Logic and Rhetoric in Philosophical Dialogue and Cultural Hermeneutics

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ABSTRACT

Philosophical dialogue as genre has a time-honoured history. In classical and late antiquity, from the early Socratic dialogues of Plato, through writings of Plutarch, Cicero, Tacitus, to Saint Augustine’s De Magistro and Contra Academicos, the genre had already undergone several mutations. It remained a dominant discourse from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and was popular among such diverse writers as Castiglione, Galileo, More, Hobbes, Hume, Berkeley, Locke, Diderot, and Voltaire.

Although philosophical dialogue is generally regarded as a “non-literary” genre or, as one writer puts it, “virtual theatre,” it nonetheless is capable of displaying some fundamental features of language in social use. The genre has received special attention from hermeneuticians like Gadamer and language philosophers in the wake of Wittgenstein. Linguistics aside, three main approaches can be identified, respectively from the perspectives of pragmatics, logic, and rhetoric; and much light has been shed on such important issues as discursive subjectivity, power relation, and truth-claim.

A similar genre, called “host and guest queries and answers” (zhuke wennan), can be found in Chinese philosophical discourse. Both the Great Debate over name and substance in the Warring States Period and the later Buddhist Gongan are often represented in dramatic and dialogic form. Zhuangzi and Gongsun Longzi are two prominent examples.
This project will enquire into the logical and rhetorical implications of philosophical dialogue. It will further enquire into the semiotics of culture, a mechanism of which, according to Juri Lotman, is dialogue.

KEYWORDS
Dialogue, rhetoric, logic, argumentation, auto-communication, cultural hermeneutics
Before delivering my paper, I would like to apologise for a possible confusion on my part. On the invitation letter dated 19th January 2004, I was assigned to Subgroup 8 Foreign Literature, whose topic is ‘Dialogue and Coexistence of Different Literature and Culture’. For some mysterious reason, which can never be explained adequately by a rational mind, I submitted an abstract with the title of ‘Logic and Rhetoric in Philosophical Dialogue’, with an additional remark that the paper was to be presented in Subgroup 5 Philosophy devoted to ‘Philosophical Dialogue and Cultural Exchange’.

I made the mistake by accident, or one could say, almost unconsciously. Now only in retrospection and with historical hindsight am I able to explain the error as possibly a conditioned response to a research project on philosophical dialogue, a project that has possessed me over the past five years. Since both Subgroups 5 and 8 share the keyword of dialogue, it may not be inappropriate to address myself on the topic of philosophical dialogue in either Subgroup. In the following, I will give a brief survey of the historical, linguistic, and epistemological backgrounds of the genre and its implications in today's cross-cultural studies.

Philosophical dialogue as genre has a time-honoured history. In classical and late antiquity, from the early Socratic dialogues of Plato, through writings of Plutarch, Cicero, Tacitus, to Saint Augustine's De Magistro and Contra Academicos, the genre had already undergone several mutations. It remained a dominant discourse from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and was popular among such diverse writers as Castiglione, Galileo, More, Hobbes, Hume, Berkeley, Locke, Diderot, and Voltaire. There was a revival of the genre in the mid to late twentieth century, closely related to the development of critical discourse of the time.

Although this special kind of writing is generally regarded as a ‘non-literary’ genre or, as one writer puts it, ‘virtual theatre’, or in Aristotle’s words, ‘low mimesis’,
it nonetheless is capable of displaying some fundamental features of language in social use. Understood from the perspectives of logic and rhetoric, as well as linguistic pragmatics, the genre sheds much light on such important issues as discursive subjectivity, power relation between interlocutors and by inference users of language, and their respective truth-claims. The genre received special attention from hermeneuticians like Hans-Georg Gadamer and language philosophers in the wake of Ludwig Wittgenstein. With the belated reception of the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin by the West, dialogism has become the focus of critical attention among literary critics, psychologists and anthropologists since the 1970s. Talking about anthropology, one is reminded that the major writings of Gregory Bateson are largely encoded in dialogic form. And probably inspired by Bakhtin, the great Russo-Estonian semiotician Jurij Lotman goes even so far as to assert that dialogue is a mechanism of cultural evolution and cross-cultural exchange.

A similar genre, called ‘host and guest queries and answers’ (zhuke wennan 主客问难), can be found in Chinese philosophical discourse. Both the Great Debate over name and substance in the Pre-Qin China and the later Buddhist Gongan 公案 are often represented in dramatic and dialogic form. Unfortunately, to date very little has been done to compare the Chinese and Western dialogue traditions. The reasons for this scholarly negligence can be many and varied, but here I would suggest two. Traditionally, philosophers are not concerned with the medium of message, by which I mean the exterior form through which philosophy is expressed. At the same time, literary scholars are not interested in this particular genre because it is non-literary, or not literary enough to merit their attention. This latter phenomenon applies also to Chinese-Western comparative literature studies.
Following the tradition established by Socrates, who was the first person to reveal the inherent discrepancy between rhetoric and logic in the early Platonic dialogues, I shall look into the pragmatic implications of philosophical dialogue. And I shall further explore its link to semiotics of culture, a mechanism of which, according to Juri Lotman, is dialogue. In many ways, the research project has been carried out in collaboration with other members of the International Association for the Study of Controversies, founded by Professor Marcelo Dascal of Tel Aviv University in 1996. Several papers have been presented in the Association’s conferences in Tel Aviv, Pisa, and Lugano, and published in special volumes devoted to different aspects of history of philosophy and linguistic pragmatics.

First, I shall venture a historical survey in relation to the present context. Aside from its Alexandrian legacy, classical scholarship had developed into full-fledged shape from late Antiquity to the eleventh century when the first university was founded. It is well known that liberal arts training during this period consisted of two parts: the quadrivium and the trivium. The three branches that constituted the trivium, namely, grammar, rhetoric, and logic, each in its own way, were all related to language. To many of us, that part of educational history seems outdated and quite irrelevant. However, recent years have witnessed renewed interest in medieval trivium as the foundation of modern language philosophy and semiotics. Meanwhile, the revival of rhetoric, first by Chaïm Perelman in the name of *nouvelle rhétorique* and more recently, by the American Neo-Pragmatists, has evoked once again the old debate between rhetoric and logic initiated by Socrates in such dialogues as the *Gorgias* and the *Meno*.

Undoubtedly, the three branches of language science have their respective functions to perform, and their cognitive and value imports are quite distinct. Although the concept of grammar has changed throughout history, in ancient Greece,
it referred in particular to lexicography and style, and in our days to the structure of language, irrespective of language’s logical status and claim to truth. In contrast, the primary and ultimate concern of logic is truth and the operational procedure in finding truth. Finally, from its birth in Socrates’ time, rhetoric has always been concerned with the art of persuasion, despite its being reduced to the craft of language embellishments in certain historical moments.

There is an important issue in Greco-Roman rhetoric. When neither party of a philosophical inquiry can claim that s/he has acquired truth, and when truth, especially that which concerns ethical values, cannot be sought through logical procedure, what should the interlocutors do? Almost the whole corpus of Platonic dialogues can be said to be dealing with this thorny issue. The etymology of the word *dialogue* (*dia-logos*) suggests that when *logos* (truth) is not yet available, when nobody can monopolise *logos* (speech), it has to be carried on across/through (*dia*) all the speakers involved. The *OED* gives a very lively example from the English novel *Tom Jones* (1749): ‘A short dialogue . . . then passed between them’. The quotation shows that dialogue is an alternating on-going discursive process, through which some kind of ‘truth’ may emerge. This pragmatic aspect of language use is so prevalent in our daily life that we practise it all the time without awareness. However, pragmatists and philosophers of language cannot but be fascinated by this common phenomenon, and this explains why the genre has become the focus of critical attention in the twentieth century.

We all know that the early dialogues of Plato have Socrates as the leading interlocutor. More often than not, he is the person who poses the initial question and launches the dialogue into action. A naïve moralistic view would regard Socrates as the spokesman of virtues, but a closer examination will show that the philosopher is as good at using rhetorical strategies as the sophists whom he attacks. Socrates often
begins by pretending that he is ignorant, then engages his opponent who is supposed
to know well the topic under discussion, and finally, through manipulation of the
discrepancy between logic and rhetoric, corners his opponent and forces the latter to
admit that he is also ignorant. This is the famous Socratic disavowal of knowledge,
and the strategy Socrates uses is the well-known *elenchos*, meaning cross-
questioning, or refutation. The word is still used in modern Greek. For instance, the immigration office at a port of entry is called the *elenchos*. An
example I have discussed elsewhere is the exchange between Socrates and Meno in
the dialogue *The Meno*. Through a series of exchange with Meno, a disciple of
Gorgias the sophist, who claimed to know what *arête* (excellence, virtue, etc.) is,
Socrates, in his characteristic disavowal of knowledge and persistent Q&A, forces
Meno to admit that he did not really know or no longer know much about it.

What is the *elenchos*? And what kind of inquiry qualifies as an *elenchos*?

Supposing we accept Gregory Vlastos' definition of standard *elenchos*, and using
Meno as example, we could recapitulate the debate like this.

1. Meno asserts a thesis of *arête*, *p*, which Socrates considers false and
targets for refutation.

2. Socrates secures agreement to further premises, say *q* and *r*. The
agreement is *ad hoc*: Socrates argues from \{*q*, *r*\}, not to them.

3. Socrates then argues, and Meno agrees, that *q* & *r* entail *not-p*.

4. Socrates then claims that he has shown that *not-p* is true, *p* false.

Further reading of the dialogue shows Socrates argues from two other propositions *q*
and *r* rather than from *p*, but he manages to make Meno to accept *q* and *r* to be true,
and to accept Socrates’s conclusion. It can be said that Socrates has violated the rule
of relation or relevancy and that of manner (e.g. prolixity) in cooperative principle
advanced by Paul Grice. The other statements, *q*, *r*, etc. are made by Socrates rather
than elicited from Meno's $p$, and the burden of proof should be shifted to Socrates rather than Meno. Therefore, the fact that one interlocutor's $p$ is inconsistent with the other interlocutor's $q$ and $r$ does not prove that $p$ is false. One perceives here that Socrates' search for truth is both realised and undermined by the dialogic form.

The method cannot be monopolised by Socrates, or for that matter the early Socrates. Some eight hundred years later, Augustine used the same method of inquiry in his dialogue with his son Adeodatus on teaching, entitled *De Magistro*. Augustine manipulates the dialogue in the name of teaching, in a unique discursive situation involving an asymmetrical father/son relationship, where the senior not only takes full advantage of his filial interlocutor, but also lays injunctions on the latter. The Socratic *elenchos* is precisely the method used by Augustine to get the better of his son, but his son may turn the table around by using the same strategy. In the opening chapter of *De Magistro*, Adeodatus firmly adheres to his $p$, refuses to give in to Augustine's $q$ and $r$, but he finally accepts $\neg p$ because he cannot argue with Christian belief which serves as the basis of Augustine's argument. Does Augustine win? Yes, he does, in so far as his argument is *a priori*. Does Adeodatus lose? The answer cannot be given because of the double-bind injunctions: you should follow the rules of argument, but you can never argue with Faith. Unlike Socrates's argument with Meno and his teaching or reminding the slave boy in the *Meno*, which eventually prove useful, Augustine fails to reason with Adeodatus, but he succeeds through appealing to belief.

The initial exchange between Augustine and Adeodatus and the father's subsequent argumentation by authority have far-reaching implications. Among other things, it shows the social functions of language. To speak is to make a speech act, and is to exercise illocutionary and/or perlocutionary forces in relation to the interlocutor. Furthermore, the effect of that speech act is more than Horatian
delectare and movere, but amounts to the higher order of docere. Whilst the effects of moving and delighting are based on the performatieve use of language, teaching comprises of both the performance of speech act and the making of constative statements. This enables the dialogue to inquire into both the semantic and pragmatic aspects of language.

Finally, we should return to the elenchos. Popular as the strategy is in classical rhetoric, the elenchos has little contribution to make to modern argumentation. What is relevant to pragmatics is perhaps the dialogic form in which this method of cross-examination is embedded. The force and limits of the method can be seen only through dialogic interaction. As Socrates's argument shows here and there, it is a method incorporating the operational procedure of logic and the moral persuasion of rhetoric, manipulated to refute and convert his interlocutor.

In Plato's Cratylus Socrates defines the dialectician as he who knows how to ask and answer questions (390c). And he has Cratylus say that ‘the methods of inquiry and discovery are of the same nature as instruction’ (436a). The importance of dialogue in philosophical inquiry cannot be over-estimated. When Socrates uses the expression ‘joined inquiry’ in the Meno, he is actually referring to the method of Q&A in conversation or more precisely, dialogue. He deliberately plays on words by expanding the link of dianoia and logos to that of dianoia and dialogos (The Sophist 263e), suggesting thereby that thought is ‘dialogue of the mind’ (psychis dialogos) (264a). The dialogic and dialectic method as a method of division is most succinctly expressed in The Sophist 253c-d. The etymological and semantic links between dialogue and dialectic are well established in the literature to need any rehearsal here.

The basic discursive situation involves two (and more) interlocutors who take turns in making meaningful utterances, to communicate so as to arrive at a logical
conclusion for certain pragmatic purposes. This discursive situation then is appropriated to serve as a model for other forms of more complicated and sophisticated communication. It is often expanded to cover exchange of ideas, views, information on a larger scale, e.g., and the interlocutors are no longer restricted to individual persons, but are replaced by collective entities. In fact, one should say that even in abstraction, the interlocutors are always already embedded in and saturated with ideologies. Thus we have, for example, the dialogue between two cultures. This is probably the origin and rationale of the theme of this international Forum.

According to Jurij Lotman, dialogue is characterised by the discreteness of language and asymmetry in communication. Where the interlocutors alternate in give-and-take, each is capable of articulating only his discrete share of discourse, perhaps only one tiny fraction at a time. The discreteness is constituted not only by moments of articulation, but also by moments of silence because when one locutor speaks and sends information, the other has to remain silent and becomes temporarily an allocutor whose job it is to decode the message s/he receives. Since natural language is by nature unstable and subject to the caprice of temporality, the information flow is often asymmetrical and perfect communication is thus impossible. Since natural language is the primary modelling system, on top of which is the secondary modelling system of culture, the phenomenon of interpreting culture becomes all the more difficult. This is especially the case in cross-cultural communication because each of the two parties involved has its own definition of culture, its own boundaries of the legitimate texts that constitute culture as well as exclude the so-called non-culture.

As dialogue of cultures is inevitable in a culture’s historical evolution, such dialogue serves, curiously, a special function of its own dialogue or, in Lotman’s
words, auto-communication. Lotman projects the dialogic discreteness onto the history of a culture, where the interlocutors cease to be the indigenous versus the exogenous, because both have already been fused as historical products, but are displaced by two historical moments which engage each other in dialogue, or are charged with the semiotic task of infinite process of encoding and decoding. An example is the dialogue between a turbulent, productive moment and its relatively calm and inert-looking but fully saturated counterpart. In this sense, the auto-communication of a culture, which is no longer a self-sufficient entity in itself, amounts to the perennial Gadامarian self-dialogue that characterises cultural hermeneutics. This is perhaps an alternative solution to the thorny problem of cross-cultural dialogue with which our Forum is concerned.