

Rhetorisation of Philosophy

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Abstract

Philosophical discourses have their own different ways in which they approach the issues of knowledge and reality, by justifying their position by distinct means, adapted to distinct ends. Therefore, the way philosophy approaches reality is not necessarily resulting from the attitude with which it observes reality, but, on the contrary, this way yields a certain attitude, in that it represents a unique verdict on reality, which a priori comprises a certain worldview. Placing philosophy in close connection with rhetoric, which we may admit or not admit to be a means of knowledge, places its founding function, or the referent and the rational discourse amidst a confrontation with the contingency of philosophical languages, with the means of representation and the interpretive options. This opens up the possibility of rhetorical philosophy making, whereby language becomes the medium in which understanding reaches its fulfilment, based on agreement and difference.

Keywords: *rhetoric, philosophy, language, text, speech, interpretation.*

In the context of separating linguistics from semiotics and problematizing the concepts of text and discourse, the twentieth century manifested a strong concern for ways of objectifying philosophical practices, as elements of legitimation and starting points for their analysis.

Emphasizing the importance of language as writing (scripture) or scripturality, Gadamer (2001) outlines the importance of philosophy as a text that does not refer to an original discourse or to the speaker's intention, since it is rather self-originating. For J.-L. Galay, philosophical meaning, that is, the system of ideas, interacts with its textual inscription, the measure of embedding philosophical meaning into the text being given by three axes: grammar, dialectics and rhetoric. Galay affirms to some extent “the constitutive interaction between textual signifier and signified, considering philosophy to comprise, as a constitutive condition, a behavior in the order of textual symbolism.” (Galay, 1977, p. 336)

The emphasis on the importance of rhetoric for philosophy has led to what N. Charbonnel calls “the rhetorisation of philosophy” (Charbonnel, 1991-1993), which marks a shift from things to words. This all-encompassing view on rhetoric engulfs philosophy within the net of language. Language now appears as a generalized pseudo-metaphor, denying philosophy’s role as an instrument of knowledge. Ernesto Grassi (2001) lays the foundations of meaning upon the rhetorical means and not on other possible dimensions such as content, reference, grammar or logic.

In contemporary thinking, that resides on a lack of foundation, the impossibility of having a principle for philosophy has become a principled position. We could conclude that priority is being given to form, to the detriment of content; yet this is the case only if we consider that rhetoric has a purely technical, external and practical purpose, and we do not regard it as discourse, the basis of rational thought. In this context, Grassi’s position becomes extremely relevant: “If philosophy aims at being a theoretical mode of thought and speech, can it have a rhetorical character and be expressed in rhetorical forms?” (Grassi, 2001, p. 18) Only the clarification of rhetoric in its relation to theoretical thought can allow us to delimit the function of rhetoric. Only this will allow us to decide whether rhetoric has a purely technical, exterior, and practical aim of persuading, or whether it has an essentially philosophical structure and function.” (Grassi, 2001, p. 19)

This tendency towards rapprochement between philosophy and rhetoric is largely due to a change in modern philosophy. Perelman wrote in the *Journal of Philosophy and Rhetoric* that rationalism, empiricism, and romanticism would not be able to consider rhetoric important or valid. However, “with philosophies of life, action, and value and leading up to pragmatism, philosophy had reacted against absolutism” (Perelman, 1965, p. 15), thus validating the idea that the mind engages in meaningful relationships with the environment through a process of symbolic transformations, and what we observe in the environment and how we react to it are both predetermined to some extent by how we are prepared to observe that type of object. Meaning thus does not come from a given symbolic pattern, but from the observer’s response. All these conceptions tend to give less importance to truth in the Platonic sense and more consideration to different interpretations of reality and different worldviews.

Whether our interest is in making ethical judgments, articulating the preferability of a particular philosophical, scientific, or historical theory vis-à-vis another, or in gaining followers for a political, social, or religious cause, rhetoric abounds. Although the motive for engaging in these or other activities may not always

explicitly be to persuade, this fact cannot obfuscate the existence and importance of symbolic influence. (Cherwitz, 1990, p. 2)

Considering knowledge as something being discovered or created through the machinery of using human symbols, we can say that the utilisation of symbols refers not only to communication, but also to knowledge, and a firm distinction between content and form no longer seems entirely plausible.

Human symbolic influence (...) is pervasive and inescapably intertwined with the workings of all modes of inquiry”and “the differing arguments made about such notions as “truth,” “reality,” and “knowledge” do not automatically prohibit a positive and constructive conception of rhetoric. For regardless of whether truth is taken to be independent of humans and somehow discoverable, or conceived as humanly constructed, or seen perhaps as beyond human awareness, it is still the case that humans engage in rhetorical activity for the purpose of coming to grips with their world and behaving in it. (Cherwitz, 1990, p. 9)

Thus, we can ask ourselves, along Cherwitz (1982) and Butchvarov (1970), whether rhetorical discourse has an epistemic function and whether we can consider it a way of describing reality through language, no matter if we define this description as social or empirical. Starting from the commonly accepted understanding that the term knowledge can be used for those elements that we can determine, that we consider true or for which we have sufficient evidence, we will necessarily define knowledge as composed of three elements: truth, faith and justification. Therefore, we can say that “to speak of knowledge is to speak of justified true belief.” (Cherwitz, 1982, p. 146), but not in order to provide guarantees or confirmations, but for

wondering about the world, seeking truth, appraising one’s beliefs, and deciding how to act. No moments in our lives are more important than those when we consider whether certain propositions are true; when we seek, or try to determine that we possess knowledge of something, when we need, and make, distinctions between what we know, what we believe with reason though not knowledge, and what we merely believe. (Butchvarov, 1970, p. 43)

Through the internal landmarks of grammatology, Derrida (1968) proposes a new report with written texts. In a radical way, Grammatology sends the problem of reference to the real, as well as the founding function of writing and interpreting texts, into a secondary realm. The referent becomes a fluctuating and unstable function of language and not a real entity or fact in the world. Deconstruction is not concerned with distillation of truth. The effect of translating thought into language is the imprinting of difference into the structure of meaning. It simultaneously embodies the intended meaning, as intended by the author, and the constraints imposed on this meaning by the act of interpreting the text.

For the same reason there is nowhere to begin to trace the sheaf of the graphics of différence. For what is put into question is precisely the quest for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure, a principal responsibility. (...) In the delineation of différence, everything is strategic and adventurous. Strategic because no transcendent truth present outside the field of writing can govern theologically the totality of the field. Adventurous because this strategy is not a simple strategy in the sense that strategy orients tactics according to a final goal, a teleos or theme of domination. (Derrida, 1968, pp. 6-7)

Everything revolves around the logos, the spoken word, even the written text. Logocentrism is therefore the privileged metaphysics, the prime act associated with the subject present, from which l'écriture (writing) is then derived. The referent is only the written tradition, which makes us interpreters. In this perspective, texts appear in their opaque materiality, as objects of interpretation, yet not in the Gadamerian sense that composes a tradition as a coherent and transparent whole, but rather deconstructing a tradition made of traces and texts, never fully intelligible, and in which we recognize ourselves partially or not at all. To consider "philosophy as a genre of writing/écriture" means, in Derrida's view, to establish the possibility of subjecting philosophy to criticism, of deconstructing it, thereby suspending its indisputable and unquestionable character. "La philosophie n'est, dans l'écriture, que ce mouvement de l'écriture comme effacement du signifiant et désir de la présence restituée, de l'être signifié dans sa brillance et son éclat." (Derrida, 1967, p. 405) [Within writing/écriture, philosophy is nothing but this movement of écriture as erasure of the significant and desire of its returned presence of the signified entity in its entire brilliance and glory].

Regarding Derrida, Richard Rorty (1982) points out that "philosophical writing, for Heidegger as for the Kantians, isn't really aimed at putting an end to writing. For Derrida, writing always leads to more writing, and more, and still more. (Rorty, 1982, p. 94) This inevitably leads to limitation of interpretation and a collapse of meaning, the limit being deconstruction - as a continuous process of questioning the accepted basis of meaning. The meaning is exclusively inscribed in the text, that is, in a signifier that signifies itself indirectly by its semiological function itself. The problem of meaning does not lead to the meaninglessness of a text, but to the idea of meaning as a question posed by the text itself. This loses sight of "the reflexivity of rhetoric that finally expresses and signifies itself at the outcome of its autonomization." (Meyer, 1994, p. 25) As Cherwitz notes,

deconstruction reveals the absurdity of the modern project's quest for fully transparent truth, whether founded on romantic self-expression or on positivistic science. If you start with Bacon and Descartes, you must end with Derrida, who

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revealed that nihilism was the unacknowledged guest in the house of Western metaphysics all along. (Cherwitz, 1990, p. 267)

No longer able to control or limit the structures of linguistic meaning, we are open to permanent confusion and interpretive decisions. The ability of philosophy to unfold as a discourse depends, under these conditions, on the ability to develop an appropriate aesthetic. In other words, the category of aesthetics is a rigorous way in which philosophy tries to base its discourse on principles internal to its system, and to build itself, through this, as a system.

The relationship and the distinction between literature and philosophy cannot be made in terms of a distinction between aesthetic and epistemological categories. All philosophy is condemned, to the extent that it is dependent on figuration. (de Man, 1996, p. 50)

Fallen prey to the error of considering that spirits are totally conditioned by the use, beyond their will and desire, of expressions and words that spring from the unconscious, the rhetoric of philosophy has caused confusion between what is imposed by language and what is consciously chosen through speech, thus failing to admit the discourse's character of conscious process acting on language, that alters reality through the mediation of thought and action.

For de Man, language has a certain self-deconstructing character that is repressed in the tradition and from which emerge a variety of coping mechanisms, ranging from denying the philosophical importance of language altogether to allowing for its importance, but not realizing that there is no pre-interpretative link to be forged between language and extralinguistic reality. (Rush, 1997, p. 445)

Both Derrida and Rorty place truth and rationality in the context of the ineluctable ethnocentrism or the awareness of inevitability and the conditioned value of language. Philosophy is thus inscribed in a post-epistemological space of equal and rhetorical discourses, in which knowledge represents "the ability to reach agreement by persuasion." (Rorty, 2000, p. 179) Language is a tool developed in and by certain cultures, shaping a certain contingent position within the particular culture that created it, and, at best, these fundamental differences between cultures can be overcome by concrete comparisons of particular alternatives.

The affirmation of ethnocentrism is for Rorty a means of weakening the strong understanding of philosophy, proposing a weak conception, which consists in treating philosophical discourse as a literary genre, closed in the metaphorical dimension and unable to offer universally valid explanations. In upholding the contextual and contingent character of truth, Rorty dismisses any essentialism of philosophical discourse as the result of its conditions of emergence. We discover,

therefore, what Foucault calls “discursive formations”, which are not based on the singularity of an object, but on a “space in which different objects are constantly looming and transforming” according to the “game of rules” that make possible over a given period, the appearance of these objects. (Foucault, 1999, p. 42) This view does not make clear the shift from the level at which institutional influences on language operate to the text itself. Only the consideration of philosophy as constitutive discourse, as proposed by Maingueneau, makes it possible to avoid a total assimilation of textual productions in the device of discursive communities. “Discourse can be defined neither as a representation of the object, nor as textual organization, nor as a communicative situation, but as the relating of these aspects, through enunciation.” (Maingueneau, 1999, p. 178) Thus, in Maingueneau’s conception, discourse is self-grounded and self-constituted, taking possession of or assuming what he calls *the archeion* (source, principle, or foundation) of discursive production from a given time and space.

Conclusions

Finally, the rhetorisation of philosophy involves nothing more than sending the discourse -reality duality into a secondary plane, if not a sheer negation of it, from a position of prime category of thinking involved in the process of knowledge – since by knowledge is understood an act of positioning the object, followed by an act of its implicit or virtual operationalization. Along with the rhetorisation of philosophy, the implicit correspondence between discourse and reality is broken: discourse is neither a representative reflection of reality, nor a manner of rationalizing reality, but an event in a continuous eruption, a metadiscourse, marked, we could say, by its own ontology.

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