

Exercising Empathy: Rhetorics of Others' Points of Views

Research Project¹

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In multicultural societies, empathy (i.e. the ability to endorse someone else's point of view) appears as an especially useful skill for civic life. It seems common sense that the more citizens are trained to endorse various point of views and the less they might be likely to fall into dogmatism. Moreover, the ability to use empathy when arguing might help citizens to deal more efficiently and more peacefully with *deep disagreement* (Fogelin: 1985) and *dialogue of the deaf* (Angenot: 2008) that are so common on any non-trivial political issue. How to exercise empathy? Answering this question is all the more important that our point of views might be naturally conservative (Kennedy 1998: 215-230; Danblon 2013: 127-148). We might even have inherited a strong tendency for segregation (Crisp and Meleady: 2012). In other words, we might not yet be prepared for the challenge of democracy in a multicultural world.

Moreover, while the neuronal basis of empathy are well documented (Preston & De Waal: 2002; Berthoz: 2004; Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia: 2008; Baron-Cohen, Tager-Flusberg & Lombardo: 2013), there is little discussion on the kind of exercises that might help to enrich this faculty and to use it effectively when arguing². My claim is that rhetoric, as a theoretical approach to argumentation and as collection of exercises to develop arguers' skills, might contribute to the interdisciplinary research on empathy.

Developing a rhetorical approach to empathy

Current researches in the fields of physiology and developmental social neuroscience paid particular attention to the negative effects of the lack of empathy. Baron-Cohen (2011) proposed to explain human cruelty in terms of erosion of empathy; Berthoz (2010) explained fanaticism as the result of destruction of the ability to change perspective. While researches on the developmental and social factors that might lead us to adjust our empathy according to categories in which we put the "other" is flourishing (Davidov *et alii* : 2013 ; Rhodes & Chalik : 2013 ; Decety & Cowel : 2014) little or no attention is given to the role of discourse in the shaping of our empathy. One might however reasonably expect that language contributes to the sophistication of the mechanisms humans can use to inhibit or stimulate their empathy. The purpose of a rhetorical approach to empathy is to analyse those mechanisms.

Empathy in a rhetorical framework

Aristotle treatise on *Rhetoric* offers two valuable tools to conduct such a study: a theory of proof and a theory of genres of speeches. Aristotle's theory of proof will be used to predict

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² This might be explained by the difficulty to structure the dialogue between rhetoric (as a theory and practice of public speeches) and current researches on psychology. The problem is how to bridge the gap between (1) the *practical knowledge* on situated uses of empathy that a rhetorician might develop by observing (*theoresai*: Aristotle, *Rhet.*, 1356a) argumentative situations (for instance, students practicing *dissoi logoi* in classroom); and (2) descriptions of empathy as a universal human faculty that cognitivists and physiologists draw from their experiments (Versmerch: 2010).

the kind of speech that will inhibit or stimulate audience's empathy³. Aristotle theory of genres of speech will be used to predict the effect of a rhetorical situation on arguers' empathic behaviour⁴. I will test those predictions with behavioural observations of participants in rhetorical exercises⁵ and by setting up an experiment on audience's reception.

Ultimately, I will use my observations to design new rhetorical exercises that will cultivate students' consciousness on the most common uses of empathy in the speeches they might hear or produce.

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³ In particular, I will use Aristotle's reflection on the cognitive components of pity and on the rhetorical means to appraise it (*Rhet.* II, 8, 1385b).

⁴ One might predict the deliberative genre encourages strategic uses of empathy (mental simulation of opponent's point of view will often be a way to take the best over him) while the forensic genre encourages adopting an *allocentric* point of view (i.e., a readiness to take opposite points of view into account on a given issue). As far as epideictic rhetoric is concerned (i.e. speeches aiming at reinforcing concord), one might predict that those speeches prompts audiences to "switch of" their cognitive empathy and to share a feeling of sympathy.

⁵ My participation, with Benoît Sans, in the project FRESH "Exercices de rhétorique : raison pratique, créativité, citoyenneté" (dir. E. Danblon) enables me to make these observations.