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Rhetorician Paper

Chaïm Perelman's New Rhetoric

Chaïm Perelman was a prominent rhetorician of the twentieth century. He was born in 1912 in Poland, however he spent the majority of his life studying and teaching in Belgium (Gross, 2003). Before becoming an esteemed rhetorician, Perelman was a philosopher of law. His extensive research and knowledge about the legal system and logic led him into the field of rhetoric. While he was doing an in depth justice study, he realized that logic and judgments are based on random choice or personal whim, therefore not being reliable. Perelman regressed in his thinking, going back to examine classical rhetorical theories. This was when he developed his most prominent, classically renewed theory, "The New Rhetoric" (Gross, 2003).

In "The New Rhetoric: A Theory of Practical Reasoning," Perelman starts off by explaining the current use of rhetoric. He believes that rhetoric has shifted meaning and has become an abstract idea. He mentions the decline of the classical rhetoric in the modern approaches to rhetorical theory. He appreciates classical rhetoric because he classified it as a theory of persuasive discourse. Classical rhetoric was originally a practical method. Arguments were made to the audiences in persuasive ways which deemed effective. Classical rhetoric was not solely used to make language sound pompous, it was used for everyday purposes; and this is what Perelman sees as most valuable (Perelman, 1971).

Perelman's New Rhetoric is an idea based off of argumentation. He wants the readers to understand that there is a big difference between argumentation and demonstration. Argumentation can be used to evaluate and prove judgments, while demonstration cannot. In

order to have an argument, the two key parts need to be included: the orator and the audience. The orator needs focus on persuading the audience, and the audience is assumed to remain attentive (Perelman, 1971).

Thus far in the New Rhetoric theory, it seems similar to classical rhetoric. However, there is one huge difference between classical and the New Rhetoric. Classical rhetoric was always used formally. For instance, Aristotle saw rhetoric as a means to search for the truth in proper debates. In New Rhetoric, argumentation is not just for formal use, it is applied to every type of reasoning out there, including informal arguments. New Rhetoric is available for use for all types of circumstances, making it a very adaptable rhetorical method. Classical rhetoric was criticized because it focused on formal argumentation with lofty language. New Rhetoric uses classical rhetoric principles, but applies the rhetoric to informal, casual situations as well as formal situations (“Chaïm Perelman on Rhetoric,” 2009).

According to Perelman, arguments have to be based upon and altered for a particular audience. All arguments formed by the orator need to be based off of beliefs that the audience believes in. Since the orator gets to choose which parts of the argument to emphasize, the audience can be referred to as the “universal audience.” A universal audience is fluid because the orator will always decide how to argue specific arguments based off of the audiences’ perceptions. Additionally, Perelman introduces the idea of “presence” as a method of argumentation under New Rhetoric. Presence is being aware that different elements attract your audience. The beliefs of the audience are fluid, so it is wise to choose to overemphasize the parts of your argument that will potentially leave the most dramatic impact on the audiences’ mind (Perelman, 1971).

In “The New Rhetoric, Judaism, and Post-Enlightenment Thought: The Cultural Origins of Perelmanian Philosophy,” David Frank applies the concept of New Rhetoric to understand and expand on the philosophy and argumentation of Judaism. Frank starts off by explaining how Chaïm Perelman’s work has been misunderstood by most scholars. New Rhetoric is designed to offer a philosophy of justice and humanity using Jewish beliefs (Frank, 1997). The vital part of understanding Perelman’s New Rhetoric, is examining his background. Perelman’s work draws from his Jewish heritage. Perelman makes many references to Jewish philosophy and the Talmud. Perelman had a lot of exposure to the Holocaust and the Nazis during World War II and this caused him to look towards justice in Judaism (Frank, 1997). Building upon this knowledge, Frank ties New Rhetoric as a way to understand Judaism.

The Jewish term Tsedeck, meaning Justice, is what New Rhetoric is based off of (Frank, 1997). Frank argues that you must be able to see a rational outcome in order to have a successful argument. All argumentation made using Tsedeck is under the case by case basis. This allows for judgments to be made in peaceful, non-violent ways, which was very important for Perelman. After World War II, Perelman realized that his old sense of strictly black and white logic was not leading to justice. Tsedeck provided a form of justice that “worked to blend love and justice, truth and peace” (Frank, 1997).

According to Frank, New Rhetoric should be applied to the post-Enlightenment search for justice. It is important to create a method for humans to disagree with each other, but remain friendly at the same time. Non-formal arguments should be made on a regular basis without the fear of judgment (Frank, 1997). Justice requires both knowledge and emotion to achieve a state of truth. Frank argues that New Rhetoric should be applied to our political world in order to solve the numerous disputes that arise due to our methods of argumentation. If New Rhetoric is

followed in a Jewish context, then many problems with our communication will be solved (Frank, 1997).

Frank applies New Rhetoric to Judaism to create a “‘third way’ between Enlightenment metaphysics and the dangers of the more extreme expressions of postmodernism” (Frank, 1997). Frank wants there to be a middle ground philosophy when it comes to analyzing truths. Being extremely positive or being extremely skeptical will not allow you to accomplish argumentation. Finding another philosophy to go by was the major purpose of applying New Rhetoric to Judaism. Frank wanted to combine all of New Rhetoric’s argumentation theories, but emphasize that this argumentation is based off of Judaism, making it more peaceful and harmonic. By creating the “third way,” Frank now considers argumentation of New Rhetoric as a way to bring together communities to agree “on values and justice via communication in a non-violent environment” (“Chaïm Perelman on Rhetoric,” 2009). By interpreting New Rhetoric in a Jewish context, the justice is served based upon values which are open for argument among the community.

New Rhetoric can be applied in numerous ways in the life of a writer. I have always known that you should consider your audience when giving a speech. However, New Rhetoric stresses that you must base your argument on what the audience already believes. This is a new idea for me, and I think this will definitely come in handy for formal speeches, but also in situations like job interviews. If you come prepared with the background knowledge of the company that is interviewing you, then you will have an easier time making your arguments in ways that please them. Additionally, I would always use methods of New Rhetoric when it comes to persuading others in informal situations. Having knowledge and audience awareness will allow me to almost always succeed in persuasion.

Perelman has a background in the philosophy of law and I am interested in pursuing a law career. It is very interesting to me that much of Perelman's work on New Rhetoric came after he examined the truthfulness of the justice system. I will apply Perelman's methods of truthful argumentation when I am in law school, and when I am in the law field. I think it is vital to have a background in New Rhetoric before pursuing law because it allows you to understand the basics of successful argumentation.

Learning New Rhetoric actually enabled me to understand classical rhetoric and modern rhetoric a lot more clearly. New Rhetoric is an advanced version of classical rhetoric which is something I admire because it goes back to traditional rhetorical theories. New Rhetoric has made me a better rhetorician by giving me methods to properly argue, and correctly understand my audience.

References

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