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Claire Floyd-Lapp
Grant High School

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Aristotle's Rhetoric
The Power of Words and the Continued Relevance of Persuasion

Claire Floyd-Lapp
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A critical work in the field of persuasion—Aristotle essentially established the discipline—*Rhetoric* offers historians a framework by which to study the subject's history. In his text, Aristotle argues what successful rhetoric entails, for what purposes rhetoric should be used, and what effective rhetoricians do. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* speaks to the power of words and has remained relevant since its publication. Rhetoric offers writers and speakers a foundation from which to build their arguments. Although the perceived importance of persuasion has faded since Aristotle's time, we still use words, and many scholars encourage the reclamation of rhetoric.

Renowned Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote *Rhetoric* during the fourth century B.C. Aristotle, born in 384 B.C., studied under Plato for twenty years until his mentor's death. Subsequently, Aristotle established a couple schools at which he taught, including the famous Lyceum. An eminent scholar during his time, Aristotle's studies of logic, science, politics, and metaphysics stimulated Western intellectual thought during ancient eras and into the seventeenth century. Aristotle's works have also influenced numerous philosophers throughout the last few centuries and have continued to be studied during modern times.¹

Aristotle wrote during a tumultuous era in Greek history. After centuries of almost ceaseless war, peace had become a recurring theme in society by the fourth century B.C.E. Poleis had long organized Greece into small-scale communities that participated chiefly in local and regional relations; little towns focused on herding and agriculture, poleis competed with each other rather than participating in large-scale interactions and conflicts. The Persian Wars (449 B.C.E. to 499 B.C.E.), however, introduced imperialism to Greece and thus altered the society's structure. Greece transitioned from a system of small city-states built on relatively informal and peaceful relations to a land of districts vying for supreme power. Suddenly, with the advent of the Persian Wars, the Greek poleis had to engage in both external and internal power struggles. Eventually, the poleis realized that in order to secure peace in the Persian and, later, Peloponnesian Wars, they had to unite and rally as Greeks against non-Greeks.²

Between both the frequent external and internal conflicts, by the fourth century, Greeks were tired of war and eager for peace; how to achieve peace became a central discussion among politicians and the public alike. Greeks strived to develop a system of governance within their nascent democracy to ensure less fighting, and much of philosophers' work sprung from the issues of war and peace that dominated the empire. While Aristotle did not discuss war and peace extensively, he did believe war was an inveterate aspect of human society and consider the

achievement of peace important. Aristotle, along with other philosophers during his time, ruminated on how to reduce war and achieve peace through legislation, as well as moral and intellectual education. Additionally, the wars and subsequent changing structure of Greek society had led to increased cross-cultural interaction, and Aristotle and his peer philosophers engaged with intellectuals from all disciplines, leading to the formation of extensive thought woven from a diversity of political, geographical, medical, and scientific ideas.³ Within the context of war, political confusion, and increased interaction, particularly among philosophers, that spurred societal advancement, *Rhetoric*, centered on persuasion, reflects the time in which Aristotle wrote it.

Many historians have speculated what kind of text *Rhetoric* is and what it aims to offer but have yet to come to a general agreement.⁴ Although *Rhetoric* is generally seen as a handbook on persuasion, many have criticized the work as a messy, redundant compilation of lecture notes, a poorly written manual considering its own emphasis on method.^{5,6} Taken as a gathering of lecture notes, it seems *Rhetoric* was not meant for publication. Whether lecture notes, a treatise, or a how-to guide, the content of *Rhetoric* was clearly meant to be shared and taught.

Regardless of format, many historians also argue that Aristotle wrote *Rhetoric* in order to defend the subject from other philosophers' criticisms. In *The Clouds*, Aristophanes, another fourth-century B.C. philosopher and playwright, condemns those who utilize rhetoric; he blames rhetoricians for trying to undermine justice by creating semblances of credibility through pretty language.⁷ Plato also scorned rhetoric, believing political speech to be nothing more than flattery crafted to hoodwink unaware listeners. In *Gorgias*, a Socratic dialogue written in 380 B.C., Plato has Socrates contend rhetoric is like cooking: it provides gratification without concern for what is good or true.⁸ Plato argued politics and rhetoric should be renounced in favor for Socratic philosophy; he disapproved political discourse that appealed to the audiences' emotions rather than straightforward, honest logic and reason. Although Aristotle recognizes rhetoric can be used by people and for causes that lack integrity, he advocates its value as a tool of public discourse through presenting its complexity and potential as a method that engages both reason and emotion.⁹ In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle asserts and seeks to prove that rhetoric, contrary to his peers' opinions, is a valid technique.¹⁰

Rhetoric, possibly the first text written about the subject, has prevailed as the official analysis of the discipline.¹¹ Aristotle defines rhetoric as persuasion; in short chapters he explains

the components of argumentation and discusses how they can be employed in order to devise an effective presentation, oral or written. Although he acknowledges their similarities, Aristotle distinguishes rhetoric from dialectic from the outset by a few key aspects. Whereas dialectic involves logical argumentation about general issues through dialogue, rhetoric refers to the capability “to see the available means of persuasion” in various circumstances.^{12, 13}

Correspondingly, dialectic is debate for skilled audiences on philosophical matters whereas rhetoric is debate for general audiences on practical issues. Additionally, dialectic intends to “discover general truths from common opinions” and rhetoric “allows us to communicate these truth claims to others.”¹⁴

After his delineation of rhetoric that serves to separate the subject from dialectic and assert its validity (as historians know, in response to peer philosophers’ assaults), Aristotle transitions to specifics. The artistic means of persuasion that Aristotle focuses on—the techniques the speaker himself applies—include what are commonly known as ethos (the speaker’s character), pathos (the audience’s emotions), and logos (the rationality of the arguments).¹⁵ In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle establishes and explains these three types of appeals to the audience which, to this day, are considered important principles of writing at all levels; they are often referred to as the “rhetorical” or “Aristotelian triangle.” A successful orator merges ethos, pathos, and logos, as Aristotle writes: “since rhetoric exists to affect the giving of decisions...the orator must not only try to make the argument of his speech demonstrative and worthy of belief; he must also make his own character look right and put his hearers, who are to decide, into the right frame of mind.”¹⁶ Rhetoric, as explained by Aristotle, is not pure reasoning: it also involves style, an “elegance or eloquence.”¹⁷ With this framework, Aristotle continues his exposition of rhetoric, revealing the power of words through analysis that unites the philosophical, political, ethical *and* literary aspects of rhetoric.

By whom did Aristotle believe rhetoric should be used? As discussed in Aristotle’s *Politics*, all citizens of a democracy have the right to participate in deliberation (excluding women and slaves, however, during Aristotle’s time). Accordingly, Aristotle would have encouraged anyone engaging in politics to consider rhetorical strategy as a means of successfully achieving his or her objectives. Additionally, Aristotle wished all citizens to be aware of rhetoric; as Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos writes in his article “Politics, Speech, and the Art of Persuasion: Toward an Aristotelian Conception of the Public Sphere,” “Aristotle argues that deliberative or

political rhetoric should be the primary concern of citizens, because it deals with their essential interests.”¹⁸ In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle clearly believes that everyone has the potential to both engage in rhetoric as a speaker and as a listener.

However, Aristotle also acknowledges that some individuals have a talent for persuasion that sets them apart from their peers. Triadafilopoulos writes that, “while in a democracy all are given the opportunity to speak, deliberate, and judge, very often an exemplary individual well versed in the art of persuasion will be singled out as the representative of a particular program or ideal.”¹⁹ Here the consideration of *Rhetoric* as a text and methodology derived from Aristotle’s experiences as a teacher offers insight into who would be especially skilled at the art of rhetoric. Naturally, some people possessed an inherent aptitude for persuasive discourse, but through developing their skills under his tutelage, Aristotle’s students were particularly well primed for engaging in effective political discourse.

Aristotle believed rhetoric was a key aspect of public officials’ education and work. The philosopher viewed rhetoric as a necessity for statesmen because of “its focus on political consensus and cooperation through persuasion,” as Richard T. Green and Robert C. Zinke write in their article “The Rhetorical Way of Knowing and Public Administration.”²⁰ Rhetoric was an integral part of students’ education at the Lyceum; Aristotle’s landmark teachings reformed rhetoric, and the art of persuasion became an honorable discipline. Subsequently, the subject became an integral part of Greek education. The study of rhetoric “stressed broad and integrative learning, steeping students in the values and traditions prized by their respective societies, and prepared them for life as honorable and accountable civic leaders.”²¹ Eventually, rhetoric became the core of liberal arts education as practiced during the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods. Schools of rhetoric produced cities’ administrators, legislative bodies, and political powerhouses; M. Burke writes in “Advertising Aristotle: A Preliminary Investigation into the Contemporary Relevance of Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric*” that, into the Renaissance period, “prominent [rhetorical] handbooks, like Aristotle’s, were essential in the making of the orator, who then went on to represent the state in lifelong public service.”²²

Despite Aristotle’s advancement of rhetorical methodology and its legitimacy, some of the initial reservations regarding rhetoric held by his peers have persisted. Many people throughout time, from Plato, Aristophanes, and others around the time of rhetoric’s emergence to scholars of contemporary times, have faulted rhetoric for lacking integrity. As Anthony DeForest

Molina and Michael W. Spicer write in their article “Aristotelian Rhetoric, Pluralism, and Public Administration,” “By all accounts, the study of rhetoric has fallen on hard times. One often uses the term *rhetoric* to describe inflammatory speech that is meant to win the public over to some cause through incitement, fear, or anger.”²³ Steven B. Katz distrusts the ethic of expediency Aristotle urged and Adolf Hitler demonstrated in Katz’s article “The Ethic of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust.” Irving J. Lee also makes a connection between Aristotle and Hitler and the negative potential of rhetoric in his article “General Semantics and Public Speaking: Perspectives on Rhetoric Comparing Aristotle, Hitler, and Korzybski.”

However, while there are examples of scholars who doubt Aristotle’s rhetoric, there are others who support it, pointing to rhetoric’s potential and calling for its revival. Political science scholar Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos refers to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s oratory in order to show the positive potential of rhetoric. Richard T. Green and Robert C. Zinke advocate greater attention to rhetoric in the sphere of public administration in their article “The Rhetorical Way of Knowing and Public Administration,” as do Molina and Spicer, who cite rhetoric as particularly useful in regards to issues of value pluralism. Lastly, Heather D. Bell, Kathleen A. Walch, and Steven B. Katz point to clinical protocol and medical writing as an example of an area that would benefit from greater attention to rhetoric. Ultimately, regardless of their specific value judgments of Aristotle, all of the above scholars’ articles attest to the power and potential of words in the art of persuasion.

In his article “The Ethic of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust,” Steven B. Katz argues the problem with the deliberative rhetoric that Aristotle pioneered and thus became a principal guide of Western culture is an ethical one, and cites the Holocaust as an example. One of the main forms of rhetoric that Aristotle focuses on, deliberative rhetoric, pertains to decision-making and action. Katz says that Aristotle “seems to collapse all ethical questions in deliberative discourse into a question of expediency;” he quotes Aristotle in *Rhetoric*, who says, “all other points, such as whether the proposal is just or unjust, honourable or dishonourable, he [the political orator] brings in as subsidiary and relative to this main consideration.”²⁴ Although Aristotle does discuss ethics in *Rhetoric*, he places the most value on an orator’s success in conveying his message. Providing various examples of technical writing by Hitler during World War II, Katz shows that “in most technical writing and...

deliberative rhetoric, the focus is on expediency, on technical criteria as a means to an end. But here [in the context of Hitler and the Holocaust] expediency and the resulting *ethos* of objectivity, logic, and narrow focus that characterize most technical writing, are taken to extremes and applied to the mass destruction of human beings.”²⁵ Katz highlights the dangers of deliberative rhetoric as defined by Aristotle: speech and writing focused on achieving action too easily put ethics by the wayside.

Irving J. Lee, Ph.D., also parallels Aristotle and Hitler. In his article “General Semantics and Public Speaking: Perspectives on Rhetoric Comparing Aristotle, Hitler, and Korzybski,” Lee describes how both Aristotle and Hitler’s rhetorics aim to accomplish their purposes. Both strive to establish speaker-audience relationships through which the audience becomes influenced by the speaker and adopts his beliefs and opinions. Consequently, both Aristotle and Hitler’s create a rhetoric and philosophy of power. Although Lee acknowledges Aristotle’s greater attention to morality in comparison to Hitler—Aristotle’s “position...is rather softened and leavened by the sense of moral purpose”²⁶—the juxtaposition of the two does illuminate the potential hazards of Aristotle’s rhetoric, which, as Katz also shows, puts the achievement of the speaker’s goals dangerously ahead of ethical considerations.

While drawing connections between Aristotle and Hitler highlights the negative power and potential of words as presented in *Rhetoric*, reviewing Martin Luther King, Jr.’s oratory proves their positive potential. The members of the African-American civil rights movement in the United States during the 1950s and ‘60s built a critical base from which the revolution grew. However, Triadafilopoulos asserts that, “it was arguably Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s oratory and personal presence that brought African-Americans’ demands to the top of the nation’s political agenda.”²⁷ Triadafilopoulos cites both King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and “I Have a Dream” speech as examples of rhetoric that effectively employ ethos, pathos, and logos in order to create powerful persuasion. As Triadafilopoulos says, “the ‘I Have a Dream’ speech succeeds because King recognized that audiences judge claims to justice not only by their rationality, but also by their ability to touch the listener’s soul.”²⁸ King’s speech epitomizes the positive potential of the art of persuasion that *Rhetoric* defines. However, although the examples of Hitler and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s rhetoric can be used to support one’s effort to label *Rhetoric* as either positive or negative, above all, both examples prove the versatile nature of rhetoric, something Aristotle himself says: “rhetoric we look upon as the power of observing the

means of persuasion on almost any subject presented to us; and this is why we say that, in its technical character, it is not concerned with any special or definite class of subjects.”²⁹

Several scholars hold that rhetoric still has value in contemporary times and encourage its revisiting. Rhetorical scholar and professor M. Burke explains how people have gradually turned away from rhetoric since the Renaissance and Enlightenment era; times have changed: “These days...there are no schools of rhetoric. The skills that those who serve a country need to acquire are provided by modern institutes of higher education, spread across a number of departments and faculties. The politician is no longer an orator first and foremost, but a politician; likewise the lawyer is not an orator, but a lawyer.”³⁰ However, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* still possesses merit as a text that offers writers and speakers a framework from which to build a successful argument. Richard T. Green and Robert C. Zinke discuss why the public administration field would improve with increased consideration of rhetoric in their article “The Rhetorical Way of Knowing and Public Administration.” They write: “Public administration is still largely conceived, taught, and practiced as a technical/scientific profession. We are mesmerized by science and technology, but our work is ultimately rhetorical.”³¹ Much of what modern public administrators do is rhetorical, and yet many do not realize how they can harness words to their advantage. While the scientific and technological aspects of arguments are important, too often they come to dominate discourse and *how* such information is presented is neglected. Pointing to Aristotle, Green and Zinke proclaim the promise of greater attention to words: “As a way of knowing and deciding, it [rhetoric] draws people together by eliciting common premises or values. It directs our attention to identifying and shaping conditions conducive to public discourse and action. It demands mature treatment of subordinates and public audiences, attributing to them a capacity for sound judgment. Furthermore, it calls attention to emotional dispositions and contextual factors appropriate for maintaining public discourse.”³² Consideration of rhetoric has the potential to yield more successful presentation.

Molina and Spicer similarly note that scientific approaches to public administration have value, but rhetoric-based approaches are also beneficial. Conventional public administrators typically concern themselves with the factual accuracy of their writing, drawing on qualitative research to prove their points, and aim to bring about “correct,” effective decision-making. However, much of public administration involves issues of value pluralism (the “idea that many of the values or ends that we hold dear are incompatible and cannot be reconciled with one

another”³³), issues of a nature that Aristotelian rhetoric can more effectively address than scientific approaches seeking to find a perfect solution based on facts alone. Choices founded on the balancing of conflicting values cannot be debated solely with science; Molina and Spicer explain how Aristotle’s rhetoric is better suited to problems of value pluralism and urge public administrators to use speech more attentively. Aristotelian rhetoric “does not attempt to dodge the complexities and difficulties of value conflict by diverting our attention away from contesting values and focusing it on the relative technical efficiency and effectiveness of administrative actions in securing the attainment of some given set of precisely defined and mutually consistent ends, objectives, or missions.”³⁴ Additionally, Aristotelian rhetoric “encourages those administrators who engage in it to be attentive to their audiences.”³⁵

Considering that public administrators essentially constitute the audience of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, the call for greater attention to rhetoric in contemporary public administration is a reasonable one. Heather D. Bell, Kathleen A. Walch, and Steven B. Katz argue the potential benefit of greater attention to rhetoric in another field: medical discourse in the pharmaceutical industry—specifically, writing clinical protocols. They explain the inconsistencies in medical writing and the consequential problems, and diagnose a disregard of words: “the result of this lack of recognition is a somewhat haphazard and subconscious approach to writing and the production of poorly written documents that in the drug development and approval process can seem to randomly fall victim to...rejection and/or request for revision, ultimately costing drug development companies (and thus patients) time and money.”³⁶ They argue that the medical industry focuses on the facts and expects the data they present to speak for themselves; as a result, clinical protocol documents typically fail to achieve their goals. In order to increase the success of these documents and the industry overall, Bell, Walch, and Katz suggest a greater attention to words, pointing specifically to several of Aristotle’s tenets, including the consideration of audience and circumstance.

Written centuries ago, *Rhetoric* by Aristotle has remained relevant and useful since its publication and practice during ancient times. Although rhetoric has been regarded with varying degrees of approbation throughout its history, it is clear that the art of persuasion, as established by Aristotle, proves the power of words. While public administrators and others in the public sphere would do well to recognize rhetoric, as Aristotle and other scholars have urged during

ancient and contemporary times, rhetoric also extends beyond its traditional oral and written contexts.

In contemporary times—chiefly during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—, the art of rhetoric appears especially persuasively and pervasively in advertising. Since the emergence of global industrialization in the twentieth century, advertising has proliferated. Although much of the world, the United States included, has moved away from domestic industrial production in recent decades, commerce still undeniably reigns. Accordingly, advertising, the means by which people strive to convince others to take certain actions, has become an increasingly influential field. Not only concerned with the successful sale of commodities, advertising also includes persuasion in relation to politics and ideology. From promoting pop to presidential candidates, modern rhetoricians frequently take the form of advertisers. From images to copy, footage to music, those with visual messages to sell find success by carefully considering the presentation of the components of their communication, just as those with more traditional oral and written messages do. The techniques that Aristotle presents in *Rhetoric* transcend medium and time: anyone can utilize persuasion.

Notes

1. Jenny Bak, ed., *Rhetoric* (Dover Publications, 2004), v-vi.
2. Kurt A. Raaflaub, "Conceptualizing and Theorizing Peace in Ancient Greece," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 139 (2009): 225-250, doi: 10.1353/apa.0.0034.
3. *Ibid.*, 228.
4. Sara J. Newman, "Aristotle's Definition of Rhetoric in the Rhetoric: The Metaphors and their Message," *Written Communication* 18 (2001): 3, doi: 10.1177/0741088301018001001.
5. Irving J. Lee, "General Semantics and Public Speaking: Perspectives on Rhetoric Comparing Aristotle, Hitler, and Korzybski," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 62 (2005): 82.
6. M. Burke, "Advertising Aristotle: A Preliminary Investigation into the Contemporary Relevance of Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric*," *Found Science* 13 (2008): 296, doi: 10.1007/s10699-008-9133-z.
7. Anthony Deforest Molina and Michael W. Spicer, "Aristotelian Rhetoric, Pluralism, and Public Administration," *Administration & Society* 36 (2004): 284, doi: 10.1177/0095399704265293.
8. *Ibid.*, 284.
9. Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos, "Politics, Speech, and the Art of Persuasion: Toward an Aristotelian Conception of the Public Sphere," *The Journal of Politics* 61 (1999): 743-744, doi: 10.2307/2647826.
10. Bak, *Rhetoric*, v.
11. Aristotle. *Rhetoric*, edited by Jenny Bak *Dover Thrift Editions*, edited by Paul Negri. Dover Publications, 2004. Originally published in W.D. Ross, ed., *The Works of Aristotle* vol. 9 (London: Oxford University Press, 1910-1931). 5: 1355^a 3-4.
12. Molina and Spicer, "Aristotelian Rhetoric, Pluralism," 285.
13. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 7: 1.2.1.
14. Triadafilopoulos, "Politics, Speech, and the Art of Persuasion" 744.
15. *Ibid.*, 745.
16. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 59: 1377^b 20-25.

17. Michael Meyer, "Aristotle's *Rhetoric*," *Topoi* 31 (2012): 249, doi: 10.1007/s11245-012-9132-0.
18. Triadafilopoulos, "Politics, Speech, and the Art of Persuasion," 745.
19. *Ibid.*, 748.
20. Richard T. Green and Robert C. Zinke, "The Rhetorical Way of Knowing and Public Administration," *Administration & Society* 25 (1993): 318, doi: 10.1177/009539979302500303.
21. *Ibid.*, 318.
22. Burke, "Advertising Aristotle," 296.
23. Molina and Spicer, "Aristotelian Rhetoric, Pluralism," 284.
24. Steven B. Katz, "The Ethic of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust," *College English* 54 (1992): 260, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/378062>.
25. *Ibid.*, 257.
26. *Ibid.*, 83.
27. Triadafilopoulos, "Politics, Speech, and the Art of Persuasion" 752.
28. *Ibid.*, 753.
29. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 7: 1355^b 30-35.
30. Burke, "Advertising Aristotle," 296.
31. Green and Zinke, "The Rhetorical Way of Knowing," 326.
32. *Ibid.*, 330.
33. Molina and Spicer, "Aristotelian Rhetoric, Pluralism," 293.
34. *Ibid.*, 299.
35. *Ibid.*, 300.
36. Heather D. Bell, Kathleen A. Walch, and Steven B Katz, "'Aristotle's Pharmacy': The Medical Rhetoric of a Clinical Protocol in the Drug Development Process," *Technical Communication Quarterly* 9 (2000): 250. ISSN:1057-2252.

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