

Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca: “The Framework of Argumentation”

In this chapter, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca discuss their approach to argumentation, which is rhetorical. They rediscover roots of argumentation in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. They point to the need for a psychologising of argument. As such, they see that argumentation is rooted in the psychology of arguers and their social conditions. Another important feature of this rhetorical approach to argumentation is the emphasis placed on audience. They argue that it is important that the arguer forms a correct conception of audience, for “... knowledge of those one wishes to win over is a condition preliminary to all effectual argumentation” (20). In every society, there are dominant opinions, unquestioned beliefs and premises which are taken for granted. The speaker wishing to persuade a particular audience needs to adapt himself to the audience's culture along with its accepted beliefs.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca also make a distinction between persuasion and conviction. This distinction is part of the distinction between objective and subjective claims. For persuasion is a term applied to argumentation that claims validity for a particular audience, or for having a private validity for a claim which we cannot impose on others because it is relevant to our liking and particular taste. Whereas, conviction is gaining the adherence or conviction of every rational being not just ourselves, and in that sense, it is objective. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca also introduce the notion of an universal audience which is different than a particular audience. The idea of audience in this approach is related to reasoning, for it seems that universal audience is related to objective reason and particular audience deals with relativistic reasoning. The notion of universal audience remains unclear to me because on page 32 Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca claim that argumentation addressed to a universal audience must convince its audience of reasons which are “self-evident, and possess an absolute and timeless validity independent of local or historical contingencies” (32). However, later on the following page, they describe the universal audience as characterized by the image the speaker has of the universal audience he/she is trying to win over since every culture has its own views of what is a universal audience. Here they are individualizing the notion of universal audience which they previously objectified. The universal audience is then described as the particular view speakers have of their audience. It is not clear which view they hold of the universal audience since both are contradictory. Further, I am curious as to how the notion of universal audience is related to the distinction made between persuasion and conviction. The notion of audience is significant in this account of argumentation because argumentation is defined as function of the audience being addressed. As such, the goal of argumentation is to increase the adherence of minds (45). Adherence is a concept that is unclear to me. It seems that adherence is a concept that plays a role in determining the success of an argument. Yet it is not clear whether adherence is part of conviction or persuasion?

Another important feature of this approach is related to how argumentation is understood in terms of action. This rhetorical approach considers argumentation in its practical effects, i.e. in the way that it brings about an action. As a result, the genre that they find most important is the *epidictic* which deals with praise or blame (49). That is because *epidictic* speeches deal with value and since they are interested in a rhetoric that leads to action, the best suitable genre, accordingly, is one that is concerned with value. As stated, “...epidictic oratory has significance and importance for argumentation because it strengthens the disposition toward action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds” (50). For the purpose of epidictic speech is to increase the adherence to values held common by the audience and the speaker. However, I find this problematic because by focusing on reinforcing what is accepted, this neglects an important part of argumentation, that of changing beliefs. As a result, I find this approach a bit limiting since there is no room for how speeches may prove useful in action when it merely stresses what is accepted. It remains uncertain to me how value is present in this account since it is reinforcing value and not creating it. And shouldn't argumentation deal with truth value? But by focusing on accepted values, this approach ignores ways in which argumentation may make normative claims about action.