

Is rhetoric ethical? The relationship between rhetoric and ethic across history and today

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The ancient Greek wall inscription “*Whoever does not study rhetoric will be a victim of it*” testifies to the important role the rhetoric played in classical Greek civilization. The ancient term from which modern word *rhetoric* is derived, originally signified “the art of speech” (from Greek τέχνη ῥητορική, *téchne rhētorikḗ*). Aristotle defines it in the following way: “Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever.”¹ The aim of a successful speech delivered by means of an effective utterance of speaker’s thoughts was then, first and foremost, to persuade the audience in compliance with the intentions of the orator. In ancient Greece, the need to improve one’s speaking skills was conditioned by the requirements of individual defense in court trials but, at the same time, it became an indispensable part of the political discourse within the ancient democracy. Moreover, rhetoric was also cultivated in other areas related to political action, as for instance ideology or later also in diplomacy which presented the political action on international level. The clash between the importance of mastery of the rhetoric on the one hand and its ethical/unethical dimensions on the other very soon became the topic in question for both the rhetoricians and their public. The history of our European civilization offers us many examples of the misuse or even abuse of rhetoric for personal purposes.

That is why, in the history rhetoric has often been overlooked or even completely refused by many thinkers and scholars as an efficient means of manipulation. For these reasons, communicators sometimes purposely deny

¹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I, 2, p. 15.

that they are using rhetoric. However, the most powerful forms of rhetoric are those which hide their own strategies and intentions. Many people accuse others of using rhetoric as if it were not ethical or appropriate, nevertheless, even the condemnation of someone else's rhetoric is itself an act of rhetoric persuading us to agree with their judgment.

On the other hand, there are still quite many of those who believe that rhetoric as a civic art has the power to shape communities, form the character of citizens and greatly effect civic life. The aim of this reflection is thus to examine the role rhetoric has played in our history and to analyze the reasons for which it has been neglected and refused in our culture for several centuries.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF RHETORIC

Rhetoric was viewed as a civic art by several ancient philosophers, in particular Aristotle (384–322 BC) and Isocrates (436–338 BC). In his work, *Antidosis*, Isocrates affirms,

“we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish.”²

By saying so he explains that rhetoric is a constitutional part of civic life in every society and that it has been necessary in the foundation of all aspects of society. Moreover, in his discourse *Against the Sophists* he further argues that rhetoric, although it cannot be taught just to anyone, has a capacity to shape the character of man. Here he states, “Nevertheless, I do think that the study of political discourse can help more than any other thing to stimulate and form such qualities of character.”³

Aristotle, who lived several decades after Isocrates, supported many of his arguments and continued to perceive the rhetoric as a civic art.⁴ In his *Politics* Aristotle writes, “it is clear that the city-state is a natural growth, and that man is by nature a political animal...”⁵ Further he continues,

² Isocrates, *Antidosis* 254, p. 326–327.

³ Isocrates, *Against the Sophists* 21, p. 176–177.

⁴ According to Aristotle, there are three kinds of rhetorical speeches: deliberative, forensic and epideictic, depending on the public settings where they are delivered: “...a member of the general assembly is a judge of things to come; the dicast, of things past; the mere spectator, of the ability of the speaker.” Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I, 3, 1358b, p. 32–33.

⁵ Aristotle, *Politics* I,1, 1253a, p. 8–9.

“man alone of the animals possesses speech. The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure, and therefore is possessed by other animals as well and this speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities.”⁶

In order to be able to express all this on public grounds, the art of speech was of great use. In Aristotle’s view, rhetoric as an art was “the *antistrophos* to dialectic”⁷ – the art of investigating or discussing the truth of opinions. In his *Rhetoric* we read,

“thus it appears that Rhetoric is as it were an offshoot of Dialectic and of the sciences of Ethics, which may be reasonably called Politics. That is why Rhetoric assumes the character of Politics, and those who claim to possess it, partly from ignorance, partly from boastfulness, and partly from other human weaknesses, do the same. [...] Rhetoric is a sort of division or likeness of Dialectic, since neither of them is a science that deals with the nature of any definite subject, but they are merely faculties of furnishing arguments.”⁸

At the same time, he puts an emphasis on the fact that rhetoric is rightly the most difficult art, i.e. art of speech, by which one expresses truthfulness, law and justice through the purity of a simple word of truth; however, dialectic and logic do not always communicate this truth.

Since rhetoric is considered a civic art capable of shaping public opinion, some of the ancient philosophers, including Plato (428–348 BC), criticized it. They claimed that while on the one hand it could be used to improve civic life, on the other, by means of it, speakers could deceive or manipulate with the listeners which had undoubtedly negative effects on the whole city. In fact, the masses were incapable of deciding or analyzing anything on their own and would thus be influenced by the most persuasive speech. Therefore, civic life could be controlled by the one who would deliver the best speech.⁹ If we examine the demagogues of the 20th century, we can easily agree with

⁶ Aristotle, *Politics* I, 1, 1253a, p. 10–11.

⁷ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I, 1, p. 3.

⁸ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I, 2, p. 18–19.

⁹ Plato expounds the problematic of moral status of rhetoric mostly in his dialogues *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*.

Plato, whose ideas about manipulation power of rhetoric are timely even today. On the contrary, the Roman orator Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC) who believed rhetoric to support the republic, argued that this art required something more than a mere eloquence. In his view, a good orator should be an honest man and a person enlightened on a variety of civic topics. He describes the proper training of the orator in his major text on rhetoric, *De Oratore*, modelled on Plato's dialogues. There we read:

“No man can be an orator complete in all points of merit, who has not attained a knowledge of all important subjects and arts. For it is from knowledge that oratory must derive its beauty and fullness, and unless there is such knowledge, well-grasped and comprehended by the speaker, there must be something empty and almost childish in the utterance.”¹⁰

But besides this, for Romans, beginning with Marcus Porcius Cato (234–149 BC), a good orator was *vir bonus dicendi peritus*. On this account, Quintilian states:

“The orator then, whom I am concerned to form, shall be the orator as defined by Marcus Cato, *a good man, skilled in speaking*. But above all he must possess the quality which Cato places first and which is in the very nature of things the greatest and most important, that is, he must be a good man. This is essential not merely on account of the fact that, if the powers of eloquence serve only to lend arms to crime, there can be nothing more pernicious than eloquence to public and private welfare alike, while I myself, who have laboured to the best of my ability to contribute something of the value to oratory, shall have rendered the worst of services to mankind, if I forge these weapons not for a soldier, but for a robber.”¹¹

During the Roman Empire, however, the rhetoric began to gradually lose its political dimension to such an extent that politically engaged rhetoric practically ceased to exist.¹² Nevertheless, in Rome, the rhetoric is enriched in the area of genres; it penetrates into poetry and artistic prose and is itself influenced by their principles of style. Roman rhetoricians developed the didactics of rhetorical theory and practice thanks to which rhetoric became

¹⁰ Cicero, *De oratore* I, 6, 20, p. 17.

¹¹ Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* XII, 1, p. 354–357.

¹² This situation is well reflected in Tacitus' dialogue on rhetoric *Dialogus de oratoribus*.

an indispensable part of the Humanist culture and humanistic education¹³ throughout the European history until modern times.

In the first centuries of the Christian era, rhetoric in Rome was not far from the thinking of Church fathers and ecclesiastical writers. Western Christian authors beginning with Tertullian (160–220) were puzzled about the use of pagan rhetorical style, nonetheless, they would not avoid it in practice. The contents of their works was Christian, yet their style was no less rhetorical than the one which had been codified by classical literature. In other words, while they were advocating the principle “*res, non verba*” instead of “*res verbaque*” which, in practice, meant to acknowledge the priority of expressing Christian truth by a clear and simple language deprived of rhetorical ornaments, one of the typical features of their writings was precisely an excellent prosaic style reflecting the teaching of contemporary rhetorical schools.

During the 3rd and mainly in the course of the 4th centuries, we do not encounter any Western Christian writer who would define the proper Christian style. Saint Augustine (354–430), trained in classical rhetorical schools where as a young man he had used to teach himself, felt the need to reevaluate the moral status of rhetoric and to find a right place for it in the homiletic style.¹⁴ The result of his endeavour is precisely his exegetical writing *De doctrina christiana* (*Teaching Christianity*) where in his fourth book he defines a convenient homiletic style based primarily on the knowledge of the Bible and finds the rhetoric the right place in it. Here he states:

“Rhetoric, after all, being the art of persuading people to accept something, whether it is true or false, would anyone dare to maintain that truth should stand there without any weapons in the hands of its defenders against falsehood; that those speakers, that is to say, who are trying to convince their hearers of what is untrue, should know how to get them on their side, to gain their attention and have them eating out of their hands by their opening remarks, while these who are defending the truth should not? That those should utter their lies briefly, clearly, plausibly, and these should state their truths in a manner too boring to listen to, too obscure to understand, and finally too repellent to believe? That those should attack

¹³ Quintilian’s rhetorical writing *Institutio oratoria* offers not only a well disposed description of the formal framework of ancient rhetoric but also its didactics and the concept of humanistic education. He transforms the former rhetoric from theory and practice of oratory into the theory and practice of the language and communication.

¹⁴ ANDOKOVÁ 2013, 120–121. For more information about the application of ancient rhetoric and philosophy in Augustine’s homiletic style, especially regarding the use of allegory and parables, see also HORKA 2015, 91–100.

the truth with specious arguments, and assert falsehoods, while these should be incapable of either defending the truth or refuting falsehood? That those, to move and force the minds of their hearers into error, should be able by their style to terrify them, move them to tears, make them laugh, give them rousing encouragement, while these on behalf of truth stumble along slow, cold and half asleep?”¹⁵

From these words it becomes evident that the manipulation with masses is not the fault of rhetoric but of the one who is abusing it. That is why the bishop of Hippo understood that the defenders of the Christian truth should, by all means, be capable of using it for good ends, that is for propagating the Christian religion.

Due to the fact that Christianity became the state religion, it turned into an instrument of power over many other nations. Therefore, Christian homiletics is a new source of inspiration for the rhetoric: it fosters the political system of the new Christian states and in the service of the ruling aristocracy it becomes a precept of intellectual communication and thus loses its former civic pathos. After the fall of the Roman Empire, new feudal relationships facilitate the curtailing of public political space. For a long period, the Church takes control over the thinking of broad masses and, at the same time, it takes up the role of a “cultivator” of the rhetoric, first of all for the needs of defending the new religion and then for its dissemination in preaching.

From the very beginning, Christianity as a missionary religion uses the elements of persuasion which existed in ancient rhetoric for quite natural reasons: the success of public defense in court was existentially important for the speaker. Nevertheless, the fact of abusing the argumentation art in order to convert people to the new faith might have become one of the reasons for rejecting the rhetoric by leading modern age thinkers.¹⁶

Medieval rhetoric is marked by its ceremonial character. However, its principles and schemes of thinking are of use also in the contemporary science; especially during the preparation of scientific lectures the medieval scholars follow the rules established by the ancient rhetoricians in the time of Cicero. Rhetoric becomes one of the pillars of the enclosed system of medieval education, while in the foreground of its interest comes the relationship between the text and its recipient, i.e., understanding of the meaning of the text and its interpretation.

¹⁵ Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* IV, 2, 3, p. 201.

¹⁶ However, the first Christian missionary saint Paul of Tarsus consciously avoided the techniques of persuasion established by ancient tradition of rhetoric and dialectic.

The boundary between medieval and modern rhetoric can be determined by two events: in 1416 leading Italian humanists, Poggio Bracciolini, Bartolomeo da Montepulciano and Cincio Romano discovered a forgotten, complete manuscript of Quintilians's *Institutio oratoria* in the monastery of St. Gall, which they found "buried in rubbish and dust" in a filthy dungeon. Five years later, in the cathedral of north-Italian town Lodi, a manuscript of Ciceo's rhetorical works was found. The public reaction to these findings was immense and marked the beginning of modern-day Humanism.

However, the later period of Enlightenment and of significant philosophers-encyclopaedists contributed to a further worsening of the reputation of rhetoric as a discipline necessary for the good functioning of human society. It was reproached for its detracting from rational knowledge. Finally, as a result of this campaign, during the 19th century, rhetoric disappeared from the curricula of many European universities (especially in Germany). The absence, or the breaking of rhetorical tradition, contempting the word, and the uncritical favouring of deeds gave way after all to a crazy mass propaganda of the 20th century.

On the territory of the Habsburg Monarchy, thanks to the intervention of the Empress Maria Theresa (reigned between 1740–1780), rhetoric was compulsorily taught at schools as one of seven liberal arts. But its significance gradually reduced to the area of literature, namely poetics – for the usage of rhetorical figures in order to achieve desired effect on a reader – and eventually for the needs of preparing panegyric speeches. Since it was a part of educational manuals, it substituted pedagogics in a certain sense,

“answering the questions of the division of speech and of the stages of the learning process, of the parallelism of words and things, of the principles of clarity, awareness, and of systematic practice by means of exercises, as well as the questions regarding educational work of the teacher and his personality.”¹⁷

We might say that the rhetoric had, to a large degree, been transformed into stylistics, teachers were asked to take into account the age of pupils when choosing appropriate study materials, and in harmony with this to use appropriate words.

¹⁷ MIKLEŠ 1985, 139.

In this period, Matthias Bel (1684–1749)¹⁸ is one of the most innovative personalities in our country as well as in the wider European context. For the needs of his teaching activity he wrote a Latin textbook of rhetoric (*Rhetorices veteris et novae*, 1716) which was based not on memorising but rather on communication and reading authors.¹⁹ The exercises were enriched by the knowledge of cultural history and geography of his homeland (that time Hungary). Moreover, Bel led his students not only to creating homiletic sermons but also to preparing speeches based on encyclopaedic knowledge.²⁰

In the history of the European education we can observe how, with the limitation of public space, five tasks of the orator (*inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria* and *actio*) were gradually reduced: *actio* becomes a simple declamation, *memoria* changes into tedious memorizing, and, since the topic and contents of the speech are given in advance, *inventio* is also fictitious. The only tasks which have been preserved are those of *dispositio* and *elocutio*; *dispositio* being used when composing letters and essays, and *elocutio* as a formal aesthetic aspect achieved by the usage of learned stylistic ornaments. After the elimination of the political aspect of communication, rhetoric became and in many cases still remains only literary.²¹

ETHICAL DIMENSION OF RHETORIC

Total denial of the freedom of public speaking during political totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century which affected large parts of (not only) the European continent, might be considered the peak of decline of rhetoric. With the spread of mass media and ongoing globalization, however, the need to study rhetoric appears to be more urgent than ever before. British political philosopher John Keane sees a big philosophical problem of the post-industrial society in the so-called *communicative abundance*. Czech philosopher Václav Bělohradský specifies this abundance as

“a society of proliferation of signs, images, utterances and speeches that result in the diminishing of reality. There are many signs but little signified,

¹⁸ Matthias Bel, a Lutheran pastor and polymath from the Kingdom of Hungary, described himself as “*lingua Slavus, natione Hungarus, eruditione Germanus*” (“by language a Slav, by nation a Hungarian, by erudition a German”).

¹⁹ JURÍKOVÁ 2006, 13.

²⁰ HANESOVÁ 2014, 273. We should not lose from the sight the fact that in Europe of that time rhetoric was not cultivated in national languages but in Latin which was obviously inaccessible to broader masses.

²¹ GEISSNER 1974.

many meanings but little significant, many parts but few units, many facts but a few contexts, many copies but few originals, many images but little displayed, many speeches but few agreements, many goals but little sense, many representatives but little represented, many answers but few questions.”²²

He then continues:

“Today’s public space is occupied by an aggressive moloch of the entertainment industry, which pushes out every relevant issue. What we call “culture” are mere cultural events which dispose of their managers, their sponsors, their logos. The remnants of the Greco-Roman-Christian-bourgeois *logos* are consumed on logos by the entertainment moloch.”²³

Moreover, for the citizens of post-Communist countries it is important to note that in the struggle between Communism and Capitalism,

“there has not been a dispute concerning the conflicts of industrial modernity, but an argument about the fact who will be ruling in it. Victory of one side is not thus a solution but only the deepening of contradictions of modernity. Communism was not disarmed by Capitalism, it failed because it had torn up the bonds between politics and civic virtues.”²⁴

In addition to that, anyone who has watched the medial matches of the presidential candidates in the US in 2016, cannot simply overlook the fact that civic virtues and political representatives of the citizens are miles away from each other even outside “post-totalitarian” public space. These and other negative voices raised in history against rhetoric should be understood today more as an effort to point out to problematic side of human interpersonal interaction; i.e., the possibility to abuse to *change thinking of another person* by means of unfair persuasion or even manipulation. In the common communication with other people, especially if one’s personal interests come to play, it becomes the question of man’s ability to recognize the inner motives of their behaviour and consequently correct them in accordance with the ethical principles. As Klapetek notices,

²² BĚLOHRADSKÝ 2009, 10.

²³ Ibid., 14.

²⁴ Ibid., 29.

“persuasion takes part in the private life usually because a man, either consciously or unconsciously, longs for the same opinion of other people around. It results from the fact that people in general consider their own opinions good and right, and so want to impose ‘this welfare’ on other crazy and ignorant ones.”²⁵

Friedrich Nietzsche’s course of lectures together with his philosophical activity was a solitary voice in favour of rhetoric in the last century. Firstly his work found in his country only little acceptance and later, unfortunately, it was misused in favour of the Nazi propaganda. Nietzsche speaks of the rhetorical aspect of a language as of its inseparable constituent. His understanding of rhetoric, his lectures on history of eloquence based on his partial translation of Aristotle’s rhetoric, point to its explicitly moral dimension which was not reflected at the time.²⁶ The tragic events in the 20th-century Europe suggest that the lack of education in the art of speech not only failed to remove the unfair argument from interpersonal communication, but on the contrary, it led to keeping the “ignorant masses” at the mercy of manipulation techniques of mass propaganda that grasped from rhetoric only what it actually needed for its purposes.

Today’s society is exposed to strong pressures on the part of mass media which do not presuppose either a real or a fictitious dialogue with their recipients as it was the case of a good orator in ancient times. The return to rhetoric and argumentation in education might be thus a possible defense against manipulation of public opinion. Rhetorical education focused on the return to ethical principles of argumentation, pointing out the techniques by which one might slip into the manipulation, should be a natural part of educational programs within university disciplines in general.²⁷

CONCLUSION

It was already Plato who was concerned with the moral purity of a speaker. Later, Aristotle considered rhetoric to be rather an art than a science but, on the other hand, he perceived certain methodology in it, i.e. the way how to dialectically elucidate and adequately present the otherwise obtained true knowledge. In other words, the task of rhetoric is not to lead to scientific truth, but rather to assist practically in this process, look for the evidence and

²⁵ Klapetek 2008, 87.

²⁶ Heinen 2016.

²⁷ The need to study rhetoric is demonstrated by a number of monographs devoted to different aspects of rhetoric; in Slovakia, see e.g. Vertanová – Andoková et al. 2015.

convincingly apply the results of this search. Rhetorical skill is thus for Aristotle the third method of searching the truth and solving the problems.²⁸ Similarly to Aristotle, Cicero consistently confirmed the *unity of dialectics and rhetoric*.²⁹ In his view, rhetoric deals with the questions of style, contents and logical structure of the speech. Therefore, it does not only provide a set of aesthetic values and an example of perfect argumentation but, first and foremost, it presents a solution of a particular *socially conditioned event*. That is why it puts special emphasis on general education of an orator.

Accordingly, rhetoric should not deal with the issues that cannot be answered in the course of a speech, this being more the domain of philosophy and science. So rhetoric does not treat “general problems of the world” but rather it focuses on specific individual issues.³⁰ Quintilian accentuates new social dimension of rhetoric: it shifts from pragmatic functions of persuasion to its moralizing and humanizing aspects. Then a rhetor should be a good stylist and dialectician, however, he/she should first of all be a morally good person (*vir bonus dicendi peritus*).

Finally, we would like to conclude that ethics is, in no case, a counterpart to rhetoric but it can be an efficient weapon in the hands both of the speakers and their audience. What makes rhetoric good or bad is the ethical/unethical attitude of the one who uses it. That is why it becomes very important even in modern-day society of mass medial communication.

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²⁸ The first method being the scientific method, the second one being the dialectic method, respectively.

²⁹ Cicero, in his treatise *Orator*, perceives the difference between rhetoric and dialectics in the following manner: “There is a visible difference between a private controversy, and a public harangue; yet both the one and the other come under the notion of reasoning. But mere discourse and argument belongs to the logician, and the art of speaking gracefully and ornamentally is the prerogative of the orator. Zeno, the father of the Stoics, used to illustrate the difference between dialectics and rhetoric by holding up his hand. For when he clenched his fingers, and presented a close fist, was for him an emblem of logic; but when he spread them out again, and displayed his open hand, resembles to him eloquence.” Cicero, *Orator* 32, 114.

³⁰ KRAUS 1981, 59.

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Résumé

Je rétorika etická?
Vzťah medzi rétorikou a etikou v histórii a dnes

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Téma vzťahu medzi rétorikou a etikou nás opätovne privádza do starého Grécka, ktoré sa stalo kolískou európskej civilizácie. Nutnosť rozvíjať rečové schopnosti tu bola podmienená potrebou individuálnej obhajoby počas súdnych procesov a postupne sa stala dôležitou aj v politickom diskurze v rámci aténskej demokracie. Jednako, veľmi skoro sa začali ozývať hlasy takých filozofov ako Platón, ktorí obviňovali rétoriku z toho, že je neetická. V priebehu dejín mnohí vedci a myslitelia rétoriku prehliadali ba ju dokonca aj odmietali, keďže ju považovali za účinný prostriedok manipulácie. Z toho dôvodu komunikátori niekedy naschvál popierajú fakt, že si vo svojich prejavoch pomáhajú práve rétorikou. Rozhodne najúčinnnejšie formy rétoriky sú tie, ktoré skrývajú svoje vlastné stratégie a zámery. Úplné popretie slobody verejného prejavu počas politických totalitných režimov 20. storočia možno považovať za vrchol úpadku rétoriky. S rozšírením masmédií a pokračujúcou globalizáciou sa však potreba rétorického vzdelania v rámci edukačných systémov javí v dnešnom svete naliehavejšie než kedykoľvek predtým. Súčasná spoločnosť je vystavená silným tlakom zo strany masmédií, ktoré často nepočítajú ani so skutočným ani s fiktívnym dialógom so svojimi recipientami, ako to bývalo v antike. Preto sa v závere nášho príspevku snažíme zdôrazniť fakt, že etika nie je v nijakom prípade protipólom k rétorike, ale môže sa stať účinnou zbraňou v rukách tak hovoriacich ako aj ich poslucháčov. Čo rétoriku robí dobrou alebo zlou je etický/neetický postoj toho, kto ju používa.

