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Rationality without identity.

Prolegomena to Kari Palonen's 'parliamentary theory of knowledge'.

Can one conceive of a redefinition of rationality in which identity would not have the last word? Where *in utramque partem disputare* would not be just tolerated, as a means of checking and elucidating a knowledge which was otherwise acquired, but, on the contrary, vindicated as in itself generative of knowledge

'Difference' is usually understood as disputed, unstable or missing identity (*ambiguitas*) – the locus classicus, in political contexts, being the third Book of Thucydides (in the midst of civil strife, words have lost their meaning, and what the ones call noble courage, the others call dangerous recklessness, CF. *history*, III, 82, 4). But this very same situation can also be described as *in utramque partem disputare*, that is not as '*lost*' or '*missing*' identity, but positively, as differing perspectives, or as emergence of new perspectives (*ambigere*).

'Identity as -always- having the last word' is not something static, like a principle, an axiom, or a set of axioms. It is rather a discursive strategy having as its purpose the reduction of difference to identity.

That is why a redefinition, such as the one sought here, is not an easy thing. Identity (to use a quasi-personification) "is aware" that there is a claim to difference, or claims to difference, and it gives itself the task of addressing those claims, or even annulling or bypassing them. The 'Identity strategy' aims at *reducing difference to identity*, also in the etymological sense of the word, *re- ducere*: bringing things back, sort of restoring the lost order.

How does this work? Aristotle's philosophical semantics is very closely interwoven with our philosophical- but also more widely, our theoretical culture. The stated principle thereof is: a word has meaning, to have one and only one meaning (univocity principle, *Met.* Gamma 4, 1006b 7.). Claiming to have more meanings than one, is self –contradictory; such a 'thing' would not be counted as signifying at all, would not be regarded as a word, but as a mere sound.

Now, Aristotle is of course aware that actual words are indeed non - univocal, that is, that they are ambiguous. They even have to be so, because, after all, as he notes in the preface to the *Sophistic Refutations*, (165a 12) the number of words is finite, while things are infinite in number.

There is thus a distance between what a word ought to be, and what it actually is. Aristotelian philosophical semantics occupies the space thus opened between the *norm* of univocity (the identity principle) and the *fact* of ambiguity: its function is to develop means of analyzing words and sentences, which would bring the ambiguous back to univocity. Its main instrument is the *distinguo* – it is though semantic distinctions that it exorcises ambiguity and restores identity.

This 'leading back to identity' is what the traditional philosopher does: if there was no ambiguity, no difference, philosophers would be out of job.

This device of recognizing and reducing ambiguity acquires an all new significance in the modern era, with the gradual emergence and emphasis upon the concept of language (as opposed to words, *verba*, and speech, *oratio*). This essentially modern notion, language, is seen as a mode of the "identity as having the last word" scheme: what is here ambiguous, while it should be unambiguous, is language, as a system.

It is L. Wittgenstein who has shown, in great detail, this strategy of identity in its relation to the concept of language: utterances which, in their particular uses are in their own right , become problematic when exposed to a claim of universal validity - the latter being the condition of universality that 'language', as opposed e.g. to 'language game', must fulfill. They become problematic, that is deficient in distinction, in precision, in identity: the strategy of identity produces the very puzzles to which it offers itself as a solution, the very illness of which it is the cure.

This strategy of identity, combined with the modern concept of language, has proven a quite powerful one: the norm of unambiguous language has become the backbone of the modernist scientific outlook, and of the modernist notion of rationality. There are few instances, few uses of discourse that seem to escape the rule of identity thus conceived, and most conspicuous amongst these are the parliamentary discourse, and the debates in the courts of justice. In a passage quoted by Kari Palonen (in the paper he is presenting here, *The Parliamentary Model of Rhetorical Political Theory*), J. S. Mill complains that "the world and many of its admired teachers" (that is, the modern world, and the modern philosophers) has imperfectly learned the lesson of adversarial debating, that is that truth "is not a single but a double question" – that it presupposes the immersion in two different perspectives - and he goes on: **We have to thank our free Parliament**, **and the publicity of our courts of justice, for whatever feeling we have of the value of debate**. As Palonen notes elsewhere, "**the rhetorical mode of thinking survived in Parliament**".

Parliamentary debate and judicial procedure are, of course, rule following uses of discourse, having their own logic, the logic of adversarial rhetoric – Palonen will refer to G. Hamilton's book, *Parliamentary Logic*; and these are uses of discourse that cannot, at least prima facie, be reduced to the identity scheme. Difference, here, diversity of perspective, seems *irreducible*. And, of course, parliamentary and courtroom debates cannot be deemed 'irrational'.

Are we then to say that in parliamentary and courtroom discourse we have the robust counterexamples that succeed in defeating the identity strategy? In a sense, this is not true: Jeremy Bentham, for one, has made a quite systematic attempt of bringing parliamentary debate within the confines of identity logic: he has used the most effective instrument identity strategy has ever devised, the detection and correction of sophisms, of fallacies. *(The book of Fallacies* 1823) In fact, Identity strategy cannot easily be outwitted or silenced by counterexamples – for it, so to say, *feeds on* counterexamples. (It is no surprise that in the same book Bentham attempts a very harsh criticism on Hamilton's *Parliamentary Logi*c)

And, in the rare case, where identity strategy will recognize something as an intractable counterexample, it will reply that, even if for the time being the problem may not be soluble –that is, e.g., even if now, parliamentary or judicial discourse may not be readily amenable to the identity norm, in principle they are, because identity is some sort of postulate of reason, and it therefore knows no limits (cf. E. Husserl, " die Schrankenlosigkeit der objektiven Vernunft", *Logische Untersuchungen,* II, 1, Tübingen[5] 1968, p.90)

Let's sum up: we started by looking for a redefinition of rationality, based on the *in utramque partem disputare*, (=difference) and not on the 'identity as having the last word' scheme. What we encountered, as an obstacle, was not a thesis, but a discursive strategy. It takes an agonistic to counter a strategy, so the redefinition of rationality we are looking for has to develop such an agonistic.

Now, the good news is, that this work is already been done, in a manner both exhaustive and exemplary, by L. Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (and the related writings) is not a 'thesis against thesis' discourse; here the adversary's attack is, as it were, reenacted, analyzed from within, the mechanics of its traps exposed. The author of the *Untersuchungen*, in the genuinely ciceronian manner praised by J. S. Mill in the passage quoted by Palonen, becomes both parts of the dispute. In so doing, Wittgenstein succeeds in definitively relativizing the identity principle: a relativized identity principle is no longer the defining element of rationality, but just a logical instrument, among others. This is a different logical landscape, and one in which the autonomy of discursive practices such as forensic and deliberative rhetoric can be affirmed.

It is in this new landscape that Stephen Toulmin, a philosopher influenced by Wittgenstein during his Cambridge years, can propose a logic of argument that denies the primacy of the traditional syllogism, and takes as starting point a scheme inspired by forensic rhetoric. (St. Toulmin, *The uses of Argument*, 1958.)

According to Mill, it was the court of justice and the parliament that "preserved" the value of adversarial debate, that is, in our interpretation, the value of difference. We saw that the vindication of forensic rhetoric, as a starting point or a new kind of logic, was the almost immediate result of the Wittgensteinian breakthrough; there remains the second part, parliamentary discourse.

One understands, intuitively, that those two discursive practices are different in scope: the deliberative rhetoric of parliament is far more comprehensive: Aristotle said that forensic rhetoric is easier, and its application more restricted – it concerns mainly private litigations – whereas deliberative rhetoric concerns the life of the *polis*, which was another way of saying it is universal, the *polis* constituting a universe. A remarkable symmetry emerges here: if what corresponds to the forensic rhetoric is logic, what would correspond to the parliamentary discourse would be something much wider, more comprehensive, of which logical theory would be only a part: parliamentary rhetoric should correspond to a theory of knowledge. (CF. Palonen, ibid, "'parliamentary' theory of knowledge and politics").