

Donald N. McCloskey, *Knowledge and Persuasion in Economics*, 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"). The reasons were that the author had given expression to some widespread malaise, and that the expression had been given by somebody who had previously gained respectability as an insider. Something similar happened in 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 his previous claims. Something similar happened also with McCloskey. The book reviewed here is actually the third part of a trilogy, beginning with *The Rhetoric of Economics* (1985) and including *If You're So Smart* (1990). It includes a bulky rejoinder to critics, made of materials originally written for numberless conferences and journal issues on *The Rhetoric of Economics*.

The book's organization follows the division of a discourse into six parts recommended by textbooks of rhetorics: the first part is *exordium*, intended to catch the audience's interest while introducing the subject, and this is done telling the story of McCloskey's positivist youth and of his Damascus's way, the way from the Department of Economics of Iowa University to the Department of English of the same University, where he was first invited to talk about the rhetoric of economics before he knew exactly what rhetoric is about.

The second part is *narration*, which gives the audience the history of the problem, and here McCloskey explains how in the later 1980s "a conversation about conversation began" at last also among economists, that is, how economists too 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 purpose to be achieved from the communication" do have a bearing on scientific

communication but also that "they 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).

An important point that McCloskey makes here is that also scientists use analogies, tell stories, adopt a person; thus rhetoric in its broad definition is the art of argument, including what is presently called logic; thus, the old topics of economic methodology, "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 has been explicit in our century after three centuries of eclipse, starting with the sixteenth century, but also in other fields an awareness has spread of the fact that we "do things with words". Some of this awareness is hindered by mixed loyalties: so, any attempt to admit of a role for scientific metaphor while keeping a distinction between the artistic and the scientific uses of metaphor presume 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 really do convince each other, not "what is true according to ultimate methods" (p. 106).

The fourth part is *proof*, in which the pros and cons of the argument are brought out. Here 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) parallels 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". Also economic writings, not only novels, have an implied author: the implied author of economic literature, once the Philosopher or the Historian, has become the Scientist. Also the writing of scientific articles – no matter how strange this sounds to an economist's ears – depends on a theory of writing: also the present dominating style does depend on a particular theory, and indeed on a theory based on strange commonplaces, like that style may be separated from

content, or that "invention", one of the parts of classical rhetoric, that is, "the framing of arguments worth listening to", is all there is. Instead – McCloskey argues – invention "arises from the metaphors and stories with which economists make their world", and besides "the content is not separable from the style and arrangement" (pp. 124–5).

Part five is *refutation*, which answers 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, MacIntyre have argued), is all that we have, with "justified true belief", that would be "an admirable ideal... if we could get it in a finite conversation about something controversial" (p. 188). In this part, chs. 15 to 23 are dedicated to giving a response (quite often of an *ad hominem* kind) to the critics of *The Rhetoric of Economics*.

Part six is *peroration*, the last part, often an impassioned summary. Here McCloskey argues the case for a new understanding of economics as a social science, that is, a conversation about a subject-matter, the economy, that already consists by itself to a wide extent of "conversation" (provided that economic actors exchange informations, persuade each other, advertise and so on). Grasping this point implies overcoming "modernist" oppositions of the subjective and the objective, making room for the *conjunctive* (what we know together). In economics this seems to imply avoiding overstress on "the individual (the 'subjective'); economics is not so much about subjective meaning and intention as it is about intersubjective patterns of action (and of belief and conversation)" (p. 378). I would add, at this point, that 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 is left to McCloskey to muse on. 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 former views. This circumstance seems an indirect proof of one point in McCloskey's argument: his critics, as every critic, not only did read his previous book; indeed they wrote his last book; or, in other words, what matters also in the conversation about rhetorics and economics is not the subjective or the objective, but (in McCloskey's wording) the *conjunctive* (i.e., what we know together) and this book is more a result of what McCloskey's critics know than an expression of McCloskey's thought.

In fact, the *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) by a Kotuzow-like strategy, 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 postempiricist philosophy of science (Feyerabend) and of post-analytic epistemology (Rorty). Let me add that a match 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 match. 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 1985 McCloskeyism that boiled down to a new way to *épater le bourgeois*. As a result, the present book is less post-modernist 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 of 1958 by Toulmin and Perelman had already suggested that the way out of the storm that was preparing in the philosophy of science would have been the recognition of a wider and looser structure to scientific argument than the hypothetico-deductive account could admit of. Such a 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 from the Seventies-Eighties, he may discover that the role of metaphor in science, or "the construction of scientific facts through words" was not unknown to an important trend in 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 at by McCloskey. But this trend also followed a path quite far from the Feyerabend-Rorty lineage that McCloskey had chosen as his pedigree in 1985. In the present book McCloskey starts taking note of serious literature by philosophers of science on metaphors and by philosophers of language on speech acts, but he has more work 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 itself both the result of a controversy (and in a sense, McCloskey's critics *wrote* this book) and a book about controversies. *The Rhetoric of Economics* was a book on persuasion; this book is about the way in which arguments get through criticism and count–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.

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## References

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McCloskey, D.N. 1990. *If You're So Smart: The Narrative of Economic Expertise*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.