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RHETORIC IN TIMES OF CHANGE: A PHILOSOPHICAL DEFENSE AGAINST EPISTEMIC REDUCTIONISMS

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Abstract

This essay examines the enduring relevance of rhetoric in Western intellectual history, particularly during periods of epistemic transition. It argues that rhetoric recurrently emerges as a corrective and mediating force whenever dominant modes of knowledge attempt to monopolize truth. Drawing on Karl Jaspers' concept of the Axial Age, the study identifies historical moments in which rhetoric reappears as a response to crises of meaning, from the birth of rhetoric in fifth-century BCE Sicily, through Augustine's reconfiguration of discourse in Late Antiquity, Petrarch's humanist critique of scholastic dialectics, Vico's challenge to Cartesian analytic reductionism, and Perelman's twentieth-century "new rhetoric" as a response to formal logic. In each case, rhetoric does not function as a mere technique of persuasion: it mediates ethical, epistemic, and civic concerns, fostering plurality, dialogue, and interpretive flexibility. The essay aims to show that rhetoric serves as a bridge across disciplines, cultures, and temporal horizons, enabling communication where singular epistemic frameworks fail. By situating rhetoric as both an intellectual and ethical practice, the study underscores its humanistic value in contemporary contexts, particularly amid technological, ecological, and political disruptions. The analysis ultimately defends rhetoric as a civic and philosophical virtue, capable of negotiating uncertainty, cultivating moral responsibility, and sustaining the conditions for shared understanding in transitional and pluralistic societies.

Keywords: *rhetoric, epistemic transition, humanism, persuasion, knowledge plurality, ethical discourse*



1. Introduction: The Periodic Resurgence of Rhetoric

The following reflections aim to offer a synthetic yet conceptually rich overview of the enduring philosophical and historical significance of rhetoric¹, particularly in transitional epochs of Western civilization. The central question animating these pages is not whether rhetoric has survived through history (possibly as a mere artifact of classical education) but how and why it resurfaces with intellectual urgency whenever prevailing paradigms of knowledge and authority begin to fracture.

Could we therefore speak of a philosophy of history with regard to rhetoric? In other words, would it be possible to trace in the unfolding of human time not exactly a deterministic direction or fixed pattern (White 1973), but certain recurring constellations – moments in which rhetoric reemerges as a form of epistemic resistance, as a counter-movement against reductionist monopolies of truth?

Unlike Hegel or Voltaire, I do not assume that history advances toward an ultimate synthesis or *telos*, nor do I believe that some universal patterns govern the progress of reason. Yet, there are discernible epochs in which rhetoric gains renewed importance: epochs defined by crises of meaning, when inherited frameworks of understanding can no longer sustain collective intelligibility. In such moments, rhetoric functions not merely as an ornament or a means of persuasion, but as an existential and epistemological response to uncertainty.

Karl Jaspers' notion of the "*Achsenzeit*" (Axial Age) provides a helpful starting point for this reflection (Jaspers 1949). Jaspers identifies the Axial Age as a period of radical transformation in human consciousness, when humanity transitioned from mythic to reflective, philosophical modes of world-understanding. In the spirit of this framework, we might conceive of rhetoric as a phenomenon that flourishes in transitional epochs – those moments when epistemic certainties collapse, and a pluralistic reconstitution of meaning becomes necessary². Rhetoric, in this sense, is not merely a symptom of instability but an active force that resists epistemic reductionism by reopening the field of meaning and dialogue.

Such transitional periods are rarely peaceful or coherent. They are marked by crises (political, social, and intellectual) where language itself becomes contested terrain. Communication breaks down; consensus dissolves; new vocabularies emerge to articulate experiences that the old ones can no longer capture. It is precisely here that rhetoric intervenes. It does not simply mediate discourse but reconstitutes the very conditions under which dialogue can occur. This reconstructive capacity makes rhetoric indispensable to civic renewal and cultural transformation (Arendt 1958; Nussbaum 2012).

2. The Birth of Rhetoric: Against the Monopoly of Myth

The first crucial moment to consider is the birth of rhetoric in fifth-century BCE Sicily, during the period of Magna Graecia. Figures such as Corax and Tisias, often remembered as the founders of rhetorical theory, lived in a world undergoing profound political change. The expulsion of the tyrant Thrasybulus from Syracuse in 465 BCE marked not only the fall of a despot but the emergence of a new political order, one that required public reasoning and civic deliberation.

¹ For an overview on the history of classical rhetoric from the beginning to modern age cf. Kennedy (1999).

² A summary table of transitional epochs is provided at the end of the text.



Rhetoric thus arose as both a response to and a catalyst of democratic transformation. It provided citizens with a means to articulate, contest, and negotiate claims in the public sphere. What emerged was not simply a technique of persuasion but an epistemological and ethical revolution: speech became the medium of truth, not merely its vehicle. The old mythic justifications of power, anchored in divine will or genealogical destiny, were replaced by a discursive legitimacy grounded in shared reasoning.

This transformation was more than political. It signaled a deeper shift in consciousness: from monologic myth to dialogic reason. The rhetorical art made visible the plurality of perspectives that compose the social world (Bakhtin 1981). By legitimizing multiplicity, rhetoric became a democratic force, not because it guaranteed equality, but because it created the space where equality could be enacted (Vernant 1965).

Furthermore, rhetoric's emergence entailed a new conception of power. Power was no longer the exclusive property of divine or hereditary authority but a potential distributed among speakers within a *polis*. As Hannah Arendt later observed, action and speech are the modes through which human plurality is realized; to speak is to act in concert with others (Arendt 1958). Rhetoric, in this light, becomes the very grammar of the political: the art that transforms isolated individuals into interlocutors, capable of shaping shared worlds through persuasion rather than coercion.

At the same time, this first rhetorical revolution brought its own ambivalences. Plato's critique of pseudo-rhetoric in the *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus* exposes the danger inherent in persuasion divorced from truth. Yet even Plato's polemic against oratorical abuses reveals rhetoric's centrality: the philosopher's anxiety about true rhetoric is itself testimony to its power. The Sophists' relativism may have unsettled Plato, but it also marked the birth of a self-conscious awareness of discourse as a site of struggle over meaning.

The Sicilian origins of rhetoric thus encapsulate a broader anthropological lesson: whenever societies transition from mythic unity to discursive plurality, rhetoric becomes both symptom and instrument of that change. It mediates the passage from the sacred to the civic, from destiny to deliberation. In doing so, it inaugurates what we might call the first "epistemic pluralism" in Western history.

Rhetoric's early development also shaped education, selfhood, and civic identity. The *paideia* of the *polis* – the education of citizens – was inseparable from rhetorical training. Learning to speak well was not only an intellectual exercise but a moral and political apprenticeship: it meant learning to inhabit the shared space of reason. In this sense, rhetoric was foundational to the formation of what later thinkers would call the "public sphere" (Habermas 1962).

To summarize, the birth of rhetoric represents the first revolt against epistemic reductionism: the reduction of truth to mythic revelation. It marks the moment when human beings claimed ownership of language as a medium of mutual persuasion and critique. It was, in short, the first humanistic revolution.

3. Augustine of Hippo: Against the Monopoly of Grammar

The second transitional moment in our genealogy of rhetoric leads us to Late Antiquity and the early Christian era, where Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) stands as a liminal figure between the rhetorical culture of the Roman world and the emerging theological order of medieval Christianity. Augustine's intellectual trajectory – from professional rhetorician to bishop and theologian – reveals a profound transformation in the meaning and purpose of discourse itself.



Educated in the classical tradition, Augustine began his career as a teacher of rhetoric in Carthage and later in Milan. His early writings exhibit the technical brilliance of a trained rhetorician, yet he soon became disillusioned with what he perceived as the vanity of worldly eloquence. The conversion recounted in the *Confessions* marked not only a spiritual awakening but an epistemic reorientation: from (pseudo)rhetoric as persuasion toward rhetoric as illumination. Language, he came to believe, should not merely adorn thought but reveal truth (and truth, for Augustine, was inseparable from the divine *Logos*) (Augustine, *Confessiones*: IX).

In *De Magistro* and *Contra Cresconium*, Augustine developed a subtle critique of the grammatical formalism that dominated late Roman education. The grammarians, he argued, mistook linguistic correctness for wisdom. Their devotion to the purity of form had become a form of idolatry – a worship of the signifier detached from the signified. Augustine saw in this an early form of epistemic reductionism: the confinement of meaning to technical mastery rather than moral or spiritual insight (Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*: II).

For Augustine, grammar represented the ossification of discourse, the reification of language into rigid structures of authority. In contrast, rhetoric, reinterpreted through the lens of Christian charity (*caritas*), became an instrument of moral and pedagogical transformation (Manzin 1998). It was no longer the art of victory (“*ars vincendi*”), but the art of teaching truth in love (“*ars docendi in caritate*”). Persuasion was redeemed as an act of service, oriented toward the salvation and edification of others.

This reconfiguration of rhetoric marked a decisive shift in the Western tradition. Augustine's synthesis of classical eloquence and Christian ethics opened the way for a conception of discourse that was at once hermeneutic and ethical. His reflections anticipated modern concerns about the instrumentalization of language (a problem later taken up by Heidegger and Gadamer, who both saw in language not a tool but the “house of Being”) (Heidegger 2010).

Augustine thus prefigures the hermeneutic insight that understanding is always mediated by language, and that language itself has an ethical dimension. His warning against the “vanity of grammarians” echoes through the centuries, reminding us that linguistic precision without ethical orientation leads to sterility. In contemporary terms, his critique could be read as a defense of the humanities against technocratic reductionism, intended as the tendency to value form and utility over meaning and truth.

Augustine's rhetorical theology also addresses the tension between interiority and communication. For him, the true teacher is not external but internal: the “*magister interior*,” Christ as the inner Word who illuminates the human mind. Yet, paradoxically, this interior illumination manifests itself through speech, through the shared *logos* of the community. The implication is clear: communication, far from being a mere vehicle of thought, participates in the very unfolding of truth.

By transforming rhetoric into a practice of *caritas*, Augustine anticipated the idea (later articulated by Gadamer and Ricoeur) that understanding involves a fusion of horizons, a dialogue between self and other in the medium of language (Gadamer 1960; Ricoeur 1990). In his view, rhetoric was not abolished by revelation but transfigured by it, becoming a mode of communion rather than competition.

In sum, Augustine's work stands as an early philosophical resistance to epistemic reductionism in its grammatical form. Against the monopoly of linguistic formalism, he proposed a vision of discourse grounded in love, responsibility, and transcendence. His legacy continues to challenge any system, ancient or modern, that divorces the mastery of expression from the moral vocation of truth.



4. Petrarch and Early Humanism: Against the Monopoly of Dialectics

The third epochal resurgence of rhetoric appears in the figure of Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374), whose passionate critique of scholastic dialectics inaugurated the humanist revolution of the Renaissance. Petrarch's revolt against the intellectual abstraction of his time was not a rejection of reason per se, but of a particular kind of reason – one that had become sterile, detached from the living realities of human experience.

In works such as *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* (*On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others*) and the *Familiars*, Petrarch attacks the pretensions of scholastic dialecticians, who, he claims, “know everything about the heavens but nothing of their own souls.” His polemic encapsulates a crucial epistemological critique: dialectics, in its medieval form, had reduced truth to formal coherence. It could demonstrate “*veritas connexionum*” (the truth of logical connections) but not “*veritas sententiarum*” (the truth of lived judgment) (Petrarch, *Letters on Familiar Matters*: XIV; cf. Manzin 1994).

Petrarch's humanism sought to restore eloquence (*eloquentia*) as a mode of knowledge that embraces affect, imagination, and moral sensibility. He regarded rhetoric not as an inferior substitute for dialectic, but (Aristotelianly!)³ as its necessary complement counterpart (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*: 135 a 1): a discipline that reintroduces the warmth of humanity into the cold machinery of syllogism. The humanist recovery of Cicero, Seneca, and Augustine reflected this aspiration: wisdom must be spoken beautifully, for truth divorced from eloquence risks becoming inhuman (Cicero, *De Oratore*: II).

In this respect, Petrarch inaugurates a second “axial” turning in the history of Western thought, one that anticipates later debates between scientific rationality and humanistic understanding. His elevation of rhetoric as a mode of ethical and emotional intelligence can be seen as a precursor to what modern philosophers call *phronesis*: practical wisdom that arises not from deduction but from engagement with concrete situations (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*: VI; Bitzer 1968; Farrell 1995).

Moreover, Petrarch's critique of dialectics possesses a prophetic resonance in our own time. In an era increasingly governed by algorithmic logic, predictive analytics, and the reduction of human meaning to data points, his humanism reminds us that truth is not exhausted by formal correctness. Understanding requires empathy, narrative, and moral imagination – dimensions that rhetoric, more than any other discipline, cultivates (Barthes 1994; Fisher 1984).

In this sense, Petrarch's revaluation of rhetoric anticipates what contemporary philosophers like Paul Ricoeur would call a *narrative epistemology*: the idea that human beings understand themselves and their world through stories that mediate between the factual and the meaningful (Ricoeur 1984). For Petrarch, the poetic and rhetorical imagination is not a deviation from truth but its deepening, its incarnation within the affective and temporal texture of life.

Petrarch's defense of eloquence also had political implications. By grounding knowledge in human experience, he implicitly challenged the scholastic claim to intellectual authority. The university dialecticians had built a monopoly over knowledge by defining it as syllogistic demonstration. Humanists like Petrarch broke this monopoly by asserting the legitimacy of *eloquentia humana*: the voice of lived wisdom that speaks from within, rather than above, the human condition.

³ In fact Petrarch accused the contemporary neo-Aristotelians of scholasticism of having an erroneous and reductive interpretation of Aristotle.



Thus, once again, rhetoric reappears at a moment of epistemic crisis: when the dominance of dialectical abstraction threatens to alienate knowledge from life. Rhetoric, in Petrarch's hands, became an act of resistance against intellectual desiccation and moral indifference. His humanism remains a call to remember that truth, to be humanly meaningful, must be not only thought but also spoken, felt, and shared.

5. Vico and the Enlightenment: Against the Monopoly of Analytics

The fourth pivotal moment in our historical survey of rhetoric emerges in the early modern period with Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), whose philosophy represents a decisive critique of Cartesian reductionism. Descartes' method, privileging deduction and mathematical abstraction as the sole pathways to knowledge (Descartes 1637), epitomized a form of epistemic reductionism in which human experience and cultural particularity were subordinated to universal rational structures (Toulmin 1992).

Vico, in his *Scienza Nuova*, argued that such a reductionist vision overlooked the historicity and cultural embeddedness of human understanding. Knowledge, he maintained, is inseparable from the practices, myths, and languages that constitute human societies. Truth is not merely discovered but enacted: it is “made” through human institutions, stories, and symbols (Burke 1969). Hence his famous dictum, “*verum ipsum factum*”: truth is not just an abstract idea, but manifests itself in human arts and action (Vico, *The New Science*: §331).

In Vico's framework, rhetoric assumes a central epistemic function. Far from being mere ornamentation, rhetorical practice enables the human mind to grasp the socially constructed nature of reality. It mediates between analytic abstraction and the historical, mythopoetic texture of culture. By attending to narrative, metaphor, and persuasion, rhetoric complements logic and analysis, offering a fuller understanding of human experience.

Vico's critique is not only methodological but also ethical. Against the Enlightenment's universalist pretensions, he insisted on the particularity of human communities and the limitations of abstract reasoning divorced from social context. His work prefigures hermeneutic approaches in modern philosophy and cultural studies, emphasizing interpretation, historical consciousness, and the inseparability of cognition from culture (Cassirer 1923–1929).

Vico's insistence on the cognitive dimension of rhetoric underscores its enduring significance (Crosswhite 1996). In moments when analytic methods claim exclusive authority, rhetoric resurfaces to restore epistemic plurality. Through metaphor, narrative, and ethical persuasion, it maintains a connection between abstract knowledge and lived human reality, thus resisting the impoverishment of understanding that accompanies methodological reductionism.

6. Perelman and the 20th Century: Against the Monopoly of Formal Logic

The fifth stage in this historical survey arrives in the twentieth century with Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, whose *Traité de l'argumentation* (1958) inaugurated the notion of a “new rhetoric.” Perelman responded to the growing dominance of formal logic, which, in his view, could not account for the richness and complexity of human reasoning in legal, moral, and political contexts.

Perelman argued that formal logic, while invaluable within its domain, imposes a reductive structure on discourse, privileging universality at the expense of context, audience, and ethical judgment. The “new rhetoric” sought to recover the art of reasonable persuasion, attending not



only to the structure of argument but also to its reception and its grounding in shared human norms. By emphasizing the concept of the “universal audience,” Perelman bridged ethical considerations with epistemic practice, insisting that argumentation must aim at reasonable assent rather than coercive victory (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958).

Of course, I am well aware of the ambiguities inherent in Perelman’s notion of “new rhetoric,” having also written about it in the past (Manzin 2012). But what seems relevant to me is that, beyond Perelman’s fidelity to a correct interpretation of rhetoric, he believed this discipline should represent an argumentative renaissance capable of transcending logical formalism and restoring to public speech the dignity of which the oratorical techniques of totalitarianism had deprived it.

In historical perspective, Perelman’s work represents *de facto* a continuation of the recurring pattern noted in our survey: rhetoric reemerges whenever a domain of knowledge claims monopoly over truth. Just as Augustine countered grammatical formalism, Petrarch resisted scholastic dialectics, and Vico opposed analytic reductionism, Perelman responded to the dominance of formal logic and to the past and present dictatorships’ split between persuasion and reasonableness. Rhetoric, in each instance, functions as a corrective – a practice that restores plurality, dialogue, and ethical deliberation to discourse.

7. Conclusion: A Humanistic Defense of Rhetoric (Rhetoric as a Bridge)

Across the epochs of Western history, a consistent theme emerges: rhetoric operates as a *bridge*. It mediates between domains of knowledge, ethical perspectives, and temporal horizons (Weaver 1987). In political life, it facilitates deliberation amidst conflicting values; in the humanities, it restores suppressed or marginalized voices; in interdisciplinary research, it enables dialogue between scientific, historical, and social perspectives (Habermas 1981).

Rhetoric bridges not only disciplines but also generations and cultures. By cultivating epistemic plurality, it allows disparate forms of knowledge to coexist and interact. It mediates understanding without demanding conformity, enabling ethical negotiation and the possibility of consensus without coercion. In this sense, rhetoric is both epistemic and ethical, sustaining the delicate balance between disagreement and dialogue.

Moreover, rhetoric embodies a sort of philosophy of uncertainty. It flourishes precisely in transitional epochs, when dominant paradigms fail to fully account for the complexities of human experience. By creating spaces for reflection, dialogue, and ethical engagement, rhetoric contributes to the resilience of civic and intellectual life (Zappen 2004). It transforms moments of epistemic crisis into opportunities for renewal and humanistic cultivation. In a word, it is capable of responding to the uncertainties and (sometimes even apocalyptic) fears that mark periods of great transition, avoiding the twists and turns of epistemic authoritarianism and dogmatism or ideology.

To conclude, rhetoric must be recognized not as an antiquarian relic or a subsidiary art, but as a vital humanistic resource. As Susan Haack reminds us, human endeavor encompasses many forms of inquiry and creation beyond the scientific: historical, legal, literary, philosophical, artistic, and narrative practices all contribute to human understanding and flourishing (Haack 1993). Rhetoric belongs in a central position to this wider spectrum of humanistic activity.

In contemporary times, characterized by rapid technological change, political polarization, and challenges to epistemic authority, we may be entering a new axial moment. Artificial intelligence, ecological threats, and global interconnectedness pose not merely technical problems but ethical and hermeneutic challenges. Rhetoric, understood as a form of truth-seeking characterized by a



practice of persuasion grounded in ethical engagement and epistemic plurality, remains a crucial tool for navigating these challenges.

Rhetoric is not reducible to a technique (Zarefsky 2010); it is a philosophical orientation, a civic and ethical habit of mind. It cultivates dialogue, sustains plurality, and allows for disagreement without enmity. It resists the monopolies of reductionist knowledge while proposing alternative ecologies of understanding (Booth 2004). Above all, rhetoric teaches us to inhabit transitional epochs with critical discernment, imaginative empathy, and hope for shared understanding.

Let us therefore reclaim rhetoric as both an academic discipline and a civic virtue. Let us teach, practice, and defend it as one of the most humane ways of navigating uncertainty, cultivating community, and imagining a shared future where truth is not a dogmatic scarecrow nor a surrender to the suggestive force of the opinions of the strongest.

– Summary Table –

Reference Author(s)	Epochal Transition	Dominant Epistemic Reductionism
Rhetoricians of Ancient Greece	Aristocracy > Democracy	Myth, Superstition
St. Augustine of Hippo	Roman Empire > Middle Ages	Grammar
Francesco Petrarca	Middle Ages > Renaissance	Dialectics
Giambattista Vico	Renaissance > Modern Age	Analytics
Chaïm Perelman	Modernity > Post-modernity	Formal Logic
...	(in progress)	AI?

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