

‘Select a cultural advance from the ancient world and discuss why it is still relevant today’

On the Art of Rhetoric

“You can speak well if your tongue can deliver the message of your heart.”

John Ford

The art of ‘speaking well’ is one that has withstood the scrutiny of time, from the ancient Greek philosophers exploring new ideas in the acropolis of Athens, to politicians worldwide this year when almost half of the population vote in elections. Although its uses change with each new generation and society – from the exposition of religious doctrines, to composing poetry and prose, to public addresses in law courts – it remains a uniquely relevant skill.

Rhetoric is an art which the ancient Greeks explored in depth. Each new generation of philosophers debated the definition according to its prevalent use in each society, yet a unanimous conclusion has not been reached. Plato defined rhetoric as the art of winning the soul by discourse – a deeper, more meaningful concept than simply persuasion. Rhetoric for the Greeks, therefore, was a collective activity for souls, stirred by the articulation of philosophical ideas, to come together and to change society for the better. It was a puissant tool for politicians and philosophers alike, with the power, as Plato said, to shape human beliefs, if used correctly. He respected rhetoric for its utility in Athenian democracy; as eloquent means for members of the *Boule* (Council) or *Ecclesia* (Assembly) to defend themselves when challenged¹, and to articulate original, creative ideas to change Athens for the better. However, he was critical too, aware of the sophistry that could emerge, a powerful tool to manipulate and deceive.

Aristotle, Plato’s student and a philosopher with a more open outlook, used rhetoric as a form of persuasion in the acropolis. His theory, which became known as the rhetorical triangle, was that a speaker’s ability to persuade was based on the balance of three different concepts: *logos*, logic and reason, *pathos*, assuring the speaker’s credibility, and *ethos*, emotion.²

¹ Brian Leggett, “History of Classical Rhetoric – an overview of its early development”, October 16th, 2012, <https://blog.iiese.edu/leggett/2012/10/16/history-of-classical-rhetoric-an-overview-of-its-early-development/> [accessed January 16th, 2024]

² Jaclyn Lutzke and Mary F. Henggeler, “The Rhetorical Triangle: Understanding and Using Logos, Ethos and Pathos”, November 2009, https://www.lsu.edu/hss/english/files/university_writing_files/item35402.pdf

Modern definitions of rhetoric include ‘the art of speaking or writing effectively’³, ‘speech or writing intended to be effective and influence people’⁴ and ‘the skill or art of using language effectively’⁵. For a modern speech to be considered rhetoric, there seem to be two criteria. Firstly, that rhetoric is an art, an aptitude worth respecting: that the skill of speaking well is something to be appreciated. Secondly, that it is effective: to be considered true rhetoric, a speech would have to influence the listeners, introducing new perspectives and concepts to challenge their minds.

Rhetoric has been a major feature in literature throughout history. Each generation, stirred by prominent poems or novels, has questioned the meaning and power of rhetoric as relevant in that particular society. For example, in the 17th century epic poem *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, Lucifer encourages his fellow ex-angels to continue to oppose God. The poem examines the power of rhetoric by showing how, armed only with the art of speech, Lucifer can convince ex-angels to do something that the reader will recognise as absurd, and make them believe it is the right thing to do.

Rhetoric has also been used in actual speeches as well as fictional ones. Martin Luther King’s speech, *I Have a Dream*, was the ‘spark for a movement of equality’⁶. What comes to mind when thinking of the civil rights movement is that phrase, *I have a dream*: five words defined a momentous campaign, encapsulating the frustration and hope of the people at that time. In fact, it was rhetoric in perfect balance, just as Aristotle explained with his rhetorical triangle – King was logical by proving ‘evidence and reasoning for why civil rights are important’⁷, credible because of his confidence, and emotional with a personal connection, describing his own dream. That goes to show the power of rhetoric, that a few well-chosen words can change the world. That power will never fade – we will always need rhetoric to fill the gaps; in this way, rhetoric will be relevant forever.

However, the influence of rhetoric in society reaches even further than literature and speeches. Today, as artificial intelligence (AI) becomes increasingly integrated in daily life, rhetoric as a skill will become more important. The perceived threat of AI to society

³ Merriam-Webster, “Rhetoric”, last updated February 21st, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rhetoric#:~:text=%3A%20the%20art%20of%20speaking%20or,means%20of%20communication%20or%20persuasion> [accessed February 24th, 2024]

⁴ Cambridge Dictionary of English, “Rhetoric”, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/rhetoric#google_vignette [accessed February 24th, 2024]

⁵ Collins Dictionary of English, “Rhetoric”, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/rhetoric#> [accessed February 24th, 2024]

⁶ Marshall Terrill, “A 10-second pause that changed history”, interviewing Christopher P. Neck, January 12th, 2023, <https://news.asu.edu/20230111-discoveries-10second-pause-changed-history#:~:text=MLK%27s%20speech%20was%20the%20spark,make%20it%20into%20the%20speech> [accessed February 24th, 2024]

⁷ StoryboardThat, “Ethos, Pathos and Logos in I Have a Dream”, <https://www.storyboardthat.com/lesson-plans/i-have-a-dream-by-martin-luther-king-jr/ethos-pathos-logos#> [accessed February 25th, 2024]

– that, as it becomes more and more powerful until it extends beyond human capability, it will ‘steal’ people’s jobs – may also be the reason that rhetoric becomes a more common practice. ChatGPT, when asked if there is anything humans will always be better at than AI, generated eight ideas, including creativity and ethical and moral reasoning. Although AI can generate content based on existing ideas and patterns, ChatGPT says that ‘the ability to think outside predefined parameters remain[s] distinctively human’⁸. Rhetoric is the essential expression of creativity: the orator articulates unique ideas from their own mind, not memorised from previous arguments. Although these ideas could be flawed and undeveloped, they are prized as original, coming from people with genuine emotions. AI-generated content might be more polished, but does not come from a real desire to improve society. Moreover, much of humanity’s ethical and moral judgement comes from a unique worldview developed through years of experiences. Although AI can explain opposite views in depth, it lacks human emotions which drive a passionate debate. One of the points of Aristotle’s triangle of rhetoric was *ethos*, emotion; AI, being defined as *artificial* intelligence, lacks the personal touch that humans innately possess. So, the skill to craft and articulate a stirring, passionate argument will become one of the few assets that humans will have over AI. Rhetoric will become increasingly relevant as AI develops.

The art of rhetoric is very relevant right now, the year in which 49% of the world’s population will vote in elections⁹. The results of these elections will shape the world’s politics and so it is vital that we, the audience to the speakers, really understand each politician’s views. For example, Donald Trump’s political slogan, *Make America Great Again*, was a patriotic mantra which became a pop culture phenomenon. The voters who felt that the USA had passed its peak – when it was the sole, undisputed global superpower, pioneering technology and modern ideas such as democracy with the Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man – found their demagogue in Trump. But when he became president, the things that prevailed were his racist and misogynistic views, not real desires to improve his country. The kind of rhetoric that Trump used to persuade thousands of people to elect him is not the same honest rhetoric as the Greeks knew; it was far more self-centred and inauthentic. So, as the elections approach, we need to be able to understand true rhetoric to be able to distinguish between sophistry and sincerity. And we need to be able to make this distinction to make the right choices about who will lead our world, especially in this critical time with China and the USA rivalling each other for the title of global superpower, and with climate change affecting more and more people worldwide. We need leaders who can manage these issues effectively, who really care about making the world a better and

⁸ ChatGPT 3.5, an extract from an answer in response to the question ‘Is there anything that humans will always be better at than AI?’; <https://chat.openai.com/c/7dafa27b-0ca5-412a-a9ce-e9350afc9e7d> [conversation occurred January 26th, 2024]

⁹ Koh Ewe, “The Ultimate Election Year: All the Elections Around the World in 2024”, December 28th, 2023, <https://time.com/6550920/world-elections-2024/> [accessed February 8th, 2024]

safer place. Therefore, rhetoric is highly relevant right now as it is employed by politicians worldwide. It is our job to understand it, and to know whether it is being used for harm or for good.

Rhetoric is a uniquely relevant cultural advance, pioneered by the Greeks, and has been shaped and adapted to each new era to act as a useful device in literature and speech. Recent challenges regarding developments of AI and threats to democracy, mean we need to value rhetoric as a uniquely human skill. Understanding this will help us to distinguish between the insincere chasing of power and a genuine desire to make the world a better, kinder place. This will happen only when, in the words of John Ford, we are able to speak the message of our heart.

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