

Chaim Perelman's "First Philosophies and Regressive Philosophy": Commentary and Translation

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Chaim Perelman's 1949 article, "First Philosophies and Regressive Philosophy," has remained unavailable to readers unable to read French. Our commentary and translation is intended to provide English readers access to the context, influences, and themes that make the article an extraordinarily important work in the history of twentieth-century rhetoric. In this article, Perelman offers a powerful critique of first philosophies and anticipates the problems of radical postmodernity. "First Philosophies" remains a strikingly elegant attempt to foil what Foucault (1984, 41–42) has called the "Enlightenment blackmail of reason," the assumption held by logical positivists and radical skeptics that if reason does not yield absolute and eternal Enlightenment knowledge, there can be no knowledge.

Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's New Rhetoric project avoids Enlightenment blackmail by charting a third way between logical positivism and radical relativism, and "First Philosophies" sets forth the project's philosophical blueprint. Commencing in 1947 and culminating in 1958 with the publication of *Traité de l'argumentation: La nouvelle rhétorique*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca sought, discovered, and developed a philosophical system designed as a rapprochement between dialectic (reason and logic) and rhetoric (the art of adapting arguments to audiences). Historians of rhetoric judge the work a "grand revolution" (Meyer 1999, 259), believing it marks a rhetorical renaissance in Europe, and suggest nothing like it will appear for another 100 years after its publication (Johnstone 1971). The New Rhetoric project influenced Gadamer and a host of post-war European and American thinkers (Mootz 1998). Michael Leff calls the 1970 English translation of *Traité* a "bombshell" (1994, 510). Beyond its historical importance, Crosswhite suggests that the New Rhetoric project is "the single most important event in contemporary rhetorical theory" (1996, 35) and "First Philosophies" marks Perelman's turn from logical

positivism to rhetoric, offering prescient answers to the post–World War II crises of reason, and the ideas in the article provide the *Traité*'s philosophical glue (see in particular the English translation, 62).

Perelman joined many post-war theorists, including Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), in the resistance to the reign of a disembodied Enlightenment rationality. However, Perelman identified what Habermas (1987, 119) would later call the “performative contradiction” in the conclusion that radical skepticism was the only alternative to Enlightenment rationality. In “First Philosophies,” Perelman responds directly to Sartre’s 1943 *Being and Nothingness* (198; see translation below) by exposing the failure of radical skeptics to see that they had been held hostage by Enlightenment blackmail in accepting the Enlightenment criterion for truth, rejecting it, and then making skepticism an absolute. Indeed, “First Philosophies” navigates from this performative contradiction to chart a third way between Enlightenment rationality and radical skepticism with an approach that he labels regressive philosophy. Regressive philosophy, Perelman argues, provides the human community with a mode of philosophical reasoning located between the extremes of Enlightenment rationality and radical skepticism. In this space between extremes, Perelman identifies contingent truths and values dependent on a rhetorical mode of reasoning, one making moral judgments possible.

To best understand “First Philosophies,” we recognize the importance of historical context in the development of social theories of knowledge (see Delacampagne 1999; Kennedy 1999). The intellectual networks in which philosophers operate also influence the development of philosophical systems, as Randall Collins has aptly documented. In addition to historical context and intellectual networks, Frederick Beiser has recently noted: “[t]he best introduction to any philosophy is the biography of the person who created it” (1999, 5). He argues that textual analysis alone cannot illuminate the motivation or meaning of a philosophy. A sense of Perelman’s biography and the cultural influences that gave rise to “First Philosophies” are necessary for a proper understanding of its themes. For Perelman, the primary intellectual exigencies of the post-war period were the interrelated crises of justice, philosophical reasoning, and responsibility to which “First Philosophies” is a response.

The crises of justice, philosophical reasoning, and responsibility

Perelman's experience during the war brought him face to face with totalitarianism. He was forced by the Nazis to resign from his faculty position at the Free University of Brussels in 1940 because he was Jewish, was arrested and then released by the German police in 1942, and was in hiding from August 1943 to the liberation of Belgium in August 1944 (Schreiber 1999). Perelman helped found the Committee for the Defense of Jews (CDJ) in July 1942 in his home, and served as the committee's co-chair.

After the war, Perelman and his wife set about the task of reconstructing Belgian society and assisting European Jews to find their way to Palestine/Israel. To help create the conditions for cultural rapprochement, he celebrated the actions of the Queen and the Cardinal of Belgium, both of whom he believed worked to save Belgian Jews (Schreiber 1999). In fact, the post-war reconstruction of Belgium plays a clear role in Perelman's development of a regressive philosophy. For instance, Perelman's contemporaries, such as André Lermينياux and the former Prime Minister Paul van Zeeland, view this period of reconstruction as offering an occasion for positive re-creation.¹ When the war ended, Perelman returned to his teaching post in the winter of 1945. Perelman had finished *De la justice* (1945a) while in hiding from the Nazis. He later noted that this "study was finished in August 1944, having been written during the worst excesses of National Socialism. It was nevertheless published with its reluctant conclusion, and in conformity with the rigorous methodology of logical positivism" (1980). That reluctant conclusion, one that he worked through and beyond between 1944 and 1948, was that justice had no basis in reason. At this point, Perelman concluded in favor of logical positivism, holding that scientific knowledge is the only kind of factual knowledge and that other doctrines are to be rejected as meaningless.

Two other conclusions attended his commitment to logical positivism in the immediate aftermath of the war. First, he made a clear distinction between the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, agreeing with the Enlightenment philosophers that the domain of philosophy was the latter. Perelman taught a course on logic during the first semester of his return to the Free University. A notebook in the Free University archives, labeled "1944-1945," contains a narrative outline of his view of logic. In the first paragraph of the notebook, he wrote, "philosophy deals with matters of contemplation, not action."

A second conclusion followed: because philosophy and reason were limited to “matters of contemplation,” there could be no reasonable or rational bases for action. Yet, this conclusion was troubling for Perelman. In a Convocation speech delivered to his students on October 8, 1949, Perelman ruminated on the consequences of this limitation: “the theoretical crisis that tormented your elders during the period between the wars . . . resulted from the limitations of the scientific method to scientific problems, leaving us without rules of action, without conviction that one could honestly accept outside of science itself” (1949a, 49). Because there were no rules of action, Perelman suggested, there was no positive doctrine developed to oppose fascism, allowing many to “degenerate into cynicism” and indifference, marking a significant failure of responsibility and conscience during the war.

Perelman struggled with his conclusion that justice and value judgments were arbitrary, the limitation of philosophical reason to contemplation, and with the failure of many to act responsibly before and during World War II. His trajectory from logical positivism to rhetoric is a result of his evolving view that many philosophers held a severely limited and truncated vision of reason. This struggle is apparent in the conference proceedings (1947 and 1949) and articles that constitute the prelude to the *New Rhetoric*: “The Jewish Problem” [La question juive] (1945b); “Free Inquiry and democracy” [Libre examen et démocratie] (1946); “Selections of the Theory of Knowledge of M. E. Dupréel” [Fragments pour la théorie de la connaissance de M. E. Dupréel] (1947b, 1948a); “Ethics and Free Choice” [Morale et libre examen] (1947c); “The Analytical Method in Philosophy” [De la méthode analytique en philosophie] (1947a); “Logic and Dialectic” [Logique et dialectique] (1948d); “The Problems of the Moral Philosophy” [Problemen uit de Moraalphilosophie] (1948f); “The Two Problems of Human Liberty” [Les deux problèmes de la liberté humaine] (1948c); “The Problem of Making Good Choices” [Le problème du bon choix] (1948b); “Truth Versus Democracy” [Vérité contre démocratie] (1948g); “Freedom and Reasoning” [Liberté et raisonnement] (1949b); “Free Inquiry, Yesterday and Today” [Le libre examen, hier et aujourd’hui] (1949a); “First Philosophies and Regressive Philosophy” [Philosophies premières et philosophie régressive] (1949e) and his first publication with Olbrechts-Tyteca, “Logic and Rhetoric” [Logique et rhétorique] (1950).

These publications chart his search for a method of securing justice and making value judgments, a philosophy of action, and a project that could extend reason into matters of responsibility. Perelman first mentions

rhetoric as an answer to the crises of justice, philosophical reason, and responsibility in "First Philosophies." His turn to rhetoric was a result of the intellectual network in which he operated as he appropriated and critiqued the ideas of several prominent thinkers of his milieu and those of medieval and classical time periods.

Perelman's intellectual network

We capture the intellectual influences most apparent in "First Philosophies" in the following diagram:

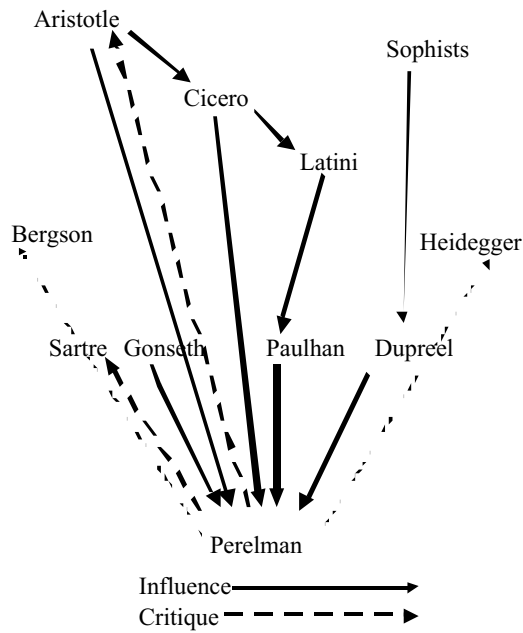


Figure One: Perelman's Intellectual Network (1944–1949)

In her history of the New Rhetoric project, Olbrechts-Tyteca details their intellectual voyage from logical positivism to rhetoric. She and Perelman identify Plato and in particular Jean Paulhan and his book *Les Fleurs de Tarbes, ou la Terreur dans les Lettres* [The Flowers of Tarbes, or the Terror in Literature], as the “revelation” providing them with a vision beyond logical positivism.

It was almost by chance that our search put us in the presence of classical rhetoric. I liked the books of Jean Paulhan, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*, notably. There are, in its appendix, some extracts from Brunetto Latini [*Li livres dou Trésor*], that showed an ancient author who also wondered about problems of argument. And if he wondered about them, it was not in a private capacity, but because others had done it before him. It was only a single step from there to the great classical tradition and notably to Aristotle, the *Topics* and the *Rhetoric*. . . . (Olbrechts-Tyteca 1963, 5–6)

Perelman states in the French edition of *L’empire rhétorique* [*Realm of Rhetoric*] that they were greatly influenced by Paulhan’s *Fleurs*. There, Perelman writes that reading *Fleurs* was a “revelation” and the appendix, with extracts from Latini’s rhetoric, led them back to the Greek and Latin tradition of rhetoric:

The long-term research, undertaken with Mme L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, led us to completely unexpected conclusions, which were a revelation for us; that is, that a specific logic concerning value judgments did not exist, but that what we were looking for had been developed in a very old discipline, at present forgotten and disdained. This revelation was provided to us when we read the book of Jean Paulhan, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*. The author published in the appendix, extracts from the rhetoric of Brunetto Latini, Dante’s teacher. From this text, it was easy for us to go back to Aristotle’s rhetoric, and the entire Greco-Latin tradition of rhetoric and topics. (1977, 9)

Fleurs is a greatly influential book, as it not only affected the thinking of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, but Blanchot and a host of other post-war French thinkers. Like Perelman, Jean Paulhan envisioned a transformation, even a kind of rebirth, of rhetoric. Paulhan, the secretary, director, and later editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, was a major figure in the French literary world from the 1920s to the 1960s. His associations with such writers and painters as Proust, Valéry, Gide, Bataille, Braque, and Picasso, to name but a few, won him the reputation of the “gray eminence”

of French literature. Paulhan's *Fleurs*, which first appeared as a book in 1941, signals in his words a "reinvention" of rhetoric.

For Paulhan, rhetoric is less a trite study of figures of style than a critical way of working through the ambiguities of language and literature. In his description of terror, Paulhan revalorizes rhetoric. Terrorist literature desires to reinvest literature with authenticity by rejecting literary commonplaces, which Paulhan terms as "clichés." By unmasking the illusions under which terrorists work (chiefly, the notion that language can be transparent), however, rhetoric appears to allow writers to communally recognize these clichés or commonplaces as commonplaces, and thereby seems to resolve the tense problematic of authenticity within language and literature. Paulhan writes, "nous avons poussé à bout la Terreur, et découvert la Rhétorique" (159) ["we have pushed terror as far as it will go, and have discovered rhetoric"].

Fleurs is also a work that firmly engages with what we now term as "postmodern" concerns; there is a textual self-awareness that leads the reader into a maze of doubled, duplicitous, utterly ambiguous and uncertain meanings rather than a final, complete understanding of the text and its significance. Paulhan ends the *Fleurs* (which is not the end of the book itself) with a disavowal of all that he has written to this point: "Mettons enfin que je n'ai rien dit" ["Let's say that I said nothing"] (177). This enigmatic retraction calls the text itself into question: we are left unable to read (or write) the clichés that are meant to free writer and reader from a perpetual preoccupation with language; we are equally unable to understand the *Fleurs* itself as a definition of literature, even if *enfantine* ["childish"] as Paulhan claims at the beginning of the *Fleurs* (24). Syrotinski notes that "[t]he book is thus a performance of the very radical ambiguity that it talks about, an ambiguity that is not simply an equivocation about what the book is saying, but that suspends it between saying and doing, stating and performing, original and commonplace" (Syrotinski 1998, 90). Paulhan's suspension between the poles of antimonies is, for Perelman, the realm of rhetoric: that space between opposites and extremes where reason-based discourse can produce just claims.

Fleurs provoked Perelman's rhetorical turn because it pointed to a tradition that could answer the crises of justice, philosophical reason, and responsibility. From Paulhan, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca derived the need for a "reinvented" or a new rhetoric, the value of clichés and commonplaces (which in turn lead to the recovery of Aristotle's epideictic), and the two key topoi in the New Rhetoric project, the classical and ro-

mantic. Paulhan's ideas served as a *point de départ* for Perelman, who subsequently developed and transformed them to fit his notion of a regressive philosophy.

The appendix in Paulhan's *Fleurs* contains a second point of departure for Perelman: extracts from book three of Latini's *Trésor*, undoubtedly one of the most influential works of the late thirteenth century. Latini's text played a critical role in Perelman's refurbished understanding of rhetoric, for it pointed him back to Classical rhetoric. Brunetto Latini, a thirteenth-century Florentine notary and teacher, translated (albeit liberally) much of Cicero's *De Inventione*, which appears for the most part in two of his works, *Rettorica* (1260) and *Li livres dou Trésor* (c. 1260) (Kennedy 1999; Murphy 1974)). In part three of *Li livres dou Trésor*, within a discussion of politics, Latini composes a full exposition of Cicero's rhetorical logic.

If Paulhan's rhetoric was quasi-postmodern, Latini's rehearsal of Cicero is decidedly classical. In the wake of the conclusions reached in *Justice*, Perelman must have been struck by this statement in the first paragraph of the appendix: "Cicero says that the most important science relative to governing the city is rhetoric, that is to say, the science of speaking, for if there were not speech, there would be no city, nor would there be any establishment of justice or of human company . . ." (1993, 279). Latini made note of the movement of human society from a state of savageness to civilization because rhetoric allowed for the maintenance of reason and justice. With the help of Latini, Perelman discovered an answer to the crises of reason and justice with the classical rhetorical tradition. Perelman's rhetorical turn begins with Paulhan, continues with Latini and Cicero, and then finds justification in Aristotle and his *Rhetoric*.

Perelman and the audience of the New Rhetoric shared the "common culture" of Classical thought, and Aristotle served as a locus because he was "considered by everyone the father of modern logic" (Perelman 1979, 56). Seeking a foothold for a new and expanded sense of reason in values and sources shared by the authors and the audience, Perelman invoked Aristotle as a source of authority for valorizing rhetoric. If Aristotle, the "father" of apodictic logic, inflated reason to include the probable and rhetoric, then Perelman's attempt to do the same must be justified.

However, it is misleading to call Perelman and his rhetoric "Aristotelian" or "Classical." Perelman establishes an antimony of "first philosophies" and "regressive philosophy," suggesting that Aristotle adhered to the Classical definition of truth and the use of dialectic in finding immu-

table knowledge. Later, in an exchange with Stanley Rosen, Perelman noted that what "I call the classical tradition, starting with Plato and Aristotle, continues with St. Augustine, St. Thomas [Aquinas], Duns Scotus, Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza and *is carried on by empiricism and logical positivism*, as it is represented by early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*" (1959, 86). Perelman continued:

[T]he tradition I call classical assigns but little importance, as far as achieving science and contemplation goes, either to practice or to the historical and situated aspects of knowledge. . . . This viewpoint is held in common by Plato and Aristotle, as well as by thinkers such as Descartes. . . . The tradition I call classical includes all those who believe that by means of self-evidence, intuitions—either rational or empirical—or supernatural revelation, the human being is capable of acquiring knowledge of immutable and eternal truths, which are the perfect and imperfectable reflexion of an objective reality. . . .(86)

The classical tradition, Perelman noted, was not open to truths that were fluid, partial, and in contradiction.

In "First Philosophies," Perelman rescues rhetoric by detaching it from Aristotle's metaphysics. Perelman appropriates Aristotle's rhetoric as the expression of regressive philosophy, doing so to check the reach of first philosophies. Perelman would eventually argue that Aristotle did not have much regard for rhetoric, and that Aristotle saw rhetoric as a tool of persuading ignorant audiences, unable to follow complex apodictic reasoning (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 5).

To develop an alternative to first philosophies, Perelman drew from the work of Ferdinand Gonseth, and from the axiology and sociology of his mentor, Eugène Dupréel, both of whom are cited in "First Philosophies." Perelman's rhetoric required a philosophical grounding, which was provided by the "open philosophy" of Gonseth. In retrospect, Paulhan, Gonseth, and Dupréel were much more influential than Aristotle in provoking Perelman's rhetorical turn. Perelman and Gonseth met in 1947 and remained lifelong friends (Perelman 1979, 101–2; Gonseth 1994). A Swiss professor of mathematics, Gonseth was the editor of *Dialectica*, the journal that published "First Philosophies." Gonseth (1994) advanced an alternative to first philosophy that emphasized experience in time rather than eternal knowledge as central to the philosophical enterprise. Gonseth held that theory and experience are intertwined, that reason should yield to the lessons of experience. Experience, according to Gonseth, could only be understood

and theorized with dialectic, which consists of four principles (wholeness, duality, openness to revision, and responsibility), discussed in “First Philosophies.”

Perelman equates “open philosophies” with “regressive philosophy” and called on the writing of Eugène Dupréel to establish an epistemology for a regressive philosophy. Dupréel, whose work Perelman summarized in two-part articles in *Dialectica* (1947b, 1948a), argued that there are limits to human knowledge, and that the history of abandoned knowledge claims reveals the power of new experience to challenge received wisdom. With Gonseth and Dupréel, Perelman established the parameters of his rhetorical turn.

As one reads “First Philosophies,” the intellectual network in which Perelman operated as well as his originality becomes apparent. In addition, the reader interested in the history of rhetoric as well as those seeking insight into the problems of post-Enlightenment thought should find use in the following themes developed in “First Philosophies.”

“First Philosophies” provides a metaphysical foundation for rhetoric, a grounding that is not absolute but firm enough to base contingent truths. In so doing, it identifies and avoids the performance contradiction that plagues post-Enlightenment thought. “First Philosophies” establishes a third way between the absolutes of first philosophies and radical skepticism. It does so by identifying contingent truths, those strong enough to warrant temporally restricted knowledge, but open to further modification and change. Knowledge need not be timeless and eternal, nor is understanding impossible. With regressive philosophy and rhetoric, it is possible to move beyond the demands of certainty and the pitfalls of aporia to arrive at contingent but reasonable judgments. Once liberated from the performance contradiction of post-Enlightenment thought, questions of values, justice, and action could be judged in the light of a regressive philosophy, one that sought progress, learned from mistakes and errors, and improved in time.

“First Philosophies” deploys the idea of temporality to distinguish first philosophies from regressive philosophy. While first philosophies focus on eternal principles, thereby marking one moment in time—generally from the past—as original, the source of its present-day principles, a regressive philosophy does not privilege any one particular moment:

[The proponents] of regressive philosophy situate the present in a historical becoming, of which they do not believe themselves capable of privileging

any moment by removing it a priori from all evolution. They challenge Aristotle's principle that calls for an absolutely first term to any regressive series" (202; see translation).

"First Philosophies" provides a framework for a philosophical reason that allows for justice and the life of action. The four principles Perelman borrows from Gosseth and the careful juxtaposition of first and regressive philosophies provide tentative answers to the intellectual crises Perelman confronted in the post-war setting. Rhetoric was the answer, although rhetoric makes but a brief appearance in the article. To develop this answer, Perelman establishes a metaphysical basis for dialogue and rhetoric:

Regressive philosophy does not seek utopian perfection, rather, it aspires to problem solving through constant deliberation and human interaction—carried out by a society of free minds interacting with each other—that accounts for the advantages and disadvantages of the positions human take as they deliberate in the context of lived experience. (202; see translation)

And it is this step from a regressive metaphysic/philosophy to the free minds interacting, to rhetoric, which is important in the history of rhetoric.

Perelman turned to rhetoric out of a concern for metaphysics. And it is rhetoric that ensures for Perelman both the freedom of minds to interact and the responsibility for judgments in the field of action. With the following words, Perelman announces his rhetorical turn for the first time, rooting his view of the ancient discipline in responsibility:

Only rhetoric, and not logic, allows the understanding of putting the principle of responsibility into play. In formal logic, a demonstration is either convincing or it is not, and the liberty of the thinker is outside of it. However, the arguments that one employs in rhetoric influence thought, but never force his agreement. The thinker commits himself by making a decision. His competence, sincerity, integrity, in a word, his responsibility are at stake. . . . It is this practical aspect, this almost moral aspect of philosophical activity that allows the rejection of a purely negative skepticism. The skeptic rejects every absolute criterion, but believes that it is impossible for him to decide since he lacks such a criterion, just as in first philosophies. But he forgets that in the domain of action, not to choose is still making a choice, and that one runs even greater risks by abstaining than by acting. . . . Dogmatism and skepticism are both opposed to the principle of responsibility, because they both search for a criterion that would make the choice necessary, and would eliminate the liberty of the thinker. It is precisely the principle of responsibility that, by affirming the personal commitment of the thinker in philosophical

activity, constitutes the only valuable refutation of negative skepticism. (198–199; see translation)

This is a critical passage in that it juxtaposes rhetorical logic with the two alternatives, brilliantly illustrating how formal logic and radical skepticism are both victims of Enlightenment blackmail in assuming that knowledge must be absolute, thereby absolving both of responsibility for their theses. Rhetorical logic requires commitment and responsibility because it provides the guide for human action. In this vision, rhetoric serves as the bridge between the *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*, thereby holding accountable those who advocate values that become the touchstones for action, affecting as well the welfare of local and universal audiences.

“First Philosophies” received a rejoinder, in German, from Swiss philosopher Michel Bernays (1950), to which Perelman responded (1952). Bernays wrote that Perelman had misinterpreted Gonthier and, foreshadowing complaints made by critics of the New Rhetoric project, argued that Perelman had failed in “First Philosophies” to adequately account for the real, necessary, and the absolute. Perelman, also foreshadowing his response to the critics of the New Rhetoric, argued that regressive philosophy would learn from the mistakes made by first philosophies, modify the rules of knowledge based on experience, and would focus on an unforeseeable future rather than an explained past.

We are hopeful that our translation will illuminate a pivotal moment in the history of rhetoric and provide the reader with useful theoretical insights. In addition, we thank the editor of *Dialectica* for permission to translate Perelman’s article. Noémi Perelman-Mattis’s help was invaluable as she assisted with the translation and provided us with critical insights into the work of her father.

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