

CRRAR Summer Institute 2009
Reflective summary on *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* by
Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca
Pages 13-62
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In this excerpt, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca describe their conception of argumentation. They describe how it is distinguished from both demonstration and formal logic, list the necessary conditions for the act of argumentation, describe the roles of the speaker and the audience in argumentative space, distinguish three types of audience, distinguish persuading and convincing from one another, outline the effects of argumentation, and describe the importance of epideictic. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (O-T) are concerned with distinguishing their conception of argumentation from other conceptions both in philosophy and argumentation in general and situating their views in the history of argumentation.

Perelman and O-T begin by distinguishing argumentation from both classical demonstration and formal logic which is only concerned with demonstrative proofs (13). They forward the thesis that argumentation is distinguished from both of these because it is primarily concerned with persuasion whereas demonstration and formal logic are not. Argumentation uses “discourse to influence the intensity of an audience’s adherence to certain theses” (14) and “*all argumentation aims at gaining the adherence of minds, and, by this very fact, assumes the existence of an intellectual contact*” (14). For Perelman and O-T, argumentation is necessarily concerned with the persuasion of an audience. For this sort of argumentation to exist, a “community of minds” (14) must exist for which there are three necessary conditions: (1) a common language so that communication can occur between the individuals in the community, (2) an attached importance to the communication between individuals (individuals must have some

motivation to gain the adherence of other interlocutors (16)), and (3) the willingness to accept an opposing point of view.

Argumentation operates between a speaker and the respective audience. For argumentation to develop, the audience must pay attention to what the speaker says (18). “Under normal circumstances”, they say, “some quality is necessary in order to speak and be listened to” (18). This quality of which they speak is entirely situation dependent, however, without such a quality, the speaker will not be listened to and in many cases will not even be allowed to speak to the audience (18).

Perelman and O-T define an audience as “*the ensemble of those whom the speaker wishes to influence by his argumentation*” (19). This definition reinforces the emphasis they place on argumentation as an act of persuasion. The audience is that group of individuals whom the speaker is attempting to persuade by the arguments presented. The audience is a “systematized construction” of the speaker. It is the speaker’s responsibility to form as accurate a construction of the audience as is possible because an inadequate picture of the audience can “have very unfortunate results” (20) for the argumentation process including a failure to persuade. An accurate construction of the audience and knowledge of that audience is a necessary condition for effective argumentation for Perelman and O-T. The speaker is required to be informed about the psychology as well as the sociology of the audience. For instance, the speaker ought to consider the social functions of the audience (i.e. their roles in particular social institutions) (21).

The social function that the listeners assume in their everyday lives prompts them to assume what they refer to as new personalities which must not be disregarded. Additionally, “what is true of the individual listener holds equally true of whole audiences” (21); what is true of the parts is also true of the whole with respect to homogenous audiences. Not all audiences are homogenous, though. There are also

heterogeneous audiences which normally require the use of a “multiplicity of arguments” in order to be persuaded (21-22). The composition of the audience influences the approach that the speaker must use in order to be persuasive. Additionally, the speaker’s own place in relation to the audience affects how the audience is characterized. For instance, “if [the speaker] holds extremist views on a question, there is nothing to restrain him from considering all his interlocutors as forming a single audience. On the other hand, if he holds a moderate view, he will see them as forming at least two distinct audiences” (23). The knowledge of the audience is intimately linked with the knowledge of how to influence that audience.

Additionally, “conditioning agents” (23) such as music or lighting (apart from speech) as well as those included in the speech itself are often used to persuade an audience.

Perelman and O-T also distinguish between the acts of persuading and convincing. It is this part of the article that I had a great deal of difficulty understanding. Although they do state that persuading and convincing cannot be conceived in total isolation from one another (27), it is not clear to me what the significant differences are, and why this distinction is important for their overall discussion of argumentation. They say that there is a “slight and perceptible difference in the meaning of the two terms” (28). They say that persuasive argumentation “claims validity for a particular audience” (28) whereas convincing argumentation “presumes to gain the adherence of every rational being” (28). Why do they distinguish between the two in this way? They say that the difference between the two depends on “the idea the speaker has formed on the incarnation of reason” (28). I’m not entirely clear what they mean by this.

They also say that the distinction between persuasion and conviction indirectly expresses the connection between “persuasion and action” and “conviction and intelligence” (29). Again, I do not see the link the authors are making here.

Perelman and O-T also engage in a very detailed description of three kinds of audience: the universal audience, the single interlocutor, and the audience of the subject himself or herself. They say that the single interlocutor and single subject are just incarnations or instantiations of the universal audience (30-31).