Toward a reassessment of Kant's notion of rhetoric. On Kant's theory and practice of popularity according to Ercolini and Santos

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According to a common misconception, Kant rejects rhetoric as worthy of no respect and neglects popularity as a dispensable accessory. Two recent publications on the communicative dimension of Kant's conception and practice of philosophy represent a very solid rebuttal of such criticism. The books in question are *Kant's Philosophy of Communication* by G. L. Ercolini and *A linguagem em Kant. A linguagem de Kant* edited by Monique Hulshof and Ubirajara Rancan de Azevedo Marques, especially in light of the long chapter "Kant e a Questão da Popularidade e da Linguagem da Filosofia" by Leonel Ribeiro dos Santos (pp. 17-69). What Ercolini's monograph and Santos' chapter have in common, is that they both argue that Kant does indeed value and practice both rhetoric and popularity. However, they differ from each other in that Ercolini lets Kant's reflection on popularity derive from occasional factors, while Santos locates its origin at the heart of Kant's critical project. In order fully to appreciate their novelty, these two contributions call for an overview of the state of research on the subject of Kant's conception of rhetoric. Thus, before closely examining them, I will briefly outline the relevant scholarship by dividing it into the three classes of those who interpret

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Kant (a) as a skillful rhetorician, (b) as dismissive of rhetoric, and finally (c) as according rhetoric a moral function.

As for those who acknowledge Kant's rhetorical skills, John Christian Laursen, examining Kant's use of the terms 'private' and 'public' in *What is Enlightenment?*, *Toward Perpetual Peace*, and *Conflict of the Faculties*, shows how Kant's strategically subversive use of this vocabulary is an "important part of his political rhetoric" (Laursen, 1992, p. 194).

In his monograph on Kant's development as a philosopher and as a writer, Willi Goetschel stresses that the "rhetorical […] elements of the Kantian discourse operate as the conditions framing and constituting the text in which philosophy formulates itself" (Goetschel, 1994, p. 181).

Volker Gerhardt reads *Toward Perpetual Peace* as displaying Kant's "resources of literary rhetoric" (Gerhardt, 1995, p. 127) and points out that "the satirical form of the essay" is throughout infused with "the aspect of *rhetoric*" (ibid., p. 141).

Michael Clarke maintains that "in both [*What is Enlightenment?* and *Conflict of the Faculties*] we see him [Kant] veil the fundamental justification of the public use of reason […] beneath highly rhetorical political appeals" (Clarke, 1997, p. 55).

Samuel McCormick examines Kant's response to the royal rescript of October 1794 as a paradigmatic example of philosophy as rhetoric, i.e. of how philosophical writings become a mode of political discourse and action. McCormick depicts Kant as a philosopher preoccupied with the "rhetorical exigencies" (McCormick, 2005, p. 305) determined by the political context and able to adjust to the "shifting rhetorical landscape" (p. 316). In his view, Kant succeeds in showing that who really is at fault before the positive law is not the disobedient subject but the arbitrary king by masterfully deploying the rhetorical gambit known as "the rhetoric of humility" (p. 317).

Analyzing Kant's use of metaphors in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Otfried Höffe emphasizes that "the claims of 'sensibility' are rehabilitated […] in the rhetorical-didactic context of striking images, comparisons and metaphors" (Höffe, 2010, p. 381).

On Jesús González Fisac's view, *What is Enlightenment?* can be read as characterized by three intertwined types of paradox which the author terms anthropological, rhetorical, and anthropological-metaphysical. Kant's rhetorical paradox consists in presenting two apparently contradicting terms and in showing that they actually are compatible. In the Enlightenment essay the terms in question are the scholar's unrestricted freedom to make public use of his reason, i.e. "the true interest of the philosopher [and also] of the people", and the public official's duty to obey, i.e. "the interest of the prince" (González Fisac, 2005, p. 40). González Fisac argues that Kant's rhetorical ability consists in championing

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freedom of speech by both showing the compatibility of the two terms and skillfully applying all three kinds of paradox to one and the same argument.

Writing on the same essay, Jay Foster contends that the essential point that Kant wishes to convey is that the prince should be content "to maintain civil order […] by maintaining civil obedience" (Foster, 2015, p. 257). Similarly to González Fisac, Foster also frames the essay as a rhetorical piece and analyzes the dexterous "rhetorical strategy" (p. 241) informing it.

Despite such appreciations of Kant's use of rhetoric, there persists the image of a Kant uncompromisingly dismissive of rhetoric because of its epistemologically suspect and morally reprehensible nature. From the long story of such readings, I will limit myself to mentioning the more recent accounts.

Drawing on Kant's treatment of rhetoric in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Robert Dostal concludes that Kant "forthrightly castigates rhetoric" because, in addition to losing the apologetic and protreptic function which had secured its place alongside philosophy in previous ages, it is manipulative, deceitful, and incapable of moving to moral actions (Dostal, 1980, p. 225).

In a study about the *Popularphilosophen*, Johan van der Zande contends that Kant gives a major contribution toward "[b]anning the tainted business of rhetoric" from philosophy (van der Zande, 1995, p. 442) since, on Kant's view, a rhetorically skillful presentation is "more an unnecessary concession to the public than the ultimate aim of philosophical discourse" (p. 439).

In his monograph on the history of rhetoric, George Kennedy devotes to Kant only the following sentence: Kant "dismisses the art of rhetoric as worthy of no respect" (Kennedy, 1999, p. 275).

In the 2001 *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, Kant even stands out in the history of rhetoric as the figure at whose hands "rhetoric [...] almost suffered its death blow" and who "condemned it outright" (p. 373) because of his alleged belief that "the reasoning, feelings, and values of audiences [are not to be] taken seriously as an agency for proper choice" (p. 428).

In their volume on the historical and systematic relation between rhetoric and democracy, Benedetto Fontana, Cary Nederman, and Gary Remer maintain that on Kant's view rhetoric results from the degeneration of reason's coming into close contact with interest or appetite and add that "for Kant even Plato is not pure and rigorous enough, for he would use myth, allegory, and other rhetorical devices as means of mass persuasion and mass education" (Fontana/Nederman/Remer, 2004, p. 10 fn).

Finally, Don Paul Abbott compares Kant's treatment of rhetoric with the 1814 treatise on the same topic by the German protestant theologian Franz Theremin and argues that Theremin, seeing what Kant supposedly misses, believes that "the rhetor can affect persuasion while respecting individual autonomy" (Abbott, 2007, p. 282). He can do so "by appealing to the universal and

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transcendent [*sic!*] ideas inherent in the minds of the auditors" (p. 282), these ideas being the Kantian couple of moral law and freedom. What Abbott presents as Theremin's rebuttal to Kant in Kantian terms, is precisely what Scott Stroud sees as being the morally permissible and beneficial use of rhetoric which Kant himself offers especially in *his* account of the ethical community. With this, we are now in position to move to those who read Kant with a view to recovering the moral function of rhetoric.

Pat Gehrke attempts to extract from Kant's philosophy "a communication ethic that privileges community and recovers the value of rhetoric" (Gehrke, 2002, p. 2). He first argues that in Kant's ethics the highest good is community and that community is constituted by the opposite poles of autonomy and love. He then concludes that "if one were to seek only to maximize rational autonomy, then one would not speak", since speaking implies influencing others. However, the opposite pole of love grounds the obligation to care for others and thus "requires first and foremost that we interact, that we speak" (p. 19) in a way that "is able simultaneously to hold forth our love for the other and to respect her or his autonomy in choosing" (p. 20).

Without importing in Kant's ethics the objectionable notion of community as the highest good or the fundamental ethical duty, Scott Stroud reconstructs a morally acceptable and even beneficial role of rhetoric from within Kant's critical corpus. Stroud frames his argument by defining rhetoric as "the study of using language to affect what in modern parlance will be called illocutionary and perlocutionary results" (Stroud, 2005, p. 330). Perlocutionary acts constitute that kind of rhetoric that Kant rejects as manipulative since they aim at evoking a reaction without essentially involving rational agreement. In contrast, illocutionary acts effect a transferal of meaning by essentially relying on rational agreement and constitute a kind of rhetoric that Kant does not call by its name but nonetheless puts forth in his account of the ethical community. Accordingly, there is a force that rhetoric can exert in a way that is morally permissible and beneficial. The source of such force resides in the use of moral concepts accessible to all agents (transcendental freedom, respect, dignity) *qua* inherent to all agents. The public discourse enacted in the ethical community is entirely premised on such concepts and "draws on reason for its force, a force that stems from the individual's own recognition of […] such concepts as derived from her own power of reason" (p. 343). Stroud details his reconstruction of a possible moral use of rhetoric in Kant's terms in his 2014 groundbreaking monograph *Kant and the Promise of Rhetoric*.

Building upon Stroud's work, Lars Leeten has most recently resumed the question of whether there can be something like Kantian eloquence, i.e. a rhetoric that exerts some kind of force which does not infringe upon Kant's notion of epistemological and ethical autonomy. To this end, Leeten recalls Kant's treatment of beauty as the symbol of the morally good and recovers rhetorical efficacy by

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exclusively locating it in a speech's beauty, "moral beauty thus being the only rhetorical force Kant allows" (Leeten, 2019, p. 79).

Suggesting to read her monograph as a companion to Scott Stroud's, in *Kant's Philosophy of Communication*, G. L. Ercolini "examines Kant's robust Enlightenment philosophy of communication" (p. 6). On her thesis, developed along the course of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusive section, Kant's quest for popularity becomes a rhetorical task which in turn results in Kant's philosophy of communication as an integral part of Kant's endeavor to foster his enlightenment project. In the *Introduction*, she significantly remarks that what seems to be Kant's fundamental refusal of rhetoric does not stem from the mere fact that the rhetor exerts influence on the audience, but rather in the means that the rhetor employs to gain influence: Kant's "objection has more to do with the means by which such influence is acquired" (p. 17). She also recalls the obvious fact that, whatever attitude Kant may exhibit toward rhetoric, he essentially treats rhetoric with respect to ethics, and outlines her anything but obvious reading that "the criteria by which he combines ethics and rhetoric […] show that the rejection is [not] wholesale" (p. 18). Convincingly substantiating these positions in the subsequent five chapters is Ercolini's contribution to Kant scholarship and communications studies.

In *Chapter 1*, Ercolini starts by pointing out that Kant differentiates between two sides to rhetoric. On the one side, there is rhetoric as the 'machinery of persuasion' (KU, AA 05: 327.28, p. 204)[1] or '*ars oratoria*' (KU, AA 05: 327.05, p. 204) and, on the other, there is rhetoric as 'merely skill in speaking (eloquence and style)'[2] (KU, AA 05: 327.06, p. 204). Whereas the latter is the epistemologically suspect and morally impermissible rhetoric which Kant rejects, the former is the place to start to reconstruct "a Kantian account of what can be considered a positive role for rhetoric" (p. 34). As for the epistemological suspect, examining Kant's treatments of persuasion and conviction in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and in the *Blomberg Logic*, Ercolini concludes that "a significant part of Kant's suspicion about rhetoric's potential misuse rests on the fact that the distinction between conviction and persuasion is admittedly indeterminate and fuzzy" (p. 36). Before recovering the moral quality of rhetoric in *Chapter 5*, Ercolini lays the groundwork for this crucial task by reconstructing Kant's attitude toward popularity, drawing attention to Kant's anthropological writings, and recalling Kant's account of the free play of the faculties.

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[1] "Maschinen der Überredung", (KU, AA 05: 327.28). References to Kant's works are to the *Academy Edition* with volume, page, and line number. References to *The Critique of Pure Reason* are to the pagination in the (A) and (B) editions. The number following the comma refers to the page number in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. All emphases are Kant's.
[2] "bloße Wohlredenheit (Eloquenz und Stil)" (KU, AA 05: 327.06).

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In *Chapter 2*, she shows that Kant, far from theorizing and practicing a wholesale rejection of popularity, does struggle to popularize his philosophy and ends up producing his own philosophy of communication (p. 89). More precisely, she characterizes Kant's conceptual and performative quest for popularity as Kant's rhetorical task and frames it as the problem of how to convey philosophy so as to both preserve scholarly rigor and provide access to non-experts. Since the *Prolegomena*, so Ercolini, are an exercise in popularity, examining both their structure and how Kant accounts for it in the *Appendix*, one can stipulate the elements of 'true popularity' according to Kant. These consist in the four requirements of analytic exposition, simplified structure, focus on the main question, and knowledge of the world. Particularly noteworthy is Ercolini's treatment of the first and fourth requirement through which she very clearly shows that what Kant rejects is not popularity *per se* but popularity how it is theorized and practiced by *Popularphilosophen* such as Christian Garve. As for the first requirement, an exposition is analytical insofar as the author's point of departure is what plausibly constitutes common knowledge or experience. However, whereas common knowledge or experience (the scientific character of mathematics and physics as a matter of general consensus in the *Prolegomena*) should be the point of departure of the exposition, the expounded concepts shall previously be derived *a priori* with scholarly rigor (the conditions of scientific cognition as investigated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*). Thus, whereas true popularity requires that concepts be first derived from *a priori* grounds and then expounded on empirical grounds, false popularity recurs to experience to both expound *and* derive concepts. As for the fourth requirement, by 'knowledge of the world' Kant means the author's knowledge of the audience's taste, inclinations, and way of thinking. Here Ercolini stresses that Kant is not suggesting catering to an audience's unreflected assumptions and transitory moods, which would constitute false popularity. Rather, he is assigning the philosopher the very demanding anthropological task of observing how that portion of humanity which makes up his potential audience processes concepts and gets moved to action. Thus, far from dismissing popularity, Kant theorizes and practices what he terms true popularity as an integral part of his critical project and, more precisely, to advance his own "view of the space of engagement, exchange, and furthering overall knowledge that comprises his vision of enlightenment" (p. 64). In light of this, Ercolini maintains that Kant's derogatory utterances against rhetoric and popularity do not indicate a principled rejection of any of them. Rather, they are Kant's "personal rejoinder" (p. 86) to Garve's conception of popularity in general and his review of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in particular. However, Kant's ensuing reflection on and practice of popularity are not of an idiosyncratic nature. Rather, what starts as a personal quarrel, evolves into a philosophically coherent endeavor responding to an internal exigency of the critical project.

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In *Chapter 3*, Ercolini shifts her focus on the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* preparing the ample use that she will make of it in *Chapter 5*. She explains the relevance of this writing for her investigation by depicting the subject of the *Anthropology* as "irrevocably social", as the realm "where communication plays a robust role [and] sufficient influence can be effected toward various purposes, without infringing upon another's autonomy" (p. 106).

In *Chapter 4*, Ercolini turns to Kant's critique of aesthetic judgment and devotes particular attention to Kant's account of the interaction of the faculties. Recalling Kant's account of the harmony of the faculties in their free play, she points out that not every interaction of the faculties results in a harmonious play. Rather, "the imagination has the power to overwhelm the understanding". The possibility of an interaction in which the imagination unseats the understanding helps further elucidating Kant's suspect toward rhetoric, since "rhetoric, in activating images of the imagination […] unleashes a […] force […] that can overwhelm the understanding" (p. 156).

Reconstructing how Kant conceives of rhetoric with a view of striking a balance among the faculties is the subject of *Chapter 5*. This is a key chapter since Ercolini enriches the understanding of Kant's concept of public use of reason with highly relevant distinctions (e.g. style vs. fashion; natural style as opposed to affected style and different from plane style), elucidations on mostly neglected and yet crucial topics (e.g. perfection in exposition), and treatments of underexamined topics (e.g. tone). One important distinction is the one of style and fashion. Accordingly, whereas fashion means "a type of prejudice […] where one does not exercise one's own taste", thus implicating heteronomy, style "involves a certain form of invention" (p. 178), thus requiring some measure of originality. Ercolini extracts from Kant's philosophy a highly demanding notion of style, on which style requires the suitability of an exposition to both the author and the audience, and to both the subject and the context. Therefore, despite Kant's talk of style as the mere clothing of scholarly rigorous concepts, Ercolini uncovers that, on Kant's view, in a speech informed by moral concerns, if logical perfection gains the upper hand over aesthetic perfection, the speech's style defeats the speech's purpose (p. 174). On this topic, of particular interest is Ercolini's elucidation of Kant's notion of perfection in exposition, which she carries out on the backdrop of Kant's account of the harmonious interaction of the faculties. A perfect exposition in Kant's sense results from the balance of the two instances of logical and aesthetic perfection. These two kinds of perfection seem at first mutually exclusive, since logical perfection requires distinct but dry concepts, whereas aesthetic perfection requires lively but confuse concepts (p. 168). Nonetheless, contrary to the common conception, Kant does not limit himself to averring the primacy of logical perfection and to relegating aesthetic perfection to a dispensable accessory. Rather,

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he recognizes the latter the merit of presenting *in concreto* what the former presents *in abstracto*, thereby directing "our attention on things that might otherwise go unnoticed" (p. 169) and contributing something indispensable to cognition and its transferal. What is more, Kant's reflections on striking the balance between two apparently mutually exclusive terms are the both epistemological and moral quest for the elusive perfection necessary to produce a harmonious interaction of the faculties and put it at the service of morality. Ercolini sees this summarized in the following passage (p. 170): "Wenn die gelehrte Erkenntnis zugleich schön ist, so ist sie die nützlichste und brauchbarste, besonders in der Praxis (V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 66.34-35)", where the harmony of the faculties of understanding, imagination, and reason is respectively referenced to by the terms 'gelehrte Erkenntnis', 'schön', and 'Praxis'. In other words, philosophical writings must serve morality (which pertains to reason), but morality can only be served if the distinctness of the concepts (which pertains to the understanding) is appropriately conveyed by the liveliness of their exposition (which pertains to sensibility).

Kant's attention to language, rhetoric, and communication is also the subject of *A linguagem em Kant. A linguagem de Kant* edited by Monique Hulshof and Ubirajara Rancan de Azevedo Marques. The volume consists of an *Introduction* and fifteen chapters by international scholars and, as signaled by the title, features treatments of both Kant's practice of philosophical exposition and reflections on language and communication. Chapters 1-9 concern Kant in particular, whereas Chapters 10-15 intertwine Kant's reflections with those of contemporary or later thinkers. The first chapter, "Kant e a questão da popularidade e da linguagem da Filosofia" by Leonel Ribeiro dos Santos (p. 17-70) is a lengthy contribution toward rectifying the misconception of a Kant disengaged with popularity and uncompromisingly dismissive of rhetoric.

Santos' subject is the relation between critical and popular philosophy in light of their respective relation with school philosophy. His threefold objective consists in revaluing popular philosophy as a movement in its own right, underscoring the common purpose of critical and popular philosophy, and elucidating the terms of their respective dispute with school philosophy. His thesis is that Kant's notion of *ästhetische Behandlung* as the *desideratum* of philosophical exposition comprises and surpasses mere popularity, thus giving reasons to recognize Kant the status of a popular philosopher (p. 20). The corollary is that with his critical philosophy Kant transforms both the philosophical approach to metaphysical questions and, as a byproduct, the relation between philosophy and language (p. 23).

In his reconstruction of Kant's notion of popularity, Santos differs from Ercolini in an important respect: whereas Ercolini reads Kant's reflection on true and false popularity as ensuing from Kant's quarrel with Garve, Santos locates its

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origin within Kant's philosophy itself and qualifies the cause of popularity as an autochthonous concern traceable from the very beginning to the very program of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (p. 28). He substantiates this thesis by pointing out that Kant expresses concerns for popularity in two letters to Marcus Herz from 1779 and 1781, hence predating both the publication of the first *Critique* and Kant's contention with Garve. More decisively, Santos reads Kant's treatment of *ästhetische Deutlichkeit* in the *Preface* to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (KrV, A XVII-XIX; p. 103-104) in a way that subverts its common interpretation. Whereas Kant is normally interpreted as establishing the primacy of scholarly rigor over popularity and vindicating the neglect of the latter, Santos reads him as explicitly reflecting on popularity and giving priority to scholarly rigor precisely with a view to making his *Critique* as reader-friendly as possible (p. 48).

In developing his argument, Santos examines in a complex and yet clear manner what Kant's critical philosophy adopts from and rejects of both popular and school philosophy. Santos first substantiates that Kant shares with school and popular philosophy the requirement that philosophy be, respectively, grounded with rigor and committed to the world. He then highlights that Kant's critical philosophy differs from school and popular philosophy in that it rejects, respectively, the empirical grounding of theoretical and practical cognition and the application of the mathematical method to philosophy. Finally, Santos summarizes the novelty of Kant's critical philosophy as "a critique of the foundations of human representations with respect to the supreme objects of metaphysics, associated with an explicit architectonic or systematic intent of philosophy" (p. 31)[3].

Importantly, one of the implications of Kant's conception and practice of philosophy is that the aforementioned worldly commitment of philosophy requires both popularity and scholarly rigor. Santos succeeds in substantiating his at first puzzling reading that popularity needs scholarly rigor precisely to stay worldly and concludes that, on Kant's view, without drawing on solidly founded cognitions, popular philosophy risks becoming a pedantry which does not engage either the audience's understanding or imagination (p. 44). After drawing from Kant's published and unpublished reflections on communication, aesthetics, and popularity, Santos concludes that Kantian true popularity yields as a result an exposition which is thorough, as critical and school philosophy wants it and popular philosophy cannot achieve, and worldly, as critical and popular philosophy wants it and school philosophy cannot achieve. It does so when it becomes capable of fashioning and exposition which, by being both scholarly thorough and

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[3] "Ora é precisamente a decisão de proceder a uma crítica dos fundamentos das representações humanas a respeito dos supremos objetos da metafísica, associada a uma explícita intenção arquitetónica ou sistemática do filosofar, o que fará a substancial diferença de Kant em relaçao aos filosófos 'populares' e a vários outros pensadores da sua época". Santos, "Kant e a questão da popularidade" (p. 31).

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generally communicable, is fertile for the understanding, emphatic for sensibility, and interesting for reason (p. 56). And this is also the task with which Kant entrusts rhetoric in its positive notion as 'merely skill in speaking' or 'eloquence and style' (p. 62).

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