

The Relationship between Rhetoric and Truth

Plato tells us that “oratory is the art of enchanting the soul” (*Phaedrus*). In his piece, *Phaedrus*, the character Sophocles manipulates Phaedrus into believing first that a non-lover is preferable to a lover, and then that a lover is more desirable. Both of Sophocles’s 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. 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 is evidence that neither contention is entirely true. Though he is using true statements to achieve strong arguments, the nature of the holistic argument may or may not be accurate. Rhetoric is the art of manipulating truths and accepted beliefs to draw conclusions that have only a coincidental relationship with 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. Sophocles refers to that inequity when he makes the claim that younger men will “of course” avoid offending the elder by shifting the balance of power. Because effective rhetoric attends “to an audience’s values, experiences, beliefs, social status, and aspirations” (Herrick 9), Sophocles’ comments are especially persuasive. Phaedrus, clearly youthful compared to Sophocles, 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 Sophocles seeks to induce; the lover seems undesirable. Thus Sophocles accurately evaluates the dynamics of his society and in such a way as to make “loving” seem detrimental.

After a few moments, Sophocles 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*). The ease with which Sophocles 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 claims would reveal flaws in his logic. That he tries to classify *every* lover relationship as oppressive is absurd; the nature of a lovers’ relationship varies amongst individuals.

For his next argument, Sophocles 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, Sophocles 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 Sophocles refers to correspond to those of his time era. 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. Sophocles’ second argument is compelling, just as the first is, yet it is too simplistic. Love cannot be always wonderful, because as Sophocles pointed out, love is not always wonderful. It can be degrading, too. Rhetoric may manipulate truths for the purpose of persuasion, but the relationship between an argument’s conclusion and truth is coincidence.

Rhetoric is a cunning art, designed to convince an audience of something that may or may not be truth. Rhetoric is meant to induce a specific response from the 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 other words, effectual rhetoric is manipulated to suit a specific audience. It is refined, premeditated, and ultimately manipulative. Sophocles, 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, Sophocles used arguments that were conducive to the religious beliefs of the time era. Neither conclusion was entirely correct or complete. Ultimately, rhetoric can use truths to construct a conclusion, but the conclusions are not always the entire truth.

Works Cited

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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 draft argues that rhetoric is primarily an attempt to persuade audiences, and that its relationship to truth is thus coincidental and non-essential. One of the great strengths of this draft is that you really focus on a text, using the *Phaedrus* both as an example and as expert testimony to your conclusions. But you also implicitly extend your claims beyond just this text, attempting to show that your insights into rhetoric and truth are correct in general. This is an excellent formula for an essay, giving you specific evidence and concrete substance to work with, while expanding your conclusions (and thus your motive) in broader directions. Furthermore, I believe that you have hit upon a compelling claim about rhetoric, and the use of the word “coincident” is provocative and could provide fuel for further reflection.

The chief problem with this draft is a certain haziness or lack of clarity. This is partly a matter of your writing: make sure that each sentence specifies its referents to your reader and that all your terms are adequately defined. But it is more a problem of organization. I recommend that you include some *orientation* for your reader, a line or a phrase every so often to help her figure out where she is in the course of your argument. I kept finding myself in the middle of a paragraph, wondering where the paragraph was going and what purpose it was supposed to serve in your larger claim. While it generally became clear eventually how the paper fits together, this lack of orienting made it difficult to follow as a reader.

The second issue to work on is the contentiousness or arguability of your claim. I can certainly imagine someone who would disagree with your thesis, someone who might claim that rhetoric constructs truth and that truth could not exist without rhetoric. Alternately, I could imagine someone who claims that rhetoric could never be persuasive if it did not appeal to an underlying truth, that rhetoric depends on truth. With these two opponents in mind, you should show your reader why there is really an argument to be had here, and why yours is the best conclusion. Even if you don't choose to consider these particular opponents, you must heighten the critical intensity in your essay by showing that something is at stake, that something can be argued here. For instance, you place Socrates's two arguments effectively on a par with each other, favoring neither over the other. Would Plato agree with you? Doesn't the dialog as a whole ask us to accept the one argument and reject the other? If so, then is this still consistent with your conclusion, or do you have to revise or rethink your understanding of rhetoric? By considering such questions, you deepen your own investigation and enhance the motive of your essay.

Finally, I am left wondering about the meaning of your thesis. *Coincident* has two related meanings in English. First, it can refer to an accidental or unintended relationship, as when you bump into an old friend in a distant city. Or it can mean two things that are related precisely by happening at the same time or place, two “incidents” that happen together. Do you mean to say that rhetoric's relationship to truth is accidental? If so, then one obvious counterargument would say that rhetoric frequently appeals to established truths, and this appeal is no accident: established truths carry a great deal of weight in persuading people of “new truths.” I see this ambiguity of the term *coincidence* in your draft not as a weakness but as an opportunity. By defining this term, you could add another layer of interest to an already interesting investigation.