
Lecture 2: Rhetoric, Sophistry, and Philosophy

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Edward P.J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors's (eds.) *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*.

“You Will Like It, Like It, Like It”

In the previous lecture, we discussed how words can change the world and we looked at some of the ways this happens, through “performative” utterances. We also examined how many things that people can say actually have several levels of meaning, the locutionary, the illocutionary, and the perlocutionary. In this lecture, we are going to discuss what is probably a more traditional understanding of rhetoric: how words can change the world by getting other people to do things, how convincing people of something is the real purpose of rhetoric—and why this is important in *all* circumstances. We are not only doing this simply because the background and history of rhetoric is intrinsically interesting (although it is), but also because we want to find ways to unify our understanding of rhetoric as a kind of speech act with more traditional views of the subject.

“Friends, Romans, Countrymen”; “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country”; “We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender”—these are the kinds of statements that come to mind if someone speaks of “rhetoric.” But in fact rhetoric is not nearly so limited to soaring political statements. “Dear Professor Drou, I’ve never learned so much from a teacher before, so you know that it’s very difficult for me to ask for this extension, something I’ve never done before” is rhetoric. So is “When you see Libbys, Libbys, Libbys on the label, label, label, you will like it, like it, like it on the table, table, table.” People have been using rhetoric since the first caveman tried to convince a friend to come with him on a mammoth hunt, but our systematic thinking about rhetoric comes from ancient Greece. The word “rhetor” means “orator” or “teacher,” and the art of rhetoric was taught in ancient Greece for public purposes: convincing and inspiring one’s peers so that they would take courses of action you believed to be wise. A group of thinkers and teachers who have gotten a lot of bad press were the Sophists. They would come to a city in ancient Greece, put on a performance of effective rhetoric (i.e., winning a public argument or giving an effective speech), and then sign up pupils for their teaching. Protagoras (ca. 481–420 BC), Gorgias (ca. 483–376 BC), and Isocrates (ca. 436–338 BC) are the most important. The Sophists got their bad reputation because Plato—whose teacher, Socrates, had been accused of being a Sophist—attacked what he characterized as their “untrue” rhetoric. The Sophists, he said, were just telling their audiences what they wanted to hear, not really convincing them of things that were true.

This is a bit unfair to the best of the Sophists, but more importantly, it illustrates one of the most significant critiques of the art of rhetoric: that this skill allows people to convince others of bad or untrue things. This critique is significant because it is true: You only have to look at infomercials or political campaign ads to see how people can use rhetoric to convince others of many things that are not true. Plato was not, however, arguing against using rhetoric in general; he knew that the art of rhetoric was incredibly important, particularly in proto-democracies in which the future of a city was often determined by citizens convincing each other of the best course of action. In fact, in his *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*, in particular, Plato was arguing that rhetoric should certainly be used, but it should only be *applied* to convince people of the good and the true: He was not opposed to the techniques; he was against their application. In some ways, Plato was trying to move debate away from strict rhetoric and into the realm of what we would call philosophy: what you should argue for rather than how you should argue.

Respecting Rhetoric

At this point, I want to make what will be the first of many pleas for respecting rhetoric. Not only because it is powerful, but also because it can be, as Plato knew, absolutely essential. Plato often communicated important ideas by stories or mythological references, so I am going to try to do the same thing.

In ancient Greek literature, Cassandra tricked the god Apollo into giving her the gift of prophesy. But as a punishment, Apollo cursed Cassandra to be right always but never to have anyone believe her. Cassandra thus exemplifies the rhetorically deficient person: She knows what is right, but she is unable to convince anyone to do anything about it.

You do not want to be a Cassandra, and if you do not have rhetorically effective communication, you very well might be.

This was an important point to Plato and his followers: They wanted to use rhetorical techniques to convince people of the truth even though those same techniques could be used to convince people of lies. One approach would be to eschew all techniques of rhetoric and speak in some nonrhetorical way. But this seems to be impossible: Any time you try to change someone's mind you are being rhetorical. Why? Because a speech-act is performative if it somehow attempts to change the world. Speakers cannot do this in a nonrhetorical way, because rhetoric is the means by which we change the world. So by making any kind of utterance of any significance, a speaker is making a locution, and that locution has illocutionary force—the speaker is trying to get someone to do or feel something. And if the speech-act is well-wrought, it will have perlocutionary force. So, unless a person wants to escape from all social interaction, that person will end up using rhetoric.

The ancient Greeks also believed that the use of rhetoric could help a person to *find* the truth, not just convince people of truth that was already known. This is another point that is often missed by many contemporary critics of “rhetoric.” The great German thinker Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel developed the now-famous paradigm of thesis, antithesis, synthesis: a person proposes a *thesis*, it comes into rhetorical conflict with its *antithesis*, and

in the end you find a *synthesis* of the two opposed points. (By the way, although this idea has been enormously influential, it was not particularly important to Hegel himself and really became most well-known through the great Idealist Immanuel Kant.) Hegel and his immediate followers, however, were aware that there was a potential synthesis between Hegelian triads and the rhetorical techniques of the ancient Greeks.

Hegel did not see thesis, antithesis, synthesis as an arguing trick. He truly thought that philosophers could use these logical and argumentative techniques as a way to better understand how the world works. Knowledge would be increased through dispute. In the rough and tumble of a real all-out intellectual brawl, with both sides equally well-armed, the truth would eventually emerge.

How Do We Know We Are Right?

Logic is a part of rhetoric, and through logic you can build up an argument until you discover the truth. In the Middle Ages, all education consisted of the “Seven Liberal Arts,” which were divided into the Trivium (the first three) and the Quadrivium (the final four). The Trivium comprises Grammar, Rhetoric, and Logic. These were considered the necessary foundation before a learner could progress to Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy. Thus rhetoric was at the foundation of everything, not just for the point of convincing people, but for understanding the truth.

That was one of Aristotle’s main points in the most influential text ever written about rhetoric: *The Art of Rhetoric*. Rhetoric could be used to find out the truth about things that had already happened, as is done in a courtroom. This is called “forensics.” We use forensics in the courtroom to *argue* and *prove* what someone did or did not do. Aristotle also noted that you could use rhetoric “deliberatively,” to decide what you should do in the future. Deliberative rhetoric is, believe it or not, what goes on in Congress. Aristotle’s final category of rhetoric is the “epideictic,” which is the use of rhetoric for praising or blaming people. We see epideictic rhetoric when people are trying to flatter others and also in political campaigns. Advertising is often characterized by the application of techniques of epideictic rhetoric to consumer products.

It all really comes down to the following question: How do we know we are right? Logic provides some essential tools, but outside of mathematics and some of the harder sciences (and even here, there is a lot more ambiguity and persuasion than people realize) you are unlikely simply to be able to set forth the evidence and say, “See! I’m right.” Instead you need to convince others. There is usually no other earthly authority to appeal to. If this sounds like relativism or relativistic truth, I apologize. I do not actually believe that all truth is relative or that there is no such thing as truth, but our *social systems* do work this way. Aristotle certainly did not believe that there was no such thing as truth, or that all knowledge was relative. But he did realize that there was no outside referee to which you could appeal beyond human reason. You instead had to *use* human reason. And human reason is embodied in humans. Yes, there are tools of logic, and we will discuss them. But when you try to talk

about things that are important to us, unless you confine yourself to mathematics and some forms of science, you rapidly get beyond the places where you can simply provide an answer and have everyone agree with you.

Rather, we create and test knowledge not only in its own logical terms, but also through what English professor Stanley Fish calls “interpretive communities.” Interpretive communities are groups of people whom we trust to determine whether things are right or wrong. They can be official or ad hoc; they can have credentials or just be people we trust, people whom we end up trusting, who are somehow authorized to determine things, or who have the power—like the umpire at the baseball game—to make final determinations. But the point is that you get your argument accepted by convincing the interpretive community—and the subject of our next lecture is how to figure out which interpretive community you are addressing, what its rules are, and how to communicate with it.

Getting to the Truth

But I want to conclude this lecture on a positive, nonrelativistic note, because I really do believe—and this is probably a belief grounded more in optimism than in fact—that rhetoric does eventually help us get at the truth, even if the relevant interpretive community is blind or pig-headed or bigoted or stupid. Here I am borrowing some ideas from the philosopher John Searle to label the relationship between our arguments and the real world out there, the way things *actually* are (as difficult as it may be to see them), “word to world fit.” That is, the words you are saying need to fit the real world, and the closer they fit, the more likely you are to be able to convince people that you are right. So, for example, if you want to convince people that pinecones and gravel make a tasty snack, well, you’ve got a little more work ahead of you than if you want to get them to eat strawberries or Snicker’s bars.

In fact, in many cases, maybe even most cases, trying to convince someone of the truth gives you a powerful rhetorical tool. With a lie you have to keep spinning and spinning. This is exactly how the police catch defendants in lies: The story gets more and more elaborate, and harder and harder to remember, because it is all made up. If you really had your foot run over by someone’s car, you will not have to remember if you said right foot or left foot or if the car was blue or brown. But when you fabricate something, you start to be forced to remember more and more information. Likewise, if you are arguing something that is not true, it is harder to fit it in with things that are true.

I know that it is *not* always easier to convince people of the truth instead of a falsehood. Some truths, particularly scientific truths, are much harder to believe than other stories, and human history gives us many examples of people believing stupid things for long periods of time. But—and again, maybe this is a romantic hope, but I really do believe this—given enough time and enough arguments and enough quality rhetoric on both sides, I believe that the truth has a lighter burden to bear and will eventually win out—through, in part, the power of rhetoric.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How do the sophists represent one of the most significant critiques of the art of rhetoric?
2. What does it mean to be a Cassandra?

Suggested Reading

Corbett, Edward P.J., and Robert J. Connors. *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Searle, John. *Mind, Language, and Society: Philosophy in the Real World*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.