

FROM *VITA CONTEMPLATIVA* TO *VITA ACTIVA*: CHAÏM  
PERELMAN AND LUCIE OLBRECHTS-TYTECA'S  
RHETORICAL TURN

David Frank

*University of Oregon*

Michelle Bolduc

*University of Oregon*

*Abstract*

Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's *Traité de l'argumentation: la nouvelle rhétorique* marked a revolution in twentieth-century rhetorical theory. In this essay, we trace Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's turn from logical positivism and the accepted belief that reason's domain was the *vita contemplativa* to rhetoric and its use as a reason designed for the *vita activa*. Our effort to tell the story of their rhetorical turn, which took place between 1944 and 1950, is informed by an account of the context in which they considered questions of reason, responsibility, and action in the wake of World War II.

"In the aftermath of the Second World War," writes Christian Delacampagne in his *History of Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, "it became necessary . . . to understand how, in the space of two centuries, the Enlightenment could have lost its way as it did. This meant having to treat reason itself as a case to be opened up for investigation" (1999, 157). One key illustration of Delacampagne's observation is H. J. Pos' welcome to the Tenth International Congress of Philosophy on August 11, 1948. Pos called his colleagues to open up the case of reason and challenge the received tradition restricting the realm of reason to speculation and inaction (1948, 3-10). The Tenth Congress, Pos observed, had been scheduled to take place in Groningen, Netherlands in 1941, with Leo Polak presiding as President. Polak, Pos noted poignantly, was a secular Jew, excluded from university teaching when the Nazis occupied the Netherlands, and died in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp on December 9, 1941.

The loss of Polak, and many other philosophers during the War, prompted Pos to observe that philosophy was now more concerned with life itself “much more than before” (5). This new attitude, Pos continued, confronted

An old speculative tradition we inherited from a certain current of Greek thought whose leader was Aristotle and whose device was that contemplation was the sweetest and noblest occupation. This is the attitude that created metaphysics and ontology and that flourished until the Renaissance, and the times, when, as Aristotle holds too, rest was deemed nobler than motion and the sense of the eternal prevailed over the temporal and secular aspects of things. (6)

Reason, Pos argued, must be active in time, and in a fitting chiasmus, called philosophers to a “life of reason and reason as a life” (6). Reason must be enlarged, insisted Pos, to include knowing, willing, and feeling, and liberated to assist with the problems of the practical life, both personal and social.

Chaïm Perelman, a professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (Free University of Brussels), was in the audience. Like Polak, Perelman was a secular Jew, dismissed by the Nazis from his post in 1941 because he was a Jew. Unlike Polak, Perelman survived and after the liberation of Belgium in September 1944, returned to the Free University as a professor (Schreiber 1999). Perelman, who had written on questions of logic before the war, started and completed a book on justice during the war, took up the case of reason and its relationship with justice after the war (Perelman 1945b). Approaching the notion of justice through the prism of logical positivism as he had before the war, he reached the conclusion that there were no reasonable grounds for justice. He found this approach dissatisfying (Perelman 1979, 8).

Until his turn to rhetoric, Perelman remained under the spell of Aristotle and the classical tradition as he continued to make a clear distinction between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, agreeing with the Enlightenment philosophers that the domain of reason was the latter (Perelman 1944-1945). Hannah Arendt’s work on the origins of the separation of the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* is much more developed than that of Perelman, and she traces the notion of the *vita contemplativa* to the Greek notion of *bios theōrētikos*, which became the “ideal of contemplation (*theōria*)” (Arendt 1958a, 14). In the Classical tradition, the contemplative life trumped the active life at every turn. Arendt

observed, “Traditionally and up to the beginning of the modern age, the term *vita activa* never lost its negative connotation of “unquiet” . . .” (1958a, 15). Speech and rhetoric, which manifest themselves in noise, disturbance, movement, and change, were at best preludes to the objective of the silence of contemplation and eternity. Aristotle, Arendt continued, made clear distinctions between quiet and unquiet, stillness and movement, and the absolute nature of Truth. The *vita contemplativa*, in this vision, sheds political activity and debate, as argument does not yield the experience of the eternal, which “discloses itself to mortal eyes only when all human movements and activities are at perfect rest. Compared with this attitude of quiet, all distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* disappear. Seen from the viewpoint of contemplation, it does not matter what disturbs the necessary quiet, as long as it is disturbed” (1958a, 15-16).

Like Arendt and Pos, Perelman sought a more robust and humane expression of reason, one that would live in the world. Perelman taught a course on logic during the first semester of his return to the Free University. A notebook in the Free University archives, labeled 1944-1945, contains a narrative outline of his view of logic during this period. In the first paragraph of the notebook, he wrote, “philosophy deals with matters of contemplation, not action” (1944-1945, 2). Because philosophy and reason were limited to “matters of contemplation,” it followed that there could be no reasonable or rational bases for the *vita activa*. This conclusion was troubling for Perelman, as it was for Pos and other philosophers in the immediate aftermath of the war. In this paper, we chart the trajectory of Perelman’s attempt to join the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* to the life of reason through a new and revitalized rhetoric.

### *Reason, the Vita Activa, and the Reconstruction of Europe*

In the wake of the war, Perelman wrote a host of articles and smaller think pieces on reason, logic, and civil affairs. A voracious reader, Perelman took notes of the many books and articles that dealt with issues of rationality and freedom. He struggled in his writings between 1944 and 1948 to bring liberty, reason, rationality, and justice into the realm of action. In the fifteen articles that he published between 1945 and 1949, he endeavored to work through

the limitation of reason to the *vita contemplativa* (Perelman 1945a, 1946, 1947d, 1947a, 1948d, 1948c, 1948b, 1948g, 1949e, 1949c, 1949d, 1949b, 1950a, 1950c). His efforts took place against a backdrop of a dominant philosophical movement of anti-metaphysics and a French sponsored culture of intellectual irresponsibility.

European and British philosophy immediately before and after the war was characterized by its anti-metaphysical stance (Collins 1998, 751). When Perelman engaged in his struggles to move reason into the public realm, he did so in the face of two conflicting expressions of anti-metaphysical philosophy: logical positivism and a cluster consisting of phenomenism- existentialism- deconstructionism. Collins notes that “the two antithetical traditions are network cousins, full of common ancestors . . . All sides of the realigning factions of the twentieth century emerged from the struggles over the foundation of mathematics at the turn of the century” (751). The logical positivists fully embraced the foundation of mathematics and denied metaphysics as meaningless; those in the cluster assumed nominalism, rejecting as absurd any notion of metaphysics or principles that would guide action.

Placing his own thinking in context, Perelman wrote: “in 1929, the same year which saw the publication of the Vienna Circle’s manifesto, that my own philosophical development began” (Perelman 1979, 55). The manifesto, entitled “Scientific Conception of the World: The Vienna Circle,” codified the beliefs of Europe’s most prominent scientists, including Gustav Bergmann, Rudolf Carnap, and Kurt Gödel. These scientists celebrated logical empiricism, scientific empiricism, and neo-positivism, holding to a vision of a unified science. The manifesto reduced proof to deduction, induction, calculation, and experiment, creating a climate in which philosophy, value judgments, metaphysics, ethics, and religion were dismissed as activities of the irrational. In the postwar period, Perelman argued that this climate contributed to the “torment” of those who lived during the period between 1929 and the postwar period who could not turn to scientific empiricism for rules for action. In a remarkable address to his students in 1948, Perelman explained:

The theoretical crisis that tormented your elders during the period between the two wars [was due to the] . . . limitation of scientific method to scientific problems, [which] left us without rules of action, without conviction that one could honestly accept outside of science itself. (1949a, 46-47)

Perelman acknowledged the descriptive powers of science, and posed questions about its limitations:

. . . how do we find directives for the action that, itself, is not satisfied at all with describing but wants to influence what is? Where do we find the rules of action? Loyalty to scientism could not provide them. We lived with a certain unease at the Free University because we could not oppose a positive doctrine to fascist slogans, to dogmatism, to fanaticism, to the appeal to force that these doctrines advocated. And among a large number of us, who were young at the time, we saw a skepticism appear that could too easily degenerate into cynicism, a lack of discipline that could turn into anarchy, an indifference that too often could resemble cowardice. (46)

Scientism thus did not provide rules for action, according to Perelman. For Sartre, who like Perelman rejected metaphysics, existentialism provided an answer in absolutized action.

Sartre himself delineates existentialism as action. As Wilkinson recounts, Sartre explained in 1945 that existentialism “defines man through action” (81). This view of action was devoid of faith in reason (Judt 1992, 1998). The “early” Sartrean philosophy was best displayed in his *L'être et le néant* of 1943. In this work, Sartre valorized action, but only as an expression of subjective choice. As Tony Judt notes, Sartre rejected tradition or any form of social conventions, holding that “all subjectivities remain totally separate and doomed to infinite and unresolvable collision”(1992, 80).

Sartre’s existentialism “precluded any attention to ethics and morality”(Judt 1992, 80). In Judt’s opinion,

Engagement and freedom, then meant something very distinctive and morally neutral to Sartre. Since we have no grounds for seeking to bring about any particular social or political objective, for which we could offer no universally valid or acceptable argument, we act as we choose for reasons that are not intrinsically better or worse than those of people who act in opposite ways. (1992, 81)

Radical skepticism, Perelman argued, was not a positive doctrine, and was unable to provide the grounds of value choice and action.

Judt’s term of “moral bifocalism” is useful to understand the philosophical context of the postwar period, because it clearly describes the unwillingness of French intellectuals to think seriously about public ethics, especially in two major areas: the postwar self-induced collective amnesia of French intellectuals regarding their role in France’s Vichy past, and the utter absence of consensus about

justice in postwar France, which led to their confused response to injustice, especially in Communist systems (Judt 1992, 47, 75, 178). With perhaps the exceptions of Aron, Blum, and Camus, many French and Belgian intellectuals—and Judt includes Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Mounier, and de Beauvoir among them—failed to act responsibly because they had rejected liberal democracy, and in the void, adopted philosophical and moral outlooks that could not yield rules for ethics or action. Paul De Man, a Belgian who set forth another famous theory of rhetoric, is a clear example of Judt’s thesis (LaCapra 1992). De Man, who attended the Free University during the same years as Perelman, and who studied in the same department during the 1939-1940 academic year, collaborated with the Nazis as a writer for the Brussels newspaper *Le Soir* (De Man et al. 1989).

The reigning philosophical movements were thus of no help to Perelman, given their declared rejection of metaphysics and social axiology. Recognizing this failure of ethics and responsibility, Perelman sought to construct a system of reason and a new rationality designed for the *vita activa*.

### *Perelman, Rhetoric, and the Vita Activa*

In his diagnosis of the tragedy of World War II, Perelman found both logical positivism and radical skepticism complicit in the actions taken by the totalitarians and those who should have resisted tyranny. The key notion in this analysis was responsibility. Those who reduced reason to scientism and logical positivism, holding with the Vienna Circle that value judgments were meaningless, were absolved of responsibility for actions taken outside the range of this constricted view of reason. Similarly, the radical skeptic and those who professed Sartrean existentialism could not be held responsible for their actions because no value or standard could be held better or stronger than another. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca would later codify this point. “The fanatic”, they write, “bows to an absolute and irrefragable truth; the skeptic refutes the commitment [to any truth] under the pretext that he does not find it sufficiently definitive” (1969a, 69). The exclusion of reason from the realm of justice and action constituted a crisis of reason, of which Pos spoke at the Tenth International Congress.

The several short articles Perelman wrote during this period (1945-1950) dealt directly with the crisis of reason. He was fully aware that before and during the war reason had been kidnapped by totalitarian governments and put in their service. During the same time period, Horkheimer and Adorno had completed their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, concluding that the “fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant,” and Hannah Arendt had located deduction as the primary logic of totalitarianism (Arendt 1958b; Horkheimer and Adorno 1994, 3). Perelman agreed with this critique of reason, but saw the dangers of rejecting the authority of reason without providing a positive alternative (Perelman 1949a, 40). Long before Habermas set forth the notion of a “performative contradiction” and Foucault warned of the Enlightenment “blackmail” of reason by holding it within the realm of the *vita contemplativa*, Perelman worked through a vision of reason that navigated between the Charbydis of Enlightenment certainty and the Scylla of radical skepticism to a realm of reason that dealt with human opinion as a legitimate form of knowledge (Habermas 1987, 112; Foucault 1984, 41-42). He sought an expression of reason that did not constrain liberty, like the iron chains of the syllogism, but still had the power to offer reasonable decisions. In all of these writings, it is clear that Perelman was motivated to move reason into the realm of action to allow for judgments in the public sphere. He established the conditions of his rhetorical turn in a series of essays on liberty, responsibility, free choice, democracy, rationality and reason, and a critically important article in which he displayed a metaphysics for a system of reason based on freedom and probable truths. A brief summary of the central ideas raised in these essays will demonstrate how they form the backdrop of the Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s new rhetoric project and its aspirations.

*Liberty and Responsibility.* In his essay on the two problems of human liberty, delivered to the Tenth International Congress of Philosophy, Perelman observed:

The first problem with liberty is the one that ties this notion to the one of responsibility. If certain beings are considered as agents in the moral domain, if they can be the objects of favorable or unfavorable moral appreciation, if one can praise them or blame them, if one distinguishes them as objects and others as beings that are considered irresponsible, it is because they possess liberty. It is liberty that distinguishes men from the rest of nature; it gives man the quality of agent and accords value to an act that he realizes. In nature, under the necessary laws, there will only be phenomenon. (1948c, 580)

Accordingly, reason for Perelman would need to allow for responsibility and human liberty. Humans have agency, Perelman argued, because they can make choices, and these choices, in turn, link the *vita contemplativa* with the *vita activa*. Perelman was then led to consider the nature of the “good choice” (Perelman 1948b).

*Free choice and decision.* One must think before one acts, wrote Perelman, and one cannot act without choosing among various options. Not to choose is nevertheless to act by not choosing (Perelman 1948b, 143). Humans, given the liberty of choice, have traditions and social mores that can be used to help frame questions of values, justice and action. These traditions and mores are open to challenge and revision, but they still provide some grounding for value choice and action. New issues and experiences may place social traditions into conflict with the individual conscience. When such conflict takes place, it may be necessary to rectify the social tradition. Here, Perelman has introduced a theme that eventually blossoms into the New Rhetoric’s take on epideictic discourse, as he features the importance of social tradition as a contingent ground of decision making. Humans, Perelman concludes, have both freedom to choose and are guided by socially embedded systems of rationality. Accordingly, the choices leading to actions have grounding in reason. This grounding, which links freedom to rationality, flourishes in systems that are authentically democratic.

*Truth and democracy.* In two articles, Perelman investigated the relationships among truth, free inquiry, and democracy (Perelman 1948f, 1946). Perelman devoted “Free Thought and Democracy” to a brief rehearsal of the role played by the Free University in the resistance to the German occupation. Perelman maintained that the University had played a central role in defying the Nazis (Perelman 1946, 37-38). The period between the two wars, Perelman observed, was characterized by a negative critique of authority expressed as anti-fascism (37). After the war, resistance to authority, influenced by the totalitarian impulse to collapse unique entities into the whole, emphasized the preservation of the individual. Each individual has a special dignity, deserving of respect, and it is here that democracy, in vesting the opinion of the individual with a protected status, functions to secure an irreducible pluralism (40-41).

A truly democratic society assumes as normative the existence of many and multiple absolute values, some which may conflict at



given times (Perelman 1948f, 37). In comparison to totalitarian societies that cannot tolerate the co-existence of opposing absolute values, democratic societies thrive on the confusion and disorder of variegated value hierarchies. At this point, Perelman confesses he is reluctant to go beyond Abraham Lincoln's definition of democracy as a political system in which power is vested in "the people." This definition, he suggests, should remain confused, beyond the reach of absolute clarity.

As a confused notion, democracy would lend itself to varied definitions and applications. Within this variance, Perelman concluded, would reside a view of power and institutional arrangements predicated on the values of the individuals working in concert with society. These issues were of great importance in the immediate aftermath of the War as Europe in general and Belgium in particular were seeking to rebuild civil society. The reconstruction of civil society required a much broader vision of reason, one that would participate directly in matters of value, action, and justice. Toward this end, Perelman in his writings turned to the relationship between reason and philosophy.

*Reason and Philosophy.* During this period, Perelman sought a new rationalism, and outlined what he hoped would be a much expanded view of philosophy. This outline appears in brief form in an article on Perelman's view of the philosophical method as it is distinguished from other approaches, and in an exchange between Perelman, Jean Piaget and other prominent thinkers on the need to seek a rationality capable of dealing with experience (Perelman 1948e, 1947a). Perelman broadens this outline in a long two-part article in the Swiss journal *Dialectica* in which Perelman summarized the philosophical, axiological, and sociological beliefs of his mentor, Eugène Dupréel (Perelman 1947b, 1948a). Dupréel, who had published books on the sophists, sociology, and a collection of essays on pluralism in the years 1948-49, was a major influence on Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (Olbrechts-Tyteca 1963). As Olbrechts-Tyteca recounts, Dupréel, who had highlighted the values of the sophists, the importance of opinion, encouraged them to consider the ideas of Gorgias.

Dupréel's ideas found their way to the core of Perelman's vision of a reconstituted sense of reason. In his review of Dupréel's body of work, Perelman considered the notions of knowledge, truth, necessity, chance, causality and probability, reality and appearance,

skepticism, modern logic, and what Perelman termed the “new spirit of philosophy(Perelman 1948a, 73-77).” Perelman revealed how Dupréel’s vision made possible the judgment of values and action. For our purpose, it is important to note the manner in which Perelman found in Dupréel the potential to place reason in the *vita activa*.

Dupréel was a sociologist interested in questions of value. He believed that values could be communicated and negotiated. Values were important in Perelman’s interpretation of Dupréel’s thought because they were precursors of action (Perelman 1947c, 358). Values, Dupréel maintained, were rooted in irreducible plurality. This plurality called for ambiguity, and Dupréel placed the notion of confusion against Descartes’ belief that knowledge must be clear. As such, Dupréel argued that “provisional knowledge” was legitimate, and should be included in studies of epistemology (Perelman 1948a, 75-77). Truth, necessity, chance, causality and probability, reality and appearance--key terms in logic and philosophy--were linked by Dupréel to the social and empirical worlds.

At the end of his review of Dupréel, Perelman discussed modern logic and the new philosophical insights. Modern logic and philosophy, according to Dupréel, would need a revised sense of logic that should enter the world of values and action. Dupréel insisted that room be made for the uncertain, the confused, and the unknown. However, he was equally insistent on the possibility of communication, understanding, and justice.

Although Dupréel did not value rhetoric, Perelman embellished Dupréel’s ideas, importing them into the new rhetoric project. Influenced by Dupréel, Perelman considered the failure of reason, narrowly defined by the logical positivists, to include liberty and experience. In turn, he detected the inhumanity in a rationality devoid of contact with the world, and in a later article, cited Bertrand Russell’s position that the fully rational human (a rationality that excluded emotions including empathy) would be an “inhuman monster” (Perelman 1979, 118).

Perelman’s search for a notion of reason that could embrace freedom and rationality became a life long project that he initiated with Lucie Obrechts-Tyteca in 1947. Their search led them to Paulhan’s *Les Fleurs de Tarbes, ou la Terreur dans les Lettres*. Paulhan held that rhetoric used clichés as commonplaces necessary

to secure the possibility of communication, a key notion for Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. It was, however, the appendix, which contained excerpts from Brunetto Latini's *Trésor*, which caught their attention, inspiring the new rhetoric project. Brunetto Latini (1220-1294), a Florentine rhetorician who translated Cicero's *De Inventione*, provides a key late-medieval example of the resurgent interest in rhetoric's role in human life. Latini's works, according to George Kennedy, signal the beginning of the study of rhetoric in vernacular languages (Kennedy 1999, 216). In part three of *Li livres dou Trésor*, within a discussion of politics, Latini composes an exposition of Cicero's logic, with its emphasis on rhetoric, the "most important science relative to governing the city" (Latini 1993, 279). Latini's work illustrated the broad vision of reason, rhetoric, and civil affairs defining the *vita activa* during the Renaissance, which, according to Dominic A. LaRusso, was "marked by its concern for humanitas, that unique blend of conception, passion, and expression" (LaRusso 1978, 55). When Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca read Brunetto's translation of Cicero's rhetoric, they called it a "revelation" (Olbrechts-Tyteca 1963, 5-6; Perelman 1977, 9)

This revelation was sparked by Cicero's claim that rhetoric was essential: "for if there were no speech, there would be no city, nor would there be any establishment of justice or of human company . . . ." (Latini 1993, 294). Here, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca were reminded of the role rhetoric played in the Renaissance and in the ancient time period as a vehicle in the *vita activa*. Perelman, in particular, must have been drawn to the connection Cicero made between rhetoric and justice. Even more important, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca rediscovered an expression of reason located between scientism and radical skepticism: the reason of practical wisdom. From here, Perelman saw the connection between liberty and reason cast as rhetoric. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca situate their work within this very tradition in the introduction of the *New Rhetoric*: "the present book is mostly related to the concerns of the Renaissance and, beyond that, to those certain Greek and Latin authors" who studied rhetoric (1969a, 5). They rediscovered the rhetorical tradition and then refurbished it to serve as the expression of reason intended for questions of action and value.

When Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca announced in the first pages of the *New Rhetoric* that they saw their work as a "break" from

Enlightenment thinking, they did so with the intent of emancipating reason from the metaphysics of Parmenides and the Classical tradition. In his later writings, Perelman unveils the metaphysical foundation of the *vita contemplativa* in the poem, "On Nature," by the pre-Socratic Parmenides. Perelman points to the "everyday experience" of a "variety of different beings and phenomena" and that the "birth of Western metaphysics is to be traced to the great poem of Parmenides, who sets against this multiplicity of appearances an eternal and uniform reality conforming to the demands of reason. Parmenides' philosophy takes the form of an ontological monism . . ." (Perelman, 1979 62). Parmenides, according to Perelman, "started the centuries-old debate . . . which has set philosophy against rhetoric . . ." (62). Under the influence of Parmenides, philosophy and philosophers in the Western tradition have sought impersonal truth, condemning rhetoricians for their concern with the vagaries of human opinion (Perelman 1982, 153).

Perelman crystallizes his quarrel with Parmenides and the Classical tradition in his response to Stanley Rosen (Perelman 1959). He traces this tradition beyond Antiquity, through the late nineteenth century: "What I call the classical tradition, starting with Plato and Aristotle, continues with St. Augustine, St. Thomas, Duns Scotus, Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza and is *carried on by empiricism and logical positivism*, as it is represented by early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*" (86). Perelman continued:

. . . the tradition I called classical assigns but little importance, as far as achieving science and contemplation goes, either to practice or to the historical and situated aspects of knowledge. . . . This viewpoint is held in common by Plato and Aristotle, as well as by thinkers such as Descartes . . . The tradition I call classical includes all those who believe that by means of self-evidence, intuitions--either rational or empirical--or supernatural revelation, the human being is capable of acquiring knowledge of immutable and eternal truths, which are the perfect and imperfectable reflexion of an objective reality. (86)

Perelman does underplay what Kimball has described as the story, beginning with Isocrates and Plato, of the debate between the orators and the philosophers. This story, in which the figure of Cicero looms large, concerns a resistance to the speculative impulse in Hellenistic thought. This resistance was not meant to supplant the *vita contemplativa* with the *vita activa*; rather, it was intended to align the two realms of reason and reasoning. The speculative philosophers, Cicero argued, were insisting on a false choice.

Thought and action, wisdom and expression, must be joined. Roman orators and those of the Italian Middle Ages insisted on the value of the *vita activa*: their philosophically-grounded rhetoric sets forth the role that reason might play in human affairs and questions of justice. The centrality of *humanitas* is a touchstone of Perelman's efforts in the post war period to extend reason into the *vita activa*. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca worked ten years to develop a philosophical rationale for extending a rhetorically-inflected view of reason into the *vita activa*. In returning to the Ciceronian vision of rhetoric, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca saw it as a vehicle for reconstructing post-war Europe and the world society.

After the revelation sparked by Paulhan's work, Perelman wrote a keystone article, published in *Dialectica* in 1949, in which he distills his thinking on the crises of reason. Here, he coalesced a metaphysics and a vision of reason for the *vita activa*. Perelman discussed rhetoric for the first time in this article, linking it directly to responsibility and liberty. We quote at length from this article as it reveals an originary moment of the major rhetorical system of the twentieth century, with its narrative move of reason into the *vita activa*:

Only rhetoric, and not logic, allows the understanding of putting the principle of responsibility into play. In formal logic, a demonstration is either convincing or it is not, and the liberty of the thinker is outside of it. However, the arguments that one employs in rhetoric influence thought, but never oblige his agreement. The thinker commits himself by making a decision. His competence, sincerity, integrity, in a word, his responsibility are at stake. When it is a matter of problems concerning foundations (and all philosophical problems are tied herein), the researcher is like a judge who has to judge equitably. We may wonder if, after having sought for centuries the model of philosophical thought in mathematics and in the exact sciences, we might not instead compare it to that of lawyers, who sometimes have to develop a new law and sometimes have to apply an existing law to concrete situations.

It is this practical aspect, this almost moral aspect of philosophical activity that allows the rejection of a purely negative skepticism. The skeptic rejects every absolute criterion, but believes that it is impossible for him to decide since he lacks such a criterion, just as in first philosophies. But he forgets that in the domain of action, not to choose is still making a choice, and that one runs even greater risks by abstaining than by acting. (1949d, 198)

Perelman yokes responsibility to reason for the purpose of just action. Rhetoric moved the focus of reason, which had been concerned with matters of demonstration and the apodictic, to the

values and potential actions of the audience. The objective of the new rhetoric project, as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca would later note, was to achieve a rapprochement between rhetoric and dialectic (defined broadly as reason). To achieve this objective, Perelman identified argumentation as the rationality of the *vita activa*. Argumentation and demonstration, Perelman wrote, were members of the larger family of reason, but the latter was reserved for the *vita contemplativa*, while the former served as the living logic of the *vita activa*. This living logic was expressed as action through argument.

### *Argumentation as Reasoned Action*

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca reflected on the nature of argumentation in an article published the aftermath of their 1958 *Traité de l'argumentation: la nouvelle rhétorique*:

The action of the orator is an aggression, because it always aims to change something, to transform the listener. . . . This action intends to cause another; the desired adherence will be rendered by an action or at least by a disposition to action. It is not enough to obtain a decision; this decision truly manifests itself only if, when the time comes, it is capable of triggering an action . . . . (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958a, 116-117)

Argumentation is neither static nor esoteric for Perelman; it has a specific purpose of putting reason into action. Perelman here transforms Paulhan's idea of communication with the self, making it dialogic. Argumentation cannot be carried out in isolation; it is only in discussing with others that the difficulties that one encounters can be elucidated. Perelman here envisions the very practice of argumentation as the interaction between people, and not simply, as Paulhan describes in his concept of the creation of literature and language, the interaction of the author with his work, or the speaker with his speech. According to Perelman, the action of an orator is an argument designed to inspire that audience to another action, a notion we discuss more fully below (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958a). This was not the primary objective of a demonstrative proof, or apodictic logic. Perelman held that argument takes place in history with a specific purpose: to move the listener to make a decision, thereby creating in the audience the disposition to act.

Perelman thus folds his discussions of liberty and responsibility into a theory of argumentative action. When a person makes a decision, he judges the plausibility of different argumentative theses. In the act of judging, the person must assume the responsibility of his decision and of his choice. Indeed, the decision-making process, the movement of time, and change are important as audiences and reason adapt to new experiences and contexts. Consequently, in order to have some moral or even simply human value, this decision cannot be a necessary choice, and yet in the same regard it cannot be without justification. A decision must be predicated upon an individual's thoughtful and considered reflection on the possible choices, and he must be able to justify the reasons for which he came to make that decision.

In his "Quest for the Rational," Perelman ties the notion of responsibility to philosopher's creation of audience (Perelman 1950b). The "principle of responsibility" provides something near to an objective value of philosophical argumentation. The philosopher cannot deny or ignore *a priori* the opinions of those who are satisfied with a particular argumentation. If the philosopher desires to obtain the agreement of peers, he or she needs to justify this choice and explain the reasons for which it seemed preferable to him. This idea led Perelman to an emphasis on audience.

Perelman argued that the core of a new rationalism was the movement away from timeless and impersonal standards of knowledge and value to standards embraced by audiences and humans. The test of a claim or an argument is the acceptance of it by a qualified audience. Ultimately, the person making an argument is responsible to and judged by an audience. Two critical concepts in the new rhetoric project, the epideictic and the universal audience, emerge from this view of responsibility.

In a direct refutation of Sartre, Perelman writes in 1949: "Man does not find himself faced with nothingness when he has to choose, and his decisions are not absurd" (Frank and Bolduc 2003, 198). Perelman argued that humans are born into social worlds in which traditions, values, and knowledge exist to assist in value choices. These touchstones are not meaningless, as the Vienna Circle advocates and Sartre would insist, nor are they absolute as totalitarians might argue. They help in making decisions and choices, and are revisable in the face of new experience and

evidence. Accordingly, Perelman refurbished Aristotle's notion of epideictic, linking it directly to action.

Aristotle, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca write, believed that epideictic discourse had "nothing to do" with action (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969b, 48). Epideictic speeches, according to Aristotle and the ancient Greeks, were "uncontroversial and without practical consequences" (48). Audiences listened to epideictic speeches and "merely applauded and went away" (48). These speeches were "show-pieces" for an audience of spectators, and concerned themselves with the aesthetics of form. Indeed, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca argue that Aristotle conflates beauty with the aesthetic value of a speech (48).

In contrast, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca believe the epideictic is the foundational genre of discourse because it "strengthens the disposition toward action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds"(50). Epideictic discourse draws upon the language, traditions, values, and knowledge held by an audience before they hear a speech. Without question, an audience might hold repugnant or barbaric values, and these would need to give way to more tolerant and uplifting outlooks. These audiences will also hold noble values that may need to be activated. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca did not intend their critique to be a scholastic exercise. In fact, they illustrate their refurbished view of the epideictic with a reference to French inaction during World War Two. Citing Simone Weil's *The Need for Roots*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca endorse the view that had the French been called to enact their own values, those, in Weil's words, that "were already in the hearts of the people, or in the hearts of certain active elements of the nation" (54) the resistance would have been as a result more effective and widespread.

Action, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca argued, should be the result of a universal vision, one that was still rooted in the experience of life. Argumentation as an expression of reason had to have the pretensions of universality. The philosopher must create in his or her mind a universal audience; therefore, the philosopher's reasoning must be able to gain the support of all reasonable minds. However, as Perelman insisted, this universal audience is never defined by a unanimous and eternal adherence to a philosophical position; as a creation of the philosopher's own mind, it is historically and socially situated. The rational, in this conception, will vary and change according to the culture, time period, and even discipline from which



it arises. Philosophers, continues Perelman, must take into account the historical context of this universal audience, making it as complex and nuanced as the moment in which we live allows.

Like the epideictic, Perelman did not see the universal audience as an abstract concept. As the vice chair of a United Nations committee dedicated to unveiling the philosophical bases of human rights, Perelman worked with a host of philosophers to determine if there were shared beliefs across cultures regarding the status of human rights. He and his colleagues discovered, after studying the results of an international survey directed to philosophers around the world, that most cultures had traditions designed to secure human rights. This finding coincided with his initial efforts to outline a new rhetoric and his first articulation of the universal audience. Accordingly, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, a statement that captured the values of 48 nations, was in part a function of an actualized universal audience (Schreiber 1999). Scholars suggest that the lives of many hundreds of people have been spared as a result of the document (Glendon 2001). For our purposes, it illustrates how Perelman's notion of a universal audience operated in action and was unavoidably a construction affected by the time and space of the arguer and the audience.

Perelman further develops the practical aspects of time's influence on argumentation, recognizing the inextricable relationship between action and time (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958a, 118). His notion of temporality in argumentation is clearly derived from Henri Bergson's notion of time as duration (*durée*) (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958a, 131-132). Bergson's concept of *durée* characterizes time as plural, experienced by consciousness rather than an external physical framework (Lacey 1989, 17-66). Perelman uses the duality inherent in Bergson's philosophy to reverse the typical understanding of rhetoric (Lacey 1989, 3-4, 65-66, 180-181). Rhetoric is not simply devoted to figures of style, in other words, connected solely to the worlds of appearance, impurity, and the vagaries of time implicit in the notion of temporality. Rhetoric, in Perelman's formulation, is instead linked to the creativity and freedom of human experience that is Bergson's *durée*.

For Bergson, *durée* implies the liberty of the agent, of the person who reasons (Lacey 1989, 30-39). The notion of *durée* thus highlights the place of the person in history and time, and his freedom to make a certain decision. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca

translate Bergson's humanistic philosophy into a focus on the human experience of argumentation. The person who argues thus "intervenes at each moment with his stability, but also with his faculty of choice, his creative liberty, the unforeseen turns of his behavior, and the precariousness of his commitments"(Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958a, 113). More important, Perelman extends Bergson's idea of self-creation in reasoning beyond the individual, and to argument itself. Argumentation, they write, "supposes a living language, with all that this entails of tradition, of ambiguity, of permanent evolution"(122). Perelman highlights the mutable aspect of argumentation; because it is associated with living, changing humans, and takes place in an ever-changing social and historical context, argumentation is perpetually transformed based on its association with human beings and human language. As a result, Perelman considers argumentation as dependent on the social and historical context; the person who argues is bound by, and acts in accordance with, time. For Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, argumentation is unlike scientific demonstration, just as reasoning is unlike geometry for Bergson; both reject the bonds of an impersonal and universal absolute. Human reason and action are marked by their place in time.

### *Conclusion*

The evolution of Perelman's philosophy and rediscovery of rhetoric were due to the crises of reason faced by philosophers in the aftermath of World War II. Perelman understood the limitations of scientism and logical positivism and saw the danger in rejecting reason in favor of radical skepticism. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's reconstituted rhetoric was designed to expand reason beyond the realm of the *vita contemplativa* into the *vita activa*, doing so to deal with probable truths.

Perelman's rediscovery of rhetoric was, as we have illustrated, a function of an agenda shared by the larger philosophical community to consider the complicity of reason in the horrors of World War II. Between 1945 and 1950, Perelman turned from logical positivism to rhetoric, doing so to meet Pos' vision of a life influenced by reason. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca saw in Ciceronian rhetoric the possibility of reason that could yoke the *vita contemplativa* with the

*vita activa* through argumentation. Their philosophy of argument offered a partial solution to the crises of reason. Over fifty-five years after his rhetorical turn, we can acknowledge the contribution of Perelman to the rehabilitation of reason and of an articulation of a *vita activa* grounded in rhetoric.

The major question, however, remains: does a reason of rhetoric and argumentation better guarantee responsibility and humane behavior? Does a rhetorically inflected sense of reason provide for the grounds of judgment in the realm of the *vita activa*? Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca thought so, and believed that argumentation cultivated respect and tolerance, while offering the tools for judgment. We believe Perelman intuited that there was something profoundly moral and ethical about genuine argumentation.

Indeed, his intuition is supported by subsequent empirical support by the Oliners. The Oliners found that the one characteristic distinguishing those who resisted from those who collaborated with the Nazis during World War II was the parental style of childrearing. Those who resisted the Nazi tyranny came from homes in which children were encouraged to question, argue, and given the freedom to dissent. Children raised by parents who used corporal punishment or did not endorse questions or argument emerged as adults far more likely to comply with totalitarian thought and action. We believe this is a critically important insight as it positions argument and rhetoric as forces that give rise to humane behavior and concern for others. As we read the stirring words of the closing paragraphs of the *New Rhetoric*, we believe that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca succeeded in setting forth a blueprint and numerous illustrations of how reason functions rhetorically, providing civil society with a third way between absolutes. The origins of this blueprint can be found in their attempt to move reason beyond the *vita contemplativa* to the *vita activa*.

### References

- Arendt, Hannah. 1958a. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1958b. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. 2nd ed. New York: Meridian.
- \*Cicero, Marcus Tullius. 2001. *Cicero on the Ideal Orator (De Oratore)*. Translated by J. M. May and J. Wisse. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Collins, Randall. 1998. *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- De Man, Paul, Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan. 1989. *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Delacampagne, Christian. 1999. *A History of Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- \*Foucault, Michel. 1984. "What is Enlightenment?" In *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow, \_\_\_\_\_. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Frank, David A., and Michelle K. Bolduc. 2003. "Chaim Perelman's 'First Philosophies and Regressive Philosophy.' Commentary and Translation." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 16:177-207.
- Glendon, Mary Ann. 2001. *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. New York: Random House.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1987. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. 1994. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Continuum.
- Judt, Tony. 1992. *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 1998. *The Burden of Responsibility: Blum, Camus, Aron, and the French Twentieth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kennedy, George Alexander. 1999. *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*. 2nd ed. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- \*Kimball, Bruce A. 1986. *Orators & Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*. New York: Teachers College Columbia University.
- LaCapra, Dominic. 1992. "Personal, the Political and the Textual: Paul de Man as Object of Transference." *History & Memory* 4:5-38.
- Lacey, A. R. 1989. *Bergson*. London: New York: Routledge.
- \*LaRusso, Dominic Anthony. 1978. "Rhetoric in the Italian Renaissance." In *Medieval Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Medieval Rhetoric*, ed. J. J. Murphy, \_\_\_\_\_. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Latini, Brunetto. 1993. *The Book of the Treasure = Li livres dou tresor*. New York: Garland.
- Olbrechts-Tyteca, Lucie. 1963. "Rencontre avec la rhétorique." *Logique et analyse* 3:1-15.
- Oliner, Samuel P., and Pearl M. Oliner. 1988. *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*. New York: Free Press.
- Paulhan, Jean. 1941. *Les fleurs de Tarbes; ou, La terreur dans les lettres*. Paris: Gallimard.
- \*Perelman, Chaim. *Réflexions sur l'explication*.
- . 1944-1945. "Logique 1944-1945" (Notebook). In *Archives: "Chaim Perelman" Université Libre de Bruxelles*. Brussels: Belgium.
- \*———. 1945a. "La question juive." *Synthèses*: 47-63.
- . 1946. "Libre examen et démocratie." *Notes et conférences* 1:36-48.
- . 1947a. "De la méthode analytique en philosophie." *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 147: 34-46.
- . 1947b. "Fragments pour la théorie de la connaissance de M. E. Dupréel." *Dialectica* 4: 354-366.

- \*———. 1947c. fragments pour la théorie de la connaissance de M. E. Dupréel [Pieces for the Theory of Knowledge of M.E. Dupreel]. *Dialectica* 1,4, 5, :354-366, 63-77.
- . 1947d. "Morale et libre examen." *Les Cahiers du Libre Examen* 7: 3-6.
- \*———. 1948a. Fragments pour la théorie de la connaissance de M. E. Dupréel. *Dialectica* 5: 66-77.
- . 1948b. "Le problème du bon choix." *Revue de l'Institut de Sociologie* 3:383-398.
- \*———. 1948c. "Les deux problèmes de la liberté humaine." In *Library of the Xth International Congress of Philosophy*. Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing.
- . 1948d. "Logique et dialectique." *Dialectica* 2: 126-130.
- . 1948e. "Participation aux Deuxiemes Entretiens de Zurich." *Dialectica* 6:126-130, 189, 190, 249.
- \*———. 1948f. Vérité contre démocratie. *Les Cahiers du Libre Examen* 5:7-14.
- \*———. 1948g. vérité contre démocratie [Truth Versus Democracy](Excerpts for the Notebooks of Free Choice). *Cahiers du libre examen* 5:7-14.
- . 1949a. Le libre examen, hier et aujourd'hui. *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles* 1:39-50.
- . 1949b. le libre examen, hier et aujourd'hui [Free Choice, Then and Now]. *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles*:39-50.
- . 1949c. "Participation aux entretiens de lund (1947) sur la nature des problemes en philosophie." In *Publications de l'Institut International de Philosophie*, edited by R. Bayer, \_\_\_\_\_. Paris: Hermann & Cie.
- . 1949d. "Philosophies premieres et philosophie regressive." *Dialectica* 11: 175-191.
- \*———. 1950a. "Humanisme et libre examen." *Les Cahiers du libre examen* 1:3 pages.
- \*———. 1950b. La quête du rationnel. *Etudes de philosophie des sciences, en hommage à F. Gouseth*:135-142.
- \*———. 1950c. la quête du rationnel [The Search for Rationality]. *Etudes de philosophie des sciences en hommage à F. Gouseth*:135-142.
- . 1977. *L'empire rhétorique: Rhétorique et argumentation*. Paris: J. Vrin,.
- . 1982. *The Realm of Rhetoric*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- , ed. 1949e. *Liberté et raisonnement, Actes du IVe congrès des sociétés de philosophie de langue française*. Neuchatel: Éditions de la baconnière.
- Perelman, Chaïm. 1945b. *De la Justice*. Bruxelles: Université Libre de Bruxelles.
- . 1959. "Reply to Stanley H. Rosen." *Inquiry* 2:85-88.
- . 1979. *The New Rhetoric and the Humanities: Essays on Rhetoric and its Applications*. Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel.
- Perelman, Chaim, and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. 1958a. "De la temporalité comme caractère de l'argumentation." *Tempo, Archivio di filosofia* 2:115-133.
- . 1958b. *Traité de l'argumentation: La nouvelle rhétorique*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- \*———. 1969a. *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

- \*Perelman, Chaïm, and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. 1969b. *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. Notre Dame: [Ind.] University of Notre Dame Press.
- \*Pos, H. J. 1948. Speech by Mr. H. J. Pos. In *Library of the Xth International Congress of Philosophy*. Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing.
- Sartre, J.-P. 1943. *L'etre et le neant, Essai d'ontologie phenomenologique, Bibliotheque des Idees*. Paris: Gallimard.
- \*Schreiber, Jean-Philippe. 1999. "Chaïm Perelman and Double Fidelity." Brussels: Martin Buber Institute; Free University of Brussels. Unpublished manuscript.
- Weil, Simone. 1952. *The Need for Roots; Prelude to a Declaration of Duties toward Mankind*. New York; Putnam.
- Wilkinson, James D. 1981. *The Intellectual Resistance in Europe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.