

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - The Normativity Of The Progymnasmata Exercises



The last four years I have been involved in a research project concerning ancient rhetorical exercises and contemporary education. In this paper I will try to conclude some of the results that possibly could have bearing for our argumentative pedagogy. This paper claims the ancient rhetorical preliminary exercises, called *progymnasmata*, could help us in our endeavour to provide students with a suitable set of analysing tools and a wide range of efficient language choices (*copia*). Furthermore it is claimed that the exercises are normative in the sense that the exercises deal with the question whether an argumentation is a good argumentation, i.e. should it be allowed to guide our attitudes and actions?

1. *Rhetorical exercises*

Rhetorical exercises have throughout the history been used for teaching argumentation. Rhetoric is an old art; so is the art of teaching rhetoric. During the Hellenistic era, when Greek culture dominated the Eastern Mediterranean region, a need for a formalistic educational program evolved. It was given the name *enkyklios paideia*, i.e., “comprehensive education” (we recognize in the Greek the origin of our term “encyclopaedia”). The art of rhetoric became an essential, perhaps *the* essential part of *enkyklios paideia*. The rhetorical training was soon organized according to a set of distinguished exercises, *progymnasmata*.

It is a series of progressive, interdependent exercises of increasing complexity, with each new exercise building on prior skills while introducing students to new ones. They are “preliminary” in the sense that they provided a foundation for understanding a comprehensive system of rhetorical theory and practice, including the three traditional types of rhetoric (forensic, deliberative, and epideictic), rhetoric’s five traditional parts, and stylistic ornamentation (figures of thought and speech). The initial exercises consisted of paraphrasing, imitating, and amplifying myths, fables, stories, anecdotes, and proverbs; the intermediate ones developed skills related to refutation and confirmation, commonplace,

encomium, comparison, personification, and description; and the final assignments were compositions on theses and law proposals.

The exercises led the student from simple translations and paraphrases to more elaborate ones, and eventually to the development of original compositions responding to a particular source or situation.

It is truly intriguing to see the increasing interest in the ancient rhetorical exercises *progymnasmata*. Ten years ago hardly anyone had heard about *progymnasmata*. Today a simple web-search will generate 100.000 hits. At most conferences on rhetorical or argumentation pedagogy you will find sections or panels on *progymnasmata*. There is no longer any reason to talk about a neglected interest in the exercises.

2. *Argumentation pedagogy*

What are the goals of our argumentation pedagogy? From one point of view it could be said to help us to a higher degree act according to our intentions, and to a higher degree hold opinions in line with our beliefs. Even if there rarely are any theoretical considerations why these exercises might do the job, such considerations are inherent in the exercises. It is assumed that an attempt to extract the theoretical considerations behind the exercises might teach us something vital for today's argumentative teaching.

There are a number of axioms for my research. One is that we are completely free to choose what language to use in argumentation. This fundamental axiom stems from the recognition of the arbitrary relationship between language and reality, that there is no forcing logical relation between language and what it denotes. In rhetorical theory this is captured in the distinction between *res* and *verba* – the distinction between reality and the language we are obliged to use to be able to think about and reflect over this reality.

From a contemporary argumentation pedagogical as well as epistemological view this distinction and necessary union between language and reality, form and content, might be the focal point for argumentation pedagogy.

The term 'epistemological' was used above. A better term – a better *verba* for the *res* I aim at – may well be *doxological*. I will do short digression and give some reasons for that. As a rhetorician I do believe that the words we choose have an impact on our perception of the assumed reality, and if we use the word *episteme*, Plato's term for sure knowledge that could not be otherwise, as the stem for how to phrase our theory of knowledge, we are already standing with one foot in

Plato's camp. The term doxology, in this meaning, was coined by the Swedish philosopher Mats Rosengren (Rosengren 2002 & 2006). The term has started to do some academic work, and is used in different disciplines (Nilsson 2005). Rosengren starts from the fact that all the knowledge we as human beings have – from theoretical understandings to practical attainments – are *our* human knowledge. By talking about “our human knowledge” all dreams about the stability and ground of knowledge are abandoned. Rosengren shifts the valuation of the terms in the classical opposition between doxa – what we believe about the world and ourselves – and episteme – how things really are. Doxology, as a contrast to epistemology, has to consider both the practical and theoretical aspects of knowledge, as well as the simple condition that it is people with different interests and possibilities that carry the knowledge, and create the practices and formulate the theories. There is no given epistemological certainty. We have to accept that no clear and sharp border between true knowledge and pure beliefs can be drawn, and see the conditioned, assumed and biased knowledge. Since no truth, evidence or knowledge exists outside or beyond its human context, rhetoric is with its perspectivistic view of knowledge central to all knowledge. The basis for knowledge is the good arguments and not the incontestable proofs, arguments that are regarded as good in a specific historical situation, a particular society, group or scientific discipline. Rosengren means that doxology is about situated, changing and interested knowledge. He argues that criteria for knowledge should not be “true” or “objective” in the way of corresponding to a non-human, objective and neutral reality, but *interesting* in relation to the specific knowledge situation. One of the reasons for Plato's, and later philosophers' and argumentation scholars', quest for secure foundations rather than an acceptance of argumentative success, is of course that such a quest aims at reducing a misuse of the power of language. The problem is to know when such a situation exists, something that, from a rhetorical point of view, cannot be decided without a negotiation with argumentative success for one side. This is at the root a democratic project, which possibly to a higher degree could be a remedy to different kinds of power abuse. Doxology sees knowledge as localized and produced in and through action – the practices that produce and maintain knowledge is inseparable from knowledge itself. Rhetoric can become a tool for scientific inquiries into our human knowledge. Shifting the role of rhetoric from showing how to influence a certain person or audience at a certain occasion, to instead being an instrument to show what this person or audience believes, values and knows in a specific context and moment. This way of describing the

elements in rhetoric – how to make an inventory of the topic, arrange and deliver your arguments based on reason, emotions, confidence etc. – show what is possible to do or imagine, what values that are prevailing, what conceptions and knowledge that are accepted, and who has the privilege of formulating the problem.

Other axioms for my research are that argumentation takes place in a cultural context that is characterized by conflicting alternatives, that the urge to argue stems from a desire to influence and guide the decision making among these alternatives, that argumentation is the alternative to violence and brutal force, and thereby the foundation for democracy, and that argumentation pedagogy is there to help us choose and decide as good as possible.

The object of study for argumentation pedagogy is communication. As a lot of other words it stems from Latin *communicare*, which means to make something common with someone (communion, communism). To study communication is to study how a sender tries to make a thought common with a receiver within a context. Argumentation scholars study how communication is used to convince and persuade, i.e. how a sender tries to make a receiver believe and act according to the transmitted thought.

We all participate in argumentations every day. We have models for effective and constructive argumentations in our heads. What argumentation pedagogy tries to do is to give us tools for conscious reflection over how these models work. And these tools are the meta-cognitive devices in the form of different tools and concepts that will enable us to communicate with our own models, to check whether they are working as good as we want them to or if we could make them work even better.

A key-term in argumentation pedagogy is, as mentioned, choice. Beside these meta-cognitive devices that can help us choose as constructively as possible, we must have something to choose from. That is one of the reasons why we have different exercises, to give us a broader palette to choose from, exercises for enlargement of our repertoire – *copia* is rhetorical term for this repertoire. And *copia* is what the ancient rhetorical exercises *progymnasmata* is all about.

Constructing dichotomies is an often used and often efficient pedagogical device, as long as we remember that they are constructions and not reality itself. One such dichotomy is the distinction between descriptive and normative ambitions in your academic work. At the ISSA conference in Amsterdam it is easy to try to

make the case why normative ambitions are important – that our aim should not be just to describe argumentation, but to be able to say whether this is a good argumentation that should be allowed to guide our attitudes and actions. Rhetoric and pragmadialectics share this normative trait. For rhetorical pedagogy normativity has been a characteristic feature since the very beginning. The Quintilian quotation “*Vir bonus*” is often mentioned. Argumentation pedagogy, pragmadialectic as well as rhetorical, could from an educational point of view be seen as aiming for an increased awareness of the impact of our choice of language for our reflected standpoints and actions. But there are differences.

From the strict distinction between rhetoric-dialectic, pragmadialectics sees rhetoric, with a well-put formulation, as among other things as *antropo-relativistic-audience oriented*, while pragmadialectic is *critical-rational-solution oriented* (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1994: 3-8). For the pragmadialectic view any audience reactions are irrelevant when it comes to judging whether an argumentation is as it should be, when to decide whether the argumentation should contribute to the solution of the problem with different standpoints. There are different forms of theoretical and empirical inferences, established more or less logically, that validate what is to be counted as just and sound. For a more rhetorically oriented argumentation theory that is an untenable stance. That the decision-making concerning possible ways of actions always is made by humans (*antropos*); that the question under discussion, with the words of Aristotle, concerns matters “that could be otherwise, contingent” (the truth of the question is relative, or at least perspective-dependent, *relativistic*); and that the decision-making always takes place within a specific situation, a context where there are receivers, at least ourselves (*audience*); this clearly shows the doxological differences between rhetoric and pragmadialectics.

The difference is perhaps best captured in the ancient accusation that rhetoricians taught how to make the weaker argument seem the stronger (Gagarin 2001, Hoffman 2003). We usually ascribe the quotation for this ability to a fragment by Protagoras (Schiappa 1991), and it occurs in chapter twenty-four of the second book of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (a fundamental chapter for argumentation analysis; here he displays argumentation that should not be accepted as guidelines since they do not constitute the whole triad of ethos, logos and pathos). To make the weaker argument seem the stronger is a characterisation that lays one’s finger on the doxological differences between a rhetorical argumentation pedagogy, and a more philosophical ditto. The philosophical accusation is

legitimate. The rhetorical doxology tells us that it is our choice of language, for making us see constructing ways of perceiving a reality that is decisive when it comes to determining what is to be counted as the strongest argument. If this was not the case, it would have been determined beforehand which is to be counted as the strongest argument. Determined before the weight or truthfulness of an assertion has been tested in a critical discussion, where the articulation of opposed alternatives also are allowed. To presuppose the strength of an argument is diametrically opposed to a rhetorical doxology that tells us that the strength of an argument is determined when it is met by the critical eye of an initiated dialogue partner in an open discussion where the whole triad of ethos, logos, and pathos are recognized as rational grounds for a reflected standpoint. So, we will always have to try to make the weakest argument the strongest in order not to risk to be stuck with a possibly erroneous standpoint.

3. *Progymnasmata*

I will now try to make the perhaps trickier case that the progymnasmata are normative exercises in the way that they enhance our ability to choose suitable language forms in normative questions. The exercises are very much hands-on without heavy theorization. But it is easy to deduce and abstract theoretical reasons from the exercises, reasons that will be parts in a theoretical framework. At least it is easy if you have had the opportunity to give the course *Progymnasmata - ancient rhetorical exercises for contemporary education*, as I have. I will now go through the exercises one by one and highlight the normative trait, before I give a short conclusion.

The first exercise, the Fable, always has a moral point. You practise how to prolong, shorten, and paraphrase fables like the dog with a piece of meat in his mouth that sees his own reflection and wants to have that piece as well. But it is this moral point that shows us a theoretical assumption that is something more than mere practical skills. From the very beginning in the exercise-series the normative trait is set. It is not about any objective description of an indifferent reality, there is no such thing. The question is not whether something is true or false in some naive way, but rather whether it is good or bad, evil or just. The moral point of the Fable is always that you should avoid the negative and evil, and instead choose a good alternative. Sometimes almost too obvious like Aphthonius' – his version of the progymnasmata is the most famous and widespread – example of the fable about the ant and the cricket, where the ant works and strives all summer while the cricket is just playing his violin and having fun. When the

winter comes the cricket freezes to death while the ant is having a good time in his nest, Aphonios writes, "Similarly, youth that does not wish to toil fares badly in old age" (Aphthonius 2003, p. 96).

The Narratio is the next exercise. From an argumentation point of view every act of communication wants and asks the receiver to look at the world from a certain perspective. While the Fable, as mentioned, is a work of fiction with a moral purpose, narration is a historical account of something that is presumably true or could be true. Like the systematic Aristotle wrote: "Everyone who effects persuasion through proof does in fact use either enthymemes or examples: there is no other way" (Aristotle, 1356b). Examples could be actual or made up, narrations belongs to the former. In any given narration, the storyteller chooses what to say to make the listener or reader perceive the story from a particular perspective. The scientific text is affected by the theoretical stand of the writer, and the holiday narration is forced to pick some aspects and drop some. No narration is a simple reflection of a given reality. As in all communication situations, the narrator must pick one perspective among a multitude of possibilities. By highlighting this choice – that includes the choice of actual wordings – the subjectivity of the narration is made obvious. Among a vast number of possible perspectives and language-choices, the narrator has, with a certain purpose, chosen this particular perspective in an attempt to try to make a certain way of looking at the world communal with the receiver. If this is clear to us as receivers we are well prepared to take a constructive stand to the truth of the narration as the one and only. The narration illustrates the probability of a standpoint in some form of argumentation, at least that the chosen perspective for some reason is worth taking into account. The narration could then be seen as an inductive support for that claim. The narration could transmit insights that are crucial for our stand on a certain question, insights that hardly could have been conveyed by "saying how it is", simply for the reason that our existence often is so multilayered and cloudy that straight assertions can risk to hinder our ability to see clear.

Next exercise, the Chreia, is the exercise that most clearly captures the theory and didactic of progymnasmata. It is about amplification according to a set scheme of topoi. Topoi that not only are heuristic in the sense that they help us understand the reasons behind a certain standpoint, reasons that do not stop at a logos-centred rationality, but recognizes the importance of ethos and pathos for a reflected standpoint. This is done for example by the topics "why listen to this person", and "What other ethos-strengthening references are there".

One such topic is the counterargument. In progymnasmata the counterargument is a recurring topic in the disposition-schemata. In the most simple way, as many ancient sources do (Aphthonius for example), it could be seen as a suggestion to show the absurdity of the opposite standpoint. But the counterargument topic could also be perceived more heuristically. Not only is it no doubt ethos-strengthening to bring up the strongest counterarguments to your standpoint yourself, it also enhances the possibilities for successful communication: We don't want the ones we are communicating with to afterwards find counterarguments, and thereby give up looking at the question from our point of view. But most of all the counterargument-topic could be seen as a topic for actually trying to listen to the counter-arguments that do exist, and from a heuristic angle that is crucial. If we do not listen to others and are not ready to take in and see a given issue from different perspectives, we have closed the door for the possibility that the matter under discussion could be otherwise – and the earth would still be flat.

The next exercise, the maxim, has the same topic pattern as the chreia, but without the author. Except amplification and heuristic understanding of the reasons why it might be reasonable to apply a maxim to a specific situation, this exercise once again highlight the importance of ethos, critical as well as confirmative. Why is something sound and justifiable just because collective life-experience has been captured in a flagrant formulation?

Refutation and Confirmation are the next exercises. Now it is time for pro et contra argumentation. The theoretical insight from this exercise is nothing less than the perspectivistic doxology behind all these exercises. It is not surprising that during the renaissance it was seen as a sign of strong ethos to be familiar with the pro and contra-exercises: A person who has the ability to argue for and against a given standpoint ought to have better chances to find the most constructive stand, why it could be a good strategy to trust such a person.

The focal point of the exercise Common topics is not, as one could believe, general argumentation-topics that could be used no matter in what context. Instead it is about the almost dichotomical chain of succession that is captured in the simpler versions of the stasis-theory (in for example Quintilian, 1856). It is about being aware of the fact that a language- or position choice will have consequences for the ability to make further choices. That it is not just possible to understand a communication process as a flow-chart, sometimes such an understanding is necessary for successful communication.

Encomium and vituperatio – praise and blame. Throughout the exercises the

whole triad of ethos, logos and pathos is taken for real. It is easy to see that that is a fact in our everyday argumentation, but another thing to give theoretical reasons why that is the case, and why it is right and sound that it should be that way. In the exercises praise and blame, appeals to emotions are practiced to make the students aware of the importance of pathos. It is not by chance that they, since antiquity, have to praise and blame the same object. A theoretical problem is how to justify the blaming. How can I as a university-teacher justify practising the ability to blame other people? The answer is that rhetoric and the ability to argue well is the alternative to mere violence. We rhetoricians use to claim it is not by chance rhetoric and democracy was born at the same time in ancient Greece. Sometimes more ethos- or logos oriented arguments are not enough to show that a certain behaviour is not accepted. The exercise Blame could from one point of view simply be seen as the art of saying enough is enough.

The Comparison is the next exercise. Here is the thought of increasing difficulty in progymnasmata obvious, again. The comparison is a double praise or blame, or a mix. The theoretical aspect in focus is once again our doxological perspectivism. You often have to compare something with something else to see salient traits. And the choice of what to compare with determines what traits are to be seen. There is another doxological point to be made. In the previous exercises the topic "metaphor" has had it's own position in the disposition. From one point of view you could say that when we understand something, we understand it as something else. All new knowledge is in relation to what we previous thought or knew. The comparison highlights and makes evident this relational trait within our ability to know things.

The Ethopoeia or the Characterisation - to compose and deliver a speech that someone else, as different as possible from you, could have done in a specific situation. It is not just an exercise in seeing the world from a different perspective, but also how to experience the emotions that are to found in that position. From a pedagogical definition of argumentation as solving a problem by means of language, you could say that when I argue I try to solve the problem of a receiver. Such a definition high lightens the dialogical trait of argumentation by paying attention to the importance of the receiver for communicative success. As a sender, it is the receiver's problem you try to solve, he or she does not hold the opinions or act in a way you think he or she should. And to solve another person's problems demands fantasy, the ability to change perspective, and not the least

empathy. This is practiced in the Ethopoeia.

The exercise Description highlights the importance of evidentialia, the impact of our choice of wordings for the perception of our reality. And that we are responsible for the way we choose to construct a perception of a given reality by our choice of wordings.

The next exercise, the Thesis, is a pro and contra exercise also, or perhaps foremost, for yourself, with an incorporation of what has been learned before. What is it that makes us believe and act in a certain way, what does the alternative look like, and what are the reasons for these alternatives? We are forced to take a stand and make a choice. The theoretical questions in this exercise will be ethical.

The last exercise, Proposal of a law, concerns the question what communal rules should determine our set of options? The natural freedom that everyone does what he or she likes is a bad alternative from a normative point of view. The theoretical focus will be on the connection argumentation – democracy, and the accompanying problem that the majority de facto could take a less constructive stand.

4. Conclusion

Aristotle named the art of argumentation a *techné*, i.e. both the theoretical consideration what constitutes a good argument, and the art of participating in good argumentations. The ancient rhetorical exercises progymnasmata practises this normative trait of argumentation pedagogy, and gives us a wider range of language choices to choose from in actual argumentation. To sum up:

Argumentation is about good or bad (the Fable)

This could be conveyed from many different perspectives (the Narratio)

How to find the right or good? (The Chreia and the Maxim)

How to determine whether something is right? (Refutation and confirmation)

What consequences will the choice of right/wrong give? (The Commonplace)

Are there other ways to determine right/wrong? (Encomium and vituperatio)

How does this fit in with the rest of our knowledge? (Comparison)

Could other people have another right appreciation of what is right? (Ethopoeia)

How can we make this evident? (Description)

How can we test whether it is right? (Thesis)

Should this what we find to be right also go for other people? (Proposal of law)

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