

*Pragmatics and Cognition* 4 (2) 1996

Donald N. McCloskey, *Knowledge and Persuasion in Economics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, xvii+445 pages, ISBN 0-521-43603-6

The hit in economic methodology of the eighties was McCloskey's *The Rhetoric of Economics*. This brilliantly written book aroused endless discussion among economists (and indeed in the most respectable mainstream journals, such as *The Journal of Economic Literature* and the *American Economic Review*). Clearly, somebody who had a good reputation within the profession had given expression to some widespread malaise. Something similar happened earlier in the philosophy of science with Thomas Kuhn and in political philosophy with John Rawls. In these cases, a book originated a controversy, and the author finally published another book presenting modified versions of his previous claims. This is what also happened with McCloskey. The book reviewed here is the third instalment of a trilogy, which began with *The Rhetoric of Economics* (1985) and includes *If You're So Smart* (1990). It contains a bulky rejoinder to critics, made of materials originally written for many conferences and journal issues on *The Rhetoric of Economics*.

The book's organization follows the division of discourse into six

parts recommended by textbooks of rhetoric. The first part is *exordium*, intended to catch the audience's interest while introducing the subject. This is achieved by telling the story of McCloskey's positivist youth and his Damascus's way – the way from the Department of Economics at Iowa University to the Department of English at the same University, where he was first invited to talk about the rhetoric of economics before he knew what rhetoric is at all about.

The second part is *narration*, which gives the audience the history of the problem. Here McCloskey explains how in the later 1980s “a conversation about conversation began” at last also among economists, who finally realized that such facts as

the presence and character of the audience, the attitudes of audience and speaker to each other, the language spoken in common, the style of the customary medium, the history of earlier and similar talk, the practical purposes to be achieved from the communication

do have a bearing on scientific communication and do not always distort it. McCloskey suggests that the theory of scientific communication economists need is precisely rhetoric. The latter “is not what is left over after logic and evidence have done their work”, nor is it “an ornament added on after the substance has been written” (p. 35).

McCloskey stresses that also scientists use analogies, tell stories, impersonate characters when arguing. Consequently, the old topics of economic, “the context of justification, the criteria for Truth, the logic of explanation, and the rational reconstruction of research programs” should fit in the wider framework of “talk about genres, arguments, metaphors, implied authors, and domains of discourse”. The revival of rhetoric in our century, after three centuries of eclipse, is due to a widespread awareness of the fact that we “do things with words”. Some of this awareness – he argues – is hindered by mixed loyalties. For instance, any attempt to admit a cognitive role for scientific metaphor while keeping a distinction between the artistic and the scientific uses of metaphor presumes after all a naive scientific realism, and its proponents “are adopting without realizing it a romantic literary criticism that puts the poet outside the routines of conversation” (p. 45).

The third part is *division*, which sets forth points agreed on by both sides and points to be contrasted”. Here the author contrasts the thin ways

of reading economics, those of Popperian and Lakatosian methodologists, with the thick ways, those of the sociologists of knowledge, and with the even thicker approach of rhetorical criticism, which considers how we do convince each other, not “what is true according to ultimate methods” (p. 106).

The fourth part is *proof*. Here, the pros and cons of the argument are brought out. McCloskey attacks the scientific style that has taken hold of the writing of economics in our century. This part (to my taste, the best of the whole book) compares economic literature to the modern novel, suggesting that the suppression of the authorial I in the latter responds to the same outlook as the suppression of the I in science, yielding “represented reality” or “unheralded assertion”. Economic writings, like novels, have an implied author: the implied author of economic literature, once the Philosopher or the Historian, has become the Scientist. The writing of scientific articles – no matter how strange this sounds to an economist’s ears – depends on a theory of writing: the present dominating style derives from a particular theory, based on strange commonplaces, such that style may be separated from content, or that “invention”, one of the parts of classical rhetoric – the framing of arguments worth listening to – is “all there is”. As opposed to this, McCloskey argues that invention “arises from the metaphors and stories with which economists make their world”, and that “content is not separable from the style and arrangement” (pp. 124–5).

Part five is *refutation*, which replies to the opponent’s argument. Here McCloskey attacks the very idea of Methodology (with a capital M), understood as an intermediate ground between common-sense methodology and an ethics of discourse. He contrasts “effective persuasion” which (as Austin, Rorty, Toulmin, and MacIntyre have argued), is all that we have, with “justified true belief”, which would be “an admirable ideal... if we could get it in a finite conversation about something controversial” (p. 188). In this part, chapters 15 to 23 are dedicated to responding, quite often in an *ad hominem* way, to the critics of *The Rhetoric of Economics*.

Part six, *peroration*, is an impassioned summary of the book. Here McCloskey argues for a new understanding of economics as social science, that is, a conversation about a subject-matter, the economy, that is itself a “conversation”, in so far as economic actors exchange informations, persuade each other, advertise their theories, and so on.

Grasping this point implies overcoming “modernist” oppositions of the subjective and the objective, making room for the *conjective* (what we know together). In economics this seems to imply avoiding overstress on “the individual (the subjective); economics is not so much about the subjective meaning and intention as it is about intersubjective patterns of action (and of belief and conversation)” (p. 378). I would add that McCloskey should reflect on how much of this view of social science is compatible with Neoclassicism (not to say with the Chicago version thereof) as a practice, a style, and a methodology. In fact, somewhere in the book, he resorts to a distinction between the “old good Chicago school”, and present-day Chicago economists, a distinction every dissenter from the Party always does sometimes before his card is withdrawn.

To sum up: the views presented in the book are in several aspects richer (and I would say, more plausible) than McCloskey’s earlier views. This circumstance seems an indirect proof of one point in McCloskey’s argument: his critics, as every good critic should do, not only did read his previous book: indeed they also wrote his last book. In other words, what matters in a critical conversation – also about rhetoric and economics – is not the subjective or the objective, but (in McCloskey’s wording) the *conjective*. The present book is, ultimately, more a result of what McCloskey’s critics know than an expression of McCloskey’s thought.

*In fact, The Rhetoric of Economics* might have been read as an attempt to defend one the most improbable versions of Neoclassicism in economic theory (i.e., the Chicago School) employing a Kotuzow-like strategy, namely arguing that, since criticism is impossible, also Chicago economists should be left alone. A politically conservative version of Neoclassicism was combined in that book with a subversive version of post-empiricist philosophy of science (Feyerabend) and post-analytic epistemology (Rorty). Let me add that a combination of political conservatism (or better, dis-commitment) and intellectual nihilism was not strange in the American Academia of the eighties: the fashion of deconstructionism was under the aegis of such a combination. Yet, the propulsive element in McCloskey’s mixture was not deconstructionism but a more sober, and more American, heritage: the tradition of the New Rhetoric, as instantiated by Kenneth Burke. This propulsive element has by now proved strong enough to lead McCloskey beyond those more superficial aspects of earlier McCloskeyism, which boiled down

to a new way to *épater le bourgeois*. As a result, the present book is less postmodernist in its mood, less relativistic in epistemology, less Chicagoan in economics, and as a whole more plausible.

In *The Rhetoric of Economics*, the choice of focusing on rhetoric, something exotic for economists, was (like many fashion-constituting choices), a partly misleading answer to a real malaise. Both the answer and the roots of the discontent are more familiar to philosophers than to economists. Two books from 1958, by Toulmin and Perelman, had already suggested that the way out of the storm that was taking shape in the philosophy of science would have been the recognition of a wider and looser structure to scientific argument than the hypothetical-deductive account could admit of. Such recognition would have been able to rescue scientific rationality from the opposite shoals of *either* deduction and falsification *or* mob psychology. If one reads the writings of Mary Hesse, Thomas Kuhn, Gilles-Gaston Granger and others dating from the seventies-eighties, one may discover that the role of metaphor in science, or “the construction of scientific facts through words” was not unknown to a vital trend in the post-empiricist philosophy of science (and, almost one century before post-empiricism, to Peirce). This trend was already far-away from the modernist scientific image of science mocked by McCloskey. But this trend also followed a path quite distant from the Feyerabend-Rorty lineage that McCloskey had chosen as his pedigree in 1985. In the present book, McCloskey begins to take note of serious literature by philosophers of science on metaphors and by philosophers of language on speech acts, but he has more homework to do.

And yet, the remarkable fact is that McCloskey’s original argument was worked and reworked through a decade of controversy between 1985 and 1994. As a result, this book is both the result of controversy and a book about controversies. *The Rhetoric of Economics* was a book on persuasion; this book is about the way arguments get through criticism and counter-criticism, that is, controversy. Controversies have been brought into the picture by several of McCloskey’s allies and opponents, mainly sociologists of science. This new element provides what was still lacking in 1985: a counterbalance to cheap self-defeating relativism, of the kind McCloskey now denies there ever was in his writings.

*Sergio Cremaschi*