

Response to W. David Hall: "The Primacy of Rhetoric"  
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It is a pleasure to respond to David Hall's fine paper "The Primacy of Rhetoric: Ernesto Grassi's Recovery of Humanism and the Possibilities for Philosophy and Religious Studies." The recovery of Grassi's project does indeed bring to mind possibilities to enrich philosophical and religious lines of inquiry. But I will instead follow the lead of Hall's first paragraph, "One of the principal places where this interest [in humanism] has become pronounced is in pedagogical concerns about the nature of liberal education...and the role of interdisciplinary in the pedagogical process." (1) Because my career has been dominated by the pedagogical concerns alluded to, I will reflect autobiographically on the paper's relevance to some of the curricular reforms with which I've been involved.

Hall notes that the rhetorical tradition Grassi recovers was born, in part, from a conflict in the early modern university between an education based on method in the Cartesian sense, and a rhetorical one aimed at instilling creative engagement in practical matters, and "invention" of arguments fitting the contexts of public institutions (10-11). My own institution is one that was, and still is, enacting similar debates. Trained in the rigors of modern philosophy and theology, I took my first job at a new state university that was opening for classes the very year I arrived. Like Vico's university, reform of the liberal arts curriculum was on everyone's mind, with a consensus favoring a broad approach to counterbalance the tendency of undergraduate education to focus narrowly on the disciplinary methods of a student's major. The watchwords of this reform were service learning, interdisciplinarity, civic engagement, and "outcomes"; they were embodied in a core curriculum to which we devoted considerable resources. As a "professor without portfolio" (we had no philosophy or religion programs at that point) my entire job would be to teach interdisciplinary topic-based courses in the core, as well as civic engagement and

critical thinking. Soon, I also became involved in creating an interdisciplinary Communication major based on a “new trivium” combining philosophy, speech communication, and rhetoric. In the classroom and the curriculum committee, I had become a partisan for the sort of humanistically inspired educational reform that Hall alludes to. His reading of Grassi sheds light on the successes of this effort, as well as some of the places we fell short.

First, I would refer to the idea of *ingenium* or inventiveness as creative response to necessity; a capacity that, in humans, lends meaning to language and gives the “arts” their purpose (7-8). In many ways, the civic engagement courses anchoring the core curriculum in my institution were an attempt to train *ingenium*, or at any rate to unleash it. These courses utilized service learning projects and “real assessments,” in which students were thrown into actual or simulated practical contexts (necessity) and asked to invent responses to the problems they identified therein (*ingenium*). Students have done surprisingly well at this, producing projects that both fulfilled the outcomes set by faculty, and impressed external community agencies. Hall notes that for Grassi and Vico, *ingenium* is also tied integrally to rhetoric, inasmuch as rhetoric trains its users to “find the topics” that will work in a given discursive situation and trains the mind to respond imaginatively to actual practical contexts, in contrast to the abstractions of method (9-10). Interestingly, our civic engagement course paired the hands-on projects with a unit on critical thinking, using a textbook that showcased a set of analytical categories that essentially were taken from the classical list of topics, even if they were not named as such. Students were prompted to approach their service projects using the tools acquired in the critical thinking unit. I am convinced that the critical thinking exercises helped the students respond inventively to their practical tasks; but as an *academic* exercise, the results were rather disappointing—students were not, generally, able to come back to the classroom and apply

this sophisticated rhetorical analyses to *texts*, nor did they improve greatly in argumentative skills. Our ambition to use rhetoric to lay an intellectual foundation that would be fruitful for interdisciplinary *academic* work went largely unrealized, however fruitful the civic and practical results were.

I find some insight into this shortcoming in the third stage of Grassi's humanism—namely the interaction between the call of metaphor and the response given by *sensus communis* or common sense. As Hall points out, the rhetorical or “topical” approach to liberal education ultimately aims not to give a recipe for persuasion, but to awaken our capacities to use imagination, to perceive similarities, to think and speak metaphorically (11-12). But metaphorical imagination by itself risks falling into an undisciplined subjectivism without the stabilization provided by *sensus communis*, the store of unreflective judgments that sort out which metaphors “work” in the contexts of shared institutions and understandings (14). I read this as a diagnosis of the failure of my institution to connect the rhetorical training of our core curriculum back to the students' academic majors. Our courses prepared students to think imaginatively in practical contexts, and to approach “topics” in a *nondisciplinary* way, but without a structural connection back to the “common sense” of the students' major disciplines, their academic applications of our liberal arts core too often amounted to little more than idiosyncratic observations or easy subjective relativism. By sequestering the core curriculum in core *courses*, we ultimately limited the reach of the humanistic reform we sought, instead of realizing our hope that this approach would leaven the teaching of the disciplines and lead to substantive interdisciplinary education.

Finally, I find that Hall's paper sheds retrospective light on our approach to the Philosophy major, when we finally got one. Having come through the experience of the common core, my colleagues and I set out to create a philosophy major that, I can now

recognize, stresses humanist “topical philosophy” over the rationalist tradition represented by Descartes or analytic philosophy (8). This comes out in a few ways: our logic course is on logic *and* disputation, placing the formal study of reasoning firmly within the practical context of real debate; in our courses on philosophical method, far from dismissing rhetoric and metaphor in Cartesian fashion (9), we use rhetorical forms (dialogue, aphorism, lecture, etc.) as a way to categorize the ways of doing philosophy; finally, we have been self-consciously interdisciplinary in our course offerings—which means a lot of “philosophy and...” titles—and along with this, a sense that philosophy is an extension of the human *ingenium* embodied in figurative language and practical arts (8), rather than a pure rationalism to be pursued in scholastic isolation. Like Grassi, we found that rhetorical and humanistic concerns led us toward a reconceptualization of philosophy, at least for purposes of pedagogy. David Hall’s recovery of Ernesto Grassi provides much food for thought for those trying to turn the recovery of humanism into renewal of liberal education, and I’m thankful for the theoretical frame for some of my pedagogical projects.