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PROOF IN PHILOSOPHY

By

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TRADITIONALLY proof has been interpreted, by the rationalists as well as by the empiricists, as an operation which must lead every normal mind either to the recognition of the truth of a proposition (rationalist point of view) or to the conviction that the statement is in conformity with fact (empiricist point of view). In both conceptions every proof postulates the existence of objective data and of a faculty of perceiving and reasoning, which would allow truths and facts to be stated in an indubitable manner. To formulate all problems in such a way that they were amenable to a universally valid proof and to accept only those propositions which had this sanction—this was the ideal of rationalists and empiricists and of all whom one could call " scientists," because mathematics and physics were to them the unique model of knowledge.

The Critical Philosophy of the late nineteenth century and the progress of logic in the twentieth have forced the contemporary heirs of the scientific tradition, the adherents of Logical Empiricism, to limit their claims. Replacing the methodological imperialism of their predecessors by a technique of renunciation, they no longer contend that all problems allow, in principle, of a solution based on universally accepted proofs. They claim, however, that those regions which lie outside of possible rational or empirical proof do not deserve serious attention and ought to be left to irrational forces, and to the dreams of poets, metaphysicians and theologians.

Shall we accept this pessimism which relegates to the field of the irrational and suggestive not only all the sciences of man, but also human action and moral and political problems in so far as they are not of a purely technical nature? Shall we reduce proofs to those operations of the mind which electronic brains could also, and perhaps even better, perform? If the classical conception of proof can lead to these consequences, it would seem to be urgent to ask how such a state of affairs could be remedied. Does not perhaps the *impasse* arise from the fact that the attempt was being made to apply the concept and technique of proof established in mathematics and physics as a unique model valid for all knowledge? If this assumption is not well founded, if there are regions where deductive and experimental proofs are not sufficient for the solution of the problems,

have we to give up treating them rationally, or have we, on the contrary, to enlarge the meaning of the word " proof " in order to include all sorts of argumentative procedures allowing us to fix our conviction? If someone pronounces a thesis which we are not prepared to accept, we ask him: " What are your proofs? " and are willing to listen to arguments other than those of traditional deductive and inductive logic. In this case we would accept as proof any argument which diminishes our doubts and eliminates our hesitations. This wider meaning of the term " proof " allows us to study, besides the traditional proofs of logic, the innumerable kinds of dialectical and rhetorical proofs. They differ from logical proof in that they concern any thesis whatsoever, and not only the truth of propositions or their conformity with facts, and further in that they are neither stringent nor necessary. These proofs are more or less efficient, that is, they produce an assent of varying degree, and we could hope to study their effect in an experimental manner, taking into account the diversity of the persons in question, their history, and their physiological and social conditions.

The preliminary distinction of these two kinds of proof would allow us to study their interdependence, whereas their confusion can only obscure the problems in question. It is well known that the classical epistemology, centring around the notion of rational or sensible evidence, is based on this confusion and on the neglect of all those elements which make their complete identity impossible. " Evidence " is, at one and the same time, the force to which every normal mind has to submit and the mark of truth of whatever is accepted as evident. Every truth was traditionally taken as a reduction to evidence, and what was taken as evident was regarded as being in no need of proof. But this identification of logical proof with specific psychological attitudes leads to certain inconveniences, if we examine the structure of logical as well as rhetorical proofs. Leibniz, contrary to Pascal's advice, already saw that in logic we have to reduce the number of axioms to a minimum " without taking account of the opinions men may have of them, and of their agreement or disagreement." He foresaw that it would be an impediment to the progress of logic to make the formal structure of proofs depend on psychological conditions. On the other hand, the identification of the two kinds of proof had disastrous effects on the study of rhetorical proofs, for it implied the complete abandonment of the enormous universe of discourse in which the evidence is not accepted by all the participants. It is no solution to hand over this whole field of knowledge to the probability calculus, for its application would presuppose, in this case, an evident knowledge of the elements to which the calculus is to be applied, and this is rarely forthcoming. On the other hand, if the degree of assent of different persons is to be assessed, even the belief in the truth of a proposition is not

sufficient. Bossuet noticed this. When he preached the words of the Gospel to a group of Christians, he said clearly that his discourse on evangelical preaching would be without effect, if their hearts and minds were not disposed to accept it favourably. How, i.e., by what argumentative means, does one obtain a sufficient degree of assent on the part of other people? The study of this problem has been completely neglected by modern philosophers. It is true, famous preachers of the last century, such as Archbishop Whateley and Cardinal Newman, have paid attention to the subject, because of problems raised by their preaching. On the other hand, specialists in the field of advertisement and propaganda have studied it. But we have to go back to the thinkers of Græco-Roman antiquity, to the Aristotle of the *Topics* and *Rhetoric*, and to the Quintilian of the *Institutio Oratorica*, to find forerunners of our manner of approaching the problem of argumentation. Indeed, the field whose theoretical study I would like to revive is that of Aristotle's dialectical proofs which I prefer to call rhetorical proofs because the word " dialectical " has to-day acquired another meaning. In my interpretation, *rhetoric is the study of the means of argumentation which allow us to obtain and to increase the assent of people to specific theses presented to them.* We shall see that *only rhetoric, in this specific sense, allows us to understand the nature of proof in philosophy.*

Ancient rhetoric was the art of talking publicly in a persuasive manner. But if one looks at it from the point of view of the nature of proof, the manner in which the contact with an audience is established is clearly not essential; the use of words is merely a particular means of establishing it. Talking to a specific audience is also only a special case among an infinite variety of others. Rhetoric, as we conceive it, examines the arguments which we use in our intimate deliberations as well as in treatises addressed to all men. These two cases are even those of the greatest philosophical interest. Ancient rhetoric represents, in this interpretation, only a specific case within the general study of persuasive arguments.

Every kind of persuasion, whether by spoken or written word, presupposes an audience which we are attempting to persuade, and thereby introduces into the proof a sociological element, which no rhetoric can neglect. Philosophical argumentation differs from other rhetorical arguments through the audience to which it is addressed.

The rôle played by the idea of evidence in the transition from the psychological to the logical aspect of proof, has already been mentioned. The assent of a sincere and honest mind accepting the rational or empirical evidence presented to it constitutes the point of departure for every kind of certitude, especially for that which does not need to be proved. What Pascal called " your consent with yourself, and the constant voice of your reason " constitutes the basis of objectivity, so long as the contrary has not been established.

Doubt and deliberation urge us to devote our attention to discursive proofs only when disagreement, opposition, or contradiction occurs. The problem of proof into which argumentation enters arises only at a second stage, as a crutch of a shaken conviction. Naturally, at this moment, the subjective evidence can, in face of an obstinate adversary, no longer be regarded as a sufficient guarantee for the truth or necessity of the proposition under discussion. Aristotle, in his *Topics*, already saw that one is obliged to use dialectical proofs in the case of first principles, which he himself in other places regards as necessary, but which the opponent does not accept as well-founded. Without them no philosophical discussion of first principles is possible. We must simply give up trying to convince those people who deny what we consider self-evident.

If one were only to repeat the evidence which the other rejects, it would constitute a *petitio principii*. In this connection it may be noted that the very idea of a *petitio principii* (begging the question) is based on rhetorical proofs without which, in a strict sense, it would become incomprehensible. Begging the question is not a logical mistake, as those who had forgotten the existence of Rhetoric have pretended throughout the centuries. Logic has never rejected the law of identity which, because it affirms that every proposition implies itself, ought to have been regarded as a *petitio principii* in its most general form, *if the latter had been a purely formal mistake*. Indeed, begging the question means assuming a premiss as granted which the adversary rejects because it postulates, in a more or less implicit manner, a proposition which should be proved. What is in question is not the truth of the proposition, but the assent of the opponent. This clearly shows that every discussion in which we talk of begging the question, belongs to the realm of rhetoric, where the aim is precisely to gain the assent of an audience.

If subjective evidence no longer suffices for providing the transition from a statement of fact to an assent to the validity of this statement, one can make use of the assent of a specific group in order to effect the transition. In his dialogues Plato used this consent as a mark of truth. This is shown by the following passage of the *Gorgias*, addressed by Socrates to Callicles:

> Thus we have found a ruling on this question; each time we have agreed on a point, this point will be considered as sufficiently proved by both sides, without any necessity arising for a further test. You could not, in fact, have given your assent, either out of ignorance or out of excessive modesty, and you could not have wished to have deceived me in giving it; for, as you say, you are my friend. Consequently when you and I are agreed it will really prove that we have reached the truth. (487d-e).

Pareto [1] has no difficulty in ridiculing this procedure, but one should not believe too much in Plato's *naïveté*. If the dialectical

[1] *Traité de Sociologie*, Vol. I, ch. IV.

method can be parodied by saying that it boils down to: "We are in agreement, therefore it is true," the principle of evidence could likewise be caricatured by saying: "I believe it, therefore it is true." Indeed, if Plato prefers the assent of a single interlocutor who is free to use his critical faculties, to the applause of an ignorant group, the reason is that the triumphant thesis, like the proposition whose truth becomes evident to the solitary thinker, is regarded as being of objective validity, and that its truth cannot be apprehended by everybody. The use either of self-evident principles or of a particular consent for proving the truth of a universally valid thesis is characteristic of the philosopher. He addresses himself, explicitly or implicitly, to all men; his writings demand the assent of all minds. But we can never be sure of their effectiveness on this audience, because the latter is nothing but a creation of our thought. The objective, the valid, can only hope for the assent of this universal audience. In so far as this assent can never be taken for granted, we must content ourselves with the actual assent of specific persons to serve as a basis of generalization. And it is only too well known how much this particular assent has varied in the course of history. The study of beliefs assumed to be eternal truths is the subject-matter of a new science, the so-called sociology of knowledge.[1] The idea of reason itself, conceived in classical thought as referring to invariant structures independent of all historical and social development, is but an abstraction. The only real and concrete reason is that which is incarnate.

But what are we to do if, in defending a thesis which seems to be objectively valid so that all reasonable beings ought to assent to it, we meet persons who obstinately refuse to accept it? In this case, we can either modify our conception of the universal audience or we can exclude the obstinate persons from the circle of reasonable beings. "Are there people who deny the existence of God?" asks La Bruyère. And he answers: "This is a serious question, if there should be such; should this be the case, it would only prove that they are monsters!" In this manner the universal audience is replaced by an audience of the *élite*, and quantity by quality. This audience would only comprise the good, the wise, the competent, those who are privileged, to whom truths inaccessible to the mass of people are revealed. It could also be described as a group of those who adhere to an *ensemble* of rules, conventions and beliefs; and one could ask, what are the conclusions from their premisses to be reached with the help of formal and rhetorical proofs? According to the specific premisses and the specific forms of proof, the juristic, theological, or formal consequences could be developed. The advantage of such a procedure would be to eliminate the always

[1] *Cf.* Ch. Perelman, "Sociologie de la connaissance et philosophie de la connaissance," in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, No. 13, 1950.

delicate passage from fact to validity. Instead of asking what is objectively valid for a universal audience, whose assent is always uncertain and doubtful, we are satisfied with premisses which are in fact admitted by members of a specific group. The study of norms is here replaced by the study of facts. This opens the way to agreements which are less precarious, though of a more limited range.

Philosophical reflection could be characterized by the fact that it is never satisfied with agreements of this limited nature. This fact distinguishes it from the particular sciences, from positive law, from theologies based on specific texts, and from normative pronouncements founded on facts admitted only by specific groups. Philosophy aims at the universal which transcends particular contingencies and specific techniques. This implies a double obligation, namely, first to study the concrete situation which is to be transcended, and secondly to examine the techniques which it uses in order to effect the transition. The examination of proof in philosophy and of the psychological and social conditions which it transcends, allows us to understand how a thought centred in concrete problems can nevertheless be directed towards the universal.