

An Introduction to Rhetoric: the Greek Experience

“What we know as rhetoric has existed in almost all ancient civilizations but, as far as we know, it was the ancient Greeks who were the first to engage in a systematic study and teaching of rhetoric and oratory”.¹



The Queen of the Humanities

Every epoch experiences its changes and upheavals, and 5th Century Greece was no different to this general trend in history. The reasons for such changes are complex but, perhaps in the case of Ancient Greece, a new sense of national identity caused by such dramatic events as Greece's victory over the Persians, its ever expanding trade routes with their resulting wealth, and, most importantly, the evolution of Athens as a nucleus of political, economic and cultural development in the western world of the day, provided Athenian society with the logos for believing in its own superiority. As a result of these changes, Athens found itself the most energetic, challenging, and prosperous polis in the Western world, where every citizen could, and was generally expected to, aspire to some public function. In intellectual terms, it was a period that marked the gradual shift from a mythological and cosmological view of the world to a more rational and man-centered interpretation.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is accepted by most historians that rhetoric, as we know it, had its origins sometime in the 5th century B.C. when a form of democracy was established in Syracuse in Sicily. Many exiles, whose property had been seized under the former reign, returned to reclaim their appropriated

¹ James Williams, Introduction to Classical Rhetoric, p. 10

properties from the new authorities. As many of these claims were some years old, the claimants were unable to produce documentary evidence of ownership. Nevertheless, they were given the opportunity to argue their case before a jury of their fellow citizens. This called for a need to speak well and persuasively. Consequently claimants sought the help of specialists in presenting their cases. As a result, a new school of oratory emerged. Corax, a Sicilian Greek was, perhaps, one of the best-known rhetors.² His system divided a speech into the following basic parts: *introduction, narrative (historical background), major arguments, subordinate arguments, subsidiary remarks, and summary.*

After Syracuse, rhetoric continued to be used, and reached its highest development in Athens. There the political system was such that sovereignty in Athenian democracy was vested in the assembly (*Ecclesia*), which was a body of adult male citizens comprising about 20% of the total population. However, as many of these potential attendees lived in outlying areas, and as others living within the Athens area were unwilling to become involved in politics, the Assembly consisted for all practical purposes of an oligarchy of city-dwelling males, with about 300 out of the possible 3,000 attending. Below the Assembly was the *Boule* (Council), an elected body of 500: 50 men were returned from each of the ten Attic tribes. They saw that the enactments of the Assembly were carried out and administrative appointments made. Both the Assembly and the *Boule* were places where men had to defend themselves when challenged and render account of their service. Administrative officials, for example, had to render an account of their services on retirement, and any male citizen could be openly accused in the Assembly. Hence the need for a sound training in rhetoric.

As with the Assembly and the Council, the court system was open to all citizens. The appeal courts usually possessed a jury that could number up to 500 citizens at times of great public importance. Later the lower

² Stone, I.F. (1988). *The Trial of Socrates* Little, Brown & Co. Boston, p.90

courts followed this model and instituted the jury system. As power did not rest with the magistrates but with the jury, citizens found it necessary to defend themselves in front of a large number of people. As any citizen could bring a prosecution against another, a tradition of political trials began, which meant that those who entered public life spent a lot of time, money and effort in developing their rhetorical skills. One such school for rhetoric was that founded by Isocrates. His school was like a preparatory school for ambitious youths.

However, before discussing Plato's dispute with the Sophists over their manner of teaching rhetoric, I would like to return to the evolution of the Sophists as the principal teachers of rhetoric.

THE PRESOCRATIC AND THE SOPHISTS

Philosophy, which simply means a 'love of wisdom', can trace its roots to Miletus, an Ionian city in Asia Minor where the first known philosophers speculated about nature (*physis*). They were concerned with the physical world and wanted to understand its substance. The most famous of these 'Milesian' philosophizers were Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes. However, it must be pointed out that the 'Milesian' school were not teachers by profession, but independent people who were curious as to the nature of the physical world. Later they were followed by Heraclitus, Pythagoras and others who tried to move the emphasis away from the mythical view of the world to a more rational one. But their undisciplined approach to explaining the nature of the physical world may have partly led the next generation of thinkers towards '***the rational examination of human affairs for the practical betterment of human life***'. This change in approach marked the beginning of the shift away from the mythological view of the world. ³

3 Classic Technology Center: *The Sophists*, internet: <http://ablemedia.com/ctcweb/netshots/sophists.htm>

Another and more practical reason for this move towards a rational approach to human affairs was generated by the substantial rewards that could be gained from a rational education. Many of this new generation of thinkers, who were mostly from outside Athens, and so had little patrimony and no wealthy patrons, found a source for their income in the education of young Athenians. According to one source,

“The educational demand was partly for genuine knowledge, but mostly reflected a desire for spurious learning that would lead to political success”.⁴

As Athenian democracy had developed more as a participatory than a representative process, a political career was within reach of all young male citizens of ability. Also, the Athenian system of democracy lent itself to litigation as a means not only of solving disputes but also of ensuring that those with privilege or in public administration were answerable to the courts. ‘*Everyone had to be his own lawyer.*’ Consequently, a great need developed for people to be in a position to defend themselves. But they needed to be trained in how to persuade large groups of people, and to argue, and the Sophists provided this training. The better one was at teaching persuasion, the more money one earned. The search for knowledge or truth, although of interest to a minority, was not their top priority. Many of the Sophists - Isocrates, for example - saw nothing wrong with the pursuit of political influence by way of the techniques of persuasion.

This group of freelance teachers, who traditionally taught rhetoric, grammar, mathematics, poetry, history and, more especially, virtue (in the sense that they taught their pupils how to perform the state functions), began to *focus* in on the teaching of rhetoric or the art of persuasion. They

⁴ Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Sophists. www.utm.edu/research/iep/s/sophists.htm

were basically seen by many as educators. The principal early Sophists were Protagoras of Abdera, Gorgias of Leontini, Prodicus of Ceos and Hippias of Elis. But what did they believe? They believed that the physical world was controlled by nature, but that the laws of the *Polis* were man made and therefore they could be influenced by man. Likewise, they rejected the presocratic belief that their cities had received their laws from some deity. Consequently, they upset those who held that to be a 'good' citizen meant conforming to the laws (as they were divine and, so, eternal in nature). Also they didn't accept the old idea that excellence (*arte*) was inborn. Likewise, they didn't accept that aristocratic birth alone qualified a young man for politics. They believed that the 'arte' was the result of training rather than birth.

EXAMPLES OF SOPHISTIC TEACHINGS

Although the Sophists began life by teaching excellence, they soon fell into questioning the very validity of the concept. How, they asked, could excellence be measured? There was no higher authority to appeal to. As there seemed to be no objective way, they went along with the idea that everything was relative and that persuasion to one's point of view was all that there was.

As they didn't accept the old explanations of the Presocratics and had no new certain ideas to offer, they became associated with the 'doubting of certainty'. They doubted everything. ***"To them all things were relative, the logical concepts, the ethical values, religion, justice, the state and so on."***⁵ Therefore, they found little problem in teaching their students both sides of an argument, which would help them greatly in the political and legal systems that they were expected to form part of. Which

⁵ Brian Vickers outlines these proofs very well in his book, *"In Defense of Rhetoric"*, p. 20. A full discussion on the development of classical rhetoric is given in Brian Vickers', Also see J. O. Urmson's *"Aristotle's Ethics"* and John Merrill, *"The Dialectic in Journalism"*, Chapter 1

argument was correct depended on which side of the argument you stood. For many Sophists, there was no right or wrong answer. If there were no higher authority for morality, then surely it depended on each person to decide.

Protagoras, for example, taught his students to praise and blame the same thing. He boasted that he could turn any weak argument into one of strength. This greatly helped his pupils' debating abilities. Protagoras, irrespective of his popularity as a teacher of rhetoric, became associated with '*skepticism*' just as his fellow Sophist, Gorgias, became associated with '*nihilism*'.

Protagoras's skepticism has been divided into three areas: **phenomenalism, empiricism, and relativism**. The idea behind phenomenalism is that we can only know ideas present in our own minds and that we cannot make a true statement about anything outside our own minds. He taught that only those practical experiences we know through our senses (by way of observation) are our source of real knowledge (empiricism). Finally, regarding relativism, he held that truth had no independent existence. "*Man*", he is reported to have written, "*is the measure of all things*". This, in my opinion, had the unfortunate result of creating a situation where there were no objective standards to judge by. Protagoras answered this by saying 'the standard of advantage (i.e. self-interest, expediency) is what is good. However, he qualified this by saying that in making judgments we naturally know what is morally correct and that this should be our guide. This could, in my opinion, have left many pupils with no guideline at all except to follow their self-interest and expediency. However, it must be pointed out that most commentators admit that not all Sophists were skeptics, although apparently a good number were.

Regarding their view of society, there were many viewpoints. One group of Sophists held that man as a natural creature was subject to the laws of nature that he must obey (*physis*). On the other hand, man was a

member of the Polis and the laws under which he lived were governed by convention or custom (*nomos*). They were man made laws. These did not command the same degree of obedience. The example used by a number of writers is the case of traffic lights. There is agreement that the red traffic light means 'stop' while the green light means 'go'. If the government wished, it could change these to mean the opposite. Also there are special circumstances when a traffic light can be ignored. Man, on the other hand, cannot change the law of nature.

Another view, which illustrates the Sophist's position, is that put forward by Antiphon (480-411 B.C.) when he says that nothing really exists. By this, he means that reality, truth or objectivity don't really exist. Another view taught by some Sophists was that men have the same human nature and, therefore, any distinction between them should be abolished. Others saw men as representative of the animal world, and human law as necessary to restrict their animal instincts. Protagoras, for example, believed that men left to their own natural instincts would destroy themselves. Therefore, for him *nomes* were absolutely necessary for men to live in a civilized society.

With regard to religion, most Sophists fell into one of two categories: those who believed that man was created by the gods, and those who were atheistic or agnostic. Protagoras was an agnostic.

He stated "*Concerning the gods, I have no means of knowing whether they exist or not or of what sort they may be. Many things prevent knowledge, including the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of human life.*" ⁶

This view caused a certain degree of distrust and, even, hostility with the ordinary population. Many conservative people still looked to the gods to

⁶ Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: *Sophists*. www.utm.edu/research/iep/s/sophists.htm

provide absolute moral guidance, and, no doubt, they felt distrustful of the Sophist's relativism. On the other hand, the Sophists were widely accepted by the young and had large numbers of followers. Most of the great figures of the time had been trained by the Sophists. Pericles, for example, had been associated with Protagoras. He epitomized the rationalistic approach to politics and the legal system, and he opened up Athens to teachers from all over Greece.

SOPHISTS AND PLATO'S REJECTION

"... in forming our judgments on Plato's procedure, we must not forget that Plato likes to argue against rhetoric and sophistry; and indeed that he is the man who by his attacks on the 'Sophists' created the bad associations connected with the word."⁷

(Karl Popper)

Plato emerged as one of the chief critics of the Sophist movement and, perhaps, it is fair to say, that he saw his teacher, Socrates, as the restorer of values and morality. Plato openly condemned Sophistry as both dishonest and untrue, and Sophists as 'being interested in appearance rather than in substance'. That Plato took his attacks on rhetoric seriously is evidenced by the fact that he devoted large sections of his books to this end; he argued his case in the Apology, Phaedrus, Gorgias (book), and in his most famous book of all, 'The Republic'.

Plato based much of his philosophy on the idea of the immortality of the soul (Phaedrus). In 'The Republic', which deals primarily with justice, the soul is divided into three parts: appetite, reason and spirit. He further argued that we should obey human law and that the true nature of justice

⁷ Karl Popper, "Open Society and its Enemies", p. 263

does not depend on human convention (nomas). He objected to the Sophists' idea that man was a product of nature (physis) but that the society that we live in is artificial. He did not like, therefore, the notion that followed from this, that people must be persuaded to obey convention, as it is artificial, rather than his idea of justice.

Gorgias (485-380 B.C.), one of the Sophists, presents language as a tool of persuading and even, as Plato would probably say, of manipulating others. Gorgias, for example, wrote in *The Praise of Helen*,

*"The power of speech has the same relation to the order of the soul as drugs have to the nature of bodies. For as different drugs expel different humors from the body, and some put an end to sickness and others to life, so some words cause grief, others joy, some fear, others render their hearers bold, and still others drug and bewitch the soul through an evil passion."*⁸

Plato takes such a low view of rhetoric that he compares, in *Gorgias* (one of his dialogues), *the art of an orator with that of a pastry-cook and equates rhetoric with flattery*. In *Gorgias* (the dialogue), Socrates adds,

*" I sum up its substance in the flattery. The practice, as I view it, has many branches, and one of them is cookery, which appears indeed to be an art "... rhetoric is another branch of it, as is also personal adornment and sophistry ". "The orators ", according to Socrates, "like the poets are set on gratifying the citizens."*⁹

⁸ Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*, www.phil.vt.edu

⁹ Stone, I.F.(1988). *The Trial of Socrates*, p.93

The assault on the oratory of the Sophists is often related to the topic of 'Style'. This was basically because the Sophists taught their students the clever use of words and sentences, which would make a favorable impression on their audiences. To achieve this end, the rhetor had to be clear and put his points in such a way that the audience understood exactly what he wanted them to understand. Therefore, language, vocabulary, patterns of emphasis, and the use of metaphors all had to be studied. Understandably this skill of style became very important in ancient Greece with the introduction of democracy. Plato objected that neither the text books that were used, nor the teachers, paid much attention to the search for truth and gave too much attention to style. But Greek democracy was not like ours: we elect representatives to speak in our interests, but in 5th century Greece, citizens were required to speak for themselves, and so style, persuasion and effective public speaking were studied and taught out of necessity. However, as far as I can gather, the issue of style was really secondary as far as Plato was concerned. The real issue, for Plato, is basically his rejection of the idea of the *polis* and *democracy*.

In Gorgias Plato scorns many of the great democratic leaders of the *polis*. He said of Pericles that he must be judged a failure as a statesman because he had left the human herd in his care "*wilder than when he took them in hand*". Consequently, Plato's objection to the huge emphasis that was placed on studying persuasion and effective speaking is in keeping with his ideas of the *polis* as a herd.

According to I.F. Stone Plato "*pictured the Golden Age of man as a time when the gods tended their human herds as men later tended their cattle*". Stone also adds, "*The unspoken premise of the Socratic assault on oratory was disdain for the common people of Athens*".¹⁰

¹⁰ See Brian Vickers' "*In Defense of Rhetoric*" for a more detail account, pp.84-120.

PLATO'S ALTERNATIVE

The word rhetoric is used generally in this essay in the Aristotelian way which, as we said earlier, simply means the 'art of persuasion'. However, Plato spoke about a philosophical rhetoric that would take into consideration the needs of the soul. In his Phaedro, for example, Plato argues that the soul is immortal and therefore its needs have to be addressed. In Book IV of the Republic, he divided the soul, as we said previously, into three parts: **reason, appetite and spirit**. These three dimensions of the soul he equated with three principal virtues: wisdom with reasoning, courage with spirit, and temperance with desire and need. He emphasized wisdom for leaders, courage for soldiers and temperance for farmers and businessmen.

Plato saw that the use of rhetoric in the Sophistic way was not "*conducive to the health of the soul*".¹⁰ So it is understandable, in many ways, that Plato should take odds with the Sophists and especially with individuals like Gorgias, who held that "***rhetoric is the queen of all arts***". On the other hand, it is argued by many writers that Plato himself used rhetoric in writing Phaedro, Gorgias and other works, as his aim was to persuade his readers of his opinion.

However, to be fair to Plato, I feel it is far too easy for us, in today's political climate where democracy is considered to be a principle, to be negative about him. Part of his negative reaction to rhetoric was, I feel, due to the current unstable political situation of the period. He had seen the disintegration of Periclean society, the surrender of Athens to Sparta, the rule of the Thirty Tyrants, and later in his life he saw the demise of Sparta after its defeat at the Battle of Leuchra in 371 B.C. Perhaps, he thought, the period called for some clear ideas and institutions which could create a period of greater stability for Athens? Also, as most of the Sophists, including Aristotle, were not from Athens, perhaps he mistrusted them to act in the interest of the city? However, the principal reason, I feel, is that

Plato accepted the concept of the soul and he viewed matters from this standpoint. Rhetoric, discussion and disagreement were not the tools, in his opinion, to create the harmony that the soul needed.

The basis of this harmony lay in establishing a degree of certainty in people's beliefs. He sought to develop the reasoning process as a way of discovering the truth. Socrates' dialectic method, for example, proceeded through a question and answer process until the reality or the truth of the situation was discovered. Xenophon said of Socrates' skill in arguing that "He could do what he liked with any disputant".

But this rejection of the art of persuasion by Plato was not as clear-cut as it may seem. He used, for example, a persuasive style for the purpose of communicating this rejection in both *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias*. In *Phaedrus*, for example he wrote:

"All the great arts require discussion and high speculation about the truths of nature; hence some of the loftiness of thought and completeness of execution. And this, as I conceive, was the quality, which, in addition to the natural gifts, Pericles acquired from his intercourse with Anaxagoras whom he happened to know. He was thus imbued with the higher philosophy, and attains the knowledge of Mind and the negative of Mind, which were favorite themes of Anaxagoras, and applied what suited his purpose to the art of speaking".¹¹

The last part of the previous sentence is unlined because I feel Plato is saying that Pericles had the philosophical background but used it only as a means to achieve his political ends and not to pursue truth or harmony for the soul.

¹¹ See Chapter 7 [Socrates and Rhetoric] of I.F. Stone's book for a full explanation.

In another part of the discourse, Socrates compared rhetoric to medicine. When Phaedrus asked why, Socrates replied in the following way.

“Why, because medicine has to define the nature of the body and rhetoric of the soul--if we would proceed, not empirically but scientifically, in one case to impart the health and strength by giving medicine and food, in the other to implant the conviction or virtue which you desire, by the right application of words and training”.¹²

It is my opinion, that what upset Plato was the unscrupulous way in which Sophists were applying their skills. Consequently, he wasn't able to see the general educational value of Sophistic education. He saw it as “...*the art of enchanting the soul*” in a negative way because, for him, rhetoric had nothing to do with truth, justice and harmony. However, his pupil, Aristotle, did see the educational value of the subject but, like his mentor, he objected to its lack of moral credibility (*ethos*).

Finally, Plato did make one great mistake, in my view. He equated virtue with knowledge. A knowledgeable person in his estimation was also a virtuous person. His two big classical failures in this respect were his students Critias and Alcibiades: one became a tyrant and the other was noted for his licentious behavior. Obviously Plato didn't heed Heraclitus' famous remark “*A man's character is his fate*”.

ARISTOTELIAN RHETORIC

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) could not go along with Plato's complete rejection of rhetoric and its educational role in the development of Athenian democracy. Likewise, he seemed to reject Plato's belief that the objective

¹² Plato, *Phaedrus*, www.georgetown.edu/grad/CCT/505/platosel.htm

truth of any situation or issue could be arrived at through Plato's rather cold and emotionless dialectical approach. At the same time, Aristotle could not go along with the Sophistic approach, which, at that time, saw rhetoric as a means of gaining power through the effective use of the spoken word. Rhetoric, for them, merely meant argumentation and style and the effective use of the psychology of emotions. It did not include the ethical dimension which gives the speaker his or her credibility. I.F. Stone in his book 'The Trial of Socrates' wrote,

"Aristotle...began his politics and his Ethics by affirming that the polis and civilized life were made possible because mankind generally possessed that modicum of 'civil virtue' and the logos to distinguish right from wrong and the just from the unjust. So he began his Rhetoric with a similar affirmation that mankind generally had sufficient intelligence to be reached by reasoned argument ".¹³

This line of reasoning, of course, places Aristotle in a different world from that of Socrates and Plato.

Aristotle agreed with Plato that the dialectic was a means of seeking the truth or the reality of a situation, but only in very limited number of circumstances (such as understanding the concept of justice). He stressed, however, that there were many more things in life that are appropriate to discussion and agreement, such as issues relating to the community (politics, law, business and so on). In fact, almost everything fell under this heading. He divided the use of his rhetoric into three areas. Deciding what the state should do is appropriate to 'deliberate rhetoric', what should be done in legal situations is 'forensic rhetoric' and how we can raise the

¹³ Plato, *Phaedrus*, www.georgetown.edu/grad/CCT/505/platosel.htm

spirits of citizens is 'epideictic rhetoric'. In developing this, Aristotle relied on his knowledge and experience.

Aristotle, it seems to me, was influenced by his times (as to experience) and by the knowledge and personality of his mentor and teacher, Plato. So when he wrote his notes that would eventually become known as 'the Rhetoric' (written between 360 and 334 B.C.), he synthesized both of these influences. On the one hand, he tended to accept the evolving democratic traditions of Athens where persuasive oratory was one of its corner stones, and, on the other hand, he accepted the criticism of persuasion as lacking in credibility.

He divided issues into two groups by a simple formula, those issues such as justice where we seek the truth, and those issues where the truth of an issue is quite impossible to be certain of (probability). In all matters of truth, he applied the dialectic method - dialectic syllogisms. In the second, he applied rhetorical syllogisms (enthymeme). Most matters, for Aristotle, concerned probability rather than certainty.

To achieve the ends of rhetoric (irrespective of whether it was in politics or law), he introduced another concept that is called '**pisteis**'. This word '**pisteis**' can be roughly translated as 'proofs', of which he said there were three: logos, pathos and ethos. These are proofs to make your audience agree to your message or point of view. Logos involves your argumentation and how reasonable it seems to your audience. Pathos involves creating the right feeling, while Ethos involves your credibility.

He firmly believed that these three proofs would help an audience to be persuaded to the speaker's point of view for a number of reasons, as I.F. Stone points out:

- *that the true and the just are naturally superior to their opposites;*
- *that, generally speaking, that which is true and better is naturally always easier to prove and more likely to persuade; and*
- *that men have sufficient natural capacity to understand and accept truth.*

CONCLUSION

With the development of the polis came the need to educate the young men of Athens. Not only did they need a general education but they needed to be trained in public speaking. They needed to know how to argue effectively and how to persuade large groups of people. The sophists provided this training.

However, no educational system is without its values and emphasis. The Sophists placed a lot of value on the idea that everything was relative and that there were no absolutes. Therefore, their training emphasized both sides of the argument. Protagoras, one of the early Sophists, taught his students to praise and blame the same thing. He boasted he could turn any weak argument into one of strength. Some even claimed that reality, truth or objectivity didn't exist. With regard to religion, many of these freelance teachers were either agnostic or atheistic in their beliefs.

Plato objected to this form of education. He condemned it as dishonest and untrue. He saw it as undermining certainty and people's beliefs. He objected to democracy as he thought of the *polis* as a herd that needs a leader. Leaders had to be knowledgeable and as he equated knowledge with virtue, knowledgeable leaders were virtuous. It was the duty of the rest of the population to be obedient to the one who is knowledgeable and virtuous.

By combining the works and ideas of his teacher, Plato, with that of the Sophists, Aristotle was able to produce his Rhetoric. It was a new mixture of the use of argumentation and emotion alongside personal credibility. Its aim was to provide a persuasive tool, which could be applied in the everyday political life. It replaced the rather cold dialectical approach of Plato and the unprincipled use by many of the Sophists of argumentation and pathos with a more balanced formula. The three dimensions of Aristotle's rhetoric are logos, pathos and ethos.

However, in Aristotle's form of arguing, the speaker was arguing for **consent** to the probable correctness of the argument, and was looking not to provide them with truth and certainty. He was arguing for agreement based on freedom, rather than on arguing to win. To do this, Aristotle included not only the deductive form of argumentation, but the inductive approach as well.

Finally, when Aristotle brought ethos into his study of rhetoric as the third proof, he thereby gave credibility to the future use and study of rhetoric. This and the introduction of the example as a means of proof were two of his principal contributions to the study of rhetoric. It did not depend on the dialectic as Plato's system did; it did not depend on style, emotion and the use of the dialectic as the Sophist's system did. It combined all these with the appeal to the authority or credibility of the speaker in order to persuade the listener.

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