a realm of rhetoric. Each citizen is able to undertake his or her journey into uncertainty. Each citizen is worthy to practice rhetoric to exercise his or her freedom. Our democracies need to rediscover the value of choice and doubt, the value of fuzziness and flux.

We have the obligation to relearn a taste for risk and for commitment. This is our urgent calling: to follow the path of ancient *technè*. This path is maybe the only acceptable horizon to give new meaning to our disoriented societies. To transmit the ancient tools of rhetoric is a way to give citizens the possibility of basing their choice on conscience and liberty. It is a means of giving them the wherewithal to put their opinions to the test of the world and of others. The future of our democracies may depend on our ability to transmit these tools.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


