

Influences on aristotle's rhetoric by plato and isocrates



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What does it mean to be human? We are “ decision-making creatures capable of overruling [their] own instincts.” It naturally follows that those tools which enable humans to exhibit these unique characteristics are the most essential to human existence and evolution. For thousands of years, Rhetoric has proved to be this ubiquitous tool. Rhetoric is a device by which humans can explore and explain the otherwise unexplainable and persuade others of the subsequently derived probabilities, all the while integrating emotion and psychology into the process. No other art, science, or communicative tool can match the intellectual potential inherent to rhetoric. Aristotle's work Rhetoric, titled after the exclusive nature of its content, explicates the enigmatic definition of rhetoric in the first book of the three-part series, and suggests ways to employ rhetoric for any conceivable end in the second and third parts. In his opening chapter, Aristotle defines rhetoric as the ability to “ see the persuasive and the apparently persuasive” in any case. Proceeding from this definition, Aristotle explains the means of persuasion, the importance of projected character in persuasion, and the importance of understanding and incorporating the desired end in any case involving persuasion. While the Greek philosopher, Pericles, lived nearly a century before Aristotle published Rhetoric, one the elder's works, “ Funeral Oration,” functions almost flawlessly as a model for Aristotle's theory of rhetoric. Aristotle's emphasis on pathos and ethos as highly useful means of persuasion as well as his prescription for effective epideictic rhetoric seem to be written following the precise form of “ Funeral Oration.” Whether one influenced another is irrelevant; the greater significance lies in the irrefutable, tremendous impact each work imparted on the future of rhetoric.

Aristotle's theory of rhetoric, while unique and original in its own right, is <https://assignbuster.com/influences-on-aristotles-rhetoric-by-plato-and-isocrates/>

rooted in a history of frequent exploration and dissertation on the same topic. Rhetoric existed long before Aristotle divulged its dense content. In fact, humans have relied on rhetoric since the birth of communication as a way to express not only their needs, but their needs fused with their feelings and emotions. As human communication and society became more sophisticated, rhetoric developed accordingly. In ancient Greece for example, society developed in such a way that discourse became the way of business in society and politics. In this society, "social and political contexts emerged that molded speech into certain conventional forms shaped by the psychology and expectation of audiences." As the need for rhetoric in ancient Greek society immediately became evident, many philosophers offered their theories. Plato (427-347 BCE) discussed rhetoric in several of his works, including *Apology* and *Gorgias*. In *Apology*, Plato describes rhetoric as dangerous and implicitly deceptive and dishonest. In his protagonists' opening statement of defense to the judge and jury, Socrates notes that rhetoric employed by his accusers was, while impressively eloquent, not truthful. Plato elaborates on his theory that rhetoric is merely a tool by which any trained or naturally intelligent person can trick any other person. To Plato, rhetoric is a device used for evil and vice. He goes on to suggest that rhetoric masks the truth with flowery language, literary devices, manipulative emotional appeal, and deceptive psychological implications. Plato seems to believe that intellectual discourse sans emotion was more productive of the truth than rhetoric, which naturally incorporated emotion, could ever prove to be. Similarly, in *Gorgias*, Plato again warns about the dangers of rhetoric; however, in *Gorgias*, Plato acknowledges the astounding amount of power in the mastery and correct implementation of rhetoric. In <https://assignbuster.com/influences-on-aristotles-rhetoric-by-plato-and-isocrates/>

Gorgias, when a student of rhetoric inquires about the scope of its power, the teacher responds that rhetoric “embraces...all the other arts!” He goes on to say, “the rhetorician is capable of speaking against everyone else and on any subject . . . in such a way that he can win over vast multitudes to anything, in a word, that he may desire.” Plato’s character recognizes the power of rhetoric and allows its use with the stipulation that “one should . . . make use of rhetoric in the same way as one does of every other sort of proficiency . . . This, one should not employ against any and everybody.” Thus, Plato views rhetoric itself as morally neutral; rhetoric’s potential for evil lies in the intent of the rhetorician. However, on the basis that rhetoric does offer such potential for evil, it should be used minimally and with extreme discretion on the parts of both the orator and the audience. Perhaps Plato’s cautious approach to rhetoric could be explained by his limited usage of it. Plato only discussed rhetoric’s place in judicial affairs. Plato’s belief that rhetoric masked the facts was based on the presumption that “the facts” were the desired end. He did not consider other situations in which rhetoric could be useful, such as deliberation and encomium. Plato’s limited view of rhetoric influenced Aristotle’s theory to an extent; however, Aristotle expanded greatly on Plato’s theory. The views of other philosophers, such as Isocrates, also contributed to Aristotle’s more moderate view of the tool’s potential. Isocrates (436-338 BCE) had a divergent theory of rhetoric. Isocrates taught rhetoric with the intention of producing noble civic leaders. To Isocrates, “Rhetoric...was a powerful tool for investigating [immediate practical] problems—where only probable, not certain, knowledge was available” Isocrates advocates obtaining knowledge of rhetoric for the purpose of creating a functioning society operated by honest, virtuous

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statesmen who would use their knowledge of rhetoric for the advancement of mankind as a whole. He expresses this belief when he says " we should not be able to live with one another" without persuasion and self-expression. Isocrates perceives the sphere of influence constructed through rhetoric in a much more optimistic way than Plato. This optimism is derived from Isocrates' confidence that men would use it for ethical, noble purposes. In one of his many theses, Isocrates states " The man who wishes to persuade people will not be negligent as to the matter of the character... [He] will apply himself above all to establish a most honorable name amongst his fellow citizens." Also dissimilar to Plato's theory of rhetoric was Isocrates' use of artistic modes of language, such as his extensive use of similes and metaphors and even incorporation of audible rhythm that worked in conjunction with the tone or meaning of his work. Also, Isocrates wrote about the systematic construction of a speech. He specifies that a speech must " have a head (introduction), torso (substantial argument), and feet (conclusion)." As a contemporary of both Plato and Isocrates, Aristotle had the unique opportunity to learn from both men and construct his own theory of rhetoric incorporating selected elements of each philosopher's theory. For example, Aristotle clearly borrowed from Plato his theory that rhetoric is morally neutral. In his theory, Aristotle emphasizes the duality of every situation. Aristotle notes that rhetoric, unlike any other art, " reasons in opposite directions" and is " equally concerned in opposite directions." In other words, rhetoric has the potential to serve opposite sides of a single situation with equal proficiency. It was out of this truth that Plato found reason for concern. However, Aristotle was not so concerned about the potential misuse of rhetoric. Aristotle dealt quite a bit more with the nature

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of rhetoric as opposed to the nature of the rhetorician. To Aristotle, as long as a person understood the available means of persuasion in rhetoric, he or she could identify the evil in it and thus not be vulnerable to deception. For example, in a case in which a person is tricked through rhetoric used for evil, Aristotle believed it was a success on the part of the rhetorician at employing the various techniques outlined in *Rhetoric* and a failure on the part of the audience at not fully comprehending rhetoric. Isocrates' theory of rhetoric lent more to Aristotle's theory than Plato's likely did. While Plato limited rhetoric to the court room, Aristotle expanded it to all realms of life. Like Isocrates, Aristotle discussed the various parts of a speech including a clear statement of the subject and a subsequent demonstration of it. Also like Isocrates, Aristotle strongly advocated any available language devices to appeal to a wide variety of audiences. For example, Aristotle advises rhetoricians to supplant euphemisms for offensive words in order to keep the audience content. He says, "[when praising] one should always take each of the attendant terms in the best sense; for example, [one should call] an irascible and excitable person "straightforward" and an arrogant person "high-minded." Plato would have likely thought this to be deceptive, while Isocrates would have likely thought it to be clever. Aristotle's theory of rhetoric incorporated many ideas from the previous theories, but it also introduced new and insightful ideas that seem to be more plausible and certainly more applicable to contemporary rhetoric. Works Cited Aristotle. *Aristotle on Rhetoric*. Trans. George A. Kennedy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. Horwitz, Linda. Lecture. *Western Rhetorical Tradition*. Lake Forest College, Lake Forest IL 19. Oct & 2. Nov. 2005. "Isocrates." Packet for

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