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THE ROLE OF RHETORIC IN DEFENDING AGAINST WEAPONS OF MASS PERSUASION

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Abstract

We live in the Information Age, where digital technologies shape our individual, social, and political realities. A central challenge of this era is 'misinformation', an umbrella term that includes fake news, echo chambers, polarization, conspiracy theories, and troll factories. The rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) has further intensified these concerns. Large Language Models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT reflect both Gorgias's description of rhetoric and Plato's criticism of it: they function like digital sophists, capable of generating persuasive texts on any topic and for any target audience at the push of a button, without any built-in guarantee of truth. They also enable large-scale rhetorical manipulation, mobilizing automated troll armies to sway public opinion. Is there anything we can do against these "weapons of mass persuasion"? And what is left of rhetoric, the art of crafting persuasive texts, now that these can be mass-produced by machines? In this keynote, I examine the shifting role of rhetoric in the face of these transformations. Rather than fading into obsolescence, I argue that rhetoric must evolve from a productive art into a critical one, arming individuals with the skills to analyze and resist manipulative discourse. In particular, I discuss the method of "rhetoric-checking" as a vital complement to fact-checking: while fact-checking verifies the accuracy of claims, rhetoric-checking assesses argumentation quality, emotional appeals, and deceptive persuasion tactics. In an era where persuasive language is both ubiquitous and machine-generated, democratic discourse hinges not only on crafting strong arguments but also on cultivating the ability to criticize them. By repositioning rhetoric as a safeguard against misinformation, we can preserve its role as a cornerstone of intellectual resilience in the digital age.

Keywords: argumentation theory, critical literacy, digital persuasion, generative AI, misinformation, rhetoric-checking



1. Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that we are living through an extraordinary moment in the history of human communication. Digital technologies have not only expanded our capacity to speak and learn; they have transformed the very conditions under which we form beliefs, engage with others, and make sense of the world. The famous picture on the cover of *Abbey Road* was taken in 1969. Here is what it would have looked like if it had been taken in our time (see Figure 1).

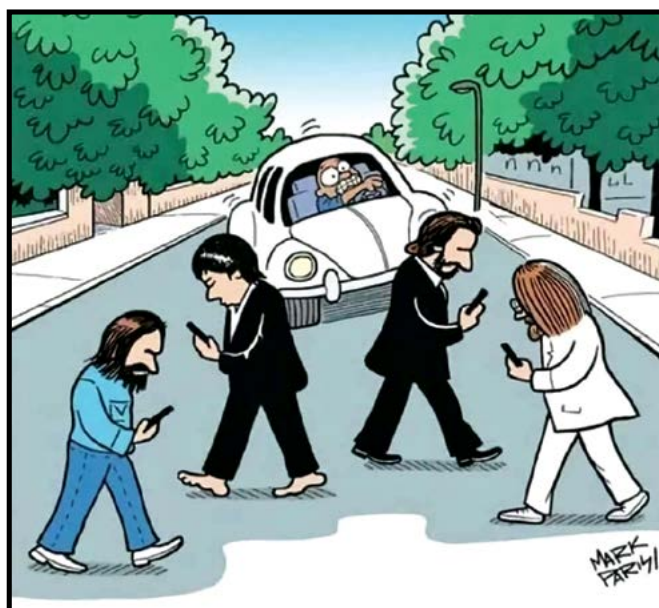


Figure 1. Crossing Abbey Road with mobile phones (2019). Mark Parisi.

We carry in our pockets tools that would have seemed like magic only a few decades ago. They allow us to summon vast libraries of information, join global conversations, and share our voices in real time. And yet, in this age of unprecedented connectivity, we are also more vulnerable than ever to communication's darker side: its capacity to distort, divide, and deceive.

The Information Age is increasingly shadowed by what might more accurately be called the Age of Misinformation. For all the data we can access, we are not necessarily better informed. Instead, we find ourselves confronted with fake news, filter bubbles, and algorithm-driven polarization. The challenge we face is not merely a surplus of bad arguments or misleading content. We are confronting highly complex systems that operate at scale to shape perception and influence belief. What we are up against are what I call “weapons of mass persuasion” (Wagemans 2024b, 1), i.e., digital tools that can mimic human communication, simulate emotional depth, and generate persuasive messages with alarming fluency. These technologies are embedded in our newsfeeds, our social media timelines, our personalized ads, and our generative AI platforms. They do not just speak *to* us, they learn how to speak *like* us.

And here's the irony: just when persuasion is being weaponized with unprecedented force, rhetoric, the discipline concerned with persuasion, still has a bad reputation. To call something “rhetorical” is often to dismiss it as manipulative, empty, or insincere. “That’s just rhetoric,” we say, as if to brush it aside. This dismissal of rhetoric has a long tradition. Look at this allegory of Dame Rhetoric, with golden chains coming out of her mouth, which guide the sheep wherever she wants (see Figure 2). You get the point.



Figure 2. *Rhetorica* (1628). Spencer Collection, The New York Public Library.

Contrast that with what we say about her sister, Dame Logic: when we call something “logical”, it’s a compliment, a marker of clarity and reason.

Today, I want to make a different case. Rhetoric is not the problem. In fact, it may be an important part of the solution. Properly understood, rhetoric is not the enemy of truth, not a bag of tricks or a toolkit for spin. It is the disciplined study of how meaning is negotiated, how arguments can persuade, and how public judgment is shaped. Far from obsolete, rhetoric offers us a crucial resource: a way to analyze and evaluate persuasive messages. A way to restore agency in our public discourse. A way to strengthen democracy not by silencing persuasion, but by making it more visible and more accountable.

My aim in this talk is to reclaim rhetoric in this critical sense: not as a weapon to win debates, but as a lens for understanding how influence works and how it can be resisted. To do that, we must look both backward and forward. Backward, to understand how rhetoric’s reputation became so compromised; and forward, to imagine how it might be retooled for the challenges of our digital age.

Here is how I will proceed. First, I examine the nature of rhetorical practice in the digital age, focusing on how new technologies have altered the dynamics of persuasion. Then I revisit the deep roots of our cultural suspicion toward rhetoric, beginning with Plato’s critique of the sophists.



Next, I trace how that suspicion shaped the development of modern argumentation theory, often leading to a rigid separation between rational argument and persuasive appeal. To offer an alternative, I then turn to Aristotle's more nuanced view of rhetoric as the counterpart to dialectic. Finally, I argue for a renewed role for rhetoric in our time, not merely as the art of persuasion, but as a critical literacy of resistance: a way to detect and defuse manipulative discourse in the digital public sphere.¹

Let us begin, then, with the present.

2. Weapons of mass persuasion

The digital revolution, for all its wonders, has done more than accelerate the pace of communication. It has reshaped the very ecology of public discourse. On the one hand, it has democratized speech, connected us across borders, and opened unprecedented pathways for learning, collaboration, and civic participation. On the other hand, it has also unleashed new and deeply troubling forms of manipulation, forms that are faster, more subtle, and vastly more scalable than anything we've seen before.

This is the paradox at the heart of the Information Age. It offers us access to the treasure trove of knowledge and useful information, while just as often delivering confusion, distortion, and distrust. We are inundated with messages engineered not to inform, but to provoke. We scroll through headlines tailored to our prejudices, memes designed to incite outrage, and streams of content increasingly generated not by fellow citizens, but by machines optimized for attention, not for truth.



Figure 3. Misinformation (2021). Bill Bramhall, NYDN.

¹ Sections 2 and 6 of this keynote are based on Plug and Wagemans (2020), Brave, Russo, and Wagemans (2022), Wagemans (2024a; 2024b), and Plug and Wagemans (2024). Sections 3, 4, and 5 are based on Wagemans (2025). All parts were adapted to be read aloud in combination with slides (some of which have been printed here too). For this reason, I have refrained from mentioning references except where they directly accompany quoted materials. For all other references, please consult the sources just mentioned.



To grasp the nature of this crisis, we need to look beyond its surface symptoms, beyond “fake news”, “alternative facts”, and “misinformation” (see Figure 3). The deeper issue is not just *what* is being said, but *how* persuasion itself now operates in the digital domain. The traditional rules of rhetorical engagement have been fundamentally altered, not just in terms of content, but in the structural and technological conditions under which persuasive discourse is produced, distributed, and received.

Today's persuasive messages are often not composed by human agents advancing arguments, but by automated systems designed to exploit our cognitive vulnerabilities. These systems determine what happens in our social feeds, our personalized search results, our viral videos, and trending hashtags. They do not merely persuade; they predict, adapt, and optimize in real time.

The rise of generative AI has added a powerful new dimension to this transformation. Large Language Models such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and others have supercharged the rhetorical capacities of machines to a near-human level. They can now produce fluent, convincing discourse on virtually any topic. They can imitate authority, simulate emotional resonance, and compose persuasive appeals with uncanny ease and without consideration of the truth. In this sense, they are the sophists of our time. Troll farms can generate realistic personas; bots can saturate comment sections with emotionally targeted messages; political campaigns can test hundreds of iterations of a slogan to find the one that most effectively incites fear or outrage. In short, rhetoric has become programmable.

These developments have two particularly alarming dimensions. The first is quantitative: the sheer volume of persuasive content that can now be generated and disseminated. What once required entire communications teams can now be done by a single person - or no person at all - using generative tools to flood the digital space with synthetic messages that are indistinguishable from those written by skilled human authors.

The second dimension of these developments is qualitative. We are entering an era in which the production of persuasive messages is guided not by intuition or tradition, but by data: biometric feedback, psychological profiling, and real-time analytics. This is the logic of neuromarketing fused with rhetoric, a convergence where every word, image, and emotional cue is fine-tuned to your individual susceptibilities. These systems don't broadcast; they narrowcast, targeting each of us with content precisely tailored to our fears, desires, and beliefs.

What does this new situation mean for the discipline of rhetoric? Has the ancient art of crafting persuasive speeches now become obsolete? Or can it be repurposed, as a form of resistance? I believe it can. But before we can reclaim rhetoric as a vital civic resource, we must first confront the barrier that stands in our way: rhetoric's damaged reputation.

3. Plato's criticisms of rhetoric

Ask the average person what the word “rhetoric” means, and you're likely to hear responses like “manipulation”, “spin”, “fluff”, and “empty words.” Even in academic and professional settings, rhetoric often carries a faint scent of suspicion. It's frequently regarded as ornamental rather than substantial, strategic rather than sincere, emotional rather than rational. In popular imagination, rhetoric is the stylistic gloss that conceals more than it reveals. If someone is being “rhetorical,” they are probably trying to deceive us (see Figure 4). Rhetoric is what politicians use when they want to avoid answering the question. And it is what advertisers use to sell us things we don't need.

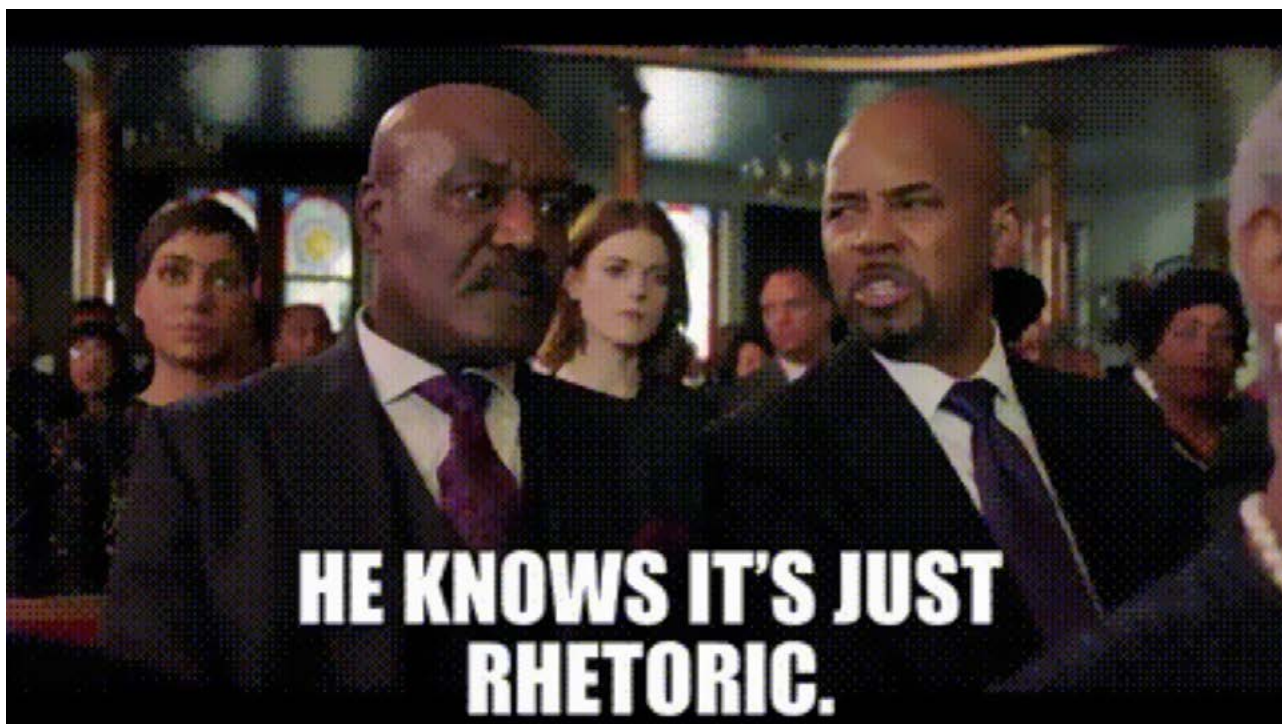


Figure 4. He knows it's just rhetoric. Yarn memes.

This reputation is not a recent development. It is ancient. And, to be blunt, it's all Plato's fault. More than any other figure, Plato shaped the Western suspicion of rhetoric as a dangerous, deceptive force. For centuries, rhetoric has been cast as a second-class discipline: morally dubious, intellectually inferior, and subordinate to logic, philosophy, and science. At best, it has been seen as a useful skill; at worst, a seductive threat to reasoned judgment.

Plato's critique of rhetoric is articulated most famously in two dialogues: *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*. In the *Gorgias*, Plato, through the voice of Socrates, portrays rhetoric as a pseudo-art, a form of persuasion concerned not with truth but with power. Socrates compares rhetoric to cookery: something that gratifies without nourishing, that appeals to the senses but fails to serve the good of the soul. Just as a sweet dessert may please the palate while harming the body, rhetoric, in this view, pleases the audience while leaving them intellectually and ethically malnourished.

What makes rhetoric dangerous, according to Plato, is its detachment from knowledge. The sophist Gorgias proudly claims that a skilled rhetorician can persuade better than any expert, even on subjects they don't truly understand. For Socrates, this is precisely the problem. It means that rhetorical power can be wielded by the ignorant, that persuasion can triumph over expertise, and that appearance can defeat reality. In a democracy, where public opinion matters, this becomes a civic threat: rhetoric turns political life into a competition of impressions, not ideas.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato offers a more constructive, though still demanding, vision of rhetoric. He sketches out what a legitimate, philosophical rhetoric might look like and identifies three essential conditions. First, the orator must possess true knowledge of the subject. Persuasion divorced from truth is deception. Rhetoric must be grounded in dialectic, the method of philosophical inquiry, because only dialectic can uncover the essence of things. Second, the orator must understand the soul of the audience. Just as a physician must diagnose the body to prescribe a cure, a rhetorician must understand the psychological makeup of the listener. Without



this insight, persuasion becomes either accidental or manipulative. And third, rhetoric must be adapted to the audience, not to flatter, but to address the soul's genuine needs. This isn't just a matter of style. It requires a scientific understanding of how different discursive means affect different types of people. It can be compared to tailoring a treatment to a diagnosis: the right speech for the right soul.

So the basic idea of a “philosophically responsible” rhetoric is this: only when persuasion is grounded in truth, and guided by a deep understanding of human psychology, can it rise above flattery and manipulation. It is dialectic, the philosophical method to arrive at truth, which provides the intellectual foundation for rhetoric. This idea is connected to Plato's remark that the philosopher should be king, promoting expertocracy above democracy.

4. Rhetoric on probation

Plato's sharp opposition between rhetoric and dialectic - one manipulative, the other rational - has left a deep and lasting imprint. It shaped not only classical philosophy but continues to inform contemporary argumentation theory, a field that emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to the limitations of formal logic. Where logic focuses on validity, deduction, and form, argumentation theorists sought to build models that could better reflect how people actually argue in real-world contexts: law, politics, science, and everyday life. These new models aimed to be more flexible, more context-sensitive, and more in line with argumentative practice (see Figure 5).

And yet, even in this progressive turn, we often see Plato's hierarchy reappear. Dialectic is framed as rational, normative, and truth-oriented. Rhetoric, by contrast, remains the dubious sibling: strategic, audience-centered, and ethically suspect. Dialectic provides the rules; rhetoric decorates the message.



Figure 5. Argumentation in real life. Wagemans (2025, 1).



We see this clearly, for instance, in the extended pragma-dialectical theory developed by van Frans van Eemeren and Peter Houtlosser. Their notion of “strategic maneuvering” assumes that arguers operate with two goals in mind: remaining reasonable (the dialectical aim), while also being persuasive (the rhetorical aim) (see Figure 6). On this view, a fallacy occurs when the rhetorical impulse violates dialectical norms – when effectiveness wins out over reasonableness.

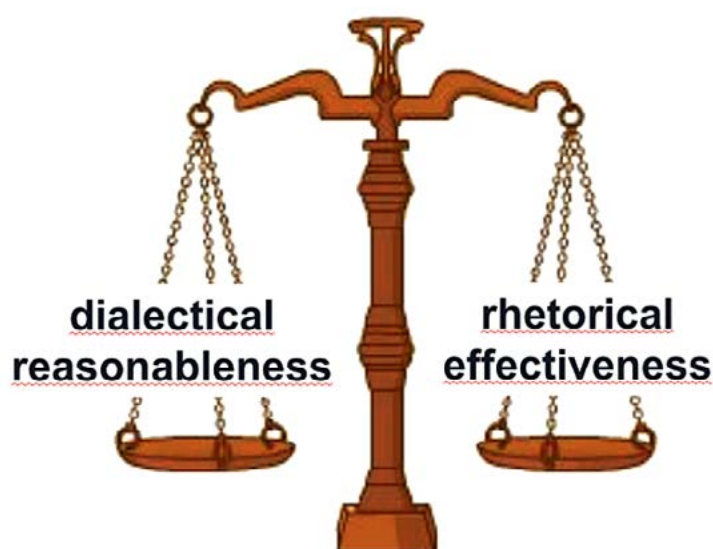


Figure 6. Dialectical reasonableness and rhetorical effectiveness.

But this model carries two problematic assumptions. First, it treats dialectic as the seat of reason and rhetoric as a kind of necessary indulgence, a way to adapt arguments to audiences. Emotional appeal, style, and framing are not treated as core properties of persuasive discourse, but as peripheral tools that operate within a dialectical framework. Second, it treats rhetorically designed moves as conditionally legitimate, acceptable only insofar as they do not conflict with dialectical rules. In this framing, rhetoric is not free to lead; it is, so to speak, permanently on probation.

Of course, there are also other views on the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric. Michael Leff, for instance, offers a more balanced metaphor: rhetoric and dialectic as partners in tension, each checking the other's excesses. Rhetoric prevents dialectic from becoming too abstract; dialectic reins in rhetoric's tendency toward manipulation. This is certainly an improvement over outright dismissal or incorporation. But the mutually corrective conversation between disciplines still remains within the Platonic frame: dialectic is the guardian of truth and rhetoric is the risky companion who must be watched closely.

The deeper assumption behind this frame is that rationality belongs to dialectic and that rhetoric can only be rational if it behaves like dialectic. But what if that assumption is mistaken? What if rhetoric is not a deviation from reason, but a form of reason in its own right? What if rhetoric is not the bug in the system, but a feature (see Figure 7)?

Let me be clear: Plato's concerns were not unfounded. The dangers of manipulation are real; we see them today in populist appeals, disinformation campaigns, and algorithmically tailored outrage. The fear that persuasion can be weaponized is well justified.

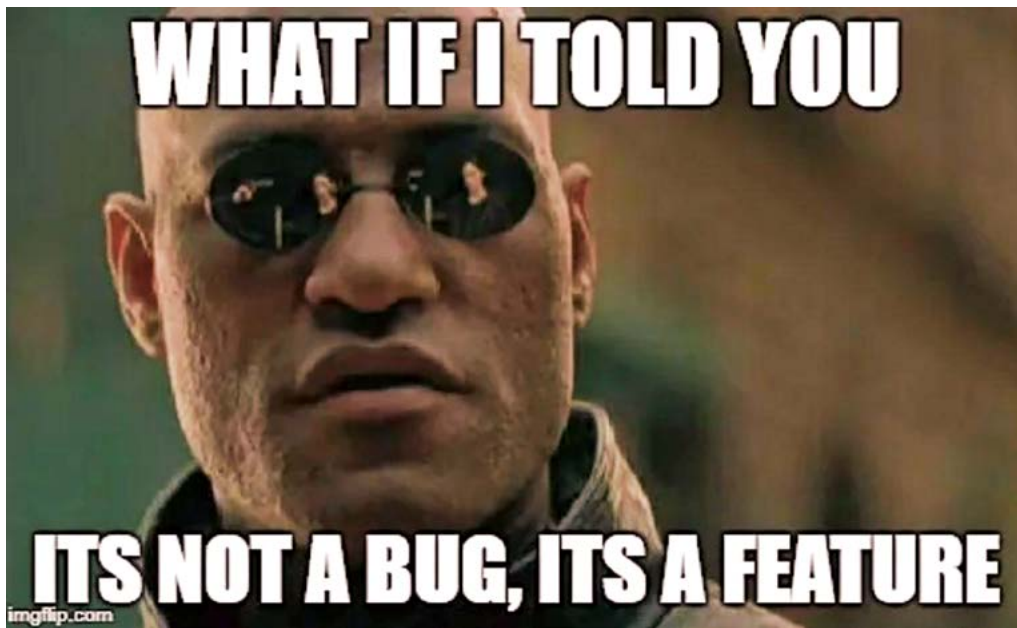


Figure 7. What if I told you meme. The Matrix, imgflip.com.

But Plato's solution, to *subordinate* rhetoric to dialectic, is not a solution at all. It simply brackets the problem. It reduces public persuasion to a philosophical ideal that few, if any, can live up to. What we need is a different starting point. One that doesn't see rhetoric as a tolerated risk, but as a rational resource. One that places rhetoric and dialectic on equal footing, not in a hierarchical relationship but as counterparts.

This was Aristotle's insight. For him, rhetoric is not merely ornamental, nor a compromise between reason and persuasion. It is its own form of rationality, distinct, but equal. And that is the perspective we must reclaim.

5. Aristotle's alternative

Aristotle opens his work on rhetoric with a striking claim: "Rhetoric is the counterpart (*antistrophos*) of dialectic" (*Rhetorica* I 1.1, 1354a1). This is no incidental remark. It's a philosophical repositioning, a deliberate challenge to Plato's hierarchy. Where Plato subordinates rhetoric to dialectic, Aristotle places them side by side, as counterparts.

For Aristotle, dialectic and rhetoric are parallel arts that have a lot in common. Both are general, not specialized. Neither has a fixed subject matter: they don't tell us what is true in ethics, politics, or science, but they do teach us how to reason and argue about such matters. Both rely on plausible reasoning, not strict demonstration. And both aim at persuasion, though in different settings: dialectic operates in dialogue, rhetoric in public speech.

What's more, from the speaker's side, both arts require the same fundamental skills: invention, arrangement, and expression (*inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio*). We often associate these "tasks of the speaker" only with rhetoric, but you can find them in Aristotle's work on dialectic as well:

Anyone who intends to frame questions must, first of all, select the ground from which he should make his attack; secondly, he must frame them and arrange them one by one to himself; thirdly and lastly, he must proceed actually to put them to the other party. (Aristotle, *Topica* 155b)



And from the audience's side, both dialectic and rhetoric expect active engagement. Both place responsibility on the addressee of the argument to evaluate and judge.

Aristotle's vision directly undermines the Platonic framing still evident in much of contemporary argumentation theory: the idea that dialectic is about reasonableness and rhetoric about effectiveness. However, there are important exceptions. Take formal dialectician Erik Krabbe. He has criticized the simplistic view of rhetoric as manipulative and dialectic as pristine, and argues instead that both are strategic, audience-directed forms of discourse. Their primary difference, he suggests, lies in the *format*: rhetoric is monological, in the form of speeches; dialectic is dialogical, in the form of conversations. But even this boundary is fluid:

[R]hetoric and dialectic must be pretty close; the only difference being that rhetoric deals with speeches, whereas dialectic deals with conversations. Indeed, their realms of interest do overlap, since conversations may contain speeches, and a series of speeches can often be described as if it were a conversation between their authors. (Krabbe 2002, 29–30)

In a similar vein, informal logician Tony Blair emphasizes that the essential difference between dialectic and rhetoric lies not in underlying logic or value systems, but in the communicative situation:

What distinguishes rhetoric, understood as argumentative speeches, from dialectic, understood as argumentative conversations," Blair writes, "are features that follow from their essential difference – that in the former, the audience does not directly interact with the arguer, whereas in the latter, the interlocutor does. (Blair 2012, 149)

For Blair, dialectic and rhetoric share not only descriptive goals (explaining how people argue) but also normative ones: offering criteria for how arguments should be evaluated.

What an Aristotelian take on the relationship between rhetoric and dialectic offers us, then, is not a theory of rhetoric as decorative language. It's a theory of rhetoric as situated reasoning. From this perspective, rhetoric is not the enemy of truth. It is a theory about the means by which particular points of view are communicated, not in abstract, but in context.

And that view on the nature of rhetoric could not be more urgent today. In our digital age, where persuasion can be automated, scaled, and simulated by machines, we need more than logical formalisms. We need a theory of how people *actually* make judgments about what they believe and what they should do. A theory that accounts for emotion, context, timing, ethos, and audience. A theory grounded in lived reasoning. And for that, Aristotle is the better guide.

To safeguard the audience from being manipulated, Plato, and later Quintilian, emphasized the epistemic and ethical qualities of the speaker, in terms of the dialectician and the *vir bonus dicendi peritus*, respectively. But for Aristotle, the virtue of the speaker alone isn't enough as a guarantee. It is inherent in rhetoric, like in any other instrument, that it can be used for the bad and for the good. This implies that the audience members also have a certain responsibility. After all, they will have to distinguish between insight and illusion, between sincere persuasion and manipulative spectacle. This means that rhetorical education cannot be confined to speakers alone. It must also cultivate critical audiences: thoughtful readers, discerning listeners, responsible citizens.



6. Rhetoric as a critical art

And these thoughts bring me to the profound implications of embracing Aristotle's view of rhetoric as the counterpart of dialectic. Let me highlight just two.

First, it challenges the idea that arguments can be judged by abstract, context-free standards. Instead of measuring persuasion against universal criteria imposed from above, from this Archimedean point of reasonableness, it calls for what we might call situated normativity. What counts as a strong argument in a courtroom might be inappropriate in a private conversation. What persuades in a political rally might fall flat in a philosophical seminar. Sometimes, the perfect is the enemy of the good. Instead of to Plato or Quintilian, we may have to listen more often to what Mediocrates has to say about argument quality (see Figure 8).

"ehh, good enough"



- Mediocrates

Figure 8. Mediocrates (2021). Via Charles Alday.

This is not relativism. It is realism. It's an acknowledgment that persuasion always happens *some-where* – with specific audiences, under particular circumstances, and with real-world consequences. Context is not noise. It's the ground on which judgment takes place.

Second, it reminds us that rhetoric is not only a productive art, in the sense of a way to craft compelling messages. It is also a critical art: a way to interpret, question, and resist persuasive messages. A way to unmask what is being done with language, and why. Today, we rightly invest in fact-checking, and that work is essential. But facts alone are not the currency of persuasion. We also need rhetoric-checking: the ability to assess the quality of arguments, the structure of appeals, and the emotional levers being pulled. This is not about censorship. It's not about building a Ministry of Truth. It's about building a culture of discernment – training people to recognize how persuasion works, so they can make informed, reflective judgments about what to believe, and how to act.

For too long, rhetoric has been sidelined in modern education, treated as a soft skill, a stylistic extra, useful perhaps for sales or politics, but not central to intellectual or civic life. But if we take seriously the world we now live in, where algorithms mediate public discourse, where machines speak in fluent human tones, where attention is monetized and persuasion weaponized, then we must place rhetoric where it belongs: at the core of civic literacy. Because the old warning still holds: "Whoever does not study rhetoric, will become a victim of it" (Murphy et al. 2014, 3).



So let us move from Plato to Aristotle. Let's avoid dismissing rhetoric as mere ornament, spin, or manipulation and reclaim it as a central component of democratic life. Let us study it, teach it, and defend it. Not as a relic of the past, but as a key to the future.

Thank you.

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