

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - How Rhetoric Became A Science



Our day has witnessed the establishment of new disciplines running from women's, to ethnic, to multi-cultural studies, to name but a few representative of this academic current. From antiquity to the end of the 19th century the aspect of Argumentation Theory which was understood as rhetoric was an officially recognised discipline. It was recognised as one of the traditional seven Liberal Arts. How did rhetoric achieve this status? What is there to be learned from the rationales that raised it to this status which is relevant to coming to grips with the status, inclusive of their justifications, their need for models, their self-understandings, of the new disciplines of our day? Can a recovery of the grounds for the establishment of the traditional liberal arts shed light on these and associated questions? To answer, however tentatively, these questions is the aim of this paper.

The seven liberal arts, the quadrivium and trivium, have had an extraordinary run. For two millennia in one form or another they provide the backdrop or the foreground of higher education. But of these seven there is only one which has a source text whose name is coextensive with the art. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and the trivial art of Rhetoric share this common trait. Moreover through all of the vicissitudes of the history of rhetoric from antiquity through the Christian ages, dark and middle, through the renaissance, and into the modern age, Aristotle's text in sometimes hidden and other times manifest ways has been a source and authority for the discipline of rhetoric.

In order to appreciate what Aristotle accomplished for rhetoric with his *Rhetoric* it is necessary to orient ourselves along an appropriate chronological parameter. Looked at retrospectively from the perspective of 1998 or of 1298, in the decades of William of Moerbke's translation of this work into Latin, it's a done thing. But looked at prospectively, with the assumption that there is nothing in the text which suggests Aristotle anticipated future developments one can search for the conditions which transformed a sometime misprised techne into a Liberal Art. With that said, allow me to focus on a few selected ways of coming to grips with these issues.

As is well known Aristotle identifies the enthymeme as the core of what rhetoric as a *techne* must address. But Aristotle's discussion of enthymemes adumbrates a foundational role for them in another sense which will turn out to be thematic to the character of Liberal Arts qua arts. What I want to suggest to you today is that this sub-textual element of the *Rhetoric* is a locus classicus for identifying how this work became instrumental in founding a discipline which survived for more than two aeons. The discussion in Book II of enthymemes implicitly defines an empirical domain for rhetoric which involves politics in a complex manner. Book II presents a generalised case for enthymemes whose open ended character allows for further developments, starting in antiquity with the stoic insistence on formalising the discipline of rhetoric as a study of defective syllogisms with missing premises and concluding with modern arguments that enthymemes are divergent syllogisms, that is non-defective, because of their character as probabilistic (Burnyeat). Both views however are grounded in Aristotle's description of enthymemes as proofs based on premises, thereby resembling syllogisms *per se*. But enthymemes differ by the fact that their premises are neither apodeictic nor strictly dialectical. For example they can depend on generalisations which are exemplary in character. But examples in the context of rhetoric, whether fabulous or factual, Aesopian or historical, are inseparable from *doxa*, that is they are rooted in *doxa*, in the Greek, they are in, if you will forgive the oxymoron, *endoxa*.

One of the most revealing cases of such an example with respect to the role that Aristotle's discussion of enthymemes plays in founding rhetoric as a liberal art is the reference to a Socratic maxim at 1393b 4-8, a star instance of a parable: "Parable is illustrated by the sayings of Socrates. For instance, if one were to say that magistrates should not be chosen by lot; for this would be the same as choosing representative athletes not those competent to contend but those on whom the lot falls, or as choosing any of the sailors as the man who should take the helm, as if it were right that the choice should be decided by lot and not by a man's knowledge."

Assuming that most traditional interpretation of enthymemes, that they are syllogisms based on premises which differ from the premises of apodeictic or dialectical syllogisms so much so that as 2.25 makes clear even examples or paradigms such as Socrates' parable can serve as the ground of a premise of an enthymeme, puts us in a position to ask why the Socratic example is only a case of a potential premise to a rhetorical argument, or, even, why it is only at the best a

paradigm argument. In what way does it fail as the basis of a knockdown proof? We can begin by reflecting that it is clear that one does not choose a pilot by lot, as little in our day as in Aristotle's, since our life depends of this choice. Given the undeniable plausibility of this piece of reasoning, it is incumbent on us to try to understand why it is merely rhetorical, that is: Why is it a parable, a congener of or the basis for the premise of an enthymeme, and not the core of a more certain syllogism? One reason may be that there is a Socratic argument alluded to by this maxim, fully developed in places as diverse as Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* and Plato's *Gorgias*. Implicit in this text is the Socratic identification of the rule of the wise over themselves with the rule of the *phronimos* over the polis. In short it is an allusion to what Socrates famously claimed, that wisdom is title to rule. But as a cursory reading of Book 1 of the *Politics* indicates, Aristotle's argument that the city is not only natural, but, is also hierarchically complex, entails the denial that political rule is homogeneous with the rule of the wise over themselves, that is, it denies that the public and the private can be so collapsed. What this suggests is that Aristotle's use of the example drawn from Socrates points to and at the same time points away from a higher order, philosophic, level of truth; in a word this use of the Socratic example puts us in touch with the truth of a common place certainty we feel in our bones by thinking how we came to Amsterdam and that it has a higher order truth behind it, a truth which is consistent with *endoxa*, even entailed by it. Although it is not, by any stretch of the imagination, simply accessible to it. As for the self-evidence of the allusion to the Socratic thesis consider the disputed lines at 1398b20 where Alcidas' version uncertainly bears witness to the same issue.

This use of the Socratic example by Aristotle has three interesting consequences. (1) In general, it shows that Aristotle presents his descriptions of rhetorical devices in a manner which preserves the autonomy of rhetoric as a *techne*, whereby its roots are emphatically implicit, but are also likewise by-passed in a manner which is consistent with the development of a transmittable discipline, that is, as something teachable, and so, self-contained from theoretical difficulties. (Allow me to illustrate this point with an analogy. Rhetoric, if it were to have turned out to be an art, as it did turn out, in some measure because of Aristotle's efforts, would have had to stand, as it does, to theory as venery does to ornithology. Thus what we see is that one of the modes by which rhetoric becomes a Liberal Art is that it is at once open to and insulated from *theoria*). But also (2), in particular, the initial theme of the work, that rhetoric is a

counterpart to dialectic, is illustrated and hence implicitly adumbrated by this example, because this initial theme has a dialectical counterpoint in Aristotle's thesis, developed at the end of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, that sophistry mistakenly identified politics with rhetoric. This example points to this nexus of issues because it functions to isolate rhetoric from the pull of politics which has always had a potential to swamp rhetoric's autonomy. It insulates the argument from political theoretical consequences, and, hence, sheds light on how Aristotle reoriented rhetoric away from politics and toward dialectics. In other words, if it is true that from the perspective of the *Ethics*, that politics needs to be protected from rhetoric, it is equally true that from the perspective of the requirements of founding rhetoric as an autonomous discipline that it needed to be protected from politics.

(3) In addition the air that enthymemes breath, the endoxa of everyday discourse is doubly illuminated in this context.

Dialectical reasoning is potentially present whenever the starting point is doxa. Although dialectic is related to the theoretical it is distinguished from the apodeictic *per se* and it is a counterpart of the rhetorical. This is the framework for understanding the status of endoxa as it is used in the *Rhetoric*. The classification of the many meanings of endoxa in Aristotle is well developed in our day. The literature on this matter has displayed many of the denotations of endoxa. These include possible meanings ranging from true and false beliefs of a popular sort, to surface beliefs as distinguished from deep or implicit beliefs, to analogous distinctions of regulative as opposed to substantive beliefs (Klein; Roche). What I want to suggest to you today about the meaning of this word will be illustrated by way of another example drawn from the *Rhetoric*. It is one which, by my lights, is consistent with the main lines of interpretation known to me about the possible senses of endoxa, but which has the advantage of suggesting another lesson about the foundations of the Liberal Arts as they are open to inspection in this work.

At 3.10, in the context of the discussion of *ta aot«ia*, which Freese translates as "smart," but which I would prefer to translate as "urbanity," Aristotle observes that "easy learning is naturally pleasant to all" (1410b15) from which it follows that "styles and enthymemes that are quickly absorbed are urbane.... this is why superficial enthymemes, those that are obvious to all and need no mental effort, are [effective]... [because]... knowledge of a sort results ... [from them]"

(1410b20). Moreover as the context makes clear this same criterion, ease of and hence pleasure at learning, decides that metaphor, the direct communication of an imputation, say, '*a is b*,' is rhetorically superior to simile, which only imputes by means of a term of comparison, for example, '*a is as, or is like b*.' Let us consider, however briefly, Aristotle on the love of learning as it manifests itself within the whole range of human nature.

"Human beings by nature desire to know." The *Metaphysics* begins with this famous universal proposition rivalled perhaps in the breath of its reach and superficial plausibility by the opening of the *Nichomachean Ethics* and by that of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. But while the cognitive bases of these claims are wrapped in the mystery of autobiographica, the evidence for them is elsewhere and accessible. The evidence for the universality of Aristotle's judgement at the beginning of the *Metaphysics* is found in our insatiable curiosity about biographical trivia whether it be of Jane Austen or our next door neighbour. When some strange sight occurs, it interests us qua mere sight sans concern for our interests or well being. When a good public speaker addresses an audience about matters of the first importance, ease of understanding, and hence pleasure at this understanding, governs the choice of illustrations, as Churchill's war time speeches illustrate. But at the level of the *Metaphysics* our need to know is gratified, if it is at all, quite differently. For those caught up by them, the arguments that lead to an open-minded consideration for the need of a Prime Mover will be the source of pleasures concomitant with the actuality of knowing. As a result, this version of the desire to know is to be found at the peak of a demographic pyramid, one whose base is fragmented by phenomena which with Aristotle's aid we can impute to different political regimes, but which Aristotle's contemporaries, or ourselves, can look at through categories drawn from Herodotus or cultural studies and sociology. Be that as it may, 'curiosity,' 'the desire to know,' 'philosophy,' the whole range of human experiences connected with these phenomenae provide the background for endoxa characterised by political or sociological breath and demographic bases and peaks.

Now just as virtue in the *Rhetoric* is looked at from the perspective of the expedient or useful, and considerations of its intrinsic worth are to be found in the *Ethics*, so analogously knowledge, in the *Rhetoric*, is inseparable from pleasure and its connection to the parameters of the persuasive. This suggests that endoxa, whether about 'virtue,' or 'knowledge,' or, as in the Socratic example we are considering today, 'choice of experts,' have two fundamental vectors. The

first is horizontal, or sociological and political, the second is vertical, or related to the first in a way that is captured by a distinction made famous by Plato, that is, the distinction between opinion and knowledge. This will allow for another lesson about the structure of this work that turns out to characterise the Liberal Arts. Before doing so, I will turn to one last illustration of my topic.

The contrast between the treatment of happiness in the *Nichomachean Ethics* and in the *Rhetoric* reveals another instructive feature of endoxa relevant to this paper. In the discussion of happiness at *Rhetoric* 1.5, happiness is taken up as an item in the realm of opinion insofar as it can be circumscribed through a compendium or list of ungraded, unrank-ordered list of variables. This list includes wealth, health, children, a good wife, and so forth. In contrast, in Book I of the *Ethics*, happiness is also introduced as a common place of the world of opinion but there it appears in another guise. Initially, Wealth is contrasted with Pleasure and both, individually, are contrasted with Honor as possible claimants to the content of a happy life, all of which serves as part of the argument for Virtue as its true locus. Here happiness is taken up through a series of synecdoches, and is thus characterised by a context which is potentially dialectical, which, allows for an examination of competitive claims. Both these approaches are endoxic but with a difference. Returning to the *Rhetoric*, one can perform a simple, obvious thought experiment to test the endoxic character of the items on the list of happiness' variables. If we entertain the possibility of replacing one of the Aristotelian variables with its opposite, say health with sickness, we would not expect people, that is we would not expect an interlocutor imagined for the purpose of weighing our sense of endoxa in this context, to agree that illness is part of a happy life. Likewise, imagine someone with no friends, poor, no children, prematurely old, ugly, weak, unathletic: this is no one's notion of a happy life.

A contrast emerges. The *Rhetoric* presents us, for the most part, with the face of endoxa which comes unsorted. It is corrigible and openly open-ended in its corrigibility. It is at once easy and pleasant to survey our opinions about such things as happiness. And so the text invites a consideration of what it is that one knows about the matter in question. It thereby invites a consideration of what one knows about the world. (How would we or Aristotle, for instance, decide whether, say, 'good fortune' is an item on Happiness' agenda?) This endoxic open-endedness is implicitly a training in one of the conditions of thoughtfulness, being open-minded. In contrast the *Ethics*, presents another face of endoxa. It is the

aspect of endoxa which is essentially the ground of dialectics, the comparison of competing claims and so their sorting out by means of philosophical arguments. The way of doing so can't be easily portrayed in a sentence. The former approach is practical in the realm associated with rhetoric namely action. It is artful, not because it is productive, the Ethics criterion of the artful, but rather because it is non-theoretical and because it is an *organon* for instauring a *mathemata*, that is, it is a tool for founding something which literally easily learnable.

What have we learned from this brief survey of Aristotle's text about the foundations of *Rhetoric* which is also fundamental to the Liberal Arts and which may aid us to evaluate and strengthen emergent disciplines? The Liberal Arts share traits in common. In all their incarnations they all teach *technai*, whether it be what is learned through mastering a sequence of Euclidean theorems or an analogous sweep of rhetorical figures. In addition each of these arts is at once autonomous and each is conceptually vectored in two directions. Each has within its notional syllabus a capacity to direct the teacher and student back to its roots. In this sense each is literally radical, arming its pupils with one of the sources and aims of philosophy: the affective and conceptual incentive to seek the foundations of things. As for the other vector, each points, albeit implicitly, towards an end or *telos*. This first comes to sight in the potential meanings of the terms of art, say, enthyme, or topic, which raise the student's view to the consideration of higher order meanings. Consonant with this each has within its purview the capacity to generate questions about the ends of life, a capacity granted to each by their primary capacity to induce, through moments of study, self-forgetting work and learning, the unreflective experience of activity intrinsic in character, an experience which on reflection can raise to consciousness the capacity to rank order matters in ways too complex to enumerate. Finally, and most importantly, the Liberal Arts are modest. They insinuate the tools of rationality, critical reasoning as it is called in our day, through the means of autonomous disciplines, that is disciplines whose scope is determined by modes of study appropriate to a subject matter, and which thus by pass, but leave accessible, their theoretical roots.

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