

Response to W. David Hall's Essay on Ernesto Grassi—
"The Primacy of Rhetoric"

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It is a pleasure to offer some remarks in response to Professor Hall's presentation of the central ideas of Grassi's thought. I have no fundamental disagreements with Professor Hall's summary of Grassi's position and I applaud his aim of connecting it with contemporary religious studies. I share his view that Grassi was an original thinker whose thought is more than an interpretation of the Renaissance and of Heidegger's treatment of the question of being.

During the last decade and a half of his life I became one of Ernesto Grassi's close friends and collaborators. We met on some occasions in the United States but most often in Zürich as members of a group known as the *Zürcher Gespräche*, of which he was largely the organizer and driving force, and also as a guest in his villa on the island of Ischia, near Naples, where we talked and worked together for days at a time on the terrace overlooking the sea. Our conversations moved back and forth in German, Italian, and English, depending upon the matter-in-hand, which gave them a kind of richness.

The last years of Grassi's career were those in which he developed his views of Vico and during which he was reaching an international audience for his thesis on the rhetorical basis of philosophy that he had been developing through his interpretation of Renaissance thought while a Professor at the

University of Munich since the second world war. Among other things, I assisted him in getting *Rhetoric as Philosophy*, his first book in English, published by Penn State Press in 1980, while I was a member of the Penn State Department of Philosophy. He was responsible for the German translation of my *Vico's Science of Imagination*.

Having known Grassi for this period, what I might add to Hall's account of his thought is not more of what Grassi thought, but how he thought. Grassi's approach to the art of philosophizing is rarely to be found among today's professional philosophers. It stems from his interest in topical thinking as more fundamental than criticism. Grassi's manner of thinking might best be described as *pensare insieme* (thinking together), a term coined, I believe, by our mutual friend Maristella Lorch, of Columbia University. For Grassi, thinking was an act of *sensus communis*, of communally making sense together. It embodied his sense of rhetoric as an art whereby language is used to bring about a commonplace, a *topos* from which to think further, not in a solitary fashion but with a constant sense of audience. This sense of audience guides thought toward the expression of basic human insights that, once stated, can be rationally and logically developed. As Vico so strongly insisted, *ars critica* presupposes *ars topica*.

This approach to ideas is in sharp contrast to what is produced on a daily basis in the world of professional philosophy and more widely in the humanities and social thought generally. Here argument and criticism are placed in the center of thought. The role of the scholar or philosopher is to

produce argument and the role of the commentator is to produce corrections and counter-argument, a back-and-forth of attack and defense. There are two features of argument that this manner of thought never fully faces. One is that for any argument, no matter how well devised and stated, it is not beyond human wit to produce a counter-argument. The knock-down, conclusive argument is a phantom that professional philosophy never tires of pursuing. A second feature of any argument is that no argument stands alone. All arguments and argumentative exchange presuppose a context, often unstated, that can be reached only by narrative. No argument makes sense apart from some narrative sense of experience within which the argument functions. This narrative is the topical sense of things that makes us give the argument any attention.

Grassi's view of metaphor, which he connected to Vico's doctrine of *universali fantastici* (imaginative universals), as Hall brings out, was not intended as a substitute for rational thought. Grassi's aim was to show that the metaphorical starting points for rational thought were themselves part of human reason. At the basis of reason is the power of *ingenium*, the ability to grasp similarity in dissimilars. If we imagine the basis of rational thought to be *modus ponens* (p implies q, p, therefore q), the question arises: How do we demonstrate *modus ponens* itself? There is no proof in principle for *modus ponens*, since it is the basis of proof. What is the original act of mind that allows us to accept the internal connection of the premisses and conclusions of

modus ponens? It is a scandal to logic, as Grassi held, that logic cannot provide, on its own terms, its own starting points.

Although this example is mine and not Grassi's, from his conception of the rhetorical conception of philosophy we can advance the answer to the above. We can do logic because we can do poetry. We can grasp the abstract interconnection between the elements of modus ponens because we can grasp the concrete interconnection between the elements of the poem. Original speech for the archaic mind, as for the mind of the child, as Vico says, is poetic, or in modern terms, mythic. A poem is greatly more complex than modus ponens, for in a poem as many factors as possible must coincide—the sounds of the syllables, the length of the lines, the layers of meanings of the words, the sense of the whole in the part, and so forth. Poetic expression is the original form of ingenium. Metaphor, the fundamental form of ingenium, is the basis of memory, for the metaphor holds together what otherwise would be a surd and unconnected. And memory, as Vico says, glossing Aristotle, is imagination (*fantasia*), because in an act of imagination we bring before the mind what is already in it. As the poet Giuseppe Ungaretti says, “Tutto, tutto, tutto è memoria” (Everything, everything, everything is memory).

When philosophy comes to a *cul-de-sac*, as it has today, having lost its will to engage in topical and speculative thinking, finding itself repeating itself in one method of thought after another, whether analytic, deconstructive, hermeneutical, structuralist, postmodernist, and so forth, the solution is to look again into its past. It must recover what it has forgotten. Otherwise, it will

remain in a constant state of fatigue, deploring itself. Grassi realized that what lay hidden in the Italian Humanist tradition from the Renaissance to Vico's *Scienza nuova* was the connection of rhetoric to reason. The connection of the *ars critica* to the *ars topica* has been forgotten. Grassi's discovery gives philosophy, and possibly religious studies, if not indeed other ways of thinking, a new *anima*. There is in his work a sense of relief—that the poet, rhetorician, and philosopher can reassert their ancient connection and speak again to the vicissitudes of the human spirit in an ingenious way. We can do more than engage in the repetition of one method or another which can never offer us a sense of the True as the whole.