How is Persuasion Possible?

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The phrase "How is x possible" has been a core question in philosophy since Immanuel Kant's era. It serves as an important tool by requiring the definition of the limits of what makes a fact possible. In rhetoric, this phrase becomes a key question that allows us to examine the cultural context of persuasive practices and compare it with the broader scope of social customs. The article mainly examines the cultural environment of persuasion, its connection to bordering symbolic violence, and the cyclical nature of persuasion as a form of practical sense.

Keywords: persuasion, conditions of possibility, action, symbolic violence.

1. Persuade and be persuaded

At the busy intersection of New York Avenue and New York Street, a figure lurks in a place where traffic lights control the flow. He is a street preacher hoping for a miracle. A miracle would happen if, at the moment when the red light stops the wave of cars, he could persuade the sinners to convert or at least listen to a sermon lasting a few dozen seconds. The conditions for effective persuasion here are tough: limited time, a random audience, the social context of people interested in everything except their own salvation, and the street's hustle and bustle drowning out the preacher's voice. The preacher uses his limited time by risking his life: he jumps onto a stool placed among stationary cars, and after a few dozen seconds, he must quickly run away from the street. No one waits for him, and no one makes way. The wave of vehicles pushes forward in a hurry. Since a miracle does not happen, the preacher repeats his sermon every few dozen seconds, as long as he can avoid collisions with the cars.

This scenario, due to its extreme nature, underscores the difficulties of persuasive action when reaching a large audience. We face limited time, partial understanding of the audience's beliefs, and restricted resources – those available at this moment, possibly not the ideal time. This leads us to ask ourselves the following question:

Is there any knowledge or skill that could increase the likelihood of success in such situations, for example, by lowering the risk of failure in persuasive efforts? This question is particularly important in the scenario described above, but it also holds significance in any situation where the goal is to influence or sustain someone's beliefs.

The second situation that I am presenting here is – in some respects – extremely different from the first.

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And here it is:

In front of the flat screen of the electronic medium, there is a receiver of verbal and visual messages coming from the screen. His consciousness is filled with various beliefs, some of which concern the nature of the bond that connects him with the content of the messages and the medium itself. Most of these beliefs are based on the statement that whoever is in front of the screen controls the situation of the message. Therefore, he can change the source of information at any time or seek information from a previously unknown source. He also has his own resources of criticism that allow him to evaluate the value of the message. Additionally, in the context of the Internet, he can create messages himself. In short, the belief in the autonomy of the subject in relation to the source is the foundation for susceptibility to the persuasiveness of the message. This belief arises in conditions of a significant lack of knowledge about how the other side of the screen works and what influences it. There are also complex systems of persuasion technology, different types of information filters operating on both sides – providing information and downloading it. It's a situation where an active source of information not only transmits the message but also creates conditions that encourage acceptance, using the knowledge of the recipient. The principle is: If you pay for nothing, you are a commodity. Therefore, this activity of the source is not limited to transmitting information but also includes gathering information about its recipients to facilitate the subsequent acceptance of the content.

Is there knowledge that can protect someone who is exposed to the strong influence of messages from the consequences of the influence asymmetry in which they are caught, especially when their own views are shaped more by their cognitive limitations than by active thinking, due to a lack of information about the message source?

2. Conditions for the possibility of persuasion

Although it seems paradoxical, believing in the independence of the individual from the source of the message is also a key factor in the message's influence. Those who do not, to some degree, feel independent of the source are less likely to be persuaded. Although this belief might be mistaken, it remains one of the essential conditions; without it, persuasion is not just ineffective but practically impossible.

The relationship established through persuasive activity between subjects results from their mutual engagement. Therefore, it has the character of a bipolar, transactional interaction and always occurs under conditions of information deficiency, which significantly influences the process and outcome. Both those who employ persuasion and those who are subjected to it must consider the limitations of knowledge that shape their participation in the process, as well as the potential results – either failure or success. Both the persuader and the persuaded demonstrate and reveal their attitudes toward each other and refer to each other's beliefs, which condition the perception of the message's value based on credibility. Thus, although the value of the message is crucial for successful persuasion, the message itself – being an effective

form of conviction – depends on the ability to reach a consensus and recognize the belief as both binding and credible.

Knowledge, therefore, which is valuable in this kind of entanglement, is first and foremost valuable knowledge, not because it contains the content of the message, but because it concerns the conditions for maintaining or expanding the effectiveness of persuasive influence. It is this kind of knowledge that makes a source reliable; it is what gives you an advantage in reaching consensus. The main value of rhetorical knowledge, which allows gaining an advantage in a transaction aimed at influencing the maintenance or change of beliefs, lies in the ability to exploit it under conditions of a information deficit that can influence beliefs. This knowledge can mitigate the importance of that deficit – not by increasing the amount of information but by enhancing the credibility of its source. Limitations in what is known – both on the part of the persuader and the one being persuaded – are therefore crucial conditions for the possibility of persuasive action itself. Without these limitations, rhetoric would be unnecessary, but also impossible. This highlights the importance of the enthymematic structure of rhetorical discourse. In other words: participants in rhetorical interaction are finite individuals, limited in their cognitive capacity by their being and particular cultural belonging. In this regard, rhetoric shares the cultural status of hermeneutics. As Hans Georg Gadamer argues, hermeneutics takes root as a practice within what he calls superstitions or prejudices (see Gadamer 1993). These serve as an effective element in the ongoing process of understanding, in which everyone participates, and which is rooted in their specific cultural context.

Persuasion is a form of strategic action. Jürgen Habermas comments on the meaning of this concept as follows:

> The teleological model of action is developed into a model of strategic action if the expectation of the decision of at least one of the other entities whose action is aimed at achieving the goal can be included in the calculation of the actor regarding the possibility of success; it is then assumed that the actor chooses and calculates the means and goals in terms of maximizing benefits, or expectations about benefits (Habermas 1986: 25).

It distinguishes between two types of social action: those based on agreement (Einverständnis) and those on "influence" (Einflussnahme). Both are connected differently to areas of knowledge.

> "Common" knowledge must meet quite high requirements. It is not given even when the participants agree on certain views; Nor when they know that they agree on them. I call common knowledge that is constituted by agreement, whereby agreement is conditioned by the intersubjective recognition of criticizable claims to validity (*kritisierbare Geltungsanspruche*). An agreement means that the participants consider certain knowledge to be important, that is, intersubjectively binding. Shared knowledge can take over the function

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> of coordinating action only to the extent that it contains components or premises with important consequences for the interaction. Mutual obligations arise only from intersubjectively shared beliefs. On the other hand, external influence (in the sense of cause-and-effect influence) on the beliefs of another participant in the interaction remains unilateral (Habermas 1986: 23).

However, the opposition between agreement and influence in persuasive action appears to be relative, valid only when reasons outweigh arguments. This emphasizes the need to consider the interactive nature of the activity. To act in anticipation of the results of influence, it is necessary to foresee and account for the intentions and actions of the other party in one's own behavior. Breaking a transaction always results from rejecting the possibility of consensus, recognizing that its conditions are impossible to satisfy. An always uncertain yet desirable consensus will be the focus of mutual efforts – persuasive and susceptible to influence.

Persuasive action is therefore a game in which success depends on the use of a consensus different from the one the rhetorical action aims for. To achieve the desired consensus by the rhetor and the expected one by the persuader, another consensus is needed – something that is already given, assumed, and embedded in the knowledge and attitudes of the rhetorical partners. The persuader exploits the fact that their audience accepts certain decisions, beliefs, and attitudes that are harder to abandon than to change the specific view, attitude, or decision that is the goal of persuasion.

3. Symbolic violence and persuasion

Effective persuasion, therefore, never occurs without the cooperation of the person being persuaded, who ultimately succumbs, in line with accepted beliefs. Thus, the limit of persuasion is violence (see Bourdieu, Wacquant 2001:162). However, there is a very fine line dividing persuasion from a specific form of violence – symbolic violence.

He explains the concept of symbolic violence, proposed by Pirre Bourdieu, as follows:

> Symbolic violence is, simply put, the form of violence that affects the social subject with its complicity. […] It is based on the fact that people accept the basic, pre-reflective assumptions of the team. Social subjects accept the world as self-explanatory, that is, they take it as it is. They consider it natural because they apply cognitive measures to it, themselves coming from the structures of this world. We are born in the social world, so we painlessly accept as our own a certain number of postulates and axioms that have not been said out loud. And that is why any realistic analysis of domination and politics must start from an analysis of this doxical acceptance of the world, this automatic correspondence of objective structures and cognitive structures. Of all the forms of "subcutaneous persuasion," the most inexorable is the one that is accomplished simply *by the order of things*." (Bourdieu, Wacquant 2001:30)

Bourdieu's formula nearly equates persuasion with symbolic violence. Therefore,

something that distinguishes the so-called "order of things" from "spoken things" might be missing in its interpretation. The former acts causatively, directly, outside of consciousness, and without its possible acceptance, while the latter operates through the meanings they carry – meanings that may or may not be accepted. The former represents the order of social forces, a kind of status quo within the interactive order, whereas the latter can either sanction or oppose this order. The difference is significant. The order of things functions regardless of what can be achieved with words alone. To produce the effect through persuasion, one must have agreement as both an end and a prerequisite.

Generally speaking, this difference is between the activity of the subject with or without the participation of thought, with or without the participation of choice. Thought must be characterized here as an active participant in the interaction. This is how Michel Foucault does it, to whom I will refer here.

> By thought I mean that which establishes, in various possible forms, the interplay of truth and falsehood, and which consequently constitutes the human being as an object of knowledge. In other words, it provides the basis for accepting or rejecting rules and constitutes human beings as social and legal entities. It is what establishes a relationship with oneself and with others and constitutes man as an ethical subject.

Therefore, "thought" understood in this way should not be seen only in theoretical formulations contained in philosophy or science. It can and must be analyzed in all modes of speaking, acting or behaving, in which the individual appears and acts as a subject of learning, as an ethical or juridical subject, as a subject aware of himself and others. In this sense, thought is understood as a form of action – as action insofar as it implies a play of truth and falsehood, acceptance or rejection of rules, attitude towards oneself and others. The study of forms of experience can therefore start from an analysis of "practices" – discursive or not – insofar as the word denotes different systems of action, insofar as they are inhabited by thought, as I have characterized it here (Foucault 1984:334-335).

In symbolic violence – as opposed to persuasion – there is a reversal of roles between the approval of meaning and agreement, of course. The approval of meaning does not serve to communicate but instead fosters the social marginalization of the one subjected to it, leading to an extreme reduction of their right to speak and a forced acceptance of the meanings in which symbolic violence is expressed. Therefore, symbolic violence functions to increase the subject's susceptibility to accept the "order of things" through participation in accepted meanings that conceal rather than validate that order. When some cannot say anything or what they say makes no difference at all, others can always be right and thus expand their right to speak, their right to participate in the game of truth and falsehood.

In symbolic violence, the aim is to establish the "order of things" and the "order

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of words," not to seek agreement. The goal is subjugation achieved when the dominant party accepts the change in meaning, which strips away the right to express and acknowledge one's own truth. By accepting this change, the individual subjected to symbolic violence consents to subjugation in social areas, through meanings that are no longer supported by explicit consensus but are maintained through silence and forced submission – either justified by rationalizing their place in society or by habits shaped by the "order of things." Thus, the agreement appears superficial. This appearance is consistently exposed by parrhesia (see Foucault 2001), a verbal act of rebellion that proclaims obedience to the order of human affairs established by symbolic violence.

Nevertheless, as Bourdieu states:

> Every linguistic exchange contains *the theoretical possibility* of an act of power, and all the more so if it involves entities occupying asymmetric positions in the distribution of appropriate capital. This possibility can be taken in parentheses, as it often happens in the family or in philia-type relationships in Aristotle's understanding. Then the violence is suspended by a kind of pact of symbolic non-aggression. Nevertheless, even in such situations, renouncing domination can be one of the dimensions of the strategy of indulgence or transfer of violence to a higher level of negation and concealment, a way to strengthen the effect of non-recognition and thus to strengthen symbolic violence (Bourdieu, Wacquant: 136).

Symbolic violence is not based on any consensus and does not seek it, and like any violence, the existing one destroys. Therefore, while violence – especially symbolic violence – can sometimes lead to the acceptance of a belief, when fear of danger becomes stronger than the desire to resist, its presence always indicates a decay in persuasive discourse. If violence comes before consent, then silence, not discourse, comes before consensus. The Silent Musae.

4. The Circularity of Rhetorical Discourse

Rhetoric is a form of culture involving words and gestures, where the communal value of conviction is recognized and promoted. Its nature is primarily determined by its purpose – to confirm or change beliefs, and to induce or maintain attitudes that can be shaped by belief. Actions aimed at achieving these goals – both verbal and non-verbal – can be collectively called "persuasion."

Persuasion is also a human activity that requires complex skills both in those who perform it and in those who are susceptible to it. Both rhetorical efforts and reactions to rhetoric are limited by many factors. Therefore, persuasive action is necessarily a socially defined act that occurs within a specific cultural context. In other words, persuasion is a socially constructed method of influencing people because it shapes their beliefs, alters attitudes, and ultimately changes their actions over time.

The importance of the cultural context in persuasion becomes clear when we recognize that the main characteristic of persuasive action is its circular nature.

Persuasion is based on consensus and ultimately leads to it. The foundation of persuasion, therefore, is the rejection of violence. It relies on convincing those who are already persuaded and reaching agreement among those who already agree. How is this possible? What is the effectiveness of persuasion? Why should and how can you convince those who are already convinced?

Let us observe that the paradox of this formulation vanishes when we recognize that consent is never universal and often fragile. There will always be individuals who disagree and those who change their minds. Moreover, consent does not apply to all situations where agreement might be possible. There will always be people who dissent from a consensus on certain issues and maintain minority beliefs. This means, contrary to all rhetoric theories, that effective persuasion cannot be reduced solely to rules and procedures. Rhetoric, in its true sense, cannot be learned like trigonometry. It also demands talent and sensitivity because it relies on the sense of the moment, as the person being persuaded may reject consent beforehand, and on circumstances, which can discourage us from our persuasive efforts.

In our cultural circle, the creators of the first concepts of persuasive action, the ancient Greeks, were well aware of this fact. Kairos – meaning the opportune moment, opportunity – and eikos, meaning chance, are key terms in Greek rhetorical art. Rhetorical art, as defined by the ancients – techne rhetorike – is not just a theory (episteme), but a specific skill, an art (techne).

In this way, we can compare persuasive skills to cycling skills. No cycling textbook – though it might be helpful for learning to ride a two-wheeler – can develop this skill on its own. You need innate abilities (such as the sense of balance) and learned skills (like mastering the specific motor skills of a vehicle).

So, returning to the question of the circular nature of persuasion: why should and how can we convince those who are already convinced?

Everything that can happen through persuasive activity between people is conditioned by two overlapping circles of relationships in which every human action is entangled. On one side, it is the sphere of social activities, i.e., interactions. These regulate human behavior regardless of the effects they produce in the sphere of meaning. Therefore, they are generally experienced through their power to bind and limit all human conduct. Their core function is to enable cooperation, often requiring compliance with certain norms and principles. Thus, they are normatively focused on intersubjective relations. When the behavior of one subject can be combined with that of another in such a way that both understand it and it fulfills some expressive, productive, or purely interactive role in their relationship, we can say that they become actions. Every action is therefore defined as cooperation. From this perspective, cooperation is simply the mutual adjustment of different subjects' behaviors based on shared and respected patterns and norms. When these behaviors recur, we call such actions practices. Because actions are governed by norms and rules, they can be repeated, expected, or anticipated. In this way, they become parts of an interactive game.

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On the other hand, we deal with the entanglement of subjects in the symbolic sphere, within the circle of relations where people interact with the field of signs: meaningful expressions and signs. It concerns behaviors that are treated in a specific way as possible, effective, meaningful acts performed on signs, carriers of meaning. They differ from practical actions in that they produce effects only if the reactions to them are conditioned by some interpretation of meaning, not just their appearance. Let's call them communication activities. Like practices, communication activities are governed by norms and rules. However, these rules pertain to creating expression and expression, not to creating interactive relationships. As in the previous case, thanks to this normativity, statements and expressions can not only be understood, accepted, or rejected, but also evaluated as rare, defective, accurate, or not. This allows them to be included in the communication process.

An important aspect of human functioning in these two spheres is that we cannot completely control them. This is due to two main reasons:

First of all, because both areas of activity are governed by norms and therefore operate under a certain system of coercion – an axionormative order – although they are experienced as acts of free will. The contrast between inner experience and social function can be explained by the fact that these compulsions are internalized. These regulations originate from the environment but are integrated into the individual's behavior. We passively submit to them in order to actively participate in another, complementary sphere. I accept the grammatical rules of the Polish language to express my thoughts clearly so others can understand. To avoid being seen as a simpleton who eats with his hands, I use a knife and fork confidently.

The act of speech seems to be spontaneous and free. However, it is actually governed by numerous norms and language rules that limit how freely we can express ourselves in a way that others can understand. It is this intelligibility that gives speech acts their quality of free expression. Yet, this intelligibility also exists beyond the formal rules of language; it is rooted in practical action. We can focus on the rules once speech effectively ensures mutual understanding. Only when it doesn't do so do we pay close attention to language itself. When language functions well, we tend to use it automatically. Although we select the words we want to say, we do so in a way that depends on the success of the communication. This depends on sharing the rules of the language system, which are common to the entire communicative community. But these are not the only conditions for effective communication. There are also rules of discourse – non-linguistic norms that also regulate expressions. A clear example is the rule of silence. It is not a linguistic rule, but it still influences how we use language.

The same applies to the realm of practical action. Although it is governed by interactional norms, as long as the purpose of practical action – the addition of one's own action to another's – is achieved, these norms stay in the background of conscious activity. When conflicts arise or contradictions make them ineffective, we turn to

language as a way to reach an agreement. It is no longer about agreeing on the norms of language and its use, but about negotiating the norms of practical action.

Both spheres therefore function together, creating an environment of human action. The structure of this environment is a normatively defined order in both spheres – practical and communicative activity. Their complementarity is such that when action in one sphere becomes ineffective, the other provides solutions. What cannot be said can be shown or done. What cannot be done or shown can still be talked about. Conflict in the sphere of interaction is resolved through negotiations, and disorder in the meanings of communicative activities is restored, enhancing the effectiveness of practical action. It is easier to reach understanding through words with those with whom we already share a practical connection, and it's also easier to achieve practical understanding when language does not hinder action. This order not only limits human initiative in meaningful expression and practical activity but also enables the activation of communicative and practical means that make these activities accessible in the social space. This makes them predictable, repeatable, and open to evaluating their effectiveness and formal correctness.

Second, we do not have complete control over these spheres because their scope and complexity go beyond what individuals can handle. Their ability to absorb interactions is so adaptable that they function as environments for subjectivity. The interplay between relationships among people and between people and signs determines the temporarily active and reactive forces acting either on the subject or their environment. Sometimes, elements of this environment serve as tools for action, and sometimes as objects. The interchangeable roles of object and instrument define action as a game that allows for strategy application and goal achievement, but always retains an element of unpredictability and surprise. Every human activity has a limited capacity for expansion, meaning a limited ability to influence and shape its environment. Instead, it's a game of influence where the influencer can take the initiative or be influenced themselves. The absence of a convincing word, the inability to persuade through meaning amidst emotional dominance or, conversely, effective persuasion that suppresses emotions, or even emotions triggered by words – these are all examples of this kind of game.

Rhetoric, therefore, rests on a dual foundation – that of the permanence and universality of patterns of relations between people who act under conditions they believe allow predicting the actions of their counterparts, and, on the other hand, on the permanence and universality of the patterns of meaning-making that the partners in rhetorical communication believe are binding for everyone. This foundation is not certain; its bases are still being reconstructed, modified, and established. Its durability depends on the fluid consensus surrounding its potential solutions. Rhetorical action, as an effective means of persuasion, is more likely to succeed in a communicative context within closed cultural systems. Only in these systems is the broad consensus sufficient

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to serve as an obvious basis for beliefs that are not immediately apparent. This idea is well-supported by history – in the cultures of ancient Greece, China – and in contemporary times, where culturally and communicatively, worlds of belief are often confined by "information bubbles."

Nevertheless, everywhere and always, convincing those who are unpredictable in their actions is pointless, and convincing those who cannot understand our words is impossible. All strategies in the art of persuasion, no matter how surprising or revealing they are, assume a basic agreement on the presumption of communicability – produced by the nature of communicative activities – and on the validity of norms in practical actions. These rules and principles may be stretched or applied in innovative or non-obvious ways, but their status and coercive power will still play a role in the rhetorical game. These conditions are necessary for actions that can change attitudes and beliefs. It is based on the agreement that if someone somewhere produces some meaning – whether a practical or communicative action – there are also conditions that can be created to interpret it. Persuasion is a strategic action that differs from other strategic activities because it uses not only its own power but also social forces rooted in coercion that the subjects of communication have internalized. Persuasion is an influence-based action that parasitically exploits another action, namely communication. That's why conviction, as an effect of persuasion, always relies on the resources of the person being persuaded. It is the person's own attitudes, expectations, stereotypes, and other beliefs that serve as the foundation for the outcome of persuasive efforts.

Coercion can take many undeniable forms: as a moral obligation (moral coercion), as a sense of obviousness (logical coercion), or as a threat of violence (physical coercion). Of these three, only the first two can be internalized as sources of motivation for changing beliefs based on consensus. The threat of violence, although it can be internalized, is never rooted in consensus.

The conditions for the possibility of persuasive action thus include heteronomous cultural fields – forces and opportunities, communicative and causal actions. Rhetoric is, therefore, the answer to the question: How can the word be incorporated into the realm of practical action governed by norms and principles of duty and obviousness? It also serves as an answer to another, complementary question: How does a word escape the threat of violence and unleash the power it holds solely because of its meaning?

The answer to these questions always requires citing the sources – historical and social – of the situation in which a specific relationship between thought, action, and word creates the possibility of realizing the power of persuasion. Its power is limited, but it also comes from, if it works, the restriction and contingency of the conditions it faces.

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