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Eloquence Takes the Prize: An Introduction to Philosophical Positions on Rhetoric

Few rivalries are as everlasting as the one between Plato and the Sophists. Many Philosophers have been handed the torch from Gorgias and Plato, to defend either side of the debate over whether rhetoric can leave room for true speech. This paper will examine this extended debate as it appears in the writings of three Philosophers: Descartes, and his platonic defense of true speech, Hume, and his bizarre ambivalence towards the nature of rhetoric, and Nietzsche, and his nihilistic view that there is *nothing but* empty rhetoric.

As the pioneer of the enlightenment, Descartes set the precedent for many views assumed during this time, and his position on rhetoric, while not specifically referenced by name, is no different. In the second chapter of his *Discourse on Method,* Descartes subtly pushes an attack on stylistic rhetoric through his praise of truth and reason. He writes, "since the sciences contained in books—at least those based on merely probable reasoning and not on demonstrations—are put together and enlarged piecemeal from the opinions of many different people, they never get as close to the truth as do the simple reasonings that one man of good sense can naturally make." (Descartes 6) He believes our judgements to be clouded from birth and experience, and can only be unclouded through the use of reason. And this reason, for Descartes, is largely eliminative. "Logic," he claims, "does contain many excellent and true precepts, but these are mixed in with so much other harmful or superfluous stuff that it is almost as difficult to separate out the truth from the rest." (Descartes 8) Where, then, would anaphora have its place in the reasoning of Descartes? Where would metaphor? He leaves no room for rhetoric in the pursuit of truth. Potkay characterized enlightenment intellectuals' views on rhetoric, saying they "regretted that the primitive was still with them; they were determined, however, to exclude its influence from mature, rational discourse." (Potkay 43) Descartes, in the tradition of Plato, favored truth over rhetoric, an opinion that led to a purge of rhetoric in contemporary societies in favor of reason. Hume would lament this position.

In describing David Hume's views on rhetoric, especially those in "Of Eloquence," Adam Potkay borrows a phrase from Hume's *Natural History of Religion*, calling it: "a riddle, an aenigma, an inexplicable mystery." (Hume) Indeed, Hume's mix of ancient nostalgia for the speakers of old, his apparent disgust of speakers like Cicero, and his praise and push for a return to the speeches of Demosthenes appear contradictory. To decipher this apparent enigma, we must

first understand Hume's views on belief and truth. Hume has difficulty distinguishing between the properties which constitute a factual, philosophical argument, and a frivolous belief, saying "tho our reasonings from proofs and probabilities be considerably different from each other, yet the former species of reasoning often degenerates insensibly into the latter, by nothing but the multitude of connected arguments." (Hume 87) While the rational man may be able to 'feel' the difference between a sound and unsound belief in the mind, Hume confesses that:

> "Tis impossible to explain perfectly this feeling or manner of conception…In philosophy we can go no farther, than assert, that it is something *felt* by the mind, which distinguishes the ideas of the judgement from the fictions of imagination." (Hume 61)

Such claims about belief form what he thinks about rhetoric, what he calls eloquence. He says "nothing is more capable of infusing any passion into the mind, than eloquence," and "till an orator excites the imagination, and gives force to these ideas, they may have but a feeble influence either on the will or the affections." (Hume 228) Since all beliefs, rational or irrational, arise from the same source, which Hume believes is experience, rhetoric can be the source of both irrational and rational beliefs. But the beliefs drawn from rhetoric, he reasons, are far more active than those drawn by reason. Hanvelt writes "Hume argues that 'reason is wholly inactive, and can never be the source of so active a principle as conscience, or a sense of morals." (Hanvelt 39) As such, rhetoric can be a tool that can be used "to persuade people of common goods" and "to fan the flames of fanaticism" alike. (Hanvelt 40)

Understanding Hume's basis for his thoughts on rhetoric, we may more fruitfully analyze his standalone "enigma" on the subject. At first, Hume appears to be in full praise of classical rhetoric, implying a return to the "high" eloquence of old over the "low" rhetoric of new. He says, "the stile or species of their [that of ancient orators] eloquence was infinitely more sublime than that which modern orators aspire to." (Hume) Yet, while at first he seems "to deplore the loss of sublime eloquence…he offers no program for restoring it in Hanoverian Britain." (Potkay 34) The work carries itself as a piece of ancient nostalgia. In speaking of Demosthenes, for example, Hume writes:

> "Could it be copied, its success would be infallible over a modern assembly. It is rapid harmony, exactly adjusted to the sense: It is vehement reasoning, without any appearance of art: It is disdain, anger, boldness, freedom, involved in a continued stream of argument." (Hume)

Hume's praise of Demosthenes is evident and lofty, even making use of ancient rhetorical ornamentation in its use of anaphora. But the questions of why this success over the modern assembly would be a good thing, or how we could enforce such practices in the modern day are left unanswered.

But Hume's praise of rhetoric is far from absolute. While he believes Demosthenes and Cicero to be superior to the rhetoricians of his day, he still criticizes Cicero, saying "He is too florid and rhetorical: His figures are too striking and palpable: The divisions of his discourse are drawn chiefly from the rules of the schools: And his wit disdains not always the artifice even of a pun, rhyme, or jingle of words." (Hume) He praises the "democratic ease" (Hume) and restraint of Demosthenes far more. Cicero was also a product of his environment to Hume, more so than Demosthenes. He says "Were there no Verres or Catiline, there would be no Cicero," whereas "It would be easy to find a Philip in modern times; but where shall we find a Demosthenes?" (Hume)

In considering On Eloquence, we must understand the position on rhetoric in the time of Hume. Eloquence was criticized, associated with youthful ignorance, madness, or general vulgarity. Shaftsbury remarked that "sublime or 'miraculous' style of the earliest pre-Homeric poets can now appeal only to the imagination of 'children in their earliest infancy." (Potkay 43-44) Lord Monboddo introduces his prose by saying, "It will not therefore have that mixture of the rhetorical and poetical…which pleases the vulgar so much." (Potkay 45) It would thus be imperative for Hume, who longs for the linguistic prowess of the ancients, to argue for a return to classical rhetoric. Simultaneously, a political uprising is forming in the republicans, who pushed for a return to eloquence and believed it signified the liberty of the people. Hume understood these political implications, saying "eloquence certainly springs up more naturally in popular governments." (Hume) Hume was later not a republican, contending that "republicanism, while admirable in theory, would in England lead only to tyranny." (Potkay 55) Hume might have exercised restraint in *On Eloquence* to separate himself from republican ideologies.

But political context, while helpful in understanding Hume's motivations, is not necessary for finding compatibility between his general Philosophy and rhetorical theory. Hume's beliefs that rhetoric could cause good and bad actions alike and that true and false beliefs are difficult to discern from one another justify a push for restrained rhetoric. He feared the notion that rhetoric would be lost to those who believed it was a vulgarity but also understood that "tis not reason, which carries the prize, but eloquence." (Hume 6)

If Hume advocated for and demonstrated restrained rhetorical practice, the German Philosopher Freidrich Nietzsche threw caution to the wind in his fiery, impassioned prose. Mirroring his frequent use of rhetorical tricks, his Philosophy of language encourages the use of empty rhetoric by claiming that such rhetoric is *all that exists* in language. Nietzsche, much like other Philosophers, at first warns us of the 'dangers' of rhetoric. He believes that "our knowledge 'is still subject to the seduction of language.'" (Alvarez and Ridley 2) But this warning is far less Platonic than it appears on the surface. While other Philosophers, like Descartes, warn that language can lead us astray from truth, Nietzsche believes that language's danger is in convincing us there *is* a truth outside of language in the first place. In other words, Nietzsche thinks "language snares us into thinking that what can be found in language has a significance that it does not really have." (Alvarez and Ridley 3) With his signature dramatic flair, he warns Philosophers in his section on language in *Beyond Good and Evil*, saying "Beware of suffering ' for the sake of truth'! Beware even of defending yourselves!" (Nietzsche 26) Nietzsche pushes this relativism in all areas of his Philosophy. In his ethics, he claims that the nobility of old created the terms for good and bad, explaining "they first arrogated the right to create values for their own profit, and to coin the names of such values." (Nietzsche 20) If all these words are human-invented coinages to terms, what is there but empty rhetoric?

Such beliefs call to mind similarities he has with the Sophists. Indeed, Nietzsche himself "suggests that the sophists may be seen as his own 'co-workers and precursors.'" (Consigny 7) Much like the sophists, Nietzsche favors a commitment to language over so-called "truth." He begins his longest chapter on language in *Beyond Good and Evil* with a discussion of translation, saying "The hardest thing to translate from one language to another is the tempo of its style; this style has its basis in the character of the race." (Nietzsche 29) He appears attuned to the emotional effects of rhetoric, and rather than ignoring them like Descartes or exhibiting

restrained longing like Hume, he brazenly praises emotion and rhetoric over reason, concluding " How could even a Plato have endured life (a Greek life, to which he said 'no') without an Aristophanes!" (Nietzsche 30) Nietzsche himself, much like the sophists, employed a flagrant use of rhetoric in his own work. Van Tongeren and Schank of the Nietzsche research group claim, "More than most philosophers, Nietzsche is also an artist of words who takes language to the very limit." (van Tongeren and Schank 5) Nietzsche's tone is one of the impassioned orator, and "[his] texts are often constructed according to rhetorical schemata that as such have the intention of accomplishing some thing in the reader." (van Tongeren and Schank 10) He demonstrates Logos in his historicism, referencing the past to set a logical precedent. He frequents Pathos in his love for the exclamatory remark. And his use of invective, of reverse ethos in calling his opponents "intellectual idlers and cobweb-spinners," (Nietzsche 26) rivals Cicero. Hume may push restrainedly for a return to Ancient Rhetoric, but Nietzsche goes out of his way to bring it back.

This central argument, between the extremes of Descartes' denial of Rhetoric and Nietzsche's denial of Truth with Hume somewhere in the middle, is ongoing both politically and Philosophically. I'm inclined to side with Nietzsche to the extent that perhaps even reason, when demonstrated to the public with the purpose of persuasion, is a form of Logos heavy rhetoric. If Descartes rids his speech of artistic means of expression, of ethos and pathos, a form of persuasive speech still remains. Furthermore, the denial of rhetoric and its study will prove counter-intuitive in lessening its influence, as those uneducated in rhetoric will find themselves more susceptible to its tricks. But I do not side wholly with Nietzsche. I believe his use of invective and heavy pathos is unacademic, and he does not meet the thinkers he criticizes on their level. In modern societies, Pathos has no place in scientific or mathematical argument. These are agreed-upon terms by all scientists and mathematicians, terms which have, in practice, proven successful for the development of those respective fields. In some bizarre fashion, Hume's approach feels the most honest. His appeal is entirely emotional, providing insubstantial logic as to *why* or *how* ancient rhetoric should be reinstated. But any rational appeal would miss the point, for it's a return to emotion that Hume desires in the first place. If one is to believe in the emotions, one must believe in rhetoric. A denial of rhetoric is a denial of a piece of ourselves, a denial of one truth for the sake of a false one.

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