Kant, rhetoric, and *paideia*

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Kant is commonly seen as a hostile critic of rhetoric,[1] and for good reason, since in his writings we find several critical remarks on the subject. Most well known, perhaps, are two claims from the *Critique of the Power of Judgement (KdU)*:

> Die Beredsamkeit, sofern darunter die Kunst zu überreden, d.i. durch den schönen Schein zu hintergehen (als ***ars oratoria***), und nicht bloße Wohlredenheit (Eloquenz und Stil) verstanden wird, ist eine Dialektik, die…die Gemüther vor der Beurtheilung für den Redner zu dessen Vortheil zu gewinnen und dieser die Freiheit zu benehmen...[2]

> Beredtheit und Wohlredenheit (zusammen Rhetorik) gehören zur schönen Kunst; aber Rednerkunst ***(1)*** ist, als Kunst sich der Schwächen der Menschen zu seinen Absichten zu bedienen (diese mögen immer so gut gemeint, oder auch wirklich gut sein, als sie wollen), gar keiner Achtung würdig. … Wer bei klarer Einsicht in Sachen die Sprache nach deren Reichthum und Reinigkeit in seiner Gewalt hat und bei einer fruchtbaren, zur Darstellung seiner Ideen tüchtigen Einbildungskraft lebhaften Herzensantheil am wahren Guten nimmt, ist der vir bonus dicendi peritus, der Redner ohne Kunst, aber voll Nachdruck, wie ihn Cicero haben will, ohne doch diesem Ideal selbst immer treu geblieben zu sein.[3]

In recent years, however, several scholars have argued that Kant did not have anything against rhetoric *per se*.[4] They point out that Kant was not only well educated in Classical and contemporary rhetoric, he was also a great admirer of writers like Horace and he draws explicitly on Hugh Blair in his writings.[5] Moreover, Kant was an enthusiastic supporter of Basedow's *Philanthropinum*, an experimental school which included rhetoric among its subjects.[6] Some scholars have gone even further and argued that rhetoric has a positive and indeed indispensable function in Kant's practical philosophy.[7] In this paper I shall advance a new argument that supports the latter view.

My argument is divided into two steps. First, I show that in the infamous attack on rhetoric (quoted above) there are in fact three senses of 'rhetoric' at

1 Cf. e.g. Kennedy 1999, 274–5.
2 *KdU* 5:327.
3 *KdU* 5:328n.
4 Cf. Garsten 2006, 93–98; Stroud 2005, 328–54; Ercolini 2010.
5 Cf. Kuehn 2001, 48; Ercolini 2010, 54, 202.
6 Stroud 2011, 420, n. 5.
7 Cf. Stroud 2011. To some extent, Ercolini's 2010 reading can also be counted among such positive reinterpretations, but, as opposed to Stroud, she does not attempt to give any systematic argument for why Kant would need to include rhetoric in a certain sense.

work. In addition to the two commonly recognized senses of ‘rhetoric’, i.e. on the one hand a negative and on the other a positive, albeit morally insignificant sense,[8] I argue that there is also a positive and morally significant sense of ‘rhetoric’. Secondly, I show that in the positive and morally significant sense, rhetoric fulfils its role by virtue of its commitment to an illusion, an illusion which poetry, according to Kant, merely plays with.[9] As we shall see, it is precisely by means of the illusion that certain examples which can be shown to play a crucial role in Kant’s understanding of moral education acquire their required moral force.[10] The illusion makes the imagined cases and scenarios presented by the speaker appear as if they were real events, in light of which the auditor’s moral disposition to distinguish between right and wrong is quickened and his motivation to carry out moral acts becomes strengthened.

Kant’s three senses of ‘rhetoric’

The first, negative sense of ‘rhetoric’ is as *ars oratoria*. This art has a negative status in two ways. First, qua art, *ars oratoria* is inferior to poetry. The reason is that while it is beautiful, art for Kant must be without any purpose or intention;[11] *ars oratoria* has a purpose, namely to persuade. To understand why *ars oratoria* also has a morally negative status, it is crucial to note that Kant defines it as a technique whose purpose is to persuade others by ‘winning their minds and robbing them of their freedom by means of a beautiful illusion’.[12] For Kant, autonomy and moral worth are two sides of the same coin. Therefore, it is quite obvious that a technique which aims to turn the minds of the listeners into machines that automatically accept the views of the orator, is morally objectionable and hence is ‘worthy of no respect’.

The second, positive sense of ‘rhetoric’ is simply as a skill in talking (*Beredheit*) combined with well-spokenness (*Wohlredenheit*), which again is defined as eloquence and style (*Eloquenz und Stil*). In Kant’s own terminology, the term ‘rhetoric’ (*Rhetorik*) is restricted to designating the combination of these features.[13] In this sense, rhetoric does indeed *belong* to beautiful art. But

8 Ijsseling 1976, 84–85; Ercolini 2010, 3.

9 *KdU* 5:327.

10 For a good analysis of the role of examples, see Stroud 2011.

11 This much follows from his analysis of beauty and the justification of the claims of the pure judgment of taste – a topic which I have to leave aside here.

12 *KdU* 5:326–7.

13 This point is obscured in the English translation of KdU by Guyer and Matthews (2000). In the quoted passages *Wohlredenheit* is first translated as ‘skill in speaking’ and the next time as ‘well-spokenness’. *Beredheit* is translated as ‘eloquence.’ Unfortunately, this sloppiness makes one lose track of Kant’s fine distinctions.

it is not thereby a beautiful art *in itself*. Rather it denotes certain capacities that can be put to the service of true art, viz. poetry.

The third sense of 'rhetoric' can be found by looking carefully at Kant's distinction between the orator who performs according to *ars oratoria* and the true *vir bonus dicendi peritus.* As opposed to the former, the latter speaker clearly does not employ a technique that aims to persuade the listeners. Nevertheless, this does not imply that this speaker, who is 'without art but full of vigour', is simply involved in rhetoric in the morally neutral sense of *Rhetorik*. The first thing to note is that according to Kant a *vir bonus dicendi peritus* must not only have an insight into the facts and a mastery of the language in its richness and purity; he must also 'through a fruitful imagination capable of presenting his ideas, partake vividly with his heart in the true good'.[14] Hence, in addition to relevant knowledge and rhetorical skills in the morally neutral sense, this good speaker affects himself by means of the imagination and thereby improves his own relationship to the good; when presenting his ideas through imagination in the appropriate kind of way, he will take part in the true good, i.e. the moral law, not only through reason but also through his heart (*Herzenantheil*). Somewhat less poetically we can say that such a good speaker is a speaker who has the capacity to quicken his own moral sensibility by means of his imagination. As Kant says elsewhere, 'Rhetoric is a business of the understanding animated through sensibility'.[15] As such, being a good speaker can clearly be morally significant for the speaker himself, but what about the audience? As we know, for Kant no one can be persuaded to be good, since goodness must be the result of an autonomous will. The crucial question for us is, however, not whether morality can be furthered in others by any means besides persuasion, but specifically whether and how the rhetorical features of the speech of a *vir bonus dicendi peritus* can contribute to moral education.

The answer to this question is suggested in Kant's claim that the moral effect of the speaker on himself is brought about by the process of a *Darstellung* (presentation) of his ideas. By *Darstellung* Kant means presenting a concept or idea in sensible intuition. For geometrical concepts, the relevant *Darstellung* would be the construction of the corresponding geometrical object in space. For ideas, presentation is a more complicated issue, since, strictly speaking, they do not have any corresponding spatio-temporal object. Instead, an idea will have to

14 Again, the English translation is inaccurate. '[L]ebhaften Herzensantheil am wahren Guten' is translated as 'feels a lively sympathy for the true good. While Kant clearly wants to claim that the heart's partaking in the true good happens *through* the fruitful and able (*tüchtige*) imagination's presentation of ideas, the English translation says that the feeling of sympathy for the true good must be *alongside*; cf. KdU, 205.

15 Kant 2007, 246–7.

be presented through some other kind of sensible representation which functions as a symbol or proxy for such an object. We shall return to this point below. For now, the most important point is to notice that there is a constraint placed on any presentation qua *Darstellung*, to wit that it can be shared by others.[16] In other words, in order for the speaker to quicken his own moral sensibility he must present (*darstellen*) the ideas so that they can be shared and affect others in the same way. This should suffice to show that Kant does indeed acknowledge the possibility of a form of rhetoric that affects (also) the audience in a morally appropriate and significant way. To see how this is supposed to happen I shall now turn to the second and final part of my argument.

The role of illusion in moral rhetoric

My aim is now to show that although *ars oratoria* exploits an illusion in an objectionable way in order to win the minds of others, a rhetorical illusion can also have an indispensible positive function in moral education.[17] To see how, we must first look briefly at Kant's understanding of illusion and error.

In the most general sense, an illusion for Kant is a representation that presents what is merely a subjective representation of an object as if it were the object itself.[18] Prime examples are optical illusions, as for instance when the moon seems to become larger when it is closer to the horizon, although in fact the moon itself does not change its size.[19] A typical feature of illusions is that they are robust and insensitive to change even when one knows that things are not really as they appear. The optical illusion just mentioned is illustrative, because in spite of our knowledge that the moon's size does not change, the moon continues to look larger on the horizon.

According to Kant, all error builds on illusion and consists of being taken in by the semblance in a way that affects our judgment or beliefs. Hence, to use the same example again, the error lies not in seeing the moon as larger (this is unavoidable) but in believing that the moon is larger.[20] But what is the illusion and resulting error in the case of rhetoric?

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16 Indeed it is particularly in the KdU, the context of our present *analysandum*, that Kant emphasizes and discusses this feature, the so-called *sensus communis*.

17 The idea that illusions can play a positive role is most explicitly advocated by Kant in the Appendix to the Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason (KrV)*. However, as I have shown elsewhere, illusions can play a positive role in the practical realm as well. Cf. Serck-Hanssen 2012.

18 Here I have generalized Kant's point in *KrV* A 297/B 354, where he talks specifically of transcendental illusions. But the analogy with optical illusion in the very same paragraph shows, I believe, that such a generalization is warranted.

19 *KrV* A 297/B 353–4.

20 For a good study on Kant and illusion see Grier 2001.

The illusion involved in rhetoric is clearly that the orator's subjective representations, e.g. his presentation of deeds and events, appear to the listeners as if they were objective states of affairs. An error, however, only occurs if the auditor also forms the corresponding belief without seeing any need to think for himself. In this case, the auditor has been deceived and has mistakenly taken what is in fact a merely subjective representation of the orator as an object to which he, the auditor, relates as an eyewitness in need of no further examination. As we have seen, the aim of *ars oratoria* is precisely to produce such a state of mind in the audience, namely that the orator's way of seeing things is the way things really are and therefore need not be critically examined. To achieve this aim, *ars oratoria* not only exploits the illusion, but also uses 'artful trickery'.[21]

As should be clear from this brief presentation of the distinction between illusion and error, if there is to be room for a rhetorical illusion that has a morally positive function, it must be due only to its presentation of the subjective *as if* it were objective, and not to any resulting erroneous beliefs (be they intended or not). To understand the potentially positive function of the illusion, we must, however, note that a rhetorical illusion can have an 'as-if character' in three ways. The first we have already touched upon, namely that the orator's 'lively presentation in examples'[22] can appear to the listeners *as if* they are real things, persons, and events. The second is that if the examples are fictions of the imagination, they can include descriptions of the inner states of agents, e.g. a person's inner battle with his conscience, and make such inner properties appear *as if* it they were epistemically accessible states of affairs.[23] Thirdly, the semblance of seeing real things, persons and events, combined with the as-if insight into the emotions, thoughts and intentions of the agent(s) yield the semblance of directly perceiving to the actuality of moral agency.

We are now finally in a position to see how the rhetorical illusion can play a role in moral education. Earlier in this paper we saw that the *vir bonus dicendi peritus* affected his own moral sense by means of a presentation (*Darstellung*) of his ideas and that this presentation must be sharable by others. We also saw that, strictly speaking, no corresponding real object or state of affairs can serve this purpose and that its place must be filled by some kind of proxy; but which?

From what has already been established, it follows that if the lively 'presentation in examples' of our good speaker has the properties of an illusion described above, such examples could in fact function as a proxy in the desired way; for first, by means of their illusory nature, the audience would indeed

21 *KdU* 5:327.
22 *KdU* 5:327.
23 Bear in mind that for Kant we cannot in fact have such insight, not even into ourselves.

'see' the examples as if they were an objective state of affairs, and as such the examples fulfil the requirement of being shareable. Moreover, as we have just seen, by using fictional examples the audience can 'have before their eyes', to use a Kantian expression, what can never be given through experience, namely exemplary cases of people who act in the right way, at the right time, with the right means for the right reasons.[24] The illusory nature of the speaker's examples thus confers upon them a capacity for a truly moral effect also on the audience, for the examples' twofold character of presence and transcendence contains a tension that is suited to awakening the auditors' natural disposition for moral and autonomous reflection. In the examples they 'see' and indeed 'feel' the presence of morality, and at the same time they realize that it can only be comprehended by serious engagement in moral reasoning. In other words, as opposed to persuasion, which aims at mechanically generated opinions, the morally appropriate kind of rhetoric entertained by the *vir bonus dicendi peritus* prompts moral reflection and reasoning in the audience – it opens their hearts to the moral law, it sharpens their moral judgement and motivates them to act truly morally.

If the above reading of a third sense of 'rhetoric' is correct, it implies that, for Kant, rhetoric can play a significant role in moral education precisely because of its peculiar commitment to and use of illusions, for by such means rhetoric can lead the audience to the kind of reflection, judgment and motivation that *paideia* should aim for.[25] As such, rhetoric in fact offers a more promising means to moral education than do both poetry and moral pedagogy. Poetry on the one hand, only 'plays with illusions' and hence reminds us throughout of their merely fictive status. Poetry is thus less suited than rhetoric to bring about serious and lasting reflection in the audience. Moral pedagogy, on the other hand, tends to take its examples from real life. Since such examples can only portray the observable conduct of people, they can easily lead to unreflective imitation rather than genuine moral agency, according to Kant.[26] Not only that, but due to our propensity for self-love, Kant also believes that when confronted with examples of those who are said to be better than ourselves, we are easily filled with envy and even with hate towards them rather than with the motivation to improve our own moral character.[27] In conclusion then, despite Kant's harsh remarks about rhetoric, there is a positive lesson to be learned: to be a *vir bonus dicendi peritus* is something which we should all strive for.

24 For this point, see also Stroud 2011.
25 For a good analysis of moral education in Kant, see Sticker forthcoming.
26 Kant 4:408, 6:479–80. For this point see also Stroud 2011, 424.
27 Kant 6:480, 27:694. Also referred to in Stroud 2011.

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