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Knowledge Production in Three Schools of Rhetoric

**Part 1: Sophistical Rhetoric**

Sophistical Rhetoric emphasizes the importance of the mastery of language in persuasion. Unlike in Platonic Rhetoric, Sophistical thinkers deny the existence of an ultimate Truth; no one, therefore, can possess the Truth. Meaning comes instead through persuasion when individuals come together in discourse communities to defend their positions. The result of these conversations is meaning that comes from one or both sides; the important factor in these conversations is not the truthfulness of either of the arguments but is the persuasive skill of the rhetor. Gorgias demonstrates this point in his *Encomium of Helen*, in which he seems to be arguing on behalf of Helen’s innocence, but is actually demonstrating his mastery of language and the importance of this skill in persuading an audience.

Gorgias used paradoxical words (*paradoxologia*) to demonstrate the idea that all speech is persuasive. In his *Encomium of Helen,* he juxtaposed two words, persuasion and deception. Gorgias argues, through a kind of deception himself, that persuasion is the same as deception: "The persuader, like a constrainer, does the wrong and the persuaded, like the constrained, in speech is wrongly charged" (Gorgias 45). By doing this, he is resignifying these words, changing the meaning of the word “persuasion” to fit his argument. The idea of *paradoxologia* involves searching for meaning in between two opposing words, like innocence and guilt. It means that we cannot find one definable “truth,” and if we think we can, as Wardy says, “Helen’s joke is on us” (475). Gorgias (presumably) convinced his audience to pity Helen and, by doing so, has convinced the audience that persuasion is deception, all the while manipulating and persuading the audience himself. The knowledge gained here was not that of Helen’s innocence or guilt. It was not about Helen’s “truth” at all. Gorgias managed to demonstrate to his audience, in real time, the power of rhetoric, of the meaning constructed through persuasive speech; the product of discourse is not “truth” but of opinion.

It is important to mention that this knowledge is not produced by the orator alone. Although Gorgias was the only one speaking when he was giving his Encomium of Helen, his speech was given in response to a field of discourse which debated the nature of rhetoric and the nature of Helen’s actions. While giving his speech, Gorgias was producing knowledge seemingly on his own, but knowledge was produced prior to his speech and as a result of his speech. So, ultimately, knowledge was constructed by both the orator and the audience.

In modern practice, Sophistical rhetoric requires that students learn how to join their chosen discourse communities before entering the field. Bruffee argued that “What students do when working collaboratively on their writing is not write or edit or, least of all, read proof. What they do is converse” (91a). Like *paradoxogolia,* the idea of *differance* also described the instability of language systems, which made it impossible for anyone to attain the “truth.” Berlin writes that “Meaning is never found in the presence of a single term but in its relation to a term not present, an absent term” (64). The meaning, therefore, cannot inherently be found in any one word, but *between* words in opposition. Discourse communities must debate to create meaning in this unstable language system. The concept of “to scatter,” in which the meaning is forever separated from the words we use, means that we are required, as a community of peers, to *construct* meaning through language rather than trying to reflect the truth, which cannot be obtained. It is necessary to find the most compelling idea presented in discourse with peers and construct meaning in collaboration.

People do not write alone in a vacuum; even Gorgias was writing in response to prior discourse about the nature of rhetoric. Knowledge is produced through conversation with peers. Bruffee wrote that “Writing may seem to be displaced in time and space from the rest of a writers community of readers and other writers, but in every instance writing is an act, however much displaced, of conversational exchange” (89a). Collaborative learning allows us to reach conclusions and construct meanings that are artifacts of those particular cultures, times, and spaces. Collaborative learning, which is a key aspect of neo-Sophistical teaching, involves conversations that produce knowledge, not objective truth. These conversations are artifacts of their times and places and can therefore change as the people engaging in discourse change. While Platonic rhetoric, as I will discuss, is based on the idea that there is a universal truth that is unchanging, the knowledge produced by Sophistical thinkers changes based on the situations that arise.

**Part 2: Platonic Rhetoric**

Through his allegory of the soul in *Phaedrus*, Plato argued that knowledge comes from recalling pieces of the truth. In his allegory, souls, represented by charioteers driving two horses—one good and one bad—struggle up a slope to glimpse at a “place beyond heaven” that is “a being that really is what it is, the subject of all true knowledge,” or in other words, the Truth (525). The bad horse, fueled by ugliness, drags the soul down, and eventually souls are dragged to Earth and are born into human bodies. The kind of person is born depends on how much of the Truth their soul had seen. Those who had seen the most have the potential to become philosophers, those who can recall and be reminded of those visions of Beauty itself, and let themselves be guided by those memories to imitate the perfection of the gods.

What is key about this theory is the idea that knowledge is produced by recalling memories from one’s soul. To be knowledgeable, to be a rhetorician, one needs first to know and recall the Truth. Objects of beauty in our world, for example, remind souls who have seen the Truth of the beauties they saw there, the visions of Beauty itself. These souls are guided by their memories of the Truth to become better people. Meaning comes from these internal memories, not from discourse with others, like the Sophists believed. The Truth is primordial and objective, and “nature requires that the soul of every human being has seen reality” (Plato 249). Every human, therefore, has seen some part of the Truth and that is the reason we have consciousness and can reason. Not everyone, however, recalls their memories of the Truth. Those who were saw little of the Truth or were corrupted are not reminded of the Truth by beauties they see on Earth; “he surrenders to pleasure and sets out in the manner of a four-footed beast” (Plato 528). Plato argues that we must strive to become philosophers if we can, looking past the distractions of this world (so to as the distraction of the bad horse dragging the soul down to Earth) and look beyond, into our memories of the Truth. That is where knowledge comes from, and that is how rhetoricians master their art.

To bring this school of rhetoric into practice, as Berthoff argues, it is important to reject positivism, the idea that all knowledge comes from concrete observation and can be scientifically proven. Because Platonists believe that Truth comes from a realm outside of our own and can be accessed through internal processes, Berthoff argues that alongside observation, abstraction is also necessary to develop meaning. Abstraction, as Berthoff wrote, is “our means of making sense of reality in perception and all that we do with symbolic forms" (43b). There are two kinds of abstraction, the discursive mode, "which proceeds by means of successive generalization," and the nondiscursive mode, "which proceeds by means of 'direct, intensive insight'" (Berthoff 43b). This insight, unlike pure observation, comes from an internal source. As Berthoff writes, meaning is created through a process in which we observe our observations, or, in other words, makes insights about what we observe, making note of what seems important and why. In this process, the students use powers that do not have to be taught because they are visualizing internally, "making meaning by means of mental images" (42b). Abstraction that comes from "intensive insight" must come from an internal source, one that cannot be taught. This calls to mind Plato’s theory of Truth and the soul. If meaning is created through making insights drawn from an internal source that cannot be taught, it evokes Plato’s allegory of the soul, in which meaning is created when people recall memories of the ultimate Truth they saw as a soul. Meaning is made, therefore, through a combination of generalization (through observation) and through insight made by recalling pieces of the Truth. Therefore, Berthoff says we must become philosophers, otherwise we are positivists, trying to make meaning only through concrete observation without abstraction (without recalling). Without recalling their memories of the Truth, without abstraction, they fail to utilize the imagination as well, which Berthoff calls “the living power and prime agent of all human perception” (42b). It might be said, therefore, that these people are not those that Plato says see “the beauty we have down here and is reminded of true beauty” (527), because they do not recall memories from their soul or employ their imagination, as Berthoff might say. Berthoff ultimately argues for the use insight and imagination, which cannot be taught, in making meaning through composition.

This demonstrates how Platonic Rhetoric is also a process of learning, in which students make “intensive insight” about the observations they make. The processes in action here are primarily internal; unlike Sophistical rhetoric, which argues that meaning is created through community discourse, Platonic thinking asserts that meaning is created through internal processes that lead to making abstractions about concrete observations. When required to defend their position in a communal setting, therefore, Platonists would believe that those that have been through these internal processes and have been able to recall the truth come into the discussion already armed with parts, if not all, of the truth, and they must convince others of the truthfulness of their argument.

Stewart argues against the ideas of the Neo-Sophistical writer, Bruffee, as they pertain to the value of collaborative learning. Bruffee, as a Sophist, believes that no one can know the truth, and, further, that the ultimate truth that Platonic rhetoricians write about does not exist. Meaning, according to Bruffee, is created through discourse and collaboration with peer groups, in which students learn the normal discourse of their chosen field and can use this discourse as the basis of further thought. Stewart argued, however, that the normal discourse in the fields is often problematic, and methods of teaching which teach the normal discourse first, such as collaborative learning, result in the stagnation of thought, and, as he fears, groupthink. When students are taught normal discourse as a base, they are limited because of what they are not taught, which, according to Stewart, is “to be lucid and literate” first. This means encouraging students to be independent thinkers, allowing them to write their truths, not distracted by societal norms or restrictions in the normal discourse.

Stewart argued that being socially well-adjusted, well-versed in normal discourse, does not necessarily produce good in their fields or in society. By teaching students to be “lucid and literate” writers, teachers enable their students to stand up to the existing discourse, to the status quo, by giving them the tools they need to express what they believe—as individuals—outside of the societal expectations or norms. Additionally, Stewart argues that humans don’t acquire their identities through groups, and knowledge is not a product of belief. This calls to mind, then, the Platonic belief in the ultimate Truth; Platonic rhetoric argues that the truth comes from recalling the truth from within the soul, and meaning is created through the expression of those ideas. This supports Stewart’s argument that students first need to learn "to be lucid and literate" in "powerful and convincing ways." This way, they are less influenced by groupthink, which Stewart warns against:

If all knowledge is socially constructed, if the individual really doesn't exist but is the product of a social context, then we have laid the groundwork for Orwell's 1984 or, even more likely, Huxley's Brave New World. There, if any place, one finds socially adjusted people! (108b).

Students, through this method of teaching (forgoing normal discourse), are given the tools they need to write the truth, and, as Platonists would say, to recall their soul’s memories. Not limited by normal discourse or groupthink, students are able to make decisions (moral and otherwise) according to what they recall of the Truth.

**Part 3: Aristotelian Rhetoric**

Aristotelian rhetoric combines aspects of the other schools of rhetoric, especially relating to the knowledge producing process. For Aristotle, Truth (the same ultimate Truth that Platonists strive for) is as important as the effective use of language in persuasion (which Sophists strive for). In Aristotelian rhetoric, the rhetor, the speaker, should always be striving for Truth. Unlike with Platonists, however, Aristotle wrote that this ultimate Truth cannot fully be acquired by any one person. He certainly believed that the divine Truth existed, but what the rhetor can reach must be deemed probable truth, or things that bear the strong resemblance of truth. Like the Sophists, Aristotle believed that it was also important to engage in community discourse or persuasion to arrive at the probable truth (as the conclusion).

For Aristotle, the Truth, however, does affect this discourse, contrary to what Sophists believe. In fact, Aristotle wrote that “things that are true and things that are better are, by their nature, practically always easier to prove and more persuasive” and moreover, “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” (2514). Truth influences the persuasive power of an argument, and every case aims to resemble Truth as much as possible (reaching probable truth), but while the truth, as Aristotle wrote, tends to prevail over its opposite, the outcome of the case depends on the persuasive powers of the rhetor. Rhetoricians must practice their craft and use persuasive techniques adapted to the audience they present to (as the Sophists encouraged). Meaning is created, therefore, when the rhetor, striving to find the truth of the situation, engages with a discourse community; they work with others to find the probable truth.

Heidlebaugh further elaborates on this community aspect of Aristotelian rhetoric. Heidlebaugh writes about how situations influence the kind of (probable) truth that may be discovered. She explains rhetorical situations, ones that “are contingent on our decision making, in which, plainly, no one clear path of action recommends itself” (76). In these situations, there is no one clear Truth, in the Platonic sense; no one person holds the perfect solution, so deliberation is vital in arriving at probable truth. In fact, Heidlebaugh writes that “probability, or the forceful appearance of truth, is created out of, not prior to, the situation in which the rhetor finds himself” (89). The speaker is not arriving at the truth individually and then communicating it to the group. The rhetor, Heidlebaugh says, helps the group reach a conclusion by removing "blinders" that are blocking their perception of the situation. The rhetor must have knowledge of the particular situation and act accordingly. The group does not arrive at one inevitable truth; they arrive at one probability that has the strong appearance of truth, and which would change according to the situation. This does not mean, however, that the conclusion which has the “forceful appearance of truth” does not contain some parts of truth; the group in deliberation is still ultimately striving towards the truth. Heidlebaugh says that these people who can discover the significance of the situation need “practical wisdom,” something, for Aristotle, that was needed to remove these “blinders,” obstacles to good reason. “Aristotle,” she wrote, “unlike the Sophists, saw the pressures of the moment as limitations to decision making and suggested good laws and good rhetoric as necessary remedies” (79). Rhetoric’s function, then, was to identify, clarify, and remove “blinders” to reason, not, as the Sophists would say, purely to gather persuasive evidence for use on one side of the discussion. The rhetor does not just argue one side; they “guide the interaction within the community” to clarify the rhetorical situation (Heidlebaugh 82).

Sophistical rhetoric combines some aspects of both of the other schools of thought, and therefore involves similar processes of learning. In Aristotelian rhetoric, everyone is capable of reaching the probable truth (which could *be* the truth), but this is best done in discourse with a community. The rhetor’s role not only requires a certain mastery of language, knowledge, and persuasive techniques, but also the ability to identify the significance of a rhetorical situation and guide the group through the argument to find the probable truth together. To do this, the speaker must always be striving toward the truth; they must not be striving only for their own gain, as Sophists may allow. The knowledge gained from these rhetorical situations ultimately bears the resemblance of the truth (probable truth), which shows Aristotelian rhetoric’s similarities to both Sophistical and Platonic rhetoric.

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1. Is the exam around eight pages in length (excluding Works Cited page), double-spaced, and in font #12?
   1. yes
2. Is the page number showing at the upper right margin and is your last name inserted before the page number?
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3. Is the Works Cited page **typed**(as opposed to copied/pasted) and is this page following but separated from the body of the exam?
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