

PREFACE

There are two questions to answer for both students and teachers who have come upon this treatment of the third liberal art of language: Why rhetoric, and why Aristotle?

Why rhetoric? “Rhetoric” has been—since its ancient invention and until now—a suspect study. Even its prominent defenders in the tradition—Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, and Erasmus, for example—handle it with the kind of care one reserves for dangerously powerful things. I will not here defend the art of rhetoric as a good since the Introduction does so; instead, I will only assert that one may practice rhetoric well or badly, but everyone practices it. Human beings are essentially language animals, and, since rhetoric is one of language’s necessary forms, we are essentially rhetorical animals. The art simply acknowledges that fact of our nature. This art can be thought of in relation to its ancient competitors (philosophy, for instance, and poetry), or in relation to the other two arts that with it make up the medieval trivium (grammar and logic/dialectic), or in relation to its contemporary studies (speech and communication or rhetoric and composition). But it is one essential, good art.

Why Aristotle? One might offer Cicero instead, for example, and there are good historical reasons for doing so. Even so, there are two reasons for using Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* as our guiding star. First, Aristotle’s treatment offers the advantage of being part of his encyclopedic treatment of other essential human subjects—including his logic and ethics, the study of both important to encourage rhetoric as an art of private and public flourishing and not simply verbal success. Rhetoric needs to be studied within a horizon larger than itself, within a circle of other subjects which supplement it, and, of all the major figures of the rhetorical tradition, Aristotle provides the most



comprehensive and detailed circle of subjects of knowledge. One must usually refine Aristotle's arguments, but one may profitably begin with them since those arguments are often wise. John Henry Newman's hyperbole in *The Idea of a University*—Aristotle is “the oracle of nature and truth” (V.5)—catches the fact that one can go a longer way with Aristotle in trying to understand most things than with anyone else. That is especially true of his rhetorical thought.

Second, his *Rhetoric* is simply the best treatment of the art. As with so much else, Aristotle discerned the nature of the art with clarity and breadth. This book is *not* a scholarly treatment of Aristotle's treatise, though I have studied and taught the book for over twenty-five years. Instead, it tries to articulate an Aristotelian approach to the art of rhetoric without any historicist or philological anxieties about using later examples of rhetoric and English terms for them. I am not trying to get his text precisely right; I am trying to get the art precisely right, and his treatise will provide the occasion for that latter enterprise. It is an adaptation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, like a film of a long, complicated novel, one that requires omissions, alterations and additions to be even more instructive and pleasurable for its audience. Think of this as a sequel to Mortimer Adler's fine *Aristotle for Everybody: Difficult Thought Made Easy*. Where he explained the whole of Aristotle, I will explain only a part. Its title, *Aristotle's Rhetoric for Everybody*, pays homage to that incomparable teacher.

I should caution the reader, however. The book is an advanced introduction which makes demands on the reader. And, because commissioned to be the third course covering the arts of language on the *Arts of Liberty* site, it presumes and reviews some grammatical and logical material useful for understanding rhetoric. John Nieto's essay on grammar and Anthony Andres' course on logic on the site are presumed prerequisite readings. A more accurate if not graceful title might be *Aristotle's Rhetoric for Everybody Who Knows A Little Grammar and Logic and Who Likes to Read Challenging*



Books: Difficult Thought Made Easier. I have selected the title I have because I believe even a reader who does not know those two arts could read the book with profit and might very well be persuaded to then study the other two arts. Education often follows a crooked path.

What can the reader expect here, and how might the book be used? This is an introduction to the art of rhetoric, written from the perspective of Aristotle—that is, if he were a contemporary American with an interest in old books. Think of it as a simplified, Aristotelian account of the art, simplified since I will avoid almost all Greek terminology, I will not feel obligated to cite Aristotle all the time, instead paraphrasing, and I do not plan on weighing in on arcane, scholarly disputes about this or that. The appendices offer sources for more advanced study. I intend this as an *introduction* for those who want to know what rhetoric is and who may have an interest in Aristotle. You may want to improve your writing, your reading, your speaking, and/or your listening. Aristotle always improves your thinking. Indeed, when Adler divides Aristotle's overall concerns into three general categories—making, doing and thinking—he explains that each is actually a form of thinking: thinking about making, thinking about doing, and thinking about thinking. As we will see, rhetoric concerns all three: Since it is a productive art, rhetoric asks us to think about “making” speech; since that made speech occurs in social settings (intimate and civic), rhetoric asks us to think about “doing” ethical and political things with it; and since that made-speech for ethical and political purposes is intimately related to philosophy, it is often theoretical. Every rhetoric, no matter how concerned with technique or virtue, assumes a *theory* of rhetoric. Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, then, takes up all three subjects of making, doing and thinking about language.

This book might be used for courses on the trivium, composition, speech and communication, philosophy (especially ethical or political), or on Aristotle himself. Or



it might be used simply for the pleasure of learning from Aristotle about a central human attribute: persuasiveness. What is that attribute, and why is it central? Those two questions are answered by the book itself. The audience in mind here is young students not yet ready to read the *Rhetoric* by themselves. Ultimately, its purpose is to persuade the reader that the art of rhetoric is an interesting and important subject and that its study reveals and empowers a most important attribute about us as human beings—our use of what distinguishes us from the other animals as we try to flourish as human beings.

The order of the sections and chapters will be thus. After an extensive introduction (Chapters 1-5), I will present the five sub-arts of the art of rhetoric: Invention (Chs. 6-14), especially the three genres or kinds of rhetoric and the three appeals; organization (15-18); style (19-22); memory (23); and delivery (24). After the presentation of each sub-art will be an exercise built upon Lincoln's "Letter to Mrs. Bixby," one of his less famous but nonetheless rhetorically masterful pieces. (There are disputes about whether Lincoln actually wrote the letter, but I will ignore those and assume he did.) Afterwards, I will conclude by locating Aristotle's art of rhetoric within the other subjects he discusses and within the other two arts of language in the trivium, grammar and logic. I will assume an elementary knowledge of grammar and logic, so I recommend completing those courses on the site first. One thing to point out is this: Aristotle spends a great deal of time proportionally on invention. His is an invention-centered rhetoric and the most logical of rhetorics. I have included three appendices: 1) a Study Guide for *Aristotle's Rhetoric for Everybody* composed of questions for each chapter; 2) a Study Guide for *Aristotle's Rhetoric* itself (outline and discussion questions), keyed to George Kennedy's translation of the text; and 3) an Annotated Bibliography for those who would like to further pursue their study of *Aristotle's Rhetoric* and rhetoric generally. My greatest hope for the book is that it will



be only the *beginning* of your rhetorical education and will lead you to the *Rhetoric* itself.

This book's treatment of the art of rhetoric builds upon the other two arts—grammar and logic—courses which are available on the *Arts of Liberty* site, fulfilling them. If Aristotle is right in the book's epigraph—that it is language for the common purpose of happiness that distinguishes human beings from the other animals—there are few more dignified and rewarding studies since, like grammar and logic, rhetoric is an art present in so many other studies. If a liberal education requires the liberal arts of language, and if rhetoric itself is the consummate liberal art of language—both views are traditional—then no one without the art can be considered liberally educated.

