Universality in Rhetoric: Perelman’s Universal Audience

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I. Introduction

An essential problem for rhetorical theory has been the question of the scope of the validity claims that may be made for non-formal argumentation. Formal argumentation can make universal validity claims because logical systems define validity in terms of logical form. A theory of non-formal argumentation, or rhetoric, can make no use of such a definition, and consequently rhetorical theory is often believed to have foresaken questions of validity for questions of effectiveness, or is even accused of having conflated the two.

In this paper, I explain, clarify, and develop and apply in new ways Chaim Perelman’s concept of a universal audience. I do this to discover what sort of universality there is in rhetoric, and whether rhetorical theory can meet the objection philosophers have made to rhetoric. I claim that, in fact, Perelman has found a way to distinguish valid from effective argumentation. He has done this without succumbing to any of the traditional philosophical dualisms and without limiting validity to formal argumentation. In particular, he has succeeded in developing a criterion of validity which avoids the dilemma of being either universal but empty or concrete but particular. Thus, he has eluded the primary dangers for theories of argumentation, reason, and truth which try to ground themselves in communication. Finally, I claim that there is implicit in his theory an account of rationality which neither disguises nor undervalues the particular ethical interest of reason.

II. Audience and Argumentation

Chaim Perelman’s rhetorical theory is founded on the axiom that the purpose of argumentation is to induce or increase people’s adherence to theses presented to them for their assent (TNR 4). What immediately follows from this is that argumentation devel-
ops in relation to an audience and that audiences are the measures of arguments. There is no measure of an argument, no way of evaluating it, independent of some concept of an audience.

Perelman recognizes that the worth of arguments cannot be immediately surrendered to just anyone who happens to come across a piece of argumentation, so he defines “audience” and distinguishes between kinds of audience in a way that he hopes will overcome the disadvantages of not having a formal or independent standard against which to measure the worth of arguments. Thus, an “audience” is made up not simply of those one explicitly addresses, or those who read one’s arguments, but rather, those whom the writer wishes to influence by the argumentation (TNR 19). An audience so defined is always a construction of an author. So conceived, argumentation is not automatically limited by the actual concrete audiences which may take it in.

Further, there are several different kinds of audience an author may construct, and they may be more or less coincident with the actual social group with which an author is faced. The most important of the distinctions Perelman draws between kinds of audience is the distinction between a particular audience and a universal audience. This distinction is made in order to distinguish between argumentation which appeals only to particular groups with particular characteristics in particular places at particular times and argumentation which attempts to transcend such particularity and make its appeals more broadly. By developing an account of the differences between universal audiences and particular ones, Perelman believes he can better distinguish between merely effective and genuinely valid argumentation. One of the advantages of this line of approach is that he can thereby avoid the more vicious dualisms which sometimes afflict theories of argumentation—for example the dualism of reason and emotion which assigns moods and emotions roles to play in persuasion and in effective argumentation, but none in convincing and in genuine argumentation. This approach also avoids similar splits of mind and body, form and content, objective and subjective, intellect and will.

Perelman’s strategy is not a perfectly new one. In the introduction to The New Rhetoric he refers to the judgment of Socrates that a worthy rhetoric would employ techniques capable of convincing the gods themselves (7). And the most systematic and persistent attempt to develop this kind of theory occurs in modern political thought—in social contract theory. A central concern of modern
political theory is to find an audience whose members evaluate one another's arguments in a way that ensures that the most worthy argument will be the most effective one.

In Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, human beings are themselves to have the authority for deciding what rules shall order their societies. In order to justify particular forms of government, such theorists imagine human beings not as they are, but as they were or would be in a state of nature, and these theorists justify the social contract on the basis of the deliberations individuals would go through in a state of nature and the rules they would adopt in such a state. The advantage of imagining a state of nature is that individuals in such a state have universal human features and follow natural laws. They are not susceptible to appeals made to them as members of particular groups or classes. Thus, the arguments by which they are persuaded have more universal worth than the arguments that persuade actual individuals in actual societies. Of course, such theories seem to have a mythic or literary cast to contemporary political theorists. And they are all bedeviled by a moral valorizing of nature which many people simply will not accept.

A more contemporary effort of this sort is made in John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, in which he tries to imagine an audience whose deliberations will result in their adopting genuine principles of justice. However, instead of imagining a state of nature, he imagines a hypothetical situation of equal liberty, what he calls the "original position." In such a position,

No one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength and the like. I shall even assume that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities. The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance.  

Because the reasoning which goes on within the original position is addressed to an audience which has only universal human features and no particular ones, the principles of justice which emerge from such deliberation have a general scope and not merely a particular one.

III. A Basic Problem with the Theory

The same general strategy has been recently adopted by Jürgen Habermas, and since his attempt is one of the most contemporary,
and is explicitly a part of a theory of communication which has already had a great influence on communication theorists, rhetoricians, and literary theorists, I want to use it as an example of the general problem such attempts face.

Habermas holds to a consensus theory of truth, but he needs a way to distinguish a "rational" consensus from a merely de facto one, and thus truth from mere agreement. He comes up with a criterion similar in some respects to Perelman's. The criterion of truth is not mere agreement, but agreement under certain conditions—conditions under which all the particular structural constraints on argumentation are removed and the cooperative search for truth is the only motive in play. There must be no internal or external constraints. Everyone must have an equal opportunity to argue and be heard. Everyone's arguments must be taken equally seriously. No one may attempt to dominate or act merely strategically—either consciously or unconsciously.5

Habermas realizes that this is never the concrete situation in which argumentation takes place. It is an ideal, counterfactual, and yet he claims that it is a supposition that we make when we speak of truth claims being rationally grounded in argumentation. Because if we can argue that the outcome of an argument was influenced by other motives, that an audience was acting strategically or neurotically, that some member was threatened by force, and so on, then this would call the truth claim into question—the consensus would not be understood to be a rational one.

However, Habermas has come to realize that there is a serious problem with his concept of an "ideal speech situation." The problem has to do with the emptiness of the motivations of the participants in it, their lack of any other motivation than reaching a consensus on truth. As Habermas writes,

It is possible that one day an emancipated human race could encounter itself within an expanded space of discursive formation of will and yet be robbed of the light in which it is capable of interpreting its life as something good? The revenge of a culture exploited over millenia for the legitimation of domination would then take this form: right at the moment of overcoming age-old repressions it would harbor no violence, but it would have no content either.6

Eventually, Habermas comes to limit the relevance of the "ideal speech situation" to deliberations about social justice, and he is left with the great problem of how rationally to ground claims about all
those social goods, actions, and ideals that are not simply matters of procedure.

And this is the general problem for theories that attempt to ground conceptions of reasonableness and validity in conceptions of ideal audiences. The argumentation that is persuasive for such abstractly conceived audiences can be conducted only in the most abstract and formal terms. The agreements such audiences are capable of reaching never concern the concrete and substantive kinds of issues such audiences were designed to deal with.

Similar objections have been made to Perelman’s concept of a universal audience. They have been made most explicitly and systematically by John Ray, who charges that the concept is “excessively formal and abstract,” and that it “loses all validity when it is concerned with particular situations.” He claims further that it is supposed to be an “infallible rational standard,” “transcendental,” and “not determined by empirical experience.”

IV. The Objection of Philosophy

In this paper, I want to explain clearly just what the concept of a universal audience is, and what its uses are. Then I want to show the advantages of Perelman’s concept of a universal audience and specifically how it avoids the dilemma of being either universal but empty or concrete but particular.

However, one may want to deny that this is a legitimate problem. One could argue that rhetoric is not really concerned with what is universal, but is instead oriented toward particular actions, or judgments about particular actions, in particular situations. It is not concerned with more general kinds of claims. There are two replies to this. First, that is simply not Perelman’s concept of rhetoric. For him, rhetoric’s domain is all non-formal reasoning, and the texts he analyzes come from all disciplines, all areas of inquiry—from philosophy, history, literature—including fiction and poetry—and the natural and social sciences, as well as law and theology. But one could still say that Perelman had it wrong, that he should have focused solely on practical reason and on judgments about particulars. That is, he should have foregone the talk about a universal audience. But—and this is my second reply—this would have had two undesirable consequences—the first, seriously unfortunate; the second, ruinous. First, it would have left philosophical and theoretical reasoning, and much scientific and social scientific reasoning, in
an uncharted territory between logic, on the one side, and practical reasoning, on the other. Second, it would have left rhetoric vulnerable to the charge that it is really only a form of flattery, a pandering to a particular audience with particular interests, desires, and plans. If an unaddressed audience objected that a line of reasoning was foolish or wicked, an author would have no way of being able to acknowledge the force of the complaint without abandoning the audience which was being addressed. In Perelman's terms, there would be no difference between an effective argument and a valid one, and rhetoric would once more be vulnerable to the classical philosophical attacks.

Why should one care about the classical philosophical attacks? Why not just let rhetoric be rhetoric, and let philosophy worry itself? Because the fundamental philosophical attack on rhetoric is that rhetoricians—sophists—do not love what is good. They love success with audiences. Thus, they care about being effective with audiences, but they do not care whether their arguments make any deeper claim. The philosopher, on the other hand, says Plato, cares about what is good—that is, cares about whether an audience should be persuaded by an argument or not. This is exactly what Perelman cares about, and this is why he distinguishes between effective arguments and valid ones on the basis of a distinction between particular and universal audiences. As Socrates says in Plato's *Phaedrus*, "It is noble to aim at a noble goal, whatever the outcome." So much, then, for the attempt to deny the importance of the challenge Perelman takes up.

V. How to Construct a Universal Audience

Next I want to give an accurate account of what Perelman's universal audience is, first, by looking at the rules he gives us for constructing a universal audience, and, second, by examining the uses to which he puts the concept.

What is interesting about the rules he gives for constructing a universal audience is that they are not systematic and could often yield conflicting results. There are no priority rules about when to follow one rule rather than another, no limiting of particular rules to particular situations or anything of the sort. Instead, Perelman simply offers these rules, sometimes only implicitly, and without ever bringing a consideration of them together at one time and place. Thus, what he really offers is not so much a system of rules
for constructing the universal audience but a number of techniques for constructing universal audiences—techniques which themselves have variable persuasive force as justifications for the universal audience one is constructing. This is because constructing a universal audience is not really much different from inventing arguments to defend one's conception of universality. For in every move toward universality, there lies a technique for achieving universality. This technique itself can be understood as part of an argument for the concept of universality it yields. This is, if one's concept of universality is called into question, then the first line of defense is to show how it follows from what is ordinarily taken to be a universality-producing technique.

All constructions of universal audiences begin with particular audiences. One has a particular audience in mind, and one performs certain imaginative operations on it in order to give it a universal character. One way to do this is to set aside all the particular, local features of the audience and consider only those features of the audience one considers universal. Another similar method is to exclude from the particular audience all those members who are prejudiced, lack imagination or sympathy, or are irrational or incompetent at following argumentation, and to include only those who are relatively unprejudiced and have the proper competence (TNR 33, NRH 14, 48). This rationality and competence qualification is further specified in a number of ways. To be competent, one must be "disposed to hear" the argumentation (RR 17) and must "submit to the data of experience" (TNR 31). One must also have the proper information and training, and in addition one must also have "duly reflected" (TNR 34).

Another way is to add particular audiences together—to be sure that one's argumentation appeals not only to one particular audience, but to many, or even all particular audiences (RR 14). By adding audiences together this way, one could eventually come to the whole of humanity—if such universality were required by the argumentation. Another technique is to imagine one's argumentation addressed not only to the particular audience one faces at the moment, but to similar audiences at other times, in later years, say. Arguments of this sort frequently make appeals to history and ask their audiences to imagine themselves in their historical roles. According to classical philosophers, the most universal of audiences is the "timeless" one, and the more one's arguments have a timeless appeal, the more universal they are usually taken to be (TNR 32).
A way to test and strengthen one's construction of a universal audience is to let other audiences criticize it (TNR 35). For example, if the particular audience one has universalized can corroborate one's judgment about what really are its universal features, then one's concept has greater validity and strength in argumentation than it would otherwise have. For example, pollsters have pretty well established that California voters are racist, that they vote for or against candidates on the basis of race. In constructing a universal audience of California voters, one would reject this characteristic. And my guess is that California voters would see the reason in this—that they would say, yes, race is a factor in how we vote, but we recognize that in some important sense it probably shouldn't be, and that political argumentation shouldn't make appeals of this sort.

Once again, these methods are not systematic and can lead to conflicting results. For example, one party may believe that a specialized audience represents the real universal audience for some particular argument. The opponent of the argument may deny this, and claim that the public represents the real universal audience. Thus, one writer may appeal more to the "competence, training and knowledge" criteria, and make them very strong criteria, while another may appeal to the criterion of adding audiences together, or letting "everyone" decide. In such a case, argumentation cannot lead to agreement because each side measures the argumentation differently. Perelman believes that in such a situation we must postpone argumentation until, through dialogue, question and answer, or exploratory discourse, we come to a deeper mutual understanding and uncover agreements that can allow us to continue the argumentation (RR 16-17).

VI. The Uses of Universal Audiences

Next, let us consider the uses to which Perelman puts the concept of a universal audience. First, he uses it to distinguish persuading from convincing (TNR 26ff.). This is a critical problem in rhetoric, and it is usually taken on by resorting to any of a number of controversial dualisms, especially the dualism of reason/emotion. Second, he uses the concept to distinguish effective from valid argumentation, and thus de facto agreement from de jure agreement (TNR 463). Third, Perelman appears to use the universal audience to distinguish fact and value. That is, a fact is supposed to be that to which a universal audience assents, while a value is that to which
only particular audiences assent (TNR 66). Perelman's aim in making this distinction is to identify which agreements stand fast in argumentation. According to The New Rhetoric, argumentation is founded on agreement, and moves from original agreements to new agreements. In any rhetorical situation, certain agreements stand fast, or argumentation is not possible. Thus, there is a rhetorical way to distinguish the domain of the real (what stands fast) from the domain of the preferred, as well as from presumptions and hypotheses about the real (about which one can argue without undermining the rhetorical situation).

However, I argue that although the concept may be used this way for the purposes of understanding the kinds of agreements operating in a rhetorical situation, it doesn't really distinguish fact from value in any philosophical way, even in Perelman's system. For he realizes that values can attain the status of facts—i.e., that ethical life isn't limited to the subjective features of valuing and preferring. As he writes: "An agreement about the conception of reality is linked to a social and historical situation which fundamentally conditions any distinction that one might wish to draw between judgments of reality and value judgments" (TNR 513). And again, "The status of statements evolves: when inserted into a system of beliefs for which universal validity is claimed, values may be treated as facts or truths" (TNR 76). When Perelman refers to "universal values," as he does on occasion, he means values that have attained the status of facts or truths—that is, the adherence of a universal audience. Thus, there seems to be some kind of distinction between facts and values working behind Perelman's recasting of their definitions for his rhetorical theory, a distinction which is in some way still operating within the theory.

Another important use of the concept is to identify the audience for philosophical argumentation, scientific argumentation, and argumentation about morality (TNR 31, 34, PR 293ff.). In all these kinds of argumentation, there is an implicit claim that one's arguments ought to be persuasive for more than a particular audience, that the one who is arguing is appealing to universal standards of reason (TNR 34). Perelman also believes that the concept can be used to solve the problems one faces in composite audiences. That is, when an actual audience consists of a number of different particular audiences who ordinarily do not assent to the same arguments, one can construct from them a universal audience, and aim one's arguments at it (TNR 31). Finally, a universal audience may be used as a standard of relevance. Although arguments can be
persuasive for particular audiences even if they are one-sided and omit any treatment of opposing arguments, an argument that is convincing, one which gains the assent of a universal audience, must give a proper hearing and proper credit to all sides of an argument, or all relevant arguments (TNR 119).

VII. Universality and Concreteness

Now that we have a clear notion of what the concept of a universal audience is, how to construct it, and what its uses are, we can better understand the senses in which it is always something more than an abstract and formal concept; in fact, we can see how Perelman has succeeded in avoiding the universal but empty or concrete but particular dilemma.

Consider first the senses in which the universal audience always has some degree of cultural specificity—for it always does. It does not gather in some non-historical sphere, isolated from and immune to human activities and mortal weaknesses. It is rather always a universal of a particular, a concrete generality. It represents a "sensus communis" rather than being an abstraction that stands above the agreements reached by actually existing groups. This can be seen clearly in some specific passages from The New Rhetoric.

First: "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" (TNR 33). In other words, any conception of a universal audience has a specific content that comes from the fact that it is constructed by a specific author within the agreements that make argumentation possible within or among specific cultures. Thus, the universal audience is not a pure or transcendental concept. There is always something empirical in it, something which comes from the experience of an author and the traditions of a culture. As Perelman says, "The universal audience is no less than others a concrete audience, which changes with time, along with the speaker's conception of it" (TNR 491). However, this statement must be qualified. For certainly, the universal audience lacks the actual existence of concrete audiences, and is to this extent ideal—after all, as Perelman also writes, the agreement of a universal audience is not a fact, but a unanimity imagined by an author (TNR 31).
Second, what follows from this is: “Each speaker’s universal audience can from an external standpoint be regarded as a particular audience” (TNR 30). That is, if we are already outside or if we move outside the rhetorical situation for which an author has constructed a universal audience, we can see the senses in which the construction lacks universality. We can imaginatively take the external point of view by employing the techniques for constructing a universal audience and carrying them farther than the author has. For example, we can imagine an argument’s being addressed to a broader group of audiences, imagine its strength in a different historical context, and so on. Of course, if one takes the external point of view, what one is really doing is setting up a new rhetorical situation and appealing to a different universal audience—and not really undermining the concept of a universal audience. For despite this sort of abstract and external criticism, Perelman insists that: “It nonetheless remains true that, for each speaker at each moment, there exists an audience transcending all others” (TNR 30, emphasis added). However, this too requires qualification. There exists one universal audience for each speaker in each situation if there is argumentation going on, if someone is advancing and supporting a claim. There is another kind of deliberation in which one explores the differences between two conflicting concepts of a universal audience—for example, in the situation of a genuine moral dilemma. This kind of exploratory discourse often takes the form of dialogue, question and answer, in which each interlocutor aims to uncover hitherto neglected agreements. Such “dialogue” can also take place in self-deliberation. The ultimate goal of this dialogue is to uncover agreements significant enough to yield a new, probably more general, universal audience. Only when a universal audience holds sway for both interlocutors can argumentation be resumed.

Third, I mentioned before that one can strengthen one’s conception of a universal audience by letting other audiences criticize it. As The New Rhetoric says, “Audiences are not independent of one another . . . particular audiences are capable of validating the universal audiences which characterize them. . . . Audiences pass judgment on one another” (TNR 35). This, too, is a way in which the content and specificity of the universal audience is preserved. The universal audience is constructed by performing imaginative operations on a particular audience. It is always the universal of a particular. If the particular audience completely rejects the univer-
sal audience constructed from it, it would weaken the argument that the conception of the universal audience is the right one. Thus, the particular audience has a role in validating the universal audience, in keeping it from losing its relation to the particular audience in question. Of course, the particular audience cannot be the only audience that has a role in validating the conception of a universal audience. After all, the construction of a universal audience is itself a judgment on the insufficiencies of the particular audience. Rather, there is always another audience to which an appeal is made in such cases, and I shall come to this shortly.

Before this, however, it should be pointed out that the fact that the universal audience is not a pure concept, that it lacks the necessity and absolute universality to qualify it as "transcendental," does nothing to cast doubt on its universalizing tendency. The techniques for constructing a universal audience are universalizing techniques. Just because they are limited by the traditional conceptions of what is good, appropriate and true, and taken for granted in a specific rhetorical community, does not mean that they do not yield increasing degrees of universality. The imaginative expansion of audiences across cultures and across time and the application of notions like competence and rationality are clear indications of this. Rather, it means that they do not yield a merely formal, abstract concept of an audience, an audience which would assent to nothing but formal proofs, analytical statements, and empty platitudes. Argumentation is rarely an end in itself. The purpose of arguing is usually to achieve some goal, to realize some good that one imagines is best achieved—all things considered—through argumentation. Thus, the universality of a universal audience is limited by the good that one can achieve by way of participating in argumentation in a particular rhetorical situation. Agreement may be a part of such a good, but such a good is more often that for the sake of which the agreement is sought. I can see only relative merit in the objections that the view from nowhere could raise to this practice, just as I can see little sense in underestimating goods that can be achieved by turning loose on such goods a generalizing impulse that eventually overpowers any conception of good whatsoever.

VIII. The Undefined Universal Audience

A final way to gain some insight into the sense in which the concept of a universal audience is both concrete and universal is to
consider a concept which is, as far as I know, almost completely neglected in philosophy and rhetorical theory, and is discussed very little by Perelman himself. This is the concept of an undefined universal audience. The concept has a very specific and very important use. Here is the single passage from *The New Rhetoric* in which it is mentioned:

> It is the undefined universal audience that is invoked to pass judgment on what is the concept of the universal audience appropriate to ... a concrete audience, to examine ... the manner in which it was composed, which are the individuals who comprise it, according to the adopted criterion, and whether this criterion is legitimate (TNR 35).

Thus, it cannot be just the concrete audience which passes such judgment, as we have seen. Rather, the undefined universal audience is the audience for our construction of a universal audience. This should not sound strange because, as we have seen, such a construction itself employs argumentative techniques, and implicitly contains a claim that the universal audience we have constructed is the appropriate one. This claim and argument do not hang in empty space; they are offered to an undefined universal audience—one to which we appeal, but one which we cannot make definite.

This can be viewed from a different direction. Once we know that we construct the universal audience within individual and cultural constraints, "as a way" as Perelman says, "to transcend the few oppositions we are aware of" (TNR 33)—once this is known, then don't we know that our concept of the universal audience is always to some degree insufficient? Don't we recognize that there are arguments of some strength which oppose our construction—even if we don't know what they are? Don't we know that, in appealing to an undefined universal audience to validate our construction, we have recognized that in some sense the universal audience is not—even for us—the universal audience? Don't we recognize that there is a universal audience beyond the universal audience?

The difficulty one faces in trying to conceive of such an audience is that it is defined as undefined. However, this is partly only an apparent problem. For although the undefined universal audience is unknown, it is never absolutely unknown. Rather, it is a determinate unknown in the sense that the move from a concrete audience to a
universal audience establishes a direction and begins to articulate an ideal or a goal. Of course this is always to some degree indeterminate, a matter of interpretation, full of historical ambiguities. And yet the direction established, the pre-conceptual sense we have of the undefined universal audience is determinate enough so that we know it when we encounter it, we know it when it does become determinate, when it does come to appearance. For example, there are those occasions when an audience responds in ways we had not anticipated, and in fact goes beyond our argumentation and interprets them in ways we could not foresee—but which we nevertheless recognize as legitimate. How is it that we can recognize such unforeseeable audience responses as legitimate? Because we do have a knowledge of the undefined universal audience—not an explicit conceptual knowledge, but the kind of knowledge which allows us to recognize the legitimacy of its responses once they do come to expression.

This kind of knowledge should not be underestimated. The substitution of a direction, a vector, an ever-better emergent newness for a comprehensively and conceptually grasped universal audience means that this audience is never grasped directly, but only indirectly—often in feelings, inclinations, reservations, hopes, and hunches. I believe it is also at play in our logically underdetermined ability to make practical and aesthetic judgments. But to comport oneself toward this undefined universal audience, even if one does not understand exactly what it is, is a relatively familiar kind of comportment. I take Socrates to be expressing something of this idea when he says that he is more satisfied at losing arguments than winning them, because when he loses an argument—when an interlocutor responds in an unanticipated but legitimate way—then he learns something new; otherwise, he is left in his ignorance.

So the undefined universal audience is both unforeseeable and anticipated—something we both know and don’t know. It is at once an unknown ideal and something potentially concrete. It becomes concrete in actual audience responses. Yet once it becomes concrete and definite in this way, it can no longer fulfill the role of the undefined. Instead, it adds further determinations to our concept of a universal audience—it becomes a part of it. It is as if universal audiences come to be out of and through the undefined universal audience, but the undefined universal audience itself forever withdraws into indefiniteness.
IX. Conclusions

We can draw a number of conclusions from this. First, rhetoric has a philosophical moment that cannot be eliminated except at great cost. This distinguishes rhetoric from any kind of social science and especially from psychology. The idea of a universal audience introduces an instability into rhetoric which makes rhetoric's domain more like history than psychology, except that the instability in rhetoric is a philosophical one, a matter not simply of what is true, but of the measure of the truth yielded by argumentation. An advanced psychology may someday be able to measure the effectiveness of arguments—or at least could, in principle—but it could never measure their validity.

This also "solves" or rather places at its proper place—in actual human interaction and this means within actual historical practices—the problem of avoiding the dilemma between empty universality and concrete particularity. It is a practical historical task to create and preserve societies with the proper balance between universalizing rationality and the goods of particular traditions. Perelman's rhetorical theory is well-adapted to this balance at the theoretical level, but it takes no historical action.

Finally, Perelman has offered a theory of rationality which neither disguises nor undervalues the particular ethical interest of reason. For the universalizing interest of reason is essentially an ethical one, and has a strong orientation toward the future. On this, both Habermas and Perelman are in strong agreement. As Habermas came to say, "I prefer to speak of an anticipation of an ideal speech situation. . . . The anticipation of the ideal speech situation has the significance of a constitutive illusion which is at the same time an appearance of a form of life." Or, as Perelman puts it, an appeal to universal values, which is always an appeal to a universal audience, is indicative of an aspiration for agreement (RR 27). In the end, any appeal to a universal audience signals such an aspiration, and thus announces a willingness to go on seeing one's opponent's side, to go on testing one's reasoning against more and more demanding measures, to make universal agreement one's aim.

And if the universal audience represents an aspiration for agreement, then rationality in the strong sense of valid argumentation is itself such an aspiration. But as Perelman knew at least from the time of The New Rhetoric, the good of universal agreement is just one good, and it must be measured and balanced by other conflict-
ing goods. Sometimes the goods about which we disagree are more important to us than our eventually reaching agreement with people who do not share our moral concerns. This is why Habermas's attempt to ground rationality in communication fails—it gives an absolute primacy to truth, and limits its universal audience to rational motivations alone in the sense of motivations to reach a consensus about truth.\(^\text{19}\) And this is precisely where Perelman succeeds. He meets the philosophical objection to rhetoric head on without succumbing to an empty rationalism, and thus fulfills philosophy's original aspiration in a philosophically oriented rhetorical theory which includes a rhetoric of philosophy, and provides, so to speak, a way out of rhetoric within rhetoric itself.

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Notes


2. There are many references to "universal audience" throughout Perelman's works, most of them duly noted in the indexes. The most important treatment of the concept is section seven of TNR, "The Universal Audience." However, this section has sometimes been misread. In the passage on classical philosophical instantiations of a universal audience, Perelman is presenting a strictly philosophical conception of universality—one which he opposes, and one in response to which he has developed his specifically rhetorical conception of universality. Nevertheless, commentators have sometimes read these lines as presenting Perelman's own views. For Perelman's own clarification of this matter, see "The New Rhetoric and the Rhetoricians: Remembrances and Comments." Quarterly Journal of Speech 70 (1984): 189–190.

3. Perelman is referring to Plato's Phaedrus 273E.


6. Philosophical-Political Profiles, trans. Fred Lawrence, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1984): 158. This passage is incorporated into an interesting discussion of the "ideal speech situation" by David Ingram, Habermas and the Dialectic of Reason. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); see chapter eleven. Interestingly enough, it also serves as the primary epigraph for David Michael

7. Ray compares Perelman to Rousseau and Kant, shows the similarity of the idea of the universal audience to the ideas of the general will and the categorical imperative, and concludes that the idea of a universal audience fails in the same way that the ideas of the general will and the categorical imperative fail. I have chosen not to respond to those particular arguments. Perelman himself addressed Ray's charges very briefly in "The New Rhetoric and the Rhetoricians: Remembrances and Comments." The citations are from John W. Ray, "Perelman's Universal Audience." Quarterly Journal of Speech 64 (1978): 361–75. In order, they are from pp. 372, 375, 370, and 372.


9. This is, of course, the charge made by Socrates in Plato's *Gorgias* 463A ff.


11. Although Perelman attempts to distinguish reasonableness from rationality (NRH 117–123), I do not follow his usage here. By "rationality" and its cognates, I mean no more than "reasonableness" and its.

12. As one would expect, Perelman omits giving us rules for adding audiences together. In this, he would encounter some of Rousseau's arithmetical difficulties in adding up the general will—*if*, as some seem to believe, he were recommending a single technique for constructing the universal audience. Of course, I am offering an interpretation of the universal audience which allows for many different, even conflicting, techniques to be employed. For an account of the problems of adding wills (or audiences) together, see John Plamenatz, *Man and Society*, (London: Longman, 1963) 1, 393. This is probably the right place to wonder aloud whether anyone could do for universalizability in rhetoric anything similar to what Marcus G. Singer did for ethical theory in his *Generalization in Ethics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961).


14. On the role of the universal audience in philosophical argumentation and on the relation of philosophy and rhetoric generally, see PR.

15. Although see PR for some problems facing any simple identification of a universal audience's responses with the dictates of common sense.

16. See Davids Ingram's provocative tracing of a nascent Benjaminian concept of aesthetic rationality in Habermas's recent writings (177ff.).

17. This concept suggests a number of more far-reaching applications as well. For example, consider Emerson's rhetoric. Could we interpret his dictum that his writing was meant not to instruct but to "provoke" as a way of recognizing that his true aim was to call into play the undefined universal audience? The audience whose characteristics emerge in newness? If Emerson had understood him better, could Thoreau have functioned in this way for him—someone who took his ideas more seriously than he did? Emerson's remarks on provocation may be found in his "Divinity School Address." His unsuccessful wrestling with Thoreau is most obvious in his 1862 memorial eulogy to Thoreau.

