



In the face of relativism: Stephen Toulmin's latest views on rhetoric and argumentation

Autor(es): Ribeiro, Henrique Jales

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IN THE FACE OF RELATIVISM: STEPHEN TOULMIN'S LATEST VIEWS ON RHETORIC AND ARGUMENTATION

HENRIQUE JALES RIBEIRO¹

Abstract: In this paper, the Author introduces and analyses the theories set forth by Toulmin in books like *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (1990) and *Return to Reason* (2001). He shows that the theory of rhetoric therein provides the essential framework in the light of which currently we must consider the challenges which our concept of rationality is generally faced with, in particular, the lack of universal foundations for what previously were the alleged philosophical fields of knowledge and human action. And holds that Toulmin's rhetorical framework implies an active compromise between classical rationalism (universalism) and postmodernism (relativism).

Keywords: argumentation, foundationalism, Kuhn, Popper, postmodernism, Quine, Toulmin, relativism, rhetoric, universalism.

Resumo: Neste artigo, o Autor introduz e analisa as teorias avançadas por Toulmin em livros como *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (1990) e *Return to Reason* (2001). Mostra que a teoria da argumentação aí apresentada constitui o enquadramento essencial à luz do qual devemos considerar atualmente os desafios com os quais o nosso conceito de racionalidade está de maneira geral confrontado, em particular, a falta de fundações universais para o que supostamente, antes, eram os campos filosóficos do conhecimento e da ação humana. E defende que o enquadramento retórico de Toulmin implica um compromisso ativo entre o racionalismo clássico (ou universalismo) e o pós-modernismo (relativismo).

Palavras-chave: argumentação, fundacionalismo, Kuhn, Popper, pós-modernismo, Quine, relativism, rhetoric, Toulmin, universalismo.

¹ Associate Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Communication and Information, 3004-530 Coimbra, Portugal. E-mail: jalesribeiro@gmail.com This article is an extended version of a paper presented at the international conference "Rhetoric in Society 4: Contemporary Rhetorical Citizenship: Purposes, Practices and Perspectives", University of Copenhagen, Denmark (January 15-18, 2013).

1. INTRODUCTION: THE RATIONAL VS. THE REASONABLE

Let me begin with a quotation from Toulmin, on the frontispiece of *Return to Reason* (his last book), which in turn is taken from Wallace Stevens's *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (see Toulmin, 2001, p. xi):

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture,
Pleased that the irrational is rational.

One could question Toulmin's mention of Sorbonne, although indirectly, and not of Cambridge or Oxford, considering the author's grief regarding the impact that his book *The Uses of Argument* had in England when it was published; something he never forgot (cf. Toulmin, 2001, p. 12). However, I will not be addressing this issue; rather, I wish to focus on the last two sentences: "We shall return at twilight from the lecture; pleased that the irrational is rational." To what extent Toulmin's intellectual work in *Return to Reason*, and even before this book, aimed at "rationalising the irrational"? Could we not say precisely the inverse: Toulmin's aim was irrationalising the rational? To what extent such rationalisation/irrationalisation—which is supposed to be essentially philosophical—concerns rhetoric and argumentation?

In my paper, I shall attempt to answer these questions. We know that for Toulmin, since *The Uses of Argument*, there is rhetoric and argumentation only where there is, in some sense, the irrational, that which cannot be truly proven or demonstrated (i.e. that which is more or less probable/certain), contrary to what *supposedly* happens in the subjects addressed by logic and other formal sciences (see Toulmin, 1958, chap. 1, pp. 11ff). As we will see, this can be disputed, and in fact was disputed by Toulmin in his latest papers and books (particularly in *Return to Reason*), because the concepts of "rational" and "irrational", according to him and in contrast with some postmodern interpretations, do not concern simply theoretical (or philosophical) matters; they are incorporated into social, cultural and political terms: what would be "rational" from a theoretical point of view can, finally, be understood as completely irrational. Anyway, being "irrational" does not mean being entirely devoid of reasons or grounds; otherwise we could not even speak about it. It is a debatable or arguable concept, as it is its target. In order to be relevant to rhetoric, the "irrational" must be transformed, through discussion and argumentation, into what the philosopher calls in some works the "reasonable" (see Toulmin, 1990, pp. 198ff; 1994; 2001, pp. 163-164), which is the field of rhetoric and argumentation.²

² We find in Perelman (1979) a very similar approach to the distinction between the rational and the reasonable. About Perelman's views since Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (2008), see Ribeiro (2009, pp. 37-47) and (2012d)

In *Return to Reason*, after alluding to some difficulties of the logical principle of non-contradiction when applied to argumentation, Toulmin (2001, p. 164) remarks:

If the idea of rationality is problematic, that of 'irrationality' is even more difficult. If formal logic were truly the science of rationality, we would expect irrationality to show itself in errors of formal reasoning. To the extent that we unwittingly speak inconsistently, our lack of attention may deserve that description; but in a broader sense, the term 'irrational' applies to situations that do not involve formal reasoning or even language use at all. (...) In phobias, tics, fugues, and other uncontrolled reactions, it is the same: a woman who freezes at the mere glimpse of a snake reacts 'irrationally', and this reaction prevents her from giving a 'reason' why she acted that way. (If she could speak coherently about her response, that would be another matter. The question is then whether her account is 'reasonable' or 'unreasonable': we are back in the land of empirical opinions, not formal theories.)

However, this theoretical approach has several relevant inconveniences: it splits or divides human rationality into opposite camps, despite the author's intentions otherwise. Furthermore, it is very problematic: to associate the "rational" simply with logic or the formal and the "reasonable", in turn, with the arguable or the informal, is not enough to explain indisputable connections between the two fields, and least of all does it provide secure grounds, historically and philosophically speaking, for what we mean by the one or the other. These concepts do not stem, in genetic terms, from a theory of argument, nor even—according to the standard meaning of the expression—from rhetoric and/or argumentation; they belong to Philosophy in their own right. Yet, fundamentally, the distinction between the rational and the reasonable, I mentioned previously, which was suggested in 1958 (with *The Uses of Argument*), had become extraordinarily debatable and controversial in the immediately following years, before the development of philosophical reflection, and, especially, before the development of Western societies, in social, cultural and political terms after the 2nd World War. It happened before the impact on philosophy of the discussions concerning the "rational" in theoretical and quantum physics, with Heisenberg and other scientists; before the "irrational" acquired a shocking and inescapable relevance in phenomena like the theory of art (music, painting, architecture, etc.), in philosophy (the end of philosophy in systematic terms announced by Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* [1953] and Quine's *Ontological Relativity* [1969]) and in philosophy of science in particular (recall Feyerabend's *Farewell to Reason* [1987]); the vindications of women's rights or the rights of homosexuals; the peace movements connected with the USA military involvement in Vietnam, the green movements; etc.

All of them claimed “reason” and “rationalisation”, making the very concept of “rational” undoubtedly controversial. To what extent was all of this “rational” or, in contrast, “reasonable”, according to the theories upheld in *The Uses of Argument* and other books? If the “reasonable” is not simply another way of interpreting and talking about what is, in the last analysis, the rational, the distinction between both would become superfluous. Perhaps the distinction does not concern the epistemic value of our argument conclusions, but mainly its extension: in the case of the reasonable, and according to Toulmin’s book *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, they would be particular, local and temporal, against what happens with the rational (Toulmin, 1992, chp. 5, pp. 175ff). In that case, the concept will become particularly problematic when associated with a relativist or, if you wish, a postmodern concept of rhetoric and argumentation, which I am addressing here in particular: if it does not make sense to talk of a rather universal framework for human action, then neither does it make sense to uphold that one can assess consistently the way we argue and to adopt a substantive position, following that assessment, on the topics discussed in those argumentations, i.e. a position that can be shared, generally and irrespective of the particular contexts in which those adopting such positions are.

- What we expect from rhetoric nowadays is not only an assessment and criticism of arguments; not simply that rhetoric must be “perverse” to democracy promoting critical thinking, but also and mainly guidance for action; we expect essentially that rhetoric, through its assessments of arguments, can provide an answer to the question “What shall I do?” And an answer to that question is not entirely compatible with relativism, or with the idea that if you share a kind of (ideological) premises you will decide in a certain way, but if you share different premises, you will decide differently. Of course, if you admit that possibility, you are apparently condemning rhetoric (at least in the philosophical sense of the concept) as a systematic enterprise.

This is, indeed, the greatest challenge of relativism to rhetoric and argumentation theory, which currently we often do not pay proper attention to. Toulmin’s old distinction, in *The Uses of Argument*, between “field-dependent” and “field-independent” arguments (Toulmin, 1958, pp. 14-15), which had been devised essentially—from a theoretical point of view—against formal logic, was somewhat useless—although in abstract it was quite pertinent—for explaining the social, cultural and political factors evoked above, for the sheer reason that with them the scope of the “reasonable” and the “rational” were intertwined. An argument claiming for equal rights between women and men, is a field-dependent or a field-independent one? Its conclusions are only local or temporal, or are they universal and, in some sense, universal and timeless? From this perspective, let us also consider the issues raised

- for rhetorical theory by the intercivilizational dialogue on human rights defence; in particular,
- by more or less radical differences in historical and cultural frameworks, like the ones separating Islam and Christianity, which justify quite distinct rhetoric;
- or simply the ones arising from the lack of consensus, within Western societies themselves, around several essential subjects like the right to abortion or euthanasia.

When you are faced with questions like: “Do you accept the right to abortion in other conditions than those that are simply medical (i.e. related to serious threats to the mother’ or the fetus’s life)?” you are supposed to give an universal answer which can be supported by scientific reasons (besides others, like the religious ones), and not simply one which would be valid for a certain social context (as relativism claims), and not valid for other contexts (for instance, valid to Occidental and Christian contexts, and not valid to Oriental ones). You are substantively making a claim, which aims to be universal, even if it can be considered controversial in competition with other (problematic) claims about the subject. The right to abortion would be considered “irrational” under other conditions than those which are simply medical. But suppose that you are following a relativist approach on that subject; suppose that you admit a completely opposed argumentation regarding the right to abortion; in that case, you must admit such kind of argumentation in other social contexts as well. Your defence of the right to abortion could be considered as “reasonable”, that is, entirely justified and legitimate.

The problem at hand is: How can rhetoric, according to Toulmin, reconcile these different approaches? What rhetoric has to say about them? I will say something about that in this paper. In any case, one thing is sure: against a dogmatic and orthodox distinction between the rational and the reasonable, as if they were unconnected fields, rhetoric and the reasonable always imply the rational, and vice-versa; the reasonable, if you wish, can be, in fact, the true rational. But without the fundamental aspiration of achieving universality in some sense (or despite relativism), no rhetorical theory is worthwhile, running the risk of not fulfilling its essential goal, which is (not only assessing arguments but) to serve human action. In brief: rhetoric, which Toulmin had confined in *The Uses of Argument* and other books to the field of “reasonable”, without the Platonic and universalist counterweight of the “rational”, would be circumscribed simply by sophistry and cynicism. So, my theory about the problem relativism vs. universalism, reasonable vs. rational, in Toulmin’s latest rhetoric, that is, in the books *Cosmopolis* and *Return to Reason*, especially in the last book (I will point out some theoretical divergences between the two books), is that his solution implies an active compromise between those views.

2. THE SCOPE AND BOUNDARIES OF THE FIELD OF RHETORIC AND ARGUMENTATION

In a conception like Toulmin's, the answer to the essential issues of rhetoric and argumentation which I have just alluded to above does not only include a theory about the way we argue and the relevant purposes, but also, and particularly, a conception about the exercise of human reason (or of rationality as a whole), in other words, of its applicability and boundaries, as both the former (theory) and the latter (conception) have been designed by the history of Western thought since ancient Greece (see Ribeiro, 2009). The two are closely connected in his work. In *The Uses of Argument*, Toulmin is known to have focused particularly on an argument theory, which he develops later in books like *Knowing and Acting* (1976), *Human Understanding* (1977) and *An Introduction to Reasoning* (1984). In these books, and already in the second, his argument theory is based on philosophical assumptions which are directly connected with a broader theory about rationality, as illustrated by the distinction between the three approaches to argumentation: the geometrical, the anthropological and the critical (Toulmin, 1976, pp. 51ff). The following is apparently his crucial perspective:

- If we wish to understand and interpret how and why we argue; if we wish to develop a theory of argument and apply it to anything (to the everyday use of language, to law, to sciences, to philosophy, to media, to literature), we have to ground that interpretation in a solid conception not only about what is supposed to be (or not to be) arguable under the particular scope of this application (and obviously get to know it in depth), but also about the culture of the society or societies where we find ourselves and their respective timeframe, and, more generally, about the history itself of the civilisation we belong to. (From the special and privileged perspective of rhetoric an argumentation, this is what the “anthropological” approach, studied in *Knowing and Acting* [Toulmin 1976, pp. 141ff], clearly implies.)

This work inevitably involves specialised and apparently disconnected research, like that concerning cosmology, history of sciences, sociology and political thought, for example, not to mention philosophy properly called. It is an absolutely essential interdisciplinary work. It is what ensures the possible legitimacy of a theory of rhetoric and argumentation, and of a theory of argument in particular. And—not to mention the books alluded to in the beginning of this section of my paper—this was precisely what Toulmin himself did throughout his work, since his doctoral dissertation (*An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics*, 1950) in books like, *The Philosophy of Science: An Introduction* (1953), *Foresight and Understanding* (1961) *The*

Architecture of Matter (1962a), *The Fabric of the Heavens* (1962b), *The Discovery of Time* (1965) or *The Return to Cosmology* (1982), and particularly in his latest publications, which I intend to focus on here: *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Rationality* (1992) and *Return to Reason* (2001). Thus, one way or the other, lead by more or less circumstantial interests during his long life, what Toulmin dedicated his work to in the end was rhetoric and argumentation.

2.1 Semi-philosophical foundations

My second core observation is that his work is clearly philosophical. Philosophy in Toulmin is supposed to provide precisely the overall framework of the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to rhetoric and argumentation which he addresses in his books (see Ribeiro, 2009, 2012b, 2012c, 2012e, 2013). In other words, such philosophy presumably provides the possible foundations of these approaches, whatever they may be. When I speak of “possible foundations”, I mean that classic foundationalism—that is, a theory about which would correspond in the world itself, metaphysically or ontologically speaking, to a universal framework as the one provided by philosophy or any other discipline—makes no sense anymore for Toulmin (cf. Toulmin, 2001 pp. 94 ff). But, contrary to the philosophical approaches (on this subject) of his time (like those of Wittgenstein, Quine, Rorty, and others) this does not mean to discard completely foundationalism. (In this regard—foundationalism vs. relativism—Toulmin would be in line with Popper's views [see Popper, 1994; and Ribeiro, 2015]) So, Toulmin's proposal for the conflict foundationalism vs. relativism is a mid-term or a compromise solution. As he himself says in *Return to Reason*, reviewing his reading of the collapse of philosophical modernity ((Toulmin, 2001, p. 171):

I spoke initially of reason ‘losing its balance’ in the seventeenth century, and put this down to the obsession with formal theory at the expense of everyday Practice that elevated Euclidean deduction above all the other kinds of reasoning. But it was no part of my agenda to tip the scale entirely, or to elevate Practice, in turn, at the expense of Theory. What I intended to do was, indeed, to restore a proper balance between them: to recognize the legitimate claims of ‘theories’ without exaggerating the formal attractions of Euclidean reasoning, and to defend the lessons of actual ‘practice’ without denigrating the powers of theoretical argument.

- Making rhetoric or argumentation theory we do not speak properly of the world, as foundationalism (or a philosophy of the “rational”) claims, nor we speak only of *the way we speak of the world*, as relativism (or a philoso-

phy of the “reasonable”) claims, but *we try to infer claims about the world having as basis the ways we speak of it.*

- In Toulmin’s view, this mean that philosophy—according to foundationalism and against relativism—is the matrix of an interdisciplinary research concerning rhetoric and argumentation, but contrary to foundationalism and in agreement with relativism, that we cannot sustain that the claims about which I was referring to, above, are always definitive and timeless (see Ribeiro, 2013). As I suggested in the beginning of this paper, this does not mean that they are not universal, substantive, and so assertive and even imperative as possible.

This issue of the interdisciplinarity is, nowadays, of the utmost importance, because currently most of the input provided by rhetoric and argumentation comes from fields (like linguistics, law theory or sociology) which sometimes have no institutional or academic connections, for reasons which actually Toulmin himself analysed intently, in general, in his last book (see Toulmin, 2001, chap. 9, “The trouble with disciplines”, pp. 138ff). *Multidisciplinarity, not interdisciplinarity, is a result of our postmodern condition after the end of modern foundationalism* (see Toulmin, 2001, chap. 3, “The invention of disciplines”, pp. 29ff). According to Toulmin’s interpretation, this is a serious and inevitable civilisational handicap, even if it can be, in some sense, circumvented: working on a particular and specialised discipline, at the university level, we can (and we must) always work from a holistic perspective (pp. 151ff). Now what happens with the core concepts of this general framework of argumentation, which I mentioned above, is that they are typically philosophical. Issues like that of the relation between the incommensurability of scientific theories and the incommensurability of societies and cultures, raised by T. S. Kuhn (1962) and W. O. Quine (1969), and addressed by P. Feyerabend (1987, 1999), K. Popper (1994), R. Rorty (1979, 1991) and many others in the last quarter of the 20th century, are essentially philosophical in nature and are largely unknown outside the scope of philosophy. (But these are precisely the issues which are at the heart of the conceptions introduced in *Cosmopolis* and *Return to Reason*.) Inversely, we find a similar situation regarding how philosophy embraces the inputs of linguistics or sociology, for example. As far as this is concerned, i.e. the interdisciplinarity needed for rhetoric and argumentation theory, there is a lot of work to be urgently done (see my concluding remarks in Ribeiro, 2012c; and Ribeiro, 2013).

3. THE POSTMODERN CONDITION OF RHETORIC AND ARGUMENTATION

In order to answer the question I asked at the beginning of my paper (“How can rhetoric and argumentation theory rationalise the irrational?”), I must come back to the crux of this question: the inevitable postmodern condition of that theory.

In *Return to Reason*, apropos Jean-François Lyotard's conceptions of postmodernity (see Lyotard, 1979), Toulmin introduces his own views on the matter (2001, pp. 11-12). The French philosopher had associated modern man's condition with tragic circumstances: the end of philosophical modernity which, since Descartes and rationalism in the 17th century, guided the destiny of Western civilisation as a whole, in cultural, social and political terms. And with that end,

- on the one hand, the collapse of the project of finding any universal framework for human experience, like the one Philosophy before was expected to provide, and,
- on the other, the origins of relativism, skepticism and nihilism, which have largely characterised our civilisation, including rhetoric itself.

In an interpretation like Toulmin's, Lyotard's theory implied reducing the human condition entirely to “absurdity”; the lack of a real universal framework, of a fixed and rather timeless framework for explaining human knowledge and action, did not imply necessarily, in his view, the total absence of any framework, first because what we call “reason” and perceive as “rationality” are not mere artefacts or intellectual constructions. They are rather concepts which are incorporated and embedded in the history of Western civilisation itself, from ancient Greece to our days, thus providing the material or cement used to build the institutions, and nation-States in particular. In other words, they are not mere theoretical and speculative entities; and, therefore, they cannot be simply dismissed by our argumentation (as it seems to happen in the French philosopher, and others, like Quine [1962, 1969] and Rorty [1979, 1991]). Lyotard's focus, in his own way, on Toulmin's “reasonable” does not necessarily make us dismiss, summarily, reason and rationality globally. As an argument theory (with tools like those presented in the *Uses of Argument* and *An Introduction to Reasoning*), rhetoric—or the “rhetoric of philosophy” (as Toulmin calls it in *Return to Reason*)—can provide, in new terms, the universal framework which was, in the past, the main goal of modern philosophy (or classic foundationalism) from Descartes onwards.

Let us call this view a *rhetorical foundationalism*. Reflecting on the skeptic and nihilistic consequences of Lyotard's views, Toulmin states:

(...) All in all, a skepticism that at first rested on doubts about the historical permanence of criteria of rationality widened to become—in effect—universal. From now on, permanent validity must be set aside as illusory, and our idea of rationality related to specific functions of the human reason. For students of rhetoric and argumentation, such skepticism toward the claim that rationality has a permanent validity is a commonplace. For philosophers in search of formal proofs, by contrast, this scepticism is catastrophic. For me personally, the outcome of forty years of philosophical critique was thus a new vision of—so to speak—the *rhetoric* of philosophy. (Toulmin, 2001, p. 12; cf. Toulmin, 2006)

He draws a similar conclusion from the analysis and criticism of Kuhn (by extension, of Quine) and Rorty's arguments about the relation between the incommensurability of scientific theories and the incommensurability of our conceptual schemes in general (see Toulmin, 2001, pp. 5ff; cf. pp. 184-185), which only in an inconsequential way legitimate cultural and political tolerance, and the appeal to the oral, the temporal and the particular, i.e. the values which, according to *Cosmopolis*, Toulmin claims for an ethics of the "reasonable", as opposed to the ethics of the "rational" (see Toulmin, 1990, chap. 5, "The way ahead", pp. 175ff). Insofar as these arguments implied an entirely relativist attitude in philosophy and, namely, lead to the conclusion of its end or its death, in other words: to the idea that there were any kind of "philosophical foundations" for human knowledge and action (as those that a "rhetoric of philosophy" can provide), has happened with Wittgenstein, they were unacceptable for Toulmin. (In a brilliant linguistic formula, Toulmin says: "If René Descartes is a symbolic figure marking the beginning of the Modern Age, we may take Ludwig Wittgenstein as marking the end." [Toulmin, 2001, p. 206.])³

- Relativism, as I said in the introduction to this paper, condemns from the start the legitimacy itself of rhetoric as a systematic enterprise, because it deprives our assessment of arguments of a true frame of reference. It would be compatible with rhetoric as a way to access arguments, not as a way to take decisions and to make substantive claims.⁴

However, while we cannot simply set aside the concepts of reason and rationality, despite their limitations and defects, neither may we, nor should we, accept them entirely, as if they were likely to be perfected or cleansed

³ It is not possible within the limits of this paper, of course, to examine the impact of Wittgenstein's views, particularly Wittgenstein (1953) on Toulmin's latest books. I did that in Ribeiro (2012e) from the perspective of argumentation theory.

⁴ About the dangers of relativism to rhetoric, see Toulmin (1976, pp. 200-206).

of such limitations, as suggested by a conception about the matter like the one submitted by J. Habermas (1984, 1987), to which Toulmin sometimes alludes in *Return to Reason* (see Toulmin, 2001, pp. 91, 95, 165, 197). Which is why he could not endorse it either.

4. FINAL REMARKS: THE RETURN TO REASON IN A COSMOPOLITAN WORLD

In spite of everything that was said regarding Toulmin's criticism of relativism, in his latest books *Cosmopolis* and *Return to Reason*, and particularly in the first, he seems to be clearly in favour of this conception in social, cultural and political terms. In his view, to support the "reasonable" means to defend the local or the particular, the contingent and the temporal, against claims about the universality, necessity, stability and timelessness of the "rational". So, our question is: in what sense this defence of the "reasonable" is compatible with his mid-term solution for the conflict between relativism and universalism, and, specially, with his defence of the "rational"? In what sense can he talk, as happens in the last above mentioned book, on a "rationalisation" of the "irrational" or on a "return to Reason"?

A good part of the response to these questions lies in what I said in the beginning of this paper regarding the revolutionary changes of the World situation after the 2nd World War. Toulmin saw that situation as a clear demonstration of the collapse of our traditional concept of Reason or rationality; that is, the very same collapse of philosophical modernity, from Descartes onwards, which was announced officially by the various quarters of philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century. Reason, for him and as I pointed out previously, is not a mere intellectual or speculative entity, but is/was incorporated and embedded in the history of Western civilisation itself. Philosophical reason, the same geometrical and Euclidean reason which Descartes identified with clear and distinct ideas, conviction and demonstration, has manifested itself since the 17th century onwards, as a social, cultural and political reason, and, in any case, as an authoritarian and repressive Reason (see Toulmin, 1992, chap. 1, pp. 5ff; 2001; chap. 5, pp. 67ff). We owe it, not only philosophy and science, but also the Nation-state, with its own hierarchy of functions, which, according to the interpretation in *Cosmopolis*, is the social and political expression of how Newton, combining mechanics and astronomy, devised the planetary system, which includes a centralised force that guarantees the "order" and "stability" of the whole system, and the other elements with fixed "orbits", following a perfectly pre-determined paths (Toulmin, 1992, pp. 105ff). It is a Reason that crushes the differences and/or plurality, the disorder and/or instability, which are precisely, as men-

tioned before, the values which a rhetoric of the “reasonable” claims. On the other hand, that Reason was never, from the beginning, immune to the decisive influence of the latter, as 20th century history in particular shows, both from the social and cultural point of view, and from the political one (cf Toulmin 2001, pp. 29 ff). *The collapse of Reason was simultaneously the collapse of Philosophy and, in some way, the collapse of our civilisation as a whole*. But with these collapses, at the same time, the irrational claiming for rationalisation (i.e the “reasonable”) come to the fore, and, in the case of Toulmin’s philosophy, to the top of his rhetorical agenda.

This implied in political terms, for example, being clearly on the side of the supporters of multiculturalism and of the intercivilisational dialogue, and of the protest movements, like the ones which were/are lead by NGOs (Non-governmental organisations): Amnesty International, Greenpeace, “Médecins sans Frontières”, etc.; or even to claim a new philosophy and a new ethics for casuistry in medical and legal terms (see Toulmin, 2001, pp. 102ff). (Actually, it is known that Toulmin was personally and professionally involved in the case of medicine, as testified in his book of 1988, *The Abuse of Casuistry*). Quite particularly, the defence of the “reasonable” made the philosopher contest the (historical and philosophical) legitimacy of the nation-State and of all political organisations which are part of the functioning of these States, and, in contrast, support the international organisations which are founded on a relation of interdependence between nation-States, without however assuming their political and/or administrative functions and/or responsibilities (which is the case of the United Nations, but no longer seems to be the case of the European Union) (see Toulmin, 1992, pp. 139 ff).⁵ The author of *Return to Reason* found that in the early 21st century the philosophy and ethics of the “reasonable”—unlike the philosophy and ethics of the “rational”—involved everything I have just said; and it was most probably such philosophy and ethics to which he was referring while quoting Wallace Stevens, in the text I mentioned at the beginning on this paper, about the “rationalisation” of the irrational. As he himself remarks: “Thus, the recovery of Reasonableness can restore to the concept of Rationality the richness of which Descartes had deprived the Classical *logos*.” (Toulmin, 2001, p. 203)

- What was previously regarded as purely irrational, before we arrived in Sorbonne (that is, before the rhetorical approach), became perfectly rational and intelligible. What was supposed to be the expression *par excellence* of indecency, disorder, instability, was included in the field of the values acquired by reason or rationality themselves.

⁵ About Toulmin’s view on nationalism, Ribeiro (2012a, pp. 237-238).

Based on these results, which are mostly due to the rhetoric of the reasonable, there was, for Toulmin, every reason for being optimistic in the face of the challenges of the 21st century, and for “moving forward” and “facing the future again” (Toulmin, 1992, pp. 203ff). A “return to Reason” was, therefore, conceivable, which would rethink, in new terms, the relation between the rational and the reasonable, and would overcome the gap between the two. As the philosopher says concluding his last book (Toumin, 2001, p. 214):

Our first intellectual obligation is to abandon the Myth of Stability that played so large a part in the Modern age: only thus can we heal the wounds inflicted on the Reason by the seventeenth-century obsession with Rationality, and give back to Reasonableness the equal treatment of which it was for so long deprived. The future belongs not so much to the pure thinkers who are content—at best—with optimistic or pessimistic slogans; it is a province, rather, for elective practitioners who are ready to act on their ideals. Warms hearts allied with cool heads seek a middle way between the extremes of abstract theory and personal impulse. The ideals of practical thinkers are most realistic than the optimistic daydreams of simple-minded calculators, who ignore the complexities of real life, or the pessimistic nightmares of their critics, who find these complexities a source of despair.

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