The rhetorical point of view in ethics: a program*

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During a philosophical discussion on the foundations of ethics, someone asked me why he shouldn't always behave in a manner as to seek his own self interest. By doing so, did he wish to affirm that he was setting himself up as an exception and that he was putting forth a norm of action which pertained to him alone, or was he proposing such a norm for everyone? If the former were true, it would be difficult to see how such a personal norm could be considered as ethical, and why I, his interlocutor, should have to approve it, for if I am not subject to his orders, he should have to convince me that such a rule deserved approval—not only my approval, but the approval of his interlocutor, whoever that might be. As soon as one adopts the rhetorical perspective, as soon as one seeks out the approbation of the interlocutor and, if it is a question of ethics, of whatever interlocutor, the speaker is obliged to transform his principle of personal action into a universally acceptable principle. Not only should I, as the speaker, act in my own self interest, but everyone should act thusly. Rhetorical perspective, by shifting the focal point of the discourse, transforms a purely egoistic principle into a general one, according to which each individual

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should seek out his own self interest, i.e., a principle that would apply to the speaker as well as everyone else. But in order for such a course of action not to lead to a full scale war, one would have to establish rules which would make the diverse interests compatible. That is the very reason why the normal sequel to the principle “Everyone for himself” is a complementary principle, “and God for all.” Divine laws guarantee behavioral compatibility; these laws would then be considered as ethical.

One could dispense with such laws only in so far as one adopted the Benthamean principle of the identity of interests which guarantees that seeking one’s self interest coincides with seeking the common interest. This would require that in ethics, as in Adam Smith’s Economic Liberalism, an “invisible hand” watches over and harmonizes all interests. If this be the case, each individual should follow not what he perceives at first glance as his own self interest, but rather what would clearly be the common interest of everyone. Apparent interest thus would be opposed to real interest in seeking a principle of action which would make all interests compatible. But in such a case, it would be this very rule which would define ethics, as happens in Kant’s categorical imperative.

If I consider my interlocutor as my equal, there is no reason for him to concede any special privileges to me. He will grant me what I am ready to grant him on an equal basis. Because of the principle of reciprocity, of formal justice which demands equal treatment of all those in an essentially similar situation, of the golden rule which dictates that one treat one’s neighbor as one’s self, one can see that the rhetorical point of view in ethics forces generalization of an egoistic principle; such reasoning leads to moral principles of universal application.

Instead of setting forth an egoistic interest, I could invoke, by addressing myself to my interlocutor, a common interest, and eventually an interest common to all the members of the group to which we belong. It is possible that commitment to a cause common to all the members of the group might be considered ethical by the members of the group. But if one addresses an audience foreign to the group, one must, unless one imposes one’s own ethics by force on the others, convince this audience that it must adopt the same principles. Insofar as the same reasoning can be repeated for each new
audience, it is necessary, in order to persuade, to arrive at principles that would be valid for any interlocutor, i.e., for a universal audience. An appeal will have to be made to such universal values as truth, good, justice, and honor or to principles of universal bearing such as Kant's categorical imperative or Bentham's principle of the greatest good for the greatest number. Thus, from the rhetorical perspective, it is understandable that insofar as one accepts an equal or reciprocal relationship between the speaker and the audience, one is led to generalize and even universalize egoistic principles.

But this equality or reciprocity between the speaker and his audience is not a given or precondition indispensable to all moral discourse. Insofar as my interlocutor admits to the existence of a hierarchical order which he accepts without reservations, an order establishing, for example, the superiority of men over animals, of people over things, of adults over children, of nobles over common mortals, or of gods over men, the rhetorical perspective allows argumentation by model, so important in ethics, to be based on these facts. In principle, it is admitted that that which is superior serves as a model and must be imitated, because recognized superiority usually establishes behavioral norms. Religious and aristocratic norms are the ones that most often use this kind of reasoning.

Moral behavior in a religious ethics is one that gets its inspiration from the divine model, that obeys the divine commandments, that derives ethics from piety. As the behavior of the villain is villainous so too is the behavior of the nobleman noble. It is normal, therefore, to invite the future king, he who considers himself as superior, to behave in such a manner as to want others to imitate his conduct. That is the meaning of Isocrates' exhortation to Nicocles:

Give your own level-headedness as an example to others, remembering that the morals of a people resemble the morals of those who govern it. You will have evidence of the worth of your royal authority when you can see that your subjects have acquired greater comforts and more civilized morals because of your efforts.

**Noblesse oblige!** All social hierarchy is accompanied by the idea of honor and by a code of conduct in conformity with it. The idea of what is noble, of what is proper for members of a superior group, is the very springboard of any aristocratic ethics, just as when a child
is told to "Behave like an adult," he is encouraged to enter into the prestigious society of adults by trying to imitate their behavior. All moral initiation invites the child, the newcomer, to conform to the rules of the society to which he wishes to be admitted. Therefore the initiation rites offer a model to imitate, whether it pertains to a knight or to a monk of a prestigious order.

Whether the moral discourse is situated in an egalitarian or hierarchical context, the moralist will not be able to do without two typically rhetorical techniques: the creation of the presence and the elaboration of the content of prestigious notions, so as better to orient the action to which they will give rise.

In fact, he who puts forth a specific ethics, whatever it might be, will have to highlight the value or values which he advocates, whether it is justice, honor, liberty, the common good, or the ideal order. He then will have to give to the values he has stressed a content which will ward off what is mere appearance and which will enhance reality. It will be necessary to give the criteria for true justice, for real honor, for liberty or interest properly understood, for the common good or for the order to be brought about. But, in acting thusly, it will be necessary to find another criterion to enable one to distinguish within a value what is apparent from what is real. Therefore, according to the individual cases, equality or reward for merit will become the criteria for real justice; dignity, purity, or honesty will become the criteria for honor; conformity to right reason or the respect of a superior order will be presented as criteria to true liberty; peace will become the criterion of interest properly understood; and the common good will be reduced to the greatest interest of the greatest number of people. The true order will be the one instituted by the gods or the one which is in conformity with nature, and not the one which results from the arbitrary will of men or from historical contingency.

To conclude these brief reflections, let me underscore how misleading the Aristotelian classification is in linking other values to each of the types of oratory, making the useful the goal of the deliberative, the just the goal of the judicial, and the beautiful and the honorable the goal of the epideictic.

The fact of deliberating on what must be done does not necessarily concern the useful, but can concern the honorable just as
easily. Plato's entire dialogue Criton is in principle deliberative. Must Socrates flee, as his friends would have him do, to escape the unjust punishment with which he has been inflicted? In this deliberation, is it a question of doing what is the most practical or what is the most honorable? Is it more honorable to commit or to suffer injustice? Should Socrates do what is practical for himself or what should serve as a model for all good citizens? The result of the deliberation is simply a consequence of the discourse which deals with the honorable. In this context, one cannot separate the deliberative from the epideictic.

And this suggests a further reflection. To the extent that the seeking of pleasure and the avoidance of suffering and death could be made the basis of ethics, there would be no further need for rhetoric. One needs rhetoric only to overcome fear or suffering, in order not to give in to temptation. In keeping with Protagoras, for more than two thousand years, now, the role of rhetoric has been to strengthen the cause which, at first glance, appears the weakest. Its role is to point out where the real interest to be sought lies, it is actually to oppose reality to appearance. He who identifies what appears at first glance to be good or evil, namely, pleasure or suffering, with true good or evil, should simply follow his instincts. But he who opposes them needs rhetoric to dissociate reality from appearance. How could one resist one's passions without rhetoric? One hardly needs a discourse to submit to what is present or what imposes itself naturally. Discourses are needed to resist what is natural and spontaneous, to evoke and make present what does not impose itself at first glance.

It is possible that the elaboration of a science, whether it be deductive or inductive, can do without the rhetorical perspective, even if it could not do without language. But it is unthinkable to formulate an ethics without the rhetorical perspective which puts adherence of the audience in the forefront.

NOTES AND REFERENCES
