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Commentary

Comment on ‘Constrained Maneuvering: Rhetoric as a Rational Enterprise’

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In his most intriguing and challenging contribution Christopher Tindale addresses one crucial point of van Eemeren and Houtlosser’s strategic maneuvering project. It is the question whether rhetoric can be rational only as being subordinated to dialectic or, rather, it can be regarded as having its own rationality. His central claim, on which I shall concentrate in what follows, is exposed in the third part of Tindale’s essay (Part III: The Rational Core of Rhetoric), where he denies that rhetoric needs dialectic to provide reasonableness. Rhetoric, so he says, can be considered as “being reasonable on its own terms”.

This claim is framed by Tindale in a view of rhetoric that he describes as essentially dialogical. As he emphasizes, any argumentation move involves both the arguer and the audience insofar as the audience’s expectations, interpretations and responses condition the development of the argument. “Understanding argumentation, including the intentions involved, must begin as much with the audience as the arguer” (Part II: Rhetorical Argumentation as a Cooperative Venture: Multiple Maneuvering; 2.1. Rhetoric and Dialectic). This statement applies equally to the reasonableness of argumentation. In particular, whether an argument is convincing and thus reasonable depends on the *universal audience*. Tindale adopts Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s concept here with certain modifications by relating it more explicitly than these authors to an empirical or “immediate” audience: “What the concept of the universal audience allows us to do is to keep our focus on the immediate audience with its particular cognitive claims, while recognizing a standard of reasonableness which should envelop that audience, and which it should acknowledge whenever recourse to the universal audience is required” (Part III: The Rational Core of Rhetoric).

Now, however, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s concept of the universal audience had been already criticized by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1995) for being relativistic. Reasonableness, so the authors, would become relative, given that each particular audience – out of which the universal audience is developed – could assume its own standards of reasonableness. As Tindale demonstrates in the cen-

tral part of his argument, the problem is not solved but only shifted, if universal audience is explained as a construct of the arguer because “now there will be as many definitions of reasonableness as there are arguers” (Part III: The Rational Core of Rhetoric). To that point, however, Tindale opposes two arguments. First, he indicates that (i) this criticism again “favours the perspective of the arguer [...] and overlooks the role of the actual audience” involved in his dialogic model of argumentation. As he writes, “it is not a matter of each arguer deciding the universal audience in some arbitrary way, such that there are as many universal audiences as there are arguers. It is a matter of the argumentative situation determining the limits on how the universal audience can be conceived in that case, and the respondent or particular audience playing a co-authoring role in that decision” (Part III: The Rational Core of Rhetoric). Furthermore, he argues that (ii) “reasonableness arises from the practices of actual reasoners, it is not an abstract code independent of them that they consult for corroboration” (Part III: The Rational Core of Rhetoric). In sum, “argumentation grows out of audience, develops according to the demands of and interaction with a (fluid) audience, and is measured by a further audience, the universal audience in each situation” (4. Conclusion).

While I can clearly see and admit the advantage of emphasising the role of the audience for sharpening and developing arguments, I am still reluctant to accept the view of rhetoric as “being reasonable on its own terms,” if that means that argumentation is measured exclusively by the audience. Before one admits that the proper fundament of the reasonableness of rhetoric is the reasonableness of the audience, several other points have to be clarified. First of all, the question arises whether the universal audience is the measure of reasonableness *eo ipso* in each situation. Or does it perform this function only in some situations, while in others not? This question leads immediately to another one, that is, how do the cognitive claims of an audience relate to other standards of reasonability such as, for example, the principle of non-contradiction? Are the former universal in the same way as the latter?

What lurks behind the afore-going questions is the suggestion that, by emphasizing the importance of the audience, Professor Tindale defends a weak concept of reasonableness. As I am going to argue, there is nothing to object against Tindale’s assumption, quoted above, that reasonableness arises from the practices of actual reasoners. However, this assumption does not help to ward off the justifiable criticism advanced by van Eemeren and Grootendorst, according to which reasonableness is a relativistic concept.

In order to clarify my point, I am going first to distinguish between two different concepts of reasonableness: a strong and a weak one. Drawing upon this distinction, I shall further demonstrate in what sense Tindale refers to a weak concept, whereas the pragma-dialectic approach applies a strong concept of reasonableness. This clarification should help us, finally, to understand to what extent rhetoric might be considered as reasonable on its own terms.

If one departs from the colloquial use of the word “reasonable” or “rational”,¹ one notices immediately that this term can encompass several different things depending on the objective area to which it is applied: deliberation, opinions, or arguments may be candidates for reasonableness within the cognitive area; actions within the behavioral area; and desires within the emotional area. When we call discourses, arguments, or thoughts reasonable, we are referring to them neither as to linguistic constructs nor as regards the respective content of their declarative statements (technically speaking, the proposition or the propositional subject matter). Such a content is either true or false, but not reasonable or unreasonable. Rather, by using the expression “reasonable” we are describing opinions in a much broader sense. In the following, “opinion” should be understood as a proposition held to be true. Holding a proposition to be true includes believing, expecting, supposing *something*, being convinced *of something*, considering its possibility, etc. So, holding an opinion is a relation between a subject (S) and a proposition (P), which can be formalized as “S is of the opinion that *p*...”. To be exact, one has to add: *S* is of the opinion *p* at a certain point in time or during a certain period of time (*t*), i.e. “*S* is of the opinion *p* at time *t*.”

A further insight into the meaning of the word “reasonable” can be gained by looking at its opposite. In contrast with simple descriptive words, the expression “unreasonable” possess a normative component in our cultural context. To say that someone is behaving unreasonably means not only to suggest that a certain statement or action of the subject has the named characteristic. It also usually includes a negative evaluation or criticism of such a statement or action, since standards of reasonability are not fulfilled. These standards may be rendered briefly by the keyword “well-founded”: opinions, actions, etc. are reasonable when they can be justified via reasons. Hence it is obvious that the meaning of “reasonable” is relative: opinions are defended relative to the argumentation standards possessed by the subject *S* in relation to the respective facts at the time *t*. And we could even add, following Tindale, that those standards of the subject are not isolated from a certain audience, but rather for the most part adapted from it. Whenever relative arguments are present, we can speak of “reasonableness” in a weak sense. In contrast, a “strong” concept of

rationality requires that the criteria to which one refers in the process of the relative substantiation of opinions and actions can themselves be proved as reasonable. The strong concept of reasonableness lays thus claim to universality: it implies that certain standards of substantiation can be justified independently of any audience. Regarding arguments, this would mean that there are norms, goals, or values which can be justified independently of a given specific audience which is being addressed.

At this point it seems necessary to introduce another distinction not always sufficiently addressed in the discussion of the relative validity of rationality. Whether or not it is reasonable to have opinion *p* depends on two conditions: on the one hand, on the respective cognitive condition; on the other hand, on the rules of rationality. By cognitive condition, I mean the whole set of accepted opinions, convictions, evidences, and goals possessed by a certain person at a certain period in time in front of a specific audience. This cognitive state must be distinguished from the rules of rationality. To be sure, both of them go hand in hand at every stage of reasoning. Even so, they can always be disentangled as its separate components.

Reasonableness is relative, first of all, with regard to the respective cognitive initial state. Secondly, it is relative with regard to certain rules or standards of theoretical reasonableness. Discussing the problem of reasonableness and its relativity, then, one has to be aware of the kind of relativity being referred to. The relativity regarding the respective cognitive initial state seems not only unproblematic, but it is even inevitable. The second type of relativity is different, though, in that it regards the rules of reasonableness. In so doing, it raises the question whether or not one can find such rules applicable to all audiences and, if so, which ones. A major problem of the relativistic view of reasonableness is that the expressions "reasonable" and "substantiated" lose their normal meaning. According to this view, "reasonable" is nothing more than "substantiated" for a certain person or a group of persons; in other words, for a specific audience. For the so-called "relativists", the rules of reasonableness are exclusively dependent on the particular audience or context; they allow no context-independent judgment. As a result, any claim to universality is denied. Therefore, a relativist will maintain that standards of rationality are completely arbitrary and cannot be justified by reasons which go beyond the specific audience.

Where does the distinction between cognitive claims and rules of rationality and the related distinction between weak and strong sense of reasonableness lead us regarding Christopher Tindale's claim that rhetoric is reasonable on its own terms? From what has been said so far it follows that we might indeed admit reasonableness of rhetoric in

a weak sense. Such a reasonableness would be founded upon the reasonableness of the audience, which corresponds exactly to its specific cognitive claims. I readily agree with Tindale that the specific cognitive claims of the audience have to be taken into account in any argumentation move. But I cannot see why and how this point could ward off the criticism according to which reasonableness of rhetoric, taken only in this weak sense, would be anything else than relativistic.

NOTE

¹ As Christopher Tindale, I also treat here 'reasonable' and 'rational' as synonyms.