

Is there a question of rhetorical/theory?

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But the active life is not necessarily active in relation to other men, as some people think, nor are only those processes of thought active that are pursued for the sake of the objects that result from action, but far more those speculations and thoughts [theôrias kai dianoêseis] that have their end in themselves and are pursued for their own sake; for the end is to do well, and therefore is a certain form of action.

Aristotle, *Politics*, 1325b

Questioning builds a way. We would be advised, therefore, all to pay heed to the way, and not fix our attention on isolated sentences and topics. The way is a way of thinking. All ways of thinking, more or less perceptibly, lead through language in a manner that is extraordinary.

Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology”

Any question about the rhetorical mode of a [...] text is always a rhetorical question which does not even know whether it is really questioning.

Paul de Man, “Semiology and Rhetoric”

Is there a question of rhetorical/theory, a way towards a relation with(in) language that (en)acts? If it appears, or if it is heard (at a distance, not least from presumption), does this question hold a “questionability”, a sense that there is something *in* question? What is entailed and what might be at stake in *asking* the question of rhetorical/theory?

Playfully, can we replace de Man’s concern for what it means to ask after a “literary” text with a query about a “theoretical” text and, if so, does the substitution bring us to an (interesting) *aporia*, a “difficulty of passing” or a loss of direction that stems from the puzzle of what it means to form and express propositions about “questions” that throw the operativity and power of expression into relief?¹ Or, following de Man just a bit further, have we proposed to gather under the banner of a “rhetorical question”, a sort of inquiry which leaves us to wonder, “For what is the use of asking, I ask, when we cannot

¹ A sort of counterpart to *theôria*, the ancient Greek concept of *aporia* includes this loss of direction or movement as one of the basic meanings.

even authoritatively decide whether a question asks or doesn't ask?"² Not then, "What is the question of rhetorical/theory?" Rather, taking care that we do not cede prematurely to the impulse of Wittgenstein's figure of the ordinary, a different direction: To what does the question of rhetorical/theory – *as a question* – call?³

Do we begin with the wonder of the question?⁴ Sometimes. Although frequently, we start elsewhere, with an interest, an intuition, a hope, or an obligation. The question arrives later, only after we have entered the matter at hand (a concept, a text, a practice, a controversy or event) and discovered – to our surprise – a surprise.⁵ With the question of rhetorical/theory, the question may be delayed further by an interlocking set of presumptions: rhetoric's particularity defies theory's larger reach and wider aspiration; composing, speaking, and criticizing are more worthy if not prior pursuits; and, of course, there is the old and seemingly uncrackable pragmatist chestnut that theory's pompous gaze must be resisted even as we can take comfort in the fact that we know a rhetorical appearance (*phainomena*) when we see one.⁶ Adding to the mix, there is, if we are honest, the unspoken anxiety that follows from (shared) worry over the precise conceptual contours and commitments of both "rhetoric" and "theory". Dancing with one or the other can be counted as productive. Taking out both, however, raises the eyebrows of those sturdy citizens who would keep us on our guard against non-monogamy. As the pious remind us on a regular basis, usually through teary apologia, the resulting impulse is a hotel-by-the-hour affair, one in which there is no time for the underlying matter of consent: precisely what is in question in the question of rhetorical theory?⁷ Rhetoric's theory. Theory's rhetoric. Rhetorical theory. Theoretical rhetoric. The folds in these concepts may have decidedly different kinks. If so, the (awkward) slash in

² Paul de Man, "Semiology and Rhetoric," *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 10. Related, see Jacques Derrida's remarks on the question of the "ethical question" (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997), 53-56). I am grateful to Pat Gehrke for bringing this latter work to my attention.

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 24.

⁴ With respect to the wonder that is thought to inaugurate philosophy, see Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155d; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b.

⁵ There is then at least something to the old adage in anthropology that one's question appears only after arriving and abiding for a time "in the field."

⁶ The close cousin of this codicil is the rather protestant antidote to idle (ideal) hands: rhetoric – (always) open for business.

⁷ I draw here from Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's essay "In The Name of..." (*Retreating the Political*, 56).

rhetorical/theory (more accurate, perhaps: rhetoric/theory) marks both an interruption and a movement, a small space in which to ask (briefly) after the work that language undertakes in the name of becoming a question about the potential of language.

Questions are not innocents. They can be leading and loaded. And, they can be fired. The interrogative that energizes a dialectic of “question and answer” can slip quickly into the interrogation that replaces an “open” interest – a being open to demanding questions and the demands of their reply – with the single-minded opening of being in the name of extracting definitive answers.⁸ Blurring the line between problematization, power, and care, one risk of venturing a question is a discomfiting finitude, an exposure of self and other that may give way to *recognizing* or which may provoke an exceptional and violent (non)response. That we hear “no question” in a question may signal a forgetting of contingency or a recollection of what cannot be asked or answered.⁹ In part, this is to say that questions have unspoken grounds. They frequently rest on an implicit and attributed “right” to question, a status that may constitute the subject of a question while disbarring its reply. No less pernicious are the invitations to question that are pre-structured in such a way as to suggest that queries shake confidence and are thus best held until crisis has wound back to normality.

“What can the Committee do for you?” Posed by Commissioners to victims of gross violations of human rights in early hearings convened by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, this question illustrates if not enacts the stakes of inquiry into the rhetorical grammar, expression, and power of questions. Indeed, it suggests that there are such things as bad questions, incoherently put and thoughtless queries that (re)present themselves as a search for truth through the initiation of dialogue but which work to curtail debate over who may ask what of whom in the name of defining and enforcing the founding consensus of politics.¹⁰ Curious. Searching. Inquisitive. Lost. Bereft. Seeking legitimacy. The “states” prone to questioning and their “approach” to

⁸ The modern etymology confirms this tendency, at least insofar as Middle French and Anglo-Norman definitions of “to question” were tied closely to the activity of torture. This is not to say, however, that good questions lack for resistance or that the trust needed to tarry is a given.

⁹ For an engaging reflection of this dynamic, see Stuart Murray, “Ethics at the Scene of Address: A Conversation with Judith Butler,” *Symposium: Review of the Canadian Journal for Continental Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 2 (fall 2007): 415–445.

¹⁰ An interesting consideration of this founding appears in Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

expression are not interchangeable, particularly as they may issue variously from a call, need, or demand and as they may invite, require, refuse, or punish response.

Are we talking about an action, a form, a voice, an event? Close to home, although not always with much heart, the modern(ist) field of erotetics or erotetic logic owes a debt to Richard Whately and concerns itself primarily with the development and utility of epistemic principles about questions.¹¹ Without giving full due to all of its p's and q's, the inquiry tends to proceed from a classification of question forms to an analytic consideration of the presuppositions, propagation, validity, and meaning(fulness) of questions.¹² The pragma-dialectical tenor of some erotetic logics has a familiar feel, particularly as they set out questions as dialogic or deliberative transitions, moments at which the possibility or foreclosure of the interrogative gesture constitutes the performative basis and normative benchmark of consensus formation.¹³ Yet, as Gadamer made plain, erotetic's interest in how the movement of a question proceeds toward the development of knowledge is heavily conditioned by assumptions that expose the ways in which questions ground methods of inquiry but obscure how the experience (*erfahrung*) of a question may open a shared transition, a jointly conducted, passionate, and playful inauguration of “learning to see what is questionable.”¹⁴ Looking back to the first moments of our own tradition, the *Dissoi-Logoi* may exemplify this transitional dynamic, at least as it illustrates how an understanding of a question's basis, terms, and force may be less an occasion for reply than a moment for discovery, a recognizing of the questionability of the question, the “undetermined possibilities of a thing” after which it

¹¹ See, in particular, Whately's *Logic*. More recent work includes, Nicholas Rescher, *Inquiry Dynamics* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2000); Henry Hiz, ed. *Questions* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1978).

¹² Rescher, for instance, develops an “erotetic cycle” that is deemed to “determine” courses of inquiry. The position has interesting interplay with Gadamer's hermeneutic circle, at least insofar as both stress the problem of how one discerns the grounds from which we are able to ask a question (Rescher, *Inquiry*, 44-48).

¹³ Llewellyn's sense of deliberative questions is instructive in this regard (John Llewellyn, “What is a Question?” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 42:1 (1964): 69-84). Specifically, the position anticipates something of how the capacity of an interlocutor to question argumentative claims is a defining although not always explicit element of Habermas' theory of communicative action (Jurgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1: *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985)). Also see Douglas Walton, *Question-Reply Argumentation* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).

¹⁴ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New York: Continuum, 1994), 365. Along with Gadamer's concern for the passion of the question, a passion that Rescher refers to as “hot cognition,” there is work to be done on the way in which the spoke and unspoken question embodies and enacts *eros*, perhaps foremost in the play of flirtation.

asks and which may not admit to resolution.¹⁵ That there are two sides to every question thus may refer not so much to a plurality of equally viable answers as to the onset of a wonder (*thaumazô*) that may be expressed in the name of *coming to a judgment* (*erôtaô*) or which may trouble language (*stasis*) and leave us silent, in a place where we are left to search (*eromai/zêteô*), for words, for the grounds to articulate puzzlement, concern, or desire.¹⁶ How often does the expression “I do not know what to say” mark the inchoate beginning of a question that cannot yet be said?¹⁷

Sampling (or spinning) just a bit of Heidegger: being called (in)to question opens a path whose way is built through leaping. Remaining a moment longer with the Greek, this movement “speaks” to the question’s basic affinity and affiliation with theory. To wonder. To wander. In its earliest forms, theory’s (*theoria*) sight-seeking began only with a journey or a pilgrimage, a departure, arrival, and return undertaken in the name of witnessing religious and secular events convened outside the confines of the city-state. Proceeding towards oracles and spectacles, the figure embodying this movement and observation (the *theoros*) took leave, set on the road (perhaps the space in which to consider how one planned to ‘look’), and aimed to view the constitutive sights (and sounds) of events at a distance.¹⁸ Working as a stranger and returning as a foreigner to “give an account”, the theorist’s roving eye was “objective” only as it is understood that theirs may no longer have been a self-certain view or one that could credibly testify to having been in meaningful relation to witness events (and people). The path of *theoria*, at least for a moment in antiquity, was a wandering toward a wonder that held the potential to defy words.

¹⁵ R. K. Sprague, ed., “Dissoi-Logoi or Dialexis,” *The Older Sophists* (Columbia: USC Press, 1972); Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 375.

¹⁶ Although it proceeds in a slightly different direction, a nuanced “hunt” for the figure of the Sophist (and sophistic) can be found in John Muckelbauer, “Sophistic Travel: Inheriting the Simulacrum Through Plato’s ‘The Sophist,’ *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 34:3 (2001): 225-244.

¹⁷ Along with recalling Vico’s account of the development of language, this points to the relationship between the interrogative voice, awe, and perhaps the sublime.

¹⁸ For accounts of this early sense of theory and the movements of the theorist see, among others, Andrea Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); William McNeill, *The Glance of an Eye: Heidegger, Aristotle and the Ends of Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, trans. Chris Dawson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Ian Rutherford, “*Theoria and Darsan: Pilgrimage and Vision in Greece and India*,” *Classical Quarterly* 50 (2000): 133-46. For a subtle reflection on one of theory’s central “objects,” the Olympics, see Philippe-Joseph Salazar, “Rhetoric on the Bleachers or, The Rhetorician as Melancholiac,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 41:4 (forthcoming 2008).

How can we say? What can be said (or judged) about that which has been seen and heard through the traversal of a distance that involves exceeding the grasp of law, the jurisdiction of precedent and *topoi* that circumscribe collective sense and sensibility? This question of theory (or is it meta-theory?) is perhaps one of rhetoric's fundamental questions. In so many ways, its reply risks the performance and legitimation of violence – the authenticity of representation, a corrupting and colonial impulse, a (touristic) gaze that denies the contingency of the question(er) from which it issues. Yet, this interrogative gesture indicates, it indicates something of the way in which the question's transition and theory's excursion proceed toward and with(in) the movement of the word, a *logos* which holds out the unsteady potential for the turn and return of a relation *between* that does not aspire to mediation. Put differently, the question of rhetorical/theory is a displacement that inaugurates something of what Giorgio Agamben calls the “taking place of language”, the calling forth of a movement, a relation that sets us beside our self, *as not one(s)* self, and which abides in the (im)potential of words to which we do and do not belong. We do not *know* whether this question (or its answer) is obligatory, at least if the question *qua* question holds the *ethos* of ethical life, a movement of bringing the power of language to itself, a movement that Agamben describes beautifully as “a shuttling in both directions along a line of sparkling alternation on which common nature and singularity, potentiality and act change roles and interpenetrate.”¹⁹

Confronting the (recurring) atrocity that leaves us silent and the everyday alienation that has left us to blog maniacally, the question of rhetorical/theory is perhaps not what to say in this moment but how this moment calls us to speak toward language and to reflect on the ways in which such talk about talk is so often discouraged by the common presumption that expression is free. Walter Benjamin seemed to grasp this when he struggled to discern the question that follows from the idea that “language is therefore both creative and the finished creation; it is word and name.”²⁰ What is at issue in

¹⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 20. Here, I also draw from Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen Pinkus (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005).

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and On the Language of Man,” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 68.

rhetorical/theory is thus not how to blur the line between margin and centre or how to develop systems of “conflict resolution.”²¹ Rather, it is the question of recognizing the question of language’s potential, the hinge at which interlocutors are confronted with the call to (not) decide the undecidable.²² Recalling Aristotle’s suggestion that action does not fate relation, what is to be said in a situation where parties to a deep dispute advocate talk but deny that those sitting across the table have the *ability* to speak in good faith? What can deliberation mean when it takes place between those who view one another as evil and hear propositions only as tactical attempts to gather and assert (sovereign) power? In the midst of such *stasis*, is it possible to advocate for talk about talk, a meta-discursive exchange that asks participants to relinquish their standing and question the underlying commitments of their own voice in the name of (re)constituting norms of productive agreement and disagreement? As it troubles the background conditions needed to speak, at what point would such proteptic discourse, a movement toward language as such, become paralytic?

Questions are the beginnings that too often get taken for granted and stalled – ironically – in the headlong rush to make a case in a manner that asks nothing of its constitutive words. The same can be said of theory. And rhetoric, too. In the hunger for the arrival of the formula, there awaits the bitterness of never having moved. It’s safer, at any rate; there appear no others who might later issue a charge of offense and no need to doubt the “course” of inquiry, the conditions that indemnify the question from being the wrong question. At a larger level, the question of rhetorical/theory shrinks in the face of the storm that calls itself transition but which amounts only to the turbulence of installing the creation which has already been presupposed. In the face of such progress, the calling of rhetorical/theory may abide in the flash of the question, a thin interrogative faith that beckons us toward the word’s potential (*dunamis*) as a question, a wonder to which persuasion may be an increasingly demeaning reply.

²¹ On this point, see Richard McKeon, “Discussion and Resolution in Political Conflicts,” *Ethics* LIV: 4 (1944), 235–262.

²² Here, the question of the messianic word would seem to loom larger, particularly the respective accounts offered by Derrida and Agamben.