"Vir bene disputandi peritus" : pro and against a "controversial paideia"

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"VIR BENE DISPUTANDI PERITUS": PRO AND AGAINST A "CONTROVERSIAL PAIDEIA"

This paper deals with two polar notions: dialogue and polemic in relation to their metaphors and to their argumentative and educational values.

Dialogue: a gentle word, echoing co-operation, tolerance and lofty feelings, good and desirable in all situations involving persuasion, in political and religious field, in the public and personal discussions, in ethics and in science, in the family and in the school.

On the contrary, an education based on "having words with someone on everything", on competitiveness and antagonism, on conflict and antitheses, is naturally objectionable. The associated metaphors of war, combat, destruction are ubiquitous and insidious. That debating is educationally valuable is a debatable and debated claim.

We suggest that is possible and desirable to pursue a controversy-oriented approach, to restore skill in debating on either side of any proposed argument. This is an intellectual procedure practised by Cicero and Quintilian, advocated by Erasmus, exemplified by Francis Bacon, inspired by Vico, supported by Mill, Toulmin, Perelman, Habermas. Rhetorical creativity and proficiency in argumentation are kinds of skills we should expect an educated person to have.

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There are many types of debates, ranging from fair discussion to excited polemic. Consequently there are at least two opposed sets of rules of debate: the "well-mannered disputant rules" and the "perfect disputant moves". Furthermore the debate has many facets and meanings: an epistemic-conceptual dimension, a rhetorical-dialectical dimension and an ethical-political dimension. Consequently the question of how and when it is good to debate has at least three aspects.

Debating is one way of arguing. To conceive debate as a process of argumentation - instead of a simple interaction, or an exchange, or a regulated procedure - means to point out the reasons that the proponent and the opponent give in support of their assertions. This approach is typically rhetorical in nature. Argumentation may be the process or the result of an elaboration carried out by a thinker who is constructing in isolation chains of inferences starting from premises and ending with conclusions that for him are the truth (a monological act, susceptible of a logical treatment, founded on the rule that *truth creates consent*); or it may be a sequence of theses and antitheses, in a zigzag of objections and replies, where two or more disputants intervene (a dialogical act, susceptible of a rhetorical treatment, founded on the rule that *consent creates truth).*

Many of our ideas are the result of a some thinking performed in isolation, not the product of interchange with other people as interlocutors or opponents, consisting of reinforcements and replies. The difference between the two procedures is the same as that existing between the activity of a solitary sporting man and the fight of two wrestlers.

The argumentative interactions that occur in a democratic assembly, in a peace conference, between scientific researchers in a laboratory or between husband and wife at home are all examples of dialogue/debate presenting many common traits but also relevant differences. The lexical variety itself (*altercation, contention, contest, controversy, cut and thrust, discussion, dispute, disputation, squabble, strife of words, tiff, quarrelling, war of words*) testifies to the complexity of the exchange generically defined as "debate".

An argumentative exchange may be located between the two poles of dialogue and polemic. In the *dialogue* the participants are prepared to modify their opinions; in the *polemic* every party is looking for arguments suitable to overcome the other side. But it is not enough to distinguish between dialogue (*heuristic* discussion where the interlocutors aim sincerely at the truth and search for the best solution of a controversial

problem) and polemic (*eristic* discussion where each participant unyield-ingly wants his thesis to prevail, refuses to revise his opinions and judges his rival's thesis always unacceptable). The distinction is certainly prob-lematic and unsatisfactory both on a theoretical level and a practical level (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958: §8). Consequently the criteria for classifying debates must include visible contents and relationships, as well as intentions, aims, attitudes and other taxonomical parameters, such as

- the initial situation;
- the main goal of that type of debate;
- the participants' particular aims;
- the degree of legitimisation acknowledged to the interlocutor;
- the agreement and disagreement on rules and facts;
- the possible outcome of the debate.

In particular, it is important, and not at all obvious, to distinguish, as Walton and Woods do, between the primary goal of a type of dialogue and the particular aim of each participant. A debate has not only a main goal, but also specific and particular goals. For example, in the "persua-sion dialogue" the aim of participants is to persuade the other(s), where-as the main goal is the resolution of conflicting points of view by verbal means. In a "negotiation dialogue", each participant aims at maximising his benefit, to get the best out of the debate for oneself, whereas the main goal is to make a deal (Walton and Woods 1982: ch. 2).

Starting from these elements it is possible to outline a classification of debates and for each type to identify characteristic argumentative schemes, moves, standards of evaluation, with special attention to the effects resulting from the use of fallacies and stratagems. I assume that the outcome of a debate depends not so much on the mastery of the content as on the rhetorical strategies used. In its turn the success of such strate-gies depends on the knowledge of how a debate works and what are its goals, that is on the knowledge of its forms and objects.

A satisfactory definition of "debate" is difficult to find perhaps because there is a relationship of "family resemblance" among different forms of debate. My intention is to sketch out, within this big family, a typology of five different types of debate, each of them characterised by a different mode of thinking, of conceiving or perceiving the debate, that is by a dif-ferent metaphor.

I shall consider the following metaphorical fields:

war metaphor	to debate is to fight
sporting metaphor	to debate is to play
trade metaphor	to debate is to transact
exploration metaphor	to debate is to travel
building metaphor	to debate is to construct.

One of the simplest and most original criteria for classifying debates is a linguistic cue; in its turn the linguistic expressions are regularly associated to a metaphor, or better to a metaphorical domain.

In brief, starting from a double consideration about (1) the argumentative function of metaphor and (2) the plurality of metaphorical domains, I'd like to understand not only why metaphors are used, but also why that particular metaphor is used, for example war, rather than exploration.

The matter has a theoretical relevance as well as a practical impact. For example, an educator can consider his educational work from different perspectives, as:

- an act of building;
- a journey of two or more travellers;
- an act of birth;
- a process of filling up;
- an activity of pulling out;
- a work of moulding and shaping;
- an aid to growth;
- a nourishment.

To conceive the educator as a grower implies ideological and operational consequences: the educator will act as a farmer, whose duty is simply to create the proper environmental conditions for the seed to develop, the seed being already endowed with all its potentialities.

To conceive the debate as war means to locate it inside a metaphorical domain clearly marked by concepts such as attack, counter-attack, defence, strategy and so on. Discussion is seen as a battle, a struggle of words, and words are, à la Gorgias, proverbially a weapon. To use Clausewitz, we might say that many debates are war continuing with other means.

This approach was initially due to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). In order to illustrate the metaphorical nature of a concept and how this concept structures our daily activity, they consider the notion of "argument" and the conceptual metaphor "argument is war". This metaphor is reflected in a great variety of locutions typical of our everyday language, such as:

- Your assertions are indefensible
- He attacked each of my arguments
- The attack was repelled
- Winning tactics and strategy
- To miss the mark.

This metaphorical framework includes many other expressions, such as:

- to undermine a thesis
- to fire point-blank
- to take aim and fire
- to marshal up arguments
- to overcome
- to fend off attacks.

The *polemic* (such as a political or ideological debate) fits naturally into the war metaphor. It is a clash between two parties, having opposite opinions to defend. This is clearly a different situation from a conflict where only one participant is biased and prejudiced, while the other one is simply doubtful or critical and aims at testing the acceptability of the point under discussion. This type of debate includes a whole range of moves, techniques and tricks designed to prevail over the adversary. (In other types of debates incorrect moves are more infrequent and restrained.) Unlike what happens in real war, where the issue is determined in the battlefield and by the balance of conquests and of casualties, in this debate it is a judge, an arbiter or public opinion that decides who wins and who loses. Therefore it is important to take care of the audience, which is the addressee that will decide the winner.

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that, if we can think of discussion as combat, we can also think of combat as a way to settle a discussion. We find the same correlation in another frequent metaphor, the

metaphor of "play", normally applied to very different notions and situations: life is play, language is play, argument too is play.

This is not surprising, for a debate may be an adversarial, hostile fight or, vice versa, a co-operative enterprise, characterised by friendly and playful traits.

The kind of debate called *confrontation* is like a sporting competition and is connected with playing and sporting images. The relationship between the two subjects is antagonistic, but there is agreement about rules and both contestants are ready to accept, if need be, a defeat, according to such rules, because, as Barth and Krabbe say, what is irrational is not to lose a discussion, but rather not to admit that one has lost (Barth and Krabbe 1982: 71). The play metaphor points out the aspect of mild antagonism. Winning or losing certainly matters and the aim of participants is obviously to prevail over the other side, but this goal, competitive in nature, is carried out in a framework of co-operation. To accept competition with verbal instead of physical means testifies to a co-operative attitude. As Walton and Krabbe say, a quarrel is not undisciplined turmoil, but exists only if both parties take turns in allowing each other to respond (Walton and Krabbe 1995: 78). Maybe the fighting is tough, even fierce, but there is not total anarchy and suspension of rules.

Co-operation manifests itself in the acceptance of the so-called "rules of the game", which during the game cannot be modified or questioned, but simply assumed as legitimate. These rules concern, for example, duration and turns of the exchange and the admissibility of certain moves, but it is up to the player to use them with the ability of a champion or the awkwardness of a beginner.

The same occurs in a debate. There are some rules one must follow if one wants to bring the debate to a successful conclusion, avoiding sanctions or disqualification by the judge or arbitrator, who is the audience; but the behaviour in the course of the discussion is very free, and victory is not decided by simple knowledge and mastery of the rules of debating.

It is interesting to note that the rules of debate may be changed, but this change takes place in the course of and by means of another debate. Once we finish a game, we can start another one founded on different rules.

The phraseology of the play and sport metaphor is very rich. It includes:

- Winning or losing a game
- To gain an advantage over a competitor
- To checkmate
- To ward off a blow
- To castle
- To go on the defensive
- To have an ace up one's sleeve
- To put one's cards on the table
- To play one's cards well.

The quiet tone of co-operative debate, conceived as a journey of two or more friendly persons walking together, is typical of a discussion between researchers, who perhaps disagree on the evaluation of data, but agree on procedures and on goals to be obtained; for example, two consulting physicians respect each other and each is prepared to modify his opinion if new information and new convincing arguments are given by the other. This type of debate is called *research dialogue*.

The nature of the debate that might be called *negotiation* is the same as the process of buying and selling and is conceived as a commercial exchange. As already said, we do not just think and talk of argument in terms of commerce, but we do a real transaction. The phraseology of this metaphor is:

- The weight of the argument
- To weigh the pros and the cons
- To borrow arguments
- To capitalise on an idea
- Negotiated conclusion.

To think of debate as travelling implies that it has a start and a finish, and a progress (linear or uneven) towards a goal.

On the basis of a simple terminological reflection, we find this phraseology drawn from the metaphor of travel:

- our starting points are experimental results
- to start from the premise
- continuing on this way, we will arrive at a point where...
- to force an opening in the discussion
- to take a wrong turn

- the route is open
- to take a step backward
- to be on the wrong track
- to change direction.

The building metaphor is connected with a type of debate that is most similar to *dialogue*, in a sense of the word that is not merely formal , but substantial, namely as interaction or discursive exchange filled with expectations and "edifying" intentions and "constructive" aims. Building metaphors occur with the following phraseology:

- to construct a speech (or an argument)
- the foundation of a thesis
- to demolish an argument
- to shore up a thesis with good reasons
- to design a countermove
- to erect a wall of objections.

We can sum up the traits of the five types of debates in the table 1 at page nine.

A second criterion useful for identifying the type of debate is supplied by the presence of certain kinds of arguments. Some recurring fallacies signal the nature of the current verbal clash, as the type of weapons employed in a real fight often reveals whether it is a skirmish, a guerrilla or a total war.

For example, the use of an *ad hominem* argument testifies that the dialogue is or is being quarrelsome in nature. This occurs when one attacks the other person's honesty and character, instead of considering the value of the opinion he expresses.

If one uses arguments *ad verecundiam* (that is an appeal to some special authority in order to support a conclusion), the dialogue becomes an asymmetrical exchange, where the weight of expertise counts more than data and other relevant considerations.

The argument ad *misericordiam*, namely the appeal to pity, is indicative of a negotiation type of dialogue, where bargaining is important (Walton and Krabbe 1995: 71).

A fallacy of authority often involves a context of unanimity (*colloquy* or *constructive dialogue*) and is easily accepted without objections where the level of consent in high. The same might be said for circular reason-

ing, the argument traditionally called *petitio principii*. The typical example is "God exists because the Holy Scriptures affirm that God exists".

Fallacies of accent consist in giving only arguments supporting one's thesis and in systematically ignoring or minimising rival arguments. These kinds of fallacies occur more often in the polemic type of debate and in public disputations.

Threats and intimidation, included under the headings *ad baculum* and *ad metum*, are normal and admitted ways of pressing the opponent during a debate of the negotiation type, in the course of commercial or ideological bargaining. These kinds of arguments, typical of negotiations, are not deemed unsuitable, and are in common use.

The fallacy of the slippery slope is an argument beloved by conservative minds. If one wants to stop an innovation one only has to connect this unwanted project with a possible dangerous ultimate outcome. This move is effective especially if presented in the form of the perversity thesis, discussed by Albert Hirschman (Hirschman 1991: ch. 2).

Over-generalisations and faulty analogies characterise the debate of the research type, a type of debate significantly associated to the exploration metaphor of travelling. These fallacies have a heuristic function, useful in the process of inquiry.

There is another important aspect involved in the relation between fallacies and debate: "field dependence". Certain moves that are considered wrong and faulty in a context of critical discussion may become admissible and effective in polemical contexts. For example, *ad hominem, tu quoque, ad populum* arguments are employed and employable in an electoral debate. Indeed to neglect the "ethos" and the audience in a public disputation is a fallacy, the most fallacious of the fallacies (Cattani 1995).

An argument judged fallacious in a given case may not be fallacious if we change the type of dialogue: it may be at most set aside as weak or trivial, not as an error. Whether a reasoning is to be considered erroneous or not in a given case, is a matter of establishing the context of dialogue one has entered and the rules accepted by both interlocutors in this context. Every debate, like Kuhn's paradigm, contains its peculiar norms of evaluation and acceptance.

Therefore we can define a fallacious move as one prohibited by the rules of a particular current type of debate. In a context of negotiation, for example, where one has to do with interests and not with truths, it would be out of place to introduce well-constructed, rigorous, formally

perfect syllogisms; on the contrary, this type of reasoning is required when we have to demonstrate or to refute a scientific conjecture.

Fighting, trading, playing, travelling, and *building* have been identified as the five modes of arguing and debating. Each way of debating is connected to a different way of thinking, of perceiving and of representing a debate, namely to different metaphorical images. I have tried to illustrate and to exemplify, on the basis of logic-linguistic considerations of two phenomena - the metaphorical domain and the presence of fallacies in reasoning - this correspondence between language and behaviour, between mode of speaking and mode of acting, in a dialogue/debate situation. The idea is that metaphor is not only a shining light but also a guiding one. The two polar and opposed images are the fighting-polemical and the edifying-dialogical ones.

Dialogue is a gentle word, echoing co-operation, tolerance and lofty feelings, good and desirable in all situations involving persuasion, in political and religious field, in the public and personal discussions, in ethics and in science, in the family and in the school.

On the contrary, an education based on "having an argument with someone on everything", on competitiveness and antagonism, on conflict and antitheses, is naturally objectionable. The associated metaphors of war, combat, destruction are ubiquitous and insidious. My thesis is that polemic and controversy are a paradigm for philosophy, a rhetorical protocol and a good pedagogical practice; that to pursue and restore such an ancient, and recent, aim is possible and desirable; that controversy has argumentative and educational values. The controversy-oriented approach, the skill in debating on either side of any proposed argument was practised by Cicero and Quintilian, advocated by Erasmus, exemplified by Francis Bacon, inspired by Vico, supported by Mill. Stephen Toulmin, Chaïm Perelman, Jurgen Habermas too are conscious of its importance and are promoters of the revival of controversy for philosophy and for social life.

For all of them, rhetorical creativity and proficiency in argumentation are kinds of skills we should expect an educated person to have and the controversy-oriented approach is intrinsically pedagogical: it promotes rhetorical creative processes and favours training in argumentation.

The inspiring principles of this intellectual approach are connected with the aim of a rhetorical education, that is to make the student able and versatile in discovering ideas and arguments. Rhetoric should achieve richness in expression as well as richness in content, abundance of style

and abundance of subject matter, variety of words and variety of arguments. The increasing of our inventive resourcefulness by developing ideas on both sides of a question could produce a change towards a broader range of ways to talk to each other and to face issues vital to us. George Herbert Mead asserts that to learn "to take the roles of another", in games and in other situations, is vitally important also for the development of thought (Mead 1934: 253). Richard A. Lanham too asserts that "in practice, rhetorical education is education in two-sided argument, argument where the truth is decided by the judge or the jury, where the truth is a dramatic criticism handed down on the forensic drama which has been played out according to the rules laid down, finally, by a rhetorical education" (Lanham 1988: 600). The idea is that competition is not incompatible with co-operation, that the arguer's dialectical obligations are not the human moral obligations, that in dialectical arena "it is good to be bad".

But obviously every *pro* argument corresponds to a *con* argument, because every controversial question has two sides and everything may be contested: affirming that debating is educationally valuable is a claim that is debatable and debated. It is debatable whether listing the pro and cons of any question is useful or not; whether subjectivity can become a partner of objectivity or not. I promise to be competitively co-operational with people who will suggest a reason, a motive or a cause for adopting a dialogical and co-operative setting and for operating in a "contrived scene of hermeneutic peace and harmony" (Gaskins 2001: 196).

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