Rhetoric, Reasonableness and Ethics: An Essay on Perelman

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ABSTRACT: The article deals with an interpretation of the work of Ch. Perelman. The author tries to determine the meaning of reasonableness in a hermeneutical and anthropological perspective. He then places the work of Perelman in the light of the theory of symbolic interactionism of G.H. Mead.

KEY WORDS: Objectivity, neutrality, value concepts, consensus, rationality, reasonableness, hermeneutical point of view, symbolic interactionism, dialogical interpretation of reasonableness, ethical vision of rhetorics.

I. INTRODUCTION

A synthetic overview of the work of Chaim Perelman is not available yet. Rather than to provide such an overview, we suffice to say that, generally speaking, Perelman has undergone a very deep change. This change means that his work can be divided into two parts. This ascertaining, however, is relative. Perelman himself has repeatedly explained what was, according to him, the cause of this change, namely the extreme relativism that was the consequence of his initial position that values are undiscussable. Without a synthesis of his work, it seems that this evolution and its explanation could only be described in a very superficial way.

The article will be divided into four parts. In the first part, we will sketch our hypothesis, including an interpretation of "reasonableness". In the second part, as an introduction to the third part, we will briefly focus on the hermeneutical dimension of his theory. The third part deals with the philosophical and anthropological dimension which we believe is present in Perelman's theory. Therefore, we will put our interpretation into a larger framework provided by the work of George Herbert Mead. We believe that the New Rhetoric can become clearer if seen in the light of the theory of symbolic interactionism as advocated by G. H. Mead. The consequences of this will, in the fourth part, show the basic philosophical and ethical options of Perelman's thought.

Our point of concern in this contribution is to try to focus somewhat closer on Perelman's evolution. This will enable us to get some more insight into his global theory. As a starting point we will formulate a hypothesis concerning the evolution that has taken place and how relevant this has been for Perelman's theory.
II. PERELMAN I AND PERELMAN II

In the first period of his philosophical reflection, Perelman’s aim was to develop a theory that would allow him to formulate objective propositions about “prestigious” or “confused” concepts. The plurality of conceptions that can be covered by such concepts is a serious objection to the creation of a consensus about the meaning of such concepts. This is the consequence of the fact that prestigious or confused concepts – such as “justice” – are strongly emotionally laden. This emotional charge implies a value scale that is represented by each of the possible conceptions. This value scale does not necessarily – and most of the time even not at all – refer to a consensus. In the absence of such a consensus or proof, a philosopher is compelled to formulate objective propositions in such a way that, given the divergent opinions on the level of conceptions, a consensus can be found beyond that, on the level of a concept.

It can be noted that here, we find the first axis to the later work of Perelman: that in the first period, the aim of the philosopher was to create a consensus. This idea is not without problems, because the larger a consensus will be, the less concrete its content. In the analysis of the concept of justice for example, the formula of formal justice is presented as an ultimate description of all possible conceptions of justice. The formula of formal justice on the one hand means that equals must be treated equally. This idea, one should remember, is not specifically for legal reasoning. It is equally valid for each and every form of theoretical and practical reasoning that deals with rules. On the other hand, the formula of formal justice has a special meaning in legal thinking, since it covers all possible conceptions of justice.

A second axis between the earlier and the later Perelman concerns the relation between theoretical and practical reason. In the first period, namely, the criteria of logical or empirical proof (theoretical reason) were also compelling criteria for practical reason. In the second period, this relation is established inversely. In the New Rhetoric, the criteria of practical reasoning become exemplary for theoretical reasoning. From then on, one becomes aware that science, for example, can not prove its own fundamental axioms. It is founded on (provisional) paradigms, which count as a matrix for problem solving activities within that science. As a matter of fact, the impossibility to “prove” a paradigm is similar to the impossibility to prove value propositions. This means that instead of applying the criteria of theoretical rationality to practical reason, it is, rather, the other way around.

The formula of formal justice was believed to be logically neutral. Perelman however quickly realized that this logical neutrality left open the possibility of strongly unethical options. These options, as the shocking examples of the Nazi-occupation have shown, were unable to create a consensus.

The originality of the New Rhetoric now lies in the fact that “logical neutrality” and “consensus” are brought together on a common trunk, namely “approval”.

The core of Perelman’s new epistemological starting point is the replacement