

Interpretation

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Volume 47 Issue 1

- 1 *Kojima Hidenobu* The Value of the Feudalistic Relationship in Edmund Burke's Political Economy
- 21 *Aaron Zubia* The Centrality of Convention in Hume's Moral and Political Philosophy
- 43 *Anthony Vecchio & J. A. Colen* **Leo Strauss's Walgreen Lectures on Machiavelli**
The "Modern Principle": The Second Walgreen Lectures by Leo Strauss (1954)
- 119 *Borys M. Kowalsky & Patrick Malcolmson* **Review Essays**
Unmasking the Administrative State: The Crisis of American Politics in the Twenty-First Century by John Marini
- 137 *David Lewis Schaefer* *The Habermas-Rawls Debate* by James Gordon Finlayson
- 153 *David Lewis Schaefer* *The Rediscovery of America: Essays by Harry V. Jaffa on the New Birth of Politics*, edited by Edward J. Erler and Ken Masugi
- 169 *Christine J. Basil* **Book Reviews**
Aristotle's Art of Rhetoric: Translated and with an Interpretive Essay by Robert Bartlett
- 179 *Matthew Berry* *Augustine's Political Thought*, edited by Richard J. Dougherty
- 185 *Erin A. Dolgoy* *Francis Bacon* by David C. Innes
- 193 *Steven H. Frankel* *Curing Mad Truths: Medieval Wisdom for the Modern Age* by Rémi Brague
- 199 *Raymond Hain* *The Postsecular Political Philosophy of Jürgen Habermas: Translating the Sacred* by Dafydd Huw Rees
- 205 *Samuel Mead* *Plato's Tough Guys and Their Attachment to Justice* by Peter J. Hansen
- 211 *Charles U. Zug* *The Lost Soul of the American Presidency* by Stephen F. Knott

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Robert Bartlett's translation of Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* and his insightful commentary on the work are particularly timely for contemporary theory and practice. In a moment when both modern and postmodern theory question the very connection between speech and truth, and tweeting executives, bitter partisan division, and vitriolic constitutional debates eclipse political speech, discourse, and statesmanship, Bartlett's work is a much-needed reminder that not all have reduced speech to a tool of force, and that there exist still some older, wiser understandings of the role of rhetoric in defending truth and justice.

Bartlett frames the theoretical timeliness of his translation in the context of a debate begun by Thomas Hobbes during the Enlightenment. Hobbes attacked "the Schoolmen" on the grounds that their joint acceptance of the Incarnation and Aristotle was devastating to the pursuit of true science in the university. Hobbes's attempt to eradicate the influence of the Scholastics on the university, the founding of which on materialistic grounds was to be no small part of his practical political founding, required an assault on the Aristotelian tradition in which it was rooted.

To speak of Hobbes is to speak to Bartlett's "chief purpose": "to encourage serious study of the art of rhetoric, by way of a return to its origins in Aristotle" (vii). It is our modern inheritance of Hobbes's devastatingly enlightened criticisms of Aristotle that have left us theoretical orphans deprived of our origins, buffeted between the twin winds of Hobbes's new "moral science" that deprecates all "eloquence" ungoverned by materialistic expertise ("public

reason”), and a postmodern reassertion of rhetoric that rejects the notion that reason and rhetoric alike have “access to the truth.” The new, postmodern interest in rhetoric, embodied for Bartlett in Stanley Fish, “is just the flip side of the demise of reason in some quarters in the academy” (x).

The consolation Bartlett brings for those of us who find ourselves lost in this storm is that the questions raised by our vexing modern situation are not as altogether new as they might appear. In fact, the “alliance between rhetoric and extreme relativism,” shared by Hobbes and Fish, “had an analogue in antiquity,” in the sophists to whom Aristotle’s work responds (xi). In this way, Bartlett situates his own labors as a response to our theoretical and practical dilemmas alike, the timeliness of which is the result of the timeless nature of the questions explored in and provoked by *Aristotle’s Art of Rhetoric*.

Bartlett’s work makes available a text that has more often than not been neglected by political theorists, not least on account of its evident complexity and apparent contradictions. Not only does the translation render the “well-known terseness or elliptical character of Aristotle’s Greek” into accessible modern English, but Bartlett’s accompanying essay outlines how to make sense of the whole of a text with so many apparently disparate parts. His translation is more precise, more eloquent, and less cumbersome than other available renderings. His essay speaks to both the complexity and unity of rhetoric, and reveals that the lessons Bartlett has learned from the *Art of Rhetoric* are embodied as much in theory as in his own practice.

Bartlett’s first object in his interpretation is to lay bare the perplexity at the heart of Aristotle’s text. “Aristotle’s treatment of rhetoric is at once theoretical and practical, which means that the *Art of Rhetoric* is neither a strictly philosophic inquiry nor yet a handy guidebook for rhetoricians” (211). The question of rhetoric’s status in relation to theoretical inquiry is a central—if not *the* central—concern around which Bartlett’s essay revolves. Thus, the essay expends great effort in wrestling apart the Gordian knot found at the outset of Aristotle’s text, which famously names rhetoric the “counterpart” (*antistrophē*) of dialectic (*Rh.* 1354a1). This issue of rhetoric’s relation to dialectic raises the question of theory’s relation to practice, the answer to which Aristotle obscures even as he elucidates.

Aristotle repeatedly emphasizes the theoretical character of even practical rhetoric when at the outset of book 1, chapter 2, he describes rhetoric’s work as “a capacity to observe [*theōrein*] what admits of being persuasive in each case” (*Rh.* 1355b26–27). Rhetoric, as much as it may lend itself to

effective persuasion, can never guarantee it. Rhetoric is contemplative rather than practical in Aristotle's description, or so it would seem, and its effectiveness depends as a result in no small way on the audience's freedom to judge for itself a speaker's case. Hence, rhetoric's relation to the more obviously theoretical dialectic, which Aristotle asserts in the *Topics* is useful to see what is true, is fraught. Rhetoric appears to be subordinate to dialectic: while dialectic might find the truth, rhetoric is useful, Aristotle emphasizes, insofar as it allows for defense of the truth and justice not only in law courts (judicial rhetoric), assemblies (deliberative rhetoric), and occasions of public praise (epideictic rhetoric), but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, in one's own soul. Indeed, "it is strange if it is a shameful thing not to be able to come to one's own aid with one's body but not a shameful thing to be unable to do so by means of argument [*logos*], which is to a greater degree a human being's own than is the use of the body" (*Rh.* 1355b1–4).

Bartlett's defense of rhetoric from modern and postmodern attacks revolves around the issue of rhetoric's relation to truth, philosophy, and self-knowledge. In the process, he lays bare Aristotle's account of the enthymeme (the "rhetorical syllogism"), the three "modes of persuasion" (character [*ēthos*], passion [*pathos*], and the argument itself [*logos*]), the three kinds of rhetoric (deliberative, judicial, and epideictic), signs and likelihoods in books 1–2, and a tremendously helpful albeit brief account of book 3, which concerns "diction" (*lexis*). His feat of translation throughout the work is especially evident in book 3, which manages not only to translate but also elucidate stylistic comments written in Attic Greek about Attic Greek. These, along with the accompanying footnotes, make accessible Aristotle's rhetorical advice and references to many obscure and lost manuscripts.

Bartlett's most distinctive contribution to understanding Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* involves the way Aristotle's account of *logos* as a mode of persuasion in book 2 has a bearing on the life and especially the trial of Socrates (263–71). The central questions surrounding Bartlett's treatment of rhetoric are embodied in this section, and so my own questions surrounding certain aspects of this translation will emerge from it, for, as Bartlett notes, "the identification of key terms and selection of their English counterparts depend in the end on the translator's interpretation of Aristotle or on an understanding of his intention" (xii). As the outlines of Bartlett's understanding of Aristotle's intention are laid out in the essay and manifest particularly in this section, a brief tracing of his argument is in order.

Bartlett's consideration of the status of *logos* in rhetoric homes in on the question of philosophy's relation to rhetoric by a remarkable detailing of the way Aristotle's treatment of the common topics of enthymemes and apparent enthymemes contains many surprising references to the trial of Socrates as recounted in Plato's *Apology*. "As it seems to me, the fate of Socrates lies behind the whole of this section of the *Rhetoric* and gives it both a unity and a gravity it would otherwise lack" (267). This especially emerges when Aristotle mentions Socrates by name in treating the issue of comparison in enthymematic speech. In discussing various "examples" that might be used in rhetoric, Aristotle provides an "example of comparison" attributed to Socrates concerning the democratic practice of selecting rulers by lot. Socrates denigrates such a mode of choosing rulers by comparing it to the selection of athletes and pilots. If selecting athletic competitors and pilots by lot is silly, how much more so would it be to select rulers in this fashion (*Rh.* 1393b4–8)? Socrates's "tough rebuke of democratic practice," a practice that neglects to ask whether a ruler thus selected would have any of the capacity or knowledge to rule well, Bartlett observes, embodies a rhetoric that fails to take seriously the *endoxa* or "accepted opinions" of the regime in which he speaks, even calling into question the practices of that regime.

The trial of Socrates, on the joint charges of impiety and corruption of the youth, arose precisely because of such unconventional speeches and examples presented before the young by Socrates. For this reason, Bartlett contends, "the legal execution of Socrates," which itself "culminated in a famous or notorious example of rhetoric," is "indicative of the fundamental tension between philosophy and the political community, between the philosopher's ceaseless search for the truth about the most important things and the community's necessary reliance on *endoxa* that cannot finally be questioned, let alone openly rejected." Hence "the trial of Socrates really is the trial of philosophy in the court of popular opinion" and is in many ways an account of the apparent failure of Socratic rhetoric (266–67).

Bartlett's reading of this portion of the text, then, is an interpretation of Aristotle's intention as revealed through his clipped speeches about Socrates, and this reading is revealed as much in Bartlett's essay as in the key terms on which it has a bearing. For this reason, the essay turns to consider the status of "wisdom" in rhetoric and political life, noting that more often than not it is subject to envy, on one hand, and accusations of idleness, on the other (265–66). The kind of wisdom Aristotle presents as an alternative to Socrates's is one that is more likely to be musical. "All honor the wise,"

says Aristotle, citing the maxim of Alcidas, yet the examples of wisdom Aristotle explicitly mentions are poets and their “musical” wisdom, along with founders of regimes (*Rh.* 1398b10). Bartlett accounts for this earlier in the essay when he examines the general treatment of enthymemes Aristotle provides in *Rhetoric* 2.22, wherein Aristotle “stresses again the limit of the enthymeme,” which must be neither too long nor complicated (233). Bartlett notes Aristotle’s observation of “the disadvantage of the educated in contrast to the uneducated, in speaking to a crowd: as the poets say...the uneducated speak ‘more musically’ to a crowd than do the educated” (*Rh.* 1395b26–31).

In light of this, the problem of Socrates might be understood as a problem of musicality. Socrates’s evident willingness “to criticize Athenians among Athenians,” rather than take the “easy” course of praising Athenians among Athenians, resulted in his death (265). Socrates’s speeches were not in harmony with the regime. This lack of musicality in Socrates amounts for Bartlett’s Aristotle to a warning that one ought to learn the musical speech of rhetoric *not* insofar as it is a part of the philosophic ascent to truth but rather because it helps avoid a repetition of Athens’s sin against philosophy. Socrates’s unveiled “incredulity at the response of the god (that ‘no one is wiser’ than Socrates)” in Plato’s *Apology* is not a problem of philosophy as such but is instead one of rhetoric: Socrates’s “human wisdom” is, according to Bartlett, “corrosive of the *endoxa* that every healthy community needs in order to thrive; such wisdom runs the risk, *if publicized*, of undermining the community’s definitive answers to the questions of what is true and good, noble and just” (270, emphasis mine). It is not that Socrates’s lack of musicality is unphilosophic; it is simply not the way to go for those who would prefer to avoid the fate of Socrates.

Bartlett’s hints throughout this section would lead us to understand Aristotle’s response to Socrates not as a rejection or even a correction of Socratic rhetoric but rather as prudent counsel to use speech more musically in order not to share in his fate. Hence rhetoric is ultimately a philosopher’s public veil for his own private search for the truth, and Aristotle’s own taking seriously the “perspective of serious (*spoudaioi*) human beings in their communal concerns” (270) is a mode of speech that serves to protect philosophers from those *publicized* opinions that foment political hostility towards philosophers. Rhetoric would then not be, as Aristotle initially describes it, useful for the defense of truth and justice so much as it is for the defense of those who pursue truth, which search is inherently “corrosive” to public, rhetorical morality.

Bartlett's understanding of Aristotle's intention is made plain in a number of key words at the heart of his translation, as we noted previously. It is here that the questions provoked by his account of rhetoric are best addressed, specifically in relation to his understanding of "diction or phrasing" (*lexis*), the enthymeme's "modes of persuasion" (*pisteis*), and "conviction" (*pistis*).

Bartlett's understanding of Aristotle's intention finds the most support in Aristotle's account of *lexis* in book 3, which he translates as "diction" or "phrasing" (others have rendered it "style"). In the glossary, Bartlett describes this most musical aspect of rhetoric as follows: "While regretting the necessity to do so, Aristotle devotes the first part of book 3 to a discussion of 'diction,' that is, the selection of the best word or phrase to bring clarity to one's speech" (278). Odd as this regret might strike anyone whose duty includes evaluating the writing of contemporary undergraduates, it apparently stems from rhetoric's likeness to poetry. Aristotle traces *lexis*'s beginnings to actors' recitations of poetry, which, as Plato's *Ion* reminds us, may have little or nothing to do with anything the speaker understands.

Aristotle here addresses the more "vulgar" aspects of rhetoric, including grammar, clarity, rhythm, metaphor, tone, and volume, to name a few. What Bartlett describes as regret stems from the fact that diction has more to do with voice, which man shares with other animals, than it does with speech (*logos*), which belongs particularly to humans (see *Pol.* 1253a15–19). Mastering these elements of the art of rhetoric is critical to attaining the appearance of trustworthy character that is one of the "modes of persuasion" (*pisteis*) inherent to the enthymeme and that is central to Aristotle's account of rhetoric. "Just as the skilled actor will disappear into his role, as it were, and so appear to be anything other than an actor (1404b22–25), so the skilled rhetorician will appear to be something other than a skilled rhetorician—as a passionate advocate, for example, a sober statesman, or an innocent victim" (272). *Lexis* has most to do with voice and is crucial in maintaining the appearance of virtue and arousing certain passions of the audience that lend themselves to establishing "conviction" or "trust," and thereby fostering a desired judgment, in one's audience.

The central question then regarding Aristotle's understanding of rhetoric is whether the involvement of voice, which communicates pleasure and pain, in speech depreciates that art and its capacity to protect or communicate truth. Does the union of voice and speech detract from the philosopher's dogged pursuit of truth, or is Aristotle's intention instead to lead us to an alternative understanding of rhetoric, and hence of philosophy, to that

portrayed by Plato's Socrates, a rhetoric that would instead integrate that which is perhaps, like the rational and nonrational parts of the soul, "two in speech but naturally inseparable" (*NE* 1102a27–31)?

Pursuit of this question draws us directly to Aristotle's most distinctive contribution to the study of rhetoric: his treatment of the enthymeme or "rhetorical syllogism." Aristotle claims at the outset of his work that the enthymeme is the neglected "body" of persuasion that prevents rhetoric, rightly practiced, from being understood as a mere tool by which to warp the judgments of jurors. Instead, grasping the enthymeme illuminates the ways rhetoric is necessary for establishing a shared understanding of the good (deliberative rhetoric), the just (judicial rhetoric), and the noble (epideictic rhetoric), which are integral to the possibility of "complete community" that culminates in a shared understanding of these matters (see *Pol.* 1353a15–19).

The enthymeme channels the three *pisteis* ("modes of persuasion")—*ēthos*, *pathos*, and *logos*—which in turn foster *pistis* ("conviction") in one's audience. The term was not invented by Aristotle but appears in Sophocles's (earlier) *Oedipus at Colonus* (292) where it characterizes Oedipus's "heartfelt words" or "his reflections or thoughts that stem (as the etymology of the word suggests) from his heart or spirit, from his *thymos*" in his own defense. "In accord with this, the related verb (*enthymeisthai*) can mean 'to take to heart' or 'to ponder or reflect on' something" (228).

The enthymeme is the beating heart at the center of every speech about what is good, just, and noble. Does this center hold in light of Aristotle's pursuit of truth, or will it lose its rhythm in the mode of philosophizing that Bartlett suggests is corrosive to communal *endoxa*? This question can be answered in one of two ways. Socrates's death might be read as the failure of the community attached to its own poetic music and therefore unable to accept truth. Yet it is also possible that Aristotle is criticizing Socrates for his failure to take *endoxa* seriously, and to speak what is true in a poetic fashion.

Bartlett suggests the former on numerous occasions; however, this alternative is provoked in more places than can be enumerated here, and sheds light on a few notable perplexities Bartlett wrestles with in his translation and interpretive essay. For example, in his account of Aristotle's treatment of judicial rhetoric, Bartlett notes Aristotle's attempt to "support a certain forgiveness" and to "dampen even the kind of anger likely to be roused by temple-robbing and the like (1374b25–29)." Aristotle intends then to "alter ordinary opinion" through a rhetorical reasoning present in the *Art of*

Rhetoric itself. Bartlett finds this to be “one of the relatively rare places in the *Rhetoric* where Aristotle seeks not just to record ordinary opinion but to leaven it” (249). He makes a similar suggestion concerning Aristotle’s treatment of anger, which gives a “fuller picture” of the phenomenon of the passions than the mere practice of rhetoric might require (259).

One must wonder whether these instances of “leavening” *endoxa* are as altogether rare as Bartlett suggests. Early in the *Art of Rhetoric* Aristotle employs an analogy about medicine in order to describe the task of rhetoric. Rhetoric’s work is not to persuade but rather “to see the persuasive points that are available in each case.” Analogously it belongs to the art of medicine “not to produce health but rather to advance health to the extent that a given case admits of it: even in the case of those unable to attain health it is nonetheless possible to treat them in a fine manner” (*Rh.* 1355b8–14). The analogy is clear: just as medicine cannot create health but can bring an individual as close to health as possible given his particular limitations and maladies, so rhetoric cannot produce or force health upon the soul of a listener but can draw a particular audience as close to this as its soul, with all its limitations and possibilities, can allow. As arts, both rhetoric and medicine are constrained insofar as they involve audiences that are limited by nature, habit, and sometimes choice. Yet each can use what is given to promote health of the body (medicine) and the soul (rhetoric) as much as possible (218).

Rhetoric, like its antistrophe dialectic, begins from “accepted opinions” (*endoxa*) as much as Aristotle does in his political writings. It is only by taking these opinions seriously that the rhetorician might lead what is honored towards what is noble, and the philosopher might lead to—and search for—the truth (*Rh.* 1367b11–12). If both rhetoric and dialectic take *endoxa* as their common beginning, is the high wall of separation between them warranted in the mode Bartlett suggests? Aristotle’s treatise points to the reality that dialectic is itself rhetorical, and, hence, that rhetoric by its very nature has ends that cannot be reduced to political utility.

The central word in all of this is *pistis*, the “conviction” that the *pisteis* or “modes of persuasion” foster in one’s audience. Bartlett’s account hints repeatedly that *pistis*, which might also be rendered “trust” or “faith,” is part of the realm of *endoxa* that is necessarily rejected or overcome by the philosopher as a mode of knowing in his pursuit of truth. Truth seems to require the interior repudiation of those commonly accepted opinions that form the foundation of a common life for political animals; the philosopher is a lonely god among men. This understanding is reflected in what I take to be the most

significant theoretical issue with Bartlett's translation: his understandable though troubling decision not to establish in English the connection between the *pisteis* and *pistis*, between what "causes trust" and the "trust" produced in an audience, implicit in Aristotle's Greek. (See xiii for his explanation of this choice). The ultimate question provoked by Bartlett's essay is whether *pistis* as Aristotle understands it is a mode of understanding that philosophy strips gradually from the human heart, or is instead the ultimate foundation of even scientific knowledge, for, as Aristotle says in the *Ethics*, "whenever someone trusts in something in a certain way, and the principles are known to him, he has scientific knowledge" (*NE* 1139b33–35).

If trust is at the foundation of knowledge, both political and philosophic, then might not Aristotle's intention be to expand our notion of reason's domain, and hence, would his account of rhetoric allow for a less tragic understanding of the relationship between the philosopher and his city? After all, Aristotle's account of rhetoric is as rife with references to Homer's musical wisdom as is Plato's critique of his poetry in the *Republic*, which itself is filled with the poetic images of caves, ships, and above all Socrates himself (xi–xii). If philosophy cannot operate without the musical, perhaps the city could be less hostile to philosophy if philosophers with Aristotle's aid better appreciated the importance of musicality to the human soul—the souls of citizens as well as philosophers—as such.

Bartlett's translation of the *Art of Rhetoric* will be of tremendous use to those concerned with the role of speech in politics, theoretical and practical. His attention to precision, beauty, and readability is a gift to his readers, especially those tasked with teaching the young. Bartlett's deed is a reassertion of the importance of speech and truth for impoverished souls whose predominant prejudice assumes the superiority of a materialistic science that would deprive us of the pursuit of wisdom about perennial human questions—questions that begin not from axiomatic principles about the nature of matter, but rather from ordinary human opinions about what is good, just, and noble. Ultimately, *The Art of Rhetoric* is a paean to and cry for a return to a fuller, more human political philosophy for those who are willing to listen and to judge.

