

Preliminary Reflections on the Rhetoric of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*¹

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Perhaps the first question anyone would ask when reading a book whose theme is rhetoric is the following: What sort of rhetoric is the author going to employ in this work? To rephrase this in somewhat more cynical terms: Where, when, and how is the author going to attempt to pull the wool over my eyes? No serious author can be unaware that his readers will likely raise this question, especially when the author under consideration is universally acknowledged to have written the foundational work on the subject: Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. In the words of Alan G. Gross and Arthur E. Walzer (2000, ix), "Whitehead's observation that the history of philosophy is one long footnote to Plato can for us be transferred to the *Rhetoric*: All subsequent rhetorical theory is but a series of responses to issues raised by that central work."² Given the obviousness of this question, one would expect that the scholar who wished to investigate this topic would have to wade through a veritable sea of secondary literature in order to set one's bearings. But this is surprisingly not the case, at least in political science. Although there has been a sort of "mini-Renaissance" of the *Rhetoric* in the last decade or so,³ the book—let alone this question—has largely been ignored by contemporary political theorists.⁴

Before beginning to answer this question, however, it may be worthwhile to take a moment and reflect upon why it is even important to address this subject matter at all: is there any vital reason today to turn to Aristotle's *Rhetoric* for guidance on pressing social or political issues, on everything from participatory democracy to civic education? Or should conclusions from a serious study of the *Rhetoric* be justly confined to the musty halls of academia? After all, it is really beyond question that "rhetoric" has a terrible reputation today: the word is hardly ever used except in a pejorative sense, and most students who are enrolled in debate or public speech courses would consider it an insult to be called rhetoricians. Most persons think that there is something dubious or even sinister about someone who is a clever speaker; we are suspicious of someone who can speak persuasively on both sides of an issue.

And such a suspicion is not at all unfounded, nor is it unique to this century. To say nothing of the reputation many lawyers and politicians have today, one need only recall that one of the reasons Socrates was tried and executed was because he could make “the weaker speech [appear] the stronger” (*Apology* 18b).⁵

But while rhetoric has always been considered with a certain amount of unease or caution, it was clearly more highly venerated in antiquity than it is today—and this precisely because of antiquity’s rich understanding of politics. For classical republicanism, citizenship meant active and direct participation in the life of a small, self-sufficient community. The entire citizen body had the awesome responsibility of self-government, and this meant that they had to articulate their own political goals and aspirations, and to develop policies and institutions that would best attain them. It is no wonder, then, that at the core of civic education according to the classics was a training in rhetoric—in how to communicate effectively with other citizens in the political arena. Citizens not only had to be able to persuade others of the nobility, advantages, or justice of one course of action over another, but they also had to be ready to unmask those corrupt and rapacious individuals who only masqueraded as selfless servants of the city. In sum, it would not be an exaggeration to say that rhetoric was *the* civic art.⁶

It might immediately be objected, however, that regardless of how theoretically rich Aristotle’s treatment of rhetoric is, he was writing primarily for an audience that was wholly different from our own: unlike the citizens of the Greek *polis*, we do not participate directly in national government but through our elected representatives; our citizen class is open and inclusive while theirs was closed and restrictive; and our state is large, liberal, and focused primarily on economics. All of this is undeniable—but to claim that we therefore have very little to learn from Aristotle is simply fallacious. While it is true that very few of us participate directly in national government, local and state associations afford us a multitudinous array of such opportunities; and these associations, from the local PTA to a state-wide ballot initiative or campaign, often have a much more immediate and personal impact upon our lives than what occurs at the national level. Moreover, we must keep in mind that an understanding of rhetoric is not only useful for persuading others (whether at the national, state, or local level), but it also helps us to see when others are trying to deceive us and advance their own special interests. At a time when citizens are bombarded by literally thousands of sound bites and advertisements, it is all the more imperative to understand the character of political discourse—both how to communicate effectively with others as

well as how to recognize and unmask potential demagogues and flatterers. Indeed, given the destructive ways modern communications, propaganda, and technology have been manipulated in the twentieth century, one could very easily make the case that we need theoretical clarity about rhetoric more than the Greeks ever did.

Let us restate the above ideas in the following way. If democratic politics is to consist of more than force and fraud—if it is to be a genuinely ennobling activity—then it will have to be based, at least in part, on reasoned discourse between and among the electorate and their representatives. The citizens of a democracy, therefore, must be instructed in the nature or character of public discourse if they are ever to distinguish between being manipulated by propaganda and listening to thoughtful arguments on opposing sides of an issue. But as is clear from the past success of such bankrupt ideologies as Stalinism, Maoism, and Fascism, such instruction is not at all easily taught or acquired. Now one of the best ways to gain theoretical clarity on this subject is to be willing to step outside our own liberal and democratic framework in order to see how these ideas were addressed and debated in other times and places; and it can hardly be doubted that Aristotle engaged in one of the most rigorous, insightful, and compelling investigations into the nature of rhetoric. A return to Aristotle, in particular, and classical antiquity, in general, for guidance on these questions is not an attempt to satisfy some conservative nostalgia for times of old; rather, Aristotle is the very one who may be able to teach us modern liberal democrats the most. As Aristotle is a critic of both liberalism and democracy, he is more likely to ask questions and make arguments that we would likely overlook, disregard, or even find offensive. As we take our political bearings from the Enlightenment, such questions and arguments are particularly important for us to raise and seriously address; for we often have unrealistic expectations about what politics can accomplish, and we tend to overestimate what even the most well-crafted civic education can achieve. In sum, by returning to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, we will begin to attain greater clarity about the theoretical and practical nature of civic discourse, as well as to see what role instruction in rhetoric should have in current debates surrounding the revamping of civic education. We are certainly not obliged to copy everything the classics recommend and to place rhetoric at the center of civic education; but by returning to a time when debates about the character and power of rhetoric were of vital public concern, we might profitably listen to and learn from Aristotle's sober discussion.

It is hoped that the aforementioned arguments and the following set of reflections might contribute in some small way to the modest but apparently

growing interest in the *Rhetoric*. At all events, let us now turn to Aristotle's treatise itself and address what might be considered the natural starting point for any political or philosophical study of the work: What is the rhetoric of the *Rhetoric*? In other words, to whom is it addressed and what did Aristotle hope to convey or teach by composing this book?⁷

The Anti-rhetorical Opening of the *Rhetoric*

If one turns to the *Rhetoric* in order to learn how to outwit a clever opponent, or to acquit a dubious client, or to learn how to promote self-interested policies while simultaneously appearing to be a selfless servant of the regime, the opening chapter of the work is likely to disappoint. Aristotle begins the treatise with what can only be described as a blistering attack against rhetoric as it is generally taught and practiced. Aristotle complains that previous authors of "arts of speech" have completely ignored enthymemes (which are initially described as the "body of persuasion") and have concentrated on only a "small part" of rhetoric, namely appealing to the emotions of judges. But arousing the anger or pity or envy of a jury is hardly germane to the proceedings in a courtroom, and in well-governed cities, such appeals are (or would be) forbidden by the law: arousing the passions of a jury in this way is like making a "straightedge rule crooked before using it." Well-governed cities require speakers to stick to proving the facts of the case (e.g., did something happen or not, or is something true or not), and Aristotle exhorts the would-be rhetorician to do nothing but support truth and justice (1.1.3–6,12).⁸ The rhetoric that Aristotle describes in Book 1, chapter 1 is clearly not the rhetoric with which we are familiar, and it is certainly not the rhetoric that many politically ambitious students would want to study. In other words, the rhetoric that is here described is purged of almost all of its "rhetorical" elements, and surely many prospective students, after hearing or reading how Aristotle purifies both the means and ends of rhetoric in the introduction, might look elsewhere for such advice. At this early point in the work, Aristotle seems in close agreement with Socrates in the *Gorgias* (463b–66a): rhetoric as it is normally taught and practiced resembles flattery, and it would seem to have very little that is noble or endearing about it.

But does all of this mean that Aristotle believes that those judging the case are any wiser or better than those arguing it, and that they should have the authority to determine whether something is "important or unimportant, or just or unjust"? This is exceedingly doubtful. Immediately after making the above remarks, Aristotle launches into a discussion as to why well-crafted laws leave as little as possible to the discretion of the jury: regardless of

whether speakers make emotional appeals, the judges themselves are simply too likely to be partial to one side or another. Only in those cases when the law cannot or does not specify certain things should the jury decide on these matters; otherwise, they should confine themselves to determining whether or not the event or action did or did not occur (1.1.1–8). It would seem that neither the people nor the speakers should have much latitude when judging cases: the latter are prone to distort the facts of a case by appealing to the jury's emotions unless prevented from doing so by the law; and the former, even in the absence of such appeals, are still liable to be partial to either the plaintiff or defendant.⁹

What does Aristotle hope to achieve or convey through this two-fold depreciation of both the rhetorician and his audience in the opening chapter—in other words, what is Aristotle's rhetorical strategy here at the outset? Three possible answers present themselves when we look at the effect this might have on Aristotle's most likely or obvious audience: potential or practicing statesmen. In the first place, Aristotle seems intent on appealing to the high-mindedness or nobility of his readers. By planting firmly and immediately in a statesman's mind what might be called an "idealized" version of rhetoric, and the political order that would support it, Aristotle discourages any attempt to use rhetoric to manipulate others: the persuasive power of rhetoric must be limited to supporting what is true and just, and not to advancing one's own selfish interests (1.1.12–13). Of course, there will inevitably be some individuals who will not heed Aristotle's advice, and this is why he shows his readers, in the second place, that well-crafted laws should regulate or control rhetoric. Unless the city asserts its supremacy over rhetoric—unless rhetoricians are kept on a "tight leash"—clever speakers will have the opportunity to create enormous havoc politically; for if human beings are susceptible to making biased decisions in even the best of circumstances, how much more erroneous and harmful will their decisions be once they are whipped up into a frenzy by an artful rhetorician. One might say that the relative health of a regime can be gauged by the character of the rhetoric in vogue in the courts: the better the regime, the less it will tolerate rhetoric as it is ordinarily understood and practiced. And finally, in the third place, even in the very best of regimes, Aristotle never says that a statesman can do away with rhetoric. An uncorrupted multitude is still a multitude, and as Aristotle maintains, even if a statesman had the most exact knowledge, it is not always possible to instruct or teach a crowd (1.1.11): persuasion will always be necessary. Aristotle offers a sober reminder that although politics involves rational discourse, citizens are not always amenable to reason.¹⁰ By

learning how, or what it means, to communicate with a crowd, the future statesman will also begin to understand the disposition or character of most political multitudes. In sum, the opening chapter not only encourages the reader to pursue and promote what is true and just, but it also indicates how rhetoric should be regulated, and why it is necessary, even in the very best regime. Aristotle promotes the civically responsible use of rhetoric, but a rhetoric that is as rational or deliberative as possible.

Clever but Decent: The Subordination of Rhetoric to Political Science

Given the rather high-minded or moral tone of the opening chapter, it comes as quite a surprise that Aristotle very quickly changes his own rhetoric in the chapters that follow—so much so that many scholars see irreconcilable tensions between chapter 1 and the rest of the book.¹¹ And one cannot explain away these discrepancies by claiming that chapter 1 is an early (or late) addition to the book, and that Aristotle changed his mind as to the nature of rhetoric while composing the treatise.¹² To say nothing of the fact that Aristotle could easily have “deleted” what he wrote, a very similar set of remarks are made at the beginning of Book 3, almost as if Aristotle wants to remind his readers of what was said in Book 1, chapter 1.¹³

After the opening chapter, Aristotle now begins to treat and discuss rhetoric as it is more commonly understood and practiced; and the practical advice he gives his readers on how to be persuasive can at best be described as “amoral.” For example, Aristotle instructs his students on how to stretch the truth when it comes to claiming that a person actually has a particular virtue or not (1.9.28–32); he tells them that they should urge a judge to follow the written law when the facts of a case are in their favor, but dissuade him from doing so when the facts are against them (1.15.3–12 and the chapter as a whole); he states that they should use maxims that conform to and even flatter the opinions and assumptions of their audience in order to enhance their own moral character (2.21.15–16); and finally, Aristotle articulates a long list of apparent or fallacious enthymemes, and there is no suggestion in the chapter that students must avoid using them in order to win their case (2.24). Notwithstanding this advice, Aristotle never openly encourages his readers to act wickedly or viciously, or to win a case at any and all costs: in fact, he sometimes states the reverse, as when he claims that

the true and the just are by nature stronger than their opposites . . . [and that] . . . one should be able to argue persuasively as to opposites, just as in the use

of syllogisms, not that we may actually do both (for one should not persuade what is debased), but in order that it may not escape our notice what the real state of the case is, and that we may be able to refute if another person uses speeches unjustly. (1.1.12)

Nevertheless, the “moral” remarks are far less numerous than those that seem “amoral,” and it is hard not to come away with the conclusion that Aristotle is more interested in teaching his students how to be successful (rather than strictly just) rhetoricians, even if they have to use an occasional underhanded technique in order to win their case.¹⁴

In order to defend Aristotle against the charge that his advice arms the wicked with the weapons needed to cause great mischief in politics, one could say (as Aristotle explicitly states above [1.1.12]) that the virtuous must know how the wicked will argue and act if they are to defeat them. Larry Arnhart (1981, 27), who uses this argument to defend Aristotle, offers the following quote from Richard Whately’s *Elements of Rhetoric* (1963, xxxix) to back up his claim. Whately writes:

With respect to what are commonly called Rhetorical Artifices—contrivances for “making the worse appear the better reason,”—it would have savoured of pedantic morality to give solemn admonitions against employing them, or to enter a formal disclaimer of dishonest intention; since, after all, the generality will, according to their respective characters, make what use of a book they think fit, without waiting for the Author’s permission. But what I have endeavored to do, is *clearly to set forth*, as far as I could, (as Bacon does in his Essay on Cunning,) these sophistical tricks of the Art; and as far as I may have succeeded in this, I shall have been providing the only effectual check to the employment of them. The adulterators of food or of drugs, and the coiners of base money, keep their processes a secret, and dread no one so much as him who detects, describes, and proclaims their contrivances, and thus puts men on their guard.

Without doubt, Arnhart and Whately bring up a weighty reason why Aristotle’s practical advice has such an “amoral” character—but there could be another reason as well. Aristotle may refuse to pepper his audience with moral admonitions against using rhetoric in a wicked manner because such admonitions, when read by the virtuous, might have the unintended consequence of disarming the virtuous with the very weapons they need to succeed in politics. In other words, the problem with the virtuous is not that they will resort to such clever rhetorical devices, but rather that they will fail to resort to them often enough in order to defeat the political machinations of others. Repeated moral admonitions of the kind Arnhart and Whately speak about might prevent, or make more difficult, the virtuous from seeing all

those rhetorical ruses they might have to employ in order to convince others to adopt policies that are truly just, and reject those that are in reality unjust. The particular problem with the high-minded is that they are prone to imagine that other persons are similar to themselves—that they act from and respond to the same motivations—and that persons would therefore be unlikely to resort to such underhanded techniques. To borrow a line from Machiavelli, the problem with the virtuous is that they are liable to be “too good” in a world of bad men; realizing this, Aristotle very quickly drops the high moral tone he had adopted in the opening chapter, candidly showing his serious reader all the devices that will have to be used in the rough-and-tumble world of politics. Politics is simply too unpredictable and violent to rely solely upon decent and just tactics; statesmen must employ what seem to be “vicious” or “immoral” means in order to secure just and reasonable ends (see also 1.15.26).

If the above idea is correct, then it also helps us make better sense of another prominent feature of the *Rhetoric* once one moves beyond the opening chapter: the clear subordination of rhetoric to politics and political science. Now the subordinate status of rhetoric to political science is already adumbrated in the opening chapter. Aristotle diminishes the attractiveness of rhetoric as a career or way of life by claiming that the rhetoric used in the courts is inferior to—or less “noble” than—deliberative rhetoric. Previous teachers of rhetoric concentrate almost exclusively on judicial rhetoric, which Aristotle argues deals solely with “private transactions”; these same authors have very little to say about deliberative rhetoric, which is far more important to the political community as a whole (1.1.9–10).¹⁵ The depreciation of judicial rhetoric prepares the reader for what Aristotle says at the beginning and end of his discussion of deliberative rhetoric. Here, Aristotle is unambiguous: the knowledge a speaker most needs is that concerning the regime. Deliberation concerns what is advantageous and/or harmful to a political community, and what is advantageous and/or harmful is always defined in respect to the regime (1.4.4–7, 12–13; 1.8.1–7). And it is not just deliberative rhetoric that requires this knowledge: epideictic and judicial rhetoric would seem to require it as well. Not only is epideictic rhetoric discussed in terms of deliberative rhetoric (1.9.35–37), but to know what to praise and blame one must understand what is honored and dishonored in the regime (compare 1.9.26, 30); similarly, to know about crime and punishment, and justice and injustice, one must know the laws of that regime (see also 1.10.3; 1.13.1–8). Unfortunately, it is precisely this specific knowledge of politics that rhetoric does not and cannot provide to an ambitious student of the *Rhetoric* (compare

1.4.13). To the extent that such an individual wishes to become a genuinely fine statesman, he will necessarily have to study a “more profound and true” subject (1.4.4), namely political science, and therefore turn to such works as the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* (see 1.8.7). Knowledge of rhetoric is clearly important for political leaders; but a future statesman must not think that by becoming a consummate rhetorician he has thereby mastered the architectonic science of politics. Aristotle would here seem to agree in large measure with Socrates’ conclusion in the *Phaedrus* (Plato *Phaedrus* 271d–72b): the genuine rhetorician needs to study the science of the soul—political science.

Let us conclude this section by restating what Aristotle is trying to accomplish rhetorically in the movement from chapter 1 to the center of the book. After appealing to the nobility and justice of his readers, and after showing them what rhetoric would look like in a well-constituted political order, Aristotle adopts a sober, hard-headed attitude about rhetoric and politics. And he needs to make this change in attitude or approach precisely because the very persons who would be attracted to his initial appeal are also those who might be hesitant about using “underhanded” rhetorical methods in order to plead their cause and win their case. The virtuous are liable to think that the praise and blame which moves them (i.e., their concern for genuine honor) is also what motivates others, and that just as they would not demean themselves by using rhetorical ruses on a crowd, neither would their opponents. But the problem is more complex than this: not only are people susceptible to the wiles of rhetoric, but speech itself can only accomplish so much in politics. Aristotle’s repeated insistence in the *Rhetoric* that rhetoricians should turn to political science is the obverse of his statement at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that politics cannot be reduced to rhetoric (as the sophists maintain). Politics requires more than reasoned or persuasive or even clever (and perhaps deceptive) speech—it requires knowledge of regimes as well as what goes into making a regime work, and this inevitably means the use of force. The potential statesman who turns to rhetoric might be susceptible to the same sort of error of which Aristotle accuses the sophists, an error which Aristotle alerts his readers to in both books. We might say that part of Aristotle’s rhetoric in the *Rhetoric* is to make his readers see that rhetoric must be understood as a *prolegomena* to political science, and the ambitious student must be pointed to the *Politics* in order to receive the fullest and most complete training in statesmanship.¹⁶

Rhetoric and Philosophy, *Endoxa* and Truth

We have suggested that the rhetoric of the *Rhetoric* is intended, at the very least, to discourage and defeat the efforts of manipulative speakers, and at the very most, to indicate to the potential statesman that the study of rhetoric must be understood as a prolegomena to political science. But is this all Aristotle intended? To rephrase the question using the language of Leo Strauss (1952, 36), does the *Rhetoric* contain any teaching from the mature philosopher Aristotle to the “puppies of his race,” i.e., the young potential philosopher?

To see that there is such a teaching, we can begin by making the following observation. Throughout the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle repeatedly makes what can only be described as disparaging (but perhaps true) remarks concerning the audience for whom rhetorical speeches are composed. Most people, Aristotle states, cannot follow a long train of arguments and have rather simple or even weak minds (1.2.12–13; 2.21.15; 3.18.4), and this is why rhetorical enthymemes should not be elaborate and drawn out (2.22.3; 3.17.6–7). Even though the delivery of rhetorical speeches is fundamentally a “vulgar matter when rightly understood,” it must nevertheless be learned due to the moral corruption of the audience: sadly, most people are moved by the “outward show” of a speech rather than by its internal substance (3.1.5–7; 3.14.8). And if this were not enough, Aristotle seems to lay it all on the line when he states that “the many are rather bad, slaves of profitmaking, and cowardly in danger” and that “human beings usually do wrong when they can” (2.5.7–8).¹⁷ The question these passages raise is the following: if this is the character of most audiences, and if the *telos* of a speech relates to the audience (1.3.1, see also 2.1.2; 2.18.1), then what is the *philosopher* Aristotle getting out of teaching this subject? If philosophy is the highest way of life, and if rhetoric is about persuasion and not about learning or instruction (1.1.12; compare 3.1.5), then how is Aristotle as a thinker being satisfied through such an extended study of this subject? To put this question in Platonic language: why would Aristotle want to descend into the cave and teach people how to be persuasive and successful? Therefore, if rhetoric is important to Aristotle—as it clearly is—then Aristotle himself must be getting something out of this study beyond correcting his predecessors and teaching the ambitious how to move a crowd. To see the possible *philosophical* value or teaching of the *Rhetoric*, we must once again return to the opening chapter, and in particular the very first line.

Aristotle opens the *Rhetoric* with what is probably the most famous—as well as most puzzling—line in the entire book: “Rhetoric is a counterpart

[*antistrophos*] of dialectic.”¹⁸ What Aristotle intended precisely by using the word *antistrophos* in this context is not at all apparent, although several possibilities suggest themselves. First, Aristotle could be throwing down the “gauntlet” (McCabe 1994, 139) at the feet of both Socrates and Isocrates, the former who claimed that rhetoric was the *antistrophos* of cookery (Plato *Gorgias* 465c–466a) and the latter who said it was the counterpart in the soul of gymnastics in the body (Isocrates *Antidosis* 181–182).¹⁹ Or again, second, Aristotle could be thinking of the *strophe* and *antistrophe* of a Greek chorus, the idea being that rhetoric is similar to dialectic, although it moves in the opposite direction (Arnhart 1981, 13–21). Third and finally, Aristotle may be using the word the way it is used in the *Analytics* and *Topics*: in these works, something is the *antistrophos* of something else if it can be converted into that very thing, i.e., if the relationship between the two terms is one of “reciprocity and reversibility.”²⁰ These last two suggestions—and in particular the third—are intriguing; for if rhetoric resembles or can even somehow be “converted” into dialectic, and if dialectic is the philosophical method *par excellence*, then this might reveal at least one reason why Aristotle is interested in the subject.

Throughout the opening pages, Aristotle highlights the numerous ways in which rhetoric and dialectic are similar. For example, both are concerned with things which can be known by most everyone and belong to no separate science (1.1.1,14; 1.2.7); both reason about opposite things (1.1.12), supply words or arguments (1.2.7), and use inductive and deductive methods of reasoning (1.2.8; see also 2.22.14); both use topics applicable or common to many different subjects (1.2.21), and both are a mental faculty rather than a specific science (1.4.6); and finally, both use *endoxa* (or reputable common opinions) (1.1.11–12; 1.2.11,13; compare 1.1.1) and deal with what seems true to certain kinds of people (1.2.11).²¹ The differences between rhetoric and dialectic, however, are no less important, and these too are also emphasized by Aristotle in the opening chapters. Although rhetoric is supposed to be universally applicable to any subject, it tends to deal with particular or given situations, most of which are ethical-political in nature (1.2.1,7,12,22; 1.4.3–7). Rhetoric aims at persuasion, not instruction (1.1.12,14; 1.2.1,8–13), and the audience is a simple-minded one that cannot follow a long train of arguments (1.1.12; 1.2.12–13). And finally, rhetoric uses enthymemes and paradigms (rather than syllogisms and induction), and generally the premises of enthymemes are not universally true (1.1.11; 1.2.8–9,13–14,20). Given the above similarities and differences, I would suggest that rhetoric is a counterpart of dialectic in the sense that a rhetorician can become a dialectician once he moves from a desire

to persuade the audience to a desire to instruct or teach his interlocutor(s) (and perhaps himself). In other words, rhetoric can be “converted” to dialectic once the ends of rhetoric change from persuasion to instruction.

In order to support this contention, it is important to note the following broad points. In the first place, the means that rhetoric and dialectic use to achieve their respective ends of persuasion and instruction are largely (or formally) one and the same. Both use, or start from, *endoxa* in order to construct their arguments; and while it is true that rhetoric concentrates almost exclusively on ethical-political *endoxa*, it is not the case that the dialectician is uninterested in these sorts of opinions: the difference would seem to be that the dialectician deals with a much wider array of such opinions (e.g., those concerning nature or the cosmos), which rarely form the material or content of rhetorical persuasion (see 1.2.11–12,21). Furthermore, although rhetorical demonstration is called enthymeme and paradigm, and dialectical proof syllogism and induction, Aristotle repeatedly points out the syllogistic nature of enthymemes throughout the treatise. Enthymemes are said to be a “kind of syllogism,”²² and just as a dialectician should be able to discern a true from an apparent syllogism so too must a rhetorician be able to see the difference between a true and an apparent enthymeme (1.1.11,14; 1.2.6,8–9). In fact, to the extent that dialectical syllogisms also employ *endoxa*, it would seem that their conclusions (like the conclusions of enthymemes) would be probabilistic in character as well (see also 1.2.13–22).²³

In the second place, once a rhetorician turned from persuasion to instruction, several other differences between the two faculties would seem to collapse. If someone were primarily interested in instruction, then it is doubtful that he would address himself to a crowd, but more likely to a smaller and more serious audience. This is not to say that a dialectician would converse solely with other dialecticians; but it does suggest that his interlocutors would frequently be capable of instruction, something which does not seem to be the case with the typical audience of the rhetorician. Moreover, once the rhetorician turned to instruction, the importance of such things as appealing to the emotions of a crowd, trying to appear to be a certain type of person, and concentrating on delivery, would rapidly decrease as they add little or nothing to the content of a serious conversation (compare 3.1.5–7; 3.14.7–8). Indeed, a rhetorician turned dialectician would not be interested in the difference between a true and an apparent enthymeme for the sake of defeating an opponent or gaining the audience to his side but to make certain that the syllogisms being examined were in fact true, and that an error had not inadvertently made its way into the conversation.

And finally, in the third place, Aristotle states in the *Topics* (100a18–101b5; Kennedy 1991, 290–292) that the only way to reach the first principles of all sciences or methods is by working through, or dialectically transcending, the *endoxa* of “all people or most people or the wise—and in the latter case all the wise or most of them or those best known and generally accepted.” The art of dialectics, Aristotle avers, is useful in the “philosophical sciences”

because if we are able to raise difficulties on both sides of an issue, we shall more easily see in each case what is true and what false. It [dialectics] has a further use in relation to the first premises in each science; for it is impossible to say anything about them on the basis of the specific first principles of each proposed science, since the principles are primary in all cases, and it is necessary to discuss them on the basis of generally accepted opinions in each case. This is specific or most proper to dialectic; for since it is investigative, it leads the way to the first principles of all methods.

Aristotle does not elaborate upon this stupendous claim, and it is not immediately clear how dialectical inquiry can ultimately provide the ground for all the sciences. Nevertheless, we can suggest that if Aristotelian dialectics resembles Socratic dialectics, then one prominent theme of this method of investigation will be the “ethical virtues,” or the “whatness” of justice and nobility (Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1078b18–30); and it is precisely the articulation of these ethical-political *endoxa* that form the bulk of Books 1 and 2 of the *Rhetoric*. Of course, the most obvious reason why such a large part of the *Rhetoric* is dedicated to articulating ethical-political *endoxa* is so that a rhetorician will know the opinions and premises he might use or appeal to when speaking before various audiences. But it could equally be the case that Aristotle is presenting a sort of dialectical raw material for potential philosophers—i.e., the ethical-political *endoxa* that students must confront and dialectically transcend in order to see the tensions and contradictions that lie at the heart of our common opinions about the just and noble things. In sum, what emerges from this comparison is that rhetoric, because it too deals with ethical-political *endoxa*, may be a sort of prolegomena to genuine philosophical dialectic, and that the treatise could be intended, in part, to attract such potential philosophers. As Aristotle states in the opening chapter of the *Rhetoric* (1.1.11):

[F]or it belongs to the same capacity both to see the true and what resembles the true, and at the same time human beings have a natural disposition for the true and to a large extent hit on the truth; thus an ability to aim at *endoxa* is a characteristic of one who also has a similar ability in regard to the truth.²⁴

Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to engage in a detailed comparison of the *endoxa* of the *Rhetoric* with those of Aristotle’s other writings,

let us conclude this section with the following observation. Almost everyone who has studied the *Rhetoric* has wondered if, or to what extent, Aristotle's discussions of happiness, virtue, the good, the passions, and so on, differ from his other works.²⁵ Needless to say, conclusions vary widely; but where there is at least some measure of agreement is that the various *endoxa* articulated in the *Rhetoric* seem to be more preliminary, or less developed, than the *endoxa* in Aristotle's other works—in other words, the *endoxa* in the *Rhetoric* have not been dialectically compared with one another in order to see the extent to which they are true. To offer a single (and all-too-brief) example, one can compare the way Aristotle describes the relationship between happiness, self-sacrifice, and virtue in the *Rhetoric* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. In Book 1, chapter 9 of the *Rhetoric*, the virtues are objects of praise precisely because they are directed towards the good of others and involve self-sacrifice: in fact, the praiseworthiness of an action seems proportional to the self-sacrifice involved, and actions that benefit no one or the actor himself are much less praiseworthy, if at all (1.9; compare 1.3.6). But Aristotle also says four chapters earlier (1.5) that everyone acts for the sake of happiness. If this is true, then it is hard to see how the virtues can be examples of genuine self-sacrifice, and therefore objects of praise. In the *Ethics*, however, these difficulties are not immediately apparent. Happiness is defined in terms of virtue, and the virtuous person does not sacrifice his happiness by acting virtuously: virtue may indeed confer benefits upon others, but this is not the sake for which the virtuous person acts.²⁶ It appears that the puzzles or tensions in the relationship between happiness, self-sacrifice, and virtue articulated in the *Rhetoric* have been worked out or perhaps even resolved in the *Ethics*. This is not to say that some of the *endoxa* articulated in the *Rhetoric* should be dismissed as irrelevant, puerile, or ridiculous: we often say that people act for the sake of their happiness *and* that virtue involves genuine self-sacrifice.²⁷ Rather, it would seem that Aristotle has dialectically compared and transcended the various contradictions within and between these common opinions in the *Ethics* and his other works. If this is true, then we might say that what Aristotle presents in the *Rhetoric* is a sort of raw material for the potential philosopher—the *endoxa* that the rhetorician might use to persuade a crowd one way or another are also the *endoxa* that the dialectician must first study and work through if he is going to aim at the truth of ethical-political things. Thus, rhetoric becomes more like dialectic—is its “counterpart”—when the rhetorician uses the *endoxa* not to persuade but to instruct and seek the truth: both dialectic and rhetoric have access to ethical-political *endoxa*, but they employ them for different purposes. In sum, the *endoxa* expressed in everyday

life and which the rhetorician utilizes as the material for persuasion—this is where a potential philosopher should begin his study of the “human things,” perhaps moving from rhetoric to ethics and then to the architectonic science of politics (*Ethics* 1094a18–b12; 1179b1–81b23).²⁸

The Independent Status of Rhetoric

To the extent that Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* is a prolegomena of sorts to both philosophy and politics, one can certainly wonder what the status of rhetoric is on its own—is the rhetorician himself caught in a sort of halfway house between the more ennobling ways of life of politics and philosophy? Or does rhetoric enjoy an independent—and therefore fulfilling and satisfying—status of its own?

Now Aristotle defines rhetoric as the “ability, in each particular case, of seeing the available means of persuasion. This is the function of no other art; for each of the others is instructive and persuasive about its own subject” (1.2.1). Rhetoric does not aim at the truth or the good or even virtue but at the persuasive—but what is so attractive about persuasion *per se*? Aristotle himself seems to rank rhetoric lower than the other arts in the above definition; for while the other arts are “instructive *and* persuasive” about their subject matter, Aristotle does not say that rhetoric is instructive about anything.²⁹ Aristotle repeatedly mentions that rhetoric does not give the rhetorician knowledge about any particular subject, and those rhetoricians who claim to possess knowledge about politics are either boastful or ignorant (1.2.7,21; 1.4.4–7; see also 3.1.5). This is not to deny that rhetoric may be useful and indeed necessary politically; but simply because something is useful and necessary does not mean that it is therefore a choiceworthy way of life. Of course, we could also mention here the themes that were discussed above (e.g., that the rhetorician’s audience is generally simple, ignorant, and/or morally corrupt, and that so many things normally associated with rhetoric—such as delivery—are fundamentally vulgar or irrelevant), but the point seems clear: Aristotle has very little positive to say about rhetoric *as a way of life on its own* in the opening chapters, and Aristotle’s most serious and attentive readers would likely be dissuaded from becoming rhetoricians.

But it is not only in Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric that the art of speaking is quietly downgraded in importance: it is also suggested that rhetoric will always have something sophistical about it. Near the end of chapter 1, Aristotle states that the difference between a dialectician and a sophist is that the former has knowledge about how to distinguish syllogisms and apparent syllogisms, while the latter deliberately chooses to employ fallacious arguments. In the case of rhetoric, however, the same word is used for the person with knowledge of true

and apparent enthymemes and the one who deliberately chooses to employ fallacious enthymemes (1.1.14). What is puzzling about this statement is that Aristotle does not thereafter distinguish between what we might call a “true” rhetorician (the counterpart of the dialectician) from a “sham” rhetorician (the counterpart of the sophist), and then continue the treatise with this distinction in mind. Perhaps Aristotle is trying to indicate that at the end of the day, it is really not possible to distinguish between a “sophistical” and “dialectical” rhetorician: to the extent that the rhetorician aims at persuasion and not the truth, there will always be something suspicious, and therefore “sophistical,” about him (see also 1.4.5; 2.24.11). The life of the rhetorician—of an itinerant teacher and speaker like Gorgias or Protagoras or Thrasymachus—simply may not be choice-worthy in and of itself. Rhetoric would then remain a prolegomena to two different activities: it is a prolegomena to dialectics in that it is able to deal with any subject matter, but above all ethical-political *endoxa*; and it is a prolegomena to politics in that it instructs the future statesman on the character of, and how to communicate with, political multitudes.

Conclusion: Rhetoric and Civic Education

This essay has attempted to limn Aristotle’s apparent rhetorical strategy in the *Rhetoric*, that is, to whom the book is addressed and what he hoped to convey or teach. We may conclude by saying a few words concerning how this discussion might contribute to a deeper and more thoroughgoing reflection on contemporary public policy issues ranging from participatory democracy to civic education—and in particular the latter.

We must never forget that the audience that Aristotle has called simple, ignorant, and often morally corrupt is the audience of which we liberal democrats are a part: we are part of an the audience that is susceptible to the artful but unjust speeches of clever rhetoricians (see 3.15.10). But to the extent that we lack knowledge about the nature of public discourse, we are both the people who need that instruction the most and, unfortunately, those who are the most difficult to instruct. Now Aristotle was keenly aware of the vital importance of civic education for all regimes. As he states in the *Politics* (1310a12–14; see also 1337a7–31):

But the greatest of all things that have been mentioned with a view to making regimes lasting—though it is now slighted by all—is education relative to the regimes. For there is no benefit in the most beneficial laws, even when these have been approved by all those engaging in politics, if they are not going to be habituated and educated in the regime—if the laws are popular, in a popular spirit, if oligarchic, in an oligarchic spirit.

Although the proper place of public discourse in civic education must be tailored to the sort of regime we believe we have, or hope to have, both conservatives and liberals would certainly agree that all citizens need some sort of instruction in this subject. Now the *Rhetoric* is not written with any particular regime in mind, and the general instruction offered therein seems just as applicable to democracies as it does to oligarchies. Similar to the *Politics*, which tries to mediate between various regimes—and especially between the extreme forms (and vices) of democracy and oligarchy—the *Rhetoric* teaches citizens of any and all regimes in what persuasive speaking consists, and consequently how to distinguish between a good speech and a bad one. Perhaps Aristotle's *Rhetoric* might also have a third audience in mind above and beyond potential philosophers and statesmen, namely the multitude of us citizens; and if this is the case, then this treatise will make manifest the genuine public spiritedness of Aristotelian political philosophy.

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank the Spencer Foundation for supporting this research as well as the constructive comments of the anonymous reviewers. It should go without saying that the views expressed herein are solely the responsibility of the author.
2. See also the representative examples cited by Kennedy (1991, x) in the “Prooemion” to his translation of Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*.
3. For example, there have been two new translations of the *Rhetoric*, the one by Kennedy (1991) cited above and another by Lawson-Tancred (1991); at least four recent studies on the origins and history of rhetoric, by Cole (1991), Conley (1990), Kennedy (1994), and Schiappa (1999); several collections of essays, including Furley and Nehamas (1994), Fortenbaugh and Mirhady (1994), Rorty (1996), and the collection edited by Gross and Walzer (2000) cited above; and at least two book length studies, by Garver (1994) and Wörner (1990). For a concise statement of the reasons for the past neglect of, and recent interest in, the *Rhetoric*, see Nehamas (1994a, xi–xv). For a review of some of the recent literature, see Moss (1997, 635–646). Erickson (1975) provides a comprehensive bibliography until the date of publication.
4. Notable exceptions include Arnhart (1981), Lord (1981), Nichols (1987), Triadafilopoulos (1999).
5. Wardy (1996, 56) puts the matter this way: “Nowadays the term ‘rhetoric’ and its etymological kin in the Romance languages tend to suggest, in ordinary parlance, no more than the dissembling, manipulative abuse of linguistic resources for self-serving ends; outside certain antiquarian and literary critical coteries, the word is

unfailing pejorative.” Wardy then goes on to note: “Not that the mere mention of ‘rhetoric’ in fourth-century B.C. Athens would have failed to evoke a host of similar, and similarly sinister, associations; rather, Aristotle was the immediate inheritor of the violent controversy over the nature and power of persuasion initiated by Gorgias and given enduring form by Plato in his *Gorgias*.”

6. It is perhaps for this reason that Kennedy (1991) subtitled his translation of the *Rhetoric*, *A Theory of Civic Discourse*. See also Garver (1994, 21, 39, 51–52, 76, 104, 108, 128).
7. Lord (1981, 327, 336–338) rightly draws attention to the importance of these latter questions: “Why did Aristotle write a *Rhetoric*? This question is so elementary that it is rarely asked; yet the answer is by no means self-evident. It is not sufficient to say that the subject interested him. Aristotle was not in the habit of producing technical treatises or handbooks.” Lord’s own answer is that Aristotle’s “ultimate intention” is “not so much to transform the practice of rhetoric as to transform the theoretical or conceptual understanding of rhetoric by political men. Aristotle is concerned above all to show rhetoric can become an instrument of political prudence or of a political science which educates to prudence.” While Aristotle does not ignore those elements of rhetoric that are “low and potentially dangerous,” he does highlight the “logical or intellectual component of rhetoric,” conferring upon it “a dignity capable of engaging the attention of men of intellectual and moral seriousness.” Rhetoric then becomes subordinate to political science, and not *vice-versa*, thereby enabling rhetoric to become “an instrument of responsible and prudent statesmanship.” While I do not disagree with Lord’s overall assessment, I focus much more on the possible *philosophical* reasons why Aristotle was interested in rhetoric.
8. All references to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* are to the edition translated by Kennedy (1991). In general I have followed this translation, although I have sometimes altered it to make it more strictly literal. The most recent critical edition of the text is that of Kassel (1976). Grimaldi (1980–1988) has provided an invaluable commentary on the text as whole, the first such commentary to appear since Cope’s (1970 [originally 1877]) three volume effort over one hundred years ago.
9. It would seem that the only thing that escapes censure in this opening section is well-crafted law—but a moment’s reflection indicates that rule by law is emphatically not a perfect or complete solution to the difficulties Aristotle has just outlined. Although Aristotle suggests some inherent limitations to lawmaking in the *Rhetoric* (e.g., that law cannot foresee all possibilities or outcomes in the future), in the final chapters of Book 3 of the *Politics*, Aristotle gives a much more comprehensive appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of rule by law (especially when it is compared to rule by a single virtuous individual [1286a6–9]). Aristotle does praise certain aspects of law (e.g., that it is not swayed by passion, and that rulers should have available to them written rules [1286a16–19, 1287a28–40]), and he does recommend the rule of law (especially in a democracy [1282b1–6,

1286a35–37]); but he also shows the reader that law is neither a panacea nor is it even the best possible solution to the question of “who should rule?” As laws are made by and with a view to a particular regime, the goodness or badness of law decisively depends on the goodness or badness of the regime and the lawmakers (1282b6–13). Moreover, when someone arises in a regime who eclipses everyone else in virtue, Aristotle’s final word on the matter is that this person should be obeyed and have authority over all matters simply (1288a26–29). We might say that law is a sort of compromise solution: when great virtue is lacking in a political order, well-crafted law might restrain our worst proclivities were we to govern ourselves in the absence of fixed legal rules. Of course, the problem still remains who is to interpret the law in those instances when the law does not seem to apply to a particular case or is not set down correctly (see also 1286a20–b7).

10. Aristotle quietly emphasizes this fact at the beginning of Book 2, where the first passion treated is anger. Aristotle may be suggesting that anger is the most common or frequent passion of the multitude; at all events, only anger and pity are twice mentioned in the opening chapter of Book 1 as passions to which rhetoricians appeal. The extent to which the multitude is reasonable might depend upon the extent to which anger is reasonable.
11. Even a scholar as sympathetic to Aristotle as Kennedy (1991, 27–28), remarks that “[c]hapter 1 creates acute problems for the unity of the treatise,” and that in the final analysis “it is probably better to acknowledge frankly that chapter 1 is inconsistent with what follows.” Arnhart (1981, 13–53), Cooper (1994, 194–196), and Grimaldi (1972, 18–52), all try to demonstrate, by contrast, that any inconsistencies between chapter 1 and the rest of the treatise are only superficial and can be resolved.
12. See, for example, Solmsen (1929) and Fortenbaugh (1986, 247–248), who also makes the same claim about the introductory chapter to Book 3.
13. The above claim would be even stronger if we accept the testimony of Diogenes Laertius (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 5.24), whose catalogue of Aristotle’s works includes an *Art of Rhetoric* in two books (presumably the first two books of the treatise we now have) and another work, *On Lexis*, also in two books (perhaps Book 3 of the treatise). Both of these works were presumably joined together by the grammarian Tyrannio or Andronicus of Rhodes. If this were the case, then Aristotle would have unmistakably wanted to begin both works with a purged or purified version of rhetoric before going on to treat the subject as it was normally understood and practiced. On conjectures and speculations when and where the *Rhetoric* was written, as well as how it was preserved, see Kennedy (1991, 299–312), Erickson (1975, 1–18), and Brandes (1989, 1–7).
14. For a sampling of the various perspectives on the morality, amorality, or even immorality of the *Rhetoric*, see Olian (1968), Ryan (1972), Johnstone (1980), Hill (1981), Sprute (1994), Engberg-Pedersen (1996), and Wardy (1996).

15. As to whether this is Aristotle's final judgment concerning the nature of judicial rhetoric and the courts, see *Politics*, 1300b18–1301a15.
16. In the *Anabasis* (II.vi.16–27), Xenophon gives a vivid illustration of these ideas in the persons of Proxenus and Meno. Proxenus (who was a student of Gorgias) could command gentlemen through the use of praise and blame because they were motivated (as he was) by a keen sense of justice and honor; he could not command the common soldiers. Meno, on the other hand, thought that a person who was not corrupted was also uneducated, and he ridiculed and plotted against individuals who were pious or virtuous. We might say that Aristotle is trying to show the likes of Proxenus all of the tools they will need to succeed against the likes of Meno: in other words, Aristotle is trying to educate clever but decent statesmen, those who see that politics *necessarily* involves a certain degree of deception and coercive violence. See Strauss (1964, 22–23).
17. Rowell (1932, 226) makes the following telling remark: Aristotle “even appears to suggest that rhetoric is needed in the world only because people are not all adequately rational beings.” Indeed!
18. For a discussion of the early history of the translation of the word *antistrophos*—and how the translation of this word both shapes and is shaped by a commentator's understanding of the text and Aristotle as a whole—see Green (1990).
19. See also Schütrumpf (1994), who not only points out similarities between the *Rhetoric* and the *Gorgias*, but also the *Phaedrus*, the *Republic*, and the *Laws*. This article also contains a number of helpful insights concerning the opening chapter.
20. Green (1990, 9–10), suggests this very idea, and it is worth quoting him at length: “*Antistrophos* appears in the *Analytics* and in the *Topics* more than 150 times. In every instance the word indicates a transformation which is reciprocal and reversible, and in which one part of a two-part relationship necessarily implies the second part by virtue of such reciprocity and reversibility. These transformations can be performed on elements such as sentences, propositions, terms, relations, and even on arguments. In general, the transformation either follows Aristotle's principles of logical conversion detailed in the *Prior Analytics*, or the transformation negates the original element. In the former case, if certain logical operations can be performed on element X to yield element Y, or on element Y to yield element X, then X and Y are convertible with one another. In the latter case, either element can always be converted to its opposite. In one of Aristotle's illustrations of conversion (*antistrophein*, *A.Pr.* 1.25a6), the statement ‘no man is an animal’ transforms into the statement ‘no animal is a man,’ while ‘every man is an animal’ transforms into ‘some animal is a man.’ Thus X and Y always imply one another, and can be transformed into one another, without actually being one another.... If this reading from the *Analytics* and *Topics* were at all permissible in the context of the *Rhetoric*, then the problematic use of the word in the declaration ‘Rhetoric is the *antistrophos* of dialectic’ would indicate that rhetoric

and dialectic could somehow be converted so that they could be understood as one another (reciprocally and reversibly), and that they do not merely resemble one another in a vague manner." Green's reading seems all the more permissible if we recall that the Alexandrian and Arabic philosophers included the *Rhetoric* (and *Poetics*) in Aristotle's *Organon* (Black 1990, 1–16). Green goes on to state that he explores this possible reading in another study, but I have been unable to locate it. For other interpretations, see Brunschwig (1996).

21. See Gaines (1986, 198). Aristotle also states that rhetoric is a "sort of offshoot" of dialectic as well as "a sort of part and likeness" of it (1.2.7; see also 1.4.5). Although it is unclear whether these remarks are intended to correct or supplement the claim that rhetoric is a counterpart of dialectic, they obviously highlight the similarity between the two faculties.
22. Or "a *sullogismos* of a kind" according to Burnyeat (1996, 105).
23. Arnhart (1981) makes perhaps the strongest case for the rational, or syllogistic, nature of enthymemes. For further discussions of what the enthymeme is (and is not), see Seaton (1914), Madden (1952), Conley (1984), and Burnyeat (1994). Conley and Burnyeat give historical overviews of what others have claimed the enthymeme is.
24. For general discussions of the relation between rhetoric and dialectic, and the *endoxa* and ethical-political concerns, see Cooper (1994), Engberg-Pedersen (1996), and Halliwell (1994).
25. See, for example, Arnhart (1981), Most (1994), Nehamas (1994b), and Irwin (1996).
26. Burks (1966) claims that both the *Rhetoric* and *Ethics* have an essentially egoistic understanding of human motivation, by which he means that human beings act for the sake of their own self-actualization. But Burks glosses over Book 1, chapter 9 of the *Rhetoric* far too quickly (see especially 406), and therefore does not see how the work exposes (without resolving) the genuine tensions mentioned above.
27. Nor is this to say that the tensions mentioned above are *in fact* solved in the *Ethics*. By privileging and developing one side of this puzzle over the other (i.e., by claiming that the core of happiness consists in acting virtuously), Aristotle may actually be magnifying and deepening the problem of the relationship between virtue, happiness, and self-sacrifice for the serious reader (a problem that is only suggested or hinted at in the *Rhetoric*).
28. See also Miller (1977, 303–9, 312–4, and especially 330) as well as Irwin (1996, 168–169).
29. Indeed, Chroust (1973, 2: 29–42) suggests that Aristotle's (now lost) dialogue *Gryllus* (or *On Rhetoric*) may have argued that rhetoric was not an art after all.

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