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Commentary on Shirali

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Commentary on Nima Shirali's "Plato, Aristotle, and Generative Logos in Democratic Deliberation"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nima Shirali's paper makes an interesting and innovative attempt at establishing common ground between Plato's and Aristotle's views on rhetoric, and especially on deliberative rhetoric. The basic idea is the implementation of a concept of "generative *logos*" in the theories of those two thinkers. This concept very clearly originates from Noam Chomsky's concept of a 'generative grammar' (p. 7). Although it is as a rule not illegitimate to employ modern concepts in interpreting ancient thinkers, nonetheless some methodological reflections may be in order. In this respect some questions impose themselves, but I will confine myself to just a few points.

2. "GENERATIVE *LOGOS*" GENERATED

Shirali's pivotal term of "generative *logos*" creates a number of problems. Shirali uses the term 'generative' in a terminological sense. Yet it is hard to find any concise, clear-cut definition of that term in his explanations. In section 6 he resorts to the sixteenth-century Spanish physician Juan Huarte, who was one of Chomsky's main inspiring sources, for an explanation that associates the term with Latin 'ingenero,' which means "engender" or "generate." Yet in Huarte's system, the generation of new thoughts is primarily associated with his second level of human intelligence, namely "normal human intelligence," not with the third one, i.e. "true creativity." Yet later on Shirali admits that Chomsky's 'generative' theory on language, which does not go "beyond the bounds of linguistics and psychology," is not the basis of his analysis, but just a "valuable paradigm" (p. 9), and when he states that "generative *logos*" must be (1) adaptive to context, and (2) creative (p. 9), which I take to be his defining criteria, he appears to associate it with Huarte's third level of "true creativity."

Definitions of 'generative' I find elsewhere refer to models that have the capacity to generate all individual surface items of a system from a limited set of abstract basic rules, and which in a self-contained manner react independently to different stimuli. In that sense, rhetoric would perhaps qualify as a kind of language system on a superior

level (possibly Huarte's third level) that could be described in an analogous way by Chomsky's generative model.

Logos, a Greek term that is notoriously equivocal and hard to define, would also perhaps call for some more substantial explanation than just a single remark in a footnote that it will be used "to denote both reason and speech" (p. 2, note 3). But, most crucially, when Shirali states that "generative *logos*" is "a term used by the Stoics" (p. 2), which, for him, in a way seems to legitimate its application also to Plato and Aristotle, one would wish to see some reference as to sources and context and on the precise Greek term that would underlie such a notion. Certainly, *logos* was a core term and concept in Stoic philosophy. One association might be that, in Stoic physics, *logos* was taken to be the active substance or principle of all reality, acting on matter as the passive substance. In that context, *logos* might perhaps be called productive; it represents Universal Reason and is also equated with Fate or primordial fire. But this is physics, and even there to my knowledge there is no such expression as "generative *logos*." Or are we to think of the concept of "*logos spermatikos*" or "seminal *logos*," which, however, means that parts of universal cosmic *logos* can be found in each being that has a soul and a mind? In Stoic grammar and philosophy of language, on the other hand, *logos* has a completely different function as the common term for any meaningful articulate linguistic utterance, and it is not referred to as a productive or "generative" principle. Hence, without any more precise explanation, the concept of "generative *logos*" as an ancient notion remains a puzzle.

3. (RE)BUILDING BRIDGES: PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

Shirali's main objective, for which he uses his concept of "generative *logos*," is to "create a bridge" (p. 1) between the rhetorical theories of Plato and Aristotle. It is evident that those theories are related to one another, since to a large extent Aristotle's theory is a response to and a critique of Plato's very critical attitude towards rhetoric. This historical relationship, however, is not always fully clear in Shirali's text, as when he states that Plato "echoes" Aristotle's notions (p. 4) or that Plato "takes a bold step by dissolving [a] dichotomy" posited by Aristotle (p. 15).

But Shirali rightly emphasizes the pivotal point of difference, namely that for Aristotle rhetoric has the epistemological status of an art (*téchnē*), which it is clearly denied by Plato. For Plato, rhetoric is nothing more than a mere routine or drill (*empeiría*) acquired by frequent practise; at least that is how he qualifies rhetoric as it was practiced and promoted by the sophists (see Plato, *Gorgias* 462b3-463b6; *Phaedrus* 260e2-7; 270b4-9; *Laws* XI, 938a3-4).

Aristotle, on the other hand, views rhetoric as neither a mere routine nor as a science (*epistḗmē*) in the full sense of the word, i.e. theoretical knowledge based on firm axioms that are themselves either self-evident or sufficiently proven (see *Nicomachean Ethics* VI 6, 1140b31-1141a1; *Posterior Analytics* II 19, 100a5-9), but as an art. Yet an art—as Aristotle himself defines the term in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (VI 4, 1140a10; a20-21)—is "a productive habit combined with true reason." An art is thus not concerned with fixed and invariable entities (as is science), but with the contingencies of human life, with things "that might as well be other than they are," as Aristotle puts it (e.g. *Nicomachean Ethics* V 7, 1134b31; VI 4, 1140a1; a22-23; *Rhetoric* I 2, 1357a35-36). Rhetoric, for Aristotle, is thus in the first place a productive activity, and the counterpart

to its corresponding "practical" habit, which is prudence (*phrónēsis*), one of the intellectual virtues. This might be of relevance, since Shirali views *phrónēsis* at the basis of both rhetoric and democratic governance (pp. 2-3). But production (*poíēsis*) and practice (*prãxis*) (see pp. 4-5) in Aristotle are fundamentally different categories that should never be confounded, and rhetoric in Aristotle should better not be called a "practical art" (pp. 2 and 4). As an art, rhetoric is nonetheless capable of using method (see *Rhetoric* I 1, 1354a8; b23; 1355a4) and of producing generalizable knowledge about the ways in which it functions. This is what marks it off from mere routine (see *Rhetoric* I 1, 1354a6-11). A productive (or "generative"?) element in rhetoric is thus easy to find in Aristotle.

As for Plato, Shirali makes use of a distinction between "deceptive" and "non-deceptive *logos*" once posited for Gorgias by George B. Kerferd (1981, pp. 133-135). Continually based on Harvey Yunis (1996) as his source, he also rightly discerns an earlier Platonic view on rhetoric as exemplified in the *Gorgias*, according to which rhetoric is mere flattery (p. 5), from a "revised view" that can be found in the *Phaedrus* (p. 11) and that would be characterized by a "*combination* of non-deceptive *logos* and *technē*" and consequently by a rejection of the dichotomy between rhetoric and instruction, i.e. the imparting of serious knowledge (pp. 11-12). But when, in the following, the concept of dialectic is used to establish a link between Plato and Aristotle, caution will be advisable. For Plato's and Aristotle's conceptions of dialectic are quite different: Whereas for Aristotle dialectic (to which rhetoric is the counterpart) is the art of discourse in dialogue vs. monological speech, Plato's understanding of dialectic is aimed at the methodical ascent to the one ultimate truth founded in the idea of the good itself, by way of the technique of "collection-and-division" cited by Yunis (1996, pp. 195-197). That for Plato dialectic (in the latter sense) is the true rhetoric, is a fundamental view of Yunis's, which he has expounded in greater detail in later publications (e.g. 2005).

Moreover, Plato's views on extempore speech and speech-writing must of course be contemplated against the background of his fundamental philosophical critique of writing that is expounded later in the Phaedrus (273c-278e). It may also be mentioned in passing that the practice of logography was not primarily practiced "for political use," as Shirali seems to imply (p. 12/21), but was mostly confined to judicial speech (yet of course before the *dẽmos* as judges) (see Yunis 1996, p. 175).

Shirali is certainly right, on the other hand, in emphasizing the role of emotions in rhetoric and the avoidance of force and violence as one of its objectives as a common trait in Plato and Aristotle (sections 7 and 8). And he is also right in stressing the importance of the adaptability of rhetorical *logos* to a particular audience (p. 13) and to particular situations (e.g. p. 10) in the ever-changing world of political debate. It may be arguable, however, if we really need a complex theory of amorphous and unstructured *logos* acting upon equally unstructured and shapeless (p. 36) political settings to describe that fact, which is almost a commonplace among rhetoricians and has been expressed in the description of rhetoric as a "stochastic art," that goes back to the Stoic Chrysippus, aptly explained by Yunis as follows:

> [R]hetoric is a conjectural art, one that involves flexibility and approximation [...] the rules of rhetoric are not invariable but must be bent according to the demands of the occasion." (Yunis 1998).

4. DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATION: WHY NOT THE SOPHISTS?

It strikes me that Shirali, in his analysis of the role of rhetorical *logos* in democratic deliberation, concentrates entirely on Plato and Aristotle, who were both not really well-disposed toward democratic governance, and does not take into account the early sophists. Their all-important pivotal term in fact was *logos*. They were highly interested in what we now call rhetoric (themselves they used to call it the 'art of *logos*') and also in the way language works as a system, and they were deeply involved in and influenced by the system of democratic governance that was practiced in Athens at their time. Obviously greatly impressed by the way political and judicial decisions were reached by way of open debate in Athenian political assemblies and popular courts, they interpreted the 'art of *logos*' as a kind of combat or competition (*agōn*), and viewed *logos* as a flexible tool and weapon in this competition.

Since Protagoras, for instance, advanced the view that two antithetic *logoi* could be formulated on each and every issue, and that the weaker *logos* could always be made to be the stronger by arguing (see Schiappa), and since Gorgias, in his *Praise of Helen*, ardently described the power of *logos* to mould and shape both the emotions and the opinions of any audience (see Segal 1962), it would appear that a lot could be gained by at least integrating the sophists into Shirali's narrative. It should also be noted that Plato's views on rhetoric are only fully intelligible if viewed against the background of sophistic rhetoric.

5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Shirali's paper presents an interesting thesis that is well worth thinking about. On the whole, it is also fairly well-argued, and its overall result is not unconvincing, even if at times it reconfirms things already known. If there are problems with details, as pointed out above, these may partly be due to the fact that the author appears to have worked not always from the primary texts but from a rather small selection of very heterogeneous secondary sources, which he follows more than closely, but the selection of which is little accounted for. In dealing with ancient authors, however, recourse to the primary texts is definitely imperative, even if read in translation. That said, I wish to emphasize that Shirali's thoughts are as a whole inspiring and provocative, and I hope they will be further pursued, thereby eliminating some of the problems. To that end, in the first instance a clarification of the precise meaning of the concept of "generative *logos*" will be paramount.

Link to paper

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