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Reassessing the Rhetoric Revival in Political Theory: Cicero, Eloquence, and the Best Form of Life

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical assessment of what Bryan Garsten has called the 'rhetoric revival' in political theory and advances an interpretation of an underappreciated strand of this tradition: Cicero's ideal of the perfect orator. It argues that, even though the theorists of the 'rhetoric revival' have given an important contribution to question the rationalist assumptions of the prevalent theories of deliberative democracy, they have fallen short of acknowledging the broader scope of Cicero's conception of eloquence, which considers it not only a civic art of public discourse, but also the concrete manifestation of what he considers the best form of life: the union of the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. In the figure of the *orator perfectus* Cicero expresses an ideal that, blending together the cultivation of the self and political commitment, brings to the fore the ethical and existential dimensions of politics, in a way that the merely deliberative perspective promoted by the theorists of the rhetoric revival is unable to do.

Keywords: rhetoric, political theory, Cicero, best form of life, deliberation, agonism

Introduction: rhetoric, past glories and present hopes

According to a recent article by Bryan Garsten (2011), we are witnessing something like a 'rhetoric revival' in political theory, that is, a new wave of interest in the ancient art of rhetoric among political theorists. In recent years, indeed, there has been a remarkable increase in the number of articles and books

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that reclaim the centrality of rhetoric for political theory (Young, 1996 and 2000; Remer, 1999; Allen, 2004; Yack, 2006; Garsten, 2006; Dryzek, 2010; Chambers, 2009; etc.). However, if the existence of such a trend is evident, determining in which sense rhetoric can be considered central to political thought—and therefore how exactly we could recognize a 'rhetoric revival'—is somewhat difficult. This difficulty is clearly related to the fact that the realm of this art is potentially infinite in scope—as Quintilian wrote, 'nothing is foreign to the art of oratory' (*Institutio oratoria* 1.pr.5)—being, as it is, concerned with the general question of the relationship between form and content. It is true that ancient rhetoricians used to associate rhetoric with a particular set of discourses: those unspecialist kinds of discourse that interest the community as a whole, that is, political matters broadly understood (e.g. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1354a1–12, 1355b, 1.1358a36–b8; Cicero, *De oratore*, 1.12, 22). But this consideration helps only a little in specifying the limits of rhetoric, because it makes them coextensive with the realm of politics. It is undeniable indeed that rhetoric refers to a series of practices—communicating, deliberating, and persuading—so ubiquitous and pervasive in our societies, that inevitably it becomes problematic to assess in a systematic way how it influences politics.

Recognizing this difficulty, Garsten (2011: 160) clarifies that his analysis focuses on a particular aspect in which rhetoric seems particularly relevant to political theory: the question of democratic deliberation. When he speaks of a 'rhetoric revival' he is referring to a specific new development in political theory, which has seen a number of scholars turning to ancient rhetoric, above all in its Aristotelian version, essentially out of a generalized dissatisfaction with the rationalist assumptions of deliberative theories of democracy such as those of Habermas and his followers.[1] In this case, rhetoric is recovered for the specific purpose of developing a better account of public deliberation, less biased in evaluating the role of extra-rational mechanisms of communication, and more attentive toward the different forms it takes according to its aims and contexts.

The fact that most theorists of the rhetoric revival have recovered this art essentially for the insights it can provide on public deliberation explains why they have focused mainly on Aristotle, rather than on other authors, since as one of them explicitly recognizes "an emphasis on public reason and political deliberation would… seem especially congenial to an Aristotelian understanding of politics" (Yack, 2006: 417). But the meaning rhetoric used to have in antiquity is broader than that of an art of deliberation, even if we understand it, as Garsten rightly underlines, as a "form of reasoning in itself" rather than a mere supplement to reason. Nietzsche once summed it up writing that "the education of the ancient man customarily culminates in rhetoric: it is the highest spiritual activity of the well-educated political man" (1983: 97). Today it is difficult to appreciate the relevance rhetoric had in the past, because with the

advent of the modern era and the consolidation of its rationalistic principles, it underwent a process of discredit that ended in its almost complete marginalization.

However, to get an idea of why rhetoric was so important we have to turn to Cicero, rather than Aristotle, since it is in the former that we find the broadest and most challenging view of rhetoric. Recovering the spirit of Isocrates' conception and mingling it with important Aristotelian insights and the tradition of Roman oratory, he expanded the meaning of this art far beyond that of a technique of persuasion, putting it at the centre of a political-ethical ideal, which would be extremely influential among the Renaissance humanists. In the context of the dispute about the best form of life, the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, he tried to unify rhetoric with philosophy (or, as he says, *eloquentia* and *sapientia*), giving a new meaning to this art: the link between theory and practice, the art capable of concretizing wisdom spreading it throughout the community and transforming it into political action.[2] Understood in these terms, eloquence became the supreme *ars civilis* and one of the highest virtues, combining a practical capacity to persuade the audience and more theoretical openness toward the ultimate ends of justice (*De oratore* 3.55). The highest form of this kind of eloquence is offered by the figure of the *orator perfectus*, who represents at the same time the ideal *vir civilis* and the perfect individual. Becoming eloquent is for Cicero a process of self-fashioning, in which the individual tries to combine political commitment with an aspiration to self-improvement through the study of philosophy and other liberal arts. It is in this sense that we can say that in the ideal of the perfect orator we don't find exclusively Cicero's conception of eloquence and its role in the community, but also his response to the vexed question of how to reconcile the *vita contemplativa* with the *vita activa*. The scope of Cicero's conception of rhetoric is therefore very broad and its meaning goes far beyond the question of deliberation. It is a conception with a high ideal character, intrinsically related to the question of how to live both as an individual and as a citizen. The theorists of the rhetoric revival have rediscovered this ancient art mostly from the perspective of a deliberative understanding of politics (Garsten, 2011: 12). But in so doing they have missed the deeper meaning to be found in Cicero's distinctive conception, and with that also the opportunity to employ its insights to question the narrowness of a deliberative model that reduces the meaning of politics to the moment of taking decisions through deliberation.

The main section of this article shows how in Cicero's conception of rhetoric we find a view of politics broader than the deliberative one; a view we could define using Ronald Beiner's (2014) definition as "epic", since it puts forward a "superlatively ambitious articulation of 'the human good.'"[3] Before that, in the next section I review the rhetoric revival in political theory to demonstrate how it approaches rhetoric only from the perspective of public deliberation, thus

missing the Ciceronian insight that eloquence is not only a political virtue, but also a form of human perfection. In the last section I draw a parallelism between Cicero's ideal of the perfect orator and Hannah Arendt's conception of political action, in order to suggest a way in which this conception of rhetoric can be reactivated. Similarly to Cicero who made self-cultivation compatible with political commitment recasting the meaning of the good life in terms of communication, Arendt's theory of politics, in describing its deepest meaning as an individual striving for excellence and distinction and a public exercise of persuasion and judgment, can combine an existential and agonist dimension with a deliberative and discursive one.

The predominance of deliberation in the current rhetoric revival

As Garsten (2011: p. 161-162) points out, the rhetoric revival in political theory has to be located in a more general philosophical context, going back to the first part of the 20th century, which saw the primacy of the category of truth questioned and, simultaneously, the linguistic character of our access to reality vindicated. This context has certainly been crucial to the development of a new sensibility for the rhetorical aspects of society and culture in all areas of the humanities. However Garsten's decision to focus on deliberation is limited but not arbitrary, because it recovers rhetoric in what can be considered its most original sense, as an art of reasoning in public. Rhetoric indeed is, as Nietzsche (1983: 97) once said, an "essentially republican art"; an art that grew out of the practice of speaking in public in the first democratic experiences in Sicily (e.g. Kennedy, 1994; Schiappa, 1999; Cole, 1999). And there are good reasons for arguing that every time it has lost its function in the public sphere, being reduced to a mere question of style—the phenomenon known as *letteraturizzazione* (Kennedy, 1980: p. 2-4)—it has also lost its *raison d'être.* The art of persuasion is intrinsically connected to public deliberation: it can thrive only under the condition that political affairs can be conducted through dialogue and the search for consent (Cicero, *Brutus*, 6-7, cf. 45). Thus it makes a lot of sense to employ the insights of this rich tradition to questioning and improving the prevailing view of democratic deliberation; above all if we consider that much of the criticism the prevailing understanding of deliberative democracy—that epitomized by Habermas' theory—has attracted can be understood as a complaint about what is considered to be an exclusionist bias resulting from a hyper-rationalist approach, which ancient rhetoric does not share. Indeed in this paradigm all emphasis is put on the possibility of reasoned agreement through an appeal to reasons and grounds, so that the "unforced force of the better argument" can prevail (Habermas, 1998: 306). The problem many scholars have

detected in this approach, however, is that authorizing only "a particular kind of reasonable political interaction is not in fact neutral, but systematically excludes a variety of voices from effective participation in democratic politics" (Dryzek, 2000: 58). This is why the form and limits of legitimate public deliberation have become, as Garsten (2011: 166) concludes, a "central node of contention" in democratic theory. Some of the most interesting contributions to this debate have come from the scholars of the rhetoric revival, who employ the art of persuasion to enlarge the "constrained reason" of predominant deliberative theories and its correspondent "form of deliberation that sharply limits both the form and substance of political argument" (Dryzek, 2010: 417-18). In this sense, rhetoric is being recovered precisely for those reasons for which it is dismissed by rationalist theories of deliberation: because it shows how passions and perceptions can be part of reasoned arguments, because it judges from the particular point of view rather than the general, because it considers disagreement a natural condition of politics, rather than a sign that something has gone wrong, and so on. Rather than defects these features are seen as aspects of public deliberation that cannot be dispensed with, if we want a more sophisticated and realistic view of these practices.

Iris Marion Young (1996 and 2000) has been one of the first to employ rhetoric in order to revise Habermas' conception of deliberative democracy. Against his rationalist approach, she has underlined the inclusionary potential of other forms of public discourse such as greetings, storytelling, and rhetoric. Rhetoric in particular is for her crucial for giving voice to those groups more used to an emotive, figurative, situated, and implicit way of communicating; groups that are disenfranchised by the fact of privileging an exclusively rational kind of arguments. A rhetorical dimension, Young tells us, is inherent in every act of communication and choosing one style of discourse inevitably favors some contents over others. So despite the attempts of some deliberative theorists to single out a non-rhetorical, purely argumentative kind of discourse with universal import, the choice of a particular style inevitably brings with it a reduction of the possibilities of communication in the public sphere. On the other hand, the importance of rhetoric dwells precisely in its capacity to make an argument fit for a specific audience, in a specific context, and in this way to accomplish the crucial task of making that specific audience move from the recognition of the general correctness of an argument to the recognition of the necessity to actuate (Young, 2000: 65-70; cf. Sanders, 1997 and Dryzek, 2010).

In a similar vein, Danielle Allen (2004) has resorted to rhetoric to tackle the problem of distrust among different groups in societies marked by deep cleavages. She has argued that the emphasis placed on rational deliberation prevents taking into consideration psychological factors, such as the presence of trust among the citizens, that are crucial for the good working of democracy. Dif-

ferently from Habermas' 'ideal speech situation', which aims at unanimity, Allen notes how rhetoric assumes the existence of irreducible political differences and starts from the premise that every political decision inevitably implies sacrifices for some groups. Thus, she concludes, by recognizing the historic sacrifices made by specific groups, rhetoric can help us avoid the consolidation of distrustful and resentful attitudes on their part, which are corrosive for society. Rationalist theories of deliberation are not predisposed to developing ways of fostering dialogue between groups that don't share the same premises; groups that, as she says, are 'strangers' among themselves (p. 54-63). And this is why Allen turns to ancient rhetoric, in particular to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, a text she considers "a philosophically subtle analysis of how to generate trust in ways that preserve an audience's autonomy and accord with the norms of friendship" (p. 141).

The distance between the abstract neutrality of rationalist accounts of public deliberation and the often partisan and interested character of concrete political decisions has been underlined by another important deliberative theorist: Bernard Yack. Also Yack (2010) has turned to Aristotelian rhetoric to bridge this gap. For him Aristotle shares with contemporary deliberative theorists the view that deliberation is the core of politics. But differently from the latter, he argues, Aristotle takes a much more realistic posture, understanding that it is in the very nature of a political community to be, not only an order that promotes the virtuous life, but also a project of mutual advantage. The consequence is that Aristotle, differently from contemporary deliberative theorists, doesn't not consider impartiality and detachment as a generally necessary condition for all public deliberation (it is so only in the case of a judge in a tribunal). As Yack explains (p. 427), for Aristotle politicians needs to consider in their deliberation the particular interests of different groups of which the community is made up if they want to win their approval. So, differently from the dispassionate and unbiased deliberators we find, for instance, behind Rawls' veil of ignorance, Aristotelian politicians need to gain a reputation of public-spiritedness in order to manifest to the public their concern with the matters under deliberation and the good of the community to which they belong (p. 421-423; Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1351b). They are deliberators who employ a live, embodied reason, who persuade not only with rational arguments, but also by displaying a certain kind of character (*ethos*) and appealing to the emotions (*pathos*) (p. 431-432).

This brief exposition should be sufficient to illustrate the general scope of the recent rhetoric revival in political theory. These theorists have employed rhetoric essentially to challenge the abstractness of rationalistic understandings of public deliberation and try to bring the concreteness of politics back in. In particular, they have stressed how rhetoric can accomplish what rational arguments alone cannot: by appealing to the emotions and engaging with par-

ticular points of view it can make a general and abstract principle something real and tangible and thus instil in us the motivation to move from a simple judgment to action.[4] Differently from a purely rational argument, rhetoric convinces people not only to change their mind but also to act accordingly. For this reason it also needs to appeal to affiliations, identities, and affects, together with rational arguments. But as Garsten rightly points out, understanding rhetoric only as a motivational and inclusive force is a mistake inasmuch as, by reducing its function to offering an extra-rational supplement to reason, it gives a merely instrumental interpretation that does not prevent the possibility of transforming this art into a form of manipulation. If we really want to rescue rhetoric as a positive practice for the public sphere, Garsten argues, we need to show that it "can influence judgments without compromising their freedom" (2011: 160). And this in turn requires dismantling the rigid antinomy reason–freedom/emotions–coercion and to show that "perceptions, images, and feelings that rhetoric works with are not separate from the activities of judging and reasoning, but partly constitutive of them" (p. 169). The risk of rhetoric becoming a form of manipulation is something inherent in the art of persuasion, which has always worried its critics, from Plato to contemporary theorists of deliberation (p. 167; cf. Allen 2004: 141-143; Chambers 2009: 334; Benhabib, 1996: 83). Thus it is not by coincidence that the direction Garsten suggests to recover rhetoric (2011: 169-174; 2006: ch. 3) is precisely that followed by Aristotle—the first to attempt a theoretical defence of this art—in order to respond to Plato's critique: first, when he tried to explain the nature of rhetoric as a form of reasoning proper to the realm of human affairs; and second, when he showed that the practice and scope of rhetoric can be philosophically scrutinized so as to transform this art into a civic art of deliberation and minimize the risk of demagoguery.[5] It is because of the realm in which this practical faculty operates, characterized by contingency and in which what counts are not compelling and absolute truths but, rather, beliefs made of an inextricable combination of rational and extra-rational motives, that for Aristotle this form of reasoning has as its specific features: the impossibility of being reduced to an exact science, a proximity with common opinions rather than scientific knowledge, the fact that it employs probabilistic rather than definitive syllogisms (*enthymemes*) and an extended form of 'reason' made of the combination between *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* (*Rhetoric* 1356a1–25, 1359b9–16, 1377b20–8, 1378a6–9, etc.).

As understood in some seminal re-discoveries of rhetoric in the 20th century (Perelman, 1988; Gadamer, 1993; Beiner, 1983), this art becomes with Aristotle a key manifestation of *phronesis*: the practical faculty of reasoning, judging, and deliberating together under conditions of freedom, where neither absolute truths nor arbitrary motives can be invoked. Joining this line of thinking, Garsten stresses how only by understanding rhetoric not as a mere

supplement to reason, but rather as a part of it, can we employ it to ameliorate rationalist accounts of deliberation and at the same time respond to the concerns of those who view rhetoric with skepticism. For him, then, rhetoric has to be comprehended as a 'form of reasoning', characterized by the sort of 'situated judgment' and 'deliberative partiality' we employ when we deliberate about things that concern us directly, such as political and ethical matters, when our evaluations are based on that "intricate structures of belief and emotion" and that "complex, differentiated and ordered set of goals and standards" we develop through the experience of deliberating together (2011: 128-129).

But even if the understanding of rhetoric as a form of reasoning is crucial, because it helps to recuperate the meaning of rhetoric as the civic art of public deliberation, it nevertheless falls short of unfolding the broader meaning it had in the past and therefore its potential for contemporary political theory. As can be seen from my review of the rhetoric revival, the way in which rhetoric has been recovered remains strictly anchored to a vision that reduces politics to its deliberative moment: reasoning together in order to arrive at a decision. Nevertheless, reducing the meaning of politics to the moment of deliberation, however important it may be, doesn't allow us to reveal a broader meaning of this activity—the fact that it can express an ideal about the best form of life—that is clear, for instance, in Cicero's conception of eloquence.

Cicero's neglected conception: eloquence as a political, ethical, and existential ideal

A substantive, non-instrumental, notion of rhetoric as a manifestation of *phronesis* that characterizes Aristotle's view on this subject can be found also in Cicero (e.g. Leff, 1998; Remer, 1999; Michel, 2003; Garsten, 2006: ch. 5; Connolly, 2007; Kapust, 2011). Cicero however expanded the frontiers of this art still further, forging what could arguably be considered the broadest and most challenging conception in ancient rhetoric. Not only does he combine in his view different strands of rhetoric, he also sought to render rhetoric compatible with the philosophic perspective of Plato, making of this art the point of encounter between politics and philosophy. In this respect his can be considered the most compelling attempt to bring the long battle between rhetoric and philosophy to an end. The role eloquence plays in his political theory cannot be underestimated: it is the pivot around which the latter revolves. Similarly to Aristotle and Isocrates, who locate the basis of human political nature in *logos*, Cicero sees politics essentially as an activity developed through the medium of language. From here he draws the idea of the centrality of eloquence for politics, since if "society finds its primordial ordering principle in the human in-

teraction of speech" then "the proper regulation of speech… is the original and essential virtue of civil life" (Connolly, 2007: 169).

Cicero's distinctive eclecticism, however, pushes him further, to the point of wanting to embrace Plato's position when he accused rhetoric of being a simple knack lacking a theoretical, philosophically-informed background. The radical implications of Cicero's view on this matter emerge precisely from the perspective of the difficult relationship between philosophy and rhetoric, two disciplines that since their beginnings have been engaged in a momentous quarrel. From the point of view of political theory, the significance of this quarrel is fundamental, or even foundational we may say, as it is there that a series of dichotomies, located at its very heart, arose for the first time with unparalleled clarity: reason and emotions, knowledge and opinions, inherence and contingency, theory and practice, *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* (Fish 1989: 474, 484; see also: Schiappa, 1999: 163-84; Wardy, 1996; Ijsseling, 1976). In Cicero's writings on rhetoric this dispute inhabits a central place (e.g. Michel, 2003; Gaines, 1995; Narducci, 2009: ch. 19; Grilli, 2002; Garsten, 2006: ch. 5). His awareness of its relevance can be traced back to his earliest work, *De inventione*, where interrogating the conditions under which eloquence can be useful, he concludes that "wisdom without eloquence does too little for the good of the states" and "eloquence without wisdom is generally highly disadvantageous and is never helpful" (1949, 1.1.1, p. 3). If eloquence needs the moral guidance of philosophy (and wisdom in general) in order to avoid becoming a mere instrument of power, philosophy would be completely helpless without the capacity of eloquence to animate and spread its principles throughout the community. It would turn into an inarticulate wisdom unable to communicate with the city, closed in a self-referential and arrogant posture. Only a wisdom able to speak, he declares, has the power to create political life out of wilderness (*De inventione* 1.1.2).

This same position will be re-proposed, in a much more articulated way, in his mature *De oratore*. There, through the character of Crassus, his mouthpiece in the dialogue, Cicero passionately calls for an end to the long quarrel between philosophy and rhetoric (*De oratore* 3.143) and argues in favour of their necessary combination. Through a quasi-mythical reconstruction of an unspecified past epoch, Crassus explains the beginning of the separation between philosophers and rhetors from an original unity when "knowledge of the most important things as well as practical involvement in them was, as a whole, called 'philosophy,'" as a consequence of Socrates' fatal splitting apart of *cor* and *lingua,* the inner world of meaning and its external manifestation in speech. It was Socrates' idea that "the knowledge of forming wise opinions and of speaking with distinction" are two separate endeavours that, for Cicero, initiated the quarrel between philosophers and rhetors and made the former indifferent and aloof from political affairs and the latter narrow-minded and

all-too mundane (2001, 3.60-61, p. 241-242). Hence, in a direct response to Plato, Cicero pulls the whole domain of philosophy back into the realm of oratory, from whence, according to him, it was usurped by the philosophers.[6] He defends the necessity of the orator's embracing the "entire study and knowledge of everything… relevant to human conduct, to human life, to virtue, and to the state" because, being involved in politics, this constitutes the material with which he is concerned (3.72, p. 246, 3.54, cf. 1.16–18, 20–21, 48–70, 160–203, 2.6.). An eloquence not supported by general knowledge, he concludes repeating Plato's position almost verbatim, could run the risk of becoming "weapons into the hands of madmen" (3.55, p. 239; cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 456c–457c, 469c–469e).

Cicero's position can be explained on different levels: on the one hand, it has to do with the question of the kind of background knowledge that is required to speak about political matters in a pertinent way. For him, every particular question (*hypothesis*) with which the orator/politician has to deal inevitably implies a more general question (*thesis*), which is studied by philosophers. The general knowledge provided by philosophy is therefore a necessary support for the orator/politician to argue effectively on the great variety of questions involved in politics.[7] The support of philosophy, however, is necessary not only to guarantee the validity of an argument, but also for deeper ethical and political reasons: because for Cicero a philosophical attitude permits that critical attitude, an opening toward the search for truth, which is the necessary counterweight for oratory familiarity with common opinions and ordinary ways of thinking.[8] Nonetheless, Cicero's embracement of this Socratic–Platonic position is only partial. His orator/politician is not a full-fledged philosopher, but a cultivated person whose main ability is that of speaking eloquently about the most important things to the majority of the people, rather than to a few experts in order to put his discourses into practice (*De oratore* 1.56–57, 94); a person whose main commitment is therefore not to truth and but to his community.[9]

These last considerations should start to reveal why in order to grasp the scope of Cicero's view on eloquence, we need to understand it in the broader perspective of the problem of the relation between politics and philosophy, and the connected political, ethical, and existential questions of the best form of life and the role of the individual within his community. These questions are especially relevant in ancient thought and play a crucial role in Cicero, representing the pivot around which his political thinking revolves.[10] It is not a coincidence that his two most political works (together with *De legibus*) – *De re publica*, dedicated to the best form of state, and *De oratore*, a work whose title can be rendered as 'the formation of the political leader' – open with precisely these sorts of questions (*De oratore* 1.1–5, *De re publica* 1.1–12). To them Cicero responds through the creation of the figure of the perfect orator: the one

who incarnates at the same time the best politician and the best individual, he who through the practice of his perfect eloquence materializes the ideal combination of philosophy and politics, the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*.[11]

The recent body of literature by political theorists on rhetoric has almost completely overlooked Cicero's original ideal of the perfect orator as the manifestation of the combination of philosophy and politics and their two corresponding forms of life. As I have pointed out, the vast majority of the theorists have turned to rhetoric only to offer more sophisticated accounts of public deliberation, missing the broader scope of that Ciceronian ideal. But even the few scholars who have recently offered analyses of Cicero's combination of philosophy and rhetoric from a political theory point of view have not emphasized its political, ethical, and existential meaning. Daniel Kapust, for instance, has dealt explicitly with the tension between Cicero the orator and Cicero the philosopher, arguing that in order to 'resolve' this tension we must look at the underlying unity that exists in the double meanings, rhetorical and moral, of the key concept of *decorum*: *decorum* as appropriateness of style to the circumstances and *decorum* as appropriateness of moral behaviour (2011: 94).[12] For him the technical aspect of rhetoric cannot be detached from ethical considerations, because our aesthetic and moral judgments, even if they are concerned with different realms, work in the same direction, judgment being a faculty ultimately rooted in human reason. It is for this reason then that moral *decorum* can work as a constraint on the orator's stylistic capacities and in combination with rhetorical *decorum* (p. 107). Despite the merit of this study, however, the impression we have is that a predominantly deliberative conception of politics still lurks behind the analysis. Indeed the main argument Kapust employs to justify the relevance of his attempt to solve the tension between philosophy and politics is that for him this question can impinge upon "the broader problems of what role rhetoric ought to play in theories of political legitimacy and deliberation" (p. 94).

And the same impression of a predominantly deliberative conception of politics is also clear in a second important study of Cicero's conception of the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy: that proposed by the same Garsten in his book *Saving Persuasion*. In this piece Garsten (2006: 156-173) underlines how this combination is related to Cicero's attempt to ease the tension between politics and philosophy, since, as we have seen above, the latter is what provides to the Ciceronian orator the necessary independence from the world of common beliefs and prevents his political activity, and specifically his rhetorical skills, from becoming merely instrumental. But in Garsten's analysis the focus is not on the combination of philosophy and rhetoric as a political, ethical, and existential ideal, but rather on the conditions under which a politics of persuasion can be guaranteed, that is, on the question of deliberation. It is in this direction, indeed, that Garsten explains Cicero's main philosophical

commitment, his affiliation to Stoicism: because in its universal principles of natural law, he argues, Cicero found those bulwarks needed to defend the republican institutions—the only ones under which a politics of persuasion can thrive (p. 146–51, 166–173; cf. Kapust, 2011: 93-94). In brief, what Kapust and Garsten offer are interesting interpretations of Cicero's rhetoric as a form of *phronesis*, which however fail to unfold its broader meaning as a normative ideal about the individual and the community.

Other examples of analysis of Cicero's combination of rhetoric and philosophy can be given (e.g. Grilli, 2002; Nederman, 2000) but none seem to emphasize enough its political, ethical, and existential meaning. The most interesting fact about Cicero's view of eloquence, instead, is precisely its being centrally related to the question of the best form of life. In *De oratore* we don't find a systematic theory to defend the idea of the necessary union between philosophy and rhetoric (and politics), also because he probably thought that an ultimate theoretical solution is not available (Nicgorski, 1991: 236). Instead of focusing on the theoretical question of the art of oratory and its precepts, he prefers to offer the corporeal representation of perfect eloquence, the figure of the perfect orator. In representing this figure, Cicero is defining a kind of human being: the individual who has devoted his life to what he considers the highest duty, the call of politics, but who at the same time has found in philosophy a fundamental guide for him as individual and as citizen. Through the description of this figure Cicero proposes an alternative to the Platonic model of the philosopher, showing us not only how the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* can be reconciled, but also that through the process of becoming eloquent the best form of life for the individual can coincide with what is best for the community, inasmuch as that the cultivation of individual excellence and the pursuit of the common good become two strictly entangled endeavours. This is what Crassus reveals in a crucial passage of *De oratore* when he declares that "the wise control of the complete orator is that which chiefly upholds not only his own dignity, but the safety of countless individuals and of the entire State" so that it is in his "power to become a glory to [himself], a source of service to [his] friends, and profitable members of the Republic" (1.34, p. 65; cf. *De officiis* 1.156–157). The originality of this ideal resides precisely in having made the ethical and existential cultivation of the self and the political search for justice and the common good converge in a 'communicative' ideal of person. So, recasting the meaning of "the good life in terms of communication" (Connolly, 2007a: 139), Cicero is able to provide not only a different view of the relationship between philosophy and politics than that intrinsically conflicting given by Plato, but also an idea of how to reconcile self-cultivation with political commitment.

Cicero accomplishes such a result, conceiving the ideal and the practical dimensions of his 'communicative' paradigm of the good life mutually depen-

dent and the process of self-cultivation thoroughly socially mediated. On the one hand, his figure of the perfect orator has a strong ideal character. It is "an eternally absent figure" (Connolly, 2007a: 14), whose function is not too far from that of the Platonic ideas (*De oratore* 1.118, 202, 3.85; *Orator*, 7-11). On the other, this ideal maintains an essential practical character. Eloquence indeed is an ideal that acquires its full meaning only through practice. The process of becoming eloquent is understood by Cicero as an extremely demanding process of self-creation (*De oratore* 1.16–19, 76 and ff., 94–95, 118, 128, 202, 2.187, 3.84, etc.) in order to enter into the public sphere,[13] in which artistic competence should come to integrate so deeply with the person of the orator to the point of disappearing into him. It is in the capacity of the orator to perfectly combine artistic competence and ethical stance, and more generally theory and practice, that the fundamental ambiguity of rhetoric—the fact of being, at the same, an art and a virtue—is recomposed.[14] Indeed for Cicero the formative process of becoming eloquent has a technical aspect, but above all it is the initiation into a form of human perfection: it a process of creating exceptional citizens and individuals endowed with a unique *dignitas* and *gravitas*; citizens and individuals whose spiritual greatness corresponds to a capacity to govern the intricacies of human interactions. And it is not by coincidence that for him it is only in the middle of one's life, at the peak of one's own development, when the youthful predisposition to action and the elderly inclination to meditation meet and combine, that this kind of human perfection can be approximated (Michel, 2003: 38; Cicero, *De senectute* 4.28).

At the same time Cicero also shows very clearly that this process of self-fashioning cannot be understood in solipsistic terms. Rather, it is a process through which "the self is shaped from childhood through maturity in a never-ending, circular process of self-fashioning, communal response, and self-reevaluation" (Connolly, 2007a: 129). Indeed, if on the one hand the orator is asked to represent all the virtues of community, so as to become something like "the speaking embodiment of the *res publica*" (Connolly, 2007b: 91); on the other, the possibility for him to become a symbol for the rest of the community depends on his capacity to be unique, exceptional, and through this quality to be able to represent his community in a outstanding way. While in this second dimension it is the support of philosophy, specifically of its capacity to expand a person's horizons, that is central; eloquence has the fundamental role of mediating between these two exigencies. The ethical/existential cultivation of the self and political engagement indeed stand in a sort of dialectical relationship that has to be negotiated through eloquence. This is can be seen, for instance, in a decisive passage of *De re publica* (2.69), where Cicero states that the first duty of a statesman is to never stop to examine himself so as to become an example to his fellow-citizens. The passage reveals that, similarly to Plato, Cicero locates the roots of justice in the psyche of the self and in a process of self-analysis in

which philosophy plays a crucial role. Nevertheless, for him is mainly through the practice of eloquence that this sort of spiritual greatness can acquire its full meaning, manifesting and finding its own confirmation in the common world, and thus becoming an authoritative example for other citizens.

Conclusion: politics as distinction and persuasion, agonism and deliberation

In the figure of the perfect orator we find the core of Cicero's 'superlatively ambitious articulation of the human good.' It is a conception that – interweaving political, ethical, and existential dimensions – transforms eloquence into a lofty ideal that combines the pursuits of the best form of life and the common good and justice. It would be difficult to understand the very high status held by rhetoric in antiquity when it represented "the highest spiritual activity of the well-educated political man" (Nietzsche, 1983: 97) without considering how it could be not only a civic art, but also the sign of an individual's spiritual eminence. Indeed it is this comprehensive understanding of eloquence that centuries later will inspire the Renaissance Humanists to forge their ideal of completeness. The main thrust of this article has been to suggest that the rhetoric revival in political theory should be expanded to include a Ciceronian perspective, which adds to the Aristotelian view of rhetoric as a form of *phronesis*, the idea that the virtue of eloquence is the sign of the best form of life: the union between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. As I have argued, the theorists of the rhetoric revival have done a great job in questioning, through rhetoric, the rationalist account of public deliberation. But what we can apprehend from Cicero is something that cannot be grasped if we put the focus exclusively on deliberation: the idea that participating in politics it is not only a way to reach a decision, but also a way to show who we are at our best.

In this respect, I would like to conclude by indicating that one possible way to reactivate Cicero's ideal of the perfect orator is to put it into dialogue with those theorists—from Nietzsche, up to Arendt, Foucault, and more recently George Kateb, William Connolly, Chantal Mouffe, or Bonnie Honig—who have explored the existential and agonist dimension of politics. What is particularly important to understand about this question is how, in a pluralist and democratic epoch such as ours, it is possible to conciliate self-cultivation and political commitment. Or, in other words, if it is possible to avoid what Richard Rorty (e.g. 1989: xii, 84-95; 2007: 196-197) feared: that every attempt to transform one's own project of self-creation into a political project would inevitably lead to anti-democratic consequences. In this regard, Cicero's ideal of the perfect orator is particularly interesting precisely because, as I have argued,

even though it is an ideal of self-improvement it needs to continually find its own approbation in the judgment of the people. This means that it is an ideal that embraces two contrasting but equally essential dimensions of political activity: the urge to distinction and the necessity of agreement and compromise. As an excellent individual who strives to cultivate his person through the pursuit of wisdom, the perfect orator incarnates someone who distinguishes himself from the rest of the community, being always moved to question and expand the limits of common beliefs in the search for true justice. At the same time, as an excellent politician he is also someone who is expected to develop a keen 'rhetorical' sensitivity, which makes him understand the necessity to materialize and actualize this search in society, finding the agreement of the people and avoiding to give the impression of being too far from common sense and everyday language (e.g. *De inventione* 1.1-7, *De oratore* 1.12, 79, 264-65, 2.1-73, 99-120,153, 178-216, 307-32, 3.1-37, 56-95, 111-43).

In emphasizing how politics entails both distinction and persuasion, Cicero offers a conception that resonates in particular with one of the theorists mentioned above: Hannah Arendt. She, like Cicero, takes politics to be the most ennobling among human activities. As she says politics is what allows to reach what "the Romans called *humanitas*… the very height of humanness" (Arendt, 1968: 73). For her its value resides in its very performance and cannot be reduced to any instrumental and teleological logic. It is through the performance of political actions that the human beings can exercise their freedom and disclose their unique identity in the public realm, leaving behind something memorable and thus resisting their primary alienation from the world. This is its vital existential meaning (e.g. Arendt, 1958: 19, 57, 173, 179–180, 205-206; 1961: 154, 215-216; 1994: 308). Such a disclosure occurs mainly through the pronunciation of "great words" and the doing of "great deeds" and is stirred by what she calls, quoting John Adams, the "passion for distinction", which pervades the public realm with a "fiercely agonal spirit, where every body has constantly to distinguish himself from all others" (Arendt 1958: 25; Arendt 1971: 69). But if the disclosure in the public realm concerns the individual, the crucial fact is that it can occur only in the midst of a plurality, since politics is inevitably a plural phenomenon. This implies that this basic stimulus for acting needs to be regulated, to avoid becoming a threat for political life: first, by making political speech assume above all the form of persuasion (e.g. 1958: 25-26; 1971: 86, 91, 227; 2000: 554, 560-561); and second, by counterbalancing the passion for distinction with moderation, "one of the political virtues par excellence" (1958: 191). Prudence, or moderation, indeed is necessary in politics not only because the passion for distinction can always run the risk of transforming itself into its opposite, ambition or *hubris*, but also because, acting in the middle of a plurality of individuals – everyone with a particular point of view and with a potential to start a new course of actions

– implies that political actions are inevitably unpredictable and unbounded (1958: 175, 190-192, 1971: 119). More in general the condition of plurality implies for Arendt that judgment, understood as an 'enlarged' way of thinking that takes in consideration the others' points of view, is the key political faculty.[15] Persuasion and judgment, that is, rhetorical reasoning, are indeed for her the two pillars on which politics should rest.[16] They are not only what permit to manage public affairs without recurring to violence, but also the best means for disclosing our individual personality in the *agon* of the public sphere. It is primarily by way of judging and trying to persuade the others indeed that we reveal our specific place in the world and our perspective on it (Arendt 1961, p. 221; Arendt 1982: 43). In this way, combining these two dimensions – existential and political, agonist and deliberative – Arendt's political theory, similarly to Cicero's conception of eloquence, at once embraces and expands the perspective of deliberative democracy theory. In the same way Cicero attempts to merge the existential-ethical endeavour of self-cultivation with the political pursuit of justice and the common good through the creation of the 'communicative' ideal of the perfect orator, for Arendt the individual striving for excellence in the public sphere should be carried out through modalities and capacities which are essentially relational and democratic: persuading and judging (cf. Lederman, 2014; Villa, 1992: 287-302).[17] This is why in both thinkers we find a combination of these equally crucial dimensions of politics that avoids falling into illiberal solutions.

Their solutions, however, is clearly nor exempt from problems and risks. Many philosophers may consider Cicero's combination of philosophy and politics, through rhetoric, too unproblematic.[18] His moralism may have made him too confident about the capacity to reconcile the orator's search for personal glory and the common good; and so as about the possibility to avoid that rhetoric could turn into an instrument of arbitrary power and particularistic interests. Moreover Cicero lofty conception of politics and eloquence, so as it occurs to a minor extent with Arendt's, certainly entails a level of elitism that is difficult to reconcile with a democratic perspective. In this article, clearly, I could not provide an exhaustive response to these important questions. What I have tried to do, instead, is to show why ancient rhetoric challenges us not only to rethink the practice of public deliberation beyond the limits of rationalism, but also to avoid reducing the meaning of politics to such a practice.

NOTES

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1 Some of the works analysed by Garsten are: Young (1996), Remer (1999), Allen (2004), Yack (2006), Dryzek (2010), and Chambers (2009).

2 Schematically, we can say that Cicero follows the Isocratean ideal of a culture with a marked civic character, centred on the use of speech, and with a strong emphasis on humanistic disciplines such literature, moral philosophy, and law. Aristotle, instead, is certainly an important influence for Cicero for the ideas of the combination of philosophy and rhetoric (e.g. *Tusculanae disputationes* 1.7, *De oratore* 3.141) and of rhetoric as an unsystematizable art and a form of practical reason. Michel (2003: 101–08, 119–23), Kennedy (1994: p. 142–43). The rhetorical-political ideal of Cicero would become one of the main influences for Renaissance humanists, contributing to moulding their idea of unity and completeness (e.g. Seigel, 1968: ch. 1; Fumaroli, 2009: p. 37-46; Arthos, 2007).

3 It is interesting that according to Beiner (2014), also Habermas' political philosophy can be considered 'epic' even though it prioritizes procedures over substantive worldviews. For Beiner what makes Habermas an 'epic' thinker is precisely his idea that "the exchange of reasonable opinions that human being vindicate their political nature" and that "entering into discourse with each other, trading judgments, challenging each other's opinions, and so on is a crucial part of the human good for human beings." These considerations urge me to clarify that my point in vindicating, through Cicero, a broader conception of politics is not to deny in any way that for some deliberative theorists such as Gutmann, Thompson, Cohen, or Habermas, deliberation has not only a merely instrumental value, but is also an expression of a political ideal that defends pluralism and a way to manifest mutual respect among citizens.

4 The capacity of rhetoric to motivate people is emphatically evoked in a famous passage in Cicero's *De inventione*: "For there was a time when men wandered at large in the fields like animals and lived on wild fare… At this juncture a man – great and wise I am sure – … assembled and gathered them in accordance with a plan; he introduced them to every useful and honourable occupation, though they cried out against it at first because of its novelty, and then when through reason and eloquence they had listened with greater attention, he transformed them from wild savages into a kind and gentle folk. To me, at least, it does not seem possible that a mute and voiceless wisdom could have turned men suddenly from their habits and introduced them to different patterns of life." Cicero (1949, 1.1.2-3, p. 5-7). In the *De officiis* (1.132) Cicero argues that thought (*cogitatio*) deals with the search of truth, whilst impulse or desire (*appetitus*) moves us to action.

5 The strategy followed by Aristotle to reply to Plato's indictment of rhetoric as a form of manipulation consists essentially in showing that rhetoric has a proper logic that can be rationally scrutinized and employed for political purposes. At the beginning of his treatise on this subject (*Rhetoric* 1354a12–15), he criticizes earlier authors of manuals of rhetoric because they neglect what for him represent the very core of rhetoric man: the *enthymeme,* the syllogistic argument that starts from verisimilar premises, and its only artistic part, that is, the only part susceptible to rational analysis: the *pisteis,* a term that can be translated as proof, means of persuasion, or belief. On the centrality of argumentation in Aristotle's conception of rhetoric see, e.g. Arnhart (1981) and Garver (1994).

6 The whole domain for Cicero includes questions "about justice, about moral duty, about establishing and governing communities, actually about the whole conduct of life, and… even about the explanation of nature." (2001, 3.122, p. 261, cf. 1.16).

7 The distinction between general and particular questions, *theses* and *hypotheses*, was a customary one in ancient rhetoric. The former were usually studied by philosophers, while the latter were studied by rhetoricians. Cicero accepts this distinction but, in a open polemic against a technicist understanding of rhetoric, in *De oratore,* strongly criticizes the *rhetores* of his time for not paying attention to the general questions, thus transforming their discipline into a set of rules to be applied to standard cases (1.58–68, 2.42, 133–134, 3.104–125).

8 In the Introduction to their translation of *De oratore*, May and Wisse (2001: 25) argue that Cicero's idea of the need for eloquence to be supported by philosophy has no moral background, but is motivated only by the fact that in every particular and concrete question with which an orator has to deal there is always implicit a more general and indefinite one. This may be true in the strict sense that for Cicero philosophy is not a discipline able to provide direct knowledge about what is good and bad, to be applied through eloquence in practice. However, keeping in mind his general understanding of philosophy as a spiritual guide, it is undeniable that for him this discipline has the crucial ethical and political significance of helping to reshape and expand the moral framework of an individual and a citizen. Cf. Garsten (2006: 156-66) and Grilli (2002: 60). A very interesting study in this respect is provided by Gildenhard (2010), who shows how through philosophy Cicero was able to expand and redefine the conventional conceptual framework of Roman culture, creating original and distinctive positions on a variety of topics such as the human condition, the nature of the divine, political and ethical affairs, and so on.

9 So Cicero specifies that for those involved in practical life only a certain familiarity with philosophical wisdom suffices; they don't need to become experts in every domain, because their responsibility is to act and leisure time to devote to the study of philosophy is scarce (*De oratore* 1.94, 3.86–89, etc.). As Nicgorski (1984: 558) has underlined, Crassus in *De oratore* (3.64) says that what interests him is not the truest philosophy but rather that which is more consistent with the task of oratory (and therefore with his political activity).

10 Cicero is an emblematic exponent of what Arendt (1958: 7) once called "perhaps the most political people we have known," the Romans, who in his writings regularly defended the greatness of politics and the absolute responsibility of the individual for his community (Cicero, *De re publica* 1.8, 12, 3.5–7, 6.13, 29, *Tusculanae disputationes* 1.90, 119, *De officiis*, 22, 70–73, etc.). At the same time, however, he was also a true admirer of philosophy, and someone who spoke of this discipline in the highest terms (Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes* 1.1–3, 4.56, 5.9, *De legibus* 1.28, 58, *De natura deorum* 1.6–9, *De divinatione* 2.1–2, etc.). The question of the conflict between philosophy and politics can be seen in various aspects of Cicero's life and thought, as for instance in the often-noted contrast between his double affiliation to Skepticism and Stoicism.

11 On the relationship between theory and practice and the necessity of their union

we could cite many relevant passages in Cicero's writings: for instance *De re publica* 1.2, 15, 28, 3.4–6, *De officiis* 1.28–29, 153–157, *De legibus* 1.17, 28, 58, *Tusculanae disputationes* 1.1-3, 4.5–6, 5.9, *De natura deorum* 1.7-9, *De divinatione* 2.1–2, etc.

12 *Decorum* covers a central place in the idea of eloquence as a form of practical wisdom. In *De oratore* Crassus calls 'tactless' (*ineptus*) those who are unable to understand what the circumstances demand, adding that this deficiency is particularly common among the Greeks (a people whose culture was considered by the Romans to be very philosophical) (2.18-20). On *decorum* see, e.g. Michel (2003: 130-33, 310-18), Connolly (2007a: 169-175).

13 On rhetoric as self-creation in Cicero see: Connolly (2007a), Dugan (2005). Both Connolly and Dugan, however, do not focus their interpretations on the combination between rhetoric and philosophy, which instead is central in my account.

14 The co-existence of the technical and the ethical aspects reveals the paradoxical nature of rhetoric: the tension between appearance and essence. To be successful the orator needs to be able to appear as he wants to appear (*De oratore* 1.87, 2.176), but as Quintilian remarks, similarly to an actor, to accomplish this the most important thing for him consists precisely in not appearing to be artful (*Institutio oratoria* 1.11.3). This explains why for Cicero and for Quintilian, rhetoric must become a sort of second nature for the orator. As Quintilian says in the *Institutio oratoria*, the instruments of rhetoric belong to the orator himself, rather than to the art of rhetoric, and indeed among them absolutely the most important is the greatness of spirit. This also clarifies why, according to both, rhetoric is essentially a *praxis*, whose value resides in itself rather than in its results (2.17.25, 2.13.1–7, 12.5.1, etc.). Cf. Connolly (2007a: 129), Gaines (1995: 56), and Michel (2003: 131).

15 Here I am considering together the two dimensions of Arendt's theory of judgment: that of the engaged actor, inspired by the Aristotelian tradition of *phronesis*, and that of the disinterested spectator, inspired by Kant's aesthetic theory.

16 On the proximity between Arendt and rhetoric, see: Beiner (1982, p. 89-156,135, 138), Garsten (2006, p. 84-5), Zerilli (2005, p. 164-168), Ballacci (2014).

17 As Arendt says judgment is "one, if not the most, important activity in which this sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass" (1961, p. 221).

18 For Nietzsche, for instance: "Cicero never understood the opposition of true philosophers and the rhetors" (1983: 102-103). Many of the criticisms Cicero has attracted throughout the centuries for the supposed superficiality and eclectic character of his thought—from Plutarch, Montaigne, Hegel, Croce, and Heidegger—can be traced back to this idea of the incompatibility between philosophy and politics, which is strictly connected to the question of the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric (i.e. Nicgorski 1984: 559; 2012: 257).

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