

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 110

CS 214 319

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 TITLE Aristotle and Social-Epistemic Rhetoric: The Systematizing of the Sophistic Legacy.  
 PUB DATE Mar 94  
 NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).  
 PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)  
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; \*Rhetoric; \*Rhetorical Theory  
 IDENTIFIERS Aristotle; Classical Rhetoric; \*Rhetoric as Epistemic; Social Epistemic Rhetoric; Sophists

## ABSTRACT

While Aristotle's philosophical views are more foundational than those of many of the Older Sophists, Aristotle's rhetorical theories inherit and incorporate many of the central tenets ascribed to Sophistic rhetoric, albeit in a more systematic fashion, as represented in the "Rhetoric." However, Aristotle was more than just a rhetorical theorist and cataloguer; he was a teacher of rhetoric as well, offering lessons at Plato's Academy in competition with Isocrates. Rather than striving to oppose or replace the teachings of the Sophists entirely, Aristotle actually perpetuates and codifies many of their disparate ideas about the nature of discourse in human affairs through his own descriptive, theoretical framework. By doing so, Aristotelian rhetoric can be seen as a more systematized version of Sophistic rhetoric, and as such is at heart as much a social-epistemic rhetoric as has been claimed for the Older Sophists. It can still function today in the classroom, when combined with a practical method. (Contains 23 references.)  
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**Aristotle and Social-Epistemic Rhetoric:**

**The Systematizing of the Sophistic Legacy**

ED 370 110

Over the last few years, a good deal of scholarship toward rehabilitating the rhetorical theories of such Older Sophists as Protagoras and Gorgias has noted how their theories and teachings about the nature of discourse, society and knowledge seem to correspond to more modern theories, particularly epistemic rhetoric and social constructionism, or what scholars like James Berlin have described as "social-epistemic rhetoric" (488). In doing so, however, many scholars have tried to define what could be called "Sophistic rhetoric" as not only distinct from, but rather antithetical to later Greek rhetorical thought, especially Aristotelian rhetoric.

Such a view, I believe, is not entirely founded. While admittedly Aristotle's philosophical views are more foundational than Protagoras, Gorgias, or many of the other Older Sophists, I will argue that Aristotle's rhetorical theories inherit and incorporate many of the central tenets currently ascribed to Sophistic rhetoric, albeit in a more systematic fashion, as represented in the *Rhetoric*. As such, rather than striving to oppose or replace the teachings of the Sophists entirely, Aristotle actually perpetuates and codifies many of their disparate ideas about the nature of discourse in human affairs through his own descriptive, theoretical framework. By doing so, I will suggest that Aristotelian rhetoric can be seen as a more systemized version of Sophistic rhetoric, and as such is at heart as much a social-epistemic rhetoric as has been claimed for the Older Sophists.

Although Aristotle does seem to possess a rather foundational perspective in regards to his overall philosophical system, his rhetorical theories indicate an indebtedness to, if not

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actual continuation of, many of the social epistemic tenets developed in Sophistic rhetoric.<sup>1</sup> That Aristotle was well-versed in the rhetorical theories and practices of others--from the earliest theorists to his contemporaries--is clearly reflected in the *Rhetoric*, as well as such works as *Sophistical Refutations*. He is also said to have written several other texts on rhetoric (now lost), such as the *Gryllus*, a Platonic-like dialogue which Anton-Hermann Chroust describes as "a polemic directed at contemporary rhetoricians in general (or, at least, those orators who appealed to emotions and passions through flattering memorials and obsequious eulogies)" ("*Gryllus*" 42). He also compiled a rather encyclopedic work called the *Synagoge Technon*, said to be "a summary of the content of the various [rhetorical] handbooks then in existence" (Kennedy 19). But Aristotle was more than just a rhetorical theorist and cataloguer; he was a teacher of rhetoric as well, offering lessons as early as his latter days at Plato's Academy (during the 350s BC) in competition with Isocrates. Indeed, a good deal of scholarship on the composition of the *Rhetoric* suggests that much of it was written during this period of his teaching career, either evolving from, or serving as his lecture notes for such a course (Chroust, "Earliest" 24-27). In fact, I would argue that, based on the information we believe was contained in such works as the *Gryllus* and the *Synagoge Technon* discussed above, it is not so much the Older Sophists who Aristotle attacks early in the *Rhetoric*, but the more formulaic handbooks which were in existence in his day.

Moreover, Aristotle was keenly aware of Sophistic non-foundational philosophy, in particular the work of Gorgias. Aristotle in fact addresses Gorgias's argument from *On the Nonexistent* in one of his minor works, entitled *On Gorgias*. While he takes issue with

Gorgias's arguments to prove that nothing exists, Aristotle seems to allow the other two parts of the argument to stand; in fact, his restatement of Gorgias' third statement demonstrates his mastery of this relativistic view of knowledge and language:

Anything, then, which a man has not in his own consciousness, how can he acquire it from the word of another, or by any sign which is different from the thing, except by seeing it if it is a colour or hearing it if it is a sound? For, to begin with, no one speaks a sound or colour, but only a word; so that it is not possible to think a colour but only to see it, nor to think a sound, but only to hear it ... Thus if anything exists, it cannot be known, and if it is known, no one could show it to another; because things are not words, and because no one thinks the same things as others. (980b 5-10, 16-19)

Aristotle's rhetorical theories may indeed be indebted to Gorgias to some extent. C. J. Classen notes that Aristotle frequently cites, and even praises, Gorgias; despite using him for examples of frigidities of style in Book III of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle "refers more frequently to Gorgias in a positive manner ... [treating] him mostly with respect as a teacher of rhetoric, and where he disagrees with him, he does so certainly not on the ground that he was a sophist [in the pejorative sense of the term]" (21). Michael Carter also argues that "it is highly probable that Aristotle and other systematic rhetoricians were profoundly influenced by the rhetoric of Gorgias and other sophists" (109).

Aristotle's belief in the epistemic power of rhetorical discourse may be questionable<sup>2</sup>; certainly his overall philosophical corpus is more foundational, more systematic than the Sophists. However, Aristotelian rhetoric does contain several social epistemic--if not

primarily social constructionist--elements: particularly, his views on the function and purpose of rhetoric; his awareness of *kairos*, especially through his early development of *stasis* theory; the role of *ethos* as a means of persuasion; and the centrality of enthymemic reasoning in his rhetorical system.

In Book I of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle clearly acknowledges rhetoric as the art concerned with the contingent nature of human affairs; an art which helps humans "to deal with such matters as we deliberate upon without arts or systems to guide us ... [when our deliberations] present us with alternative possibilities" (1357a 1-2, 5). Moreover, Aristotle notes that rhetoric is by nature a social act, for "it is persuasive because there is somebody whom it persuades" (1356b 28). As such, rhetoric for Aristotle is grounded in what Thomas Farrell calls "social knowledge." As Farrell notes:

Long ago, Aristotle formulated a functional relationship between a fully developed art of rhetoric and a generally accepted body of knowledge pertaining to matters of public concern ... [For Aristotle,] rhetoric had application to the common subjects of deliberation, those matters to which this "common knowledge" was pertinent ... In Aristotle's early expansive vision, then, rhetoric was the art which employed the common knowledge of a particular audience to inform and guide reasoned judgements about matters of public interest. (1)

Thus, for Aristotle, "rhetorical method found its warrant in occasions of particular choice, its form in the enthymeme and example, and its substance in shared contingent knowledge" (Farrell 2).

The importance of *kairos*, central to Sophistic rhetoric, is also found in Aristotle's rhetorical treatise: from careful considerations of the genres (or occasions) of rhetorical speech--deliberative, epideictic, and forensic--as well as the material premises particular to each, to the characters of the audiences particular to each genre. Through his analysis of the emotions, as well as the employment of examples, maxims, and the various *topoi*, the *Rhetoric* appears designed to emphasize flexibility of response according to the particular rhetorical situation. Nowhere is this notion of the opportune, of the appropriate more notable than in Book III: Aristotle clearly stresses the importance of appropriateness in considerations of style. His treatment of arrangement is highly organic: approaches to introductions, narrations, proofs, and conclusions (including the issue as to whether such elements are necessary for a given speech) are seen as directly contingent on the context in which the speech is delivered. In short, discovering "the available means of persuasion" (1355b 27) is not simply a general, almost abstract process, but one which is necessarily related to the particular social, rhetorical context of the speech.

Aristotle may very well be elaborating on this notion of *kairos* in his early treatment of *stasis* theory, "the method by which rhetors in the classical tradition identified the area of disagreement, the point that was to be argued, the issue on which a case hinged" (Carter 98).<sup>3</sup> Michael Carter argues that Aristotle's development of *stasis* "may have been derived from the older *kairos* ... [emerging] out of the relativistic epistemology (the belief in the contingent nature of knowledge) of the sophists" (107). Both classical principles, in Carter's view, demonstrate a social constructionist perspective:

*kairos* and *stasis* are strikingly similar ... they act as controlling principles of

rhetoric, determining both the generation and aim of rhetoric ... Guided by these principles, rhetoric is not an individual but a *communal* act of inquiry, growing out of a conflict of knowledge in the community and aimed at restoring knowledge for the community. *Kairos* and *stasis*, then, both provide social foundations for their respective rhetorical traditions. (107)

As such, Carter believes, Aristotle was perhaps "more evolutionary than revolutionary, systematizing many of the procedures that already existed in sophistic rhetoric. *Stasis* may be one example of a rhetorical *techne* that has its roots deep in sophistic epistemology" (109).

Along the lines of Aristotle's sensitivity to *kairos* is his treatment of *ethos* as a means of persuasion. As he notes, the credibility of the speaker is essential to convincing others, so much so that the speaker's "character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses" (1356a13). But what is important about Aristotle's notion of *ethos* is that it is for the most part socially constructed, relying on and reflecting the values and beliefs of the community the speaker addresses: the rhetor must be sure to "make his own character look right" (1377b22) to the community. Thus, as Nan Johnson suggests:

Aristotle stresses that conveying credibility requires acknowledgement of the accepted views and common emotions particular to different speech situations ... [Thus,] *ethos* is a strategy in Aristotle's rhetoric but a beneficent rather than manipulative one; "making one's character look right" results from deliberation about the nature of the audience and the "mean" course appropriate to the subject and the situation. In other words, *ethos* is the result

of a considered choice about how the Good is best defined and conveyed within the boundaries of received opinion. (101, 103)

In short, Aristotle infuses *ethos* with a strong recognition of *kairos*: the speaker, in a rather Burkean fashion, adjusts his/her character to fit the moment, in order to establish a sense of identification--of credibility as a member of the community. As such, both speaker and community socially collaborate in the creation of the rhetor's *ethos*, based on shared values and beliefs.

Perhaps the most significant social constructionist element of Aristotelian rhetoric is the enthymeme, which Aristotle calls "the substance of rhetorical persuasion" (1354a 15). For Aristotle, the enthymeme is the focal point of rhetoric; it is "the one rhetorical strategy that incorporates the three major elements of rhetoric as persuasive discourse: rational appeal, emotional appeal, and the ethical appeal" (Hairston 59). So central is enthymemic reasoning to Aristotle's rhetorical theory that, as James McBurney argues, the enthymeme becomes a kind of unifying structure for the first two books of the *Rhetoric*, which supply the material premises, *topoi*, and other materials with which to construct enthymemes. In fact, "if we view the enthymeme as the 'body and substance of rhetorical persuasion,' as Aristotle tells us to, we have no difficulty in understanding the organization of the Rhetoric" (McBurney 129-30).

Most important, though, is the inherently social nature of the enthymeme: it is dialogic (in the Bakhtinian sense), a means of active interaction between speaker and auditor(s) through discourse where each participant influences the other. As Lloyd Bitzer explains:

Enthymemes occur only when speaker and audience jointly produce them. Because they are jointly produced, enthymemes intimately unite speaker and audience and provide the strongest possible proofs. The aim of rhetorical discourse is persuasion; since rhetorical arguments, or enthymemes, are formed out of premises supplied by the audience, they have the virtue of being self-persuasive. Owing to the skill of the speaker, *the audience itself helps construct the proofs by which it is persuaded.* (151)

Thus, enthymemic reasoning fosters a kind of collaborative rhetoric, shaping the views of both speaker and auditor in the dialogic interplay. Moreover, because Aristotle makes the enthymeme the counterpart of the syllogism--linking rhetorical reasoning, concerned with contingent knowledge, with dialectical reasoning, which could be used to pursue "certain" knowledge--rhetoric gains added epistemic force:

Rhetoric as a form of dialectic implies ... that knowledge can be created in the activity of discourse ... knowledge can be considered as something that people *do* together, rather than as something which any one person, outside of discourse, *has*. Knowledge can be said to be valid, that is, to the extent that it can be shared ... In the world of probable knowledge with which *Rhetoric* deals, real understanding results no less from the influence of the audience on the knowledge of the rhetor. The centrality of the concept of the enthymeme in the *Rhetoric* derives from this view of knowledge. (Gage 156)

In other words, Aristotle's focus on the enthymeme "as a sort of metonymy for the whole rhetorical activity for discovering the basis for mutual judgement ... defines a way to think

about such choices as establishing the previously unknown (or unshared) on the basis of the known (or shared)" (Gage 157).

Thus, Aristotle's development of enthymemic reasoning, with its sensitivity to *kairos* through its essentially dialogic nature, gives his rhetorical theory an social epistemic character. As Maxine Hairston observes, Aristotle's enthymeme acts as

an investigative tool, a stimulus to discovery [which assists] the rhetor [who] must quickly and accurately assess what the audience brings to the occasion and choose examples that will suit that particular audience, given its preknowledge and predisposition ... [Thus, Aristotle] is only affirming a principle on which all modern rhetoricians agree: that all discourse occurs within a cultural context in which the knowledge and attitudes of the parties involved necessarily qualify the statements that are made. (65)

Through the enthymeme, then, Aristotle develops a theory of rhetoric that is rooted in the Sophistic (or social epistemic) perspective; a theory that, in Carl Holmberg's words, is a "rhetorical rhetoric" which presupposes that

the grounds of the connections of meaning are left undefined or ambiguous and the speaking and writing are open for various and equally correct interpretations ... [As such, if] there should be various experiences of reality, any of them may be treated as potentially "correct"; therefore, rhetoric as persuasion becomes the converting of experience to such degrees that each person can come to realize how "reality" is shaped for others and that, in turn, these alternatives are alike viable ... Hence, Aristotle is saying that rhetoric is

a style of versifying-with; rhetoric is a way of helping others apprehend different bases for viewing and living reality ... Rhetoric involves ... the connecting of human reality among humans, and rhetoric engenders this connection as a human faculty. (238-39)

In short, Aristotelian rhetoric, rather than being seen as opposed to Sophistic rhetoric, can be viewed as rescuing the rhetorical tenets of the Sophists through a descriptive codification of their relatively disparate teachings. In doing so, Aristotelian rhetoric maintains at its core many of the same concerns about the nature of language and knowledge in the realm of human affairs as the Older Sophists held, and as such should not be seen as some rigid, foundational treatise on rhetoric, but one that, in its essence, preserves and promotes a more social-epistemic view of rhetoric, combined with a practical method, which can still serve us today.

### Notes

1. Admittedly, this view is not uniformly shared. In fact, scholars such as John Poulakos and Susan Jarratt attack Aristotle's rhetorical theories, which they see as oppressing or opposing Sophistic rhetoric. Poulakos in particular complains that Aristotle's more theoretical, systemized rhetoric overpowered the rhetoric of the Sophists, further helping to discredit their position for centuries ("Rhetoric" 216).

2. William Benoit states that Aristotle "apparently sees no epistemic function for rhetoric. For him, science discovers truth, and dialectic tests particular statements ... [thus,] knowledge about the topic is acquired prior to rhetoric" (256). However, Aristotle does acknowledge in the *Rhetoric* that "We should base our arguments upon probabilities as well as upon certainties" (1396a 3); that rhetoric "deals with contingent affairs" (Benoit 256). Indeed, James Kinneavy argues that  
 probably as the result of Isocrates' repeated emphasis on the uncertain character of all thinking in the areas of the human

sciences, Aristotle reverted to the Sophistic and Isocratean position that in these disciplines only a measure of probability or belief was possible ... Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, therefore, sides with Isocrates in the epistemological debate with Plato. (76)

3. See Wayne Thompson's essay "Stasis in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*," [In *Aristotle: The Classical Heritage of Rhetoric*. Ed. Keith V. Erickson (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1974), 267-77] as well as James Backes' article "Aristotle's Theory of Stasis in Forensic and Deliberative Speech in the *Rhetoric*," [*Central States Speech Journal* 7.1 (Autumn 1960): 6-8] for discussions of how Aristotle formulates his theory of *stasis*, particularly in Books I and III.

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