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An ethical approach to Argumentation in discourse analysis

This approach is anchored in the following conception of language: the latter is in no way a set of informational means or instruments, but a mode of social life playing a central role in the management of socio-political life, public opinion and existential ethical questions. We partly speak in order to inform our audience, but our main goal is to share our doubts or profound convictions, to justify our stands or to attempt to exercise an influence on the audience's opinion. We thus enter the field of argumentative rhetoric and practical reason.

What is at stake in this conception of argumentative rhetoric is to stimulate ethical reflection or to persuade the addressee to join the arguer's point of view. The justification of one's stance thus strongly depends on the critical judgment of an ethical fundamental actor: the Other, whether he is a single person or a collective entity. The rational accomplishment of any argumentative procedure depends on this kind of verbal interaction.

Argumentative rhetoric consists here of a set of arguments and justifications inviting one's audience to share axiological questions. The Other can be an individual or a collectivity, a homogeneous or heterogeneous audience, a real or imaginary one, interiorized or external. The arguer shares with this *alter ego* ethical questions and dilemmas leading to autonomous and justified

choices. These choices lead to the essential goal of this kind of dialogue: the decision to move from debate to action.

This kind of argumentative logic puts the value judgment back to the fore. The latter no more limits itself to a strategy of moralizing stigmatization, but refers to a cognitive technique allowing us, for example, to distinguish between a test of efficiency and a test of ethical integrity, namely between an instrumental and an axiological regime of rationality. The judgments of fact and truth do still play an essential role, but they are no more the only target of ethical questioning. Argumentative rhetoric gives a crucial importance to a critical approach of the notions of good, bad, just, unjust in a specific socio-historical context. These fundamental values are then no more defined *a priori*: they are objects which have to be questioned, defined and structured by the arguer and his audience. The subject of an ethics of discourse is an autonomous arguer, assuming the responsibility of his speech acts; he agrees *a priori* that his opinions do not have the monopoly on evidential truth and are therefore quite always questionable and refutable. Opinion is not the field of absolute Truth but the domain of plausibility and reasonableness; it is however perfectible due to argumentation and verbal interactions with highly critical audiences.

Argumentative rhetoric is anchored in individual or common values transmitted by public education. When individuals or collectivities attach to these values a profound signification, when they make sense for them and cannot be dissociated from one's autonomy, they play a role comparable to a source of energy, to an existential driving force stimulating questioning procedures and an orientation toward choices, decisions and actions. The ethics of discourse is then the frame of a "Logic of the Preferable" (Perelman,

Rhétoriques, 1989: 77), a regime of axiological rationality where we have to hierarchize what really matters in a specific context and dissociate it from less crucial considerations and preferences. We are then doubtlessly in the field of practical reason. I am therefore in complete agreement with Pascal Engel and Kervin Mulligan (2003) when they take the following stance at the end of their paper “Ethical Norms and Cognitive Norms”:

“It is not because ethics is not an exact science and because the ethical contemporary theories suffer from serious shortcomings, because it is not a kind of knowledge and there is nothing to say about it, that there are no objective requirements or values in both ethics and epistemology” (My translation)¹.

The question of moral external principles and norms, prior basis of any choice and decision, is mandatory in moral philosophy. This epistemic and ethical obligation is incompatible with an ethics of argumentation. It does not mean that argumentative rhetoric has no norms nor basis: it means that it decenters and transforms them. They however cannot be prescriptive, because they have to be structured by verbal rationalized interactions where the audience plays an essential role: its critical analysis or refutation is the norm of the debate validity, valuation and devaluation. Furthermore, it is a context-dependent procedure which cannot be reified. One thus enters in the field of the “logic of the preferable” where, Perelman (*Le champ de l’argumentation*, 1970:299) declares, we have to distinguish between “what is essential and what is

¹ «Ce n’est pas parce que l’éthique n’est pas une science exacte ni parce que les théories éthiques contemporaines souffrent de sérieux défauts, qu’elle n’est pas une connaissance du tout et qu’il n’y a rien à en dire, qu’il n’y a pas d’impératifs ni de valeurs objectifs aussi bien en éthique qu’en épistémologie ».

secondary, what matters and what does not matter, what is relevant and what is irrelevant” (my translation) in a specific vital context.

This kind of discursive and argumentative ethics has led me to the following kinds of research topics : discursive subjectivity or objectivity, individual or collective responsibility in national French written newspapers, rhetoric of the definitions of terrorism in the media, the rhetoric of double standards, analysis of the comparative following reasoning techniques: comparison, axiological analogies and metaphors; axiological rationality of the discourse subject and last but not least : the ethical commitment of the researcher dealing with corpuses reasoning about matters of life and death or explicit vs implicit incitement to hatred. My last scientific book: *Rhétorique et Éthique Du jugement de valeur*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2019, proposes both a theoretical and practical approach of the main points raised in this abstract.