

Conclusions are only Partial Truths

Plato tells us that “oratory is the art of enchanting the soul” (*Phaedrus*). In his piece, *Phaedrus*, the character Socrates manipulates Phaedrus into believing first that a non-lover is preferable to a lover, and then that a lover is more desirable. Both of Socrates’ arguments could be deemed compelling and draw from truths, be they information pertinent to the time period, accepted beliefs, or universal human themes. The dialogue reveals something about the nature of rhetoric. Effective rhetoric strings together truths and beliefs to achieve persuasion. Yet, because someone well acquainted with the art of rhetoric can “make the same thing appear to the same persons to be one time just, another time, if he is so inclined to be unjust” (*Phaedrus*), rhetoric has been called “‘empty talk,’ or even ‘deception’” (Herrick 1). Socrates’ ability to effectively argue two opposing view points supports this attitude towards rhetoric, and is evidence that neither contention (that the lover or non-lover is better) is entirely true. The conclusion of each argument represents a partial truth, a truth that fails to fully explore the argument. Rhetoric is the art of manipulating truths and accepted beliefs to draw conclusions that have only an incidental relationship with truth; even when all of the premises for an argument are true, the conclusion can be only a partial truth.

Plato begins with the claim that, “He who is the victim of his passion and the slave of pleasure will of course desire to make his beloved as agreeable to himself as possible” (*Phaedrus*), and therefore, “to him who has a mind diseased anything is agreeable which is not opposed to him, but that which is equal or superior is hateful to him, and therefore the lover will not brook any superiority or equality on the part of his beloved; he is always employed in reducing him to inferiority” (*Phaedrus*). Truth: such was the Greek culture that older men took younger men as their lovers. The age difference produced unequal power dynamics between the lovers, in favor of the elder. Socrates refers to that inequity when he makes the claim that younger men will be submissive and “of course” avoid offending the elder. Because effective rhetoric attends “to an audience’s values, experiences, beliefs, social status, and aspirations” (Herrick 9), Socrates’ comments are especially persuasive. Phaedrus, clearly youthful compared to Socrates, would likely be familiar with the nuances of being the younger lover. Words like “reduce,” synonymous with “degrade,” and “inferiority,” and its negative connotation, provoke the response Socrates seeks to induce; the lover seems undesirable. Thus Socrates accurately evaluates the dynamics of his society and in such a way as to make “loving” seem detrimental. To reach the conclusion that a non-lover is preferable, Socrates appeals specifically to truths that are relevant to his audience and support his argument.

After a few moments, Socrates announces, “I told a lie when I said that the beloved ought to accept the non-lover when he might have the lover,” and enthusiastically begins his new campaign, arguing that love is madness, a type of madness that is a “divine gift, and the source of the chiefest blessings granted to men” (*Phaedrus*). Again he draws from truths. The ease with which Socrates takes on the opposing viewpoint is significant; the obvious conclusion is that his previous argument can not be the complete and total truth. A more critical evaluation of

his first argument would reveal flaws in his logic. That Socrates tries to classify *every* lover relationship as oppressive is absurd; the nature of a lovers' relationship varies amongst individuals. The conclusion to his first argument, though based on truths, fails to be complete.

For his next argument, Socrates explains that there is "true knowledge" (*Phaedrus*) amongst the Gods. He uses imagery of chariots and horses, claiming that each person has a chariot with two horses, one with wings and one without. The chariots circle in the heavens, trying to fly high enough to reach the Gods and their divine truth. Being in love, Socrates claims, is to be reminded of the divine knowledge: "The divine intelligence, being nurtured upon mind and pure knowledge, and the intelligence of every which is capable of receiving the proper food to it, rejoices at beholding reality, and once more upon gazing upon truth, is replenished and made glad" (*Phaedrus*). The argument is all the more effective because the beliefs Socrates refers to correspond to those of his time. But even a non believer might appreciate his argument because it touches upon a greater universal human truth. As Joseph Campbell explains, "I think what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive" (Moyers 1). Being in love can be a form of achieving what Campbell refers to, and it could be argued that the "true knowledge" and "resonances within our innermost being and reality" are more or less the same ideas. Socrates' second argument is compelling, just as the first is, yet it is too simplistic. Love cannot be always wonderful, because as Socrates pointed out, love is not always wonderful. It can be degrading, too. Rhetoric may manipulate truths for the purpose of persuasion, but an argument's conclusion is only partially true.

Rhetoric is refined and premeditated, making use of only the facts and beliefs that support a claim. Rhetoric is also persuasive; it is designed to evoke a specific response from an audience. Plato claims that, “he who would be an orator has to learn the differences of human souls--they are so many and of nature, and from them come the differences between man and man. Having proceeded thus far in his analysis, he will next divide speeches into their different classes” (*Phaedrus*). In addition to employing only truths that support an argument, effectual rhetoric draws solely from truths that are relevant to a specific audience. These two limitations drastically limit the likeliness that the conclusions drawn will be accurate. Socrates, in both of his arguments, drew from truths and beliefs that were relevant to Phaedrus. In the first argument, he drew from truths that were relevant to Phaedrus’s social status and age; in the second, Socrates used arguments that were conducive to the religious beliefs of the time. His ability to effectively argue two opposing viewpoints implies that neither position is an entirely complete truth. Using only arguments that were appealing to his audience and supported his thesis resulted in conclusions that were neither entirely correct nor complete. Ultimately, rhetoric can use truths to construct a conclusion, but the conclusions are not always the entire truth.

Works Cited

Herrick, James A. The History and Rhetoric: An Introduction. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, 2005.

Moyers, Bill. The Power of Myth. New York: Anchor-Random, 1991.

Plato. Phaedrus. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. 9 Feb. 2005

<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/texts/phaedrus.html>

Samantha,

Your revision argues that rhetoric becomes persuasive by choosing arguments with a specific appeal to the intended audience, but therefore the conclusion of these arguments represents only a partial truth. This revision is a distinct improvement over what was already a strong draft, as you have corrected many of the draft's faults without introducing new problems. Among the many strengths of this essay is its relatively narrow scope, which allows you to explore your topic fully without producing an excessive number of pages. You also organize your arguments well, leading your reader from one point to the next, and relating your individual paragraphs back to your overarching thesis. Most impressive to me is the way in which you have been able to extract from Socrates's arguments a grain of truth, such that these ancient arguments become plausible and compelling even to us modern readers. Between this recognition of the value of the argument and the use of well chosen quotations, you bring Plato to life while also making your own point about his ideas. This clarity, originality, and construction indicate a strong writing ability, and it will no doubt continue to improve as you work on it more. Well done.

There are a few things that still nag at me about this revision, though. I continue to feel as though the situation is more complex than you make it out to be, and that your choice of thesis, while supportable, does not quite get to the heart of the matter. We can all agree that the conclusion to Plato's argument depends on the specifics of the situation, and if that is basically what you are saying (that sometimes a lover is better, sometimes a non-lover), then it is a fairly tame conclusion and not very arguable. To push this uncontentious claim further, you could have offered a more daring thesis about the implications of the ambiguity of Socrates's two arguments. If rhetoric can use sound arguments to produce partial truth, then does this mean that there is no such thing as a fact of the matter? Is there no actual truth about, for example, whether a lover or non-lover is preferable? I doubt that Plato or Socrates or Phaedrus would be satisfied with the idea that it all depends on the specifics. Certainly they would agree that neither the lover nor the non-lover will always be preferable, but they would also claim that the point of these speeches is to get at some more basic truth about the matter. Does Socrates's first argument hold any weight for cases where there is not an inherent power imbalance, for (potential) lovers of the same age and socioeconomic status? Does his second argument establish a reason to reject non-lovers in general, to search for love even if a good power balance could be established with a non-lover? The point is not that you needed to pick a side or prefer one argument to the other. Your point is about rhetoric's power to establish partial truth. But this feels like a bit of a cop-out, as though you are considering these examples of rhetoric from a great distance and haven't really felt the force of either argument. What I am recommending is a very sophisticated and difficult aspect of writing, but it makes all the difference between competence and brilliance. Now that you have amply demonstrated your competence, push yourself farther, take more risks, try to examine a topic that is harder to get the bottom of. I look forward to seeing what you produce.

3.5 out of 4