

# ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Rules Of Refutation And Strategies Of Dissuasion In Debate

✘ I would briefly consider and pose to your refutational criticism three questions: why to refute, how to refute, when to refute. These questions concern the place of confirmation/refutation between logic and rhetoric and involve the pair apology vs. criticism.

I'll begin with an apodictical starting, only in order to establish a subjective certainty among many uncertainties.

The logical process of refutation is naturally associated with the act of dissuasion. How can we dissuade? Which are the tools of dissuasion? The typical human weapon of dissuasion should be a discouraging argument, an argument against, a proof of falsehood. Indeed it is unquestionable that 'the use of reasoning is more characteristic of man than the use of physical strength', using the words of Aristotle (*Rhetorica* 1355 b 1). Dissuasion, or changing the belief or the behaviour of an audience, is the perlocutionary effect of refutation, whose illocutionary effect may be confusing, confounding, shedding doubt.

But refuting is not a *performative* act. And dissuasion is not the simple opposite of persuasion. I would like to consider the origin, the nature and the implications of this difference, a difference that concerns perhaps some other general and problematic couples such as validation/invalidation, affirming/denying, approving/disapproving, constructive analysis/destructive analysis.

## *The terminology of refutation /dissuasion*

There are some curious and interesting linguistic facts. The common language, said John Austin, is not the last, but indeed the first word. The speech acts theory may be yet useful in many ways. For example, in refuting one demonstrates the falsehood, by refuting one dissuades. We can dissuade from believing and from saying, or from doing and making something. Furthermore dissuasion may have a side-effect, a 'perlocutionary sequel' (Austin 19752, p. 118), such as to cast doubt, confuse, block, paralyse.

## *What means 'to refute'? the three names of refusal*

If I deny, object, challenge, I deny, object, challenge just because I say what I say: the speaker names something and, as he names it, it appears. On the contrary if I say 'I refute' I'm simply announcing my intention to do that. Saying that I'm confuting is not to confute, while saying that I'm denying (objecting, challenging), is to deny (object, challenge). In the frame of the speech acts theory, the first act is like to utter a descriptive 'I eat', the second is like to utter an operational 'I promise'.

To refuse, to object and to refute are three different ways of dissenting.

Who is refusing expresses his disagreement without necessarily offering any reason. He rejects but he does not explain why a thesis or a thing should not be accepted.

To object (or criticize) is to express our disagreement stressing out the incompatibility of our world vision with the adversary's world vision. It consists in refusing with reason/reasons.

*To refute* is very different both from *to refuse* and *to object*. Who is refuting in the strong sense is testing and weakening the internal consistency of the contested theory, starting from its very presuppositions and its world vision (cf. Dell'Aversano & Grilli 2005, p. 123).

'The refutation is successful when the questioner is able to draw from his interlocutor's admissions either some conclusion incompatible with the original thesis (not necessarily its direct contradictory) or some absurdity whose derivation used the thesis as premiss' (Hitchcock 2000, p. 60). The process is somewhat similar to the demolition of a building using its own kinetic force accumulated during its construction.

In this perspective *to refute* consists indeed in accepting premises, rules of inference, world vision and refusing proofs and arguments of the interlocutor/adversary, while in objecting or criticizing one is accepting nothing at all (including premises, rules, world vision, proofs and arguments, as well as obviously the conclusion) in order to demonstrate that the opposing argument is bad.

Refutation is not a simple attack on the arguments of the opponent. It is not a simple process of exposing flaws in opponents' arguments. It is not a simply pointing out that there is a flaw in the opponents' argument, a simply process of

responding to opponent arguments, such as 'the source for their evidence is biased', 'their evidence is out of date', this 'is an isolated example' (Hanson 1994, pp. 43, 139, 152).

'Strictly interpreted, the term *refute* means to overcome opposing evidence and reasoning by proving it is false or erroneous.' (Freeley 19969, p. 281).

So, we have at least two different notions of refutation: a strict one, a falsifying refutation (that falsifies, makes false) and a large one, a non-falsifying refutation (that weakens, undermines, makes feeble). 'Non-falsifying refutations are in no sense proofs against the propositions they refute... Falsifying refutations are proofs in some sense, but they are not proofs in every sense' (Woods & Irvine 2004, p. 82). But it seems to me a little contradictory to speak of 'a soft, a mild, a loose, a half-refutation': refutation is or is not. Refutation should be the place of 'dissolution of reasoning' (*Rhetorica*, 1402 a 35) or the field of *the annihilation of errors* (Vigrahavyavartani), as says the title of a work by a Buddhist thinker, Nagarjuna (1992).

This dissolution can be done by logical tools or by rhetorical tools. There is indeed a non conclusive rhetorical refutation capable of refuting the adversary rather than to establish the truth: an argument that is neither *ad rem* nor *ad hominem*, but *ad personam*, namely that refutes the supporter of thesis instead of the thesis itself.

We have the couple to *persuade/to dissuade*. But what is the contrary of 'to convince', which is often used, properly or not, as synonymous of *to persuade*? Schematically, we can represent the situation this way:

to persuade / to dissuade

to convince / ? \*to dis-convince

And what is the contrary of 'to refute'? To accept, to approve, to confirm, to support, to admit, to prove: none of them seems precisely the opposite right term.

to demonstrate true / to demonstrate false

? \* to accept / to refute

So I can *dedicate* a victory or a book, but there is not a '*disdedication*' or something like this. I have not a definitive explication for this phenomenon, but perhaps it relates to the asymmetry between confirmation and refutation.

To confute is strictly connected with a polemical mood. Our society and our education do not favour polemic. 'Refusal is a difficult act to perform persuasively'... While it is always face threatening to refuse someone's request, one can perform the refusal with more or less politeness' by offering an apology, plus some explanation or reason, and an acknowledgement of the regret for the other's face loss (Mullholand 1994, pp. 310-311).

But, with the words of Cicero, '*disputation cannot be held without reprehension*' (*'neque enim disputari sine reprehensione nec cum iracundia aut pertinacia recte disputari potest'*, Cicero 1931, I, 28). And all the history of thought is an uninterrupted sequence of refuted arguments, of arguments and counterarguments.

I would consider and move from a few accepted facts and from some problematic questions, about the role and primacy of 'negative' and the centrality of refutation.

The following are six remarks, again apodictically asserted, followed by some more problematic points.

#### *Six remarks*

1. It is certainly easier to demonstrate something false than to demonstrate something true.
2. 'What could I say to show that you are wrong' and 'what could I say to show you that I am right' are very different and asymmetrical questions.
3. Refutability, rather than provability, is considered today an essential feature of science and, more generally, criticism is considered an essential feature of rationality.
4. Refutation is significantly important in every field, especially in the logical and reasoning field.
5. Dissuasion is also important in educational and social fields.
6. A refutation consists in convincing someone that a certain thesis is inconsistent. It has a destructive and polemical nature. But, on the other hand, refutation is connected with freedom of thinking and of word, with John Stuart Mill's 'liberty of thought and discussion', and it is a symptomatic sign and promoter of a liberal, libertarian society.

#### *Seven questions*

I have the advantage to speak first in this session, so I can pose some problems, leaving the answers open for the forthcoming discussion.

1. Confirmation and refutation are asymmetrical notions, if only because it is certainly easier to demonstrate something false than to demonstrate something true. Is the same true also for persuasion and dissuasion?
2. Negative evaluation and criticism seem to have a priority over positive evaluation and advocacy: is the primacy of negative evaluation based on a practical or on a logical basis?
3. A refutation may be more or less convincing? 'Convincing refutation' is a redundant expression? And what about 'mild refutation', 'half-refutation'?
4. Are there refutations that are non refuting? Is sophistical refutation a proper, a suitable expression? Is it a correct translation of the aristotelian *élenkos* (proof, tool of persuasion, especially in order to reply and to refute) as we find in *Analytica Protera* (60 b 111) and in *Sophisticoi elenchoi* (165 a 3): 'a syllogism of the contradiction' (*antipháseos syllogismós*, 170 b). In other terms, for Aristotle to propose an *élenkos* is to *antisillogízesthai*, namely to establish a syllogism with a conclusion opposite to the conclusion we want to refute.
5. Is it possible to persuade without convincing?
6. A successful refutation relies upon convincing someone that a certain view is wrong: how can refutation positively lead to a right view? Is the refutation only a destructive tool? What is, if any, the positive value of refutation? The *pars destruens* is a step of the proof, or is it the only true, the only possible kind of proof? I would follow the spirit of John Stuart Mill and his reflection on 'negative logic' and his belief that negative criticism would be indeed poor enough as an ultimate result; but as a means to attaining any positive knowledge or conviction worthy of the name, it cannot be valued too highly: 'if there are any persons who contest a received opinion, or who will do so if law or opinion will let them, let us thank them for it, open our minds to listen to them, and rejoice that there is some one to do for us what we otherwise ought, if we have any regard for either the certainty or the vitality of our convictions, to do with much greater labour for ourselves' (Mill 1989, pp. 46-47).
7. Is refutation a logical act or a more complex affair?

In the following part of my paper, I will try to answer only to this last question.

### *Role and primacy of negative. centrality of refutation*

The primacy of negative evaluation is discussed and convincingly supported by Maurice Finocchiaro (Finocchiaro 1980, pp. 421-24; 1994a, pp. 21-35; 1994b, pp. 1-21.) The author of *Galileo and the art of Reasoning* recognises to the negative

evaluation a constitutive function for reasoning and to the critical argument a priority over constructive argument. This status of primacy 'corresponds to trends and results discernible in other approaches to logic and other fields of scholarship and of culture in general' (Finocchiaro 1980, p. 421).

First, in the context of art history and criticism, there are objective standards for negative evaluation, but not for positive evaluation, because it seems that there are wrong reasons for disliking a work of art, but 'I do not think that there are wrong reasons for liking a statue or a picture' (Gombrich 1966, p. 5).

Second, in the context of psychology and psychotherapy, one can tell someone how not to be unhappy, whereas he can't tell him how to be happy (Ellis & Harper 1968, pp. 69-70).

Third, in the context of epistemology of Karl Popper, the real scientific mark is falsifiability rather than provability. 'In the Popperian approaches, the essential feature of a scientific theory is its falsifiability or testability rather than its provability or confirmability; the essential feature of rationality lies in its critical attitude, i.e. in being open to criticism, rather than in being right or in being in possession of the truth; the most significant feature of the growth of scientific knowledge is the occurrence of errors and the struggle for their elimination' (Finocchiaro 1980, p. 422).

Fourth, in the context of logical teaching, the so-called critical thinking prevails, whose ratio is to teach how to avoid the invalid and fallacious reasoning as means of teaching how to improve one's reasoning. 'The stress on criticism is often abused and frequently superficial... and its practice justification lies in the preponderance of fallacious reasoning... Its theoretical justification, however, must be in the critical-evaluative nature of reasoning itself, in the fact that reasoning is correct when it lacks specifiable faults' (Finocchiaro 1980, p. 424).

From a practical point of view, to recognise fallacies is relatively simple. To reason validly is more difficult. It is easier complaining about inconsistency, criticising integrity, denying a fact or consistency or relevance or validity than demonstrating and claiming or securing them. From an epistemic point of view, it is well known, even independently from Popper, that one disconfirming instance is enough for refuting a thesis and enables us to have a certainty, even if negative.

### *Refutation and confirmation*

Two schools confront each other on the issue of confirmation and rejection: for the first one the refutation of errors is of no relevant advantage for the discovery

of truth; apology is considered more important than criticism, confirmation more relevant than refutation; the other one relies on the so called 'epistemology of error' supported by Bachelard and Popper, and by XVIIIth century poet-philosopher Giacomo Leopardi, who said that '*Every progress eradicates an error; it sets no truth* ('*Ogni passo della sapienza moderna svelle un errore; non pianta niuna verità*', Leopardi 1969, p. 688). Even Socrates' daemon tells him what not to do, where not to go, which conclusion not to draw. He exerted only a dissuasive power. Dissuasive power (like the power attributed to punishments) is important in society too.

### *Refutation between logic and rhetoric*

We are arguing when we produce reasons for and against, when we offer motives for acting or causes for explaining. The argumentative line is double: in favour of or versus something.

The answer to the seventh of our preceding questions is: there is a logic, but also an art of refutation. Arguing is a complex and comprehensive act. It is an act of saying and of doing. A good functional and interactive definition of refutation is proposed by the Swiss linguist Jacques Moeschler: 'an illocutionary reactive function of negative evaluation containing an argumentation' (Moeschler 1982, p. 148). The definition is good, even if limited.

Refutation is based on (logical) rules and improved by (rhetorical) moves.

I refer not simply to the fact that there exist some figures of refutation such as the *rejectio*, the *prolexis* or anticipated refutation, the refuting dilemma, the *anticategoria et cetera*.

It is rhetorical the choice of the time of refutation.

It is rhetorical the sequential order of the proofs and disproofs. Which of them is better to introduce first? We have to edify after having demolished or vice versa?

Refutation is the sum of many different aspects: logical and cognitive, dialectical and rhetorical, ethical and behavioural. In particular, 'why to refute', 'how to refute', 'when to refute' are questions whose answers are rhetorical in nature.

Like rhetoric, refutation is, using Austin's formula, 'the total speech-act in the total speech-situation' (Austin 19752, p. 52) that implies *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*. It is at the same time the capacity of inventing and of discovering, the skill of answering and of ordering, the ability of speaking and of acting. And finally it is a

discourse that produces effects, first of all the result of dissuasion.

Such a complexity makes my thesis easily refutable. I rely on the fact that, even if to refute is the most powerful way of replying, it is not at all the first one to try nor is it the more efficient move from the rhetorical point of view. So I hope that you will first kindly try simply to object and criticize my paper, keeping your demolition charge till last. I'm conscious however that every theory (about knowledge and ethic or about disease and food) is good, acceptable or irrefutable only until the next refutation.

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