

Rhetoric as the Practice of Liberal Education
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My topic this afternoon is rhetoric. For the average American, rhetoric is a word with a negative connotation. Rhetoric today is used to refer to two things. First, an impediment to action; someone who engages in rhetoric is someone who talks too much, so as perhaps to avoid acting. And second, rhetoric is partisanship. We've all heard some version of this phrase before, "this or that senator's partisan rhetoric." The implication is that rhetoric itself is responsible for our political divisions and the failure to arrive at consensus. Rhetoric is rarely invoked to refer to something positive. If a politician gives an inspiring and powerful speech, the most that is said is that he/she is a talented speaker, and that they gave an inspiring or powerful speech, yet we don't refer to it as *rhetoric*. One wonders if those who use such terms realize that *speech is a form of rhetoric*.

This question has preoccupied my work since I began my studies of rhetoric in graduate school. I don't have a definitive answer as to why rhetoric has grown out of favor so quickly. What I can say with certainty is that rhetoric's demise in society occurred simultaneously with its decline in the academy. Rhetoric, once viewed as the focal point of a liberal education, was relegated to the first-year writing and public speaking classrooms. This isn't to diminish the importance of instruction in those subjects, but rather to point out that rhetoric has become just another general education requirement. In his essay *Language is Sermonic*, Richard Weaver, writing in 1963, describes the decline of rhetoric in the following way:

"Our age has witnessed the decline of a number of subjects that once enjoyed prestige and general esteem, but no subject, I believe, has suffered more amazingly in this respect than rhetoric."¹

The reasons for this are up for debate – and those within my field have debated and continue to debate such questions – but what I wish to discuss more fully, in this talk but also in my own academic work, is *rhetoric as the practice of a liberal education*. My hope is that such discussions may lead to a revival of rhetoric and liberal education in higher education.

I would like to begin with an argument from definition, by defining liberal education. A liberal education is education in freedom or toward freedom. I am paraphrasing Leo Strauss, who famously described liberal education as "education in culture or toward culture."² Culture can only flourish when individuals are free, and so that is where my definition of liberal education begins. Liberal means free. A liberally educated student is a free student. How is such a student free, and what kind of freedom can they exercise? A liberally educated student is free to be a social and political animal. This is described by Aristotle at two

¹ Richard M. Weaver, "Language Is Sermonic," in *Language Is Sermonic* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1970, 201-225)

² Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press)

different passages in his work the *Politics*. First and most famously when he says that man is “by nature a political animal.”³ What he means by this is that man, more than any other animal, is built to be social and to live collectively in societal arrangements of their choosing. What sets man apart from other animals is the faculty of speech. Animals have a voice, which they can use to indicate “sensations of what is painful and pleasant” but man possesses speech and can indicate “the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and wrong.”⁴ The function of rhetoric in society becomes clear at the end of this passage when Aristotle says that speech “makes a household and a city-state.”⁵ Cities, which I would simply describe as all societies, are founded in speech. The end of speech is to contribute to the good of society. In his *Institutes of Oratory*, Quintilian says that speech alone is responsible for bringing a “wandering multitude” together “to form a people.”⁶ Cities are founded in speech, and a liberal education *teaches students how to be free to live in the city*. This is a form of freedom, because without the city, without political community, we would be forced to live in a state of nature, which as Hobbes famously reminds us, is “nasty, brutish, and short.”⁷ The freedom I am speaking of is the freedom to rise above the base instincts of man as an animal. This Dante reminds us keenly in the Ulysses canto of the *Inferno*: “Consider well the seed that gave you birth: you were not made to live your lives as brutes, but to be followers of worth and knowledge.”⁸ This freedom elevates man from his status as an animal. Liberal education is education for citizenship, it is education as preparation for life in a political community.

Having defined liberal education, we now move to rhetoric.

What is rhetoric? This question is, I believe, the most important in the whole of the Western tradition. It informs the drama of the Platonic dialogues, which depict Plato’s Socrates doing battle with famous sophists – Gorgias in the dialogue of the same name, and Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, just to use two examples – and the subject of their disputes is the tension between rhetoric and philosophy. Rhetoric and philosophy are the great adversaries of Ancient Greece. There are two dialogues which deal explicitly with rhetoric, the *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias*, in the former rhetoric is defended and in the latter rhetoric is condemned. Plato’s Socrates condemns rhetoric by calling it a form of flattery, simply the practice of telling the audience what they want to hear. In the *Gorgias*, rhetoric is not described as an art (*technē* in Greek), but rather a knack – something that does not take much training or knowledge. The only thing it requires is a sense of knowing what the audience wants to hear. This is what Plato’s Socrates is referring to in the *Phaedrus*, when he asks what happens

³ Aristotle, Aristotle’s *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ George A. Kennedy, *Quintilian: A Roman Educator and His Quest for the Perfect Orator* (Lexington, KY: Sophron, 2017)

⁷ Taken from Michael Oakeshott’s book on Hobbes: “Hobbes on Civil Association”

⁸ Taken from Charles Singleton’s translation of the *Inferno*. The original Italian: “considerate la vostra semenza: fatti non foste a viver come bruti, ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.”

when “a rhetorician who does not know good from bad addresses a city which knows no better” (260c). The only knowledge required for rhetoric as flattery, as it is described in the *Gorgias*, is knowledge of the feelings of the audience. It doesn’t matter *what the audience feels*, and it doesn’t matter *whether or not the feelings of the audience are right or wrong*. *What matters is that the rhetorician speaks to those feelings*. This is a form of demagoguery when it takes place from high office, such as the White House, which the experience of the Trump administration demonstrates. The rise of right-wing political parties all across the world provide more examples. The Platonic critique of rhetoric can therefore be summarized as follows: the rhetorician, who must only know what the audience wishes to hear, can be a spokesperson for sinister and evil causes in society. If your fidelity is to the feelings of the audience, rather than what is true, or what is beneficial to the broader political community, you run the risk of promoting evil. Plato’s Socrates essentially argues that the rhetorician must have knowledge of philosophy, which can inform his practice of rhetoric. This kind of rhetoric is described in the *Phaedrus*. Plato’s Socrates presents the possibility of a “good” form of rhetoric. It is the art of “directing the soul by means of speech” (261a). The only way to direct the soul is to know where it should go. The rhetorician, in the opinion of Plato’s Socrates, should have a sense of direction, and the proper knowledge of where the soul should go. This would, of course, make him a philosopher – and that is the tension between rhetoric and philosophy in the Platonic dialogues: both rhetoric and philosophy view themselves as possessing what the other denies they possess.

The Platonic definition of rhetoric is typically contrasted with Aristotle’s conception of rhetoric. The first line of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* sets out his limited conception of rhetoric: rhetoric is the art of “finding the available means of persuasion.”⁹ We are probably most familiar with this definition of rhetoric, since it has historically enjoyed the most attention, not just from scholars but the general public too. It is however a limited definition of rhetoric. My own conception of rhetoric brings these two together. *I consider rhetoric to be persuasion of right attitudes among citizens*. Speech is the faculty that sets man apart from other animals. It is the defining characteristic of the human condition, and it enables man to form societies and to live collectively. Therefore, rhetoric, properly configured, has a political dimension, since the exercise thereof is what brings us together as citizens in societies of our choosing. *This political dimension of rhetoric is what I refer to as “right attitudes” – it is the use of rhetoric to persuade citizens to adopt right attitudes which contribute to the common good*. Aristotle tells us that rhetoric is persuasion, but my response is to ask what the substance of our persuasion is. For me, the substance of rhetoric’s function as persuasion is the common good of society, both in terms of the individual citizens and as a whole. Rhetoric as the practice of liberal education is ultimately about teaching students how to be citizens and how to exercise civic freedom.

Societies are founded in speech, but they are also sustained through speech. The health of a society can be judged by its deliberation and by the quality of disagreement. By quality of disagreement, I mean the ability to disagree without animus. Traditionally, the rhetoric classroom was where students learned how to deliberate and disagree as citizens. The

⁹ Aristotle, “Art of Rhetoric”, trans. Robert C. Bartlett (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019)

rhetoric classroom was the arena where students were taught how to be citizen-orators capable of engaging in thoughtful, meaningful ways with their fellow citizens. Rhetoric has the capacity to inform and persuade, but only if we seek to use it for civic-minded ends. Teaching students how to engage with one another, and how to deliberate in productive, thoughtful ways is a precondition for a vibrant and flourishing political discourse, which is the defining characteristic of a healthy society.

Now what can such a rhetorical education look like? I don't think that rhetoric can be systematized or instrumentalized, and therefore I also don't think teaching it is something that can be reduced to a set of techniques. The teacher of rhetoric must embrace kairos and realize that every decision they make should be in response to the circumstances at the time. That said, there are two general "rules" – I use that term loosely – that can guide rhetoric as the practice of liberal education. The first is to keep in mind the civic ends of rhetoric, and to always remember that what we teach in class bears on the real world. I always ask myself if I can see my students using what they learn in my class to inform their actions in their communities. If the answer is no, you have a problem. And second, is knowledge of the common good. The teacher of rhetoric must have a vision of the common good of the community, otherwise they cannot teach their students how to pursue it and defend it. These are the two general "rules" I follow in my own teaching of rhetoric.

A renaissance of rhetoric and liberal education can prepare a new generation of citizens to take on the responsibility of citizenship with open arms. Preparing that generation of citizens must start in college and university classrooms. And it must start by recognizing the possibility of rhetoric as the practice of and instruction in liberal education, which is education for the sake of citizenship.

Thank you.