Some Consequences of The New Rhetoric: A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT: This review article examines some aspects of the legacy of Perelman’s The New Rhetoric as reflected in two volumes of his collected essays in the new edition of his Works as well as in a memorial volume edited by Michel Meyer and the acts of a colloquium sponsored by Meyer’s Center for Argumentation.


Chaïm Perelman has been well served since his death in 1984. 1986 saw the publication of two memorial volumes of essays that analyze and extend his contribution to rhetoric. In addition to the essays contributed primarily by American scholars to Golden and Pilotta’s Practical Reasoning in Human Affairs (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers), Michel Meyer assembled a collection of essays from French speaking scholars (De la Métaphysique à la rhétorique) which has recently appeared in the English translation under review here. The essays cover the same interdisciplinary spectrum as the American book, but are less assessments of Perelman’s work or even derived from it than contributions to the many fields Perelman prized. Figures et conflits rhétoriques records the proceedings of a 1990 colloquium organized by the European Center for the Study of Argumentation which Meyer directs at Perelman’s Free University of Brussels.

THE NEW EDITION OF PERELMAN’S WORKS

Before examining the Meyer memorial volume and the colloquium proceedings in more detail, mention should be made of another project that assures that Perelman’s voice will continue to sound: the publication of Perelman’s Oeuvres by the Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles. In 1988 Meyer prefaced a fifth edition to Perelman’s magnum opus, the Traité de l’argumentation. Two collections of Perelman’s essays followed. The first, Rhétoriques, will be of direct interest to readers of this journal as will be the twenty some essays (out of fifty-five) that deal with judicial argumentation in Ethique et Droit edited by Alain Lempereur. These conference papers and journal articles have all previously appeared in various scholarly outlets, and many have already been


Although the *Rhétoriques* articles were published over a twenty-one year span between 1949 and 1970, it is not surprising that the mean publication date falls in 1958, the year the *Traité de l’argumentation* appeared, since all the essays in this collection are related to *The New Rhetoric*. In the early ones Perelman tests concepts that would find their way into that treatise; around 1958 a spate of articles and conference papers publicize its appearance; succeeding years find Perelman occasionally elucidating some controversial notion like the universal audience, but more commonly enriching a concept or insight of the treatise, for example, the role of decision making, or the topoi of classicism and romanticism. The fact that over half the essays of *Ethique et Droit* were published after 1970 suggests that the legal questions which had initially drawn Perelman to rhetoric increasingly occupied his attention in the last years of his life. In spite of the inevitable repetition from essay to essay, the initiative to gather them together is welcome. The thematic heading Meyer and Lempereur have used to group these texts forcefully articulate Perelman’s central themes; regrettably, the lack of indexes that would facilitate surveying modulations of his thought undercuts the usefulness of these otherwise well produced volumes, for not every reader will want to work through their nearly 1300 pages.

THE LIMITS OF THE PHILOSOPHIC MODEL

The distinction Perelman stressed between demonstration and argumentation runs though many of the essays of the memorial volume and colloquium. *From Metaphysics to Rhetoric* opens, in fact, with a short previously unpublished paper by Perelman developing the distinction in terms of formal and informal logic. Jean-Blaise Grize’s brief but suggestive “To Reason While Speaking” leads to Pierre Oléron’s substantial “Organization and Articulation of Verbal Exchanges: Question-Response Exchanges in Polemical Contexts.” Oléron proposes an initial approach for analyzing and inventorying the components of verbal exchanges. By studying the status of the initiating remark, the response to this comment, and the articulation between them, he seeks to underscore the rational basis underlying such exchanges. This linguistic orientation is continued in Jean-Claude Anscombe and Oswald Ducrot’s “Argumentativity and Informativity” which argues that what passes for objective information in much discourse derives from a underlying argumentative framework. “Investigating