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Taking care of identity through politeness

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Insofar as identity is image, it falls under the domain of politeness, and threats show its need for care. From the viewpoint of Fundamental Rhetoric, it is possible a deeper anthropological understanding of politeness, based on current studies about care, many of them conducted in the field of Care Ethics that recognizes vulnerability – hence the need to be cared for – as inherently human. If humans are "dependent rational animals", it follows that beyond childhood, elderly, illness and poverty, dependence also means ordinary life: the need to eat, to rest, to be transported, dressed, educated, nursed, etc. Our image is vulnerable in the same way.

Key-words: care, *politeness, fundamental rhetoric, philosophy of care, identity*.

1. Anthropological Depth through Fundamental Rhetoric

In search for a deeper anthropological understanding of the politeness theory, my approach consists of focusing on the notion of care. The specificity of this reflection refers to the framework of Fundamental Rhetoric, from a standpoint like Peter Oesterreich's. His book *Fundamentalrhetorik* (1990) deals specifically with this discipline, though in others he provides more condensed presentations, like the following:

> Fundamental Rhetoric is to be understood as a regional anthropology whose subject is not the entire being of man, but the aspect of his/her public existence. Accordingly, the center of its reflections is not the pure thinking activity of human beings but their public speaking activity (Oesterreich 1994, 3).

As proof that this is not an instance of anthropology being "reduced" to rhetoric, but rather a deepening of rhetoric and one from which we learn what it means to be human, Oesterreich specifies that

> the new self-conception of Fundamental Rhetoric is based on the assumption that metaphysics and rhetorics are reconcilable. It considers what is rhetorical not only to be an accidental means of the external self-manifestation of

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> metaphysics, but an element of its own being which has so far been disregarded (1997, 6).

Hence it is not the art of rhetoric (*Kunstrhetorik* or *Redekunst*) but an understanding of the original human condition as *homo rhetoricus*, in light of an interpretation of the *logos* present in man's definition (*zoon logon echon*) as "public active word or living discourse" (Oesterreich 1994, 3) rendering the focus on ordinary life as vital for our subject matter (cf. Oesterreich 1990, 122).

> On the guide of the classical and modern rhetoric theory and hermeneutical phenomenology [*the Fundamental Rhetoric*] tries to gain a holistic and everyday-life-oriented conception of person, through which man should be understood as a being of creative speech activity" (Oesterreich 1994, 3).

2. Politeness, Identity, Face, Person

Approaching identity from the viewpoint of the politeness theory is pertinent given the notion of face at the center and the strategies to preserve it from any risk (cf. Brown-Levinson 1978, 65-71). Identity is not only image, but image is one of its essential components. An anthropological treatment of face, its threats and protective strategies, leads us to conclude that all this means the speaker is in front of a person. Robin Lakoff's justification for the second pragmatic maxim "be polite" (after the first maxim, i.e. "be clear") is that the relationship between interlocutors is often more important than the contents of their conversation,

> it is considered more important in a conversation to avoid offense than to achieve clarity. This makes sense, since in most informal conversations actual communication of important ideas is secondary to merely reaffirming and strengthening relationships (1973, 297-298).

We cannot separate image from person, although we can distinguish them, as result of an analysis. The Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset is especially known for the maxim "I am I and my circumstance" (1914, 322): there is no I without my things and my things are nothing without me. To paraphrase: I am I and my image. Taking care of our image is not necessarily a substitution of being by appearance. My body is me, my image is me. But there is more. Ortega's phrase continues with the less famous words: "I am I and my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I do not save myself". Here the verb *save* is to be noted. Ortega could have said, "If I don't know it, I don't know myself," or "If I don't like it, I don't like myself". The choice is meaningful for us. Hypertrophic approaches to image are always possible, but caring

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for someone's image is often the best—if not the only—way of caring for that person, and caring always goes beyond knowing and liking.

The philosophical concept of care is not far from the highly intuitive meaning we attribute to the term.

> The term *care* very often indicates the *actions* ideally derived from the attitude of *caring about* someone or something—an attitude that Heidegger argues is one of the defining marks of being human. Caring about someone or something always involves an *attitude of concern* on the side of the person who cares and of *fragility* on the side of the being who is taken care of. A caring person would be one who perceives human fragility and is not indifferent to it but rather shows an efficacious desire to alleviate it—that is, a desire which, if not impeded, leads to effective action to alleviate that need (González-Iffland 2014, 2-3).

The connection between politeness and care can be very direct. As face is exposed to risks, it must be defended. The nature of this protection is care. The consideration of identity, according to the conference proposition ("constructing identity through language use"), offers in the first place evidence that identity has to be defended insofar as identity is image. Identity has to be cared for. The role of the Fundamental Rhetoric (or anthropology based on Fundamental Rhetoric, which is the same) is relevant here as a hermeneutical approach. In Oesterreich's words: "Personal identity and the respective understanding of the world and of being are a result of rhetorical interpretation" (1994, 5).

3. Care and Dependence, a (Re)discovery

Care is essentially linked to fragility and dependence, which has been of late rediscovered as a distinctive feature of human beings. A rediscovery for daily life, a genuine discovery for philosophy. Such a discovery entails the elements for a philosophical turn. In his work *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre raises an essential question:

> What difference to moral philosophy would it make, if we were to treat the facts of vulnerability and affliction and the related facts of dependence as central to the human condition? (MacIntyre 1999, 4).

Later, in the development of the book, he dedicates a chapter to "The virtues of acknowledged dependence" (119-128).

This discovery or acknowledgement comes after a long period of rationalist sensitivity that still leads us to consider only the intellectual aspects of our being as

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the essence of what is human. The Cartesian distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* (cf. Chirinos 2014, 197; Oesterreich 1994, 13) renders it difficult to consider the authenticity of human realities such as eating, resting and being nursed; which in extreme positions are considered humiliating aspects of our lives. Would we not be more free without the need to be fed, transported, nursed, etc.? Maybe so, as Chirinos would say (cf. 2014, 205), but this would not be human freedom.

A decisive factor in this discovery is the reflection on feminine condition as read, for example, in Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings and Eva Feder Kittay. Gilligan writes: "Here the conventional feminine voice emerges with great clarity, defining the self and proclaiming its worth on the basis of the ability to care for and protect others" (Gilligan 1993, 79). "Here" indicates the field where selfishness and responsibility are found, as discussed in the chapter titled "Concepts of Self and Morality".

The spirit of our culture (at least the Western culture) does not appreciate dependence (cf. Moschella 2014, 87). Ancient roots of this pride are to be found in the aristocratic sensitivity typical of Greek culture (cf. Chirinos 2014, 196), for example the conception of work as a non-rational activity, even slavish, in opposition to human perfection. There are also components of modernity that strongly characterize the Western mindset. Kant's thought, which constructs ethical behaviour on strictly rationalist principles, is a sound foundation for this *Zeitgeist*. The Hobbesian *homo homini lupus*, focusing all human attention on individual interests, actually rejects any essential relationship (cf. Chirinos 2014, 203-204[2]; Moschella 2014, 89). Without personal relationships, work easily becomes dominion, power and control over nature. We recall Francis Bacon and his "*victoria artis super naturam*" (1620, 117). In a similar way, it seems clear that even for people who would not relate to Nietzsche's thinking, the sensitivity implied in the notion of a super-man often remains valid; that is, a sensitivity that feels fragility and dependence as humiliating features of our existence.

The social nature of humans does not consist only of conversation and dialogue. It also involves the reality of the aforementioned fragility and the response thereto, which is care. As I have said, among fragilities we find our own face. In the introduction of their book, Brown and Levinson remind the reader of

> the particular importance that Goffman attributed to the behaviours that we have collected under the rubric of politeness, namely as indicative of essential aspects of human nature and its social construction (Brown-Levinson 1978, 50).

Of course "dependence" has a variable meaning through analogy, as does the term "need". There is the extreme need of water for someone who is (literally) dying of thirst, as well as the need to speak better or to feel refreshed. Both are also cases of

[2] Here and in other remarks about the profile of the new anthropological sensitivity and contrast with the former one, I am in debt with Chirinos, especially the conversation we held on August 28, 2013.

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dependence. A single human action often has different dimensions, each with a certain type of necessity. Nutrition is a good example of a basic need that receives a new reading in light of what it means to be human: "nutrition represents an exchange relation between the living thing and its environment" (Chirinos 2014, 206). What does "environment" mean? Octavio Paz (we are celebrating his birth centennial) exhibited the dimensions of human love at three levels: sex / eroticism / love; corresponding to nature / culture / person, respectively (cf. 1993, 106). On this basis I propose that a similar dimensionality may be applied to eating: beyond the nutritional facts (nature) we find culture (a taste, a tradition, a particular cuisine) and the value of persons' encounter at the table.

4. Human Vocation to Care

I have already mentioned Heidegger, whose intuition did not enjoy immediate development, but actually is the heart of the further philosophy of care: the being of the *Dasein* itself, that is the human being, is to care; and care (*Sorge*) includes taking care of the things at hand, taking care of the things objectively present, and taking care of the *Dasein* itself (cf. 1927, 240-305). The title of this chapter is "Care as the Being of Dasein". This is a real human vocation to care.

Touching stories, such as videos and images that circulate in social networks, show animals engaged in "human" activities and attitudes. Moreover, animals are often presented as models for humans. Interestingly, rather than their intelligence, these representations stress something in animals that looks very much like the ability to care. There is, for instance, the tender interaction between a dog and a little child with Down syndrome, or the multiple scenes of hippos helping other animals after crocodile attacks, or the very sweet images of a leopard that, after killing a female baboon, realizes it had a pup and proceeds to take care of it. With these examples I simply want to illustrate the thesis that in the ability to care we recognize the essence of being human.

Returning to dependence and fragility, it should be noted that this vulnerability (and its consequent need of care) not only refers to childhood, sickness, elderly and poverty, but also to rather common situations of daily life (cf. Chirinos 2014, 204-205).

> What someone in dire need is likely to need immediately here and now is food, drink, clothing and shelter. But, when these first needs have been met, what those in need then most need is to be admitted or readmitted to some recognized position within some network of communal relationships in which they are acknowledged as a participating member of a deliberative community, a position that affords them both empowering respect from others and self-respect (MacIntyre 1999, 127).

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Some vulnerabilities were never difficult to recognize. The specificity of the new anthropological climate is in its acknowledgement of ordinary, utterly common (i.e. not even borderline) fragilities. The attention given to the experienced social relationships, proper to Ethics of Care, leads us to discover human beings as fragile and dependent, and thus very far from any ideal of super-man.

For the Aristotelian definition of the human being it would be misleading to associate body with "animal" and soul with "rational". By the same token, it would be misleading to associate dependence with our animal basis, as if rationality were only autonomy. Octavio Paz finds a two-way flow of properties between body and soul. One would think depth and mystery pertain to the spirit, but he attributes them to the body, and writes:

> When I speak of the human person I do not evoke an abstraction. I am referring to a concrete totality. I mentioned repeatedly the word soul and confess myself guilty of an omission: the soul, or however one wants to refer to the human psyche, is not only reason and intellect—it is sensitivity as well. The soul is body, it is, then, sensation, and sensation becomes affection, feeling, passion (1993, 170-171).

Here the highlights noted by Fundamental Rhetoric regarding everyday life become especially meaningful; that is, the omnipresence of rhetoric in the lifeworld, not the art of rhetoric (*Kunstrhetorik*) but "the 'wild' rhetoric of the lifeworld" (Oesterreich 1994, 8; cf. 2008, 870). This formulation expresses succinctly the content of Nietzsche's text that Oesterreich uses as an epigraph for his *Fundamentalrhetorik*.[3] Yet, I argue that, unlike Oesterreich's *fundamentalrhetorische Anthropologie*, Nietzsche's assertion probably gives way to an anthropology reduced to rhetoric.

5. Personhood

Among human fragilities (needs of care) we find face and therefore, identity as well. Let us consider this text, which refers to person's goodness, as if it were likewise said about image:

> In the case of persons, one measure of care is the well-being or flourishing of the person who is cared for. Yet the advancement of personal well-being or flourishing should not be understood as actively promoting the care recipient's

[3] „...die *Rhetorik eine Fortbildung der in der Sprache gelegenen Kunstmittel* ist, am hellen Lichte des Vertandes. Es giebt gar keine unrhetorische „Natürlichkeit" der Sprache, an die man appelliren könnte: die Sprache selbst ist das Resultat von lauter rhetorischen Künsten" (cf. Nietzsche, 1874: 298).

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> "happiness" in a maximalist sense—according to Kant, "an ideal of the imagination," whose realization is subject to many contingencies—but rather as actions that tackle and alleviate the adverse consequences of those fragilities that often compromise ordinary well-being (González-Iffland 2014, 3).

This consideration is quite typical of politeness and its defence of face. Such interactions exist in a field of contingence and freedom, just as all human actions. This is the reason why Aristotle said that the aim of rhetoric is not persuading, but finding the means of persuasion, and going as far as the circumstances allow (*Rhetoric* I, 1, 1335b11-13). Moreover, the link between the self and its image is once again relevant. Care is a strictly *personal* issue. Not in the sense of exclusivity, i.e. "this is my problem, not somebody else's", but *personal* in the sense of *not individual*. When something belongs to someone without any reference to others—as far as this is possible—it can be called "individual". The notion of person is essentially linked to relation, and the criterion for goodness as well. It is significant that the epigraph for the entire volume by Brown-Levinson is this quotation from Durkheim: "The human personality is a sacred thing; one dare not violate it nor infringe its bounds, while at the same time the greatest good is in communion with others" (Durkheim 1915, 299).

Dependence plays a magnificent role here in the construction of the person. Dependence reminds us that our "individual self" is an invention. Indeed, dependence

> reveals its relation not only to the life of a rational human being but to a rational human being who is not a machine but a certain kind of animal, not autonomous but dependent, and whose dependency is uniquely related to his or her bodily condition (Chirinos 2014, 201).

Being personal also means uniqueness:

> No virtual presence can replace cleaners, nannies, carers for the elderly and the disabled—at homes and in institutions—as well as the more skilled labour of nurses, doctors and teachers (Yuval-Davis 2008, 284).

It also denotes unity:

> The use of the binomial "politeness-charity", in addition to clearing politeness from its ambiguity and its hypocrisy, is aimed at the unity of the human person, in order that the beauty in appearance may be expression of inner goodness (Sisi 2013, 237).

This holistic experience explains the need that fundamental rhetoricians feel to convey their subject matter in a different discipline. I do not intend to dwell on this

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methodological issue, but rather to simply mention its presence as a sign of the actual depth that pragmatics is able to reach in respect to the person. In the closing pages of his *Fundamentalrhetorik*, Oesterreich deals with the paradigm of the lie, with the correlation between construction of personality and the concrete public sphere thereof, from the viewpoint of existence in the lifeworld, with the possibility of deception and dictatorship. His final lines read as follows:

> Thus questions of a responsible way of life arise, aimed at the maintenance of the public lifeworld, at the cultivation of its speech culture and at the development of its liberal pluralism. But can practical postulates be formulated at all from a philosophical viewpoint? However, the theoretical foundation of Fundamental Rhetoric ends with a hint to these problems. Finding solutions to them would be the task of an *Ethics of Rhetoric*, which would have to be designed against the background of the sense theory (Oesterreich 1990, 142).

This deep connection with real life explains the title of Otto Gert's book, which contains a sort of rhetoric's definition: *The Art of Responsibly Speaking* (1994).

6. Politeness and Care in Everyday Life

Among the many aspects of identity, I will now briefly focus on politeness profiles to find how the notion of care can be applied in this field. Dependence is directly opposed to the primary value of negative politeness, i.e. autonomy. On the other hand, the logic of offering, a characteristic of positive politeness, is not necessarily care. It might bear a sense of dominion. Moreover, the sensitivity of positive politeness often entails an education that instructs us to refuse, even though taking for granted that the offering person will insist (cf. Brown-Levinson 1978, 233).

The notion of care opens a more positive approach to manage face than pure defence. Katherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni recognizes the validity of Brown-Levinson's theory of politeness, but finds it too defensive. She introduces a notion complementary to that of FTA: the FFA, Face Flattering Act.

> The main adjustment to the Brown-Levinson system is introducing a concept with a positive role parallel to that of FTA: after talking earlier of anti-FTA (a term which unhappily suggests that these acts are marked by their relation with threatening acts), now I call FFAs (Face Flattering Acts) any actions likely to have positive effects on the faces, such as compliments, wishes or thanks. Thus, speech acts are divided into several categories, depending on whether they have negative (FTAs), positive (FFAs) or both effects on face

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> (mixed acts, like offerings, which are both a threat to the negative face of the addressee, over whom we exert some pressure by offering, and an anti-threat to the positive face of this same addressee whereas the offering expresses concern for others) (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2000, 24).

I think that the notion of care has an anthropological starting point and covers both flattering and defensive fields. On the other hand, it should be recognized that Brown and Levinson are also ready to describe politeness profiles without reference to risks, for example, when they write:

> We can characterize the distinction [*between positive and negative profiles*] as polar types on the W_x dimension [*seriousness of FTA*], where the "warm" positive-politeness cultures have a subjective ideal of small values for D [*social distance*], R [*rating of imposition*] and relative P [*power*] which give them their egalitarian, fraternal ethos, while the "standoffish" negative-politeness cultures subscribe to a subjective ideal of large values for D, R and relative P which give them their hierarchical, paternal ethos (Brown-Levinson 1978, 246-247).

It would be interesting, but excessive for this paper, to include a consideration of women's politeness (cf. Brown-Levinson 1978, 246) from the standpoint of care, given the impact of feminine philosophy on the new appreciation of care. I confine myself to Kittay's way of dealing with acceptance of care. She notes that few people have studied the receptive aspect of care. Noddings calls it "the completion of care" and Tronto "the reception of care" (cf. Kittay 2014, 33). From my standpoint, this is encouraging, as I have studied a similar notion in a rhetorical field: the addressee's goodwill (cf. 2006). Kittay's anthropological approach presents the act of caring as something accomplished both by the caregiver and the care recipient.

> I want to insist that when we do not receive care graciously, we harm more than ourselves. We can refuse care graciously either by refusing care or by accepting the care but not accepting it graciously. In either case, we fail to complete the care of the other, and so undermine more than our own good (Kittay 2014, 39).

After what has been said about the ancient Greek conception of work, what Cristina Campo states about Greeks as masters of attention should be noted as fair. Masters of attention, not of the imagination! She contends attention and imagination are antithetical. This is what made the Greeks great. "Greeks were beings without imagination, whose heroic attention, adamant, continuously got through and collected, separated and united" (2010, 153). But this issue, clearly pertinent to care and politeness, must wait for further discussion.

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Regarding politeness, the speaker is often prepared to refuse, especially if his or her profile is negative, but this happens also in the case of positive profiles when the speaker has a good balance of positiveness and negativeness, or in the case of a rite with several offerings that does not foresee the acceptance on the first attempt. In the case of different profiles, which is the profile to be defended? There are people with a sort of "pride politeness" who impose their own profile (not necessarily positive) to others, but there is also the opposite case (not necessarily negative) that tries to adjust the action to the sensitivity of the hearer. I think that an answer is more likely to be found when the action is more closely perceived as care. When attention is given to the person, knowing well that care creates the relationship, the factuality of the politeness strategy becomes less important. Kittay speaks of a duty to receive as required for the completion of care. Refusing would be as much as refusing the relationship (cf. 2014, 39); but the extent of this action varies greatly, as does the nature of the relationship.

> In the case of people to whom we are close, this can be a painful rejection of our expression of love and concern. In the case of people who are giving care professionally, this is a frustration of their duty and obligation (39-40).

This is human life as community (cf. Gil 2008, 287-288). Outside this dimension, caring for identity becomes inhuman. A good illustration of human person's depth is Bruce Beresford's film *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989). A relationship between an old woman in Southern USA and her chauffeur grows and improves over the years, from her proud refusal of help to her subsequent acceptance and trust. The final scene shows the old lady in a retirement home and the chauffeur, now her best friend, spoon feeding her. A British acquaintance of mine once commented this ending, and found it extremely sad, the worst situation one might imagine for him/herself. Beyond all the possible reasons against such a position, my instinctive disagreement stemmed from a politeness profile that was different from hers. The same contrast emerged also during a university lecture when I said that I found the old woman's attitude of trust and surrender very beautiful. An Anglo-American student said, "Oh, that's so Mexican." Neither of us (the interlocutors and myself) would desire such an extreme dependence for ourselves, of course, but much less does the woman in the story, who shows the live reality of the personal relationship more deeply than default politeness strategies.

This scene, against the background of the entire story, illustrates very well the relevance of goodwill and trust:

> Trust is based on the person, first of all in his/her ability to create and maintain community (…). It can be concluded that rhetoric as a human science aims to investigate how the personal principle, in its completion

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through the community, creates the necessary confidence that rhetoric lives on (Gil 2008, 293).

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