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Aristotle Through Time

The threads of Western European rhetorical theory weave throughout history, beginning with the Sophists in Greece and continuing through to the present. As a student of the Sophists, Socrates, and Plato, Aristotle is perhaps the most influential philosopher in terms of rhetorical theory, primarily because of his focus on rhetoric as a unique and necessary art. He defined several key tenets of rhetoric which have been taken up by subsequent philosophers and rhetoricians, including in the work of Renaissance thinker Francis Bacon and contemporary theorist Kenneth Burke. Aristotle was concerned with the psychological considerations of the audience, the malleability of language, and that rhetoric's primary purpose was persuasion -- three topics on which Bacon and Burke also ruminate in relation to their respective historical contexts.

Psychology of Audience

Somewhat ahead of his time by modern standards, Aristotle considered the psychological perspectives of the audience as one of the key elements when developing an argument. He works from a specifically homogeneous perspective, however, owing in part to his place in cultural history. According to Bizzell and Herzberg, "Aristotle assumes that people always seek to serve their own self-interest and that different people perceive their self-interest differently; he thus

compares young men and old, the rich and the poor, and rulers of democracies and of oligarchies. He treats most psychological attributes as human nature, common to all people in all circumstances" (3). It should be noted, however, that these conceptualizations of difference are still rooted in the values of the time; specifically, that both audience members and rhetors were male. Aristotle realized that there would be class-based knowledge differences, writing that it's best practice to "assume an audience of untrained thinkers" (13), marking another element for consideration when assessing the mindset of one's audience. He advises that "rhetoric has regard to classes of men, not to individual men; its subjects, and the premisses from which it argues, are in the main such as present alternative possibilities in the sphere of human action; and it must adapt itself to an audience of untrained thinkers who cannot follow a long train of reasoning" (1.2.10). Only through understanding these psychological and educational differences in one's audience can a rhetor devise a successfully persuasive argument.

Over fifteen hundred years later, Francis Bacon took up the Aristotelian concepts of psychology of audience. Granted, he had the benefit of being a man of his times, and part of a generation of theorists who began to embrace a more scientific understanding and perspective of psychology, departing from the construct that our individual perspectives are simply the consequence of a divinely-rendered human nature that transcends all groups. Additionally, he was part of a world that was expanding, discovering new and different people, and that likely impacted his conceptualization of psychology. Bacon addresses the nature of thought as faculties of mind, a psychological interpretation of the way in which people will perceive information. He writes, "The knowledge which respecteth the faculties of the mind of man is of two kinds—the one respecting his understanding and reason, and the other his will, appetite, and affection; whereof the former produceth position or decree, the latter action or execution" (2.12.1). Bacon

sought to systematize rhetoric, in a way, and to move it away from concepts of flowery or excessive ornamentation. As Bizzell and Herzberg write, Bacon considered those practices to "contribute to such confusions," and "that is reason to reform the art on sound psychological principles, not condemn it" (738). Bacon moves Aristotle's ideas of audience toward a more scientific perspective, growing the Aristotelian seed of shaping the message for one's audience into a sprout.

But neither Aristotle nor Bacon went as far to grow this concept into a fully formed, ethos-rooted tree than Kenneth Burke did, a few hundred years later. Plainly, Burke's perspective on the psychology of an audience is a reimagined process of ego identification. While Aristotle accentuated ethos and Bacon prioritized logos, Burke recognizes that pathos is often at the core of persuasion. Specifically, an effective argument is presented in such a way that will allow the audience to identify with you and, as part of that identification, they'll ultimately persuade themselves (Borcher, 150). The psychological component of this is that we don't want to be in conflict nor isolated from each other, so we seek to identify with others in order to fulfill this desire.

These three rhetoricians prioritize how we might connect with and help resolve the psychological needs of our audiences or communities. As Herrick notes, "the history of rhetoric is replete with efforts to understand human values, identify factors prompting audiences to action, and to grasp the symbolic resources for drawing people together" (10).

Interpreting Symbols and Language

Another concern that these three rhetoricians shared was in terms of the malleability of language -- how the words that we use might not mean the same thing to everyone, and how we

might resolve that. Kenneth Burke addressed this quandary with his theory of terministic screens, which is key to his perspective and work in rhetoric. He writes that "even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality" (45). Therefore, Burke proposes that the very words that we choose will shape our discourse through specific lenses. This is akin to how a surgeon might recommend surgery to repair an injury, while a physical therapist may suggest rehabilitation exercise: Each practitioner views their treatment plans through the lens of their practical toolset. Ultimately, from Burke's perspective, there was no known objective truth; we create our realities simply through the language that we've been trained to use in order to interpret it. Again, this is something that Burke contended with during his time giving the interconnectedness of global cultures, in contrast to the type experienced by Bacon and, further back, Aristotle.

Being aware of the tendency to shape our perspectives by the language we use is an important progression in the conceptualization of linguistic expression as it relates to collaborative communication. Burke's ideas built upon Francis Bacon's concerns regarding subjectivity, which he addressed by recognizing that "human knowledge must be regarded as only a version of the objective truth, a version warped by prejudices, preconceptions, and imprecise language" (Bizzell and Herzberg 10). In fact, Bacon's perspective on this topic was no small element of his work, nor his epistemological contribution:

> His observation that perception is not infallible, nor are mental operations neutral . . . he maintains that reason and the senses are warped by common preconceptions, personal predilections, the ambiguities of language, and the misrepresentations of philosophical

systems. There may be objective truth in the world, but knowing is subjective" (Bizzell and Herzberg 737).

Bacon's attempts to move scientific inquiry away from strict empiricist practices was somewhat unsuccessful, but he did lay the groundwork for future thinkers such as Burke to identify how essential subjectivity is to understanding how to engage in effective discourse. While he was one of the intellectual fathers of scientific inquiry and empiricism, he fought hard to reject the intellectual practice of positivism, simply because he recognized how malleable our knowledge -- and the human capacity to conceive it -- really was.

But Bacon's ideas on this topic didn't come from divine inspiration! He hearkens back to Aristotle's influence when he wrote that "Aristotle saith well, 'Words are the images of cogitations, and letters are the images of words.' But yet it is not of necessity that cogitations be expressed by the medium of words" (2.16.2). Aristotle, for his part, was intent on defining structure and systems of language that would be able to move the argument into an objective and away from a subjective place. He writes that the "foundation of good style is correctness of language, which is discussed under five heads: (1) right use of connecting words; (2) use of special, and not vague general, terms; (3) avoidance of ambiguity; (4) observance of gender; (5) correct indication of grammatical number." He continues with, "Style, to be good, must be clear; it must also be appropriate, avoiding both meanness and excess of dignity. How these qualities may be attained. Rare, compound, and invented words must be used sparingly in prose; in which, over and above the regular and proper terms for things, metaphorical terms only can be used with advantage, and even these need care."

All three rhetoricians recognized that language itself might lead to misunderstanding and that we need to develop ways in which we address those gray areas in order to ensure proper communication, they simply addressed it in a different way -- owing, in part, to the times that they lived in. But the interplay between the psychological components and symbolic considerations leads us to the final Aristotelian ideal on which both Bacon and then Burke built their theoretical framework. Herrick demonstrated this interconnectedness when he wrote:

> But rhetoric is also a form of psychological power; that is, the power to shape the thinking of other people. Symbols and the structure of human thought are intricately connected. Thus, we may change the way people think simply by altering the symbolic framework they employ to organize their thinking (19-20).

Aristotle's groundwork regarding psychology and the symbolism of language during the Classical period directly informed both Bacon and Burke centuries later as they defined the ultimate power of rhetoric: Persuasion.

Persuasion and Purpose

Aristotle defined rhetoric as an art, the defining factor of which was its ability to be used to persuade others that extended across disciplines. He wrote, "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. This is not a function of any other art" (10). It was important to him, however, that elements such as logos and ethos be accentuated in developing a persuasive argument. Using facts, data, and concrete details to shape your argument was preferable to relying too much on pathetic or emotion-based appeals. Aristotle's outsize influence on rhetoric, however, shows up in the future inquiry of his intellectual descendents. Departing from Plato's perspective that rhetoric was a superfluous and

untrustworthy art, Aristotle wrote that rhetoric and dialectic went hand in hand, the former helping to communicate the products of the latter (4). The dialectic was essential to Aristotle's concept of knowledge-making, however, and his approach to dialectic helped shape formal education for centuries afterward.

One main point of contention that Bacon held, however, was that dialectic was unnecessarily retarding our ability to discover knowledge. As Bizzell and Herzberg describe, Bacon argued that it was simply "hollow Scholasticism" and that it should be rejected as it "relies on received wisdom and the tautologies of syllogism and so can discover nothing new" (737). His concept of invention was rooted in the idea that we can create knowledge through observation of the natural world, not simply through reasoning through the data sets handed down from our intellectual forefathers. Similarly to Aristotle, however, he saw that rhetoric's ability to persuade was an essential component of knowledge making -- and knowledge sharing. He famously wrote, "the duty and office of rhetoric is to apply reason to imagination for the better moving of the will" (2.18.2). For both rhetoricians, the tools afforded by the discipline should be used to help community members make decisions that were in the best interest of the group. They recognized that mere logos and ethos couldn't move people to action on their own, however, and employed pathos in order to seal the deal, as it were.

For Burke, rhetoric's power was in bringing communities together. Borcher writes, "In other words, dramatism is interested in how language functions to create and maintain communities of individuals" (144). Burke does this through the lens of how language can be used to create or destroy or, as he puts it, put together or take apart. He classifies language as either scientistic, or basic factual information that cannot really be questioned -- it either is or it is not -- or dramatistic, language used to explore and influence an action (Burke, 44). The

persuasion element of Burke's theory connects to earlier considerations in this paper; specifically, his reworking of Aristotle's psychology of audience to extend it as an active element of persuasion. He goes further, however, likely because of his lived experience, in considering how a community's overall complexity of language can be used in order to persuade them one way or another.

Herrick sums up how each of these elements interconnect -- psychology, language, and persuasion, in his reimagining of what rhetoric is:

> But I would like to expand the definition of rhetoric to include other goals such as achieving clarity through the structured use of symbols, awakening our sense of beauty through the aesthetic potential in symbols, or bringing about mutual understanding through the careful management of common meanings attached to symbols. Thus, I will define the art of rhetoric as the systematic study and intentional practice of effective symbolic expression (7).

Aristotle, Bacon, and Burke all recognized that rhetoric was essential because simple reason alone could not be relied upon for humans to behave in the community's best interest. During their own respective times, they identified that it was often necessary for individuals -- and sometimes communities -- to be persuaded in order for social rebalancing and cultural advancement to occur. Herrick's redefinition makes it clear that each rhetorician, building off the ideas of those that came before them, have contributed to a contemporary synthesis of each part that psychology, language, and persuasion play in the realm of communication and rhetorical theory.

Conclusion

Since so much of our current concepts of education and discourse are rooted in the concepts developed by the Greeks over two thousand years ago, the fact that Aristotle's ideas should show up through time shouldn't be surprising. Where he left off, Bacon picked up with his introduction of the scientific method, enabling Burke to continue the conversation thousands of years later. Herrick's analysis provides us with a powerful tool in understanding how each of these threads have been interwoven to produce a tapestry of ideas that is useful in our continuing attempts to connect and communicate with each other.

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