

## Rhetorical Theory

Rhetorical theory is the body of thought about human symbol use. The term rhetoric, in its popular usage, typically has negative connotations. Rhetoric is contrasted with action; it is empty words, talk without substance, mere ornament. This contemporary understanding of rhetoric is at odds with a long history of rhetorical theory, dating back in the West to ancient Greece and Rome, that provides a long-standing foundation on which the contemporary discipline of communication is built.

At the heart of theorizing about rhetoric, whether for the Greeks or contemporary scholars, is what came to be called by Lloyd Bitzer in 1968 the rhetorical situation. Rhetoric occurs in response to an exigence or some kind of urgency, problem, or something not as it should be. Another characteristic of the situation is the audience—those individuals capable of affecting the exigence in some way. In addition, there are constraints in the situation—positive and negative factors that hinder or enhance the possibility that the audience will be able to affect the exigence. Rhetoric comes into being, then, when a rhetor observes or creates an exigence and offers discourse designed to bring the interests of the audience to bear on it. In essence, then, rhetorical theorists address some or all parts of the rhetorical situation—the rhetor and the degree of agency available to him or her; the audience and the constraints available to them; the discourse, message, or symbols used to address the exigence; how the exigence itself is constructed, created, and addressed; and the larger contexts—historical, economic, cultural, and symbolic—in which the situation is playing out. This entry will discuss definitions of rhetoric, origins of rhetorical theory, and some of the major developments and elaborations on rhetorical theory since its classical beginnings.

### History and Development of Rhetorical Theory

Aristotle's definition of rhetoric provides a starting point for understanding how rhetoric has been defined: the art of discovering all the available means of persuasion. For the ancient Greeks, rhetoric was the use of logos or logical argument, ethos or speaker credibility, and pathos or emotional argument to construct a **persuasive** argument. Rhetoric essentially was the art of discourse, of systematically and artfully thinking through the five canons of rhetoric: invention, organization, style, delivery, and memory. Today, rhetoric is generally defined much more broadly as human symbol use, an idea explained later in this essay.

Rhetorical theory is said to have begun in Syracuse on the island of Sicily when a dictator was overthrown, leaving former and current landowners to argue in court over who rightfully owned the land—the original owners or those who had been given the land during the tyrant's regime. Under the Greek legal system of the time, individuals had to present their own cases in court—they could not hire lawyers to speak for them—creating the need for individuals to become adept at the art of rhetoric. Corax can be credited with the first formal rhetorical theory; he wrote a treatise called "The Art of Rhetoric" to assist those involved in the land disputes. In his treatise, he highlighted the importance of probability to rhetoric; a speaker should argue from general probabilities or create a probable connection or basis for belief when actual facts cannot be established.

Corax's student, Tisias, brought the teaching of rhetoric to Athens and mainland Greece. The belief that rhetoric could be taught—that eloquence was not something innate—gave rise to a group of teachers of rhetoric called sophists, a term derived from the Greek word *sophos*, meaning knowledge or wisdom. Today we look back on the sophists as philosophers and teachers who not only helped establish the foundations of rhetoric as a

discipline, but also were remarkably current in their understanding of the power of language. In Athens, however, they were not seen in the same light in which we view them now. They were distrusted for several reasons. First, many were foreigners, and the Athenians were proud of their city state and judgmental of others—even if they came from other Greek cities and territories. In addition, the sophists charged for their services, at odds with Greek tradition, so some disliked the sophists because they could not afford them. That the sophists claimed to teach wisdom or virtue, which had been seen as an innate capacity that could not be taught, was an additional source of ill will.

But in all likelihood, none of these factors would have been important except for an accident of history—the survival of Plato's dialogues. Plato, Aristotle's teacher and a prominent Athenian philosopher, disliked the sophists because they claimed there was no absolute truth. Plato believed in absolute and unchanging forms—justice, virtue, the good—and used his own rhetorical skills to discredit the sophists and their views on rhetoric in his dialogues. That Plato's writings against the sophists survived is primarily responsible for the negative associations of rhetoric that persist to this day.

Classical rhetorical theories were dominated by the ideas of Aristotle and Plato. Plato was interested in contrasting what he saw as the limitations of the sophists' rhetoric (the subject of his dialogue, *Gorgias*, in which he compared rhetoric to cookery) with that of an ideal rhetoric, which he offers in *Phaedrus*. Aristotle was more interested in codifying rhetorical instruction and in developing a pragmatic approach to the subject, in contrast to the moral perspective Plato brought to the subject. Aristotle's *Rhetoric*—actually a compilation of his students' notes of his lectures—offers the first systematic and comprehensive treatise of rhetoric.

The important Greece treatises on rhetoric were picked up by the Romans, who were borrowers; as they took over the Mediterranean, they adopted and adapted Greek rhetorical theories for their own needs. Cicero epitomizes Roman rhetoric in that he both wrote about rhetoric and was himself a great orator. Three of his rhetorical treatises were *De Inventione (On Invention)*, *De Oratore [On Oratory]*, and *Orator (Orator)*, and he developed the canon of style—and especially types of style—more completely than any of his predecessors. The Romans were particularly interested in the role of rhetoric in civic affairs, and for them, it was a practical art that demanded natural ability, engagement in the life of the state, instruction, and practice to fully realize the rhetorical ideal.

When a series of dictators assumed control of Rome, rhetoric became increasingly divorced from civic affairs (150-400 AD). Speaking out about state matters was likely to result in punishment, so rhetoric became largely concerned with matters of style and delivery rather than the substantive content of invention. During the Middle Ages that followed (400-1400 AD), rhetoric continued its role as a practical art, with rhetorical treatises addressing letter writing and preaching in particular.

Not until the Renaissance (1400-1600) was rhetoric revived as a subject for philosophical inquiry. The Italian Humanists—linguists, grammarians, and literary scholars—demonstrated a renewed interest in language not seen since the sophists. They believed that language has a central place in constructing the human world—language is the lens through which the meanings of the world come into being: Whether making sense of thunder in the night sky or of a political election campaign, humans employ symbols to make sense of the phenomena around them.

Rationalism also had its origins in the Renaissance, with René Descartes playing a central role in the separation of reason from feeling and emotion. This focus on reason would dominate rhetorical treatises through the 20th century, with rational argument becoming the preferred type of appeal, aligned as it was with the new ideals of objectivity and empirical, scientific approaches. The development of a new science called faculty psychology suggested there were five faculties governing the human being—understanding, memory, imagination, passion, and will—and reason was directed at the understanding. This led to interests among rhetorical theorists who offered ways to also address the other faculties rhetorically—and George Campbell's definition of rhetoric does

just that: enlightening understanding, pleasing imagination, moving passions, and influencing will. What came to be called the modern period in rhetoric, then, sought to understand the rhetorical impulse as it affected all aspects of the human mind across a range of contexts as diverse as letter writing, elocution (the study of delivery), and belles lettres (beautiful letters or literature).

The contemporary period of rhetorical theory emerged from several starting points. In Europe and the United States, propaganda efforts during World War II gave rise to various media institutes that were designed to study not only propaganda but also all kinds of communication processes. British and European philosophers—from I. A. Richards in England, Cha'im Perelman in the Netherlands, Jürgen Habermas in Germany, and Michael Foucault in France—began to take up rhetorical issues—though they did not necessarily refer to themselves as rhetorical scholars. They were interested in language and how it functioned—at a microlevel to create or dispel misunderstandings, to adapt arguments to particular audiences, to create the possibility for reason in society, and to understand systems of discourse that implicitly structure societies.

These interests also found their way to the United States where, in 1914, teachers in English who had been teaching public speaking broke away to form new departments of **speech** and **speech** communication, as well as a new discipline of **speech** with its own national association—the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking (now the National Communication Association). Scholars in these new departments of **speech** asserted their differences from English by focusing on the criterion of effectiveness to evaluate **speeches** in contrast to English scholars, whose focus had been on aesthetic considerations. In the 1960s, this singular interest broadened to include multiple methods, subject matters, and various philosophical starting places. The status of rhetorical theory today reflects this diversity: No longer confined to simply the study of **speeches** or discourse, it is generally viewed as the study of any kind of symbols. In fact, many scholars of rhetoric use the terms rhetoric and communication interchangeably; both terms can refer to the process and product of a human symbolic interaction. In the remainder of this essay, four major developments that characterize contemporary rhetorical theory will be showcased.

## Contemporary Developments

First, rhetorical theory now addresses all contexts in which symbol use occurs. No longer confined to the public domains of classical Greece for which rhetoric originally was designed—the judicial context or court of law, the legislative or political realm, and the ceremonial or display function—rhetorical theorists study every kind of context in which symbol use occurs. Today this means studying everything from intrapersonal to interpersonal to public discourse to social movements and mediated discourse. Rhetorical theories address what makes a public, personal diaries as rhetoric, and television, the Internet, and Web sites as rhetorical artifacts. This means that rhetorical theory also includes the study of visual and nonverbal elements, such as the study of art and architecture, buildings and all design elements of cities, and dress and appearance, to sports, to name only a few. There is virtually nothing that is part of the human experience that cannot be looked at from a rhetorical perspective.

Rhetorical theory has also seen a shift away from a strict focus on persuasion as the central focus of rhetoric to an interest in all of the reasons for which humans create rhetoric. For some rhetorical theorists, all human symbol use is inherently **persuasive**—no matter what our intent, anything we say or write, whether intentional or not, affects those around us. Other rhetorical theorists continue to focus on delineating how persuasion works in the variety of new arenas for theorizing. Yet others question the **persuasive** act itself—is it appropriate to ask another to change?—and encourage research into other rhetorical modes, such as invitational rhetoric, that might be as or even more effective than persuasion. In general, then, the focus on persuasion and its possibilities has led to an ongoing interest among rhetorical theorists in rhetoric's relationship to social change.

Another contemporary trend in rhetorical theory is the recognition that there are many different kinds of rhetoric beyond the Western rhetoric with origins in ancient Greece. Eastern rhetorics, for example, look entirely

different from Western rhetorics because of their different cultural context. What is seen as persuasibility or conformity to messages in the West is considered politeness, tact, or face-saving strategies in many cultures. Communication apprehension or communication avoidance is considered a deficiency to be dealt with in Western rhetorics; for many Eastern and Native American cultures, silence is a positive trait. And deception, rather than being a moral issue in many cultures, comes down to a matter of face. Although at first rhetorical theorists were reluctant to acknowledge different systems of and approaches to symbol use as rhetorical, today it is understood that every human society makes use of rhetoric—it cannot not do so. Rhetorical theorists, then, are investigating all of the nuances of the rhetorical act in a wide range of cultural contexts.

The recognition that Greek rhetorics were designed for those who had access to the public domain in Greece—elite, well-educated Athenian men—has led to rhetorical theorizing focused in particular on the nature of the rhetor as well. Contemporary rhetorical theorists believe that the characteristics of the rhetor cannot help but make for different rhetorics. When women were able to take to the public platform, they introduced different rhetorical exigencies, arguments, and styles. African American, Latino/a, and gay and lesbian rhetors have been studied to understand the ways the standpoint of a rhetor affects the rhetorics produced. Whiteness studies have emerged to suggest the ways that standpoint affects how messages are delivered and received. When Harvey Milk, the first gay supervisor of San Francisco, was first running for office (he ran four times before he finally won), he ran as an outsider—he was gay, Jewish, not a politician, and a New Yorker. His outsider arguments appealed to gay members of his audiences, however, essentially creating a gay community that had not existed previously.

Rhetorical theory has come a long way from theorizing designed to help litigants in ancient Greece and Rome. Rhetorical theory now addresses all aspects of the rhetorical situation—exigence, audience, and rhetor—as well as the larger contexts in which any given rhetorical act occurs. Rhetorical theory cannot be divorced from questions about human agency, the role of symbols in the creation of the human world, and the power of audiences to coconstruct that world.

—Karen A. Foss

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## Further Readings

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