PHILOSOPHY AND/OR PERSUASION

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In the fall of 1962 there was accomplished an introduction which had been much too long delayed: Charles Perelman and the profession of Speech formally entered into acquaintanceship, when Dr. Perelman became the Distinguished Visiting Professor of Speech and Philosophy in The Pennsylvania State University. In the meeting there was on both sides a happy element of surprise. Dr. Perelman had encountered only a very few scattered references to the American Speech fraternity (of which only A. Craig Baird's *Argumentation, Discussion and Debate* had impressed itself upon his attention); and despite a laudatory review of his volumes on argumentation and rhetoric in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* frankness requires the admission that his work was virtually unknown to the scholars in our field.

How, then, did he happen to be invited to our University? Because of a natural affinity of interests, re-inforced by personal ties, the Departments of Philosophy and Speech at Penn State decided to unite in appointing a distinguished visiting professor who would add strength to their graduate study programs at the major point of congruence: the relationships between dialectic and rhetoric — or the field of argumentation. Dr. Henry Johnstone was at the time of decision the Acting Head of the Department of Philosophy, and he suggested the appointment of Dr. Perelman. The faculty of the Department of Speech concurred in a spirit of «watchful waiting» — uncertain of the value such an appointment might be to them, but willing to find out.

The first impression made by Dr. and Mrs. Perelman was a triumph of personality. Whatever intellectual contribution this visiting professor might make, it was felt, he and his wife would at least be charming members of the social community. Very soon we were impressed by the earnestness with which he set about probing to learn everything he could of the aims, the background, the purposes of this faculty-student group designated by the rather strange term of *Speech.* It was learned that he did not appear with a portfolio of prepared lectures. Instead, he inquired perceptively and in detail into the nature of the interests and preparation of the staff members and students who would be attending his seminar. «For,»

he asked, «how can I prepare lectures until I know the nature of my audience ?»

The question was disarming because it was so precisely the exact question which we in the Speech profession would ourselves consider the significant one to raise. We were not prepared for it from a philosopher — for we entertained the notion that a philosopher is a person concentrated upon the objective search for ultimate truth and absolute values, irrespective of time and place. Our expectation was that he would tell us what he wished to say, in whatever form and whatever context he wished to say it, and that we would grope among his ideas to try to identify what we could that should prove to be of value to us in the inquiries in which we are engaged.

Interestingly enough, in our first somewhat guarded discussions, both he and we found ourselves making the same points: each with the aim of enlightening the other. «In my view,» he explained, «any discussion assumes realism only insofar as it commences from a point of common agreement between speaker and listener. Facts are facts (psychologically) only in terms of their mutual acceptability. Truth, in a particularized sense, at least, is that which the participants of the discussion agree is true. We cannot talk to one another except as we establish a preliminary foundation of common premises.»

We Speech professors listened with the delight a traveller feels who encounters a stranger who turns out to be a fellow countryman. Without hesitation, he had struck at once at the heart of the philosophy upon which our profession is based. More clearly and surely than many of our own colleagues in other departments of our own universities, he had stated precisely the central core of our own discipline. Still we could not quite believe that this professor from Europe, where the Speech profession is practically unknown, could possibly understand the full implications of what he himself had so cogently stated. On our part, we undertook the task of exposition.

«In our view,» we told him, «there are at least four different kinds of thinking, each suited to its own particular way of looking at the world of reality. First, there is the scientist, who tries objectively to identify the real nature of facts, carefully safeguarding himself from the subjective tendency to interpret them according to his own biases. Second, there is the logician, who is concerned with invariable laws governing the relationship of facts according to formalistic patterns that are not affected by the accidents of time and place. Third, there is the untrained and highly subjective layman,

whose concern is far less with external reality than with the mirroring of his own internalized feelings, prejudices, and mixture of hopes and fears. Finally, there is the rhetorical mode of viewing reality, which is the one we profess.

«Rhetoric,» we explained to him, while he listened with tolerant patience, «is a mode of thinking that interprets the meaning of a fact or an event from a triangulation of three focal points: the intrinsic truth of the matter under consideration; the intent or purpose of the speaker who is discussing it; and the needs or interests of the audience to which the discussion is addressed.»

There is great value, we assured him, in the scientifically objective, the logical, and the unrigorously personalized modes of thinking. The first unfolds a vast array of dependable information about the nature of the physico-social universe within which we dwell; the second guides our minds toward the reaching of reliable (if not always valid) relationships among those ascertained facts; and the third reveals to psycho-analysis and even to untrained observation a great deal concerning the complicated and often unpredictable nature of the human creature. But there is also great value, we insisted with a certain defensive intensity, in our own view that those social relationships which comprise civilization are possible only in terms of how facts and relationships appear, or may be made to appear, by speakers who interpret them in accordance with their own preconceptions as adjusted to the preconceptions of their chosen audiences. And to clinch our point, we quoted to him the confirmatory assertions of two great European literary contemporaries: Thomas Mann, who declared that «Speech is civilization»; and Albert Camus, who wrote that ours is a «civilization of dialogue.»

Dr. Perelman listened to us with much the same interest with which we had received his introductory statement. «We are mutually concerned,» he said, «with the tradition of rhetoric that had been forgotten for centuries by philosophers generally, but that was of great concern to such men as Plato and Aristotle, St. Augustine, Vico, Campbell, Whately, and Schopenhauer.»

By this time we were commencing to smile at one another not with the polite reserve of cordial strangers, but with the warm assurance of newly discovered friends. Eagerly, we placed in his hands copies of the journals published by the Speech Association of America: *The Quarterly Journal of Speech, Speech Monographs,* and *The Speech Teacher,* and many of the books written by our own scholars in the field of Speech. He responded by pursuing this new trail with zest and with the copiousness of mind, industry, alert curiosity,

and sharpness of intellect which have so markedly distinguished his career of scholarship. And as we shared with him, so did he with us.

For one thing, in a series of lectures distinguished by great clarity and cogency, he introduced us to an array of French and German rhetorical scholarship that, with a genuine sense of surprise, we had to confess we had not known. With typical generosity, he sought to protect our sensitivity. «The truth of the matter is,» he explained, «that these writers whom I cite are not rhetoricians in any conscious or explicit sense. They reveal considerable rhetorical insight, but often without intention and even without realizing it themselves. What they have to contribute can only be discovered by bringing the rhetorical method to bear upon them.»

Gradually we came to recognize Dr. Perelman as a professional colleague even though his background is very different from our own. By himself, without any aid from the 8,000 affiliated members of our profession in America, he had worked out in systematic detail much the same point of view that marks our own contribution to education. Then, as we came to accept the similarities, we came also to note differences. If he is not so far removed from our theories as we had expected, neither is his thinking typical of that in our field. Rather, he now appears to us to stand midway between Philosophy and Speech as a kind of ideal ambassador: with a sympathetic understanding of the aims and purposes of each; able to look both ways and capable of interpreting the one to the other. It is a position of great strength from which, if his principles are widely and wisely adopted, both Philosophy and Speech may have much to profit.

Speech education is largely guided by the principle stated by Quintilian and restated by John Milton: to fit the maturing youth to play an effective role of leadership and participation in public and private life. The democratic pre-occupation of American society demands that everyone, so far as possible, be fitted to think and act both independently and cooperatively: to arrive at independent conclusions, and to adjust his own thought and behavior harmoniously with that of his fellows. Moreover, our goal is that this aim should be pursued not for the chosen few who are manifestly superior, but for the whole population — excluding only the obviously unfit.

Such an educational philosophy demands not alone that students learn the traditions of their society but that they also develop the will and the ability to seek to change them. Quite naturally, the

conclusion is that all students should be aided to attain skill in all four of the communicative arts: reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Toward the attainment of our aim of producing pragmatically capable citizens who can exercise their democratic responsibilities, we have found it essential to maintain sustained teaching of the communicative arts of speaking and listening. For oral communication is the lifeblood of a dynamically democratic society.

The act of speaking differs from thinking and writing in significant ways. Thought can be both solitary and private: it is internalized and not in itself subject to the critical evaluation of anyone except the thinker (and until he externalizes it in writing or in speech, it commonly is not carefully evaluated even by himself). Writing can be done at leisure, when the mood and circumstances are right, with ample opportunity to caste aside imperfect first efforts and try again. But speech partakes of the instant life of the fleeting moment. The occasions are transitory; the demands are immediate; delay itself is failure. The premium is placed upon promptitude in rising to the occasion. What is spoken can be later amended but it cannot be erased. The individual is committed by the instancy of the situation. There is no escape from confronting challenges as they arise.

For this reason, effective speaking is much more difficult than is solitary thought, or than writing. Furthermore, the problem of speaking is additionally complicated by the fact that oral discourse is always dialogue. The speaker cannot command the situation, as a dictator might, but must adjust to it, democratically adapting his methods and even the sequential development of his ideas to the intervening reactions of his listeners. If the occasion is such that the listeners are prohibited from speaking forth their reactions, the task of the speaker becomes not easier but still more difficult — for in that case he must only adapt to the reactions of his audience but must also interpret those reactions from the minor, ambiguous, and vague clues of glances, facial expressions, and bodily postures. Above all, he must fit himself in advance to gear his ideas with those of this audience by a successful analysis of their knowledge of the subject, the degree and kind of their interest in it, and the variations of their reactions to him as a person. Even so hasty and incomplete a summation as that contained in this and the preceding paragraph must be sufficient to establish the point that effective speech is a complex and difficult skill — one, surely, which cannot be taken for granted, but must be carefully and consciously taught.

It is for reasons such as these that Dr. Perelman found in America something that was foreign to his experience in Europe: an entire academic profession exclusively devoted to the study and teaching of rhetoric: the art of effective speech. In our own University, the Department numbers a staff of sixty teachers and enrolls in its courses more than 5,000 students each year. Every student in the University is required to complete at least one course in Speech. A select few choose to major in this area, and they may proceed to earn their bachelor's, master's, and doctor's degrees in it. It may surprise European scholars to learn that in this university, which is perhaps typically American, the third largest Department in the College of Liberal Arts (next only to English and Mathematics) is the Department of Speech.

The course is expensive to teach, for students may not be assembled in large lecture classes, but must be divided into small groups of twenty — the reason being that they are not there to absorb what a professor has to tell them but to set forth and win adherence for their own ideas. It is difficult to teach, for professors cannot manage their preparation for each day in advance, but must listen critically to every student speech, interpret the audience reaction to it, and then improvize the kind of specific guidance which will prove most helpful to both speakers and listeners. Despite the problems posed by such an academic discipline, it is thought in our country to be exceedingly valuable — in part because of the sheer importance of skill in the oral communicative arts; in part because most education consists of what the student is «taking in» and this achieves its ultimate value only in terms of developed ability to synthesize, integrate, and formulate the personalized meanings which the totality of information has for the student himself, both internally and in his relations with his fellows.

The governing philosophy of American Departments of Speech has been so cogently stated by Quintilian that we cannot do better than to quote from Book I of his *Institutes of Oratory:*

> The first essential for such a one is that he should be a good man, and consequently we demand of him not merely the possession of exceptional gifts of speech, but of all the excellencies of character as well..... The man who can really play his part as a citizen and is capable of meeting the demands both of public and private business, the man who can guide a state by his counsels, give it a firm basis by his legislation and purge its vices by his decisions as a judge, is assuredly no other than the orator of our quest..... For

> eloquence depends in the main on the state of the mind, which must be moved, conceive images, and adapt itself to suit the nature of the subject, which is the theme of the speech. Shall we marvel then, if oratory, the highest gift of providence to man, needs the assistance of many arts, which, although they do not reveal or intrude themselves in actual speaking, supply hidden forces and make their silent presence felt ?

Dr. Perelman, as we understand him, is thoroughly in accord with these views; and he certainly is a prime exemplar of the principle in practice. But despite wide areas of agreement, he has had much to teach us which will have lasting effects.

Most particularly, he has impressed upon us the philosophical characteristics of carefulness of definition and consistency of theory. Our profession has surely not been lax in its conception of honesty in inquiry; but, as indicated earlier, our approach has tended to be pragmatic. Finding ourselves confronted by a problem, we have commonly asked: how may it be solved; what should we do about it ? Our closest allegiance has been with the field of social psychology, and, like the experts in that field, we have given high importance to the total effects of a situation. We have developed our concepts upon the proposition that «personality is a factor of the situation as well as of the person.» The result is that we have been more factually than theoretically oriented. The question of whether a particular methodology is internally consistent, or consistent with other methods and principles which we accept, has been of less moment to us than the pragmatic test: does it work ? Thus, in my own *Psychology of Persuasive Speech* (1942, 1957), I did not undertake to present a completely coherent theory of personality, nor of motivation. The attempt, rather, was to pose this question: granted that an individual is confronted by a given persuasive problem (involving his own purposes, the subject matter, and the nature of the audience in its own situation), what might he do in the effort to deal effectively with the problem ? With such an aim, even rigid terminological consistency appears relatively unimportant — provided the reader will abide with the context in which a particular topic is being treated.

This, too, is much the spirit governing another standard book in our field, *Speech Criticism* (1948) by Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird. In one sense the book is a history of western rhetorical theory; but it is organized around particular types of problems which speakers encounter, illuminated by a selective presentation of

historical solutions, as interpreted and evaluated by the authors. Neither completeness nor consistency is felt to be as important as the factor of practicality. Likewise, the sixty-odd scholars who contributed studies for the three-volume *History and Criticism of American Public Address* (1943, 1955), edited (Vols. I-II) by William Norwood Brigance and (Vol. III) by Marie Hochmuth, directed their inquiries mainly to the question of the means by which the great orators in American history sought to exercise influence through oral discourse. How this approach to education gradually developed from colonial times to the present is explained in a series of careful historical studies edited by Karl R. Wallace, in *History of Speech Education in America* (1954). Twentieth century revisions and refinements are discussed by a score of scholars in *Re-Establishing the Speech Profession: The First Fifty Years* (1959), edited by Robert T. Oliver and Marvin G. Bauer (in which, significantly, social psychology is emphasized, but no philosopher except William James is considered).

The work of the scholars and teachers of Speech in America is coordinated and directed by a plethora of state, regional, and national organizations, all of which hold annual conventions and most of which publish journals. These include a Speech Association in almost every State; the Speech Association of America, which publishes the three journals named earlier; the American Speech and Hearing Association, which publishes the *Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders* and the *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research;* the American Educational Theatre Association, with its *AETA Journal;* the National Society for the Study of Communication, with the *Journal of Communication;* the International Society for General Semantics, with *Etc.: A Review of General Semantics;* the National Association of Educational Broadcasters, with its *NAEB Journal;* and four regional Speech Associations, which publish, respectively, *Today's Speech,* the *Southern Speech Journal, The Central States Speech Journal,* and *Western Speech.*

In *Speech Monographs* is compiled annually the list of all theses and dissertations written in Speech. The *Index to the Quarterly Journal of Speech,* Vols. I-XL (1915-1954) was edited by Giles Wilkeson Gray and is supplemented by annual indexes to the three journals published by the Speech Association of America. The four regional Speech journals are indexed for the years 1935-1960 in a volume entitled *Index and Table of Contents...,* by Robert E. Dunham and L. S. Harms. Inquiries concerning any of these books, journals, and

indexes may be directed to the Executive Secretary, Speech Association of America, Suite 59, Statler-Hilton Hotel, New York city.

To try to summarize the range of materials that appear in the Speech publications would be as hopeless as it is needless to try to summarize the cardinal ideas of Dr. Perelman — for no one could do this as cogently as he has done it himself. There are, however, points of special interest in which it appears to me that the philosopher and the persuader become one.

Mind, we probably all would say, is not a prisoner of the cranium but a comprehensive monarch, extending dominion over personality and including within its purview a vast assortment of feelings, beliefs, prejudices, convictions, experiential memories, and dimly comprehended hopes and fears. Mind is a totality of perceptual and conceptual possibilities, both randomized and systematized, defying limitation, yet helplessly amenable to even careless and casual vagaries. Man as we know him is not only wonderfully and fearfully but also carelessly and accidentally made: capable on the one hand of precise self-manipulation and on the other hand vulnerable to sheerly incidental irrelevancies of misdirection.

Both philosophers and rhetoricians (or students of persuasion) are dedicated to the consideration of the nature and effects of mind and with the ways in which minds affect one another. Philosophy, historically, seems to us who are outside that field to have concerned itself largely with methodological considerations; persuasion with the achievement of pragmatic effects. Philosophy has asked: how can we know what is; persuasion, how can we do what must be done. Philosophy is practical in its concentration upon the nature of essence, of being; persuasion in its prepossession with attainable results.

Philosophy and persuasion come together at one crucial point in their commonality of interest in ethics or in value systems. Dr. Perelman, for one, seems especially interested in the truth of fact as measured and validated by human reactions. The key to his view of the essential union of philosophy and persuasion is stated in his *rule of justice:* that the rules of judgment applied in one case should also be applied in like manner to all others of a like nature. The emphasis here is placed not upon some indeterminate and unutterable reality but upon a comprehensible methodological attainment of a predictable result. Like the rhetorician, Dr. Perelman would say: the aim is the achievement of an ascertainable result. And like the philosopher, he would say: the effect sought

should have a universality of applicability that is not at the mercy of accidents of influence or of variable considerations.

Let us bring the matter to a conclusion. Dr. Perelman, like the Speech profession, understands that men and events are severally unique. No two are ever alike; each must be encountered and evaluated upon its own terms. Yet each man as he views his present situation and considers his future potentialities must seek an understanding through analogical and metaphorical processes. The questions always are: what am I in comparison with my past and with my fellows; and how should I act, or how will I be judged, in accordance with pre-established and accepted rules of the game? No man is an island, complete in himself, but each is a part of the main. The most intimitate problems of life are to be solved not in solitude but in relation to other people. Unless there are rules, and except as there may be dependence upon them, predictability and also independence of judgment are alike impossible. Orderly life either internally or in social relationships, depends upon relevance, consistency, reliability — a confidence that behavior which achieves a certain result in one instance will, if repeated with reasonable verisimilitude, likewise produce a further similar outcome. Without this assurance, neither thought nor action can escape from incomprehensible chaos. Philosophy, then, is an essential handmaid of rhetoric — just as rhetoric, the study of the means of relating objective facts and logical methods to the constantly shifting subjective nature of particularized audiences, is a necessary agent of philosophy.

To Dr. Perelman, whom we in the Speech profession must henceforth consider a good friend, we say: thank you for the emphasis you have placed upon the importance of method and internal consistency. To all his colleagues in Europe we express the hope that this flirtation which has taken place between philosophy and rhetoric will result in a lasting friendship if not indeed in a developing partnership between your field and ours. It is our hope that the teaching of Speech may become as indispensable a part of education in Europe as it is in America; and it is our further hope that the fructification of our endeavors from the stream of philosophical thought will continue and enlarge.

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