The Rhetorical Progymnasmata – A Teaching Program for Critical Thinking?

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The ancient rhetorical progymnasmata were devised to school students in invention, arrangement and style. But they also contain a well-structured program in three progressive steps for schooling in argumentation and critical thinking. In chreia and maxim, students find arguments for supporting the moral content of an anecdote or proverb following a set of argumentative techniques. In refutation and confirmation, they refute or confirm a narrative according to criteria such as clarity, plausibility, possibility, logical consistency, adequacy, and expediency. In advanced exercises, students apply these skills to arguing for or against an action or a proposed law by producing well-structured arguments and anticipating counterarguments. By this program, students learn to think carefully, avoid hasty inferences, structure their thoughts, and look at problems from various sides.

1. INTRODUCTION

For schooling students in elementary skills in rhetoric and composition, ancient rhetoric had developed a very efficient program consisting in a graded and ordered series of 14 basic exercises called the ‘progymnasmata’ or preliminary exercises. Step by step, these exercises guided students from easy writing tasks to more complex processes of rational argument and decision-making. In early modern times, these exercises were revived and practiced widely in grammar schools from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century. Yet also quite recently, in the 21st century, they have seen another unexpected revival especially in U.S. Christian schools and in the domain of homeschooling. Since 1999, books such as the 4th edition, by R.J. Connors, of E.P.J. Corbett’s *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (Corbett & Connors, 1999), the 2nd edition, by Debra Hawhee, of Sharon Crowley’s *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* (Crowley & Hawhee, 1999), or Frank J. D’Angelo’s *Composition in the Classical Tradition* (D’Angelo, 2000) have effectively promoted and adapted the progymnasmata to contemporary use. And Susan Wise Bauer, one of the spearheads of the homeschooling movement, has most warmly recommended them to home-schooling parents (Wise Bauer & Wise, 1999).

The main objective of these exercises was to prepare students for the tasks of rhetorical invention, arrangement and style. Yet I will argue that they also contain a well-structured program for schooling in argumentation and what we today would call critical thinking. Present-day advocates of a revival of the progymnasmata for teaching composition have on various occasions pointed to this feature. “Good writers […] are good thinkers,” says James A. Selby, headmaster at Whitefield Academy, a Christian school in Kansas City, MO, and one of the main promoters of the progymnasmata. For, he adds: “The Progymnasmata begins to develop logical and rhetorical structures in the mind.” (Selby, 2010, p. 97). Likewise, Lene Mahler Jaqua and Tracy Gustilo, proponents of the homeschooling tradition, emphasize that the progymnasmata “come from a writing tradition which has produced many of the best thinkers, authors, and statesmen of the past two thousand years.” (Mahler Jaqua & Gustilo, 2002-2010). Finally, Natalie Sue Baxter, in her thorough analysis of present-day use of the progymnasmata in secondary school teaching, also finds: “Outcomes of teaching the progymnasmata include development of judgment, mental dexterity, and the ability to perform well in speaking or writing on demand.” (Baxter, 2008, p. 2).

My argument will be that the overall curriculum of the progymnasmata encloses, as it

were, a well-devised sub-curriculum in three clearly distinguishable steps that can be regarded as a training course in rational argumentation and critical thinking. Mark Battersby and Sharon Bailin have recently criticized traditional critical thinking instruction for reducing its goal too much to learning not to fall prey to invalid, inadequate or fallacious arguments, and for failing to provide instead the active reasoning skills that students need in order to find, lay out and construct their own arguments (Battersby & Bailin, 2018). Since, as David Hitchcock also well points out, critical thinking is a process involving noticing problems, structuring and solving them, avoiding bias, and generating possible answers, ultimately leading to substantiated judgment (Hitchcock, 2018, sections 5 and 6), and must hence consist in a practical program for achieving an educational goal (see also Scheffler, 1960, p. 19), the ancient progymnasmata might provide the core and outline of such a program.

2. STEP ONE: FORMAL TYPES OF ARGUMENT: CHREIA AND MAXIM

The most elaborate account of the ancient program of progymnasmatic exercises is that provided by Aphthonius, a fourth-century C.E. sophist from Antioch in Syria (text in English translation in Kennedy, 2003, pp. 96-127). His curriculum consists of 14 exercises: (1) Fable, (2) Narrative, (3) Chreia, (4) Maxim, (5) Refutation, (6) Confirmation, (7) Commonplace, (8) Praise, (9) Blame, (10) Comparison, (11) Ethopoeia, (12) Description, (13) Thesis, (14) Proposal of a Law. Some of these exercises are merely narrative, others descriptive or epideictic, but a substantial part of them are argumentative in character.

After students have trained their skills in the art of narration with the most basic exercises of fable and narrative, they are for the first time introduced to the realm of argumentation in the exercises of Chreia (anecdote) and Maxim (proverb) (Kennedy, 2003, pp. 97-101). A chreia is a brief anecdote with a moral content, reporting a famous saying or significant action by some historical celebrity. It thus still contains a strong element of narrative. A proverb, by contrast, is as a rule anonymous. Yet students are not simply meant to retell, paraphrase or modify these little stories (as they were in the first couple of assignments), but are requested to elaborate on their moral content in eight mandatory steps. These eight steps are as follows:

(1) Praise of the author
(2) Paraphrase
(3) Cause
(4) Contrary
(5) Comparison
(6) Example
(7) Testimony
(8) Summary

Students will thus begin with a praise of the person responsible for the respective saying or action (1). Then, they will paraphrase the story in their own words (2). Next, they will give a reason for the truth or utility of its content (3). Next, they will support it starting from the point of view of its contrary (4). Then, they will give an illustrative comparison or analogy (5), followed by a significant example (6) and some citation from indisputable authority (7). At the end, the whole argument will be summed up and rounded off by a concluding exhortatory statement (8).

What must interest us in this standard pattern of elaboration, is that in it we find a perfect tableau of possible types or patterns of argument: It has been a truism since Aristotle that arguing may proceed in two basic ways: deductively or inductively. Both these types are represented here. In Cause (3), a direct deductive rationale must be given for the demonstrandum (pretty much in the manner that Aristotle would call an enthymeme). In Contrary (4), however, the starting point must be the opposite of the demonstrandum, which then has to be reduced to absurdity; so what we have is the method of indirect deductive proof. On the side of induction, we get Example (6); for according to Aristotle, it is example that (for the sake of brevity) represents inductive reasoning in a rhetorical context. With Comparison (5), however, we get to the domain of arguments by analogy (which are of a more complex structure, and can involve a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning). But how about Testimony (7)? What we have here, placed last, is the argument from authority (*ad verecundiam*), a type of argument not really held in very high esteem nowadays, but which used to be a standard argument in ancient and medieval times. If one wishes, one can even find it also in the introductory Praise of the author (1). It might even be regarded as a kind of positive argument *ad hominem*.

It can rightly be said, thus, that by extensively practicing elaboration of chreiae and maxims,

students will learn and imbibe the various different formal types of argument available and acquire the ability to analyze them when they see them, and to construct their own arguments correctly. They will not really have to invent very much at this stage yet, since mostly the outline of arguments will be given to them by the teacher. But they will learn how to set up an argumentation in a formally correct manner.

3. STEP TWO: 'FINAL HEADINGS': REFUTATION, CONFIRMATION AND COMMONPLACE

Having gotten this far, students will have become sufficiently familiar with the formal methods of proof, but they will still be lacking substantial criteria on which to base their arguments. This gap will speedily be filled in the two exercises immediately following Chreia and Maxim, namely Refutation and Confirmation. Originally, in earlier handbooks, these two were not two different exercises, but two aspects of one and the same. It was only Aphthonius who divided them up into two chapters.

In these two exercises, the task set to students is to refute or confirm the truth of a given narrative (in antiquity, mostly a mythical story). The starting point is quite similar to what happened in Chreia and Maxim (and thus familiar to students): In the first place (even before the exposition of the story itself), students are instructed to begin with a eulogy (or, in the case of a refutation, a defamation) of the author of the story, in order to enhance (or, for that matter, undermine) its credibility. But what follows next is not types of proof, but this time criteria by which to gauge the plausibility of any given story or claim. It is clearly arguments of probability or defeasible arguments that are at stake here. But those are also the kind of arguments that critical thinking is mainly about.

These criteria are those that ancient rhetoric used to call 'final headings' or 'final aims', *teliká kephálaia* in Greek, and *capita finalia* in Latin. For a refutation, these criteria are: obscurity, incredibility, impossibility, inconsistency, inadequacy, and uselessness. Some of these, such as obscurity and inconsistency, are rather related to presentational form, others to content. For confirmation, the respective opposite criteria will of course be clarity, credibility, possibility, consistency, adequacy, and utility. One might speak of a list of general topics.

Combining the formal argument types of Chreia and Maxim with the final aims conveyed in Refutation and Confirmation, students will no longer be far from mastering the argumentative section of any speech, judicial or deliberative. In effect, Nicolaus of Myra, another author of a progymnasmata handbook from the 5th century C.E., explicitly states: "Once we have been practiced by the chreia and the maxim in paradeigmatic and enthymematic demonstration, these [i.e. refutation and confirmation] teach us in greater detail how to engage in debate in reply to antitheses, so that in complete hypotheses [i.e. declamations] we shall be able to offer a solution to the objections of the opponents and easily confirm what seems to us best." (Kennedy, 2003, p.p 144-145).

Let us briefly look at how Aphthonius in his handbook applies these criteria in his model example for refutation (the mythical story about the god Apollo falling in love with the girl Daphne, who, fleeing from the god's advances, gets metamorphosed into a laurel tree): Obscurity: How is it imaginable that a river (Ladon) and Earth (Daphne's mythical parents) have intercourse and beget a child? Incredibility: How can two gods beget a mortal child? Impossibility: Daphne could never have grown up with any of her parents, neither under water nor underground. Inconsistency: How can Earth, who has evidently had sexual intercourse herself and begotten a child, advise her daughter against? Inadequacy: It is inadequate for a god such as Apollo to behave like an amorous teenager. Uselessness: Neither Apollo nor Earth in the end achieve what they pursue. Hardly worth mentioning that, in the next chapter, Aphthonius follows this up with a confirmation of the very same story, applying the opposite criteria.

Having reached the level of exercises number 5 and 6, students are hence capable not only of constructing good arguments of various formal types, but also of filling them with appropriate content.

The precepts of Refutation and Confirmation work best in contexts of judicial debate or political deliberation. What falls short, is epideictic speech. This, however, is at least partly made up for by the next exercise called Commonplace, which in a sense completes the argumentative block of exercises 3 to 6. A commonplace in the sense of these exercises is a general line of argument that can be used in favor or against a certain laudable or censurable stereotype of person (in favor of a hero or a wise

man; or against a thief, a traitor, a murderer, an adulterer or the like). In the precepts for this exercise, we find a combination of formal types of argument and final aims. One is supposed to begin with an argument from the contrary, followed by an emotive description, a comparison, and a flashback to the person's earlier conduct, and in the end, another, typically epideictic set of final aims should be applied: legality, justice, opportunity, possibility, fame, and future consequences.

One can thus rightly say that with the exercise of Commonplace, the students' range of arguments and topical criteria is substantially enlarged in the direction of epideictic rhetoric.

4. STEP THREE: COMPLETE AUTONOMOUS ARGUMENT: THESIS AND LAW PROPOSAL

The five exercises described so far form a homogeneous block of tasks dedicated to the acquisition of skills in building good arguments. The teacher will, so to speak, not release students until they will have grasped the basic requirements of good rational argument. It would seem that students should by now be well enough prepared for making their own independent judgments and devising their own arguments accordingly and responsibly. Yet before they are allowed to do so, they still have to wait a moment and first deal with a number of exercises of other kinds until they finally get back to the argumentative level with the very last couple of tasks.

In the earlier argumentative block, the actual objective of the argument was always given with the actual assignment. Students would always perfectly know what to argue for or against. This, however, changes profoundly with the last two exercises in the series: Thesis and Proposal of Law. In these two, students are now confronted with a controversial problem, for the solution of which they need to decide themselves which side to take. This means that, before even starting to set up a line of argument, the student must first of all deliberate and consider all the pros and cons. For this purpose, the student needs to apply all the argumentative tools that she or he has so far acquired: the various formal types of proof and the final criteria and topics. But, in order to arrive at a rational and responsible decision, she or he will also need good judgment, which, hopefully, she or he will have acquired in the course of the more rudimentary exercises. If all goes well, the student is now capable of taking her or his own independent position in the face of a difficult problem and of defending it in competent manner.

A thesis, of course, consists in the argumentative analysis of and response to a general problem, either political (i.e. oriented towards action) or philosophical (purely theoretical). A political thesis, for instance, would be the question "Should one marry?" or "Should one fortify cities?", while a philosophical thesis might be "Is the earth round or flat?" or "Are there many worlds?" There is still a difference between a thesis and what the ancients called a hypothesis, namely an individual case including special circumstances such as individual persons, places, times etc., such as "Should the Spartans fortify their city in view of the Persians advancing into Greece?" A thesis is thus the penultimate step that comes before a complete speech.

Likewise, a proposition of law is almost an independent speech. Since it usually involves a number of special circumstances, it was regarded as being placed half-way between a thesis and a full speech. But in any case, both exercises allow for, nay require a personal decision, which calls for mature judgment on the part of the speaker.

The argumentative criteria or final aims are also identical for both exercises: legality, justice, opportunity and possibility. It is evident that all those criteria are already familiar from preceding exercises. Likewise, the practical procedure is similar for both exercises, except that, in Proposal of Law, one is invited to begin with a description of a situation contrary to the one envisaged by the proposed law.

But what is completely new in these two exercises is the manner in which they are to be executed. The argumentation is perfectly structured by the feature of counterarguments allegedly raised by an imaginary opponent, but in fact made up by the speaker, only to be immediately refuted in due course. In all of Aphthonius's examples, there are three objections and responses that structure the argument. This feature is highly important, since – in contrast to all earlier exercises – it requires that the speaker consider potential counterarguments and counterpositions and argue for a well-balanced and well-reasoned position of her or his own. This is a clear indication of a more mature, independent and responsible level of reasoning and argumentation meanwhile attained by the student.

5. CONCLUSION

One may thus conclude as a result that the ancient series of progymnasmatic exercises, among many other things, undoubtedly also contained a well-devised sub-program of schooling in the art and technique of good reasoning and good arguing, in fact a highly sophisticated and well-structured program that methodically and gradually guided students from easier and more elementary tasks through progressively more advanced exercises up to the level of highest technicality and expertise. Not only, however, did this program school students in the technical aspects of argumentation, but at the same time it also nurtured a way of thinking that can be called critical, independent and responsible. Not to forget that this series of exercises also served a purpose of moral education. It is a hotly disputed issue whether education in critical thinking should also include moral education, as especially Robert Ennis has requested (1996; 2011). The ancient program of progymnasmata certainly did, as is acknowledged by many of their modern defenders (see, e.g., Mahler Jaqua & Gustilo, 2002-2010: "training in writing cannot be separated from training in virtue.").

Tutored by these exercises, students will make their arguments meet criteria such as legality, equity, benefit, or feasibility, and check them for relevance, sufficiency, and acceptability, and they will learn to take into account alternative positions, classical requirements of critical thinking. They will learn to think carefully, avoid hasty inferences, structure and balance their thoughts, and look at problems from various sides, in short, to act as autonomous and responsible intellectual subjects. And, as far as the relationship of critical thinking to cognitive and metacognitive abilities is concerned (see Hitchcock, 2018, section 12.1), recent field-research on the practical aspects of the progymnasmata from the viewpoint of cognitive psychology has yielded encouraging results that show that especially metacognitive abilities (i.e. the ability to correctly and responsibly assess one's own argumentative abilities) are considerably enhanced by schooling in those ancient exercises (see Grialou et al., 2020). There are encouraging signs that the impact of progymnasmata on intellectual and moral education is not without attraction even in our times.

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