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### Recommended Citation

Mailloux, Steven. "Humanist Controversies: The Rhetorical Humanism of Ernesto Grassi and Michael Leff." *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 45 (2012): 134-47.

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## Humanist Controversies: The Rhetorical Humanism of Ernesto Grassi and Michael Leff

*Steven Mailloux*

### ABSTRACT

This article discusses two twentieth-century examples of humanist controversies in order to demonstrate some rhetorical paths of thought involved in developing and securing rhetorical humanism within philosophy and rhetorical studies. The article begins with Martin Heidegger's antihumanist provocation and examines Ernesto Grassi's response in his revisionist interpretation of a nonmetaphysical Renaissance humanism. Next it takes up the post-Heideggerian moment of late twentieth-century postmodern critiques, including attacks on humanist foundationalism and essentialist notions of agency, and compares Grassi's defense of rhetorical humanism within Continental philosophy to Michael Leff's reinterpretation of Ciceronian humanism within communication studies. Both Grassi and Leff propose a rhetorical humanist alternative to Heidegger's and postmodernism's philosophical antihumanism. These two rhetoricians demonstrate an interpretive power and a rhetorical creativity that not only revitalize rhetorical humanism in the present age but also provide valuable resources for its extension into the future.

Humanism has always been about human being and becoming. Historically, it has related human being and becoming to various domains of thinking and acting, such as epistemology, ethics, politics, art, theology, and, of course, rhetoric. As many rhetorical humanists have noted, Protagoras famously said, "Humans are the measure of all things, of things that are that they are and of things that are not that they are not."

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*Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2012  
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Plato countered with his Athenian who declares that “it is God who is the measure of all things, not humanity as some say” (*Laws* 716c).<sup>1</sup> This first “humanist controversy” has been repeated again and again throughout the history of Western culture. In late nineteenth century America, for example, Harvard president Charles W. Eliot is said to have vetoed William James’s recommendation that Protagoras’s human-as-measure fragment be placed above the door to the newly constructed philosophy building, Emerson Hall. Instead Eliot insisted on the biblical question to God, “What is man that thou art mindful of him?” (Psalms 8:4).<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, James’s most polemical ally, F. C. S. Schiller, advocated a version of pragmatism he called “humanism” and developed its claims through a positive anti-Platonist reading of Protagorean sophistry, emphasizing the human-as-measure dictum and its complementary valuing of worldly rhetorical practice over philosophical searches for supernatural absolute truth.<sup>3</sup>

Schiller’s proposal of a pragmatic humanism soon set off the first of many twentieth-century controversies in which versions of humanism, in its philosophical and literary varieties, were repeatedly proposed, criticized, and defended. In the United States in the twenties and early thirties, there was the New Humanist controversy in literary studies with its arguments over classicism and romanticism, morality and aesthetics, universal values and modern relativism.<sup>4</sup> In France and Germany in the late forties there was the debate over Jean-Paul Sartre’s essay “Existentialism Is a Humanism” and Martin Heidegger’s rejoinder in his “Letter on Humanism,” to which I return below. In the sixties, again in France, Louis Althusser published his “Marxism and Humanism,” which became part of still another humanist controversy not only within the French Communist Party but more widely within European philosophy.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the last century, both during the American culture wars and in specialized academic debates over postmodernism, various humanisms, antihumanisms, and posthumanisms significantly defined positions within contemporary thinking.

In what follows I discuss two examples of these humanist controversies in order to demonstrate some rhetorical paths of thought involved in developing and securing rhetorical humanism within disciplinary fields, first philosophy and then communication studies.<sup>6</sup> I start with Heidegger’s antihumanist provocation and examine Ernesto Grassi’s response in his revisionist interpretation of a nonmetaphysical Renaissance humanism. Next I take up the post-Heideggerian moment of late twentieth-century

postmodern critiques, including attacks on humanist foundationalism and essentialist notions of agency, and compare Grassi's defense of rhetorical humanism within Continental philosophy to Michael Leff's reinterpretation of Ciceronian humanism within communication studies. Both Grassi and Leff propose a rhetorical humanist alternative to Heidegger's and post-modernism's philosophical antihumanism.

In 1947 Heidegger published his "Letter on Humanism" in response to Sartre's argument that existentialism was humanistic. In a lecture the previous year, Sartre had claimed that existentialism, which he partly derived from his reading of the early Heidegger, could be considered a form of humanism. Existentialism, he maintained, is a humanism because both assert that "there is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity," and in existential humanism,

we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realization, that man can realize himself as truly human. (1948, 55–56)

Heidegger rejected Sartre's claim that any existentialism derived from his work could be humanistic in a positive sense.

For Heidegger, every humanism is metaphysical and mistakenly assumes the what and how of human *beings* instead of thinking the truth of *Being*. Humanism does this when it ignores or distorts the ontological difference between beings and Being. This neglect of the ontological difference can be seen in typical humanist definitions of humankind, which always differentiate humans from other beings, a move that gets in the way of asking the question of Being. For example, all traditional humanisms presuppose "the most universal 'essence' of man to be obvious," and this assumption led Roman humanism, "the first humanism," to a "metaphysical interpretation" of the Greek definition of man, "zōon logon echon," which misleadingly translated it into Latin as "animal rationale" (Heidegger 1977, 202). Heidegger asks, "Are we really on the right track toward the essence of man as long as we set him off as one living creature among others in contrast to plants, beasts, and God?" To think the truth of Being, we must recognize the ontological difference and move beyond the humanist metaphysical effort to "locate man within being as one being among others" (1977, 203).

Ernesto Grassi studied with Heidegger for several years beginning in 1928 and helped publish his teacher's "Letter on Humanism" in 1947 (Grassi 1988b, xii–xix). But then he spent the next four decades defending Italian humanism against what he took to be Heidegger's misinterpretation.<sup>7</sup> This rhetorical move, providing a counterinterpretation of the humanist tradition, gets repeated in various humanist controversies throughout the century. Indeed, we might call this argumentative tactic a part of the rhetorical hermeneutics of any new humanism: defending humanistic traditions by reinterpreting them in light of contemporary attacks. In his version of the rhetorical move, Grassi argues that Heidegger simply and mistakenly accepted traditional readings of Italian humanism and dismissed it as a literary-cultural movement with no philosophical value. According to Grassi, Heidegger misinterpreted Italian humanism as a rather insignificant example of onto-theological metaphysics. Metaphysics as onto-theology can only think Being in relation to beings as a whole and in relation to the supreme or highest being (Heidegger 1969). It forgets the ontological difference and collapses ontology and theology into each other. Furthermore, according to Grassi, "for *onto*-theological metaphysics, only the logical, rational word is valid and objective. Any other word, for example the metaphorical word that transfers the significance of one rationally defined term to another (eagle = power), can have a poetic, literary or even rhetorical sense, apt to strike sentiments and to convince, but it does not have a philosophical function" (1988a, 144). For Grassi, such onto-theological metaphysics in no way characterizes what he calls "rhetorical humanism." He argues that "unlike traditional metaphysics," Italian rhetorical humanism "does not begin with an ontology (that is with a philosophical activity that attempts to define beings rationally) but with the problem of the word. This historical word, not abstract, not rational, clarifies reality" (1988a, 145).

Grassi highlights Heidegger's thesis in his "Letter on Humanism" that the "thinking expressed in *Being and Time* is against humanism" (Heidegger 1977, 210). Calling this claim categorical and polemical, Grassi explains that for Heidegger "the humanist conception does not grasp man's essence," for it does not think profoundly enough man's *humanitas*. The Italian philosopher then asks: "What is the conception of humanism to which Heidegger refers and against which he rails? Is this conception historically valid?" (1988a, 136–37). Grassi ends up answering this question in the negative. Through readings of the later Heidegger, he shows exactly what constitutes Heideggerian antihumanism and how

Heidegger's critique does *not* apply to Italian humanism, which prior to and alongside its Neoplatonist turn was as antimetaphysical in its rhetoric and poetics as any Heideggerian might wish. He develops this counterinterpretation in such books as *Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism* (1983) and *Renaissance Humanism: Studies in Philosophy and Poetics* (1986).

In *Renaissance Humanism*, dedicated to Heidegger, Grassi presents his alternative rhetorical humanism through a strategic reading of specific Italian and other humanists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. At first echoing Heidegger, he summarizes the dominant model of Western thought, against which, Grassi argues, a non-Platonic Italian humanism reacted. This traditional "onto-theological metaphysics" gives precedence to the philosophical problem of existence over the rhetorical question of the word: "Following Plato's interpretation of Socratic thought, the principal problem became the question of the rational definition of being, that is, the 'causal understanding,' the explanation of its essence, its *οὐσία*. This led to a definition (*χωρισμός*), a determination of being independent of 'time' and 'space.' And the definition of manifold being through rational, causal thought led to the definition of the 'first,' primal being—God," thus resulting in the onto-theological tradition of metaphysics that Heidegger and poststructuralism after him vigorously reject (1988b, 121).

Born in Plato's interpretation of Socrates, the metaphysical tradition persisted in the European Renaissance through the Platonic humanism of Marsilio Ficino and others. This Platonic humanism, Grassi contends, is the metaphysical humanism that Heidegger mistakenly took as Italian humanism *tout court*. However, Grassi argues, there was a more significant, non-Platonic strand of humanism ingeniously articulated by a range of Renaissance thinkers from Coluccio Salutati and Leonardo Bruni through Leon Battista Alberti and Erasmus that eventually culminated in Vico. This non-Platonic, rhetorical humanism "'reversed' the whole of the speculative tradition. 'Usus' and 'experimentia' replace the *a priori* idea; the question of the existential claim replaces the problem of causal, rational thought; the investigation of the word as the correspondence of the existential claim takes the place of the rational definition of being; the assertion of the pre-eminence of metaphoric language over rational language is maintained" (1988b, 121).

One of the more complicated figures in Grassi's humanist canon is Lorenzo Valla, whose critique of Plato Grassi ends up turning back on Valla himself. Valla is Grassi's prime example of the humanist merging philosophy

with rhetoric: “The interpretations of being . . . are possible only from the sphere of the answer responding to the address [of the concrete situation], and this address becomes known through enunciating the signification of the words ‘here’ and ‘now,’ i.e., through rhetoric” (1988b, 80–81). For Valla, “the individual case is of central importance; the individual case is not—as maintained by the Platonists—the accidental, the futile, and unimportant, but quite the contrary: it is the expression of the situation, of the concrete in the compass of which man always finds himself and in which he answers the demands put to him. It is therefore important to recognize the ever new and varying historical disclosure of Being through the experience of the demands of the word” (1988b, 81). This is rhetoric as philosophy.<sup>8</sup> “Rhetorical thinking and speaking” discover “the meaning of beings in the ‘context’ of the historical situation” (1988b, 82).

With this reading of Valla’s rhetorical humanism in place, Grassi goes on to complicate his interpretation by noting that Valla builds on the ruins of traditional metaphysics and presents “suddenly and without transition” a new rationale for Christian thought (82). Valla does this by replacing “the cardinal virtues of classical metaphysics with the three theological virtues” as articulated by St. Paul:

If being receives its meaning as the response to the [existential] appeal, then all existential behavior is based on the *faith* in the unfathomable address. This response to the address occurs in rhetorical, rather than rational, language. Language which realizes itself within the framework of a non-derivative primal instance is at the same time and always the expression of an act of faith, and of a hope without which faith itself would be meaningless. Hope implies per se a letting-be—in the sphere of the individual situation—of an ever newly self-manifesting being. Such recognition therefore demands the affirmation of openness and love. (1988b, 83)

Faith, hope, and love. Grassi then goes on to resecularize Valla’s attempt to reinterpret classical metaphysics through Christian theology. Indeed, Grassi uses the same argument against Valla that Valla used against Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics.

Quoting Valla’s claim that “it is just as ludicrous to talk of a life of the gods whom we do not know as if we were guessing the life of animals which we do not know,” Grassi argues that “the critique of ‘contemplatio’ as the essence of the life of the gods, which Valla puts into the mouths

of the opponents of Platonist and Aristotelian philosophy, turns de facto also against his own ‘new’ Christian philosophy” (1988b, 85). Specifically, “after having maintained the preeminence of rhetorical speech, which uses metaphors, over rational speech, which uses concepts, Valla holds that he is justified in proposing a metaphoric description of paradise” (1988b, 85). But, argues Grassi, such an analogy is “inadmissible for [Valla’s] purpose” of “maintaining a ‘res religiosa’ on the basis of man’s experiences in history as he responds to demands made upon him” (1988b, 85). Why is Valla’s move inadmissible? Because “a metaphor is possible only if there is a similarity: but between a historical life, with its elements of faith, hope and love, and a suprahistorical reality there can be no ‘similitudo.’ In celestial suprahistorical reality the existence of time cannot be assumed, nor can any becoming, or constantly renewed striving, or disclosing; neither has hope, nor faith, nor an anti-dogmatic attitude (*caritas* = openness) any meaning” (1988b, 85).

I am less concerned here with the persuasiveness of Grassi’s secularized critique of Valla than I am with the rhetorical hermeneutics of Grassi’s placement of Valla within his revisionist reading of a non-Platonic Italian humanism. Grassi ends up with a rhetorical humanism that rejects onto-theological metaphysics and thus, at the very least, compels a reevaluation of Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian reductive readings of Italian humanism.

Michael Leff’s later advocacy of rhetorical humanism is a good example of such a reevaluation. Though situated primarily within the academic disciplinary debates over rhetoric within communication studies, Leff’s defense of rhetorical humanism (or what he calls “humanistic rhetoric”) provides an interdisciplinary exemplar of rhetorical hermeneutics (or what Leff calls “hermeneutical rhetoric”) that transcends its disciplinary context. In Leff’s example we see the kind of skillful combination of rhetoric and interpretation found in Grassi’s defense of humanism, and Leff concocts this admixture against a postmodern antihumanism indebted to the same Heidegger against whom Grassi worked. However, Leff makes two additions to the argumentative repertoire of a prohumanist apologetics: he self-reflexively situates his claims in a disciplinary context and ends up providing some specific names to apply to his strategic maneuvers—Ciceronian humanism as hermeneutical rhetoric.

In “Tradition and Agency in Humanistic Rhetoric,” Leff attends to a “specific development in the history of rhetoric that begins in classical Greece with Protagoras and Isocrates, appears in Rome under the sponsorship of Cicero and Quintilian, rises to prominence again in the

Renaissance ‘humanists,’ and still commands attention and respect from some contemporary rhetoricians” (2003, 135). Leff places Cicero at the center of this humanistic tradition, and though acknowledging variations in “Ciceronian humanism” throughout its history, he identifies a cluster of common features, which include

a suspicious attitude toward abstract theory not only in respect to rhetoric but also to ethics and politics; a conviction that discourse, especially discourse that allows for argument on both sides of an issue, has a constitutive role to play in civic life; a valorization and idealization of eloquence that entails a strong connection between eloquence and virtue; and a conception of virtue that is decisively linked to political activity. (2003, 136)<sup>9</sup>

In this and other articles Leff focuses on views about agency and tradition within Ciceronian humanist rhetoric, views that have been critiqued in certain strands of critical postmodernism or poststructuralism.

One of Leff’s friendly adversaries is Dilip Gaonkar, especially in his influential “The Idea of Rhetoric in the Rhetoric of Science” (1997). Here Gaonkar challenges the contemporary use of rhetorical models borrowed from classical rhetoric. He argues that this borrowing has led to an unfortunate misapplication of classical production-based models within today’s interpretive-centered disciplinary projects. Leff characterizes Gaonkar’s central thesis as a postmodern critique of the “ideology of human agency,” associated with a classical rhetoric that “radically separates the older, humanistic paradigm from the contemporary, interpretive turn in rhetorical studies” (1997b, 90). In response, Leff, like Grassi before him, challenges the challenger’s interpretation of the humanist rhetorical tradition and puts forth a counter-reading that attempts to blunt the main thrust of the critique. Leff argues that Gaonkar and other postmodernist critics reductively characterize humanistic rhetoric as assuming a concept of agency as absolutely originary and of tradition as only negatively constraining. In contrast, Leff rereads the theory and practice of humanistic rhetoric as much more complicated historically and politically: “The humanistic approach entails a productively ambiguous notion of agency that positions the orator both as an individual who leads an audience and as a community member shaped and constrained by the demands of the audience” (2003, 135). Thus understood, Leff claims, the orator is precisely not a simple originary source but rather a performative node of articulation, and an enabling

(not just restraining) tradition functions as “a mediating force between individual and collective identities” as it “emerges as the primary resource for rhetorical invention” (2003, 135).

Leff develops his defense of humanistic rhetoric through the close reading of various texts from the classical and modernist rhetorical canons, including Thucydides, Isocrates, Lincoln, and Kenneth Burke.<sup>10</sup> Cicero, of course, is Leff’s most prominent and relevant illustration, for the Roman rhetorician provides both the theory and the practice of agency as historically articulating and tradition as performatively enabling.<sup>11</sup> But Leff uses a reading of Lincoln to add the argumentative moves I have mentioned: a situating of his humanist defense within its disciplinary context and a self-reflexive naming of his strategy of using interpretation for rhetorical invention.

In “Hermeneutical Rhetoric” Leff resists collapsing his approach into my version of rhetorical hermeneutics because, he sensibly argues, to do so would erase the disciplinary contexts out of which our complementary approaches arose, literary studies within English for my rhetorical hermeneutics and rhetorical criticism within communication studies for his hermeneutical rhetoric.<sup>12</sup> Our approaches certainly agree that “all interpretative work involves participation in a rhetorical exchange, and every rhetorical exchange involves some interpretative work.” Such considerations, Leff goes on, “might tempt us . . . to regard rhetorical hermeneutics and hermeneutical rhetoric as two ways of saying the same thing” (1997a, 198). I certainly am so tempted, but Leff resists the identification, arguing that “rhetorical criticism (in speech communication) and literary hermeneutics (in literary disciplines) have had significantly different histories, and scholars in the two domains typically engage in significantly different practices.” And “even if these distinctions are arbitrary and counterproductive,” which Leff doesn’t think they always are, “they remain a practical fact that cannot be ignored” (1997a, 198). Instead, Leff argues for “a hermeneutic (in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s sense of the term) that recognizes the ‘otherness’ of disciplinary interests while it opens space for fusing these differences into new perspectives” (1997a, 198–99). Whether one agrees or disagrees with Leff here about the status of disciplinary boundaries, it is hard to deny that the different disciplinary identities that he highlights continue to be part of the current rhetorical scene where any defense of rhetorical humanism takes place. To foreground that differentiation can be an effective strategy for convincing a specific audience to accept the usefulness of your particular defense.

In any case, Leff makes his disciplinary point as a prelude to illustrating how his hermeneutical rhetoric works in practice by rereading Lincoln's speeches, showing how Lincoln uses a controversial interpretation of the Declaration of Independence to achieve his rhetorical purpose of promoting antislavery politics. Lincoln calls the Declaration an "immortal emblem of Humanity," asserting the equality of all God's creatures against the petty partisanship of exclusionary politics (1997a, 206).<sup>13</sup> I suggest that this illustration is another instance in which Leff demonstrates the power of his brand of rhetorical humanism. That is, Lincoln's mixture of interpretive strategy and rhetorical argument—of interpretive performance as rhetorical invention—supports Leff's presentation of agency and tradition as mutually constitutive components in humanistic rhetoric. Leff explicitly connects hermeneutical rhetoric to rhetorical humanism in his reading of Isocrates's *Areopagiticus*, which he uses to exemplify the performative power of agency and tradition within humanistic rhetoric. "When read from this perspective, the *Areopagiticus* becomes an exercise in the rhetorical and hermeneutic uses of history. The Athenian tradition frames and justifies the argument but the tradition is fabricated (or at least tailored) as it is invoked, and the text works to fashion a reciprocal interaction between the past and the present" (2003, 143). In this way Leff puts his close reading of Isocrates, a prominent representative of his humanistic rhetorical tradition, to the service of his defense of that tradition against reductive postmodern readings of humanist agency.

Leff not only finds hermeneutical rhetoric in the texts he interprets—specific speeches using interpretation as a resource for rhetorical invention—but also suggests that interpretive reception and rhetorical production cannot be as easily separated within the humanistic tradition more generally as some critics of it assume. Leff uses the classical notion of *imitatio* to make his point. *Imitatio* has sometimes been "badly misunderstood because of the aversion to 'imitation' that we have inherited from the Romantic movement. *Imitatio* was not the mere repetition or mechanistic reproduction of something found in an existing text. It was instead a complex process that allowed historical texts to serve as resources for invention." Thus, Leff concludes, "within the larger program of rhetorical [humanist] education, *imitatio* allowed interpretation to play a vital role in the formation of rhetorical judgment" (1997b, 97). By arguing effectively that interpretive practice and rhetorical invention "virtually coalesce" (1997b, 98–99) within the classical humanist tradition, Leff adds

to his defense of that tradition against those who view it as based on an outmoded production model no longer useful to rhetorical studies after the hermeneutic turn.

Within their different humanist controversies, Grassi and Leff share a set of rhetorical hermeneutic strategies for reinterpreting and championing the tradition of rhetorical humanism. Against Heidegger's antihumanism Grassi offers a nonmetaphysical reading of humanism that focuses on its forceful valuing of the word, while against a certain reductive postmodernist critique Leff presents more complex notions of agency and tradition within a developing humanistic rhetoric. These rhetoricians demonstrate an interpretive power and a rhetorical creativity that not only revitalize rhetorical humanism in the present age but also provide valuable resources for its extension into the foreseeable future.

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## NOTES

1. See Sprague 1972, 18. On the translation and interpretation of Protagoras's *anthrōpos metron* fragment, see Schiappa 2003, 117–33. On the history of the term “humanism” and its application to various movements, see Giustiniani 1985, Kristeller 1988, Knight 1995, and Kraye 1996.

2. See Kuklick 1977, 251n.

3. See Mailloux 1998, 27–32, and Porrovecchio 2011.

4. See Foerster 1930, Grattan 1930, and Hoeveler 1977.

5. See Althusser 1969 and 2003.

6. On rhetorical paths of thought as rhetorics of thinking and as thinking about rhetoric, see Mailloux 2006.

7. See Rubini 2008 on the development of Grassi's humanism argument prior to Heidegger's 1947 letter and Celenza 2004 for the Italian context of Grassi's defense; also see Foss, Foss, and Trapp 2002, 51–79 and Struever 2009.

8. See Grassi 2001.

9. In his endnotes to this passage, Leff cites several texts in support of his generalizations, including Eden 1997, Kahn 1997, Mendelson 1997, Sloane 1997, Lanham 1993, 186–92, Conley 1990, esp. 17–20, 34–42, and 109–50, and Struever 1970, 5–39.

10. Besides essays cited in the following paragraphs, see Leff 1989 and 1996.

11. Among his many essays on Cicero, see, for example, Leff 1986, 1990, 1998.

12. As Leff explains, his coining of “hermeneutical rhetoric” is a pointed disciplinary reversal of the terms in “rhetorical hermeneutics” (see Mailloux 1989 and 1998), a shift in focus “from how rhetoric constrains understanding of texts to how interpretative processes

become inventional resources in texts that purport to address extraverbal reality” (197a, 197–98).

13. Leff is here quoting Lincoln’s 17 August 1858 campaign speech delivered in Lewistown, Illinois, before his first debate with Stephen Douglas.



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