

## CHAPTER 5

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### THE RELATION BETWEEN DIALECTIC AND RHETORIC IN A CLASSICAL AND A MODERN PERSPECTIVE

In this contribution I will present some characteristic differences between rhetoric and dialectic that appear in the pre-modern tradition and that offer a basis for understanding more recent developments.<sup>1</sup> Then, in light of this historical analysis, I want to characterize some current approaches to dialectic. Finally, I want to maintain that a hybrid conception of dialectic has the virtue of negotiating between logic and rhetoric, or more properly, between strictly propositional views of rationality and strictly instrumental views of persuasion.

#### 1. RHETORIC AND DIALECTIC: SOME TRADITIONAL DISTINCTIONS

I need to begin this section with an important caveat. In what follows, I am going to distinguish between rhetoric and dialectic in terms of some general characteristics. This procedure necessarily oversimplifies a very complex historical development and might encourage the attitude that rhetoric and dialectic are stable disciplines possessing clear, distinct, and neatly opposed features. In fact, no such stability exists.<sup>2</sup> The historical record is one of almost constant change as the identity, function, structure, and mutual relationship of these arts become issues of argumentative contestation. The two are not fixed entities but evolving disciplines defined and redefined by generations of squabbling teachers, and it would be a mistake to think that the differences I note are absolute or essential. What I attempt to do, instead, is to locate some tendencies that mark family resemblances and differences.

In his *De topicis differentiis*, Boethius succinctly articulates one of the most persistent distinctions made in separating dialectic from rhetoric: "The dialectical discipline examines the thesis only; a thesis is a question not involved in circumstances. The rhetorical [discipline], on the other hand, discusses the hypothesis, that is, questions hedged in by a multitude of circumstances. Circumstances are who, what, where, when, why, how, by what means" (1205C). The dialectical thesis — e.g. should a man marry? — is unencumbered by particulars, and thus dialectical arguments focus upon principles of inference per se. On the other hand, the rhetorical hypothesis — e.g. should Cato marry? — must deal with the specific per-

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<sup>2</sup> Mack (1993, 1-14) notes some of the complications in the historical record.

sons and actions that enter into consideration of a social or political situation, and so rhetorical argument must apply principles to actual cases.<sup>3</sup> This distinction in the issues proper to the arts leads to two characteristic differences between them. First, dialectic deals more directly with argumentative procedures than does rhetoric, since rhetoric must consider how such procedures embody themselves in material cases rather than with procedures abstractly considered. Secondly, because the dialectical thesis engages the genus of argument, dialecticians normally treat argumentation in its entirety. Rhetoricians are far more likely to divide argument into different fields or genres and to consider how subject-matter, institutions, and traditions condition the conduct of argument. Or, as my colleague Jean Goodwin (1999) has said: "Where dialectic tries to model argument universally, rhetoric aims only at local usefulness."

So, in the first place, rhetoric and dialectic contrast because the one deals with concrete issues, while the other deals with abstract issues. The second difference I want to note is more complex and has to do with the way that the propositions of the two arts are situated. This distinction can be illustrated by comparing Aristotle's *Topica* with his *Rhetoric*: The *Topica* develops argumentative principles based on how terms connect within and across propositions. Thus, the topics are divided into the categories of definition, genus, property, and accident, and participation in the dialectical game requires considerable technical knowledge about the lore of predicables. The *Rhetoric* does not require such knowledge, since propositions are not broken down into terms, and the proposition itself serves as the atomic unit of argument. Rhetorical argumentation also involves something more than propositional relationships, because, as Richard McKeon has noted, rhetorical arguments must develop not just in terms of their plausibility "relative to their alternatives, but in their plausibility relative to the audience addressed" (1952, 222).

Once again dialectic emerges as more closely connected with "reason" than does rhetoric. Dialectic need consider only the *logos* of argument and can bracket matters of character (*ethos*) or emotion (*pathos*).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, dialectic seems to be rationally autonomous because it proceeds according to its own procedural norms, while rhetoric must answer to the extrinsic demands of the audience. It is tempting to move from these observations to the conclusion that rhetoric has no intrinsic normative standards. A number of informal logicians, for example, offer a sharp contrast between the normative rationality of logic or dialectic and the rhetorical standard of effectiveness.<sup>5</sup> The reasoning here is that since the end of rhetoric is persuasion, and since persuasion ultimately is a matter of pragmatic effect, rhetoric can have only an extrinsic telos — effective persuasion as measured by audience response. But this conclusion misrepresents the position of Aristotle and most other classical rhetoricians, and I would like to pause for a moment and consider whether and to what extent rhetorical art can sustain intrinsic norms.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed account of this distinction and its importance in rhetorical and dialectical argumentation, see Leff (1983).

<sup>4</sup> This point is noted by Tindale (1998) and Johnson (1998a).

<sup>5</sup> As, for example, Johnson (1998a).

Aristotle does stipulate that the audience determines the genres of rhetoric and the end and object of a speech. Yet, he clearly is not thinking about particular and actual audiences; he is working within a typology of audience functions. Thus, in the case of deliberative rhetoric, the audience must make a judgment directed toward future time about the expediency or in expediency of a proposed action; in forensic oratory, the audience judges past fact in order to decide about the justice or injustice of some action; and in ceremonial oratory, the audience acts not as judge but as spectator (*Rhetoric*: 1358a-b). This classification is not simply empirical; it establishes logically proper functions for audiences in different contexts and implies normative standards of obligation connected with the activity of rhetoric itself.

More generally, Aristotle does not define rhetoric in terms of persuasive effect. Instead, he says that rhetoric is the faculty for observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. This position implies a difference between using the art properly and achieving a specific outcome, and Eugene Garver aptly calls this a distinction between what can be done with words and what can be done by words (1994, 22-41). Rhetorical argument, no matter how well constructed, cannot always succeed in achieving its end. Too many chance factors enter into the persuasive situation for the art to control success in any particular case, and so rhetoric cannot always succeed by words. Yet, the art can establish standards for excellence in performance, for what can be done with words, and that standard is connected with values intrinsic to rhetoric. In that sense, for example, political rhetoric can exhibit excellence as a practice that is independent of immediate persuasive effect.

Rhetoricians in the Latin tradition make much the same point when they differentiate the end and the duty of the orator. The end is to persuade through speech; the duty is to speak in a manner suited for persuasion.<sup>6</sup> Judged according to these terms, the orator can fulfil his duty by speaking in accordance with the art without actually achieving an extrinsic end. There is, of course, considerable ambiguity about what it might mean to speak well artistically, and a number of possibilities have been articulated. For Quintilian, the standard for speaking well is ethical; for renaissance humanists, often it is to achieve eloquence in expression; for speech act theorists (see Kauffeld, 1999), it might be to fulfill the obligations imposed by a certain kind of discursive situation; and for other contemporary rhetoricians (see Wenzel, 1998), it might be to demonstrate an enlarged and embodied sense of rationality. Whatever the differences among these conceptions in other respects, all of them posit normative standards for rhetoric.

The issue, then, is not a contrast between a normative art of dialectic and a merely empirical art of rhetoric. Rather, it is a matter of the characteristic differences between the norms associated with both arts. From that perspective, the most obvious conclusion is that dialectical norms are less ambiguous, better focused, and more specific. Rhetorical standards are so much less settled that it is difficult to locate a dominant position. But, at least in the pre-modern tradition, I think that there is a discernable general tendency, and that is a tendency toward a norm of appropriateness. To speak well rhetorically as a matter of art is to demonstrate a capacity to adapt to changing local circumstances. In other words, the circumstantial and

<sup>6</sup> See for example, Cicero, *De inventione*, I.6.

situated character of rhetoric encourages a norm of accommodation and flexibility — a norm connected with *phronesis* or *prudentia*. The more stable context of dialectical argument encourages a norm that more closely approximates abstract rationality.

I have now considered two traditional points of comparison between rhetoric and dialectic, the one having to do with the issues they engage, the other with the norms that they invoke. A third distinction arises from the discursive practices connected with the two arts. Dialectic proceeds through questions and answers between two interlocutors, and the goal of each interlocutor is persuade the other. Rhetoric proceeds through uninterrupted discourse, one speaker addressing many, and the goal is not to persuade opposing speakers but to persuade an audience that does not participate directly in the exchange (see, Boethius, 1205C-1206C).

This is a simple and an apparently superficial difference, but it has a number of important consequences. When associated with a specific academic exercise, as it is for most of its pre-modern history, dialectic is essentially and unavoidably dialogic. A competent rhetorician must invoke premises that the audience will accept and must anticipate objections, but the encounter with the other is not direct. In dialectic, the turn-taking process forces an unmediated interaction. Secondly, since the interlocutors in dialectic engage one another, the process has a private character, whereas rhetoric is necessarily public. Jacques Braunschwig finds this contrast crucial to Aristotle's conception of how the two arts relate to one another: "Dialectic and rhetoric are antistrophic in the precise sense that what dialectic is to the private and conversational use of language (between two people alternatively speaking and hearing, asking questions and answering them), rhetoric is to the public use of language (political in a broad sense) addressed by a single speaker to a collective audience" (1996, 36). It is possible to conceive dialectic in a way that is less directly connected with its origin as a private, conversational exercise, but that origin leaves a strong impression on almost all future developments.

In fact, the private or academic character of dialectical practice fits well with other features of dialectic that distinguish it from rhetoric — most notably the dialectician's tendency to treat argumentation as a more formal and more abstract activity than does the rhetorician. Braunschwig concludes that, at least for Aristotle, the configuration of the two arts follows from their proximity to or distance from the public world: "Dialectic basically is a greenhouse flower that grows and flourishes in the protected atmosphere of the school. The philosopher is able to keep it under intellectual control.... But rhetoric is a plant growing in the open air of the city and public places. This is why it smashes abstract schemas into fragments; it off-handedly makes fun of the most respectable theoretical distinctions" (1996, 51).

This metaphorical and, I suppose, rather rhetorical contrast between the two disciplines leads to the last in my list of characteristic differences — the modes of expression proper to each of them. Rhetorical language is open, expansive, adaptive, and ornamented. Dialectical language is closed, precise, technical, and plain. This is a very common distinction, and it is often treated as though rhetoric simply has something that it can add to dialectic. Dialectic expresses arguments in the blue-collar language of logical functionality; rhetoric does a make-over by ornamenting the verbal exterior.

This view presupposes a dichotomy between language and argument that is alien to the mainstream rhetorical tradition. In the tradition that stretches from Isocrates to Cicero and from there to the Renaissance humanists, content and style, words and thoughts, the aesthetic and the rational are regarded as interconnected parts of eloquence. Rhetorical argument is not simply decoration added to logic. It is a fully embodied expression of reason that is at once accommodated to and also capable of intervening in public situations. Rhetoric, then, imbricates style and argument to achieve evocative and emotional force, and while rhetorical argumentation often uses dialectical principles, it does not add a linguistic veneer to them so much as it transforms them into instruments for public action. The language of rhetoric, therefore, effects a substantive difference between rhetorical argument and its dialectical counterpart.

All told, I have sketched four points of contrast between dialectic and rhetoric: (1) Dialectic deals with general, abstract issues, rhetoric with specific, circumstantial issues; (2) dialectic considers the relationship of propositions to one another and follows norms of logical rationality, while rhetorical argumentation considers the relationship between propositions and situations and follows norms that refer to appropriate social relationships; (3) dialectic proceeds through question and answer, and the interlocutors seek to persuade one another; rhetoric proceeds through uninterrupted discourse, and speakers seek to persuade the audience; and (4) dialectic employs unadorned, technical language, whereas rhetoric accommodates and embellishes language for persuasive purposes.

Set out in these synoptic terms, the contrasts may appear orderly and decisive. But, as I noted earlier, the tradition is not so simple, and the record shows notable instances where scholars have mixed elements I have placed in opposition here, often with interesting and useful results.<sup>7</sup> My schematic is designed only to establish characteristic differences of tendency between the two arts and to function as a rough historical ground for sorting out contemporary issues. The most general of these tendencies, and the main point of this exercise, bears on the relationship of argumentation to social context. Dialectic tends to generate procedures that work autonomously within the practice of the art; rhetoric tends to adjust argumentation to public situations.

Even on this point, I need to issue a caution. This isolated antithesis between rhetoric and dialectic may exaggerate the differences between them and make them appear as categorical opposites. As a corrective, we need to remember that, although dialectic has some affinity with the ambitions of formal logic, it always remains a more interactive and flexible medium of reasoning. Dialectic, after all, deals with argumentation, not disembodied thought, and if it tends to restrict the argumentative encounter according to rational procedures, it also acknowledges the interplay of opposing positions and the presence of speakers who seek to persuade one another. It employs modes of inference that are more responsive to the matter of argument than the apodeictic logic of the Scholastics, and it can never yield to the silent rigor of modern deductive logic. It also derives its premises from items of social belief

<sup>7</sup> For evidence of this, see, *inter alia*, Cogan (1984, 163-194), Mack (1993), and Meerhoff (1988, 270-280).

Dialectic and Rhetoric

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