Practical Reasoning in Organizations: Perelman's Universal and Particular Audiences

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Introduction

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca describe audience using two constructs: a normative notion of a universal audience and a concrete notion of a particular audience. The universal audience, consisting of all normal, adult persons, provides a norm for objective argumentation (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 30–31). Specifically, a speaker strives to select premises that will secure the unanimous agreement of the universal audience, the highest level of agreement possible (31). As explained by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, "philosophers always claim to be addressing such an audience…because they think that all who understand the reasons they give will have to accept their conclusions" (31). A particular audience, in contrast, is a concrete incarnation of the universal audience, for example an audience comprised of those who have "the same training, qualifications, and information" (34). The universal audience and its incarnation in particular audiences is central to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's theory, for it is through these constructs that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca incorporate practical reasoning. According to Perelman,

> The new rhetoric does not aim at displacing or replacing formal logic, but at adding to it a field of reasoning that, up to now, has escaped all efforts at rationalization, namely practical reasoning. Its domain is the study of critical thought, reasonable choice, and justified behavior. It applies whenever action is linked to rationality. ("The New Rhetoric" 40)

Perelman's interest in practical reasoning recurs often in his writing. In an early essay, he voices two main objections to the Cartesian theory of knowledge. First, knowledge as described by Descartes depends on self-evidence and certitude, and is both asocial and unhistoric ("Self-Evidence" 295). But "Perelman believes that modern epistemology should deal with all the factors, including social and cultural elements, which condition the acquisition of ideas and beliefs" (Dearin 23). Perelman's second critique of the Cartesian method is that it separates theory and practice: "Descartes himself insists, in several passages, on the inapplicability of his method in two spheres: that of matters of faith, and that of daily life" ("Self-Evidence" 296). Yet Perelman's interest is that reasoning that occurs in daily life. As he and Olbrechts-Tyteca explain in the introduction to *The New Rhetoric*, "we shall examine arguments put forward by advertisers in newspapers, politicians in speeches, lawyers in pleadings, judges in decisions, and philosophers in treatises" (10). Applying Perelman to organizational discourse therefore seems warranted. Organizational discourse is a specific instance of practical reasoning; reasoning directed toward an audience that can be described with reference to the universal and the

particular as follows: The universal audience of a society is circumscribed by its social institutions and is incarnated in particular organizational audiences.

In this paper, I provide a brief description of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's theory of argumentation and the pivotal role of audience. I then discuss how the notions of universal and particular audiences fulfill two functions. First, the concept of the universal audience incorporates social, cultural, and historical factors into Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's theory of argumentation. Second, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca use the notions of universal versus particular audiences to distinguish between two types of values (76). Both of these functions can be analyzed with respect to social institutions and organizations, and the dialectical relationship between these entities provides mechanisms for addressing specific organizational audiences.

The Pivotal Role of Audience

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca describe their theory of argumentation as "…the study of the discursive techniques allowing us *to induce or to increase the mind's adherence to the theses presented for its assent*" (4). Furthermore, "for argumentation to exist, an effective community of minds must be realized at a given moment" (14). This community of minds is possible only if agreement is reached first on forming the community and then on debating a specific issue; a consensus not reached automatically (14). Rather, a speaker must be interested in gaining an audience's adherence and the audience must be willing to listen. If the audience does not agree with the premises of an argument, it will not attend: "When a speaker selects and puts forward the premises that are to serve as foundation for his argument, he relies on his hearers' adherence to the propositions from which he will start" (65). As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca assert, "*it is in terms of an audience that an argumentation develops*" (5).

Rather than defining an audience materially, a speaker constructs a mental image of those he wants to influence (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 19). By knowing the psychological and sociological origins of an anticipated audience, a speaker can construct an image of the audience that is as close as possible to reality, and select premises that that audience will accept (19–20). In his recent paper on Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca's universal audience, Alan Gross has claimed that experimental psychology is cognitively prior to rhetoric (204); a similar claim can be made with reference to sociology. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca argue that the sociology of an audience is critical: "Every social circle or milieu is distinguishable in terms of its dominant opinions and unquestioned beliefs, of the premises that it takes for granted without hesitation: these views form an integral part of its culture, and an orator wishing to persuade a particular audience must of necessity adapt himself to it" (20–21).

The sociology of the audience includes both social functions and social settings. Social functions are the roles played in social institutions by not only individual audience members, but also entire audiences (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 21). For instance, the classical types of oratory—deliberative, forensic, and epideictic—are based on the role of the audience in specific social institutions—politics, law, and community. The second sociological consideration is the social setting, or the social groups to which audience members belong, whether political, occupational, or religious (22). Analyzing the sociological origins of the audience enables the speaker to adapt to it (23). According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, "In argumentation, the important thing is not knowing what the speaker regards as true or important, but knowing the views of those he is addressing" (23–24).

As shown by this summary, both social institutions and occupational groups play a part in forming the views of an audience. Furthermore, both can be operationalized using Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca's concepts of universal and particular audiences.

The Universal and the Particular Audience

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca question the rationalism of the Cartesian method, asking whether "there is really objective validity in what convinces a universal audience" (33). Specifically, what people have viewed as true, as factual, or as valid has varied over history.

> Everyone constitutes the universal audience from what he knows of his fellow men, in such a way as to transcend the few oppositions he is aware of. Each individual, each culture, has thus its own conception of the universal audience. The study of these variations would be very instructive, as we would learn from it what men, at different times in history, have regarded as *real*, *true*, and *objectively valid*. (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 33)

Thus the universal audience is circumscribed by the social institutions of a particular epoch and culture. A particular audience, while also circumscribed by historically- and culturally-situated social institutions, instantiates those institutions based on the viewpoint of a concrete audience. Namely, a particular audience is a concrete representation of the universal audience.

These two concepts of audience, the universal and the particular, are interdependent. According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca,

> We believe, then, that audiences are not independent of one another, that particular concrete audiences are capable of validating a concept of the universal audience which characterizes them. On the other hand, it is the undefined universal audience that is invoked to pass judgment on what is the concept of the universal audience appropriate to such a concrete audience…. (35)

Further, "the task is not, as often assumed, to address *either* a particular audience or a universal audience, but in the process of persuasion to adjust to and then to transform the particularities of an audience into universal dimensions" ("Report of the Committee on the Nature of Rhetorical Invention," qtd. in "The New Rhetoric and The Rhetoricians" 246). This process of adjustment and transformation can be illustrated by the relationship between social institutions and organizations.

Social Institutions and Organizations

A clear differentiation of contemporary social institutions is offered by the sociologist Niklas Luhmann, who uses systems theory to describe the economy, law, science, politics, religion, and education. He differentiates between these systems by means of value / counter-value pairs such as: payment / nonpayment for the economy (52–53); legal / illegal for law (64); truth / falsity for science (76); office held / not held for politics (86–87); immanence / transcendence for religion (95); and lastly, better / worse for education (101). These value pairs characterize the universal values to which twentieth-century, Western society adheres, and therefore describe the views of the universal audience. Yet Luhmann further differentiates between these social institutions based on the criteria that determine appropriate operations within each (45): prices (53), laws (64), theories (76), popular will (87), Holy Scripture (97), or

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curricula (102). It is by changing these criteria that society renders the value pairs particular and stipulates the operations of social institutions.

Examining the social functions of organizations and the occupational roles of its members illustrates this point nicely, because both can be defined relative to social institutions. First, the value pairs of social institutions are instantiated in organizational values and goals in the form of operational criteria based on an organization's function. For instance, profit-making organizations function within the economy through payments; however, the products and services they offer are both specific and distinct. In contrast, regulatory organizations such as the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) and the NRC (Nuclear Regulatory Commission) operate mainly within the legal institution; however, the laws legislating telecommunications companies and nuclear power plants are unique. Finally, organizations that are federally funded, such as NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) and the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts), are answerable to the political system and yet pursue discrete agendas. These particularities, as described above, can be transformed into universal dimensions for persuasive purposes. For instance, an argument based on the profit margin could be used in most organizations, regardless of the specific goods and services produced.

Second, individual members of an organization can be differentiated on the basis of occupation, such as accounting, management, or engineering. Interestingly, these occupational groups function with respect to specific social institutions similar to the way that organizations as a whole do: accountants function according to the economy, managers to either politics or the economy, and engineers to science. By analyzing occupational groups, therefore, a speaker can isolate areas of possible conflict, such as that between managers and engineers. Consideration of the sociological origins of an organizational audience in the form of the organization's social function as a whole and the occupational groups of its individual members allows a speaker to identify both the organization's values as well as possible conflicts.

The concepts of the universal and particular audiences not only integrate social considerations into Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's theory of argumentation, but also provide a strategy for resolving conflicts. As mentioned in the introduction, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca use the concepts of universal and particular audiences to define two types of values. Like the universal and particular audiences, these two types are interdependent, and it is this interdependence that can be exploited by a speaker in controversial situations.

Universal and Particular Values

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca discuss two classes of objects of agreement: the real and the preferable (66). The first class, the real, consists of facts, truths, and presumptions (67). Both facts and truths refer to an objective reality "common to several thinking beings" (Poincaré, qtd. in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 67); what holds the status of a fact or truth is determined by the universal audience. Presumptions, which correspond to what is normal or likely, are also validated by the adherence of the universal audience, but to a lesser degree of intensity (70–71). The second class of objects of agreement, the preferable, consists of values, hierarchies, and the *loci* of the preferable, objects classified as opinions in the classical tradition (74). More importantly, these objects of agreement are those to which a particular audience, not the universal audience, adheres (74). In sum, the real is comprised of objects upon which all rational beings of a particular epoch would agree, the preferable of objects that reflect the viewpoint of a particular audience (66).

While Gross explored this use of the universal and the particular audiences in his recent paper, it is the way in which these concepts of audience can also be used to distinguish between two types of values—universal, or abstract, values and particular, or concrete, values, that is germane to this discussion. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca qualify the dual dichotomies of universal and particular audience and the real and the preferable as follows: "when inserted into a system of beliefs for which universal validity is claimed, values may be treated as facts or truths" (76). These universal values, which include things such as the *True* and the *Good*, can claim the adherence of the universal audience, but only as long as they are general: "They can be regarded as valid for a universal audience only on condition that their content not be specified; as soon as we try to go into details, we meet only the adherence of particular audiences" (76). Furthermore, the strength of these values lies precisely in their ambiguity, the universal aspect of which can be used as a basis for agreement. This agreement "is evidence of the fact that one has decided to transcend particular agreements, at least in intention, and that one recognizes the importance attaching to the universal agreement which these values make it possible to achieve" (76).

Thus universal and particular values, like the universal and the particular audiences, are interdependent. According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca,

> the particular values can always be connected to the universal values and serve to make the latter more specific. The actual audience will be able to consider itself all the more close to a universal audience as the particular value seems to fade before the universal value it determines. It is thus by virtue of their being vague that these values appear as universal values and lay claim to a status similar to that of facts. (76)

The implication of this interdependence is that a speaker can reestablish a basis of agreement by shifting from the particular to the universal. Since, as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca assert, it is when the details of a value are specified that agreement breaks down, reframing a particular value relative to its universal value may restore agreement.

Justification and Particularization

This dialectical tacking between the universal and the particular in order to address possible conflicts can also be illustrated using social institutions and organizations. Luhmann's value pairs constitute a set of universal values because the universal audience of twentieth-century, Western society adheres to them. These values are instantiated within an organization based on both the organization's function and its employees' occupations. Because of this dual instantiation, conflict can arise between occupational beliefs and organizational values, which are not necessarily defined with respect to the same social institutions. A case in point is an engineer working for NASA, who has values defined by science but is working in a political organization.

As befits universal values, Luhmann's value pairs are also highly ambiguous. For instance, although the dominant value of science is truth, what that truth is, is not specified. Gaining an audience's adherence to truth as an abstract value may be easier than gaining adherence to evolution as the true genesis of mankind. Similarly, the purchase of an advanced computer system, environmental restrictions, federal funding, the ethics of genetic engineering, or the relative value of a degree versus experience are all issues that can provoke conflict. Nevertheless, since both organizational functions and occupational groups particularize societal values, a speaker can refer to those abstract values to justify a concept. In the case of evolution, a

speaker can argue that empirical adequacy and predictive power guarantee objective truth, before addressing Darwin's theory of evolution.

Conclusion

By characterizing audience using the two interdependent constructs of the universal and the particular, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca forge a powerful tool for analyzing audiences. By defining the universal audience with respect to social conditions, a speaker identifies values universally considered valid. Based on the social function and setting of the anticipated audience, the speaker can further clarify the viewpoint of that audience, one that instantiates a universal concept. Moreover, the dialectical relationship between the universal and particular resonates such that the speaker can tack between the abstract and the concrete, resorting to the first to justify a concept and the second to particularize that concept.

The heuristic power of these two constructs can be illustrated with respect to contemporary organizations. Using Luhmann's depiction of twentieth-century social institutions, a speaker can identify universally accepted values, values reproduced and instantiated by organizations based on organization-specific functions and by individuals based on occupation. In periods of controversy, the speaker can transcend the conflict by appealing to the integrative potential of the abstract, universal values. In periods of indecision, the speaker can appeal to the values specific to the organization and adhered to by employees. Through this model of interdependence between the universal and the particular, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca not only provide a method of audience analysis, but also a strategy for argumentation.

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