A Philosophical Approach to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*


Despite the vicissitudes that afflicted—and afflict—the transmission and pertinence of classical culture, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* has seldom fallen into utter obscurity and disuse. The reason is evident: far more than just possessing historical significance, the *Rhetoric* has never been entirely superseded within the discipline of rhetorical theory as a primary statement of disciplinary knowledge. Since antiquity it has claimed the attention and stimulated the thinking of anyone seriously concerned with persuasion. Cicero, for instance, learned much from the *Rhetoric*; during the Middle Ages there were several translations into Latin and at least one into Arabic; and Hobbes’ *Briefe of the Art of Rhetorique* (1637) was the first English version of Aristotle’s treatise. Since rhetoric long played a central role in European education, Aristotle’s approach to rhetoric contributed fundamentally, often through intermediaries, to this cultural inheritance. This trend has continued into the twentieth century as Chaim Perelman and Kenneth Burke, the two most influential recent theorists of rhetoric, have treated the *Rhetoric* as a source of the first importance and derived from it crucial contributions to their own work. Today in the United States, the *Rhetoric* is sometimes taught in undergraduate college courses on rhetoric, speech, composition, and communication.


Since the rise of classical philology in modern Europe, philologists too have not neglected the *Rhetoric*. Especially since the late nineteenth century, the text, arguments, and historical and philosophical context of the *Rhetoric* have received extensive critical scrutiny. Though a modern, comprehensive commentary has yet to be produced (and given the difficulty of the task there is little reason to expect one soon), there are nevertheless useful commentaries (Cope and Sandys, Grimaldi), one of the best editions of any classical author (Kassel), numerous translations into many languages including an excellent recent annotated English version (Kennedy), and of course scores of books and articles on the kinds of topics that philologists are wont to explore. On many basic problems—e.g., the circumstances of composition; the structure of the whole, especially the relationship of the first two books to the third book; the complicated notions of *topoi* and enthymemes; the place of arousing emotions in view of the primacy of argument—no single view has decisively established itself among the experts. But philologists have clarified the problems and thereby greatly expanded our understanding of the *Rhetoric*.

The situation has been otherwise among philosophers. In the first three centuries after Aristotle, rhetoric and Aristotle's treatise on the subject continued to command attention from philosophers of the various Hellenistic schools. But since antiquity, philosophers have shown an uneven interest in the subject. As Alexander Nehamas notes, this was probably due to the fact that under the influence of Plato's attack on rhetoric they viewed rhetoric as unphilosophical and its associated problems as philosophically uninteresting. But such a view lost ground towards the middle of this century: as philosophers have taken an interest in problems of communication and argument, rhetoric has attracted their attention. Now Aristotle's *Rhetoric* in particular has begun to interest students of ancient philosophy. The *Rhetoric* formed the subject of the twelfth Symposium Aristotelicum (Princeton, 1990), which led to the publication of an excellent collection of essays. A more recent collection, which recycles material from the Princeton symposium and supplements it with other essays, opens peremp-