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John Thorp

Western University, jthorp@uwo.ca

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Aristotle's Rhetorodicy

John Thorp, *The University of Western Ontario*
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Abstract

There is a well-known question about Aristotle's view of rhetoric: on the one hand he inherited the typical Platonic disdain for rhetoric as a concealer of truth; but on the other he throws himself with verve into the elaboration of a rhetorical manual. This paper points up a little-noticed Aristotelian justification for rhetoric, one that sees rhetorical contests as means for *discovering* the truth; it asks how such an optimistic view might be grounded.

I. Plato's legacy

Plato was notoriously hard on rhetoric and its practitioners. His animus on this subject lurks nearly everywhere in his work, and the shadow cast by that animus has been very long. In common modern English, for example, there is really no non-pejorative sense of the term 'rhetoric' or its congeners¹: the noun 'rhetoric' is readily paired with 'propaganda', and the intent is expegetical; the adjective 'rhetorical' most easily attracts the nouns 'flourishes' and 'tricks'. Indeed, De Quincey, in the 19th century, remarked that rhetoric has, in general, two connotations: one of ostentatious ornament, and the other of fallacious argument.

The basis for Plato's dislike of rhetoric is, of course, that he sees it as the art of deception. It is practiced by those who do not themselves know the truth, in order to persuade others that they do. It sweetens falsehood and makes it agreeable to the popular mind. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates asks: "Does not a good and successful discourse presuppose a knowledge in the mind of the speaker of the truth about his subject?" And Phaedrus replies: "As to that, dear Socrates, what I have heard is that the intending orator is under no necessity of understanding what is truly just, but only what is likely to be thought just by the body of men who are to give judgment; nor need he know what is truly good or noble, but what will be thought so, since it is on the latter, not the former, that persuasion depends."(259e-260a)

And it is for reasons of this sort that Plato – and others with him – saw rhetoric as the curse of Athens.

II Aristotle's view of rhetoric

¹ I acknowledge, of course, that there is a pedagogical movement gaining steam to bring back the academic subject of 'rhetoric', where that term is understood neutrally; this movement reaches back to an older tradition, of course.

Although Aristotle appears to have begun his intellectual life in substantial agreement with Plato on the subject of Rhetoric,² it is well-known that he soon enough changed his mind,³ and started to compose rhetorical treatises with the best of them — indeed, to compose the best of them. What happened? How did Aristotle's change of heart come about?

Reading standard accounts of Aristotle one gets the impression that, basically, Aristotle held his nose. On the one hand, he just was more interested in cataloguing and organizing existing practice than in profoundly reforming it, and the old Platonic strictures were not going to keep him away from tackling so important a phenomenon as rhetoric.⁴ On the other hand, explicitly advanced in the *Rhetoric*, are pragmatic defensive considerations: however deplorable a tool rhetoric is, the enemy has it, so we should get it for ourselves (1355a23); other people are going to use it, so we must study it so that we can be wise to their tricks (1355a33). And, exuding the unmistakable odour of rationalization, there is the following argument: “it is absurd to hold that a man ought to be ashamed of being unable to defend himself with his limbs, but not of being unable to defend himself with speech and reason, when the use of rational speech is more distinctive of a human being than the use of his limbs” (1355b1ff).

It is true that Aristotle advances these arguments, and it is true that, as a bunch, they seem unsatisfactorily limp. In Plato we had a high-minded rejection of (most) rhetoric; it seems a disappointment that Aristotle gives us so pragmatic a justification, so defensive a defence. At best, rhetoric emerges as morally neutral, a tool which can be put to good or evil use, and indeed Aristotle cautions that we must not use rhetoric to seek to persuade people of what is wrong (1355a31). But I want to draw your attention to something else that Aristotle says in his defence of rhetoric, something which has scarcely been noticed by the commentators, but which, if Aristotle means it seriously, amounts to the strongest and best of all possible defences. Let me quote two passages from the first chapter of the first Book of the *Rhetoric*:

Rhetoric is useful because things that are true and things that are just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites, so that if the decisions of judges are not what they ought to be, the defeat must be due to the speakers themselves and they must be blamed accordingly. (1355a21-24)

[Speaking of debating on both sides of an issue] The underlying facts do not lend themselves equally well to the contrary views. No; things that are true and things that are better are, by their nature, practically always easier to prove and easier to believe in. (1355a36-39)

Think for a moment how important this claim might be. Aristotle is claiming that the truth had a tendency to win in a rhetorical contest. If this is correct, it changes the moral neutrality of rhetoric: rhetoric can become not just a tool for persuasion but also a device for discovery of the truth. One can learn the art not just in order to make one's view prevail, but in order to participate in a contest which is likely to discover the truth and the just course of action. So far from Plato's troubling requirement that rhetoricians

² Quintillian, *Institutiones*, 2.17.1

³ The thesis of a development in Aristotle's views of rhetoric was first advanced by Friedrich Solmsen, *Die Entwicklung der aristotelischen Logik und Rhetorik (Neue philologische Untersuchungen)*, Berlin, 1929

⁴ Kennedy, George, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963, 85

should know the truth (i.e. know that what they know *is* the truth) before they seek to persuade others, we have a situation in which precisely those who do not know the truth on some subject might engage in rhetorical debates in order to discover it. To me it seems that this idea of Aristotle's, if he means it seriously, is the great answer to Plato, the strong positive thesis that we would like to see.

It is a disappointment that the passage has had so little attention from commentators. Cope's edition of the *Rhetoric* has a substantial note on the first passage, but it is about whether the Greek word *autôn* which occurs in it should be printed with a rough or a smooth breathing.⁵ Médéric Dufour's Budé edition and translation is so embarrassed at the apparent claim in the second text that the truth is easier to prove, that it translates the Greek term as 'plus propre au raisonnement syllogistique' — easier to get into syllogistic form.⁶ George Kennedy's standard history of Greek rhetoric, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* scarcely mentions Aristotle's surprising claim in its summary of his view of the usefulness of rhetoric. And where Aristotle had said that things that are true and things that are better are...*practically always* easier to prove..., Kennedy waters the claim down before retreating from it: "a willingness to argue on both sides *sometimes* demonstrates the true nature of a case and in any event it helps the orator to recognize the arguments, fair or unfair, of his opponents⁷ (*italics mine*). In Kennedy's 1991 translation of the *Rhetoric* he offers, by way of explanation of the first passage, the footnote remark that "Aristotle believed that truth was grounded in nature (*physis*), and capable of apprehension by reason."⁸ This doesn't take us very far, to say the least. And from his chapter-by-chapter outline of the contents of the book the idea of these passages is altogether absent.⁹ The hold of Plato's contempt for rhetoric is very strong indeed.

Only four commentators seem to me to have glimpsed the importance of these passages, and only one of these has gone any distance in exploring how Aristotle's surprising claims might be true. Everett Lee Hunt, in his 1925 paper "Plato and Aristotle on Rhetoric and Rhetoricians" prints our passages in full and remarks "The inherent superiority of just and true things is thus increased by the universal use of rhetoric. This is a broader and sounder view than Plato was able to take."¹⁰ And in his sumptuous 1980 commentary on the text of the *Rhetoric* William Grimaldi provides a note of two pages in length on the first of our passages. A page and a half are devoted to the old question whether the breathing on *autôn* should be rough or smooth, but in the final paragraph Grimaldi writes: "[i]mplicit in this statement, and worthy of note, is that rhetoric prevents us from making wrong judgments, and in doing so it protects truth and justice....[t]hus it is that in explaining the usefulness of rhetoric here Aristotle is making a remarkably strong pronouncement about the importance of rhetoric, a pronouncement which is

⁵ Cope, E.M., *The Rhetoric of Aristotle with a Commentary*, vol. 1, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1877, 22 n.12

⁶ Médéric Dufour, ed. & tr., *Aristote, Rhétorique*, vol. 1, 2e édition, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1960, 75.

⁷ Kennedy, George, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963, 18

⁸ Kennedy, George, tr., *Aristotle, On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, 34, n.24

⁹ Kennedy, George, tr., *Aristotle, On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, 14

¹⁰ Hunt, Everett Lee, "Plato and Aristotle on Rhetoric and Rhetoricians", in *Studies in Rhetoric and Public Speaking in Honor of James Albert Winans*, New York, Russell & Russell, 1925, 47

usually not even considered as possible for the *Rhetoric*....”¹¹ In a 1981 commentary on the *Rhetoric* Larry Arnhart is sufficiently intrigued by Aristotle’s claims that he seeks to understand what thought might lie behind them; he suggests that the material for rhetoric is the common opinions of people (*ta endoxa*), and that the rhetoricians’ need to take constant account of the common opinions will keep them close to these opinions; moreover, according to Aristotle these common opinions are broadly true.¹² In a paper from 1992, Robert Wardy takes Aristotle’s claims seriously, but his interest is not in how they might be grounded, but rather in whether the subsequent treatment of rhetorical method is consistent with them.¹³ These four commentators have seen the importance of Aristotle’s remarks here; but none of them has really gone any distance in an attempt to understand them.

What I want to do here is to think about just what Aristotle might have said to explain this remarkable claim, that rhetoric, far from being a device for eclipsing the truth, might be a means for discovering it. What possible justification could there be for this view? On the surface it sounds like the vice of logical optimism, a vice of which we should be wary given our knowledge of how often, in history, rhetoric has swayed thousands to falsehood and evil. I will offer you three considerations.

III Justifying Aristotle’s view

(i) Debate

It is worth recalling that Aristotle divides rhetoric into three types, political, forensic and epideictic. Political oratory is deliberative and aims to establish the expediency or in expediency of a course of action. Forensic oratory is concerned with justice and injustice. And epideictic oratory is the oratory of display, of encomia and condemnations, praise and censure¹⁴. Now the first two types of rhetoric are used in contexts of debate, with speakers urging pro and con. In political oratory the contending factions try to persuade the assembly to adopt or to reject some course of action. In forensic oratory there is a prosecutor and a defendant. Only in epideictic oratory would one not, I think, typically find speakers on both sides: funerals, for example, don’t normally feature debates; eulogies are not normally answered by kakologies. And in the two remarkable texts we cited, Aristotle is quite explicitly thinking of rhetorical contests, that is, cases in which there is rhetorical pleading on both sides of an issue. I’m inclined to think, then, and I would want to suggest, that part of what Aristotle has in mind when he sees rhetoric as a truth-discoverer, is that truth is discovered, or approached, in a *debate*. When both sides of a question are aired, and there is a clash of criticism between them, we are likely to learn more and more about the matter. And so, it would seem, we are likely to get nearer to the truth. So probably Aristotle would not consider that the rhetoric of display, epideictic rhetoric, is a truth-discoverer. Rather it is the other two types, political and forensic, that may lead to truth, and they do so because of the

¹¹ Grimaldi, William M.A., S.J., *Aristotle, Rhetoric I, A Commentary*, New York, Fordham University Press, 1980, 27-28

¹² Arnhart, Larry, *Aristotle on Political Reasoning: A Commentary on the “Rhetoric”*, DeKalb, Northern Illinois University Press, 1981, 27-8

¹³ Wardy, Robert, “Mighty is the truth and it shall prevail?”, in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle’s Rhetoric*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1996, 56-87

¹⁴ *Rhetoric*, I,3

structure of debate. (One is reminded here, inevitably, of Mill's confidence that free and open debate is likely to lead to truth, a confidence that is the main pillar of his belief in freedom of speech.)

(ii) *Ethics & Deliberation*

Now political oratory is used typically in a context of deliberation: should we go to war against the Cretans or not? Should we use public funds to beautify the temple of Aphrodite or not? Should we extend the reach of Medicaid or not? And forensic oratory, at least in Greek antiquity, is very much bound up with moral judgments. (This is something of a difference between antiquity and us, I think; our laws are so detailed that the deliberation is often about whether a given law does or does not apply to a given case. It's perhaps only in interesting cases of jury nullification that we see a fundamentally moral judgment being made by the jury.) The province of rhetoric, then, is deliberation and ethics.

Now readers of the *Nicomachean Ethics* will recall that Aristotle has some striking things to say with regard to deliberation and to ethical judgments — namely, that they are endemically imprecise. The most famous remark along these lines is, I suppose, that in which Aristotle says that you are not to expect the same degree of exactness in ethics as in mathematics: indeed it is the mark of a boor to expect a mathematical exactness in ethics (1094b11-27). Another famous remark is his definition of virtue, in which he allows, to put it in modern terms, that there is, in the final analysis, no decision procedure for choosing the virtuous act. A man of practical wisdom will be able to make the decision, but there is no rule for making the decision (1160b36ff). Practical wisdom is more like a knack than like a science. It's like chicken-sexing, or gaydar. And there are many other passages in Aristotle that are to the same effect.¹⁵ Ethical advice and matters of deliberation just are not capable of the same precision as are the sciences.

I want to emphasize how striking it is that in the *Rhetoric* Aristotle in effect holds that exactly two sorts of matters are the province of rhetoric: ethics and deliberation; and in the *Ethics* he repeatedly identifies two areas where precision is impossible and not to be sought: ethics and deliberation. Surely these two claims are connected. Now I think that the subject of the imprecision of ethics in Aristotle, is a rich and deep one, and I won't try to go into it here. But perhaps I can cover the essence of it by expounding my third and last consideration: probability.

(iii) *Probability*

Aristotle famously tells us that rhetoric is the counterpart of dialectic; what is the difference between them? His explicit answer here is that the two operate in different fields. This emerges when he is working out the intellectual kinship of the dialectician and the rhetorician, and comments that they have the same sort of mental ability; but dialectic operates in the field of what is true; rhetoric in the field of what is probable; dialectic apprehends the true, rhetoric the approximately true.¹⁶ This, I think, is the key element of the rhetorodicy.

¹⁵ e.g. *Metaphysics*, 995a9-13, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098a25, 1104a1, 1107a26, 1112a33, 1140a30, 1165a12, 1180b8 etc.

¹⁶ 1355a10ff. For a lengthy discussion of the difference between rhetoric and dialectic see Eugene E. Ryan, *Aristotle's Theory of Rhetorical Argumentation*, Montréal, Bellarmin, 1984, 38-60

But probability is a notoriously difficult concept. In English the language of probability comes from two semantic fields. On the one hand there is the word ‘probable’, stemming from the Latin *probabilis* and meaning credible, demonstrable, provable — or, we might rather say — supportable, confirmable, evidenceable. On the other hand we have the word ‘likely’, ‘likelihood’. At first blush this is a mysterious word: what is the probable like? Then we recall that in other languages cognate with ours this image of likeness abounds, and answers our question: *verisimilis*, *vraisemblable*, *verosimigliante*, *wahrscheinlich*. What is probable, then, is what is *like* what is true. Cicero rolls all this together nicely in his definition of *probabile*:

probabile est id, quod fere fieri solet, aut quod in opinione positum est, aut quod habet in se ad haec quandam similitudinem, sive id falsum est, sive verum (*Inv.* 1, 29)¹⁷

Greek, however, uses mainly the semantic field of likeness for talk about probability.¹⁸ Plato’s ‘probable story’ about the truths of generation in the *Timaeus* is an *eikôs logos*. The probable in Aristotle is often *to eikos*. And lest there be any uncertainty about the precise image that is being evoked here, we have a wonderfully clear passage in the first chapter of the *Rhetoric* in which Aristotle says that truth and probability are known by the same faculty, and hence that the people who are good at hitting the one are good at hitting the other. The words here translated ‘truth’ and ‘probability’ are ‘truth’ and ‘like the truth’ *to alêthes* and *to homoion tô alêthei*. The probable, then, is what “seems true”.

So what, exactly, is the claim that is made for rhetoric here? I suggest that it is something like the following. A rhetorical debate, a debate that pitches opposing views about matters of deliberation or ethics (in which, remember, extreme precision is not possible) has a good chance of producing a clear verdict about what *seems* true. What seems true may, in fact, not turn out to be what *is* true; but in some matters (like ethics and deliberation) we have to go with what seems true, for what *is* true is not independently accessible.

Conclusion

Let me quickly summarize. I’ve shone a light on a couple of passages in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* that are of huge importance, though, interestingly, most of the tradition of commentary has been unable even to hear them. They claim that rhetoric, far from being the art of deception about a previously known truth, may be a technique for discovering a truth that is not yet known. I have enquired whyever Aristotle might have believed such a thing; I have asked how he might justify the claim. And the line of thought that I offered is this: a rhetorical *debate*, with arguments to and fro, on subjects of ethics and deliberation where the truth is not known beforehand and cannot be known

¹⁷ “That is probable which for the most part comes to pass, or which is a part of the ordinary beliefs of mankind, or which contains in itself some resemblance to these qualities, whether such resemblance be true or false”, *De Inventione*, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard Mass., Harvard University Press, 1976, 1, 29, p.84

¹⁸ There is of course the adjective *pithanos*, used primarily of speakers and meaning persuasive, and then transferred to arguments, meaning credible. cf. *Rhetoric* 1356b26

with precision, will produce a secure verdict about what seems true – what is *likely*. That is what I have argued.

But there is perhaps a further, subliminal, inference at work as well. From
“A rhetorical debate will discover the likely truth”
Aristotle perhaps infers that
“A rhetorical debate will likely discover the truth”.
I will leave the assessment of this inference to our discussion.