

Rhetoric



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Lawyers have become less interested in Justice and more interested in winning the case. Churches, perhaps most devastatingly, finds ways to interpret the Bible to allow for all types of lifestyles the Bible condemns, in order to be accommodating to themselves and to avoid ridicule. Truth becomes less and less important, and more of a convenient tool that can be used to help the individual. This idea is rampant in today's culture, but dates back much further. The Sophists of ancient Greece were early examples of the loss of the importance of truth and the rise of empty rhetoric.

These Sophists were teachers and public figures who were skilled in the art of persuasion. They originated from those who practiced oral traditions such as poets and public speakers. When the Greek democracy was formed, citizens stepped up to snatch the political power. Naturally, as seen today, those skilled in public speaking and who could make the most promises effectively and persuasively attained and held this power. Those who had the education, the sophists and their pupils, become the holders of all the power. This created a need for sophists and those who could afford had their sons educated by the orators.

Persuasive speaking in itself is certainly no issue; however it becomes problematic when truth is sacrificed for the sake of rhetoric. To uphold the value of truth, however, it needs a definition and groundwork for its importance. According to the Merriam Webster online dictionary, Truth is "the state of being the case; the body of real things, events, and facts". Within the context of the sophists this definition proves valid, because this is the type of truth the sophists violated. The facts of things, and presenting things exactly the way they are promotes the common good.

In the example of a politician the truth of what he will do in office does not always appear the most desirable and may not always gain him the office he is running for. Often politicians, knowing this, make false promises and fabrications and twist the truth to get elected. While this gains them political power, and thus best suits the individual, the vast populous, those whose expectations are not being fulfilled, are left in a worse state with political power in the hands of a leader who can do little more than make empty statements.

For example, the republican presidential nominee in 2012 Mitt Romney, who claimed to hold views against abortion, taxes, and gay marriage: he knew the views he professed would earn him votes and support from conservative voters. However after the fact, he has had changes of heart or simply hasn't taken any action. The Bible also proclaims the importance of truth in Escherichia 8: 16, " These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace;" As a biblical command, the importance of truth is quite clear.

Humans ought to speak truth and uphold its value. Socrates, one of the great ancient philosophers illustrated the importance of speaking truth, " I am one of those who are very willing to be refuted if I say anything which is not true, and very willing to refute anyone else who says what is not true, and quite as ready to be refuted as to refute-I for I hold that this is the greater gain of the two, just as the gain is greater of being cured of a very great evil than of curing another.

For I imagine that there is no evil which a man can endure so great as an erroneous opinion about the matters of which we are speaking". False opinions, according to Socrates, are a great evil, and one that should be avoided, regardless of whether it costs reputation or humiliation, as being refuted publicly is sure to do. Truth in fact, is so precious that it ranks in importance above all else. Manipulation of words is often used to avoid this refutation Socrates speaks of. However accepting refutation holds great value in reaching the goal of truth.

The importance of truth creates a strong case for it to be upheld, but this was not a primary goal of the sophists. Sophists made their entrance into society for the purpose of gaining political power, but teachers and lawyers had influence in virtually every aspect of culture. The Sophists readily and proudly admitted their ability to persuade on any topic. As the rhetorician Georgia put it, " But is not this a great comfort, Socrates, to be able without learning any other arts but this one to prove in no way inferior to the specialists? With the sophist's abilities to win arguments, they were the first to be consulted in legal matters, or whenever citizens needed a quick tongue and wit. Sophists sought to persuade, and considered their art, rhetoric, to be this. In Plat's dialogue the Sophist, this statement is made and is agreed upon by a stranger sophist, " But the art of the lawyer, of the popular orator, and the conversation may be called in one word the art of persuasion. And of persuasion, there may be said to be two kinds, one is private, and the other public. And again in another of Plat's dialogues between Socrates and Georgia, " Now at last Georgia, you have revealed to me, what are you consider rhetoric to be, and if I understand you aright, you assert rhetoric is

a creator of persuasion, and all its activity is concerned with this, and this is its sum and substance. Establishing "Persuasion" as the definition of rhetoric, where truth is lost becomes clear. The rhetorician Georgia admitted in his discussion with Socrates that he taught his students to persuade, not search for truth.

Skills of rhetoric allowed them to win arguments on topics of which they were completely ignorant simply through the tricks of persuasion. This idea of rhetoric came under great fire, as it was admittedly used to persuade without regard to fact. Rhetoricians would debate and persuade people on topics they were completely ignorant of, and would say whatever it took to prove their point. In the debate, Socrates inquired of Georgia: "the rhetorician need not know the truth about things; he has only to discover some way of persuading the ignorant that he has more knowledge than those who know? To which the teacher of rhetoric responded: mimes, Socrates," Georgia openly admits his ignorance of what he persuades, stating it is the only skill you need. With this mindset, facts are a secondary issue; one must only be persuasive in speaking and manner to win a debate or convince an audience. With this regard for truth, the public's opinions of the sophists were rather heated. Those who could afford it sought the sophists as teachers for the children, and were content to hire them when their skills would benefit them.

But according to *Classical Philosophy: An Contemporary Introduction*, they had a reputation similar to the lawyers of today: All were happy to criticize the sophists until they needed their services. Philosophers' opinions of rhetoric and sophistry were far more developed. Prominent among those

opposing rhetoric was the philosopher Socrates. As previously mentioned, Socrates put great value in truth and the seeking of it. He greatly enjoyed debate and argument, and would seek it out as often as possible.

He was infamous for engaging men in debates on topics of which they claimed expertise, and then shattering the discussion and exposing their ignorance. Gorgias, the rhetorician suffered this in his discussion with Socrates on rhetoric. Socrates drew admissions from Gorgias that rhetoric is not just nor is it an art, as Gorgias first described it. They defined rhetoric in the debate thus, "Then Rhetoric apparently is a creator of a conviction that is persuasive but not instructive about right and wrong." Socrates exposed rhetoric as a crafty trick of creating belief, still keeping the audience completely in the dark.

His opinion of rhetoric was this, "Well than Gorgias, the activity as a whole, it seems to me, is not an art, but the occupation of a shrewd and enterprising spirit, and of one naturally skilled in its dealings with men, and in sum and substance I call it flattery. Now it seems to me that there are many other parts of this activity... Rhetoric in my opinion are the semblance off part of politics." Socrates held the strong opinion that rhetoric was little more than the manipulation of the audience's mind, and later on described it as bad".

The philosopher Socrates also fiercely opposed the sophists. He held the opinion that teachers should commit their students to the studies of fact and to develop an art and profession rather than simply learn to persuade. His opening statement in his arguments against sophistry was, "If all who are engaged in the profession of education were willing to state the facts instead

of making greater promises than they can possibly fulfill, they would not be in such bad repute with the lay-public.

As it is, however, the teachers who do not scruple to vaunt their powers with utter disregard of the truth have created the impression that those who choose a life of careless indolence are better advised than those who devote themselves to serious study. " He abhorred the idea that those who lie and disregard truth are better off than those who study fact and use truth to persuade and live by, however this was the philosophy of so many sophistic teachers. The Sophists in his view were outright liars, who proclaim they search for truth but are lying in what they teach.

Socrates does not like the claims that the teachings of the sophists will make men great speakers. He speaks against those who charge great sums for their teaching; because he believes natural ability is what makes men good communicators, saying that they are cheating others of their money by claiming to be able to make great orators out of anyone. Despite the sophists receiving their share of criticism, there was good to their teaching. There is no doubt they possessed great skill. Socrates admits so saying that the sophists' teachings help men who also have natural ability by teaching them how to use their skill most effectively.

Georgia professes power of hitherto when he said: " I have often, along with my brother and with other physicians, visited one of their patients who refused to drink a medicine or submit to the surgeon's knife or cattery, and when the doctor was unable to persuade them, I did so, by no other art but rhetoric. " The skills of rhetoric taught by the sophists were useful in courts

and in other forums. Men such as Socrates and Socrates used rhetoric in the sense of persuasion, for it in itself is not a bad thing. It is a tool, by which either good or bad can be done.

The issue with the sophists comes in when the tool is used for evil: to convince others of something which is not true. A man with rhetoric is like a man with a hammer. The man could use his hammer for good: he could build a house or make repairs or earn a living to support his family. But that man can also use his hammer to destroy. In his hands he holds the power to smash windows, destroy another man's property, or injure another man. The sophists used their "hammer" for whatever served their purpose, which many times resulted in lies and twisted truth.

Sophists appeared and had a significant effect in ancient Greece, UT their techniques and mindsets are still prevalent today. The Sophistic influence can be seen in many aspects of modern culture, quite greatly in politics. Politicians today do not generally carry the reputation of being trustworthy. Candidates on the campaign trail make shining promises that cannot help but trigger at least a sliver of hope in the minds of the voters. Great speeches pave the way to political office. However when these men take office these promises are rarely fulfilled.

In the 2008 election, claims of change and a better future were the battle cry of the democratic antedate. A logo depicting a sunrise graced the car of every blue-leaning voter. The bumper sticker signified new beginnings and a fresh start for the American people. The biggest issue in the debates was economy, and the winning candidate was positive he could solve it. However

the economy at the end of his term was hardly in a better state. He passed the blame by saying it was his predecessor's mess, and that no one could fix it in only four short years. Through rhetoric and proper framing, he won his next election on this platform.

This example of the brilliant rhetorical skill of days politicians sadly represents the modern day sophists. While this political figures platforms and slogans and promises held little truth the public could hardly help but take a liking to the inspiring speeches and promises of hope. This eerily parallels with the ancient sophists. Just like in during the time of the original sophists those who can persuade with words without regard to fact are the ones gaining political power. This issue does not stop, nor does it start with fully grown adults in the real world.

The cycle starts with what is being taught to the younger minds, articulacy in high school debate. Highly valued on college applications, debate is chosen by more and more high school students as a way to round out their high school careers. However it can have dangerous effects. Sophistry and dangerous use of rhetoric again makes an appearance in the activity of debate. Most debate leagues give their students a resolution, and in almost all cases the students do not choose which side they will argue, often arguing for both sides. These types of systems have created an environment where winning becomes the highest goal. With the limited