

A DEFINITION OF "RHETORIC"?

So we see learn from ancient writings that "rhetoric is responsive to the desire of a free people asserting their own personal self-interest". This leads us into exploring some questions that one might already foresee.

Wayne Booth, a rhetorician, in his text, *The Vocation of a Teacher*, 1988, states that as a teacher of rhetoric:

"My first problem lies of course
in the very word 'rhetoric'.

Booth suggest, the term "rhetoric" may pose some problems at the outset because of the various meanings it has acquired. For some people "rhetoric" is synonymous with "empty talk" or even deception". The clichés, "That's mere rhetoric", and "That's just empty rhetoric" are used as insults.

Meanwhile, rhetoric has become an important topic of study in recent years. Its significance to public discussion of important political, social, and even scientific issues has been widely recognized.

Scholars and teachers have expressed great interest in the topic. Many colleges and universities are offering courses in rhetoric, and dozens of books with "rhetoric" in their titles are published every year. Clearly, "rhetoric" arouses mixed feelings. It is both condemned and widely studied; used as an insult and recommended to students as something they should master. What's going on here?

The negative attitude toward rhetoric is not of recent origin. Plato calls rhetoric "foul" and "ugly", and as you will learn, Plato was Aristotle's teacher. One of the earliest and most influential discussions of rhetoric, Plato's *Gorgias*, written in the opening decades of the fourth century B. C. when rhetoric was highly popular in Athens, takes a dim view of the practice.

In this dialogue, the character Socrates, apparently representing Plato's own perspective says:

"Rhetoric is simply a means by which naturally clever people flatter their unsuspecting listeners into agreeing with them and doing their bidding."

Rhetoric bashing continues in an almost unbroken tradition from Plato's day to the present. In 1690, the great philosopher, John Locke, advanced a view that had perhaps been influenced by Plato:

"If we speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats..." (Essay on Human Understanding, 1690)

We could continue with other condemnations of "rhetoric", however, opinion about rhetoric has always been divided.

Plato's criticism of rhetoric were themselves answers to someone else's claims about its power and usefulness. and Locke's view often has been answered as well.

Recent writers have reevaluated rhetoric, and they sometimes have come to surprising conclusions.

For example, Wayne Booth wrote just a few years ago that he believed:

"Rhetoric held entire dominion over all verbal pursuits. Logic, dialectic, grammar, philosophy, history, poetry--all are rhetoric." (The Vocation of a Teacher, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988)

Can Booth be talking about the same rhetoric we heard Plato condemn as "foul" and "ugly" or those elements of eloquence Locke referred to as "perfect cheats"? How is it that rhetoric can elicit such sharply opposed judgments about its nature or value?

Almost certainly part of the answer to this question is found in rhetoric's association with persuasion.

I personally take the position that rhetoric is more than persuasion, however, rhetoric traditionally has been concerned with techniques used to gain compliance from other people. This connection with persuasion is likely at the heart of the various attitudes toward rhetoric,

RHETORIC SOMETIMES IS DEFINED BROADLY AS THE PERSUASIVE USE OF LANGUAGE.

This definition would give a person a reason for interest in, and at the same time suspicion of, rhetoric. We all try to persuade at one time or another. Most of us also have had some bad experiences as the object of someone else's persuasive efforts.

Think of the last time you knew you were being persuaded by a telephone solicitor, a religious advocate in an airport, a high-pressure salesperson, a politician, a colleague, or simply a friend or family member.

Something inside you may have resisted the persuasion effort, and you may even have felt some irritation. But you also may have felt you were being drawn in by the appeal, that you were actually being persuaded.

If the person doing the persuading was employing the techniques of rhetoric, you probably think you have a reason to distrust both rhetoric and the people who practice it.