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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

# **Are Truth and Justice Naturally Stronger than their Opposites?:**

**A Comparative Study of Plato's *Gorgias* and Aristotle's *Rhetoric***

**by Jake Verrilli**

## **Table Of Contents**

<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Preface.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. Introductory Section.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1a. What is Rhetoric?.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1b. How is Rhetoric Used?.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1c. How is Rhetoric Seen</b>	
<b>Today?.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1d. Did We Formerly See Rhetoric Differently?.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. Socrates Against Rhetoric in the <i>Gorgias</i>.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2a. Socrates and Gorgias Agree on a Definition of Rhetoric.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2b. Why this Definition Means Rhetoric is Harmful.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2c. Socrates and Polus: Why doing Wrong is Worse than Suffering It.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2d. Socrates and Callicles: Why Self-Indulgence is not a Better Life.....</b>	<b>12</b>

**2e. Conclusions Socrates Arrives at and What we are left**

**Wondering.....16**

**3. Aristotle on Rhetoric.....19**

**3a. Introduction to Aristotle’s Rhetoric.....19**

**3b. On the nature of Rhetoric.....20**

**3c. Aristotle’s Mission of Redefining and Redeeming Rhetoric.....26**

**3d. Topics that fall under Aristotle’s Rhetoric, and Concerns about these**

**Topics....32**

**4. Troubles in Modern Politics.....37**

**4a. Our isolated worlds.....37**

**4b. The Problems with Isolation.....38**

**4c. The True Ugly Face of Demagoguery.....41**

**5. Pursuing Solutions.....43**

**5a. Solving the Problem?.....43**

**5b. Aristotle’s Political Advice.....44**

**6. Conclusions.....46**

**6a. Ground Covered.....46**

**6b. What now?.....46**

**Bibliography.....48**

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## Preface

This work is primarily a comparative study of Plato's *Gorgias* and Aristotle's *The Art of Rhetoric*. I also draw upon secondary sources about these texts and other contemporary texts about rhetoric in the political sphere in the hopes of forming a more complete discussion on the topic of political rhetoric. For the formatting of this work I have used standard MLA 9th edition guidelines. All footnotes are used to draw attention to sources, while the Bibliography does the work of citations. Any work used for the first time will mention the author's full name, which

can then be used to determine the corresponding source in the bibliography according to MLA format. For Aristotle's *The Art of Rhetoric* parenthetical citations, I use page numbers, as the edition I was referencing did not use line numbers. For Plato's *Gorgias* parenthetical citations, I use line numbers according to the corresponding edition.

## 1. Introduction

### 1a. What is Rhetoric?

When hearing the word rhetoric, it is likely that most people think of rhetorical questions not aimed at getting an answer, but rather at making a point. In this way one can gain an understanding of what rhetoric is all about. The aim of rhetoric is persuasion. Many would call rhetoric an art: a set of techniques of argumentation. Throughout history, many manuals and essays have aimed to define and teach rhetoric. Where it starts and where it ends is not clear, but what is clear is that rhetoric is like a tool, and that it can be used to produce conviction in listeners or readers.

### 1b. How is Rhetoric used?

In practice, rhetoric is used in public and private debates, political gatherings, writings, and many other places. When a person wishes to convince a listener, reader, or audience of something, the most effective way to do that is through rhetoric. The problem is that rhetoric is a powerful tool, but potentially has no bearing on truth. We humans are prone to use tools for evil

as well as good. With conviction comes support for a cause, and where there is support, politicians will have a much easier time executing their agendas. Of course the nature and inherent good in these agendas is, in many cases, irrelevant to the power of persuasion that rhetoric bestows.

### **1c. How is Rhetoric Seen Today?**

The separation of truth from rhetoric is a topic that has become increasingly relevant in our modern political context. Today, there are countless examples of politicians who are seen mainly as manipulators, at least by those who do not support them. These politicians use rhetoric in a way that their opponents would call destructive. While these politicians themselves argue that they are simply telling the truth, or “saying it how it is”, there are many who see their speeches and debates as simple manipulation for their own good. For this reason, rhetoric is often seen as a negative term used to describe the manipulation of language for one’s own ends.<sup>1</sup> Many would say that when a politician is being honest and genuinely has the interests of their constituents in mind, they are simply “telling the truth”, and are not engaged in rhetoric at all. In reality, rhetoric is an integral part of the political process, for it is the aspect of speeches that makes them persuasive, whether for good or ill.

### **1d. Did We Formerly See Rhetoric Differently?**

Parmenides was the first philosopher to draw a sharp distinction between the false persuasion of men, and true logical arguments. Gorgias broke down Parmenides’ distinction by showing how logic was not a vehicle of certain truth, for it could lead to completely opposite

conclusions on a given topic. Gorgias is considered the founder of rhetoric, for he tried to capture and describe it as a sort of art. For him, rhetoric was about producing conviction, and had nothing to do with truth.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, Plato's Socrates pushes back against the rhetoric of Gorgias, and rhetoric as a whole, because of his fear of its power of manipulation. Aristotle, Plato's student, aims to redefine and redeem rhetoric in light of the Platonic challenge and the rhetorical style of Gorgias.

For the purposes of this work, I will be summarizing and analyzing the relevant ideas in Plato's *Gorgias* and Aristotle's *The Art of Rhetoric*. While these two works are not officially in dialogue with one another, Aristotle certainly was aware of the Platonic challenge. Plato's Socrates argues that rhetoric should be replaced by "teaching," which he sees as the best way of getting at the truth, improving individual souls and society as a whole. Aristotle, on the other hand, does not believe that teaching as Plato understands it is possible in the public forum. Rhetoric has an unavoidable place in public life. In discussing Aristotle's *Rhetoric* I will also consider some secondary texts that focus on a few of its puzzling aspects. Finally, I will introduce two works that are relevant to rhetoric and political discourse today; *The Trouble with Reality* by Brooke Gladstone, and *Demagoguery and Democracy* by Patricia Roberts-Miller. They capture many of the most important problems that afflict our contemporary political climate.

I shall find that the ancient context for political rhetoric - the public forum where speakers seek to woo citizens - has been so displaced by mass media - and most recently, the internet - that Plato's skepticism has become even more relevant because the stable community that Aristotle optimistically presumed for the healthy functioning of political rhetoric has broken down.

## **1. Socrates Against Rhetoric in the *Gorgias***

Written around 380 BCE, Plato's *Gorgias* is framed as a dialogue between Plato's teacher, Socrates, and a group of sophists. In ancient Greece, sophists were teachers who promised that they could convince people of anything, "even better than the experts." This was an important skill to have in democratic Athens, where influence depended on citizens' ability to persuade. Gorgias was famous for proclaiming that he could, through rhetoric, make the worse argument seem better, and the better argument worse.

### **2a. Socrates and Gorgias Agree on a Definition of Rhetoric**

After an exchange of formalities between Socrates and the group of sophists, Socrates makes his position clear; he is deeply skeptical about rhetoric and its uses. Gorgias' opposing position is that rhetoric is the most important art and the best skill to have. Socrates tries to get Gorgias to define rhetoric. Eventually, they agree that a rhetorician is "an agent of the kind of persuasion which is designed to produce conviction, but not to educate people, about matters of right and wrong" (Plato, *Gorgias* 455a). With this definition in mind, Socrates begins to discredit rhetoric and its influence.



## 2b. Why this Definition Means Rhetoric is Harmful

Socrates' key point is that a rhetorician aims to convince people on matters of right and wrong, with no actual reference to moral understanding. This means that rhetoric is often used to convince people of a moral wrong or falsehood. It is obvious that there are politicians who convince people of things that they themselves do not believe for their own gain. Socrates is pointing out that rhetoric is the tool-set which enables blatant corruption.

Socrates charges that rhetoricians cannot confer understanding because they do not have enough time with a crowd, unlike teachers who can truly educate. "Teaching," for Socrates, is an activity which aims to give its recipients a thorough understanding of the topic at hand so that listeners can discern when something is morally wrong or false, or when a speaker does not really know what they are talking about.

Socrates argues that most aspects of life are covered by specialists, and so a rhetorician should not have a place convincing people of something they are less educated on than an expert. The burden of inducing conviction is much less than that of "teaching," and a rhetorician does not need to have knowledge on a topic to convince an audience of something. Instead, they can simply use the tools that their "art" provides. I use quotation marks around the word art here because while the sophists like to call rhetoric an art, Socrates disputes this definition.

Based on this criticism, Socrates gets Gorgias to admit out of shame that before teaching rhetoric he would teach morality to his students, to be sure that they would use their weapon in the public interest. Socrates then uses this concession to conclude that rhetoric cannot be the most important topic to teach, as its students must first be familiar with morality before they can become rhetoricians. Socrates also states that since rhetors are educated on morality, then they

must also be moral. Gorgias agrees, and Socrates points out that earlier Gorgias had admitted that rhetors can actually sometimes do wrong. Gorgias had also said earlier that rhetoric is the most important art of all, but if this is the case, he should not have to first teach his students morality. In this way, Socrates has drawn out a contradiction from Gorgias, and so Socrates “wins” the argument. It is interesting to note here that Socrates is using a technique that is in itself rhetorical. By drawing out a contradiction from Gorgias, he has defeated his opponent, but has not taught him much.

One problem here is that it seems perfectly reasonable that a person who is educated on morality could still do wrong. People seem to do things all the time that they know to be immoral, but they do them anyway. Ultimately, it will be Socrates’ burden to prove that anyone who truly knows what’s just would see that this is for their own good and so would have no interest in being unjust. This equivocation leads Gorgias’ pupil, Polus, to step in and challenge Socrates.

## **2c. Socrates and Polus: Why doing Wrong is Worse than Suffering it**

Like the wild colt after whom he is named, Polus intervenes because he is not satisfied with Socrates’ apparent refutation of Gorgias. Gorgias never should have pretended that he would teach morality to his students before teaching them rhetoric. Polus asks Socrates to define what he takes rhetoric to be, and Socrates replies that it is not an area of expertise or “art,” but rather a kind of experiential “knack” that aims at producing pleasure and gratification, like cooking. And these two activities are part of the same branch: flattery or pandering. Like cookery that produces a tasty but possibly unhealthy meal, rhetoric aims at gratification, not

genuine welfare. Polus is confused because, he declares, most people do not seem to find rhetoricians contemptible. In fact, they are the most “powerful” members of the community.

Socrates denies that rhetoricians are the most powerful citizens because power must be good for those who possess it, and rhetoricians are not taught about what is genuinely good for them, since their profession is about what seems good, not what serves one’s genuine welfare. What serves one’s genuine welfare is acting justly, and this gives the agent the only power worth seeking. Socrates argues that it is not possible for a man to be happy in spite of being immoral. Polus is stunned by this assertion, and argues that it is obviously possible, citing the example of the tyrant Archelaus (472d). Surely he is happy as can be, given that he is able to do exactly what he pleases and exert power over others.

Polus argues that so long as a criminal avoids punishment, he will be happy, and if he ends up punished, he will be unhappy. Socrates believes the opposite: an unpunished criminal is worse off than one who is punished. Socrates shocks Polus by stating that everyone actually believes it is worse to do wrong than suffer it. Here the dialogue gets thorny, and, it appears, Socrates deploys an argument that is downright sophistic.

He asks Polus if he believes that wrongdoing is more contemptible than suffering wrong, and Polus agrees. Since Polus believes that it is more contemptible but not worse, Socrates points out that he must not equate contemptible and worse. Polus thinks that doing wrong is more contemptible because others would see it as such. He does not believe that the agent would be worse off for getting away with doing as they please. Socrates replies that when something is more contemptible it must be either unpleasant or harmful. Polus does not believe that doing wrong is unpleasant, so Socrates points out that it must be harmful. Now Socrates argues that it

must also be worse. Polus seems confused, but concedes that “the argument doesn’t make it seem possible” (475e) to disagree.

Here’s the problem. Socrates did not specify to whom doing wrong is more harmful. We suspect that Polus meant it was harmful to the victim, but he would not have agreed that wrongdoing is more harmful to the agent. Socrates has caused Polus to make a contradiction, as earlier he claimed that suffering wrong is worse than doing it, but now he has agreed to the opposite. Once again, Socrates “wins” the argument, though through conspicuously rhetorical means which Callicles will now expose.

## **2d. Socrates and Callicles: Why Self-Indulgence is not a Better Life**

Socrates appears to convince Polus that immorality is never good for the wrongdoer, but Callicles is not persuaded. He reverts to Polus’s original position that morality is like a chain holding people back. Now Socrates truly lays his cards on the table, and we gain a better understanding of where he is coming from. Developing Polus’s own position, Callicles is a hedonist: “If a person has the means to live a life of sensual, self-indulgent freedom, there’s no better or happier state of existence; all the rest of it --the pretty words, the unnatural, man-made conventions --they’re all just pointless trumpery” (492c). Callicles makes this forceful statement with the implication that rhetoric is the greatest tool for achieving a most pleasurable life, free from the constraints of society. This is exactly whom Socrates really wanted to argue with, an unabashed hedonist who is willing to claim that unchecked immorality is good.

Callicles now introduces a key distinction that illuminates where Polus has gone wrong. Polus, he says, has only agreed that doing wrong is worse because he had accepted that it was more harmful, not realizing that Socrates meant more harmful to the agent. In his heart of hearts, Polus

of course does not agree with this position, and Callicles explains why. Doing wrong is worse only according to convention (*nomos*). By nature (*physis*) the strong rule over the weak. Society is only a means for the weak to shackle the strong to and prevent them from living their best life - to the benefit of the weak.

The root of the dispute is Callicles' hedonism. Since pleasure is the measure of the good, one is best off being able to use others to one's own advantage. Callicles' understanding of the natural order of the *psyche* is the reverse of Socrates'. He thinks that the appetites should rule, that moderation is a vice, and that courage involves taking risks to get what one can for themselves. Wisdom, he believes, is about being as clever and calculating as one can in service of gratification.

Socrates now must argue that living justly is better for the agent by nature, and not just by convention. He believes that rhetoric is not concerned with morality, but rather with conviction, and so is only as good as the ends it serves. About hedonists, he proclaims: "They can see that punishment is painful, but they have a blind spot about how beneficial it is, and they fail to appreciate that life with an unhealthy mind --a mind which is unsound, immoral, and unjust --is infinitely more wretched than a life with an unhealthy body" (497b-c). Socrates believes that rhetoric encourages this kind of harmful behavior, and so is a mere "knack" that is subordinate to "teaching.". The next step will be for Socrates to defend his position that an immoral life is necessarily a bad one.

A summary of his argument goes like this:

1. The pleasant and the good are not the same.
2. The good should be the reason we do pleasant things, not vice versa.

3. Being pleasant means enjoying, while being good makes us good.
  - a. This means that we must figure out what good is, and that good must come in the form of organization, perfection, and expertise in the area of the good.
4. A good state is an ordered and organized state.
5. An ordered mind must then be a good mind.
6. Order in the mind is self discipline.
7. A self-disciplined mind is a good mind.
8. A mind in the opposite state is bad (an undisciplined and self-indulgent mind).
9. A disciplined person must act in an appropriate manner so as to not indicate a lack of self-discipline.
10. Appropriate relations with our fellow human beings means being just, and appropriate relations with gods means being pious.
  - a. Anyone who acts justly and piously is a just and pious person.
11. These people also have the courage to use self-discipline and turn away or toward events, people, pleasures, and irritations when appropriate.
  - a. These people must then be a paradigm of goodness, and do things well and successfully which brings fulfillment and happiness.
    - i. This also means that a bad person does things badly, and is unhappy because they are too self-indulgent.
12. This means that to live a happy life one must seek out and practice self-discipline, and, if he should ever unfortunately fall to indulgence, he should let justice have its course. We should devote the community and ourselves to justice and self-discipline, guaranteeing happiness.

- a. Refusal to restrain our desires results in outlaws, bandits, and predators, and these people are incapable of cooperation and of love from their fellow humans.
- i. This is why Socrates says that he, along with many other experts believe that justice, discipline, order, cooperation, and love are what allow the universe to be a *cosmos*: an ordered whole, not an unruly mess. Socrates says that Callicles cannot see the geometrical equality that exists between gods and men, leading him to believe some deserve more than their fair share.

Socrates aims to disprove the hedonists' credo that pleasure is what matters most in life. The hedonist, he says, is like a leaky jar. In this analogy, the water that fills the jar is pleasure, and despite the hedonist's best efforts, the jar will never be filled, as it is always leaking. In this way, Socrates argues that a hedonist will never be satisfied. If they are always trying to live their lives in a way that maximizes pleasure, they will find themselves more and more desperate to achieve satisfaction that they will never get.

If instead a person aims at what is truly good, then they will find things pleasurable in a way that avoids the above problem. Aiming at the good means that when we take action, it should benefit us in the long term. A hedonist who focuses exclusively on pleasure will find, Socrates argues, that they will suffer in the long term. This enables Socrates to persuade Callicles that some pleasures are bad, while some pains are good. This concession causes Callicles to then make a distinction between better and worse pleasures. Based on this new distinction, Socrates moves to show that what makes pleasures better is when they aim at the good, whereas bad ones do not. A good pleasure is one that has good long term effects. This then brings Socrates to his description of the good.

Socrates says that what makes a house or ship good is its order and organization. In the same way, we might describe a healthy body as ordered and organized. This healthy body is a good one, and so Socrates concludes that an ordered and organized state is a good one. By analogy, a good mind, which makes a good person, is ordered and organized. This requires self-discipline. In this way, a mind lacking in self-control is “out of shape.” The power we really seek is power over ourselves, not power over others as hedonists believe.

People must exhibit moderation by turning away from excessive pleasures. Courage means being willing to risk discomfort for the sake of acting justly. A virtuous person, Socrates concludes, will be a good and happy person. By contrast, when people do not restrain their appetites, they become bandits, outlaws, and predators, and are incapable of receiving love and cooperation from their fellow humans. Socrates sees immorality as scarring to the soul. While these scars might not be visible externally, they are wounding the person nonetheless. He believes that punishment is a way to heal these scars, and so one is better being punished than going scot-free. But true punishment is education: culminating in the knowledge that one is never better off acting unjustly.

## **2e. Conclusions Socrates Arrives at and What we are left Wondering**

Based on his definition of a good and happy life, Socrates chides politicians for prizing the wrong things when they aim at power, gratification, and pleasure. If politicians focused on instilling self-discipline and justice in themselves and their fellow citizens, then they would be doing their job properly. As it currently stands, Socrates sees politicians as corrupt, for, in using rhetoric to serve their own selfish ends, they are not only harming society but also themselves.



Socrates then offers a myth of the afterlife where the soul is freed from the body, and any badness is made clear before Hades, the fair-minded judge. Eternal damnation will result for those with bad souls. If a person has lived a hedonistic life, then their soul (symbolized by their naked body) will be full of scars, which will lead to an eternity of suffering for them. While a person might be able to get away with taking advantage of people in their life, Socrates believes that their soul will be damaged, and they will suffer for eternity. It's important to note that the suffering inflicted by punishment in the afterlife simply reinforces a suffering that, we are led to believe, the unjust person has inflicted upon themselves during their life on earth. They were already miserable, despite appearances to the contrary.

These reasons constitute Socrates' motivation for advocating for the "art" of teaching aimed at improving students' souls rather than the "knack" of rhetoric aimed at helping students win arguments and "get ahead" regardless of the truth. Because experts are more knowledgeable on a given topic, and rhetoricians are not aiming at the good of their listeners or readers, rhetoric should be replaced by teaching.<sup>3</sup>

Now it remains to ask if Socrates has actually convinced us that a clever politician who abuses rhetoric and power is really inherently worse off by nature. I am not saying that this life is necessarily a better one, especially if a person happens to be conscientious. But if Socrates is correct, it seems that there should not be people continually choosing hedonism. In explanation of this confusion, Socrates would likely cite the power of ignorance, and the appeal of what seems to be good. Of course, unchecked hedonism has clear drawbacks. It is easy to imagine someone in this position dying of an overdose fairly quickly. That said, if someone were to live a moderately indulgent life or a life of extreme indulgence with a few checks, it does not seem certain that their life will always be a bad one. Socrates makes use of the idea of "scars on the

soul”, but does not explicitly describe how these scars will manifest themselves in a mortal life. While the afterlife might be a significant deterrent to some, not everyone believes in an existence after death. At the end of the day, it seems there are people who are content with their immorality, making Socrates' picture of a horribly scarred and miserable criminal seem less plausible. I would contend that while immorality is wrong, Socrates has not convinced that it is inherently harmful for the agent. If anything, this means that Socrates' worries about rhetoric are even more important. If hedonism is appetizing for selfish people, that means there will be more people out there using rhetoric for ill.

The next task will be to examine the work of Plato's student, Aristotle, on rhetoric. With the worries of Plato in mind, the guiding question will be whether Aristotle's rhetoric can put his teacher's concerns to rest, and where that leaves us.

## 1. Aristotle on Rhetoric

### 3a. Introduction to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*

Aristotle's *Rhetoric* was written during two periods, from around 367-347 BCE, and from around 335-322 BCE. During the first of these periods, Aristotle was in Athens at the school of Plato. During the second period, Aristotle had his own school, the Lyceum. Before this work, rhetoric as an art and tool was under serious fire. Plato's *Gorgias* had, around thirteen years

earlier, sought to discredit rhetoric, and expose it as being useless and harmful to society. Being a student of Plato's this certainly would not have been lost on Aristotle, but he did not seem to come to the same conclusions on the topic as his mentor. As will be discussed, Aristotle clearly saw a place for rhetoric in the public sphere. Why exactly he chooses to disregard Plato's desire to shift away from rhetoric and toward teaching is unclear. What can be discerned, however, is that Aristotle clearly did not believe that teaching was sufficient for the continued survival of society.

Aristotle was much more of a realist than Plato when it came to politics. Where Plato's *Republic* lays out his utopian vision for politics, Aristotle takes a much more descriptive approach, showing respect for different kinds of regimes so long as they remain stable. In this way, Aristotle was more of a conservative. He acknowledged that a new, ambitious, grand vision for politics was not feasible.<sup>4</sup> Instead, Aristotle sought to affect change by commenting on the systems that already existed. By describing the different regimes and how they come about, and by giving his takes on which were the most effective, Aristotle aimed to give his students the tools to have a deeper understanding of the basics of politics. This is how Aristotle acquired his title as the father of political science. By being more thorough and systematic, Aristotle gave his students tools to hopefully make less ambitious, but more achievable changes than what Plato had in mind.

While Plato's Socrates is more of a critic and visionary, Aristotle is more of a realist. So, when it comes to rhetoric, the question becomes: can Aristotle answer the challenge that Plato poses? Can Aristotle redeem rhetoric, while addressing the concerns that Plato had in a way that lays to rest all fears. The answer is, unfortunately, not simple.

Like with other topics, Aristotle takes a much more grounded and realistic approach to his rhetoric. Despite the ethical challenges of rhetoric which Aristotle acknowledges, Aristotle the realist cannot disregard the inevitability of rhetoric in political life. As Plato's Socrates admits in *The Apology*, his philosophical candor and refusal to pander to the jury meant that he would likely be unable to defend himself in court. While Plato's ends might have been more noble, the means to achieving them were not in sight. On the other hand, Aristotle is giving advice that can and does work in a contemporary setting. That being said, however, the Platonic challenge still stands strong, and rings true throughout history. We must now dive into the *Rhetoric* and analyze the efficacy of Aristotle's attempt to redeem it.

### **3b. On the nature of Rhetoric**

Aristotle begins by defining the nature of rhetoric and the various ways his view differs from what has come before. How this relates to Plato's challenge to rhetoric will come later. He begins by stating: "Rhetoric is a counterpart to dialectic" (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3). The function of rhetoric is "seeing what means of persuasion are available in any given case" (6). Both dialectic and rhetoric involve persuasion, and where dialectic is about a conversation between two people, rhetoric has a larger audience in mind. Both of these arts are a part of life for every person so long as they are trying to persuade.

For Aristotle, "a systematic approach to rhetoric is concerned with proofs" (5), and "the instrument of rhetorical demonstration is the enthymeme" (5). A proof is an argument that demonstrates a point, and an enthymeme is a kind of deductive proof. This is of practical importance because when people believe a point has been demonstrated, they are more likely to believe the point. Aristotle first distinguishes between kinds of proofs by dividing them into

inartificial proofs (ones that do not use the rhetorical method, such as witnesses, confessions, etc.), and artificial proofs (which do use the rhetorical method). He then goes on to divide artificial proofs, which are the subject of this work, into three categories. These categories are proof by speaker credibility speeches, proof by speeches that induce emotion, and proofs by argument.

Proofs by “speaker credibility speeches” are ones that convince an audience by raising the audience’s opinion of the speaker. If the audience has a high enough opinion of the speaker, they may believe what they are saying based on that fact alone. This is, of course, shaky as it convinces in a way that does not take truth into account.

Speeches that induce emotion, Aristotle says, are in fact “the only kind of proof that contemporary authors of rhetorical manuals attempt to treat” (7). The troubling reality is that speeches that evoke emotion to convince are often more effective in front of a crowd because proofs that involve long chains of reasoning are simply too taxing. A well-put, simple, logical argument might be more effective, but such proofs are likely packed with assumptions. This is what Plato’s Socrates is most worried about.

Lastly there are proofs by argument. These are Aristotle’s favored kind of proof, and what he considers to constitute the body of the rhetorical art. This is an important note to make, as proofs by argument aim at truth, whereas the other kinds of proofs are tangential to it. In placing these proofs at the heart of rhetoric, Aristotle aims to sidestep the Platonic challenge. The most important kind of proof by argument is the enthymeme. Aristotle says that “...an enthymeme is a kind of deduction... an enthymeme should not involve a long chain of reasoning or include all the steps that lead to the conclusion” because “length would induce confusion and stating what is already obvious would be redundant” (101). Aristotle acknowledges that a crowd

will get lost in long arguments, and so to be convincing, a rhetorician must make use of short and effective proofs; and this is where the enthymeme comes in.

When it comes to “dumbing down” arguments, Aristotle says that “a speech from an uneducated man is more persuasive before a mob than one from an educated man” (101). Here Aristotle makes reference to “a mob”, which Plato’s Socrates considers dangerous because they are easier to convince. Aristotle explains further by saying that “educated people speak in generalities and abstractions, whereas uneducated people base what they say on what they know and see around them” (101). He acknowledges that when rhetoric is used to convince uneducated crowds, they will not be convinced by educated sounding speeches. Unfortunately, the bar for conviction in an uneducated mass seems to be lower than for an educated one. This means that a good rhetorician bears responsibility for keeping rhetoric tied to truth.

In a telling moment, Aristotle states: “We should take as the basis of our arguments, then, not all possible views, but those of a determinate group of people, such as the judges or those whose views are acceptable to the judges, and the fact that they hold these views should be clear to all or the majority of them” (101). Here, Aristotle is referring to *endoxa*. These are a set of commonly held beliefs which, when drawn upon, will be easily accepted by the majority of people. These beliefs lead to conclusions that will only be as true as the *endoxa* on which they are based. But in general, Aristotle presumes, they have merit. In sum, enthymemes are deductive proofs which use *endoxa* as their starting point.

A most important point to highlight is Aristotle’s belief that “...what is true and what is right are naturally stronger than their opposites, and so in cases where the proper judgment is not reached, the defeat of truth and justice is necessarily due to the speaker himself, which is reprehensible” (5). This statement is commonly referred to as “Aristotle’s optimism”. We might

imagine a debate between two equally skilled practitioners of Aristotle's rhetoric. The audience is completely unbiased when it comes to the two individuals, and all other factors are equal. In this case, it seems at least plausible that the rhetorician working with the true and righteous position would have an easier time convincing the audience than his opponent, who is not working with the true position. The problem here is that all factors are rarely equal, and it is questionable exactly how much weight truth holds. If we take Aristotle's claim here to be valid at face value, then the Platonic challenge does seem to be answered. If truth naturally wins out in rhetorical debate, then we have nothing to worry about. The sound argument will be more convincing, and our society will continue on the path of justice and truth. A gaping problem here is that Aristotle does not make an argument in support of his optimism, but simply states it as a premise. My skepticism of Aristotle's optimism is clear, and we will continue to discuss the topic at length later.

Crucial to the construction of Aristotle's rhetoric are three different kinds that he enumerates, which correspond to three different audiences that rhetoric is used on. Deliberative rhetoric is used in private or public assemblies, with the aim of determining expediency and harm. Judicial rhetoric is used for convincing a judge or jury of what is just or unjust. Finally, epideictic rhetoric is used for assigning praise or blame to an individual, and concerns itself with fineness or shamefulness.

As for deliberative rhetoric, Aristotle enumerates five subjects or themes: "ways and means; war and peace; national defense; imports and exports; and legislation" (15). Aristotle says that the speaker must be informed about each topic that he gives advice on, because for that advice to be persuasive, it should be good advice. This comes back to his optimism about truth, and helps to answer the Platonic challenge. Of course a rhetorician can always use his knowledge

for ill, but if used as prescribed, Aristotle's rhetoric should be for the good of society. It remains to be asked whether or not it is actually more convincing to use rhetoric properly, however.

*Eudaimonia* - the focus of ethics - is relevant to rhetoric because "...every attempt to persuade or dissuade an audience is concerned with happiness and the things that entail or oppose it" (17). Because what every person aims at, in Aristotle's eyes, is "...happiness and its constituent parts" (17), a rhetorician needs to be knowledgeable about *eudaimonia*. The claim that everyone aims at happiness is not a settled debate in philosophy, but for the purposes of Aristotle's rhetoric, it seems convincing enough. The real question is how to adjudicate between different conceptions of happiness. If someone can tap into what an audience truly wants, then they will certainly have a much easier time convincing. The problem is that what people want varies, as not everyone has an understanding of *eudaimonia* like Aristotle's *phronimos*. Aristotle defines happiness as "success accompanied by virtue, or as self-sufficiency in life, or as a life secure in the enjoyment of the maximum pleasure, or as a flourishing state of property and body along with the resources to protect and make use of them" (17). Following his *Ethics*, Aristotle defines the parts of happiness as "possession of both internal and external goods" (18).

Aristotle emphasizes the rhetorician's need for political knowledge as well as ethical wisdom: "...When it comes to being persuasive and offering good advice, nothing is more important or critical than a thorough grasp of political systems and a breakdown of their customs, institutions, and interests. For all men are persuaded by considerations of where their interest lies, and what is in their interest is the preservation of their political system" (31). In the proper context, the rhetorician is speaking to an audience who are devoted to the continued existence of their political system. If the rhetorician is operating in a corrupt regime, however, Aristotle might well believe that using rhetoric to undermine the regime is appropriate. That he does not say this



explicitly is telling. But the presumption that political regimes are stable may be a clue to why he believes that truth and justice “naturally win out” in the *polis*.

Aristotle believes that the strength of a regime and its laws has a strong connection to the virtues of its citizens. A regime that does not have decent laws, or few laws in general, is a place where rhetoric properly understood is not meant to function. He says that the parts of virtue are “justice, courage, moderation, magnificence, high-mindedness, generosity, gentleness, practical intelligence, and wisdom” (32). Aristotle believes that courage, moderation, and justice are heavily informed by law, and this further illustrates the importance of having a good regime for rhetoric to be effective.

Aristotle’s discussion of the nature of virtue and vice, and of justice and injustice in particular, is intended to give the reader a sense of how to convince people, because understanding what people want and their motivations is also heavily informed by these topics. In addition to this, this section ensures that potential rhetoricians have an understanding of these topics so that they themselves can avoid wrongdoing, and hopefully see that wrongdoing in other speakers, further helping to create a public-spirited political culture. While he does not spend much time explicitly discussing the culture and setting required for his rhetoric to work for the public good, we are beginning to tease out the fact that he does vaguely imagine the kind of political culture that is necessary for salutary use of rhetoric.

### **3c. Aristotle’s Mission of Redefining and Redeeming Rhetoric**

In the beginning of his work, Aristotle acknowledges the troubles that rhetoric has faced before him. Rhetoric was essentially created by Gorgias, but this posed clear problems for society as it was not constrained by truth, and was a powerful tool of the sophists. In addition to

this, Aristotle was a student of Plato, and certainly would have been aware of his teacher's stance on the matter. In this section, I will try to mount an argument against the Platonic challenge from the perspective of *The Art of Rhetoric*. As will become clear, Aristotle makes no direct reference or reply to his teacher's criticisms of rhetoric within this work. This makes it difficult to put the Platonic challenge to rest, especially considering the topics that Aristotle includes in this work. Overall, there are some important points made here which help to mitigate the problems that Plato was addressing. However, as there is no direct reply, I find it difficult to disregard what Plato's Socrates is saying. With that said, we will begin with an analysis of Aristotle's redemption of rhetoric.

Aristotle tells us that "as things stand at present ... the authors of rhetorical manuals have worked out only a small portion of the art, because only proofs are a matter of art, while everything else is merely ancillary, but they say nothing about enthymemes, which constitute the body of proof" (3). As Jacques Brunschwig points out, Aristotle is drawing an important distinction between his new form of rhetoric, and the forms that have come before. Many rhetorical manuals in the past were focused on memorization of speeches rather than actually learning the art as a whole. Plato's Socrates, of course, denied that rhetoric was an "art" at all, and so Aristotle will seek to defend the status of rhetoric as an art, while distinguishing it from what was described in previous manuals.

In his essay on *The Art of Rhetoric*, Robert Wardy brings up another important point in favor of Aristotle's redemption. Today, he claims, there is a certain ruling consensus on rhetoric, but before and after Aristotle it was likely different. Many consider Aristotle to be the first to legitimize the art, where before it was likely seen in a much worse light. This of course, helps to account for the Platonic challenge. It is possible that Plato would have had far fewer problems

with Aristotle's rhetoric than he had with the sophistic rhetoric he is battling against in the *Gorgias*. He mentions that Aristotle is attempting to show that there is not as much of a distinction between rhetoric and philosophical arguments as Plato thought, and this makes it less of a target of contempt. With these factors in mind, however, Wardy adopts an overall skeptical stance on Aristotle's ability to put the Platonic challenge to rest.

We recall that Aristotle addresses the fact that before him, authors of rhetorical manuals have spent much time on teaching how to arouse calumny, pity, anger, and similar emotions, and that these are "not concerned with the matter at hand" (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3). Where past authors of rhetorical manuals have focused on the manipulation of emotions as the main body of their work, Aristotle is sidelining this aspect in favor of proofs, and more specifically, enthymemes. Instead of focusing on conviction through manipulation, Aristotle's rhetoric aims to produce conviction through proofs that are sound. Still Aristotle acknowledges that the audiences that many of these speeches are aimed at are simply not able to follow complicated proofs. Despite this, he betrays confidence that his art can achieve the aims of truth and justice that Plato reserved for "teaching". Where inciting emotions in an audience to gain conviction leaves the audience with little or no actual reasons for supporting an initiative, a proof gives the audience a much deeper understanding of the topic. Of course if a teacher was working with a small group, or a logician giving a complex but thorough proof on a topic, the audiences in those situations would likely have a much better understanding of why they support the initiative. Only if it is in fact the case that truth and justice "naturally" win out over their opposites in front of larger audiences is Aristotle justified in having fewer fears about rhetoric than one finds in his teacher Plato.

In her essay on *The Art of Rhetoric*, Amelie Rorty sees Aristotle as moving past the Platonic challenge by arguing that Aristotle's ideal orator does not stoop to manipulation, and since the reputation of each rhetorician is at least partly determined by the policies they help enact, it would be difficult for an immoral one to find much success.

Troels Engberg-Pederson also finds Aristotle's optimism convincing. Aristotle's emphasis on enthymemes helps us understand that he envisions a rhetoric which aims at finding truth. Under the proper circumstances, two rhetoricians arguing with one another would be aiming at the truth, and through their argument, the position that best represents the truth will emerge victorious. Troels-Pederson argues that in this context, using rhetoric improperly would require specific moral wrongs that interfere with the substance of the argument. In this way, he sees Aristotle's rhetoric as being more difficult to use for ill. Of course, there is no guarantee that rhetoric actually ends up operating in this context, Pederson's argument is simply that this is the context Aristotle desired.

The problem I have with Aristotle's optimism and these authors' relative faith in it is one which is informed by the current political climate in many places. While it is true that truth should be more believable than lies, that does not always seem to be the case in actuality. As we have said, there is a problem within political debates, and that is that factors are rarely, if ever, equal, and people are frequently immoral. Two rhetoricians will often have a difference in skill level, one side of the debate will often more easily lend itself to conviction, and the audience will also usually have a predisposition to believe one side of the debate over the other. All of these factors combine to mean that even when one rhetorician is working with the side of the debate which is more fully based in truth, they might still have a more difficult time convincing than their opponent.

With this being said, it is likely that Aristotle was aware of these factors. When he mentions his belief in the power of truth, he says that its defeat will be due to the speaker, and that this is reprehensible. Aristotle clearly holds practitioners of rhetoric to a very high standard. A rhetorician who convinces his audience of lies, or fails to convince his audience of the truth, is worthy of reprimand. This idea connects back to the setting which Aristotle desires for rhetoric. We might infer that Aristotle wants the system in which rhetoric operates to be one which enforces certain moral and structural guidelines on its rhetoricians. If unconstrained by either the political culture or good laws, rhetoric has a clear potential to be detrimental to society. Aristotle says about past authors of rhetorical manuals that "... If all court cases were conducted as they are today in at least some states (especially those with good laws), these authors would have nothing to say" (3). It is unfortunate that Aristotle does not give a more complete account of his ideal setting for rhetoric.

Aristotle does tell us that "...in many places the law forbids speaking outside the matter at hand in court, whereas in the political arena the judges themselves are enough to guard against it" (5). Aristotle is conceiving of a context in which the judges of political rhetoric (namely the audience or policy-makers) are able to tell when the rhetorician is using rhetoric that is "outside the matter at hand". While winning the audience to one's side through credibility and manipulation of emotions are not absent from Aristotle's view of rhetoric, they are sidelined in favor of enthymemes. Accordingly, Aristotle excludes past authors of rhetorical manuals because they focus on what is outside of the matter-at-hand. In the political arena, he trusts, the audience and judges of speeches should be enough to guard against such talk.

This statement is a confusing one, as it simply does not seem to hold true in many cases. This is another place where Aristotle's optimism could use some defending. While it might be

better for political culture if talk that was “outside the matter at hand” was discouraged, it clearly is not always so. Here we might infer that Aristotle imagines his rhetoric operating in states where this is the case. What is confusing is that he certainly knows about corrupt regimes, and so why he has such faith in the audience is unclear.

By describing the knowledge that a deliberative speaker giving advice must have, we can see that Aristotle is not advising rhetoricians to give the appearance of knowledge to persuade, but to persuade by giving genuinely helpful advice. In other words, Aristotle wants practitioners of rhetoric to be concerned with the good of the state, and not only or primarily with their own good. This is in line with what Aristotle says about ethics in relation to rhetoric. They are clearly intertwined, he says, and this is an important move in avoiding the trap that Gorgias fell into with Socrates. By agreeing that rhetoric and ethics are inseparable, Aristotle puts the responsibility of wrongdoing on the rhetorician, and not on the art. This is backed up by Aristotle’s statement about truth, and that when a rhetorician with the true position cannot convince, it is reprehensible. Of course the problem remains that students of rhetoric could always decide to use rhetoric for ill, but, through his optimism, Aristotle minimizes this fact.

Next we will come to what is perhaps Aristotle’s most direct response to the Platonic challenge to rhetoric. He says that “...it sometimes happens that, despite knowing perfectly well what one is talking about, it is difficult to make use of that knowledge to speak persuasively to others. For speaking with knowledge is teaching, but when that is impossible one has to construct proofs and arguments on the basis of generally accepted notions” (5). This line reads especially like a direct response to the Platonic challenge. In effect, Aristotle is saying that, *pace* Plato’s Socrates, there is still a place for rhetoric in politics. Unlike his teacher, Aristotle believes that teaching is not sufficient for society to move forward. Teaching is a slow process compared

to rhetoric, and is ineffective in front of large, unorganized, and intellectually unsophisticated crowds. Aristotle is saying that in these situations where teaching will not suffice, there is a place for rhetoric. Aristotle attempts to redeem rhetoric, relying on a dose of optimism to move past the Platonic challenge.

Unlike Plato's *Gorgias*, where Socrates is arguing with hedonists and no-holds-barred sophists, Aristotle's work on rhetoric seems aimed at well educated men who have political aspirations. It is likely that, in Aristotle's eyes, the readers of his work would be morally sound men to begin with, as they would have been properly educated against the selfishness that Plato's Socrates is battling against. If this is in fact the case, then it makes sense why Aristotle spends such a small amount of time discussing how, where, and when he wants his rhetoric to be used. It is, as always, important to keep in mind that people can always go bad, even if they were "raised right". To further support this point, T.H. Irwin says that, although Aristotle agrees that rhetoric is liable to misuse, he advocates that students of rhetoric are familiar with both proper and immoral arguments so that they will be able to condemn the bad ones. These rhetoricians would be familiar with ethics, and so be able to keep each other's morals in check.

As we have been indicating, Aristotle does much work to separate his rhetoric from past forms, ones which Plato's Socrates takes serious issue with. He also gives us indications of the kind of places and settings in which he believes rhetoric should operate in. Lastly, he ensures that rhetoric is not separate from ethics, to hopefully keep his rhetoricians from using it for immoral acts. We will see soon that while Aristotle takes many steps to keep his rhetoric in check, he actually advises some immoral and hypocritical tactics. By these immoral tactics, he is stooping to the exact strategies which lead to corruption in the first place.

### **3d. Topics that fall under Aristotle's Rhetoric, and Concerns about these Topics**

Now we will move to the section where Aristotle more thoroughly outlines the knowledge and skills that a practitioner of his rhetoric must have. He begins with a discussion of speaker credibility, where one must “present himself as a certain kind of person” in order to be more convincing to his audience (60). The mere fact of the matter, unfortunately, is that there are aspects of persuasion which have little or no bearing on facts, or what is best for the community. We might think of extremely well-liked celebrities, and what them giving a speech might look like. It is easy to imagine a scenario in which that celebrity is giving a speech before a crowd of die-hard fans. In this situation, the celebrity would have a very low burden of persuasion, as the crowd is already giving that speaker maximum credibility. The fact that speakers do not need to make effective arguments that have bearing on reality to be convincing is exactly the kind of problem that Plato was worried about. Of course Aristotle does not believe that this constitutes the body of rhetoric, but he still discusses it at length, unlike his indications of the proper setting for rhetoric.

His section on the delivery of speeches is essentially concerned with intonation within speeches, and, once again, he makes a troubling observation. Aristotle says that “...just as nowadays the actor’s delivery counts for more in poetic contests than the playwright’s script, the same goes for political competitions too, thanks to the corruption of our political systems” (120). This quote seems to contradict what Aristotle has said earlier about truth. If truth does win out at the end of the day, then, to use a rhetorical question, why does delivery count for more in political competitions? The best answer here seems to be that Aristotle has a very optimistic goal for his rhetoric, which is that it will be used in ways and contexts which are conducive to truth, more so than the average political system.



Amelie Rorty points out that a system gets the rhetorician which it deserves. A corrupt polity gets a corrupt rhetorician. If the system is corrupt, then rhetoric will be too, and will worsen the situation in that context. The lack of a solution to this problem is what is most concerning about Aristotle's rhetoric, and once again causes us to return to the argument made by Plato, that it would be better to do away with political rhetoric entirely. If the system is corrupt but this rhetoric did not exist, then it would not be able to be used as a tool to further that corruption.

Additionally, Aristotle later makes another seeming contradiction. He initially says that calumny is "outside the matter at hand", but goes on to say that a method of refutation "involves responding to your accuser with calumnies of your own, since what a man says is hardly likely to be credible when he is not credible himself" (149). This is another difficult and almost certainly detrimental part of rhetoric. Responding to calumny with calumny contributes to the problem we have been identifying throughout the text, which is that there are effective parts of rhetoric which contribute to the deterioration of the political system.

Next, Aristotle comes to a discussion of the manipulation of emotions. He says that "The emotions are all those affections, accompanied by either pain or pleasure, that cause people to undergo a change and modify their judgements" (61). Once again, our concern about the nature of rhetoric comes back to the surface. As Aristotle says, emotions affect people's judgements. This is an obvious fact of life. With that being said, intentional manipulation of these emotions to produce conviction is what Plato would say is the work of a hedonistic sophist. Again, this part of rhetoric is not at the heart of what Aristotle advocates, but the fact that he makes use of it at all means that there are parts of rhetoric which are not reflective of truth. Later, Aristotle further discusses emotion by saying that "...the mind of listeners falsely concludes that a speaker is

telling the truth because in such circumstances they are disposed to think he is telling the truth even when he is not. Besides, listeners always sympathize with someone who is speaking emotionally even if he is talking nonsense. That is why many speakers overwhelm their audiences with clamour” (130). Of course, Aristotle makes it seem as though he is not advocating practitioners of rhetoric to “overwhelm” their audiences with emotion, but he is acknowledging that it is effective, reinforcing Plato’s Socrates’ reasoning for discounting rhetoric entirely. Because Aristotle makes no direct reply to the Platonic challenge here, we are inclined to take things at face value.

Robert Wardy analyses Aristotle’s rhetoric, and comes to a place of concerned skepticism, a position which resonates with me as well. Wardy argues that Aristotle’s claim about the usefulness of rhetoric rests on his conviction that truth and justice naturally win out. But, as Wardy points out, this claim is dubious at best. He directs the argument to certain places in the text, many which are described above, which are either neutral, or outright detrimental to the victory of truth. Wardy worries that people are more susceptible to lies than Aristotle seems to believe. It is also confusing that Aristotle believes that truth will win out, while at the same time giving his readers tools that, in the words of Wardy, “subordinate truth to victory”.

Aristotle believes that it is simply true that manipulation of the audience to produce differing opinions of oneself or of different speakers can be very effective in rhetoric. He understands that not mentioning this topic might weaken the art that he is trying to nail down. He appears to hold that a certain level of manipulation is less convincing than proofs, and so when supplementing proofs, is legitimate, and effective. One must keep in mind Aristotle’s mission of scrapping and recreating rhetoric; he is trying to nail down an art which will be used for the betterment of society, not one that allows people to achieve their self-serving ends.

It may not be clear on a less than careful reading of Aristotle's rhetoric that this is the case, but it is very important to consider that Aristotle places emphasis on the idea that a good rhetorician has a robust knowledge of ethics. The hope is that, armed with this knowledge, such a rhetorician will be less inclined to do wrong, as he would be more aware of those wrongs when he commits them. Unfortunately, this is not enough to ensure that people do not use all of this knowledge for ill, as can clearly be seen in contemporary politics.

In conclusion of my analysis, it is important to mention the extent to which various topics are addressed in *The Art of Rhetoric*. As has been mentioned, Aristotle makes a few brief mentions of the kind of setting he desires for rhetoric. This gives the impression that the setting in which rhetoric operates is not actually that relevant to rhetoric itself. Instead, Aristotle spends the majority of the work discussing the various techniques and strategies that make up the art. This work is defining a tool, not how that tool should be used. The problem with this is that it seems to fall exactly into the trap that past rhetoric did. Even if Aristotle has done work to distinguish his rhetoric, he has not made it incorruptible, and has actually spent very little time acknowledging that it can be misused. This means that while this rhetoric might be less detrimental than past versions, the worries of Socrates have not been put to rest. The question to ask then, is whether it is better to use rhetoric at all or not. I do not believe that either Socrates or Aristotle have settled the debate with either work, but I think that Aristotle is on the right track by indicating a certain setting for rhetoric to operate in. As we have said, there are elements of rhetoric which are clearly dangerous and corruptive, but perhaps in the right political context, the effects of these elements could be safely mitigated. This will be the next topic of this work.

## **1. Troubles in Modern Politics**

### **4a. Our isolated worlds**

The political climate that exists in America today is one that is increasingly volatile and unstable. Many political scientists have noted the deeply worrying trends that are appearing all over the country. This is not an isolated incident, with many other countries experiencing similar situations. These trends are why political rhetoric is in the place it is today. Political rhetoric needs a stable and effective political culture to operate smoothly. Without this context, rhetoric

goes off the rails, and contributes to corruption and a broken system. As Amelie Rorty points out, the corrupt political regime feeds into a corrupt rhetorical style, which then feeds into the corrupt political regime, and so on. One need not look far to see evidence of this phenomenon. There are countless political speeches and Tweets that give a clear picture of a dangerous rhetorical style. As these examples, and the works of Brooke Gladstone and Patricia Roberts Miller show, there is a problem with the system.

Unfortunately, much of this corruption is due to human nature. Every animal, in fact, has only a small subset of the world which they perceive. As Gladstone says, this is called the “umwelt”. The totality of reality, which most of us are only aware of a tiny fraction, is called the “umgebung”. For each person, every belief, thought, and experience is informed by our umwelt. Things that are outside of our umwelt do not affect us, for we are not aware of them. In this way, each person has the capability to craft their own reality, despite the fact that most are entirely unaware of it. With this in mind, we might change our perception of some people. A person who would be called deluded can be seen as someone whose umwelt is simply very different from other people’s. Most of the time, we do not consciously decide what is a part of our umwelt or not. Many people are inclined to believe lots of things they are told at face value. Even if they are not true, these things become a part of that person’s umwelt.

One of the biggest problems that results from this, as Gladstone points out, is that we as humans do not like to alter information that has already been incorporated into our umwelts. If a person has decided something is true, it is an automatic response in many cases to defend the validity of that information. To overwrite this perceived “fact” is to alter a person’s universe in potentially fundamental ways. Because our lives are entirely informed by our umwelts, a change causes us to feel very uneasy and uncomfortable. Instead, the standard response is to double

down, to not believe that we were mistaken. While this is helpful for a person's mental health in many cases, it also fuels factionalism and extremism. Instead of listening to opposing viewpoints, it is natural for humans to disregard, or respond with anger.

Gladstone aptly points out that this means that human nature is not very conducive to reason. History and the internet, she says, have given us abundant evidence for this. Part of the problem is that the rules and institutions of our world and country do not take this into account. Perhaps we have been too optimistic, but democracy is a system which relies on consensus, which is actually often counterintuitive to human nature.

#### **4b. The Problems with Isolation**

Since humans are naturally inclined to filter information in a way that supports their *umwelt*, they are easier to manipulate with rhetoric. If a person supports a politician, they likely see the actions of that politician in a positive light. Even when that politician acts hypocritically, or in a way that their supporters do not agree with, the behavior will be excused or explained away. As Gladstone says, the brain rewards lying to oneself. Acknowledging a flaw in a candidate that a person has supported would be uncomfortable if not painful.

Additionally, this means that the less common ground there is, the more volatile the political system becomes. In her work on demagoguery, Patricia Roberts Miller expresses her concern about the identity politics which are present in many places in the world, but are especially prevalent in the United States. While identity has always been an important part of politics, the identities with which voters associate are becoming increasingly disparate. Because political groups craft an identity for themselves, and because of how polarized these identities

are, communication and compromise becomes more and more difficult. To concede a point to the other group is to be forced to rewrite a part of one's umwelt and identity. Compromise is not on the table because doing so means you are a bad person.

Important to this topic is the concept of naive realism. A naive realist is a person who believes that to determine what is true, one needs only to use their perceptions, and that this process will lead them to the truth. Naive realists often take the most simple explanation to be true, and believe that their worldview is a sort of universal one. People who have opposing views are simply prejudiced and wrong. These people are often mistaken about the same issues over and over because they can not understand that they made an error in judgment. People who have different views are dismissed simply because they did not see things in the same "correct" way.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of naive realists out there. This perspective is one that also easily lends itself to manipulation. Rhetoricians can, and often do, tap into people's naivete, gain their support, and then use it to do whatever they please. Because their supporters will explain away hypocrisy, there is very little that this rhetorician or politician could do to "cross the line". It is important to note that naive realism does not always lead people to the most obvious "truths". In many cases, whatever rhetoric reaches these individuals first is what shapes their beliefs. This can help explain people who believe in radical conspiracy theories.

When rhetoricians and politicians make debates about which group is better, resolving disagreement becomes personal, and much more difficult. This kind of discussion takes away from what actually matters in politics: policies. Of course, there are some policies which are immoral, but so long as the debate is about the policy itself, this issue can usually be resolved. Arguing about which party is better or worse will only deepen the divide between them rather than help find solutions.

As Ned Resnikoff said, “Consensus is the bedrock of democracy”. If issues are to be resolved, there needs to be consensus on the terms of the debate. Rhetoricians must be aware of shared responsibilities and rights, and must be able to start from some sort of common ground. When the basic premises of a debate are contested, such as what rhetoric is appropriate, speaking order, etc, politics revert back to a power struggle where the strong rule over the weak. If the setting for the debate is one in which slander, identity politics, and power struggles are the norm, then there will be no hope that the political system will remain effective. In this way, the nature of the rhetoric and the political system in which it exists are intrinsically connected.

As Miller points out, if people do not hold political figures to a set of shared rules, if people only want their side to succeed without regard to the people “across the aisle”, then democracy will not function. As she says, this kind of discourse is demagoguery, and when this discourse is the norm, it is only a matter of time before a demagogue arises.

#### **4c. The True Ugly Face of Demagoguery**

Michael Signer writes about four criteria that a person must meet to qualify as a demagogue. They must pose as a mirror for the masses; ignite waves of intense emotion; use that emotion for political gain; and break the rules that govern us. There are countless examples of people who have met these criteria throughout history, but the real problem is when society encourages, and is conducive to this behavior. When rhetoricians are not held accountable for their actions and the nature of their rhetoric, demagoguery is natural.



Of course, there is a reason why people support demagoguery, what makes it so sinister is that it plays into what many people want. As Gladstone says, the classic authoritarian deal is that supporters get to feel elevated by recognition, by promises and license bestowed, and all they need to do in return is believe whatever the demagogue says. Even when it is hypocritical, or goes against the beliefs of the supporters. When people have devoted themselves to a figure like this one, they do not have to think for themselves.

Demagoguery frames political discourse as a struggle between the ingroup and the outgroup. It helps remove cognitive dissonance and confusion by reassuring people that they are right, have always been right, and are the victims. It promises an escape from thinking about the rules or nuances of rhetorical debate by simplifying all issues and scapegoating the outgroup. Of course the outgroup might change from time to time, but the strategy remains consistent. The tools of demagoguery include deductive arguments that cannot be countered, false equivalencies, binaries, and of course, scapegoating. In the context of the rhetorical debate, demagoguery is seeing things as exclusively expressive, as compliance-gaining, or as bargaining. When politicians and citizens are no longer trying to work together to solve problems, the system breaks down, and demagogues arise.

The other unfortunate side effect of demagoguery is that when it is the norm, it traps all politicians involved in the system. Individuals who try to show the issues as being as complex as they are, are labeled as idiots for not having a decisive opinion on the matter. Those who are feeding into the system of demagoguery see those who wish to engage in a healthy way as fools.

## 1. Pursuing Solutions

### 5a. Solving the Problem?

When thinking about all of these works together, we can begin to get a clearer picture of the issues at play. Political rhetoric is an effective tool for producing conviction. Society is built in a way that is conducive to the presence of political rhetoric. Imagining a world in which this

rhetoric goes away is not that feasible. To have something like a ban on rhetoric would be to violate what most consider to be a right to free speech. For these reasons, it would be almost impossible to make rhetoric disappear. Having it be phased out through a cultural change is also unlikely because the people who will be the most effective at producing change will always be those who have the most effective rhetoric.

What this means is that we need to work to improve the context surrounding rhetoric. If we do not want rhetoric to be used by demagogues and sophists, then we need to find other ways to discourage demagoguery and sophism. Gladstone argues that facts will reassert themselves, and sides with Hannah Arendt, who says that the real world catches up to us eventually. A political culture that revolves around demagoguery is an extremely volatile one. This kind of political setting is bound to experience a regime change at some point because of the extreme polarization that results. Either the scales get tipped back to a healthy political culture, or the system implodes, and a different one asserts itself.

We can see that something needs to be done, and I will side with Miller in saying that we need to take a long collective look at how discourse is done. As she says, democracy depends on rhetoric. There needs to be back and forth discussion and argumentation about policies and issues. Political discourse must involve inclusion, fairness, responsibility, self-skepticism, and a set of common issues and ground to work from. Discourse needs to involve critical thinking, and a willingness to be wrong. People must be willing to think about issues from the other side, and to listen. These factors need to be emphasized heavily. If politicians are not being held to a high standard, or any standard at all, there will be no way for the system to function properly. When audiences are complacent, or worse, are encouraging the tactics conducive to sophistry or demagoguery, then the political system deteriorates, and so does the rhetoric. Everyone needs to

take an active role, and to express their voice when it comes to these issues. Instead of letting ourselves be distracted by other, less important issues, we need to come together on something everyone can agree on. Everyone wants the political system to function properly, but if we do not take action to ensure that it does, then it will fall apart.

## **5b. Aristotle's Political Advice**

Aristotle tells us that we must consider ethics when considering rhetoric, and this means for our system to function, we must aim at what is good and true. When we lose sight of this, rhetoric falls away and we are left with Sophistry, which is the kind of Rhetoric that Plato thought was irredeemable. If we can change the culture and arrive at a system with healthy political discourse, then we will have also redeemed rhetoric. There are also a few instances, as has been discussed, where Aristotle gives us an idea of the kind of setting he desires for rhetoric. In essence, he proposes solutions similar to the ones I have outlined above. There must be some way for the political context to limit rhetoric that is misused. It is unfortunate that Aristotle does not explain further on this topic in his work on rhetoric, but this comes back to Aristotle's optimism, and the likelihood that he is aiming his rhetoric at those who are already morally upstanding. Plato's *Gorgias* is aimed at refuting the hedonistic position, whereas Aristotle's work on rhetoric is aimed at students of ethics and rhetoric.

With all of this in mind, I believe it is important to make note of the differences between rhetoric today, and rhetoric during the time of Aristotle and Plato. In modern society, the internet, social media, and many other forms of mass media are a huge tool that are used to gain support for political agendas. To be a powerful politician today, it is not enough to be a great

speaker. In ancient Greece, speeches in the public forum would have been one of the only ways to reach the masses, or to gather support. This meant that one good speech could change a lot. In some ways, there is more of an incremental effect in rhetoric today. On these online platforms, people are exposed to far more rhetoric than people of the past ever would have been. This makes the task of changing the culture around rhetoric much more difficult, as limiting rhetoric can no longer be achieved by limiting what people can say in speeches. Of course there is also the problem how this would even be achieved without infringing on freedom of speech. This also means that rhetoric reaches far more people. With more rhetoric reaching more people, radical, and harmful positions have become increasingly common. This has only served to heighten the problems that Plato addresses, and in many ways shown his worries to be true. Unfortunately, Plato's alternative for rhetoric, teaching, is unlikely to ever be sufficient as a replacement.

## **1. Conclusions**

### **6a. Ground Covered**

In this work I have argued that political rhetoric is a dangerous tool. When used in the wrong context, and by the wrong person, it corrupts and damages society. A complete cessation

of the use of rhetoric as Socrates suggests is simply not feasible without immense, and possibly unrealistic changes to society. Aristotle did much to redeem rhetoric, but he did not transform it in a way that makes it completely safe. That being said, we have learned through his text that rhetoric is an immensely powerful tool. It is an important part of politics, and of life more broadly, and it is not going away anytime soon. The works of Gladstone and Miller have demonstrated the different ways in which our modern political culture has degenerated, and gave us a few ideas about what we can do.

We must work together to create the right atmosphere for rhetoric to operate in, because otherwise our political system will suffer, and the rhetoric will suffer as well. All of this is vital because most change in the world comes at the political level. If we are not holding politicians and ourselves to certain standards, we will not be able to move forward.

## **6b. What now?**

We must equip ourselves with the knowledge to see when our peers and politicians are stooping to demagoguery, and denounce it as such. Once we become aware of the problem, we can start to fix it. The change will not be a rapid one. Demagoguery has its foot on the throat of democracy as we speak. The echo chambers are becoming worse and will one day burst if we do nothing. We can already see the troubling consequences of this. We must come together, we must listen to each other, and most importantly, we must be willing to be wrong.

How exactly to achieve this is another topic, but I believe that it would start with education. As has been said, moderating harmful rhetoric seems very difficult without infringing on freedom of speech. It seems to me that the solution lies in changing our education system to

teach people to be more open minded. There is very little that is certain in this world, but that is not how most people see things, or want to see things. It might be uncomfortable to keep one's umwelt in flux so often, but it might also be necessary if we want to avoid political strife and the harms that come with it.

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