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Rhetoric as Philosophy of Language : an Aristotelian Perspective

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Rhetoric in Italy

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Abstract

This paper sustains that rhetoric can be a fruitful way of practicing philosophy of language. The starting point is a suggestion drawn from the work of the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito. According to Esposito, one of the main characteristics of the Italian thought is the focus on the necessary connection between language and extra-linguistic world. I argue that rhetoric (intended in an Aristotelian sense), thanks to its extra-linguistic aim (persuasion), pays particular attention to this connection. This has important consequences: 1. considering speakers and listeners as essential components of speech and assigning a key position to the listener; 2. including the sphere of emotion in the field of reflection on language; 3. considering truth as a social practice; 4. considering the agonistic dimension as a constitutive element of the speech.

Key words

Rhetoric, Philosophy of Language, Italian Thought, Aristotle

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Rhetoric as Philosophy of Language. An Aristotelian Perspective

1. Introduction

Currently in Italy, rhetorical studies are mainly carried out by classicists, linguists and scholars of literature, but little (or nothing) is done by philosophers¹. This lack of interest probably depends on the persistence of a general (and deep seated) prejudice against rhetoric. Indeed, despite several attempts to re-evaluate this ancient *techne*, the idea that rhetoric does not have any depth and has nothing to do with truth still exists (Piazza 2004). In this paper, I will argue the contrary: that rhetoric – especially if it is intended in an Aristotelian sense – still has much to contribute to philosophy and especially to the philosophy of language. The most common way to demonstrate rhetoric’s vitality is to compare it with other (ancient as well as modern) disciplines². In many cases this comparison confines itself to identifying similarities and differences and often considers rhetoric like an ancestor, which may be noble but still is only a relic from the past (Piazza 2013).

Although this kind of comparison can be fruitful, on this occasion I will follow another path. My aim is not to show the relationship between rhetoric and the philosophy of language or to consider rhetoric as a (more or less important) part of the philosophy of language. I have another aim: I intend to argue that rhetoric can be a fruitful *way of practicing* philosophy, especially the philosophy of language. Indeed, I agree with Bottiroli (1993, 49) according to whom “rhetoric is not only a way of speaking but also *a way of thinking*. It is not only the art of persuading, but also *a style of knowledge*” (italics mine). If this is true, a rhetorical point of view can enable us to see linguistic phenomena in a different way. Therefore, in what follows I will show what this point of view is as well as the reasons why it is philosophically fruitful.

1. For a comprehensive review of current rhetorical studies in Italy, see Venier 2013.

2. I refer not only to those disciplines traditionally linked with it (such as poetics or dialectics) but also – to mention just the most prominent – aesthetics (Mattioli 1986), linguistics (Mortara Garavelli 2006, Venier 2008), semiotics (Eco 1986; Lo Russo 2006); argumentation theory (Cattani, et al. 2009; D’Agostini 2009; Rigotti E. 2009), hermeneutics (Ferraris 1988), logic (Preti 1968; Marconi 1993), science (Rossi 1986; Pera 1991), ethics (Rigotti F. 1995), politics (Ardizzone Berlioz 2005; Santulli, 2005), advertising (Cattani, 2009) and, more recently, also neuroscience (Calabrese 2013).

2. Roberto Esposito on features of Italian thought

I start from a suggestion drawn from the work of the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito and especially from what he calls the *movement toward the outside*. According to Esposito (2012, 10-11):

Italian thought came into the world *turned upside down and inside out*, as it were, into the world of historical and political life. This *movement toward the outside* has long been identified by critics as the most consistent trait of the Italian philosophical tradition. Both the characteristics usually attributed to it, the epithet of “civil philosophy” – elaborated upon primarily by Eugenio Garin and his school – and its artistic or literary style, are premised on it. The point of tangency between them, it could be said, *lies in the unique propensity of Italian philosophy for the non-philosophical*.

This particular attitude preserves Italian tradition from the “primacy of language” and from the “subordination to the linguistic sphere” typical in almost all other philosophical contemporary perspectives³. In other words, thanks to this *propensity for the non-philosophical*, Italian thought is immune to the what is called the *linguistic turn* (Cimatti 2014). This does not mean that:

[t]he sphere of language doesn’t constitute a terrain of philosophical investigation in Italy. On the contrary, starting from its origin with Dante and then throughout the period of Humanism up to Vico, language has been one of its privileged topics of reflection, contemplated from a unique angle that sometimes interweaves thought and poetic experience, as in the case of Giacomo Leopardi. (...) Moreover, the most recent Italian thought takes language as a given that is so constitutive of the human being that it can be identified as the point of suture between nature and mutation, invariance and difference, biology and history. In this last formulation, however, a movement can be discerned that shifts the terms of the discourse in a new direction: *rather than being examined in its autonomous structure, language is situated within a broader horizon*, described in terms of biology, or of ontological realism. (Esposito 2012, 7-8; italics mine)

Even though Esposito does not explicitly refer to rhetoric (probably because he himself is a victim of the prejudice against rhetoric to some extent), in what follows I will argue that this *movement toward the outside* as well as this inclination to situate language *within a broader horizon* are both typical of the rhetorical point of view. This is the main reason why rhetoric can be a way of practicing the philosophy of language without being subject to the primacy of language. Indeed, language can be better understood if it is situated in a broader horizon and considered in its intertwining with non-linguistic components (and activities). The rhetorical perspective can be a good way of making this shift. I know that this claim might sound paradoxical since, after all, the subject of rhetoric is the

3. Esposito mainly refers to hermeneutics and to analytic philosophy but he also includes the recent shift toward cognitive psychology and neuroscience and states: “regardless of which perspective you have on the quadrant of our time, from logic to phenomenology and pragmatics to structuralism, language appears to be the epicentre where all the trajectories of thought converge” (Esposito 2012, 6).

study of language's power. However, this seems less strange if we consider that rhetoric can never avoid considering the external framework and the ultimate goal of speech (i.e., persuasion), i.e., a non-linguistic goal. Actually, the real subject of rhetoric is not the power of language in general but *persuasive speech*, which necessitates the consideration of extra-linguistic components (such as emotions and desires) as well.

3. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* as a philosophic work

Before continuing, it is useful to clarify that my proposal takes place against an Aristotelian background and assumes that Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is a philosophic work. This means that, as Garver (1994, 3) says, it is "a piece of philosophic inquiry" and therefore it can be read "in the hopes of learning something about contemporary philosophic issues"⁴. Considering *Rhetoric* as a philosophic work also allows us to shed new light on the whole Aristotelian philosophy of language. As is well known, Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1355b 26-27) sees rhetoric not as the art of persuasion but as philosophical reflection about persuasive speech or, more exactly, "an ability, in each [particular] case, to see (*theorein*) the available means of persuasion (*to endechomenon pithanon*)". This definition clearly reveals a theoretical point of view on rhetoric and is based on the belief that persuasion plays a crucial role in human life. Indeed, at the very beginning of his work Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1354 a 1-6) says that:

Rhetoric is an *antistrophos*⁵ to dialectic; for both are concerned with such things as are, to a certain extent, within the knowledge of all people and belong to no separately defined science. A result is that all people, in some way, share in both; for all, to some extent, try both to test and maintain an argument [as in dialectic] and to defend themselves and attack [others, as in rhetoric].

This passage reveals a first important feature of the rhetorical point of view: although it seems to have a very specific subject (persuasive speech), nevertheless it concerns an ability that belongs – as a matter of principle – to all human beings. Indeed, the real subject of rhetoric is the whole linguistic activity considered from a particular point of view, that of *persuasion* (namely the possibility that speeches have effects on the interlocutors and on the world).

Far from being a flaw, this is the main asset of the rhetorical way of thinking about language. Indeed, looking at language from the point of view of persuasion entails having to deal also with what is not (or does not seem to be) linguistic. Since rhetoric concerns how our speeches can guide our actions in the world, it

4. See also Grimaldi (1972) and Piazza (2008).

5. Concerning the word *antistrophos*, commonly translated "counterpart", see Kennedy (1991, 28, n.1).

doesn't consider – it can't afford to consider – language as a separate object or an autonomous system. Instead, it is obliged to take into account our concrete linguistic practices (activities) and their close linkage with other human practices.

We can also find a similar attitude toward language in A. Gramsci's work; his idea of non-autonomy (independence) of language is such that he extends the semantics of the word "language" so that "it can include the entirety of values and attitudes that we wrongly place outside of language" (Lo Piparo 2014a, 78).

By echoing Esposito's words, rhetoric makes that *movement toward the outside* thanks to which language *rather than being examined in its autonomous structure is situated within a broader horizon*. This movement protects against the "primacy of language" and heightens the awareness that in order to understand the linguistic domain we must look beyond it.

4. Aristotle's philosophy of language

In Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, there is a basic insight that can be seen as a sign of this *movement toward the outside*. I refer to the idea according to which *speakers and listeners are inside and not outside discourse*. This is an important move that, thanks to the inclusion of extra-linguistic elements, allows us to not consider language as an autonomous system.

This insight is explicitly stated in a well-known passage where Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1358a 37-b1) says that:

Logos is constituted by three elements, by the *person speaking*, by the *topic spoken about* and by the *person spoken to*, and the objective (*telos*) of the speech relates to the last, (I mean the hearer).

It is a simple statement, yet it is rich with theoretical consequences. It expresses a leading principle of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and it is also useful for understanding the Aristotelian conception of language and speech. Let us analyze it in detail.

First of all, we should clarify an important point. Unfortunately, this statement has often been interpreted as an anticipation of the code-based model of communication (or even of Jakobson's communicative functions)⁶. According to this view, Aristotle shares the idea of language as a *code* used by an *addresser* to send a *message* to an *addressee*. I believe that this is a misreading of the Aristotelian point of view. Indeed, if we read this passage trying to forget the modern terminology, we see that we do not have *addressers* or *addressees* here, nor *codes* or *messages* transferred from one mind to another. In the quoted passage, we only have the *person speaking*, the *person spoken to* and the *topic spoken about*. It is

6. See Kennedy (1991, 47, n. 75) and Venier (2008, 14).

not just a terminological difference; it is a different point of view on language and communication.

Moreover, to better understand the Aristotelian statement, it should be emphasized that it does not concern *communication* in general but *speech (logos)* specifically. The *person speaking*, the *person spoken to* and the *topic spoken about* are not the constitutive elements of the communicative system, as many scholars sustain⁷. More exactly, they are *the components of speech (logos)*. The difference is not superficial. Indeed, in the first case, speakers and listeners, even though they are essential to the communicative process, are external users. They remain outside the *logos* (that they use to communicate). In this way, the discourse seems to only coincide with one of its elements, the “message” or “what is said”. Instead, here Aristotle is saying something different: *logos* is not only “what is said” but it is made up of all of the three elements, *speaker*, *listener* and *topic*. Each of these plays a crucial role in building the speech that gains its real consistency only thanks to the relationship between these three elements. In this way, speakers and listeners can be considered as internal components and not only as external users.

This is the first – and most important – result of the *movement toward the outside* of which Esposito speaks. Indeed, considering the *person speaking*, the *person spoken to* and the *topic spoken about* as internal components of speech is a way to extend the semantics of the word “language”. It is not by chance that this extension takes place in the framework of rhetoric. Actually, as we have seen, unlike other language sciences, the rhetorical point of view is obliged to take all of the concrete elements that contribute to speech’s real consistency into account.

The Aristotelian sentence quoted above also shows another asset of the rhetorical point of view: the primacy of the listener. Indeed, concluding the passage, Aristotle stresses that the aim (*telos*) of the speech relates to the listener. To better understand this statement, it is useful to bear in mind that, in the Aristotelian perspective, the concept of *telos* has both logical and ontological priority and it plays a crucial role in understanding both natural and artificial processes. Therefore, the Aristotelian specification clearly means that one of the three components of *logos*, the listener, occupies a key position in the discursive relationship. It is a clear reversal of the most usual order that considers the speaker as the starting point of a process that is assumed to be linear (Lo Piparo, 2014b). On several occasions, Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1356b 28) emphasizes the role of the listener, for example, when he affirms that “the persuasive is *persuasive to someone*” or that, broadly speaking, the listener is always a *judge* (because he/she must pass judgment on the speaker’s speech, see *Rhetoric* 1391b 8-23). To be more precise, this fundamental position of the listener does not imply an underestimation of the other two

7. See Mortara Garavelli (2006, 3).

elements. Indeed, as was said above, each component is essential to the building of *logos*. Moreover, we should not forget that speakers and listeners continually exchange roles in ordinary conversation. Hence, to say that the *telos* of the speech relates to the listener is not only a matter of hierarchy. Instead, it involves seeing our talk exchanges from the point of view of listening and not only from that of speaking. This is not a trivial difference, but a fruitful shift in the way we see our talk exchanges.

This shift is a distinctive feature of the rhetorical point of view and can be seen as another important result of the *movement toward the outside*. Rhetorical thought is firmly anchored to the speaker/listener couple. Having an extra-linguistic goal (persuasion), rhetoric makes it clear that to speak is always to *speak to someone*. Therefore, thinking about language from a rhetorical point of view allows us to emphasize that to speak is an intrinsically *public* activity and that it is “a constitutive and inseparable part of an extra-linguistic praxis” (Lo Piparo, 2014b, 159).

5. Rhetorical “artistic proofs” and the semantics of the word “language”

The Aristotelian passage that we are analyzing (*Rhetoric* 1358a 37-b1) is not only a general consideration but also it represents one of the organizing principles of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*⁸. Indeed, the triad *speaker, listener, topic* is also the basis of the well-known triple-partition of the *entechnoi pisteis* (means of persuasion embodied in art or “artistic proofs”): *ethos, pathos* and *logos*. They are the rhetorical means of persuasion (*pisteis*) provided “by us” and “through speech” (*dia tou logou*), opposed to the so-called *atechnoi pisteis* (“non-artistic” means of persuasion) that are not provided by us, but instead are pre-existing⁹. Each of the three *entechnoi pisteis* corresponds to one of the three elements of the triad: the first, *ethos*, is the proof based “on the character of the *speaker*”, the second, *pathos*, consists “in disposing the hearer in some way” and the third, *logos*, is the “argument itself, by showing or seeming to show something” (*Rhetoric* 1356a 2-5).

Although variously interpreted, this triple-partition is generally considered as the most vital part of the Aristotelian *Rhetoric*. This is not the place to take into account the many questions it raises and the different interpretations proposed. I limit myself to only making some general remarks, in order to show its philosophical richness.

8. It is not possible here to deal with all of the consequences of this idea on the entire Aristotelian rhetorical system. I limit myself to only indicating that the classical distinction between the three species of rhetoric: deliberative, forensic and epideictic (cf. *Rhetoric* 1358b 1) are also based on it.

9. Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1355b, 37-40: “I call *atechnic* those that are not provided by “us” [i.e. the potential speaker] but are pre-existing: for example, witnesses, testimony of slaves taken under torture, contracts, and such like; and artistic whatever can be prepared by method and by “us”; thus, one must use the former and *invent* the latter”.

First of all, it is worth noting that the three *entechnoi pisteis* are closely connected to each other and, if the speech is effective, persuasion can be seen as the result of the interaction between *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* (see Grimaldi 1972; Fortenbaugh 2003; Garver 1994; Dow 2007). This is a direct consequence of the basic insight of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Indeed, if speakers and listeners are inside and not outside the speech, *ethos* and *pathos* can be seen as internal components of the persuasive process and not only as external (or, worse, "irrational") expedients.

Also, this can be seen as a fruitful result of *the movement toward the outside* typical of the rhetoric point of view. Indeed, the consideration of *ethos* and *pathos* as *entechnoi pisteis* – namely *pisteis* realized "through speech" – is another way of extending the semantics of the word "language" and situating it *within a broader horizon*. This clearly emerges if we consider what Aristotle says about these three rhetorical *pisteis* more closely.

6. Rhetorical ethos and the philosophy of language

Let us begin with *ethos*. Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1365 a 4-13) describes it in this way:

There is persuasion (*pistis*) through character (*ethos*) whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence (*axiopiston*); for we believe (*pisteuomen*) fair-minded (*epieikes*) people to a greater extent and more quickly [than we do others] on all subjects in general and completely so in cases where there is not exact knowledge (*akribes*) but room for doubt (*amphidoxein*). And this should result from the speech, not from a previous opinion than the speaker is a certain kind of person; for it is not the case, as some of the technical writers propose in their treatment of the art, that fair-mindedness (*epieikeia*) on the part of the speaker makes no contribution to persuasiveness; rather, character (*ethos*) is almost, so to speak, the controlling factor in persuasion.

The *ethos* Aristotle is referring to in this passage is not the pre-existing reputation of the speaker, but a character constructed "through *logos*". Indeed, Aristotle is not saying that the speaker's credibility makes the speech credible but the inverse; he is stating that *the way in which the speech is spoken* makes the speaker trustworthy. Therefore, the speaker's trustworthiness is not a precondition (prerequisite) but an effect that he/she must achieve thanks to his/her speech. Although important for "all subjects in general," the relevance of this effect is particularly evident when the issues at stake leave room for doubt, as in the case of persuasive speech.

It is important to bear in mind that in the Aristotelian perspective, there is nothing irrational in giving weight to the character of the speaker. Indeed, as Garver (1994, 191-192) has rightly pointed out, in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*:

Logos and *ethos* are integrated. [...] There is a mutual implication and interdependence between the two terms. We trust a speaker, and impute *arete* and *phronesis* to him, when he presents us with a cogent and intelligent argument. We infer from *logos* to *ethos*. But rhetorical arguments

are about indeterminate matters. So, in order to regard an argument as cogent and intelligent, we have to trust the speaker. [...] We need trust to perceive the argument correctly. We infer from *ethos* to *logos*. It is the interdependence of *ethos* and *logos* that prevents such inferences from becoming a vicious circle.

This way of understanding the role of the speaker's trustworthiness is possible only thanks to the consideration of the speaker as an internal factor of the speech instead of as an external user. Regarding the specific aim of this paper, this crucial role of *ethos* is further evidence of the richness of the rhetorical point of view. Indeed, it makes clear that in our concrete linguistic practices the sharp distinction between *who speaks* and *what is said* is not a starting point but the result of a process of abstraction. Of course, the problem is not the abstraction in itself but its removal. Indeed, in some conditions and for specific purposes, the abstraction of *what is said* from *who speaks* can be useful (if not necessary) but we must not forget that it is only an abstraction and that in our real speech acts we *always* have the Aristotelian triad (the *person speaking*, the *person spoken to* and the *topic spoken about*). Instead, the removal of this abstraction can produce the dangerous illusion that there are speeches that are independent from speakers and listeners. The rhetorical point of view on language is immune from this illusion. Once again, we are faced with one of the consequences of the *movement toward the outside*, which is able to include aspects that are not (or do not seem to be) linguistic within the domain of philosophy of language.

7. Rhetorical *pathos* and the philosophy of language

Something similar can be said concerning *pathos*, the rhetorical proof provided "through the hearers when they are lead to feel emotion (*pathos*) *by the speech*" (*Rhetoric* 1356 a 14-15). In this case, the extra-linguistic element that is included is *desire (orexis)*. I believe that this inclusion is one of the most fruitful advantages of the rhetorical point of view on language. To better understand this statement, we briefly need to take into account the role of desire and its link with judgment and action in Aristotle's anthropology. According to Aristotle, in the case of practical reason, our judgments can never be independent from our desires. Indeed, "thought (*logos*) by itself moves nothing" but "what moves us is thought aiming at some goal and concerned with action" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1139 a 35-36). To move a living being, it is necessary that it feels pleasure or pain. Human beings are no exception. Certainly, in the case of human beings the action is not only a matter of pleasure and pain, even if these are necessary to act. Human action (*praxis*) is possible only thanks to the strict connection between desire and judgment (see *De Anima*, 432b 27- 33b 30). Or, to put things in a better way, an action is *human*

in that it is a result of this connection. Therefore, since a persuasive speech is a speech that aims to convince the audience to make a practical choice (namely to judge in view of an action), the reason why desire can't be neglected is clear. Once again, it is the pursuit of persuasion that necessitates the inclusion of desire – and therefore of the living body – in the domain of reflection on language.

This is not a reductionist move that leads everything back to language. The challenging task is to be able to conceive of *logos* and *orexis* – to use the Aristotelian image – as convex and concave in the circumference of a circle that is “distinct by definition but by nature inseparable” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1102a 27-30)¹⁰. This means that we have to make a double movement: on the one hand, we have to acknowledge that language affects human emotions (including those originally more distant from the verbal sphere) or even produces them; on the other hand, we must not forget that language can have this power on human emotions only if *logos* is rooted in *orexis*.

This intertwining between *logos* and *orexis* also emerges in the rich analysis of *pathe*, which is the subject of a great part of book II (*Rhetoric* 1378 a 31-1388b 30). It is important to emphasize – in accordance with what I said before – that Aristotle's is a *philosophical* analysis (and this not despite his rhetorical destination but thanks to it)¹¹. It is carried out following a rigorous method. First of all, each *pathos* is defined and then analyzed according three aspects (that can be traced back to the three components of speech seen before): the people more inclined to feel that emotion (and his/her state of mind); the people with whom they usually feel that emotion and finally on what grounds they feel it (*Rhetoric* 1378 a 23-25). Following this method, Aristotle paints a rich picture of human emotions from which the complex relation between language and emotional sphere emerges. This is not the occasion to consider this analysis in detail; I limit myself to only emphasizing that its richness is a further sign of the philosophical potentiality of rhetoric. As in the case of *ethos*, considering *pathos* as a *pistis* realized “through speech” entails acknowledging that a reflection about language and its power cannot exclude the sphere of desire.

Moreover, this inclusion is also the basis of one of the fundamental principles of Aristotelian rhetoric: the idea according to which *the more a speech can hold together pleasure and knowledge the more persuasive it will be*¹². This implies that, in order to be persuasive, we should not separate the emotional component from the cognitive one. The relationship between these two spheres is not an extrinsic juxtaposition but something like a chiasm. According to Aristotle, a speech is

10. See Lo Piparo (2003, 10-11).

11. See Fortenbaugh (2002) and Piazza (2008b).

12. See Aristotle's *Rhetoric* 1357a 8-22; 1395bb 27-30; 1400b 29-35; 1404b 32-37; 1405a 8-26; 1409a 35-1409b 6; 1410b 10-36; 1412a 13; 1414 a 23-29.

persuasive not because it produces knowledge and, *in addition*, pleasure, but because it is able to produce *pleasant knowledge* and *pleasure that produces knowledge* simultaneously (Piazza, 2015). Once again, it is just the rhetorical point of view that shows this chiasm between pleasure and knowledge, a chiasm that it is not merely limited to persuasive speech in a narrow sense. Indeed, we also find it in the famous Aristotelian description of the human being as “desiderative reason” (*orektikos nous*) or “rational desire” (*orexis dianoetike*) (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1139b 4-5; cf. Lo Piparo 2003, 14-19).

8. Rhetorical *logos* and the philosophy of language

The philosophical fruitfulness of rhetorical thought (as well as its orientation towards the outside) also emerges if we take into account the third rhetorical *pistis* corresponding to “what is said” and consisting in the “argument (*logos*, *speech*) itself, by showing or seeming to show something” (*Rhetoric* 1356a 2-5). In particular, the Aristotelian treatment of this *pistis* allows us to shed light on the complex relationship between rhetoric and truth. Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1356a 19-21) describes this *pistis* in this way: “persuasion is effected through the speech itself when we have proved a truth or an apparent truth by means of the persuasive arguments suitable to the case in question”. As we can see, this rhetorical *pistis* jeopardizes the role of truth in the persuasive speech. In contrast with the traditional idea – to some extent due to Plato – that rhetoric has nothing to do with the truth, here Aristotle clearly shows a different perspective. The practical aim of rhetorical discourse does not imply indifference or disregard for truth. Persuading someone of something, namely convincing the hearers to change their minds and to act accordingly, cannot do without truth or, better, without what the hearers believe true. Of course, the rhetorical point of view on truth is different from that of a logician or a scientist. Nevertheless, the issues raised by rhetoric about truth are eminently philosophical and very far from being resolved. The truth rhetoric is dealing with is never a universal and necessary truth but always a contingent and fallible one. This feature is strictly dependent on the nature of the rhetorical issues that are, using an Aristotelian terminology, issues that *can be otherwise* and have a *for the most part* regularity (Di Piazza 2011). These are those things that precisely because of their nature (and not only because of our cognitive limits) cannot be a subject of a stable and ultimate knowledge.

The issues at stake in rhetorical discourses are, by definition, issues on which there is no agreement. The rhetorical point of view shows how hard it is to draw a sharp boundary between truth and apparent truth or between truth and persuasiveness. Describing the third *entechnoi pisteis* as the one that proves “a truth

or an apparent truth by means of the persuasive arguments suitable to the case in question” (*Rhetoric* 1356a 19-21) entails recognizing that the starting point is always the persuasive argument and that the truth we are dealing with is, by definition, a precarious one. It is the reason why in the rhetoric field the notion of *eikos* (generally translated as *likelihood* or *probable*) plays a crucial role. Without going into the details, it is important to bear in mind that, according to Aristotle, the *eikos* is not an imitation (least of all a manipulation) of the truth but the truth appropriate to rhetorical issues, i.e., a truth always exposed to failure (Piazza and Di Piazza 2012). Actually, since rhetorical speech deals with intrinsically questionable issues (on which we must make a choice) it faces the difficulty of establishing the truth of claims on which our collective or individual life might depend. Therefore, anything but indifferent to true and false, rhetoric brings into focus not only the difficulty of truth but also its complex link with another couple of values. Indeed, in rhetorical speech the true/false couple is always to some extent linked to the just/unjust, advantageous/harmful and honorable/shameful couples that are the value couples that the hearer must pass judgment on for each species of rhetorical discourse (*forensic, deliberative and epideictic Rhetoric* 1358 a 36-59 a30).

In Foucault’s terms, we could say that rhetoric is interested in “truth-telling” or *veridiction* rather than truth. Indeed, we could apply to rhetoric what Foucault (2014, 28) says in the inauguration of the course of lectures delivered at the Catholic University of Louvain on the avowal (italics mine):

It is, of course, certainly possible, it is certainly legitimate, and certainly desirable to study truth-telling, to study the assertions from the point of view of the formal or empirical conditions that allow one to say whether they are true or false. But I think that one can also study truth-telling from something of an ethnological perspective I mean truth-telling as a *social practice* – to study it as a *weapon in relationships between individuals*, to study it as a means of modifying relations of power among those who speak, and finally as an element within an institutional structure.

This is exactly the rhetorical point of view. Indeed, rhetoric concerns what Foucault (2014, 39) calls – using a successful neologism – *alethurgy*, namely a “ritual procedure for bringing forth *alethes*”. This *alethurgy* is at the heart of rhetoric and reveals, once again, the necessary movement toward the outside of which Esposito speaks. In this case, the outside is the power or, better, *the relations of power among those who speak* and the political framework within which truth-telling occurs.

Thanks to this particular conception of truth as a *social practice* and as a *weapon in relationships between individuals*, the rhetorical point of view is also able to take the agonistic dimension of these relationships into account without trying to expel it. Thanks to this inclusion of conflict, the rhetorical point of view on language is also able to bring out the difficult relationship between word and violence,

a relationship that cannot be reduced to a simple mutual exclusion (Piazza 2008c; Virno 2013, 21; Serra 2014). Considered from this perspective, rhetoric reveals its anthropological values and shows that persuasive speech is at the very heart of human nature.

9. Conclusions

Finally, what I am arguing is that the rhetoric is not a repertoire of concepts and means of persuasion, not even just a theory of speaking well, but *a way of thinking*, a particular and fruitful point of view on language. The main advantage of this point of view is its attention to the extra-linguistic components or, more exactly, to the intertwining between linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of social practices. As we have seen, since rhetoric has an extra-linguistic aim (persuasion), it is in a privileged position to understand this intertwining. Paradoxical though it may appear, the rhetorical point of view allows us to see that to understand how human language works, we need to look beyond it and to move toward the outside. It is exactly this movement that involves the theoretical consequences that I have tried to clarify in this paper. First of all, the inclusion of speakers and listeners as essential components of speech and the awareness that speech is the result of the relationship of the *person speaking*, the *person spoken to* and the *topic spoken about*. Thanks to this awareness, the rhetorical point of view assigns a key position to the listeners and considers our talk exchanges from the point of view of listening and not only from that of speaking. Moreover, the practical aim of rhetoric also requires the inclusion of the emotional sphere in the field of reflection on language, paying attention to the intertwining between speech (*logos*) and desire (*orexis*). Finally, the rhetorical point of view also reveals how problematic the achievement of truth is and considers it as social practice without removing its agonistic dimension. Thanks to all of these features, rhetoric turns out to be a fruitful way of practicing the philosophy of language.

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