

# RHETORIC IS SYNONYMOUS WITH EMPTY SPEECH

Patricia Roberts-Miller

Recently, I was at a meeting of faculty whose research and teaching interests concerned issues of environmentalism. A colleague from another department asked me what my area was. “Environmental rhetoric,” I replied. He looked slightly shocked and then commented, “Good environmentalism doesn’t have a rhetoric.” I’m in a department of rhetoric, so I teach rhetoric, read scholarly pieces on rhetoric, and attend conferences on rhetoric. However, I often forget that other faculty members’ views on rhetoric might be different than mine.

A popular view of rhetoric is that it is a straightforward model of how communication should work: A person can speak the truth simply by using words that refer to true things in the world. If she chooses not to use sentences filled with words that refer to true things in the world, then she is engaged in rhetoric. Rhetoric, in this view, is something you add on to sentences (such as metaphor) that decorates and obscures communication. If I say, “The cat is on the mat,” I am using language correctly. However, if I say, “The elegant feline languishes mournfully on the expensive carpet, waiting impatiently for what he sees as his lazy servants to open a can of salmon,” then I have added rhetoric to the first sentence, or chosen rhetoric over clear communication.

For many people, the simpler, plainer version of the sentence is not just a stylistic choice, it’s a moral one. Many people believe that the addition of more complicated words obscures the meaning of the sentence. Rhetoric, to them, is something that hides the truth. If you look at the two sentences, though, you can see that the elaborated, supposedly more rhetorical one communicates quite clearly. In fact, it communicates more effectively and precisely than “The

cat is on the mat.” It might, of course, be false—there might not be such a cat; it might not be elegant; it might not be thinking much of anything; it might be quite cheerful; it might not like salmon. But the same is true of the simpler sentence—there might not be a cat; it might not be on a mat. Thus, linguistic simplicity and truthfulness aren’t necessarily connected, and linguistic complexity and truthfulness aren’t necessarily opposed.

Or, to put it another way, for a long time, philosophers of language insisted that language works by sentences having propositional content—“the cat is on the mat”—which can be expressed in various ways. Rhetoric is what we layer onto the proposition. Or, as the old saying goes, “Rhetoric is clothing on the idea.” In an Edenic world, we would all wander around naked, and we would all simply and clearly speak our thoughts; rhetoric is something we must have in this fallen world.

People who believe that rhetoric hides meaning believe that we could return to Eden by using simple, plain, and rhetoric-free language. One of several underlying assumptions is that it’s harder to lie in plain language, or that lies are more obvious when the language is less complicated. Therefore, we can trust plain language and should treat complicated language with suspicion. Oddly enough, this seemingly straightforward proposition isn’t true. In other words, this simple belief shows that an idea can be untrue and persuasive at the same time. It is also interesting that the master deceivers have generally relied on simple, yet false, claims. It’s quite likely that people believed their assertions were clear and plain and, therefore, assumed that they must be true.

The Edenic view isn’t a helpful way to think about rhetoric. It isn’t even how language works. While it’s true that the same thing can be said in different ways, there is a way of saying that thing without rhetoric. “The cat is on the mat” is still a style—the simple style—with internal rhyming and prose rhythm. It’s also structurally the rhetorical figure of chiasmus—the sentence begins and ends in an almost identical way. We can’t get away from rhetoric, but we can choose its kind.

As in all interesting arguments, it’s a question of how we’re defining terms. And rhetoric has a variety of definitions. It was first used in Platonic dialogues with very little precision. It comes from the Greek word for a person with a certain role in the Athenian Assembly (rhetor). It is believed that it was Plato who added the -ic later.

He used rhetoric in terms of speech-making as opposed to

arguing in small groups. Plato wasn't opposed to argumentation, and he wasn't even opposed to some verbal sleight of hand. After all, Socrates—often read as a kind of spokesman for Plato's views—relied heavily on some fairly dodgy logical moves in the dialogues. Plato's point seems to be that speech-making isn't a very useful skill because making speeches to large groups (Athenian juries might have hundreds of people) is not very effective for getting to the truth. It might be effective for getting others to accept the truth one has already figured out (that seems to be the point that Socrates is making in the dialogue *Phaedrus*), but, if you want to find out what's true, argue with another individual. Do not make a speech.

Of course, Socrates makes a lot of speeches in Platonic dialogues. So, it is still murky whether or not Plato noticed the contradiction, was making a different point despite noticing the proposition, or didn't write the dialogues to get to the truth. In fact, Plato's overall attitude toward rhetoric is murky, even though his school, the Academy, did have rhetoric classes. They were taught by a man named Aristotle.

On the other hand, Aristotle, who was a teacher of rhetoric, neither defined rhetoric as style nor as something you add to language. He described it as a discipline and a skill that enables you to see the available means of persuasion. For Aristotle, rhetoric is about public speaking to large groups, and it is different from philosophy. So, he did share those two assumptions with Plato. But he didn't agree with Plato about rhetoric not getting us to the truth. He thought that it could get us to the truth, but that it could also be used to deceive. It depends on the motives of the person using it.

Aristotle loved syllogisms, and seems to have believed that all reasoning could be done through them. In philosophy, to get to the truth, you try to begin with a universally valid major premise (e.g., all men are mortal). Then you have a more specific proposition related to that premise (e.g., Socrates is a man) that enables you to draw a conclusion (e.g., Socrates is mortal). But Aristotle said that this kind of reasoning doesn't work in large assemblies for two reasons. First, during a speech, people don't have the time to reason from universally valid major premises—if you're arguing about whether Philip of Macedon represents a threat, it's useless to try to find universally valid premises about tyrants or war or people from Macedon. You don't have time. Second, the kind of things about which we make speeches—politics, ethics, military

strategy, guilt or innocence, honor and dishonor—aren't subject to certainty. There are no universally valid major premises about tyrants that will help us figure out what we need to do now and here to assess Philip. We must rely on what is probably true.

According to Aristotle, what you learn from rhetoric is how to approach political, ethical, and legal problems, how to come up with an argument when you can't be (or, at least, shouldn't be) certain that you're right. You also learn how to assess other people's arguments. Aristotle, unlike many other philosophers, doesn't present rhetoric as an inferior discipline to philosophy (he says it's a "counterpart"). It's just different. It's a pragmatic skill that helps us in decision-making.

Aristotle, being an astute observer, noticed that people argued about different things in similar ways. He came up with 28 approaches, called "lines of argument" (they're also sometimes called "formal topoi," which makes it seem as though they have long dresses and white ties). If I am making a speech trying to persuade people to become more active in politics, I might argue from precedent (listed as #11 of his 28 lines), or argue that the consequences of political activism are good (#13), or point out inconsistencies in the argument for political quietism (#22), and so on. Those different lines aren't ornaments I hang on the proposition that people should be politically active; they are all different ways of thinking about the situation.

Take, for instance, Aristotle's first line of argument: consideration of the opposite, a strategy that might structure my entire case. I might spend all my time trying to show that political activism is good because political quietism is bad. I might, however, make that just part of one speech, in which I move from how good it is to be politically active to a moving description of the tragedies associated with political quietism. Or, I might make it one paragraph, or one sentence. I might say, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." In other words, the forms—such as consideration of the opposite—can be used to structure a clause, sentence, paragraph, speech, or (in John F. Kennedy's case) political philosophy. Rhetoric is a way of thinking. It is not just something added to a thought derived by other means.

Does that mean that rhetoric is always good? Of course not. Rhetoric is a contingent, pragmatic, and generally (but not always) verbal way of approaching problems we face as members of communities. It is the cause as well as the consequence of thought. If we tend to think in binaries and divide everything into this versus that,

then we'll probably be drawn to the rhetorical figures that divide things into two. Continually presenting and interpreting issues in that divided way will reinforce our sense that things really are divided into two. We might then act in ways that divide things into two—we might believe that everyone is either an ally or an enemy, and thereby alienate neutral parties. Thinking and talking about everyone as ally or enemy might mean we are likely to end up in a world in which people end up treating us in that manner. Rhetoric isn't always good, and it isn't always bad, but it's rarely neutral.

For instance, we might be tempted to use metaphors of disease, infection, or contamination for those groups that we don't like. That might be a calculated decision to mislead an audience. We might not dislike the groups as vehemently as we project but we still perform for the audience to get votes, money, popularity, sales, sex, or something else. It is insincere. These types of people might make us feel unsettled and disgusted. They might even come across to us as dangerous. Thus, we call them slimy or a cancer on the body politic. We proclaim that they spread ideas, weaken our community, and threaten our children. Those metaphors and that rhetoric would feel accurate, and it would convey our meaning—it is not added on; it is not ornamentation. It is what we mean. And it can hurt us as a community because it can mean that we then interpret that group's actions through a lens of disease, threat, and danger. We can end up killing them or getting them killed because of the rhetoric we used. We can't get away from rhetoric, but we can choose the kind of rhetoric we use.

### Further Reading

For further reading on rhetoric as more than “mere rhetoric,” see especially Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Rhetoric*, which distinguishes between “rhetrickery” and rhetoric as an inclusive method of deliberation. Eugene Garver's *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character* is an elegant introduction to Aristotle, and Debra Hawhee and Sharon Crowley's *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, though a textbook, explains classical and current conceptions of rhetoric usefully.

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