

# The Nature Scope and Function of Rhetoric

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## Introduction:

Rhetoric has been defined and redefined by countless historical figures and shifts in society throughout time. Classical rhetoric is thought to have originated in ancient Greece during the 5th century as a way to educate the polis in hopes of creating more informed citizens. The classic writings and teachings of famous Greek philosophers laid the groundwork for the rhetorical evolution that would take place throughout the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment Period in Europe, and, eventually, the modern world. From Plato, who believed rhetoric to be mere “cooking of the soul”, to Hume, who conceptualized rhetoric as lived experiences and impressions, the nature, scope, and function of rhetoric has been revised time and time again.

Influenced by the turbulent times of ancient Greece, Plato believed rhetoric to be manipulative in nature with the sole purpose of persuasion or public appeasement. In Plato’s *Gorgias*, he mentions rhetoric as “the persuasion of ignorant masses within the... courts and assemblies” (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001). He felt that the common person would be susceptible to falsehoods of corrupt men and, therefore, easily swayed by rhetorical speech. Furthermore, when rhetoric did not seemingly have this intention, such as the rhetorical model put forth by the Sophists, Plato felt that rhetoric lacked purpose as its function then only seems to pacify. To combat these improper uses of rhetorical speech, Plato put forth a new defining feature of rhetoric which would be based on goodness and illuminate truth. Plato said that “where truth instructs the soul about the good, beauty motivates the soul towards it” (Bizzell and Herzberg). In defining rhetoric in this way, Plato’s “noble rhetoric” founded on “beauty and eloquence” was to be seen as a tool given to man as a gift from the gods and, in this regard, removed the tendency for man to bend rhetoric to his corrupted will.

Much like Plato, Hume, who solidified his place in history during the enlightenment period, also believed that rhetoric should be used as a tool to enlighten and illuminate. Hume stated that “[there] is no such thing as freedom of choice unless there is freedom to refuse”

(Russell, 2014). Though Hume agreed that this was the essential function of rhetoric, he understood that the modern world required an updated understanding of “eloquence”. As such, Hume reframed eloquence to adhere to conventions of reason, to consider the audience, and to comply with the standards of civility. In this suggested revision to the classical rhetorical function of truth-seeking, Hume frees rhetoric from the shackles of its past and restores access to the rhetorical domain for all who seek it.

Though Plato and Hume both defined the function of rhetoric as presenting truth, rhetoric served many masters. In the 2nd century B.C., as Rome began to transform from a republic to an empire, rhetorical speech was adopted in the political arena. Not only had rhetoric become regarded as an integral part of society, it was viewed as one’s civic duty. Cicero said that the “republic was a gathering of citizens, their character and behavior of paramount importance for the wellbeing of the Republic” (Cicero, qtd in Swithinbank, 2009). As Roman politics became the rhetorical realm, and politics would later be heavily influenced by religious doctrine, Roman rhetoric would eventually become the preferred tool of the church (Billows, 2009). In both of these utilizations, rhetoric’s function would shift back to that of persuasion.

Despite these seemingly different understandings of the purpose of rhetoric, one thing seemingly remains constant throughout time: rhetoric seeks to communicate that which we seek to understand. In other words, rhetoric is meant to aid us in expressing ourselves and our thoughts in the hopes of better understanding ourselves and those around us. In this way, the nature of rhetoric is dependent upon the user’s desired understanding and is accomplished through effective communication that occurs through an exchange of ideas and dialogue resulting in a better understanding of ourselves and our place in the world.

### **Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece:**

During the beginnings of democracy in Athens, classic rhetoric began to take shape. Because the Greeks encouraged public political participation, it is during this time that rhetors, philosophers, and skilled orators utilized language as instruments of persuasion. The most important aspect of speech in ancient Greece was being able to speak and rationalize your thoughts competently. According to the Greeks, classical rhetoric required one’s ability to develop sound arguments. In many instances, however, rhetoric was degraded to align to favor those in power in efforts to control the polis, further solidifying their hold over society.

One such group of rhetoricians who subscribed to this type of rhetoric was the Sophists. Though they sold their rhetoric as a tool of the people, only those most elite were able to attend classes (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001). Not being from Athens, many Sophists were seen as outsiders and were criticized heavily by philosophers, such as Plato. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato uses Socrates as a vessel to “accuse the sophists of lacking true knowledge and the training of their students as unethical, manipulative form of rhetoric that can persuade audiences regardless of the truth of falsehoods of its claims” (english.hawaii.edu). Criticisms like Plato’s painted the Sophists as masters of deception, identifying them as enemies of true rhetoric.

Plato was critical of this use of rhetoric as he saw the only aim of speech done in this manner was to intentionally deceive citizens. Plato further criticized this use of rhetoric as it often focused on the evoking of emotional responses as opposed to proposing any legitimate truth. Plato regarded this type of rhetoric as “cooking for the soul” or a “sham art of the soul” because it offers mere momentary gratification as Sophistic techniques for rhetoric resorted to moving audiences by any means necessary (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001). As it was often the emotional attachments to the ideas presented that would lead people to believe or support the ideas presented, as opposed to whether or not the individual supports the idea itself, Sophistic rhetoric reached only to the sentiments of an individual and discounted the truth of the message presented. In this fashion, rhetoric was utilized as a device for manipulation.

Because Plato saw this use of rhetoric as a destructive force that could easily be used to plant false ideas among the polis and potentially could be damaging to society as a whole, Plato began to expand and establish a noble form of speech and discussion. In order to illustrate a more in-depth concept of rhetoric, Plato began by examining the underlying mechanisms, or nature, of rhetoric itself. In doing so, he sought to highlight and understand the subject and purpose of rhetoric. Upon inspection, Plato was unable to define a singular subject of rhetoric and ultimately determined that the subject of rhetoric was adaptable and would change depending upon the purpose the rhetoric would serve (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001). If rhetoric was to function as a tool of persuasion, then the subject would follow suit and take the form of that which one was trying to convince. For Plato, this was not a sufficient subject.

As Plato believed the purpose of the soul was one of transcendence, Sophistic rhetoric stood in direct opposition to the nature of the soul. Plato saw the soul as a “winged chariot driven by 2 horses” where the first horse is understood as noble and able to carry the soul above and

beyond the earth to the place where truth resides (transcendence) and the second horse, a dark horse, is a horse of human inclination that seeks to control the soul and bind it to this world (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001). In this instance, the soul is compelled to be carried to the truth but because the nature of humanity is flawed, and its desires of selfishness disrupt our ability to access truth and beauty, we must seek out instances that lead the soul back in favor of the noble horse. In this allegory, Plato offers a new function for rhetoric (illumination) where the subject aligns with the pure desires of the soul: truth.

### **Rhetoric As Duty**

As Roman General Gaius Julius Caesar was determined to take power away from Pompey Magnus, a nobleman who sat the head of the Senate, and the Roman Republic began to transform, Marcus Tullius Cicero, a lawyer, scholar, and rhetor, entered the scene as perhaps the greatest orator of the time. As he believed that citizens must have great oratory skills in order to become informed, Cicero encouraged others to follow in his footsteps as he understood virtue to be essential to Roman citizens in order to conduct themselves in public displays, speeches, and matters of politics. As an aid to oration, Cicero emphasized the role ethos (an appeal to ethics), pathos (an appeal to emotion), and logos (an appeal to logic) had in public speaking and, therefore, rhetoric. Cicero's *De Oratore* was considered to be a "beautifully composed dialogue in which the interlocutors not only set out the standards of parts of the art but discuss and debate their nature and significance, always taking care to root the importance of rhetoric in practical affairs and not just in theoretical consistency" (Conely, pg. 113 1990). In this writing, Cicero puts forth that the subject of rhetoric should be relevant to the audience and, in this way, pushes for rhetoric's use as a tool for political debate. Though Cicero intended for this use of political rhetoric to aid citizens in their understanding of the often restricted world of politics, rhetoric in this time took on a life of its own as a renewed tool of persuasion (Cicero, qtd in archive.org). With the function of rhetoric firmly shifted away from illuminating truth and beauty, and now aligned to persuade individuals to support or refute political agenda, rhetoric in the Roman era acted less like a tool of freedom and more like a slave to those who wielded it.

As the Roman Republic expanded into the Roman Empire, it would continue to meander back and forth from senate rule democracies and ruthless dictatorships all with rhetoric in tow, but under the rule of Emperor Constantine, rhetoric was passed on and chained to a new master:

religion. Rome began yet again to undergo another transformation as religious doctrine became the law of the land (Billows, 2009). Despite the shift in nature from politics to religion, the function of rhetoric remained to persuade and control as it would take over a millennia to free rhetoric from this persuasion-based prison.

**Freeing Rhetoric:**

During the Renaissance, the Western Roman Empire, a remnant of its former self, was still governed by the Catholic church. With power consolidated in what is now called Germany, religious rule continued to dictate the lives of people. During this time, only a select few were permitted access to information as bibles and other great works of literature were written in Latin, a language of religious scholars, condemning the common person to a life of illiteracy. Late in the 14th century, however, advocates of humanism proclaimed the need to revisit ancient Greek and Roman styles of philosophy and rhetoric (Conely, 1994). Due to the turbulence witnessed in the middle ages, humanism began to play an important role in everyday society. In 1517, Martin Luther, a former Augustinian monk, priest, professor of theology, and rhetorician, declared the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation. In his letter, 95 Revolutionary Opinions he nailed to a castle door in Wittenberg, Germany, Luther condemned the Catholic Church and its practice of indulgences (White, 2017). Luther concluded that such indulgences by the Catholic Church as a form of extortion and sought instead to put the beliefs of God into the hands of people (White, 2017). Luther sought to separate the rhetorical from the religious as he understood “rhetorical observations [as focused] at his word and conclude[d] that biblical writings should be understood as a spoken message from within” (Vind, 2017). As Martin Luther’s work opened the door for ordinary citizens to interpret the works of God for themselves, he too carved a path that would lead to the Enlightenment Period and restore rhetoric’s role in illumination, truth, and beauty.

**Rhetoric for the People:**

The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement in Europe that focused on the idea that a person’s reason should be the driving force for “...authority and advocated such ideals as liberty, progress, tolerance, fraternity, constitutional government, and separation of church and state” (courses.lumenlearning.com). During this time, there was an increase in attention on the

significance of the scientific method and growing scrutiny of the authority of the church. Writer, philosopher, and rhetorician, David Hume, played a significant role during the Scottish enlightenment in returning rhetoric to its classical origins. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, Hume attended the University of Edinburgh but was unable to earn a degree. In 1739, Hume wrote *A Treatise on Human Nature* that was considered to be one the most influential books on philosophy. Hume believed in empiricism and theorized that people acquired knowledge by way of the senses through lived experience (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001). Inherent in his book, Hume appeals for the efficacy of empiricism by explaining the notion that complex ideas are mere conglomerates formed from simpler ideas that individuals come to know through the experiences associated with human senses (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001). In this regard, the scope by which rhetoric should function is through the sensory experiences of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste.

Hume, also an accomplished letter writer, published “Of Eloquence” and “Of the Standard taste”, both of which highlight rhetorical concerns in Great Britain. “Of Eloquence” describes British oratory as bland and not consisting of good models. Hume suggests oratory must contain qualities more closely linked to Classical understandings of truth-seeking and beauty than that of persuasion (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001). Furthermore, Hume makes clear his disgust with the use of pathetic appeals such as pathos appealing to the audience's emotions of fear, anger, sadness, or rage (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001). Hume explains, in his “Of the Standard taste”, the clear problem of judgment and points out that in order to determine the standard of how things are judged, one must first determine an individual's opinion or sentiment on the matter. Hume suggests that “All sentiment is right; because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself” (Hume, qtd in stefanibarden.net). In this letter, Hume highlights the problem of sentiment as it will always be correct as long as the person is honest while simultaneously offering this as a solution to the problem of sentiment as the case of differing sentiments or opinions is a matter of “taste” where some “tastes” may hold more weight than others but all “taste” builds the basis for judgment about what is beautiful and virtuous (Hume, qtd in stefanibarden.net)

By combining his notions of taste and perception, Hume ultimately restored the classical function of illumination to rhetoric with only a slight shift as to where rhetoric draws its inspiration. As opposed to Plato's noble rhetoric, Hume's high rhetoric was not based on the

goodness of the gods. Instead, Hume, influenced by the Enlightenment movement and growing understanding of the empirical world, turns to adopt reason as the nature of rhetoric with the function of seeking truth through polite dialog and friendly debate that accounts for the tastes and lived experiences of individuals engaged in the work and world of rhetoric (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001). In this reframing, Hume builds upon the restoration of a classical rhetorical model by giving it back to the people that it was intended to serve at its origin.

**Conclusion:**

Despite the many ways rhetoric has been shaped by men of the past, how it is used today, and how it will likely be used in the future, has, and will continue to, evolve as it bends to the changing times. Though this may be the nature of rhetoric, that is to say, that rhetoric's nature is ever-changing, the function remains somewhat more predictable as no matter the subject matter, rhetoric always seeks to communicate. Since its introduction, rhetoric has been cast in the supporting role to communicating thoughts and ideas whether those be inspired by truth, corruption, control, expression, emotion, religion, appeasement, power, greed, peace, inspiration, reason, or otherwise. And though the nature of rhetoric may be subject to interpretation, the requirement that its use must communicate attributes certain bounds that restrict the scope to known methods of effective communication such as open dialogue and civil debate. It is this form of rhetoric, one that aligns with illumination (as championed by Plato), is accessible to all (like that shaped by Cicero), and subject to individual tastes (as posed by Hume) that provides both the flexibility and the bounds under which continued growth and development of humanity will to thrive.

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