

# WHAT IS PERSUASIVE ABOUT THE OLD AND THE NEW?

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*Abstract: The evaluation of the persuasive force of being old or new comprises considerations that are both quantitative, i.e. regarding distance and relevance of context, and qualitative, i.e. regarding semantic and pragmatic content. The meaning of the terms antiquus and modernus has a history revealed to be parallel to that of the notion of progress, and to some extent explains the different sensitivities towards the old and the new, towards tradition and progress and, consequently, the argumentative use of such notions.*

*Keywords: ancient; modern; progress; tradition; persuasion; argumentation; topoi; argument from direction; generation gap.*

“Argumentum *ad antiquitatem*” and “argumentum *ad novitatem*” are part of our lexicon of fallacies. It is not these appeals, but rather the *real* persuasive force (or lack thereof) of indicating a certain thing or idea as old or new, which is the subject of the proposed reflections. Arguments constructed upon such a basis are present in many areas of debate, not only those currently in the media limelight. In the sphere of argumentation studies, there is greater consensus regarding fallacies as defective cases in argumentation schemes that would otherwise be valid.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the *ad auctoritatem* argument, we see the generalized tendency to immediately perceive such an argument as a fallacy, but it is clear that there can be a valid *ad auctoritatem* argumentation. Perelman explains the argument from authority as a type of argument from prestige and strongly defends its validity<sup>3</sup>: “The place that the argument from authority occupies in argumentation is significant, but one must keep in mind that, like any other argument, it should be taken together with other accords.”<sup>4</sup>

## 1. What is Old or New

The analysis of arguments from old and new leads immediately to the consideration of their relativity: their force depends upon other factors as well, not purely upon temporal distance. We can group such factors into two fields, one of which is quantitative, the other being qualitative. The first is temporal distance:

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Van Eemeren, Frans H., and Rob Grootendorst. *A systematic theory of argumentation. The pragma-dialectical approach*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 162 sqq.; Cattani, Adelino. *50 Discorsi ingannevoli: argomenti per difendersi, attaccare, divertirsi*. Padova: Edizioni GB, 2011, 63 sqq.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Perelman, Chaim, and Lucien Olbrechts-Tyteca. *Tratado de la argumentación: la nueva retórica*. Madrid: Gredos, 1989, §70, 469-476.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 473.

how far in the past must something be to be considered *old*? How near must something be to be considered *new*? Actually, distance itself is not enough for the analysis: it has to be put into context, a time segment which enables the distance to be considered short or long.

The qualitative aspect is the content. New is good or bad, and old is bad or good according to the subject, to the criterion of judgement. For each one of us, certain things are good, because they are new, and others are good, because they are old. Old or new clothes, old or new ideas, old or new fashion, old or new people, old or new buildings, old or new friends, old or new pottery, old or new music... The question put briefly is: what is the value – positive or negative – to be associated with new or old things?

### 1.1. Dimensions of Time

We must keep in mind that the opposition is not between the past and the future: in both arguments, the appeal is to the past, either the remote past or the recent past. However, we are accustomed to think that what is new opens up the future to us. The basis of such a manner of thinking is the human condition, the fact that human life has a beginning and an end, with a span of development in the middle. We can see this in the chapters of the *Rhetoric* (II, 12-14), devoted by Aristotle to the human ages: the future is more meaningful for the young, because it is part of the segment of time that very probably will be included in their life.<sup>5</sup> This is not the case for the old, for whom the past has a meaning that escapes the young.<sup>6</sup>

Both the old and the young have a past, but the former have lived a longer time than the latter. When the young do experience a change – something ends and something else begins –, they find that which has ended to be “old-fashioned”. Since the old have lived longer, what begins might be for them simply something that returns, that is, older than the *new* thing for young people, but old enough not to be recognized by the latter. This is the case of an erroneous sample in an argument from direction: while individuating an event or an object at a specific moment in a process, one judges it according to a non-representative segment of time.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.2. Argument from Direction

The argument from direction is often presented as an *a priori* argument. However, there is actually a spontaneous use of direction that implies induction and comparison, such as in the evaluation of the historical moment of a law in a particular country by comparing it with a series of laws regarding a similar subject

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<sup>5</sup> “Their lives are mainly spent not in memory but in expectation; for expectation refers to the future, memory to the past, and youth has a long future before it and a short past behind it” (*Rhetoric*. II, 12, 1389a21-23).

<sup>6</sup> “They live by memory rather than by hope; for what is left to them of life is but little as compared with the long past; and hope is of the future, memory of the past” (*Rhetoric*. II, 13, 1390a6-8).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Perelman, *op. cit.* §66, 434-443.

in other countries, or the comprehension of a behaviour by situating its place in the age of a human being. Perelman classifies it among arguments that are based upon the structure of reality.<sup>8</sup>

The argument from direction is *a priori* as far as it consists in grasping an essence and the conclusion that derives therefrom as a natural development in time. It is not *a priori* insofar as it begins with the reality of a process and arrives at particular conclusions through the individuation of an object or an event in a process; in fact, it is a type of informal reasoning. For the soundness of the argument, one must take into account the relevance of the chosen segment and the nature of the series of events (e.g., necessity, causality, etc.). The precautions necessary in applying this argumentation are similar to those to be applied in the analysis of a possible *slippery slope* argument. Perelman actually groups these arguments together.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. The Semantic and Pragmatic History of “Modern” and “Ancient”

The history of semantic and pragmatic relations between the terms “modern” and “ancient” can be very illustrative in this regard. The inclination to value positively what is modern was not always linked to common sense. There have been several *modernities*, and not all of them related in the same way with the times of their predecessors. A historian of philosophy writes:

There is very little content to the concept of modernity except as a term of contrast with antiquity and the Middle Ages, and what is signified as “modern” changes, depending upon the specific contrast one wishes to make. Historians often use the term to designate nineteenth-century phenomena such as the industrial revolution, the rise of capitalism, the institution of representative democracy, and urbanization. In philosophy, “modernity” is usually taken to refer to the period that discarded medieval or scholastic philosophy, beginning roughly in the sixteenth century and encompassing such intellectual movements as the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Counter-Reformation, continuing in the seventeenth with what is called the Age of Reason (early modern philosophy), and culminating in the eighteenth with the Enlightenment.

Of course, all of the terms above are imprecise and disputed, but few will disagree that the work of René Descartes typifies early modern philosophy and sets the agenda for the philosophers who came after him.<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted, first of all, that “*modernus*” comes from “*modo*”, which means “now”. The modern is that which is now. This term, “*modernus*”, has had a

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 438.

<sup>10</sup> Ariew, Roger. “Modernity”. *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*. Ed. R. Pasnau. Cambridge (UK) – New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 114.

strictly temporal meaning, “which can be attested to at least from the fifth-sixth centuries, specifically as found within certain letters of Pope Gelasius I (492-496) and in the *Variae* of Cassiodorus (485-480).”<sup>11</sup>

An evolution in this terminology is to be found in the period from late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, whose development is particularly noticeable between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. It is there that we find a modernity, certainly the most important modernity before that to which we are accustomed. In a study that is very significant historiographically, Marie-Dominique Chenu writes, after some examples of various meanings of the terms:

Before a meaning thus characterized, we cannot any longer accept the univocal interpretation that the historians of medieval doctrines sometimes give of the terms *antiqui-moderni*. It is easy to distinguish the various senses that, depending upon the context, they may take:

1. *Antiqui* can represent the authors of Greek-Latin antiquity as opposed to the writers of the Christian era, *moderni*. (...) Boethius [5<sup>th</sup> century] in this sense is called a modern. (...)
2. *Antiqui* represents the writers of the first Christian centuries (Fathers) and *moderni* the doctors of the Middle Ages.
3. *Antiqui* also means the followers of the old Covenant, as opposed to the *moderni*, the followers of Christian revelation. This is the obvious meaning of these words used in the question regarding dogmas in the economy of salvation: “*Utrum una sit fides modernorum et antiquorum*” S. Thomas, *De Ver.*, q.14, a.12.
4. Then (...), during the twelfth century, *antiqui* and *moderni* assume a meaning which relates to the stages of the penetration of Aristotelian logic, *logica vetus*, *logica nova*. Abelard is thus “modern”, and Boethius is “old”.
5. We finally arrive at the special meaning which these terms held in the twelfth century, and that we have defined above.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.1. The Length of Modernity

Roger Bacon’s (1214-1294) use of the expression “*nos moderni*” is often cited. A study by Alexandre Koyré (1892-1964) on modern thought made famous this use in first person of the adjective *modernus*: “*Nos moderni*, disait déjà Roger

<sup>11</sup> Ghisalberti, Alessandro. “I moderni”. *Lo spazio letterario del Medioevo: il Medioevo latino*. Ed. G. Cavallo, C. Leonardi, E. Menestò. Roma: Salerno, 1982, 606.

<sup>12</sup> Chenu, Marie-Dominique. “Antiqui, moderni”. *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 17. 1928, 87-88. Cf. Hartmann, Wilfried. “‘Modernus’ und ‘Antiquus’: zur Verbreitung und Bedeutung dieser Bezeichnungen in der wissenschaftlichen Literatur vom 9. bis zum 12. Jahrhundert”. Zimmermann, Albert (ed.). *Antiqui und Moderni. Traditionsbewusstsein und Fortschrittsbewusstsein im späten Mittelalter*. Berlin – New York: W. de Gruyter, 1974, 21; Grössmann, Elisabeth. “‘Antiqui’ und ‘Moderni’ im 12. Jahrhundert”. Zimmermann. op. cit. 43.

Bacon.”<sup>13</sup> This is interesting, of course, but the awareness of living among the *moderni* was quite common in the previous century. An example can be taken from Peter of Capua (c.1160-1214), a theologian with a historically relevant way of using logic in his reflections.<sup>14</sup> Around 1185, he answered a question in the following words: “Master Anselm [c. 1033-1109] and the ancients said that (...). On the contrary, Master Peter [Cantor: c.1130-1197] and almost all moderns say that (...).”<sup>15</sup>

The distance between the two masters is 97 years, according to the dates of birth. Shortly afterwards, Albert the Great (c. 1200-1280) and Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) will consider William of Auxerre (c. 1150-1231), Prepositin of Cremona (c. 1150-1210), Philip the Chancellor (c. 1165-1236) and Robert Grosseteste (c. 1168/75-1253) to be among the *antiqui*.<sup>16</sup> The distance between the *moderni* and *antiqui* becomes even shorter, a brief 32 years.

According to the nature itself of the term (...) and to the passing of generations, the *moderni* become in their turn *antiqui*: the commentators of Peter Lombard, the *magister* par excellence, will soon take up the opinions of the *moderni* against him. Since the modern in and of itself does not exist, *modernitas*, at least materially, is an unstable value. Walter Map [12<sup>th</sup> century] calculates the length of time during which one remains modern as a hundred years. (...) He notes, however, that the *antiquitas* remains prestigious, from generation to generation, and that the *modernitas* has always been regarded with suspicion, almost to the point of being discredited, until the day that the halo of antiquity rehabilitates these *moderni* as ancients.<sup>17</sup>

The logical terminology in these centuries is highly illustrative. (When Chenu wrote his 1928 article, the historiography of medieval logic was not sufficiently developed, and he does fall into some inaccuracies.) There was a set of books, used in schools until the twelfth century, which included two works by Aristotle and a series of other texts. Most of these works were ancient, but one or two of them were also extremely recent. When other works by Aristotle were discovered, the entire set was named the *logica vetus*; the works of more recent discovery were instead called the *logica nova*. The epistemological revolution that followed such a discovery (modern science would arrive shortly after) allowed for

<sup>13</sup> Koyré, Alexandre. “La pensée moderne”. Le Livre, 4<sup>e</sup> année, nouvelle série, mai 1930, n° 1, 1. It appears at least three times in Oxford Greek Grammar.

<sup>14</sup> See for example Jiménez Cataño, Rafael. “Copulatio in Peter of Capua (12th Century) and the Nature of the Proposition”. Studies on the History of Logic. Ed. I. Angelelli, M. Cerezo. Berlin - New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996, 197-208.

<sup>15</sup> “Magister Anselmus et illi antiqui dixerunt quod (...). Magister vero Petrus et fere omnes moderni dicunt quod (...)” (Peter of Capua. Summa theologiae. q.11, Codex 51, Biblioteca Municipale di Todi, f. 7v° a).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Chenu, “Antiqui, moderni”, 86-87.

<sup>17</sup> Chenu, La teologia nel dodicesimo secolo, 440.

the creation of new treatises of logic, which received the name of *logica modernorum*, while the collection of *logica vetus* and *logica nova* now became the *logica antiquorum*.

Then with the characterization of realism as the *via antiqua* and nominalism as the *via moderna* we read:

To the *via antiqua* belong Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Giles of Rome, i.e., the proponents of 'realism' and of the use of Aristotelianism in the field of theology; to the *via moderna* belong instead Ochkam, Gregory of Rimini, Buridan, Peter D'Ailly, Marsilius of Inghen, Adam Woodham, John Dorp, Albert of Saxony.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Axiology and Progress

The evaluations of modernity cited in this article are primarily positive. In order to complete our perspective on modernity, negative evaluations, perhaps surprising for contemporary man, should also be presented.

For Marsilius of Padua (1275-1342), whose thought is in sharp contrast with the Church of Rome,

the "*via moderna*" is that of his opponents, of the Roman pontiffs and their supporters, to whose "*modernitas*" (...) is attributed the quite negative sense of "error" and "aberration". The "*perversa opinio*" of Roman bishops constitutes an innovation that not only is not based upon the guarantee of the "*antiqua tempora*", i.e., the past, but intends to subvert the past itself and must be completely rejected.<sup>19</sup>

Humanism, the prelude or first phase of the Renaissance, might be assumed to evaluate modernity positively, but instead, the works of this period testify to "the definitely negative and polemical use of the term '*moderni*' by the major representatives of the first generations of humanists,"<sup>20</sup> such as Petrarch.

#### 3.1 Modernity as an Identity

In the modernity of the twelfth century, there is a semantic-pragmatic element of decisive importance: a positivity that does not imply a negative evaluation of antiquity. Alessandro Ghisalberti characterized such a modernity as the "ability of the authors of that century to propose themselves as creators of a new tradition in regard to the classics and their ancient commentators."<sup>21</sup> For the first time, "*modernus*" did not signify merely a period of time: it pointed towards

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<sup>18</sup> Ghisalberti, op. cit. 630.

<sup>19</sup> Piaia, Gregorio. "'Antiqui', 'moderni' e 'via moderna' in Marsilio da Padova". Zimmermann. op. cit. 341.

<sup>20</sup> Vasoli, Cesare. "Intorno al Petrarca ed ai logici 'moderni'". Zimmermann. op. cit. 142.

<sup>21</sup> Ghisalberti, op. cit. 609.

an identity, the awareness of being “creators of a new tradition.” This is the essential meaning of Bernard of Chartres’ (+ 1124/30) famous formulation: “We are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants and see farther than they.”<sup>22</sup> Here is the substance of progress in a cumulative sense.

Throughout the aforementioned centuries, the new treatises of logic were called “*magna logicalia*” or “*logica maior*” when they developed the subjects of the *logica antiquorum*; they received the name of “*parva logicalia*” or “*logica minor*” when they were concerned with the subjects of the *logica modernorum*. The spirit of such a terminology was clear: we are small; the ancients were big. In this perspective, the persuasive value of ancient and modern can be formulated as such: the ancient is good – the modern is better. There is no animosity. Without the ancient masters, we would not be what we are.

Obviously, all this can be very complex, varying from author to author, and from discipline to discipline. However, it is important for us to be aware of the possibility of this axiology as well as its concrete historical existence, because the axiology of contemporary man is that of seventeenth century modernity, which is not inclined to recognize the worth of our ancestors. The current axiology of the new and the old (the modern is good – the ancient is bad) is inextricably linked to our feelings about progress, although perhaps phrased in other words, such as “tradition” and “modernity”. I will not dwell on this axiology precisely because it is more well-known; rather, I would like to point out the connection between this feeling and the manner of understanding progress as a continuous movement towards the better.

The modernity of the seventeenth century presented a new concept of progress, exemplified in Francis Bacon as “*victoria cursus artis super naturam*.”<sup>23</sup> When the other Bacon, Roger, had called himself *modernus*, he was already aware of progress, but understood it in a different manner. If our understanding of progress proceeds from the assumption that we, with the development of reason, are able to dominate nature, it is natural that we do not feel the need to take into account those who have preceded us. If we understand progress to be an experience of growth achieved within a certain period, it is natural that we tend to recognize the merits of those that preceded us. This explains the reason why, whereas earlier there was a continuous transition from being modern to being ancient, today, after four centuries, Descartes continues to be called “modern”.

#### 4. Formulations of Common Places

From antiquity comes the most oft-repeated formulation of the common place of appreciation of the past: the *laudatio temporis acti*. In its Horatian origin,

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<sup>22</sup> Delivered by John of Salisbury. *Metalogicon*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2013. III, 4: “Dicebat Bernardus Carnotensis nos esse quasi nanos gigantum umeris insidentes, ut possimus plura eis et remotiora videre” (Ioannis Saresberiensis. *Metalogicon*. Turnholt: Brepols, 1991. III, 4).

<sup>23</sup> “Victory of art over nature in the race” (Novum organum. The Works of Francis Bacon. Boston: Houghton Mifflin [vol.I for Latin and vol.VIII for English]. 1900. I,117).

the meaning was narrower than that currently attributed to the expression. Horace is describing the idiosyncrasies, generally negative, of the old. The complete expression is *laudator temporis acti / se puero*:<sup>24</sup> “given to praising the years when / he was a boy.”<sup>25</sup>

This formulation is little-known in Spanish-speaking countries, because there is another formulation, well-rooted in Spanish literature, from the medieval poet Jorge Manrique (1440-1479): “*cualquier tiempo pasado fue mejor*”,<sup>26</sup> “every past time was better”. As in the case of Horace, the original sense is more restricted, because the poet speaks of death, of the transience of life, the transience of pleasure.<sup>27</sup> He says namely that, when pleasure is over, its memory is painful, and then *it seems to us* that “every past time was better.”<sup>28</sup> These formulations, both the ancient Latin and the medieval Spanish, allow us to clearly see that they are not referring to pure distance or proximity. What is relevant in both cases is something vital: one’s own experience of life, which includes childhood and old age, pleasure and pain.

The Horatian topos of *laudator temporis acti* is fundamentally negative, indicating displeasure and frustration. More relevant in dealing with time is the ancient notion of authority and what it entails. Due to this notion of *auctoritas*, an ancient heritage that otherwise would have been lost (e.g., literature, history, etc.), was preserved: this was the consciousness of being custodians of a treasure, the transmitters of a heritage. This transmission is *traditio*, delivery, tradition. We can say very synthetically that the beliefs guiding this transmission were the following: the *auctores*, who varied according to subject matter, left clear principles for their respective disciplines, dividing them in a reasonable manner and developing their major subjects. Therefore, the most appropriate way to study a discipline was by striving to achieve a better understanding of the received books, to explain their difficulties and not to contradict them without necessity. If contradiction was necessary, there was always a manner of affirming that, at a more profound level,

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. Horace. *Ars poetica*, 173. The Latin Library. Fri. 1<sup>st</sup> November 2013. <<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/horace/arspoet.shtml>>.

<sup>25</sup> Transl. A. S. Kline. 2005. Fri. 1<sup>st</sup> November 2013. <[http://poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/HoraceArsPoetica.htm#\\_Toc98156244](http://poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/HoraceArsPoetica.htm#_Toc98156244)>).

<sup>26</sup> Coplas de don Jorge Manrique por la muerte de su padre, I. Manrique, Jorge. Cancionero. 3<sup>a</sup> ed. Ed. A. Cortina. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1952, 89.

<sup>27</sup> “(...) quan presto se va el plazer, / como, despues de acordado, / da dolor; / como, a nuestro parescer, / qualquiere tiempo passado / fue mejor”. “(...) Swiftly our pleasures glide away, / Our hearts recall the distant day / With many sighs; / The moments that are speeding fast / We heed not, but the past,—the past, / More highly prize” (Transl. Henry W. Longfellow. *Complete Poetical Works*. 1893. Bartleby.com. Fri. 1<sup>st</sup> November 2013. <<http://www.bartleby.com/356/478.html>>).

<sup>28</sup> “El poeta no afirma, nota unicamente que *–a nuestro parecer–* fue mejor lo pasado” (Cortina, Augusto. “Jorge Manrique. Voz, alma y mbito”. Manrique, Jorge. Cancionero. Cit., XLIX).

this was the real thought of the author.<sup>29</sup> The Horatian expression “*quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus*”<sup>30</sup> betrays this reluctance to report an error in an authority.

Insofar as it is a delivery, tradition is a duty of each generation to the next. What will we deliver to our children? What kind of a world economy? What kind of environment? One has to be very insensitive not to be touched by these questions. Therefore, despite the grim image of tradition, an intuition of its profound meaning remains as well as an ambiguous meaning of progress. (There is also a depth to progress and an ambiguity of tradition, but the myth of progress does not facilitate the elaboration of a more balanced vision. At present it is not at all clear that we desire a victory of reason over nature.) Kafka narrates a short story, a recreation of the myth of Babel, which describes the aporetic aspects of the modern notion of progress: the builders of the tower do not do anything, because they know that in the future, people will be able to build better and faster. Why should they try? If the building could be finished in one generation, it would be reasonable to begin in the here and now. Since, instead, the tower will take several centuries, and in the future people will be able to build the tower in six months, and much better, at present all efforts are focused on obtaining the best quarters for the workmen, in defending the prerogatives of the class, and so on.<sup>31</sup> Their faith in progress makes them conservative. This is the death of both tradition and progress.

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Ebbessen, Sten. “Ancient Scholastic Logic as the Source of Medieval Scholastic Logic”. *The Cambridge History of later Medieval Philosophy*. Ed. N. Kretzmann, A. Kenny, J. Pinborg. Cambridge – New York – Port Chester – Melbourne – Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1982, 101. About the change of mentality during the Middle Ages, that put the argument of authority in the last place, see Jiménez Cataño, Rafael. “Nosotros, modernos del siglo XII”. *Vuelta*. 240. 1996, 28-31.

<sup>30</sup> *Ars poetica*, 359.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Kafka, Franz. “Das Stadtwappen” (1920). *Die Erzählungen*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2006, 374-375.

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