Reviewing Rhetoric in the Classical Period – Plato and Aristotle

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Abstract

Plato and Aristotle are key figures in the study of rhetoric. Classical period had been known as the era where rhetoric emerged as the influential language existence. Experts on rhetoric had discussed deeply about the history of rhetoric from the classical period up to the renaissance. In this writing, the focus of the discussion is in the classical period. The reviews being discussed in this writing are mainly derived from ongoing discussion on rhetoric.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Classical Period, Plato, Aristotle

INTRODUCTION

Rhetoric is indeed sophisticated for its historical development and movements, especially during the classical period known as the Greek and Roman era. Two classical figures among other figures that influenced the shape, form, meaning, and intention of rhetoric were Plato and Aristotle. This writing would focus primarily on the contributions of Plato and Aristotle toward the historical development of rhetoric in the classical period. Their major theories and claims might also be reviewed and linked back to the notion of how rhetoric would seem to be defined in their terms. In the classical period, there might be a lot of controversies and differences that emerged along with Plato’s and Aristotle’s ideas about rhetoric; however, the writer views these as a way for him to see how rhetoric could be defined through Plato and Aristotle.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In the classical period, “Rhetoric was, first and foremost, the art of persuasive speaking” (Bizzell 1-2). It means that rhetoric was perceived as speaking for specific circumstances intended to specific audience. However, Sellars studied that “in the context of an encyclopaedia, the position of rhetoric is an awkward one” (2). This awkwardness might happen due to the ups and downs of rhetoric itself. As it can be seen from its classical movements to medieval period, rhetoric has different realms, even though rhetoric was still connected to language in a larger perspective.

From its earlier condition, the word ‘rhetoric’ was started to be framed in the Greek. Kennedy states that “The English word ‘rhetoric’ is derived from Greek rhétoriké, which apparently came into use in the circle of Socrates in the fifth century and first appears in Plato’s dialogue “Gorgias”, probably written about 385 B.C, but set dramatically a generation earlier” (3). At this point, it can be stated that the word ‘rhetoric’ was created by Plato in his writing Gorgias. It seems that rhetoric had been developed long before Plato composed Gorgias but the word ‘rhetoric’ came into an abstract being after Plato put it in
Gorgias. Additionally, Kennedy also points out that “the most important and most influential of the critics of rhetoric was Plato, especially in the dialogue of Gorgias” (Kennedy 7). Plato’s work Gorgias was and even is, perhaps, perceived as the crucial stone in understanding what and how rhetoric was during that era. Interestingly, if we locate rhetoric through contemporary perspectives, rhetoric can take part in a new dimension of intellectual pursuits. “In Gorgias, Plato addresses major questions attending rhetoric throughout its history, many of which are as important to contemporary society as they were to the ancient Greeks” (Herrick 54). Therefore, understanding this notion contextually can help readers frame the particularities of rhetoric, although the dimension of time is different.

METHODOLOGY

The time frame that is being discussed is limited to classical movements per se, even though medieval and renaissance might also influence the meaning of rhetoric. Medieval rhetoric will also be slightly explained in this writing as well but focus on Cicero. To build a clear distinction between these three periods is essential to see how rhetoric was framed, especially during the classical period in Greek and Roman. The explanation of rhetoric in this writing would be based on general views toward Plato’s and Aristotle’s theories and claims that were also articulated through different contemporary scholars.

DISCUSSION

In understanding the classical rhetoric, Plato and Aristotle had their own specific views concerning how rhetoric should be framed. The Sophists were part of the dynamics of how the classical figures frame rhetoric. Some of whom might agree and some of whom might disagree on rhetoric simply because they had different views about rhetoric. An interesting thing that can be linked to Plato’s thoughts about rhetoric was the ways Plato addressed his objections toward the Sophists. Bizzell points out that “Plato encouraged the view that the Sophists were concerned merely with the manipulative aspect of how humans acquire knowledge – that is, with how people could be persuaded that they had learned the truth, whether or not truth was in fact conveyed.” (23). Plato is then considered as the party that opposed the Sophists’ concepts about truth. Plato insisted that the Sophists were not acceptable in the way that human could comprehend a certain set of knowledge. Despite of having strong statements in opposing the Sophists’ views, Gagarin mentions a different thing about Plato, where he states that his purpose is “…to consider the force of Plato’s criticisms, to examine closely one issue on which modern scholars still follow Plato’s lead, even though he is demonstrably wrong…” (46). Even though Gagarin states that Plato was mistakenly claiming his views, Gagarin was not satisfying enough in presenting his own claim about Plato’s thoughts. In contradiction with Gagarin, Crowley, in fact, states that “Even though Plato was opposed to sophistry, he appears to have understood the importance of rhetoric” (Crowley 11). At this point, Plato emerged as a classical figure that had a certain level of understanding about rhetoric.

One of Plato’s works is Phaedrus. Many classicists and contemporary scholars analyzed Phaedrus in different ways. Herrick put his argument about this by stating that “Phaedrus is not devoted strictly to discussing rhetoric, but summarizes Plato’s views on several issues including love, immortality, the soul, and poetry. Plato argues that a true art
of persuasive speech would aim to bring order to society through a thorough study of the human soul, the different types of people, and the power of words...” (63). As Herrick states in here, the understanding of human soul and emotional forms, such as love, are crucial for Plato. His contemplation toward abstract concepts had led him to be considered as the figure that played as a key role in determining what rhetoric was.

In addition to Plato’s works, Gorgias is also one of his works that receive much attention in the context of classical studies. Through Gorgias, rhetoric was perceived as the thing that attracted the manipulation of emotion. It seems that rhetoric became the concept of how language could relate with emotional, especially in the Parmenidean. “Plato’s response to Gorgias in his dialogue the Gorgias is to present us with the most emphatic reaffirmation of the Parmenidean ideal, a scheme of philosophical dialectic utterly distinct from and immeasurably superior to rhetoric, which is fiercely castigated as nakedly, exploitative emotional manipulation” (Wardy 51). In order words, the presentation of Parmenidean ideal was what Plato intended to convey in Gorgias.

Furthermore, the connection between truth and audience in Plato’s concept is found in the ways Plato framed the uses of rhetoric. At this point, there is the notion of true rhetoric, as Plato argues as the system of connecting the philosophers and his students. True rhetoric, as displayed in the Phaedrus, becomes the method whereby the philosopher and his pupil free themselves from conventional beliefs and all worldly encumbrances in the pursuit and eventual attainment of transcendent absolute truth. Plato sanctions two uses of rhetoric to reach truth. One is to convey truth that is already in the rhetor’s possession to an ignorant audience — by any effective means, so long as the virtuous rhetor keeps the audience’s best interests at heart. [...] The second use of rhetoric is more methodological. [...] Whereas Plato’s first use of rhetoric might be regarded as manipulative, even if in a good cause, the second is more truly collaborative, requiring the informed participation of all parties. This is the highest form of rhetoric, in Plato’s view (Bizzell 29).

The above statement indicates that Plato has a great emphasis on framing rhetoric through the connection between the philosopher and the students. The form of rhetoric that has collaborative aspect has made the notion of students as the people who should comprehend more if the students would like to discuss about rhetoric. Moreover, “Plato’s hostility towards rhetoric, which is also evident in the Phaedrus and poets expressed throughout his works” (Gagarin 48). Even though Bizzell points out that Plato might understand rhetoric, but his works shows different things. Young states that “For Plato, rhetoric was not mere verbal expertise, the art of linguistic cosmetology; it was the expression of truth, which had power because it appealed to man’s rationality. Rhetoric, for him, was closely related to philosophy.” (2). From Young’s statement, it clearly indicates that rhetoric and philosophy were connected each other. In this classical period, Plato seemed framing his claims that rhetoric and philosophy are inseparable. The basic notion that Plato would like to express is merely related to the way he composed his arguments through rhetoric and philosophy, in which Aristotle might have different views about rhetoric.

Regarding Plato’s and Aristotle’s view about rhetoric, they have slightly different views, although their basic ideas are related each other. The differences can be seen through the aspects in which both emphasized the function of rhetoric. “Plato’s Gorgias (c. 387-385 BCE) exposes the dangers and deceptiveness of rhetoric, but Aristotle’s Rhetoric (c. 350
BCE) engages with those danger in order to improve people’s abilities to make wise decisions about matters that affect their interests” (Olmsted 10). Plato framed his ideas on seeing rhetoric as an abstract thing that has certain dangers, which also means viewing rhetoric as manipulative; meanwhile, Aristotle views rhetoric as a way to engage with the audience in order to improve certain set of qualities in their life. Aristotle seemed to view rhetoric as a tool that can be used for certain purposes. In here, Aristotle has different views about rhetoric, compared to Plato, even though both of them frame their ideas through the same basis, which is rhetoric.

In line with Aristotle, “Part of the value of Aristotle’s definition is thus that it tells us the definition cannot be located ‘in’ Aristotle but must be referred elsewhere: to that context in which one already is” (Sellars 2). It means that the definition of rhetoric cannot be explicitly defined as simply as looking at its ‘producer’. Since rhetoric was the notion of Aristotle’s teachings, as it was described by Plato in Gorgias, then, rhetoric cannot be seen through Aristotle, but it should be seen through a contextualized approach of something in which rhetoric has been associated with. In a sense, the period in which rhetoric was prescribed, classical period, had created specific ways of looking at rhetoric. Specifically, Shea argues that “In Aristotle’s day and in ours, those who understand and can use the available means to appeal to an audience of one or many find themselves in a position of strength” (1). Through this point of view, it can be articulated that rhetoric was a tool that can be used by individual’s purposes in relation to a specific audience, where the result of this rhetorical empowerment could lead such individual into an enormous state of life because the individual had strength in the society.

Aristotle has specific ways in defining what rhetoric was, even though his definition was based on Plato. Demonstration, dialectic, and rhetoric were the ideas proposed by Aristotle.

Aristotle draws important distinctions among demonstration, dialectic, and rhetoric and the type of knowledge found in each. Demonstration reveals unalterable truth about the physical world. Dialectic uses rigorous syllogistic logic to approach probable truths in questions about human affairs and philosophy that do not lend themselves to absolute certainty. Rhetoric also seek probable truth in the realm of human affairs, relying on knowledge produced by demonstration and dialectic, along with traditional or received wisdom and the various means of finding persuasive connections, such as those suggested by the common topics (Bizzell 4).

Between Aristotle and Plato, there is a connection. The connection can be seen through the concept of truth; nevertheless, they both seem to frame the truth into probable truth. The difference that can be seen is that Aristotle linked such truth with knowledge, received wisdom, and common topics. Aristotle expanded Plato’s views about rhetoric, but he did not intend to follow Plato’s concept about rhetoric. In relation to this, these two figures have differences that might be interesting to see. “The crucial difference from Plato and Aristotle is that the Sophists make possible an additional question – a question virtually unavoidable in the current critical climate: how does language create different answers to those questions at different moments in history?” (Jarratt xviii). Jarratt frames this question as a way to see how strong Aristotle’s concepts about such truth. Since rhetoric has the realms of probable truth, the Sophists stood against Plato and Aristotle by asking such question, even though the answer of this question might be even more problematic that it
was perceived in this classical period. This question might be answered through Howland’s statement, “Anyone concerned with the perception of human souls must therefore consider the problem of how to establish and sustain the cultural conditions that will promote their development – a problem with which Plato is obviously wrestling in the Republic” (81). This statement emphasizes that Plato tried to mention that language is related to souls and cultural conditions. Therefore, the Sophists question might be answered by stating that the different answers at different moments could happen due to the dynamics of cultural condition where the question was declared. One question at one moment might have different answer, especially when the question was uttered in different moments.

Talking about Aristotle and rhetoric, it is important to see how Aristotle contributes his ideas for rhetoric. As Jarratt points out, “Aristotle’s major contribution to rhetoric, the systematization of informal logic, takes shape alongside the more stable structure of his formal logic...” (xxii). Aristotle puts the ideas of ‘logic’ into informal and formal logic. These two types of logic seemed to be framed well by Aristotle. Besides, “Aristotle set out to present a systematic treatment of the art of rhetoric, and, by most accounts, he succeeded. His treatment of rhetoric remains one of the most complete and insightful ever penned. Rhetoric was, for Aristotle, “the faculty of discovering the available means of persuasion in any setting” (Herrick 87). At this point, the connection between logic and rhetoric was what Aristotle had claimed earlier. Aristotle reframes the definition given by Plato into a more complex one by linking rhetoric with logic and persuasive tools for convincing ideas into targeted audience. Aristotle’s concentrated view toward rhetoric had made his claim to be perceived as a strong foundation to see rhetoric later in medieval and renaissance rhetoric.

In addition to Aristotle’s contribution to rhetoric, based on Aristotle’s view about dialectic, Sellars mentioned that “Dialectic, he writes, is about testing and maintaining an argument, while rhetoric is at the same time about defense and attack – everyone knows how to defend and attack, ‘to a certain extent’, but everyone can also learn how to practice them better” (Sellars 3). Dialectic is a part in which Aristotle put his argument to state that the delivered idea should be maintained well. In other words, dialectic is considered as the notion of how language could be used to convince or to empower one’s ideas from disagreement. Moreover, Aristotle’s contribution to rhetoric can be seen through the concept of logos, pathos, and ethos. “The arguments that one discovers or “invents” should appeal to reason (logos), emotion about the subject under discussion (pathos), and trust in the speaker’s character (ethos). For Aristotle, the appeal to reason was by far the most important” (Bizzell 31). These three parts of rhetoric, eventually, influenced how language is perceived later on in the next two periods: medieval and renaissance. In addition to this three parts of rhetoric, “the Rhetoric is the earliest extant example of a complete techne, or art, of rhetoric. Aristotle’s major contribution to rhetoric was his systematic and thorough treatment of invention – the art of finding the available arguments in a given case” (Crowley 12). Aristotle is, then, known for his concept of invention. Not only the invention, Aristotle’s contribution toward rhetoric can be also seen through the several concepts, such as commonplaces, enthymemes, examples, maxims and signs, ethical and pathetic proofs, and “he was the first to combine [all of those concepts] into a systematic treatment of available argumentative strategies” (Crowley 12). All of these things shaped how rhetoric was perceived in the classical period. Interestingly, Plato and Aristotle had different
interests concerning topics and subjects being learned. “Aristotle had a deep interest in natural science, perhaps derived from his father, which led him to research in biology, a subject of little interest to Plato but which helped from Aristotle’s approach to ethics, politics, poetics, and rhetoric” (Kennedy 51). Consequently, Rhetoric, in the hand of Aristotle, emerged into a broader perspective. This made rhetoric had a strong sense of its emergence in the classical period.

When it comes to understanding the dynamics of Greek rhetoric, Aristotle’s theory had influenced almost all aspects of Greek rhetoric. As Young states,

Thus Greek rhetoric was not a single, homogeneous theory. Aristotle’s formulation of the art, however, became the nucleus of the theory that dominated the tradition of rhetoric. The influence of his theory is no doubt attributable, at least in part, to its being the most fully developed of all theories of rhetoric; but its influence may also be the result of its ability to reconcile the apparently rival claims of truth and eloquence (Young 3).

This particular statement means that Aristotle’s views about rhetoric, especially the one that was related to truth and eloquence, had influenced how rhetoric was considered during the classical period. However, Young also mentions that,

It was Aristotle’s conception of rhetoric, modified and developed by the Roman rhetoricians Cicero and Quintilian that shaped the great tradition of Western rhetoric. [...] At the heart of the theory, as it was elaborated by the Romans, were the five arts of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery (Young 3-4).

Later in medieval period after the movement of classical period, Cicero’s and Quintilian’s theories influenced the conception of rhetoric. This period played a role as a connection between classical and renaissance period, even though some of Aristotle’s works in medieval period were not influential as they might be in the classical period, except in the renaissance period, Aristotle’s works became emerged and put into specific context by the scholars.

Plato and Aristotle might have slight differences about what interested them. “Like Isocrates, Aristotle values rhetoric as an aid to reaching agreement on questions of value or preference that demand immediate action in everyday life. If for Isocrates this study has a political bent and a philosophical angle for Plato, for Aristotle the interest seems to be psychological” (Bizzell 31). Similarly, the distinction between Plato and Aristotle concerning rhetoric is interesting. Kennedy views these two figures as slightly different but connected in a lot of ways. Kennedy illustrates this difference by stating that Aristotle,

He had rather interest in religion, little sympathy with Plato’s mystical cast of mind, and serious doubt about, ending in complete rejection of, Plato’s theory of transcendent forms. Plato, whether or not he can be said to be a dogmatist, was certainly at heart an idealist, far more dogmatic, fascinated with the complexity of nature and human life. Both shared, in differing ways, a commitment to the search for knowledge and understanding and also a strong motivation to discover and teach the moral basis on which social stability and human well-being could best be achieved” (52).

At this point, the interpretation of Plato and Aristotle can be looked up from their base, which is knowledge. Aristotle had a great desire in shaping what it means to use language in pursuing the truth. He also agrees that to seek for truth, one need to employ a lot of methodologies. On the contrary, “...Plato is more interested in laying out a
complicated problem than in solving it” (Zuckert 149). Plato and Aristotle have strong basis in arguing about language and truth, but they seem to frame their ideas on what they believe as the right thing. Even though for personalities and historical background Plato and Aristotle were connected, they also differed in a lot of ways.

Through his *Historical Survey of Rhetoric*, Kennedy emphasizes that “In scholarly context, however, the meanings of rhetoric tend to fall into one or the other of two categories. Viewed historically, as an academic discipline that developed in Greek times, was taught in schools throughout the Greco-Roman period, and became, with grammar and dialectic, a part of the trivium in the liberal arts course of the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and early modern periods, rhetoric is a system of effective and artistic composition with public address in civic and religious life, but then adapted to literary composition, including poetry, and to letter writing (the medieval and renaissance *dictamen*)” (4-5). From the development of rhetoric in the classical period, rhetoric emerged into another realm in which it had been associated with larger terms and concepts in the medieval and renaissance period.

**CONCLUSION**

To make it brief, Plato and Aristotle had left significant intellectual-prints for contemporary scholars in understanding rhetoric, especially if it is viewed through the classical period. From time to time, rhetoric emerged into a broader concept with diverse historical figures. Nonetheless, rhetoric remains the form of speaking persuasively for the audience.

**REFERENCES**


