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Reason and Person in Persuasion

Texts on Dialogue and Argumentation

EDUSC

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INTRODUCTION

Persuasion is the central topic of rhetoric and, since this centrality was recuperated by the “new rhetoric” – that not for nothing was made almost to coincide with a theory of argumentation –, it has acquired a renewed consciousness of the vital character of arguing and persuading. Demonstration and formal reasoning can enjoy validity in themselves, without reference to an addressee. On the contrary, the validity of the argumentation cannot be studied in its integrity without knowing the public to whom this is directed, without knowing what it means for the speaker and for the interlocutor, without knowing anything of the circumstances in which the argumentation takes place.

Certainly some general observation can be made, but always knowing that an idea is being explained that we will afterward have to know how to insert in a concrete situation. It is possible also to ask oneself about the concrete efficacy of a demonstration, but the question, in this case, refers precisely to the persuasive value of demonstration. It is not a coincidence that the complement of the verb “demonstrate” is a thesis (I demonstrated that *p*), while the complement of the verb “persuade” is a person (I persuaded John).

This is the thread that unites the texts collected in the present volume, all of them born in an academic setting, although later they have assumed diverse formats: articles, communications of congresses and reworkings of these last. The first part collects various articles from the column “The Blessing of Babel” (“La bendición de Babel”), that I maintained for the Mexican journal *Ixtus*¹ (1, 2, 4, and 6). Another text (7) could have had the same origin, but I prefer to translate a more precise one that I presented in a congress, from which I extracted later the first article of the series and the title of the column itself. Another article (3)

¹ Journal founded by Javier Sicilia in 1993 and directed by him until its extinction in 2007.

appeared in the journal *Conspiratio*² (that in a certain sense continued the activity of “*Ixtus*” when this interrupted its publications), for which I maintained the column “Praise of Impurity” (“Elogio de la impureza”). And at last, a text with a complementary role (5) comes from the intervention in a congress and in some way completes the first part of this volume.

The vital profile of *Ixtus*, which we could call Christian-Gandhian, can help understand the character of these texts, for the sensibility that can be foreseen in the majority of its readers. When I wrote for them, I felt as a philosopher a great freedom, that came from the conviction that they would not be very concerned about distinguishing with precision between what comes from sensible experience and from rational elaboration and what is born from the listening to another person, a distinction that did not keep Gandhi awake, nor many representatives of twentieth century philosophies – phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics – with which I feel in particular harmony, while with difficulty I recognize myself in other sensibilities that tend to be inexorable in the delimitation of the extent of reason, as happens in scientism, in the most rationalist positions of neo-Thomism and in good part of analytical philosophy.

Diminishing relevance from this distinction in a dialogic-argumentative sphere is not renouncing methodological rigor, but professing a determined conception of what is reason and what is man. Man is not only reason: the resources of reason do not exhaust the totality of the resources of man, and this is of capital importance in the field with which we are dealing. A good part of the advances in the dialogic capacity consist in a progressive widening of the horizon, that ordinarily supposes the overcoming of obstacles of a rationalistic character: human intelligence is not only reason, it is also intellect; to persuade it is not enough to reason well, for one also must inspire trust and establish emotive harmony (*logos – ethos – pathos*, in classical terms); language is not only semantics (the meaning of the signs) but also pragmatics (*use* of the signs, relationship with its users).

²Magazine also founded and directed by Javier Sicilia, from 2009 to 2012.

The enumeration of aspects in which reductionism slows us down could continue. I would like now only to add a reflection about the nature of the truth that illustrates well the place of this notion in the argumentative dynamic: the truth is not everything. The truth is weak at least in two very evident aspects: a) it is possible to have the truth without being able to make it valuable (how many times have we had the experience of being right and people do not believe us?); b) with the truth one can fool, corrupt, spoil (the best disinformation tends to be that which only says the truth).

It is said that the truth always wins in the end. I am convinced that it is true, and Aristotle assures that “the true and the just are naturally superior to their opposites” (*Rhetoric*: I, 1, 1355a20). Nevertheless, if we do not want to wait until the final judgment one must anticipate vigor to the truth. The two aspects of its weakness lead us by the hand to the Aristotelian notion of rhetoric, the “faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever” (*Rhetoric*: I, 2, 1355b25), which I like to reformulate as the following: the art of making the truth appear true. A precious art! What would a father not give for the capacity to present things to his children in such a way that they see them in an adequate way? What would a teacher not give? What would not give one who is disposed to declare his love?

Man is not only reason, we said, and we got ready to enumerate other resources of man. Also we can overcome reductionism exploring the notion of reason. There are various ways to distinguish types of reason, among which there is the distinction prepared by Carlos Pereda, which calls “austere reason” that appropriate to calculation, to univocal semantics, to exactitude, and “emphatic reason” that which admits figurative language, probability, that which takes into account the history of concepts and of terms, that which considers relevant who says something and to whom it is said.³ Emphatic reason is not second-class reason. It is so much not so that Pereda affirms that “defending an emphatic reason is the best defense of reason” (Pereda 1994b: 320).

³ A terminology proposed by Marcelo Dascal for a similar distinction is: *hard reason* / *soft reason*.

Austere reason is a specialization of reason. To articulate austere reason with the human rationality in its fullness the role of emphatic reason is indispensable. Octavio Paz, regarding certain dead-end streets that reason appears at times to take us down, that have reached the point of suggesting an invitation to silence (evident allusion to the conclusion of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*), said, "Perhaps it may be the most rational, but not the wisest" (Paz [1969] 1985: 42).

Another observation about the tone of the texts gathered here is the conviction that the philosophical essay has a value that should be defended before the technicalities imposed by the formal criteria of the current academic meritocracy, what Guillermo Hurtado calls "the dictatorship of paper." Hence the use of first person is not renounced in this volume nor are other resources of the language banned for the professionalization of philosophy, according to which

the prose of the thesis of philosophy should have the dryness of the sciences. The advisor obliges his pupil to eliminate whatever rhetorical resource is frowned upon by the academy. To console him, perhaps he is told that when he graduates he could write as he likes, but this is false. Not even the definitive professors have *carte blanche*. The institutions in which we work demand that we publish constantly articles in specialized journals (Hurtado 2016).

The second part of this volume collects principally texts of congresses about dialogue, rhetoric and argumentation: four of them are communications (1, 4, 5, and 7), two published later in the corresponding proceedings (4 and 5) and one in a journal (1); to them is added a fourth communication that I never sent for the proceedings (3). The other two texts are an article (2) written as a complement to the first and a chapter (6) of a collective volume.

The commitment to make valuable the relevance of the personal and existential element in the construction of dialogue could appear something obvious, but the efforts that look to obtain methodological rigor imply frequently a high level of abstraction, in such a way that even when one is inspired by the best intentions it is possible to lose contact with the ground.

Once, in Palermo, I had occasion to take on the theme of the interdisciplinary nature in an intervention entitled “Dialogue of the knowledges” given before an audience of university teachers. Someone insinuated that, in the end, I had spoken of the dialogue “of the flavors” (in Italian “knowledges” is *saperi*, “flavors” is *sapori*). In spite of the fact that it was a play on words, the use of paronyms was not without a basis. Far from adventuring with the helmet of the epistemologist through the hidden corners of interdisciplinarity, I had taken care to make my listeners discover the resources for dialogue among disciplines in their own capacity to know the *other*: the taking in of a guest, this school of otherness which is the family, the experience of translation.

I am convinced that the capacity to appreciate the profound human sense of a well-set table, through which there is established an encounter of people and one places himself in a cultural tradition, could prove to be of the greatest efficacy for the dialogue between disciplines, more than a course in methodology. Hence the play on words, to which the listeners—a majority of then Sicilians—were already inclined due to the cuisine that they ordinarily enjoy.

I will not go so far in this collection of essays. Although this sensibility will not be lacking, the exposition will treat themes belonging to linguistics and classical rhetoric. For texts about politeness, the classrooms were excellent proving ground that confirms the relevance of the theme in a dialogic field. And, together with the congresses about dialogue and argumentation, they were also proving ground for my approach to the notion of goodwill. All these themes, in one way or another, have been discussed at the dinner table.

I. THE TRUTH AND ITS FORMULATIONS

1. MY TRUTH, YOUR TRUTH⁴

It is always a great disappointment to see that a promising conversation is obstructed because an interlocutor believes that an essential premise for dialogue is lacking. This impasse occurs at times because of a difference between interlocutors that could be described – if we use for each extreme the label that one would put on the other – like that which is between relativism and fundamentalism.⁵

Although it might well happen that really a fundamentalist and a relativist could have a dialogue, my intention is to analyze those cases in which the interlocutors are neither one thing nor the other, but could appear to be. Here, at the moment, I will start from the perspective of one who could appear to be a fundamentalist.

1. IMPULSIVE REALISM

Let us contemplate, therefore, the position of one who tries to avoid that people shut him out because his way of expressing himself makes them think that he does not accept pluralism. For this purpose it is useful to know what are the expressions and strategies that are usually taken as characteristics of the non-pluralist. It is also useful to consider the possibility that there really is a certain rigidity, which can be eliminated by a better understanding of what pluralism means, and for this what is needed is to understand pluralism and the reasons for which relativism is possible.

Among the formulas most often used to *profess* realism we could mention the following: “there is only one truth,”

⁴ Published originally in *Ixtus*, 56(2006); 20-23 (in the column “La bendición de Babel”).

⁵ In the following chapter (“Margins of dialogue”) I examine this polarity.

“truth is objective,” “truth is reality,” “this is truth” (while touching a solid object⁶), “the truth is neither yours nor mine,” “truth is absolute.” In the face of declarations like these, many no longer continue because it seems impossible or useless to speak with a person who expresses himself in this way. The formulas that are usually perceived to be relativist are in great part the reverse of the previous ones: “there are no absolute truths,” “this is my truth,” “this is subjective or psychological or relative.”

In this area, an effective strategy for maintaining dialogue is the understanding of the senses in which it can be said that there is one truth and the senses in which it can be said that there are multiple truths. The greater part of these reflections is dedicated to this understanding, but first I will suggest a few communicative strategies. First of all, how necessary is it that we express our conviction about the uniqueness of the truth, its absolute character, etc.? It is probable that the interlocutor will not notice a lack of pluralism in our conversation if we do not make a profession like one of these. On the other hand, if it is necessary to state one’s position, one does not have to exclude the possibility of accepting a formula that appears relativist. If someone says that something is subjective, we can remember that there are subjective things that are very real, things that are subjective by their own nature. It is frequently said that cold is subjective, or hunger. In effect, without a *subject* who feels cold there is no cold, but rather low temperature. It is true that we also call low temperature cold, but it is clear that here there are two different things, feeling cold and being cold, the first clearly subjective, the second objective, but easily interpreted in the subjective sense. The same can be said of the adjective “psychological”: if there is no *psyche* there is no cold or hunger, which does not take away the reality of the hunger I feel. In regard to the things that are declared “relativist,” it is enough to ask oneself if they are not relative in themselves.

⁶ This strategy is known as the *argumentum ad lapidem*, for the solidity of stone.

2. THE TRUTH IN PLURAL

In the times in which we live it is not politically correct to bother someone who declares “Allah is one.” For the person who affirms that the truth is one, there is no political correctness: he is a hopeless fundamentalist. Why cause such an ominous name to be placed on oneself? Not because of the annoyance of the accusation but for the interruption of possible dialogue. There are so many non-relativist senses in which it can be said that there are several truths!

The first of these senses – very elemental – is when “truth” is synonymous with “true proposition.” The truth that alkaline metals have an odd number of electrons and the truth that Sri Lanka is in the northern hemisphere are *two truths*. As can be seen, not all use of the plural of the noun “truth” colors the conversation with relativism. Even in subjects as delicate as the faith this plural is calmly used. One speaks, in effect, of the “truths of the faith.”

This does not deny the uniqueness of the truth. It is a phenomenon caused by the nature of our knowledge and language. We know things through a multiplicity of acts, of various kinds, among which are judgments, which are also multiple and each one of them we express in a proposition.

What I am expounding on has a strategic value, but not only that. It is real: knowledge and language are this way. The strategy rests in appealing to the resources of the interlocutor that can best facilitate comprehension. An adequate knowledge of the strategy will lead us to “regain territory,” which is the same as completing the sense of what we want to say. If we limit ourselves to the affirmation that “there are many truths,” the interlocutor could become convinced of something different from what we want to communicate.

A use of the plural with more relevant consequences than the preceding point is that of substituting *truth* for its definition. One very classical way to define the truth is that which characterizes it as an “*adaequatio rei et intellectus*,” that is “correspondence of the thing and the intellect.” The author is Isaac Israeli, Hebrew medical doctor and philosopher from North Africa,

from the ninth and tenth centuries. A decisive factor in the good fortune that this definition has had is that Thomas Aquinas cited it and made it his own.⁷

Therefore, if the truth is the correspondence between the intellect and the thing, it is possible to ask oneself where it is: in the intellect or in the thing? Perhaps the realistic instinct urges some to respond “in the thing,” but the correspondence cannot but be in the intellect, as it is a cognitive reality. In addition, each act of knowledge that can be called true is *one* correspondence. Here again we have the truth multiplied: there are as many truths as there are correspondences. And again the origin of the plurality is in our way of knowing.

3. THE TRUTH POSSESSED

Now comes the most significant thing that I see in this new multiplication, given that the understanding is not something abstract: the plurality of intellects and their individual character. The correspondence of an intellect does not work for someone else: no one can know in my place. Either the correspondence is mine, or I do not know. Calling the correspondence *mine* permits the use of the possessive with the truth. I know very well that such a use – my truth, your truth... – has often a relativist background. I also understand the well-known realist response: the truth is not yours or mine, it is *the* truth. I understand it, and probably share the thought it expresses. Nevertheless, I think that this is another of the unnecessary obstacles to dialogue. When someone appeals to “his truth” in moral questions, it is often done to justify conduct that could be reproached, but I have also seen the contrary. A friend from USA, about to accept a relationship with a young man, found out that for him a relationship meant cohabitation, and did not accept it. As an explanation for her refusal she said: “this is not my truth!” To the frequent confession of faith “I am Catholic in my way,” I feel moved to respond that I

⁷ Thomas Aquinas attributes the definition to Isaac various times (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q.16, a.2, ad 2; *De veritate*, q.1, a.1), although currently it seems clear that the concept comes from Avicenna through William of Auxerre.

too am in my way: “You wouldn’t want me to be Catholic in your way...” I say, and everyone concedes. I think that, if one has not become Catholic in his way, he has not yet fully responded to the Christian vocation.

I said above that there are very real relationships, or, to put it another way, very important realities that are of a relative character. One of them is the truth, because of its character of relation: precisely because it is a correspondence. Here one can see very clearly how realism does not consist in eliminating instances that are subjective, relative, etc., nor is valuing them equivalent to becoming relativist. The correspondence is yours or mine, and it is a relationship. But—here we begin to regain ground—it is not just any relationship: it is a relationship of correspondence. Of correspondence to a thing. If we are talking about the same thing we have to agree. If we do not agree, then at least one of us did not adapt.

And have we never had the experience of not agreeing and, nonetheless, had the intuition—even the certainty—that both of us were right? This is the next step in our reflection.

* * *

On this subject I have a later work, more academic: “Ambigüedades del rechazo de la verdad.” *Open Insight* 7(2014); 227-237, <http://openinsight.mx/index.php/open/article/view/97> [ED: Januar 26th, 2020].

See also the following texts by Franca D’Agostini: “Misunderstandings about truth.” *Church, Communication and Culture* 4-3; 266-286, DOI: 10.1080/23753234.2019.1667252; *Introduzione alla verità*. Torino: Bollati-Boringhieri, 2011.