

Working Papers in Philosophy:
Registers of Philosophy

Szerkesztők: Kovács Gábor
Paár Tamás

2017/2

Response to Adam Potkay's lecture

Rhetoric and Philosophy from Cicero to Adam Smith: Tropes, Dialogue, Self-Division

Zsolt Komáromy

*Department of English Studies
Eötvös University, Budapest*



Institute of Philosophy
Research Centre for the Humanities
Hungarian Academy of Sciences

About the author

Zsolt Komáromy is Assistant Professor at the Department of English Studies, Eötvös Loránd University. After graduate studies at the University of Edinburgh (British Council scholarship) and Trinity College Dublin (Soros Graduate Research Scholarship), he earned his PhD at Eötvös Loránd University. His main field of interests are 18th century and Romantic literature and aesthetics, subjects in which he has published in both English and Hungarian.

Abstract

In my response, I first focus on the connection between the “social way of knowing” that Professor Potkay’s lecture advances and the metaphorical nature of the language of philosophy. I suggest that the role of “rhetoric” in philosophy is of a different nature in the Nietzschean-Derridaen tradition than in the tradition uncovered and theorized by Grassi; I then speculate on the metaphor of “vivacity” in the language of empirical philosophy and ask if it can indeed be seen as suggesting a connection between a social way of knowing and the use of metaphors in philosophy. In the second part of my response, I ask if the skeptical inheritance that gave rise to the philosophical dialogue may not in fact undo the social knowledge that Potkay suggests to persist in the dialogue form. Finally, I ask if Smith’s stoic ethical thought is indeed compatible with the social way of knowledge that may not in fact tolerate the closures of “complete accord.”

Zsolt Komáromy: *Response to Adam Potkay’s lecture: Rhetoric and Philosophy from Cicero to Adam Smith: Tropes, Dialogue, Self-Division*¹

Let me begin by thanking the organizers for having invited me to a conference on issues of philosophy, despite the fact that I am not a philosopher. I am especially happy to have the opportunity to respond to Professor Potkay’s fascinating talk, as its topic is of great interest to the literary scholar as well. Connections between philosophy and rhetoric – some aspects of which Professor Potkay’s talk explored for us – indicate that the philosophical contents of works are separated at our peril from their forms of expression. Indeed, Potkay’s reliance on Ernesto Grassi serves to present a rhetorical tradition in philosophy in which language does not function as a system of transparent mathematical signs that expresses abstract, universally valid propositions, but is of a literary nature in its reliance on tropes and images. The debate between “registers” of philosophy that reject or embrace rhetorical devices and figurative language in the pursuit of truth stretches at least from Plato to the present, and this fact itself shows that ways of thinking are hardly separable from ways of speaking. Such writers as Shaftesbury or Hume, for instance have always been of interest for students of literature as well as of philosophy – and not only because the notion of “literature” in their time was not understood as something separate from philosophy, but also because they themselves made clear and posterity also always found that understanding what they thought depends on also interpreting how they wrote. Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* is a famous case in point for the wide divergence in its interpretations – philosophers would seek to establish what Hume thought through interpreting the work’s intellectual content, while literary scholars would do the same through interpreting how Hume chose to express himself. Professor Potkay’s paper shows us, amongst other things, that the relation of rhetoric to philosophy focalizes the intertwining of ways of thinking and ways of speaking.

The paper gave us a particular historical instance of this general issue: it has shown us a certain tradition of moral and religious thought in which the presence of a rhetorical inheritance is tangible, and for which rhetorical methods are inalienable from ideas. The gist of Potkay’s arguments to my mind is that this inheritance reveals a particular form of knowledge, which he describes, in the spirit of Grassi, as a “social way of knowing,” and

¹ This paper was presented at the conference “Registers of Philosophy III.,” May 13, 2017, Budapest, organized by the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and Pázmány Péter Catholic University. The referenced work also appeared as a paper of our series, see: Adam Potkay: “Rhetoric and Philosophy from Cicero to Adam Smith: Tropes, Dialogue, Self-Division,” *Working Papers in Philosophy – The Registers of Philosophy* 2017/1, http://www.fi.btk.mta.hu/images/Working_papers/2017_01_adam_potkay_rhetoric_and_philosophy.pdf

which thereby also offers us ways of knowing about society and morality. I find this example very valuable for the perspectives it provides on evaluating the nature of much 18th century British writing – there are indeed numerous ways in which the manner of thinking the paper outlined is tangible also in the literary forms and endeavors of the period. I am also in full agreement with Potkay’s claim for the presence – as well as the importance of noting the presence – of the rhetorical tradition in central strands of 18th century thought. The historical trajectories we may discern for the survival of this tradition, furthermore, may also have philosophical relevance, and Potkay’s paper alerts us to this, is well. It is in connection to such trajectories that I would like to make some remarks. Let me, however, begin with commenting on and offering for discussion what is perhaps first and foremost a philosophical question.

I.

The first section of the paper responds to Grassi’s distinction between “rational” and “rhetorical speech,” which, for Grassi, marks a distinction between ways of knowing: Grassi uncovers a particular form of philosophical thought which deviates from modern scientific methods and which is enabled by metaphorical language. Potkay here sets out to link the social meaning-making he finds in the register of philosophy that Grassi also advances, to “a fundamentally metaphorical meaning-making.” I seem to sense a slippage here concerning the level of generality in this first section of the paper.

Grassi traces a view on the origin and the function of language in the humanist tradition, in which view the use of metaphors and images is integral for conceiving of philosophy *as* rhetoric. When Potkay responds to this thesis, he contrasts anti-rhetorical views of empiricist thinkers with a tradition reaching from Nietzsche to Derrida that has also shown the ineradicable presence of figurality in language. But I am not sure that these two approaches to metaphorical meaning-making are on par. I find that in Grassi’s book metaphorical language emerges from its rhetorical function of *persuasion*, metaphorical meaning-making is a means to the end of humanizing the phenomenal world.² For a thinker like Derrida, language is *essentially* metaphorical; this insight also leads to a certain register or manner of philosophy, but not because of the uncovering of a tradition or as a means to the

² See Ernesto Grassi: *Philosophy as Rhetoric. The Humanist Tradition*, trans by J. M. Krois and A. Azodi, foreword by T. W. Cursius, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980, especially 76-98.

end of a social way of knowing, but because for him the lack of a tenable distinction between the literal and the metaphorical describes the way the world is. Indeed, Potkay has said that the criticism focusing on the use of tropes in empiricist philosophy responded not to Grassi, but to the likes of Derrida; but – and this is my first question – does this not weaken the argument that the *essentially* metaphorical nature of language leads us to a register of philosophy that is a form of social meaning-making?

Let me demonstrate my uncertainty through the metaphor of vividness that Potkay mentions. I am in full agreement with the claim that empiricist epistemology draws the metaphor of vivacity from classical rhetoric. To my mind, the reason for this is to be sought in the perceptual metaphor grounding empiricist reasoning, a manner of reasoning for which understanding ultimately depends on “seeing” ideas in the mind analogously to how the eye physically perceives objects. Everywhere in the empiricist tradition we meet the claim that images of sensory perception are more vivid than those of mental perception, because the degree of vividness depends on the proximity to sensory perception; sensory images are more vivid than memories, and memories of objects once perceived are more vivid than images of the imagination that have never been present to the senses. Vivacity enables assent because it indicates proximity to empirical experience. As Potkay states, in ancient rhetoric liveliness or vivacity of presentation was a mode of persuasion. It may be relevant to add to this that the rhetorical efficacy of vividness was based on the same perceptual metaphor that we find in empiricist thought. The use of vivid images was advised in rhetoric as a means of reaching a reality effect that incurs belief. It is worth noting that the *Ad Herennium* discusses the vividness of images as a prerequisite for their memorability, for this also indicates that presenting vivid images to the audience makes the impression that what is presented is remembered, and not made up – in ancient rhetoric as well, vividness of images nears them to sensory experience, it enables the poet or the orator to present what is said as if he were transmitting eye-witness testimony, not hear-say, speculation, or make-believe. This way of thinking can already be found in Homeric texts: Odysseus praises the eloquence of Demodocus by saying that he told his story so well as if he were actually present at the recited events. And we may even think of inspiration by the Muses in these terms: as the invocation before the catalogue of ships in the *Iliad* says, the Muses can help the poet because as goddesses they are “there when things happen” and so “know all things” while the poet only relies on hearsay.³ The Muses can impart things vividly because they were there to see what

³ *Iliad* 2.485–86. See *The Iliad*. 2 vols. Translated by A. T. Murray. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press;

the poet could not see, but the poet inspired by the Muses partakes of their testimony and that is why he can speak vividly. Poetic inspiration and rhetorical persuasion in the ancient world are based on the same perceptual metaphor that empiricism uses to explain assent to ideas.⁴

We may thus think that the presence of a rhetorical means of persuasion in empiricist epistemology is due to their shared basis in a perceptual metaphor. And if we may say this, may we not conclude that the metaphor of vividness is drawn from rhetoric not because empiricism would base its own premises on modes of persuasion, but because its use in rhetoric is itself based on what are empiricist premises? And further, if this is what we conclude, may we not see this as a historical inheritance (or a form of ancient authority) that empiricist thought found comfortably exploitable, rather than the sign of the *inherently* metaphorical nature of language? Let me stress, these questions do not invalidate Potkay's claim that empiricist epistemology employs metaphors taken from methods of rhetorical persuasion – they only wish to elaborate my uncertainty about the role in this tradition of the *essentially* metaphorical nature of language. This uncertainty, ultimately concerns the question whether empiricist epistemology is to be seen as a social way of knowing *because* its language is metaphorical.

II.

Let me now move on to some remarks about the second and the third parts of the paper, those concerning the genre of philosophical dialogue, and internal dialogue.

Potkay has remarked on account of Cicero that skepticism is a congenial mode for the social way of knowledge that, as the paper has shown, the tradition of philosophical dialogue enacts. I have no argument with that. But as Potkay has also indicated, “the dialogue form reveals the difficulty as well as the possibility of common sense.” Indeed, skepticism may be just as dangerous as productive a position in ethical thought. In her work *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance*, Victoria Kahn has suggested a historical narrative in which the dangers of skepticism have the upper hand. This book, although it does not reach the period Potkay focuses on, takes a rather similar point of departure, the connection between

London: William Heinemann, 1960. For a commentary on and interpolations to Murray's translation of the passage, see Gregory Nagy, *Greek Mythology and Poetics*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990, 26.

⁴ For sources underpinning the argument made in this paragraph see my *Figures of Memory. From the Muses to Eighteenth Century British Aesthetics* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011), where I explore this connection and the metaphor of vivacity in detail.

ethics and rhetoric in the humanist tradition. In Kahn's account, this connection centers on a sense of reading as a form of prudence: texts are supposed to engage readers in an activity of discrimination, training their "prudential judgment which is essential to the active life." In the background of this tradition is Cicero's skeptical method of presenting arguments on both sides of the discussed issue, a method whereby rhetoric seeks to train readers in prudential judgment. Kahn's thesis is that the balance of skepticism and prudence was unsettled in the course of time by the inner workings of skepticism itself, which could and was turned against the method it was part of, destabilizing the terrain of the probable, on which prudential judgment operated: by eroding reliable criteria for any judgement, it eroded the power of persuasion to lead to right action.⁵ In the light of this narrative, the following questions may be raised. Can we confidently speak of a unified "rhetorical tradition," one that reaches into the 18th century and upholds philosophy as a social form of knowledge? Is there no retreat in the period to ethical universals from the skeptical mode that seems necessary for what is meant here by *sensus communis*, and is not the social way of knowing endangered in the rhetorical tradition of 18th century moral thought by an excess of skepticism?

I suspect that in assessing these questions an interpretation of Hume could be crucial. Potkay's remarks on *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* suggest that the skeptic's surrender at the end of the work is provisional, contingent and contextual, and the theist's victory is not authoritative, and so that the dialogue can be taken as an example of that form of social knowledge which rhetoric as philosophy enables. Pondering this point, I found it fascinating to recall Michael Prince's reading of the same dialogue, in his book on *The Philosophical Dialogue in the Enlightenment* that Potkay also refers to. According to Prince, the dialogue form was at the time used, on the one hand, to discuss obvious issues in an entertaining way, and on the other hand to discuss issues too obscure for resolution; Hume in the opening of the dialogue in question suggests he is using it for both of these ends. This, Prince points out, corresponds to the dialogue's theme on the *being* and the *attributes* of the deity, the first being an obvious prior knowledge, the second an obscure and eternally indeterminable subject. Hume's point, according to Prince, is to demonstrate that a distinction between the being and the attributes of God cannot be maintained in religious argument, and the dialogic form is offered by Hume as a formal equivalent of this impossible philosophical distinction. Hume's dialogue, Prince argues, in fact displays that the dialogue form itself is doomed to failure. Thus, concludes Prince, Hume's work in fact "sabotages" the dialogue

⁵ See Victoria Kahn: *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985, 11.

form. What I find noteworthy here is that Prince's argument nonetheless leads in a similar direction as Potkay's: the sabotaging of the form serves to redirect arguments about natural religion to an ethics that, instead of relying on universals, is "located within the vicissitudes of human experience," that is, to one that may in many ways be seen as part of the tradition into which Potkay places Hume's dialogue.⁶ But there is a crucial point of difference between the two interpretations as well: while for Prince, a certain way of knowing requires exposure of the shortcomings of the traditional forms of philosophical dialogue, for Potkay the form is a distinguished vehicle for a very similar form of knowledge. And this implies that the historical trajectories and forms through which the social way of knowledge of rhetoric is maintained in the philosophy of the period may be worth further examination and discussion.

The last remark I have time to make here also concerns historical trajectories. Prince's suggestion is that the route and forms that a non-metaphysical ethics took in the period leads us to literature, in his view specifically to the novel. Potkay concludes his discussion of the dialogue by saying that within the rhetorical tradition, it is ethics that takes us closer to consensus about truth. His line of thought takes us not to literature, but to the role of the inner dialogue in Shaftesbury's and Smith's moral thought. I will refrain from speculation on the role literature may have in the tradition Potkay highlights, for that would perhaps take us too far afield from the registers of philosophy. Instead, I will close with two questions pertaining to the last part of the lecture, which I will phrase in the plainest possible form. As for the first example of self-division: if for Shaftesbury self-division is a means to a complete accord, can we confidently place self-division in a tradition that, it seems, must stay skeptical about reaching complete accord? And as for the second example: if this tradition indeed requires a skeptical attitude, how does that accord with Smith's debt to Stoic thought, which, despite any possible overlaps, is essentially at odds with skepticism? Potkay is convincing in showing that Smith's spectatorial aloofness from one's own circumstances marks a profoundly social way of thinking, but couldn't it be read also as a stoical resigning of the particularity of human circumstance for the sake of an ethical universal? Or, to conclude by combining these questions: can the social way of knowing be squared with complete accord at all?

The questions I raised in this response to Potkay's paper are offered as possible contexts or crossroads that may indicate possible directions of discussion. They serve to suggest that the forms and historical routes in which the rhetorical tradition survived into

⁶ Michael Prince: *Philosophical Dialogue in the British Enlightenment: Theology, Aesthetics, and the Novel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 153, 154, see also 136-163.

eighteenth century thought may indeed be relevant for assessing its philosophical import. Potkay's line of reasoning seems to include this claim, reminding us of the importance of further exploring the labyrinthine historical routes through which rhetoric shaped 18th century philosophy.

