

Reflective Summary: Perelman

Nancy Cathcart, 2009

Perelman understands argument as an exercise that “uses discourse to influence the intensity of an audience’s adherence to certain theses” (p. 14). The whole purpose of argument is to influence others. Underlying this understanding are a couple of basic ideas: 1) that arguments involve people; 2) that people’s ideas can be influenced by argument; 3) that people are unavoidably psychological, intellectual and social creatures; 4) that, therefore, the best way to use arguments to influence people is to involve the psychological, intellectual and social aspects in the creation of the argument. In other words, the most effective way to gain the adherence of people is to consider them when creating one’s argument.

Effectively considering the people toward whom one is arguing requires some awareness. Perelman tells us that if one wishes to persuade another, then “a person must attach some importance to gaining the adherence of his interlocutor” (p. 16). A demonstration of that importance should be represented by attempts to create an argument that is considerate of the arguee (whom Perelman dubs “the audience”). First, one should consider the language of the delivery, making sure that the language that can be appropriately understood by the audience. Second, one should consider the “preliminary conditions” (p. 17) of argument, meaning that factors such as membership in social class, social relations and willingness on the part of the audience to listen should all be thought about. The argument that is produced should be mindful of these things.

It is, of course, very difficult to gain a thorough understanding of things like psychology, sociology, intellectual levels, social class and social relations of an audience. This is because “audience” is an abstract term which must be concretized by the speaker. “Care must be taken”, says Perelman, to form a concept of the anticipated audience as close as possible to reality” (p. 20). An audience can consist of anywhere from one to a large number of people. It can be composed of highly diverse groups, or it can be unified along one psychological, political or sociological principle. It can even be contained within the mind of one person who practices the exercise of self-examination, challenging oneself with various sides of an argument. Nevertheless, Perelman teaches us that a speaker must continuously adapt to the audience in order to best capitalize on persuading.

This adaptability is so important that Perelman claims it is the audience that determines the argument. For example, if one wanted to argue for gun control to an audience that was largely made up of members of the NRA, one would necessarily adjust the argument to address the issues of concern to NRA members. It would be unwise to argue that guns are objects used for evildoings, since the audience would not see itself as evil. In this way, the audience would determine the composition of the argument. Perelman is quick to remind us, here, that it is not necessary to change one’s opinions to the point of being hypocritical simply to gain adherence to one’s ideas; for him, any means of persuasion is not acceptable. However, an accomplished arguer is required to be able to look at a point of view in a number of ways, presenting it such a way as to have it more readily accepted because the audience’s penchants have been demonstrably understood.

Perelman also reminds us that there is no need to supply audiences with “necessary truth”. Indeed, in the presence of necessary truths, argument is superfluous. It is rhetorical proof that we seek. “Maximally efficacious rhetoric, in the case of a universal audience, is rhetoric

employing nothing but logical proof”, he says (p. 32). The goal of argument should not be to supply a vast “everyman” abstract universal audience with absolutely necessary proofs that cannot be disproven. Rather, arguments should be designed with the goal of allowing a particular, concrete audience of real, thinking and deliberating people the choice of accepting the conclusion based on the information offered by the arguer. The audience should choose to adhere to a conclusion that has been presented in such a manner as to allow acceptance that is subsequently demonstrated through action.

Reflection:

I first encountered this article by Perelman as an undergraduate in the early 90’s. As a seeker of wisdom of truth, devoted to philosophy, the development of critical thinking and informal logic, I was working hard to learn to figure out just what I thought, and then how to express it. The idea of having to consider the audience with whom I was communicating seemed repugnant to me. I understood rhetoric as a sort of “selling out”, and thought that what Perelman was advocating was a relativistic understanding of the truth. I believed that he was advising his readers to alter their truths for the sake of winning adherence to whatever argument they had decided to make. And I thought that winning for its own sake was a very shallow and dishonest goal, contrary to everything I loved about philosophy and the process of dialectic.

I’m older now. Perhaps wiser, but certainly more in tune with the idea that real, necessary truths are few and far between, and when they are occasionally unearthed they are immune to the need to argue about them. Now I understand my ability to think critically and argue as a tool that enables me to communicate my points of view effectively, rather than as a way of “proving that I am right”. The ability to argue well is an excellent way to communicate with others. I recognize value in considering the audience when attempting to communicate, particularly when that communication might be controversial. I know that if you wish to connect with someone, you must attempt to acknowledge their beliefs and opinions by considering them when communicating. You must enter their communicative space before you can encourage them to enter yours.

I do still struggle with the idea that one should make arguments with the sole purpose being to persuade another. Of course, it would be lovely to have an interlocutor accept one’s views holus-bolus, but it seems that in real life this isn’t always my reason for developing arguments. I develop arguments less in hopes of creating agreement in the minds of others than to provide them with understanding of my motivations and purposes. I argue to help others to see that there is great diversity in opinions and beliefs (and yes, even “truths”-small “T”) and that knowing this can make dealing with others (myself as one example) easier. Perhaps that is a form of persuasion, but it seems milder than the one Perelman talks about.

I also still believe that winning for its own sake is a shallow and dishonest goal. It’s the exchange of ideas that makes argument so compelling, not the recognition that one is “right”.