The Rhetorical Mean: Aristotelian Rhetoric as Mediation of Sophistic and Platonic Rhetoric

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By

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ABSTRACT

THE RHETORICAL MEAN: ARISTOTELIAN RHETORIC AS MEDIATION OF
SOPHISTIC AND PLATONIC RHETORIC

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Aristotle’s Rhetoric has long been a canonical text regarding the subject. One would be hard pressed to find a class on Rhetoric that does not include the study of this book. While important to the field, the ethical consistency of the work has been questioned. Scholars seem to be in disagreement regarding whether Aristotle was consistent with his own ethical standards or whether he aligned strongly with the ethical standards of the Sophists or Plato. In order to attempt a more accurate reading of the Rhetoric, this study conducts a close textual analysis between the Rhetoric and his primary ethical work the Nichomachean Ethics.

This inquiry will attempt to provide an overview of the ethical/rhetorical situation Aristotle existed in as well as demonstrate his own ethical/rhetorical thinking. In order to do so, the ethical standards of the Sophists will be reviewed as well as their works on rhetoric. Furthermore, a general overview of the perception of the group both as a whole and as represented by a few individuals will be considered. Additionally, the ethical
standards of Plato will be represented as well as an overview of his perception of the study of rhetoric. Finally, a background on Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* will be provided as well as an analysis of the ethical schema presented in that work alongside the ideas expressed in the *Rhetoric*. As stated, in response to the questioning of Aristotle’s ethical consistency, this study seeks to evaluate his *Rhetoric* against his own ethical standards. Focusing on the possibility that Aristotle’s theory of rhetoric is a direct response to the ethical polarity that exists before him, the analysis will address the prospect that his theory was meant to find the virtuous mean between the two. If held consistent with the doctrine of the mean and the notion of avoiding excess and deficiency, Aristotle’s theory might attempt to remedy the perceived deficit of effectiveness present in Platonic rhetoric and the excess of style and tactical manipulation present in the rhetoric of the sophists. If this is the case, Aristotle’s rhetoric is not contradictory to his ethics but is an embodiment of his ethical position.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Rhetoric is difficult to define. Many have attempted and many have come to different definitions or understandings of this concept. Whether we are separated on how we define the term: an act, a product, a capacity, an art, associated with persuasion and power, misleading arguments, associated with attempting to identify with another, or inviting another to participate in a viewpoint, one thing can easily be generalized—the study of rhetoric cannot be separated from the study of ethics. This has been recognized from the beginning dialogues regarding the subject of rhetoric and is still continuing today. While modern day society’s rhetorical/ethical concerns focus on many new issues, such as the influx of consumer advertising messages that attempt to get us to buy things we do not need, many issues remain the same. These issues include the ability to defend oneself against a verbal attack—whether personal or legal, or the ability to communicate a position on a subject with another person. While we all participate in the exchange of rhetorical messages, many of us may not have clearly defined or even consciously thought about our ethical position in the exchange of these messages. While most of us remain unconscious to our stance on this relationship, a few have addressed this link directly.

Regarding classical Greek rhetoric, it appears that the ethical positions of Plato and the Sophists are quite clear and generally agreed upon. Plato was a moral absolutist—there is only one Truth, one Good, and only those who have seen the Forms were capable of knowing the Truth. The Sophists, on the other hand, were generally relativists—they did not believe in an ultimate Truth and they perceived situations with a level of flexibility that allowed for human and situational variation. Furthermore, they
tended to be interested more in effectiveness in immediate situations as opposed to philosophical pursuits. Even though he wrote the most explicit works outlining his ethical theory, Aristotle’s ethical position toward rhetoric is not generally agreed upon. Some scholars have viewed Aristotle as aligning highly with his mentor Plato and approaching all things that distract (in Plato’s view) from the Truth to be despicable. Other scholars have perceived him to highly align with the Sophists considering he did recognize subjective and contingent truth and taught stylistic techniques. Beyond these varied opinions and interpretations, Aristotle has also received attacks stating that he was teaching his students techniques that he thought were unethical (Poster, 2002). Other attacks include calling him a ‘Sophist’ in a pejorative sense, stating that his work was “a rampant instance of Plato’s worst nightmare” (Wardy 1996, p.79), a clear embracing of the evil-lover model of rhetoric and teaching his students how to use rhetoric for deceit (Marsh, 2001). In order to address this controversy, this study will analyze both his ethical and rhetorical work and seek resolution regarding consistency between his ethical stance and rhetorical teaching.

To begin, very little is known about Aristotle as a person. We know he was born around 400 B.C.E in a small Greek city outside the Macedonian kingdom. He moved to Athens and joined the Academy where Plato taught. While his early years reflected a strong Platonic influence, his later years demonstrated much less idealistic thought and became much more pragmatic. After years at the Academy, numerous treatises such as Categories, Topics, Poetics, and many others, and the perception that he was Plato’s greatest student, he was unable to take the head of the Academy position after Plato. After Plato’s death, King Philip persuaded him to move to Macedonia and tutor his son—
who we know best as Alexander the Great (Kennedy, 2007). While we may not have detailed accounts of his life we do know this—during his time in Athens he was faced with a clear and strong polarity between the rhetorical/ethical beliefs of Plato, and of the Sophists.

Considering that Aristotle was Plato’s student, it is natural to suspect that his teachings—especially his earlier works—would have some semblance to his mentor’s. W.K.C. Guthrie (1971) acknowledges that some of the similarities they share include a teleological viewpoint as well as generally adhering to the notion of realism (as opposed to nominalism). Another aspect where they apparently share similarities would be in their open dialogue about their dislike towards the Sophists. John Poulakos (1983) states, “it is well known that Plato did not hold the Sophists in high esteem” (p. 215) and “seldom misses a chance to attack their rhetorical practices, to ridicule their promises to prospective students, to condemn their teaching methods, and to dissect their claims beyond recognition (1995, p.74). In a similar fashion, in Aristotle’s early works such as the Gryllus and Sophistical Refutations, he condemns the positions of the Sophists stating that they are “one who makes money from apparent and not real wisdom” (Sophistical Refutations 1.1) and has “the appearance of wisdom without reality” (Sophistical Refutations 1.2). In these statements he argues that the Sophists only seek to study speech for the manipulation of others and financial gain. These types of statements have led scholars (Cooper, 1935; Cope, 1877; Garver, 1994; Jacob, 1996) to perceive Aristotle as being as “anti-sophistic” as Plato. Furthermore, Lane Cooper (1935) even states that Aristotle is “absolutely free from the Greek Sophistical Tradition” (p.15). While these
scholars have placed Plato and Aristotle at one end of the spectrum, many also view Aristotle as heavily aligned with the Sophists.

The previously expressed attack directed at Aristotle relates to his differences from Plato and perceived similarities to the Sophists. His lack of interest in searching for universal Truths, acceptance of subjectivism and contingent truths, and teaching of stylistic techniques have caused many scholars to doubt Aristotle’s alliance with his teacher and stated that he closer resembled the Sophists. While not containing the same emotional fervor as seen in the attacks against Aristotle mentioned prior, other scholars have also perceived similarities between Aristotle and the Sophists. Furthermore, scholars such as John Poulakos and W.K.C. Guthrie have seen Aristotle’s work to either resemble or to at least be informed by Sophistic orators at the time. While scholars have perceived Aristotle having shared similarities with either the Sophists or Plato, there are many aspects that set him apart from both.

One of the first areas where Aristotle sets himself apart is the treatment of the Sophists. While his earlier work might have reflected a strong dislike for the group (similar to Plato), his later work demonstrates a level of consideration for the talent of the Sophists. John Poulakos (1995) states that while Plato condemned the Sophists and focused on their lack of truth-value in their arguments, Aristotle was more focused on the logical correctness (or incorrectness) of their arguments. He felt that Aristotle recognized their contribution to Greek society but that their reasoning needed to be corrected. Poulakos (1983) further challenges the traditionally held view and questions the impact that the Sophists might have had upon the formation of Aristotle’s theory of rhetoric. While he does recognize that Aristotle and the Sophists differ in many ways, he views
Aristotle as in debt to the Sophists both historically and conceptually and without their presence he would not have been able to form his theory. Without either side of the polarity, he would not have been able to search for a virtuous mean in regards to rhetoric.

According to W.K.C Guthrie (1971), another distinction between Aristotle and Plato is that Aristotle does not possess the same level of moral absolutism as Plato. According to James Hyslop and Charles Higgens (1903) Plato’s ethical stance was that morality was absolute and in no way affected by humans. He believed that values existed in their absolute forms and that only knowledge of these forms would be true. Everett Lee Hunt (1961) stated that for Plato, the true rhetorician would have such high moral purpose that he will not say anything that is not “acceptable to God” (p. 68). Rather than absolutes, Aristotle focused on the notion of “becoming good men” as opposed to “knowing what virtue is”. In regards to rhetoric specifically, George Kennedy (2007) states that Aristotle perceived rhetoric to be morally neutral; it could be used for good or for evil. In regards to how Aristotle instructed his students, Kennedy (2007) states, “He wanted his students to understand the dangers of Sophistic rhetoric as dramatically portrayed by Plato, and at the same time to be able to defend themselves and be effective if they engaged in public life” (p. xi). In this sense, Aristotle’s rhetoric represents a “happy medium” or a mediation between the extremes of Platonic and Sophistic rhetoric. The students are expected to have morality in mind but recognize that without effective speaking that message will not be able to reach people.

While there are inconsistencies regarding Aristotle’s ethical beliefs and his rhetorical instruction, a few scholars have attempted to link the two works. Rowland, R.C. and Womack D.F. (1985) focused on the consistency found between Aristotle’s
ethical, rhetorical, and political thought. They focus on the requirements placed upon the rhetor as established by Aristotle, the notion of rhetoric as art or product, the political ramifications of rhetoric, and a comparative analysis of his ethical work. After their research they concluded that Aristotle’s political/rhetorical views did not place the high level of moral importance that theorists such as Plato placed upon them, in so much that Aristotle’s political/rhetorical teaching had a different aim—to educate the public on broad current political matters and help guide them to a better understanding of the truth. His theory does not see people as useless and corrupt and in need of divine guidance. Rather, they work together in order to achieve a higher understanding. While never leading people toward deceptive messages, the political use of rhetoric does not violate the outlines of his ethical theory. Scholar Lois S. Self (1979) additionally sought a connection between Aristotle’s rhetorical and ethical work observing the role of phronesis in his rhetorical theory. She argues that the concerns of the phronimos and a rhetor are “strikingly similar” (p. 131), the examples of excellence in oration are expressed in characteristics possessed by the phronimos as expressed in the Nichomachean Ethics, and that the relationship of the phronimos to the public, and the rhetor to the public are both described in a similar manner throughout the two works. While not directly stated, she implies that his rhetor is a phronimos and therefore demonstrates consistency between the two works. Finally, Richard C. Huseman (1970) attempted a similar exploration to this study utilizing his notion of the doctrine of the mean in relation to his rhetorical theory. Here, he focuses strictly on Aristotle’s discussion of style in relation to the doctrine of the mean and concludes that consistencies lie in the explanation that the application of any art requires a mean or a level of
appropriateness in order to attain virtue. Regarding rhetoric, virtue is in clarity, conduct, rhythm, and having the “right reason” (p.121) and therefore demonstrates further consistency between the two works.

While the above studies are informative to students, scholars, and this inquiry, further investigation is needed. Even after these studies were published, Aristotle’s ethical consistency in his rhetorical teaching is still under question. Either being perceived as his instructors’ best and most morally faithful student or his worst nightmare is a problem. A similar issue perceives him as either strongly anti-sophistic or completely aligned with the Sophists. Furthermore, stating that a scholar of many subjects, including ethics, is teaching tactics that he believes to be unethical is a strong accusation. Besides labeling Aristotle as Platonic, Sophistic, or intentionally unethical, another major issue is that his ethical stance toward rhetoric is being evaluated by standards other than his own. He did not follow the ethical standards of Plato or the Sophists and fortunately laid out treatises of his own on the subject. Aristotle’s ethical works demonstrate that, for him, virtue was found somewhere between two extreme poles. This “somewhere” is not just anywhere, but an appropriate level determined by one with practical wisdom (among other traits discussed later). Rather than evaluating him against absolutism or relativism, his rhetorical work needs to be evaluated against his own notion of the mean. Not only is the consideration of evaluating him against his own standards a courtesy which needs to be extended to all if we wish to understand them better, but it is also necessary in order to understand his canonical text *Rhetoric* and accept the possibility of a proposition for an alternative ethical standard in rhetorical situations.
Through a close comparative textual analysis, this study will focus on themes of avoidance of excess or deficiency, appropriateness, avoidance of vice, practical reasoning, and intermediacy that have been expressed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Rhetoric*. It will primarily be focusing on levels of consistency and/or inconsistency between the two teachings. Furthermore, this study will observe instances where vice, excess, defect, and other non-appropriate examples are provided to observe if they are examples of Sophistic or Platonic rhetoric. This study hopes to demonstrate that when compared to his own ethical standards, Aristotle’s rhetoric was not only consistent with his ethics but actually embodied them throughout his rhetorical teachings. Furthermore, this study hopes to support the argument that his rhetoric actually provided a mediation between deficit of effectiveness present in Platonic rhetoric and the excess of style and tactical manipulation present in the rhetoric of the Sophists.

Aristotle’s ethical writings are presented to us in three works: the *Great Ethics*, the *Eudemian Ethics*, and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The Great Ethics (also known as *Magna Moralia*), consists of two books and is largely recognized as an extract or a series of lecture notes (see Gomperz, 1964; Guthrie, 1998). Gignon (1959) states that the perception of the *Great Ethics* is “in parts a badly worn handbook” in which the usefulness is typically found in aiding the understanding of the other two ethical works (as cited in W.K.C. Guthrie, 1998 p.336). The *Eudemian Ethics* are largely viewed as incomplete, as lecture notes, the works of—or at least highly edited by—Aristotle’s disciple Eudemus of Rhodes, as an authentic work of Aristotle that reflects an earlier and less developed philosophy than the *Nicomachean*, or a combination of the previously mentioned (Spengel, Grant *Ethics*, 1,21; Gomperz, 1964; Guthrie, 1998). One aspect
regarding the *Eudemian Ethics* universally agreed upon is that books 5-7 of the *Eudemian* were lost and replaced with the corresponding chapters from the *Nichomachean*, lending one reason why the *Nichomachean* is agreed upon to be the most complete version of Aristotle’s ethical works available. Gompers (1964) states, “the Eudemian version exhibits certain individual peculiarities, especially a stronger emphasis on the religious element; the Nichomachean version is that one with which the half-dozen quotations from himself made by Aristotle in his other works are found to correspond exactly” (p.240). The ‘peculiarities’ of the *Eudemian* version and consistencies present in the *Nichomachean* further encourage the use of the *Nichomachean* for this inquiry. George Kennedy (2007) states that it is in the *Nichomachean Ethics* that Aristotle “reveals his mind and values fully” (p.1). While still viewed as refined, edited, or possibly embellished lecture notes, the *Nichomachean Ethics* is largely viewed as the most authentic and most complete of Aristotle’s ethical writings and therefore will be used as the basis for this study.

Choosing the *Rhetoric* as a text in order to understand his theory or teaching on the subject was an easier choice. While Aristotle had written other works on the subject including *On Sophistical Refutations* and *Gryllus*, the *Rhetoric* is the most developed, the most focused directly on the subject of rhetoric, and also the one that has survived the most through the ages. Furthermore, the text is viewed as canonical and students from many disciplines study it to understand his thoughts on oration, writing, character, ethics, and argument among other subjects. For the reasons listed above, those are the two texts this study will be focusing on.
The study is faced with a few limitations. First, not all of the works that will be reviewed—namely Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*—are in complete form. Beyond being in partial form, controversy surrounds whether or not the *Rhetoric* was handed down as Aristotle had intended or whether predecessors edited and compiled the work as they saw fit (McAdon, 2004). Furthermore, this study will be approaching texts that will have been translated from their original language. The translation might skew one word to have a slightly different meaning than what it would have had originally. Additionally, this is a textual analysis and like any is open to subjective approaches. Hopefully, by clearly stating what texts and themes will be analyzed the subjectivity of the research will be well-defined. A note regarding this study, in this paper I will be largely using masculine pronouns—he, him, man, and others of this nature. Given the historical context, the texts were intended for a male audience and had very few (if any) mentions of women in them. As such, I will not be altering these works or projecting them further than they intended to. Of course, the study of rhetoric is not limited to any gender nowadays (or at least should not be); but it was largely then.

This inquiry will attempt to provide an overview of the ethical/rhetorical situation Aristotle existed in as well as demonstrate his own ethical/rhetorical thinking. In order to do so, the ethical standards of the Sophists will be reviewed as well as their works on rhetoric. Furthermore, a general overview of the perception of the group both as a whole and as represented by a few individuals will be considered. Additionally, the ethical standards of Plato will be represented as well as an overview of his perception of the study of rhetoric. Finally, a background on Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* will be provided as well as an analysis of the ethical schema presented in that work alongside the
ideas expressed in the *Rhetoric*. As stated, in response to the questioning of Aristotle’s ethical consistency, this study seeks to evaluate his *Rhetoric* against his own ethical standards. Focusing on the possibility that Aristotle’s theory of rhetoric is a direct response to the ethical polarity that exists before him, the analysis will address the prospect that his theory was meant to find the virtuous mean between the two. If held consistent with the doctrine of the mean and the notion of avoiding excess and deficiency, Aristotle’s theory might attempt to remedy the perceived deficit of effectiveness present in Platonic rhetoric and the excess of style and tactical manipulation present in the rhetoric of the sophists. If this is the case, Aristotle’s rhetoric is not contradictory to his ethics but is an embodiment of his ethical position.
Chapter 2: The Ethical and Rhetorical Theory of the Sophists

The Sophists, more than any other group or individual have excited scholars regarding the study of the ethical implications in classical Greek rhetoric. W.K.C. Guthrie (1971) states, “whatever we may think of the Sophistic movement, we must all agree that no intellectual movement can be compared with it in the permanence of its results, and that the questions which the Sophists posed have never been allowed to lapse in the history of Western thought down to our own day” (p. 3). They have been called “provocative” and as such produce either strong defenders or detractors (Poulakos 1995 p.1). Strong critics of the Sophists view the group as superficial, destructive, corrupt, morally indecent, and while professing to teach value actually stray their students from any education on the subject (See Kennedy 1980 and Guthrie 1971).

This negative perception was the viewpoint largely held by scholars until the 1930’s. Olian (1965) states, “the intellectual climate produced by World War II has produced a singular shift in interpretation. Since Platonism has at least the potential for justifying a totalitarian state, the revulsion produce by the fascist forces has led to an intellectual rejection of the Athenian philosopher” (p.65). Considering Plato’s propositions represent much of what was despised during that period, a natural tendency was to be in favor of the propositions of his enemies—the Sophists. Furthermore, the Sophists’ thought is closer to current trends in thought proposing more relative or constructionist perceptions on reality as opposed to absolute truths. Proponents of these positive perceptions suggest that fragments show a concern for virtue, that the group were advocates of a democratic society, and that they taught practical skills in a time when it was desperately needed (see Guthrie 1971, Kennedy 1980, and Poulakos 1983, 1984, 1995 [look up Havelock and Popper too in support].
For the purposes of this study, the current reputation of the Sophists is not as important as the perception of them at the time of Aristotle. Current interpretations will be utilized when needed to assist in the development of a concept or when referring to works that have been lost, but considering this study is interested in ethical schema presented before Aristotle we will attempt to focus on the views of the Sophists held in Athens at that time. To our knowledge, those recognized as Sophists did not write works explicitly outlining their moral and ethical stance. Much of what they have composed has not survived in complete form, and many of the works demonstrating their ideas could be strongly biased (considering they were largely recorded by their greatest critic Plato). However, many of the fragments or complete works available allow insight into individual ethical suppositions as well as themes consistent with the group. While it is impossible to fully unveil an accurate depiction of the views held towards the Sophists during Aristotle’s time, this chapter will focus on the historical situation that both prompted and encouraged the development of the Sophists, a discussion of the unifying themes consistent with the group supported by theories of a few prominent Sophists, and an overview of Aristotle’s opinion of the Sophists constructed by direct mentions of the group or individuals recognized as Sophists throughout his two works.

To begin to describe the Sophists it is important to understand the historical situation that prompted their emergence and importance. John Poulakos (1995) states, “when situated culturally, the Greek Sophists can be shown to have been not only products but also catalysts of their age, an age that facilitated their emergence, adopted many of their views and practices, and eventually initiated their denigration for centuries to come” (p.12). One of the major changes that occurred in Athenian culture that prompted the need for such teachers was the shift from aristocracy to democracy. This transition to democracy allowed for the participation of the
citizens of Athens in the political arena, and created a heightened sense of political and civic consciousness (Poulakos 1995). Not only did it allow for civic participation, the hostile climate of Athens at the time made it necessary to learn how to defend oneself in court. Bertrand Russell (1945) describes the judicial system at the time as such:

“Judges and most executive officers were chosen by lot, and served for short periods; they were the average citizens, like our jurors, with the prejudices and lack of professionalism characteristic of average citizens…. The plaintiff and defendant, or prosecutor and accused, appeared in person, not through professional lawyers. Naturally, success or failure depended largely on oratorical skill in appealing to popular prejudices” (p. 74-5).

In a climate such as this, it was of extreme importance for those at risk of accusation to acquire forensic skill. The new necessity for the ability to speak effectively prompted the need for instruction; an education the Sophists took up as their primary teaching.

Another aspect of the historical situation that prompted similarities shared between the Sophists were the dissatisfaction with the theories of the Presocratics. Robin Waterfield (2000) called the Sophists “heirs of the Presocratics” (p. XXVII), which is not to say that they shared the same concerns as the Presocratics (scientific advancements and metaphysics), but rather the rejection of their theories is a unifying theme amongst the Sophists. H.D. Rankin (1983) states that “Aristotle (Soph. Elench. 173a, 7) says that people in the old times were concerned with the confrontation between nature and law. There is no reason to think he is speaking of anybody earlier than the Sophists” (p. 82). Waterfield (2000) continues in stating “once the Presocratics had made the world at least potentially comprehensible to the human mind, a humanist or anthropocentric emphasis on the importance of human beings was inevitable” (p. XXVII). The Sophists focused on moral, social, and political philosophy and had a strong interest in the capability and achievements of people. Furthermore, perceived flaws in Presocratic theories
resulted in a strong sense of skepticism among the group; a “mistrust of the possibility of absolute knowledge” (Guthrie 1960, p. 66). This mistrust of concrete notions regarding the gods, nature, and other forms of absolute knowledge is the main focus of the separation of thought between not only the Sophists and the Presocratics, but also that of the Sophists and Plato, and to some extent Aristotle. Furthermore, this skepticism strongly influences their ethical position and is characteristic of the group as a whole.

While difficult to define or attach a unified set of tenets upon the group, there are themes that tend to be characteristic of those called Sophists. The term “Sophist” derived from ‘sophos’ (wise) and is best translated to ‘skilled craftsman’, ‘expert’, and often implied ‘teacher’ (for more see Freeman 1949, Guthrie 1971). George Kennedy (1980) describes the Sophists as;

“self-appointed professors of how to succeed in the civic life of the Greek states. Most were not themselves Athenians but the young men of Athens constituted their chief clientele. They taught primarily by public or private declamation of speeches which presented in striking form their ideas and their techniques of proof” (p. 25).

While they taught many subjects idiosyncratic to the instructor, one characteristic which is shared throughout the group is a strong interest in rhetoric. Their lessons on rhetoric consisted primarily of memorizing and reciting prewritten speeches, exercises in declamation including having to create and deliver speeches on a given topic, and mock trials (for further information see Kennedy 1980). This type of education prepared those at risk of prosecution to be able to defend themselves in front of the assembly. Olian (1965) states, “if one must generalize about the Sophists as a group, it would be most logical to say that they provided or accepted an epistemology which would serve a democratic society” (p.90). While certain Sophists including Protagoras and Gorgias are often viewed as contributing to philosophical thought, others are strictly known for teaching these types of devices in argument and emphasis in order to aid those
who have to defend themselves or plead cases publicly (Kennedy 1980). As a group, they tended to be relativists, believed that decisions were based in various circumstances and perception, and that virtue was viewed as the result of a collective judgment between right and wrong. They had little to no interest in absolute truths (except refuting their existence) and focused on deliberating issues that were in need of immediate attention as opposed to chasing what they perceive as questions without attainable answers.

This change started a strong shift from the beliefs commonly held prior (and continuously held by Plato); that truth and knowledge existed in absolute form and was handed down by the Gods or found in nature. While this belief system states that Truth and Knowledge are universal and objective—they exist in concrete stable forms outside of the individual or community—the Sophists began to take a reflexive turn focusing on individual perception, social construction, convention, and a shift away from focusing on deities. Guthrie states (1971), “doubts about the order and stability of the physical world as a whole, and the dethronement of divinity in favor of chance and natural necessity as causes, were seized upon by upholders of the relativity of ethical conceptions and became part of the basis of their case” (p.59). The Sophists transitioned the focus of inquiry from \textit{physis} (nature, reality) to \textit{nomos} (what is thought to be right, custom, convention, tradition, and law); both of which were perceived as strictly opposed and mutually exclusive. Guthrie (1971) further outlines the notion of \textit{nomos} in regards to its moral and political influence as “(i) usage or custom based on traditional or conventional beliefs as to what is right or true, (ii) laws formally drawn up and passed, which codify ‘right usage’ and elevate it into an obligatory norm backed by the authority of the state” (p. 57). While societal norms and enforceable laws are not perceived as one in the same today, they were predominately seen as separate at that time. As stated, prior to the Sophists, many Greeks believed that laws were
handed down and enforced by the Gods so the notion that the laws and customs were constructed by people and communities created strong disagreements with the ethical position held by many of the Sophists (holding them as deviant or amoral). In order to demonstrate this transition, examples from some of the more prominent Sophists will illuminate theories that were both influential to the group as a whole as well as arousing strong opposition amongst critics of the group.

Regarding the dismissal of the gods, one of the passages which exemplifies this shift characteristic to the group is from one of the most well known and highly discussed Sophists—Protagoras. He states, “I have no capability of knowing about the gods, whether they are or are not, nor what they are like in appearance. There are many impediments to knowledge in this subject, including the obscurity of the subject matter and the brevity of life” (Diogenes Laertius 9.51; Eusebius, Praeparatio Evangelica 14.3, 7 [found in Rankin p.32]). In this passage, one can see that his acknowledgement of the gods demonstrated the importance of the subject to many at the time, but knowledge of them was not imperative to either his focus of inquiry or informed his position on morality. He appeared to feel that the subject was too abstract to worry about and considering the limited time we all have in life we should focus on more attainable epistemological pursuits. This dismissal demonstrates a strong shift regarding ethics and morality being determined and handed down by the Gods to a notion that morality was constructed by individuals and communities. This is again indicative of the shift from physis to nomos—from the ultimate ‘Good’ to what is socially ‘right’. Furthermore, Critias “regarded the gods as a social function invented to police the incorrigible instincts of human nature (Sisyphus cf. Chapter 3, found in Rankin 1983, p.139). While many Sophists were not atheists in the way we understand the word today, many of them defined them as different than what was
typically/prior understood or just did not bother with the subject. Not only did the disbelief in universal laws inform their stance towards the governance of people, it also informed their understanding of reality.

Beyond the focus on more community centered questions, another unifying theme amongst the Sophists are relativistic concepts of truth and reality. One example is also provided by Protagoras. He states, “of all things the measure is man, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, they are not” (Plato Theaetetus 151e-152a). This is typically referred to as “man is the measure of all things” and demonstrates that—for Protagoras—truth and knowledge to a matter of perception; ones persons concept of truth was as accurate as the next.

While relativism and perception describes that ‘truths’ exist but are relative to the individual, certain Sophists have been viewed as seeing truth as nonexistent. In On Nature, or the Nonexistent, Gorgias writes to prove three main points: “(a) that nothing exists; (b) that if anything did exist, we could not know it; (c) that if we could know anything, we could not communicate it to our neighbor” (Guthrie 1960, p.68). As opposed to relative truth expressed by Protagoras, Richard Bett (1989) states that for Gorgias,

“The point is much simpler; there can be no such thing as knowledge, or successful reference. Knowledge and reference are not relativized, but absolutely denied…the position is skeptical (in the modern sense) rather than relativistic, in that it negates a very basic, pre-reflective assumption—the assumption that things ‘are’” (p. 150-151).

In this sense, there can be no true statements considering all are false—language is not connected with anything outside of itself so attempting to participate in speaking for anything beyond speaking is a fruitless endeavor. Without a reference for truth or virtue that is outside of us and comprehensible, Gorgias has been perceived as not caring what moral results his teachings
encourage and therefore proposing a base education without ethics which only concerned what is on the surface. The true adoption of a nihilistic position is difficult to imagine and has potentially contributed to the varied interpretation of piece. (INCLUDE OTHER INTERPRETATIONS) However, it is easy to see how this would also contribute in shifting his and many other Sophists towards an education based on language, style, and a focus on convention and nomos.

While not consistently perceived as a Sophist, another figure worth considering who has a strong interest in the subject of rhetoric and a disinterest in the search for objective knowledge is Isocrates. His standing as a Sophist or anti-sophistic is under contention. Some scholars perceive him to be a Sophist, a second-generation Sophist, or against the Sophistic tradition. For example, Gillis (1969) stated that Isocrates’ Against the Sophists “is a declaration of war, nothing less” (p.321) against what was seen as Sophistic rhetoric—winning without regard for the truth. In this case Isocrates is seen as aggressively anti-sophistic. However, Jaeger (1944) stated that Isocrates was a “representative of the sophistic and rhetorical culture which had flourished in the Periclean period,” (p.49) and as “a genuine sophist... who brought the sophistic movement in education to its culminating point” (p.48). Here we can see Isocrates being painted as not only in favor of the Sophists but one himself. The disagreement is understandable; he is in favor of certain sophistic practices and against others. Poulakos (1995) states:

“He [Isocrates] adopted their [the Sophists] professional practice of teaching rhetoric for money, posited that rhetoric in itself is neither beneficial nor harmful, and sided with the argument that responsibility for rhetoric’s misuse or abuse lies with the practitioner, not the teacher. Like the Sophists, he glorified rhetoric’s capacity to bring and hold people together, to accomplish what physical power cannot, and to invent and satisfy human desires” (p. 113).
While these and others similarities (see Poulakos 1995, and Kennedy 1980 for further examples) demonstrate understandably why some would place him in the sophistic tradition, he also demonstrates traits inconsistent with the Sophists. Isocrates had a stable school and was a native to Athens, both inconsistent with other Sophists who were largely nomads. While the Sophists were largely characterized as playful and flamboyant, Isocrates was not characterized as such. While he did teach his students to memorize and practice written speeches (like the Sophists), having a school, and the systematic style of education he created was different from the tutorial style of the older Sophists (Poulakos 1995). Furthermore, while he did not believe in seeking absolute truths he showed concern for virtue stating in the *Antidosis*, “I hold that man to be wise who is able to by his own powers of conjecture to arrive generally at the best course” (p.271 translation found in Marsh). Most importantly to this study however, is not our perception of Isocrates as a Sophist or not, but if Aristotle believed him to be so. J.J. Murphy (2012) states that Aristotle “unfairly included” Isocrates in the same group as the Sophists. George Kennedy (2007) further explains stating

“The most evident difference between Aristotelian and Isocrates’ teaching is the great emphasis put on truth, knowledge of a subject, and logical argument by Aristotle in contrast to Isocrates’ inclination to gloss over historical facts and his obsession with techniques of amplification and smoothness of style. Aristotle doubtless thought that Isocrates was at heart a Sophist, that his philosophy was shallow, and that as a teacher of rhetoric he failed to give his students an adequate understanding of logical argument” (p.13)

While placing Isocrates in the Sophist category varies significantly, the likelihood that Aristotle would have done so prompts the placement of him in this section of the study.

As a pupil of Gorgias, one would imagine Isocrates would also embody the perceived nihilistic views of his teacher. He states, “I believe, [that ideal morality] has never existed and does not now exist, and that people who profess that power will grow weary and cease from their
vain pretensions before such an education is ever found” (found in Mcgee, find quotation). While this may lead many to the conclusion that he was following in the footsteps of his mentor, Isocrates made many attempts to utilize the power of rhetoric for a collective good. Similar to the other Sophists discussed, he did not spend time searching for the universal truths proposed by figures like Plato. What he did focus on was legislation, *nomos*, and that what was good for a community could be achieved through language. For him, the questions of the mind and the soul were not found in introspective practices, but in language and deliberation. He states, “For since it is not in the nature of man to attain a science by the possession of which we can know positively what we should do or what we should say, in the next resort I hold that man to be wise who is able by his own powers of conjecture to arrive generally at the best course” (*Antidosis* 271). His constructionist views are expressed in declaring “it is possible to discourse on the same subject matter in many different ways—to represent the great as lowly or to invest the little with grandeur” (*Panegyricus* 123); however, he also proposed that one support causes that are “great and honorable” (*Antidosis* 339). According to Michael Calvin McGee (1985), for Isocrates, “morality is learned, and it is easily recognized; but it is acquired in the practice of everyday life. It underpins the rules, codes, and laws we freeze in syntactics” (p. 9). Both upholding a socially constructive viewpoint alongside a notion that a ‘good’ can be attained through discourse causes Isocrates’ ethics to appear inconsistent. Chase (2009) states that Isocrates “held simultaneously to an external reality of virtue and to the view that external realities are themselves effects of discourse” (p. 247). While it is obvious to see where Plato would have an issue to the dismissal of ultimate truths and a focus on a collective set of ethics constructed by individuals and language, it still differs from an Aristotelian notion of ethics focused on discovering a virtuous mean in both internal thought and outward action.
Regarding the Sophists, Aristotle’s conception of them appears to vary and develop over his life. In his earlier work *Sophistical Refutations* he states:

“The man who scrutinizes general ideas in relation to a particular instance practices dialectic; but the man who only apparently does this is a Sophist. Eristic and Sophistic reasoning is only apparent reasoning, and even if it arrives at a correct conclusion, it is the business of dialectic to examine it, for it is fallacious in respect of its causes….Just as cheating in a game and dirty fighting have a certain distinct character, so eristic is dirty fighting in argument. In the former case, those who are determined to win stop at nothing, and the same is true of eristic arguers. People who argue in this fashion merely to win, merely seem to be eristic and contentious. Those who do it for purposes of publicity and financial gain are considered to be Sophistic. Sophistry, and I have said, is a way of making money from a mere show of wisdom, and for this reason Sophists are interested in a show of logical proof” (*Sophistical Refutations* 171b, 7-11, 22-30).

As we can see, similar to his teacher Plato, Aristotle originally took a relatively hostile position towards the Sophists. Similar to Plato’s claim of rhetoric as ‘flattery’, Aristotle critiques the Sophists as simply demonstrating a facade which appearance is similar to reasoning and argument but that their performance of dialectic is both fallacious and empty. Even if they arrive at a correct conclusion, it is not discovered through virtuous intention (according to Aristotle, virtue is attained when both intention and action are aimed at what is ‘good’; correct action alone is not sufficient). Also similar to his instructor, Aristotle holds that the financial requirement for rhetorical instruction is reprehensible. While money is expressed as an issue, it appears that the main concern is teaching apparent wisdom as opposed to dialectical training (or his later concept of rhetoric). In such, the remainder of the surviving portions of this work are dedicated to recognizing fallacious arguments and tactics in refuting them. While Aristotle expressed contempt in his early work for those proposing to teach false wisdom, he did not treat approach them with the same fervor in the *Rhetoric* and even appeared to adopt certain similar tactics.
As stated in the introduction of this work, some scholars have aligned Aristotle strongly with the Sophists—while that is a stretch, they do share certain similarities. Guthrie (1971) states:

“On the subjects in which the Sophists were primarily interested, Aristotle’s standpoint was in many ways closer to theirs than Plato’s….He openly prefers Gorgias’s method of enumerating separate virtues to the Socratic demand for a general definition of virtue, which he calls self-deception (pol. 1260a25), and in the first book of the Ethics, which contains one of his most sustained and effective attacks on the Platonic theory of Forms, we find a defense of the relativity and multiplicity of goods which might almost have been written by Protagoras” (p. 53-4).

Aristotle rejected Plato’s theory of Forms, did not propose ultimate truths, and opposed to focusing on these type of metaphysical questions, he shared with the Sophists an interest in human action, social and political theory, and issues of character. Furthermore, Aristotle acknowledged the importance for one to be able to effectively defend themselves against attacks and advance ones position (when ethically sound which will be discussed further later in this study). While they may share some apparent similarities, Aristotle did not align strongly with the group. According to John Poulakos (1995),

“Aristotle defines the sophist as a practitioner of questionable rhetorical and argumentative practices. But whereas Plato has defined him with a dramatic sense of urgency, turning the act of defining into a venturesome expedition of hunting down a cunning beast, Aristotle defines him dispassionately…Treating them as a part of early Hellenic intellectual history, Aristotle pays them some attention, seeks to overcome what he regards as their shortcomings in rhetoric, and to correct what he considers as their errors in logic” (p.151-3).

Aristotle did not condemn the group or seek to destroy their tradition. Rather, he collected from what existed before him and sought to develop a system of rhetoric that was the most effective possible while maintaining the truth as we knew it best in contingent situations.
Chapter 3: The Ethical and Rhetorical Theory of Plato

While trying to summarize the relation of ethics to rhetoric according to such a voluminous author as Plato is an arduous task, this portion seeks to discuss just that. Plato has received much attention, reverence, praise, and as stated post WWII has been largely seen as a proponent for the type of system that could give rise to the Third Reich. He has been called “one of the most dangerous writers in human history, responsible for much of the dogmatism, intolerance, and ideological oppression that has characterized Western history” (Kennedy 1994, p.41), “totalitarian and repressive” (Kaufman 1994, p.101) and a “bigoted reactionary” (Guthrie 1971, p.10). Furthermore Black (1994) stated that the rhetoric proposed by Plato was a mode of “social control” (p. 98). However, other authors such as E.L. Hunt (1990) stated that what he was proposing was “goodness as Plato conceived it” (p.133). Whatever we think of Plato we can see that he was an influential figure in the subject of ethics and rhetoric. In order to uncover his conception of rhetoric and ethics, this study will seek to situate Plato historically and demonstrate his concepts of rhetoric and ethics as expressed in the Gorgias and the Phaedrus.

Similar to the prior chapter, an evaluation of the historical situation current at the time of Plato is necessary to examine. As stated, the shift from an aristocracy to democracy aided the rise and prominence of the Sophists. These Sophists did not believe in absolute truths, absolute moral standards, and absolute knowledge and were instead preoccupied with nomos (customs, what is generally agreed upon to be ‘right’). Considering this type of thinking challenged Plato’s mentor and no-doubt perceived embodiment of virtue, Plato’s mission became keeping Socrates and his standards alive.
Guthrie (1960) states, “for him [Plato] two things were simultaneously at stake, not only the existence of absolute moral standards which was the legacy of Socrates, but also the whole possibility of scientific knowledge, which on a Heraclitean theory of the world was a chimera” (p.88). With objective knowledge and absolute moral standards being challenged, Plato did what he needed to in order to maintain his position. He stated that these objects of knowledge did exist but not transcended our world. These are what are known as Plato’s Ideas or Forms. Things that we perceive as being beautiful, good, or just all have in common that they resemble or partake in the objective and absolute Idea of the Beautiful, Good, or Just (Guthrie 1960). These are entities; they are outside of our world, our minds, not affected by time or change, and will be elaborated on further in our discussion of one of the two texts we will examine closely.

While Plato did not directly write a work dedicated to his theory of ethics, it was apparent in all of his works. While there were no ‘ethical works’, there are two pieces that tie directly into Plato’s concept of the ‘good’ in relation to the subject of rhetoric—the Gorgias and the Phaedrus. Like many of his other works, they are both in the form of dialogues in which the hero and controller of the conversation is Socrates. Furthermore, both dialogues involve Socrates debating with and eventually defeating Sophists. John Poulakos (2000) states:

“Plato’s relationship to the Sophists is simultaneously one of dependence and antagonism. He wishes to preserve and eliminate them at the same time. Their preservation provides a background against which he can argue for the superiority of his polished philosophical system over their indefensible rhetorical enterprise. On the other hand, their elimination promises to clear the path leading to the utopia of the perfect polis. Without the Sophists, Plato would have had little or nothing to challenge” (p.74).
Both texts support this notion in that the Sophists are needed to propose what is ‘wrong’ and Plato’s Socrates is there to show them the way. Further justifying the use of these texts to enable us to discover the connection Plato makes between rhetoric and ethic, Enos (2000) states:

“For many years we have taught Plato’s views on rhetoric through his dialogues in the Gorgias and the Phaedrus. There are very good reasons for selecting these two important treatises. Both dialogues explore the nature of rhetoric as practiced by the Sophists and its potential as a serious discipline in the pursuit of knowledge and management of civic affairs. Parallel to our teaching, the rhetorical scholarship on Plato also has relied on the Gorgias and the Phaedrus to carry the burden of representing Plato’s views on language and its relationship to paideia or the virtue of (and quest for) intellectual excellence” (p. 91).

Considering these two texts provide insight into Plato’s concept of rhetoric and his ethical theory these will be used as the basis for this analysis. Furthermore, considering the Phaedrus attempts to remedy criticism brought forth by the Gorgias we will examine these works chronologically.

The Gorgias was the first of the two dialogues addressing rhetoric and featured a discussion between Socrates and three Sophists: Gorgias, Callicles, and Polus. Through dramatic enactment and demonstration of his Sophistic method of question and answer, Socrates (in Plato’s opinion) ends victorious in the story by logically defeating the other rhetors then prescribe his notion of what all should strive for. After knocking down many straw men and tying the dialogues into logical knots, Socrates demonstrates that only his form of philosophical pursuits can lead anyone to any real good and rhetoric only provides the illusion of obtaining it. Furthermore, Plato’s Socrates makes it clear that rhetoric is not a tekhne (art) that has its own area of expertise and product, but in fact is just a ‘knack’ that has no subject matter and no principles. In this dialogue, Socrates
prevails over three negative archetypes: the politically cunning, underhanded and manipulative Callicles; the young, impressionable, and impatient Polus; and the empty, superficial Gorgias.

The first dialogue occurs between Gorgias and Socrates regarding the nature or expertise of rhetoric. Basically restricting Gorgias (and the other Sophists) to yes or no answers, Socrates guises lectures as questions at considerable length attempting to uncover what the specialization of rhetoric is. After considerable questioning the expertise, as explained by Gorgias, shifts from simply “speaking” (449e) to “to persuade people in the kinds of mass meetings which happen in lawcourts and so on; and I think its province is right and wrong” (454b). However, having an issue with the concept that rhetoric offers instruction on right or wrong, Socrates reduces rhetoric to as a way to guide ignorant masses to come to a conviction without understanding rather than educating, promoting understanding, or being concerned with morals. Here, rhetoric is not concerned with truth or promote knowledge but deals only with conviction and opinion.

Considering Gorgias was unable to provide an area of expertise specific to rhetoric, Polus takes over in defense of his mentor and begins to question Socrates as to what he perceives rhetoric as. When asked what kind of expertise was involved in rhetoric, Socrates simply stated that he did not believe there was any. As opposed to an art, which has its own expertise (a painters expertise is painting), Socrates reduces rhetoric to an “experiential knack” (462c). In order to demonstrate what he means by knack he compares rhetoric to cookery in that it strictly concerned with pleasure and gratification and as opposed to an art he refers to it as “flattery”. In order for something
to be an art it needs an expertise and a true understanding of the underlying principles, subject matter, and theory specific to that art. A knack is a matter of habituation acquired by trial and error—it has no expertise because it does not have specific principles. By flattery, Socrates describes sophistic rhetoric as contemptible and strictly concerned with appearances and not with benefiting the state or soul of those listening. Flattery strictly makes messages look better on the surface; it is a façade in which rhetoricians make their opinion appear to be your opinion by appealing to base needs.

Furthering the argument in Plato’s mind that rhetoric lacks specific expertise and appeals to base needs, the frustrated Callicles joins the conversation arguing that seeking pleasure is a means to a satisfying life. Here, we begin to see some of the moral standards of Plato considering hedonistic enterprises are contemptible and do not contribute to a satisfying life or result in achieving happiness. For Socrates, the life worth pursuing avoids immediate gratification and instead pursues enterprises that involve foresight and seek to benefit the souls of oneself and others. Knacks only benefit selfish needs that only result in pleasure as opposed to true arts that are in accordance with the Good, self-discipline, an expertise, and leads to the improvement of people’s souls. While Gorgias explicitly demonstrates Plato’s contempt for the subject of rhetoric and begins to demonstrate his ethical standards, his ethical theory is clearly displayed in his next work on rhetoric—the Phaedrus.

While the intended subject of the Phaedrus is under debate (Kennedy 1963), two subjects dominate the conversation—rhetoric and love. Kennedy (1963) states, “love beautifully exemplifies what he has in mind about rhetoric: rather than being a purely objective rational or artistic matter it involves the soul of the disputants” (p. 75). While
at first sight these subjects might not seem to parallel each other but in the description presented they equally represent an exchange between people. Love requires an exchange between individuals and so does rhetoric. Considering the *Phaedrus* is delivered to us in the form of three speeches, it also represents three different types of exchanges of rhetoric and of love. The first two speeches provide insight into what Plato finds despicable about the subject of rhetoric and the third speech outlines both his concept of ideal rhetoric as well as his ethical schema.

As stated, the *Phaedrus* consists of three speeches that demonstrate the non-lover, the evil-lover, and the noble-lover and each form correlates with a similar form of rhetoric. The first speech by Lysias representing the non-lover is representative of Plato’s conception of Sophistic rhetoric. Similar to the conception of Sophistic rhetoric as Plato represented in the *Gorgias*, Lysias’ non-lover speech is (in Plato’s opinion) more concerned with appearance, flowery language, concealing the subject matter by stylistic distractions, and demonstrating ones skill rather than attempting to relay the Truth of the subject (235a). Not only was there no concern for the Truth, the language concealed the message rendering the speech ineffective. Dissatisfied with Lysias’ speech, Socrates seeks to provide a speech that remedies the issue regarding the clarity of the subject matter. In this speech, Socrates is attempting to persuade the youth to choose an individual who does not love them in order to avoid threats and consequences. While the intention of the lover is revealed in his first “evil-lover” speech, it demonstrates another issue that Socrates has with rhetoric—that it can be used to manipulate and move someone towards an ignoble and unethical action. Not only can this type of rhetoric move people towards decisions that are harmful to the recipient, it is one sided in that it
does not provide room for the argument of the individual. While this speech is effective in revealing the intention of the rhetor with clarity, it does not promote Truth or what is good for the listener. His dismissal of his first speech begins to clearly address his ethical theory. He states, “if Love is a god or something divine—which he is—he can’t be bad in any way; and yet our speeches just now spoke of him as if he were. That is their offense against Love” (242e). While the first speech by Socrates was inspired by madness (which he later describes as divine), it was not in line with his absolute moral standards that require actions to be in accordance with the Forms and requires knowledge of the soul.

In order to redeem himself in offending Love, Socrates delivers the “noble-lover” speech that outlines his ethical schema as well as his concept of an ideal rhetoric. As opposed to the evil-lover speech, the noble-lover is delivered as a result of god-sent madness that will insure the good for participants and remain in accordance with the Truth. In this speech, knowledge of the soul and the Forms are essential for noble love and rhetoric. For Socrates (as for Plato), the Forms are transcendent entities that exist beyond heaven. He states, “what is in this place is without color and without shape and without solidity, a being that really is what it is, the subject of all true knowledge, visible only to intelligence, the soul’s steersman” (247c). These forms include Knowledge, Justice, Beauty, Love, Self-control and any other entity in which life in the world that we experience attempt to imitate. These are absolute, objective, and not subject to change. According to Plato, prior to being imprisoned in a physical body, our soul strives to be released so that it may fly back to the realm of the Forms. While we are unable to access Knowledge in the physical world, our vague and imperfect memories of the realm from
which our soul came assists us in recovering portions of the perfect knowledge with which we were previously surrounded with. While explaining this difficult concept cannot be described in direct terms, Socrates resorts to an analogy in which the soul is split into two horses and a charioteer. In short, the allegory states that one's soul becomes possessed when in the presence of something that reminds them of the perfection of Beauty. While conflicted between striving for what is noble and beneficial for both against what is ignoble and seeks only immediate gratification, the noble soul rids of their ignoble desires and acts in accordance with Beauty and Self-control leaving them nothing but reverence for their love. In conclusion, Socrates is satisfied that this speech was both in accordance with the Truth as well as effective to the audience.

Plato’s ethical stance is teleological—it focuses on achieving an end. This end focuses on realizing what an object’s function is or becoming what they are meant to be. For example, the function or purpose of an eye is seeing and if that is not actualized it fails to embody the essence or end of an eye. Plato perceives all that exists as only achieving its function if it reaches its specific purpose or end (Guthrie 1960). Sidgwick states:

“In short, we may say of all organs and instruments that they are what we think them in proportion as they fulfill their function and attain their end: if, then, we conceive the whole universe organically, as a complex arrangement of means to ends, we shall understand how Plato might hold that all things really were, or (as we say) ‘realized their idea,’ in proportion as they accomplished the special end or good for which they were adapted. But this special end, again, can only be really good so far as it is related to the ultimate end or good of the whole, as one of the means or particulars by or in which this is partially realized. If, then, the essence or reality of each part of the organized world is to be found in its particular end or good, the ultimate ground of all reality must be found in the ultimate end or good of the universe” (p. 38).
For Plato, we cannot act in a way that is good for people if we do not know what Good is as an idea. We are only moral if we act in accordance to what is Good as embodied or delivered by the gods. Morals, for Plato, are absolute; what is Good is not subject to change and individuals, arts, or objects are not serving their function if they do not reach their specific end.

Taking this teleological approach to Love as expressed in the *Phaedrus* and relating it to rhetoric, Richard Weaver (1985) analyzes the three speeches in accordance to whether or not they achieved their ends. The first speech of the non-lover featured what Weaver calls “neutered” language which is purely instrumental with no regard or affection for which the subject it addresses. Comparing it to scientific or mathematical language presented as objective and without bias, this speech fails to move the listener. In this sense, the rhetoric of the non-lover does not reach its end because it was ineffective and missed its opportunity. The second “evil-lover” speech is motivated strictly by selfish appetites and exploitation of others. Similar to how the lover exploits their love, this type of rhetoric is also focused on manipulation and exploitation. Avoiding the truth, this type of rhetoric is based in threats, distractions, and misrepresentations. It fails to reach its end because it is unethical and fails to work towards benefiting the soul of the listener. Finally, the “noble-lover” speech seeks to benefit the soul of both lovers. For Weaver, the true art of rhetoric as described in the *Phaedrus* operates this way as well. A noble rhetor gains knowledge of the Truth and reveals it to their revered audience in an artful presentation so that they can be moved towards the Good and the True. Weaver states (1985), “rhetoric at its truest seeks to perfect men by showing them better versions of themselves, links in a chain extending up
toward the ideal, which only the intellect can apprehend and only the soul have affection for” (p. 15). Rhetoric in this sense achieves its end; it contains knowledge of the Truth and brings all involved to the Good.

Following the speeches in the Phaedrus, a discussion regarding the nature of rhetoric begins. It is in this discussion that Socrates no longer resorts to myth to describe his ideal philosophical rhetoric but directly states:

“Until someone knows the truth of each thing about which he speaks or writes and is able to define everything in its own genus, and having defined it knows how to break the genus down into species and subspecies to the point of indivisibility, discerning the nature of the soul in accordance with the same method, while discovering the logical category which fits with each nature, and until in a similar way he composes and adorns speech, furnished variegated and complex speech to a variegated soul and simple speech to a simple soul—not until then will it be possible for speech to exist in an artistic form in so far as the nature of the speech is capable of such treatment, neither for instruction nor for persuasion, and has been shown by our entire past discussion” (277b5-c6).

Here, we finally see Plato’s conception of ideal rhetoric. The ideal rhetor or “philosopher king” requires the ability to remember the Forms, has knowledge of the nature of all souls, and then dispenses that information to the masses. If one believes they are acting or speaking in accordance with what it is Good, but does not actually have the knowledge of the Good they are unethical. As we can see in both the Gorgias and the Phaedrus, any rhetoric that did not serve absolute Truth was simply a knack, flattery, and not the true art of rhetoric. A true speech—similar to the Forms—is an organism; it has a head, a body, and feet. It would be an entity in itself that would transcend all who listened. For Plato, philosophers who through dialectical training are able to uncover these ultimate Truths should be the only ones qualified to pursue studying rhetoric. While stating that the true art of rhetoric will never be seen in the Gorgias, in the Phaedrus he states that it can only
be seen through teacher and student and does not outline the principles to do so. Stating that there is no method for the true art of rhetoric, that anyone who is interested in rhetoric is only concerned with convicting, and relying on the basis that “it exists because I say it exists”, Plato demonstrates that his true art of rhetoric will never be found.

It is no surprise that the ideal rhetoric proposed by Plato has been perceived as problematic. The notion of absolute truths as proposed by Plato has been described as “repulsive to ordinary common sense” (Jaeger, p.57, found in marsh). Furthermore, Hunt states, “the ideal rhetoric sketched in the Phaedrus is as far from the possibilities of mankind as [Plato’s] Republic was from Athens” (p. 149 found in marsh). Not only is the knowledge required unattainable, the kind of rhetoric that can only take place in one-to-one has very little practical application when attempting to address an audience consisting of many different souls. Marsh (2001) states, “Plato’s greatest contribution to persuasive discourse may have been forcing Aristotle and Isocrates to define and refine reactionary, real-world rhetorics” (p. 87). Possibly dissatisfied with the impossible managerial rhetoric proposed by Plato, Aristotle recognizes rhetoric’s capacity for being effecting in contingent situations. Furthermore, as opposed to focusing strictly on ends, Aristotle began to outline an ethical standard as well as rhetorical teachings that focused on both means and ends. For Aristotle, if your attention is directly mostly to the means, the ends will out. If you focus on treating people well, the best outcomes will result. If we continue to apply honest rhetorical practices to contingent situations, the argument closer to the truth will be more persuasive and therefore, the truth will out.
Chapter 4: Aristotle’s Ethical Theory in the Nichomachean Ethics

The *Nichomachean Ethics* consists of ten books. Book 1 consists of discussions regarding the nature of goods for man including a discussion on ends, on happiness, as well as what types of lives one can lead in order to reach happiness. Furthermore, Book 1 states that the study of ethics is not an exact science and introduces the concept of phronesis, or “practical wisdom” which addresses the nature of those who are better equipped to understand, recognize, and reach noble ends. Books 2-4 discuss the subject of moral excellence—in general as well as focusing on particular moral virtues. Particularly important to this study, book 2 introduces one of Aristotle’s most famous concepts—the doctrine of the mean. Book 5 covers Aristotle’s thoughts on justice and while important to his work; it will not be emphasized in this research. Book 6 discusses intellectual excellence and its role in discovering moral virtues. Furthermore, this book covers Aristotle’s definition of art (*techne*) which will be utilized in addressing Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. Book 7 elaborates on the concepts of virtue and vice providing specific examples for each. Furthermore, this chapter also addresses the nature of pleasure. Books 8 and 9 cover friendship and will also not be emphasized in this work. Book 10 returns to the subject of pleasure and discusses the nature of well being.

Considering this study is looking for consistencies between what Aristotle thought was ethical in the *Nichomachean Ethics* and his rhetorical teachings, the focus will be on what his definition of virtue is as well as the means to achieve it. Furthermore, we will attempt to look at current applications of the doctrine of the mean as well as controversies surrounding the theory.
Before focusing on the specific aspects utilized in this study, one must understand the primary focus of Aristotle’s ethical teachings. To begin the work, Aristotle states, “every art and every scientific inquiry, and similarly every action and choice (purpose and pursuit have also been used), may be said to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.” (1094a1-2). Not only does this opening statement of the Nichomachean Ethics display Aristotle’s teleological thought, but it also reveals the main focus of his ethical work. Much like his other studies, Aristotle was searching for the function or end of whatever he was studying. In the case of the Nichomachean Ethics, his main focus was the function (ergon) or end of man. This was not looking at a specific man’s function (a doctor’s function is to heal, a carpenter’s to build), but rather what common function is shared with all of humanity. Aristotle states “if there is an end for all that we do, this will be the good achievable by action, and if there are more than one, these will be the goods achievable by action” (1097a 23). But what is this “end for all we do”? Aristotle continues in saying that something that is worthy in and of itself and not for something else is ultimately what is worth striving for. He states, “happiness, on the other hand, no one chooses for the sake of these [other reasons outside of happiness], nor, in general, for anything other than itself” (1097b 5). While this may seem very vague and ambiguous, Aristotle does continue at some length as to what happiness is and what it takes to reach it.

While many scholars agree that the word “happiness” (eudaimonia, also translated as flourishing) is a poor translation and that it does not convey the meaning of the original word used, Aristotle offers a definition of what is meant by “happiness” (see
W.K.C Guthrie 1998 page 340 footnote 4). He states, “happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue, we must consider the nature of virtue, for perhaps we shall thus see better the nature of happiness” (1102a1). While this might lead us into questioning a vague and ambiguous statement, Aristotle spends a significant portion of the work describing what he believed was the nature of virtue. He defines virtue as:

“A state involving rational choice, consisting in a mean relative to us and determined by reason—the reason, that is, by reference to which the practically wise person would determine it. It is a mean between the two vices, one of excess, the other of deficiency. It is a mean also in that some vices fall short of what is right in feelings and actions, and other exceed it, while virtue both attains it and chooses the mean” (1006b 36-37).

This is not only his explanation of the nature of virtue, it is also his concept known as the “doctrine of the mean”. As we can see from this passage, to be virtuous is to be rational, practical, wise, and to operate in neither excess nor deficiency but to understand, negotiate, and strive to live somewhere in between extremes judged accordingly to each situation. This concept is not only essential to Aristotle’s ethics but is central to this study.

The doctrine of the mean is not suggesting that there is one fixed middle ground that is appropriate for everyone, nor is it necessarily equidistant of the two extremes. Rather, it states that the mean is relative to the person, the situation, and determined by the phronimos (one who possesses practical wisdom). Furthermore, the doctrine of the mean is different from the doctrine of moderation—which would suggest a level of controlled indulgence. Aristotle clarifies by stating, “By the intermediate in the object I mean that which is equidistant from each of the extremes, which is one and the same for all men; by the intermediate relatively to us that which is neither too much nor too little—and this is not one, nor the same for all” (1106a 29-32). This statement demonstrates that
the mean is not necessarily in the exact middle but might lean one way or another toward an extreme. He provides an example regarding eating—if two pounds of food is too little and ten pounds too much; the mean does not state that the person should consume the mathematical mean of six pounds. Rather, the individual should consume the mean relative to their size and activity level; someone who is larger and more active would need to consume more than someone smaller and less active (1106a 35-b 7). While this may lead one to think that the mean is entirely relative, that is not the case.

The mean is subjective and acknowledges context but not completely relative—it is determined by the phronimos; one who possesses phronesis or “practical wisdom”. According to Aristotle, phronesis is a virtue which guides those with practical wisdom toward the mean in all aspects of life. Aristotle defines phronesis as “a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods” (1140b20-21). Phronesis is concerned with the capacity for and an action toward virtue. Akrill (1973) states:

“The phronimos has to decide what to do in particular and often complicated circumstances. So he must be able to seize the relevant facts, weigh them up, consider alternatives, and reach the right decision. That requires experience, an eye (1143b 14) for what is and what is not essential, a ‘sense’ of what is fitting (1109b 23, 1113a 1, 1142a 27)” (p.257).

This statement coincides with Aristotle’s earlier discussion of the role of education and life experience in developing one’s ability to be a good judge. He states, “the man who has been educated in a subject is a good judge of that subject, and the man who has received an all-round education is a good judge in general. Hence a young man is not a proper hearer of lectures on political science; for he is inexperienced in actions that occur in life” (1095a1-3). While one needs the intellectual capacity to discover the virtuous mean, phronesis is concerned with action; the phronimos has the intellectual capacity to
discover the mean, but also acts in a virtuous manner. He states, “The work of man is accomplished in accordance with phronesis and moral virtue; virtue that ensures that the aim is right, and phronesis is the means to the aim,” (1144a6-9) and “virtue points out the end, and phronesis makes us do what conduce to it” (1145a5-6). We can see again that while intellectual excellence can direct one toward the mean, phronesis is responsible for acting that way.

To summarize; the ends of man common to all people is happiness, happiness is reached by living a virtuous life, in order to live a virtuous life one must have moral and intellectual intelligence, moral and intellectual intelligence is determined by phronesis, and the hallmark of phronesis is living within a mean that is relative to us and avoids defects of excess or vice. While summarizing Aristotle’s function of man in one sentence (even a long one) is admittedly far too simplistic we can see that in order to live a virtuous life and reach our proper function one must live according to the doctrine of the mean.

Aristotle’s ethical teachings have gained attention and suggested application outside of the realm of classics. For example, Ronald F. Duska (1993) discusses how the subjective approach of Aristotle’s ethics be positively applied when approaching ethical situations in business settings. Considering Aristotle proposes that happiness is attained when people engage in activities that align with their nature one would want to discover what the nature of those individuals are and encourage what activities or elements would allow them to flourish. His ethics also acknowledge that certain activities will be good for some and bad for others and therefore we should not apply universals to all
individuals and allow variety or consideration of their needs and context. Specifically he outlines nine strategies in which Aristotelian ethics can be applied in business settings:

1. Drop the deductive model.
2. Settle for less than certain and definitive answers.
3. Adopt where helpful the use of narratives or paradigms.
4. Rehabilitate rhetoric through understanding the uses and limits of enthymemes.
5. Recognize that solving ethical issues is more like an art than a science.
6. Recognize that all views are within a context, a form of life, or a culture, but some distance can be gained from that culture and the views can be evaluated in the light of whether they lead to human flourishing.
7. Recognize that in persuasion we must start with unanimities, agreements.
8. Trust the insight of the common person. They know from experience, and common experience provides the starting point for truth in practical matters.
9. Critique the perceptions of the common person, when they cause disequilibrium or when there is conflict, but do not question the, as did Descartes, when there is no good reason to question them (p.245-6).

As we can see, Duska has utilized Aristotle’s ethical theory as presented in the Nichomachean Ethics to suggest positive applications in business settings which allows the subjective perspective of individuals to be valued and shared and attempt to tend to their well being in the work force. Furthermore, Peter Hadreas suggests that modern corporations could learn from acknowledging Aristotelian ethics and specifically the doctrine of the mean in relation to the ethics of wealth. He suggests that acknowledging the connection between the gain and distribution of wealth with the corporation, the community, the state, and to individuals can help the corporation gain financially and flourish but also to not create an environment or community impact that would inhibit their ability to flourish as well. The attempt is to find the virtuous mean in which the company’s practices synonymously meet their goals as well as benefit those involved or affected. While receiving current attention outside the obvious realms of study, Aristotle’s ethical treatise is not met without question.
One of the issues surrounding the doctrine of the mean is whether it is an exact mathematical equation or more of a qualitative method utilizing a mathematical metaphor. Whitney J. Oates (1936) states that the doctrine of the mean has been utilized in all modes of practical ethical philosophies. While highly recognized, she acknowledges that there is some confusion about what the ‘mean’ is. As it appears the mean has been historically addressed in two separate ways. She states:

“First, the mean as such is viewed as an entity or hypostatization, having its being as a Platonic Idea has its being. The mathematical concept of the mean as we find it in the Pythagorean writings would fall into this mode. Secondly, the mean is viewed as an ethical law or principle, more or less definitely formulated in which the notion of ‘meanness’ (or, to use Horace’s word, mediocritas) is actually noting to save mathematical imagery. In other words, the doctrine of the mean in this sense is simply the expression of a principle or law by a mathematical metaphor

Through an examination of Classic Greek texts addressing the mean she finds excerpts that address both sides of the argument. For example, in the Philebus the mean is described in the first manner. For Socrates and Plato the mean occupies a space side by side with the Beautiful and the Good and the other Forms. However, when the mean is addressed by Aristotle in the Nichomachean Ethics, Oates finds evidence for both modes—at times he expresses it as an entity or mathematical location and at other times highly metaphorical. One major difference for Aristotle is that his treatment of the mean is directed at human conduct, which is a much more broad and practical application than that of Socrates and Plato. Taking seriously the claim that Aristotle’s mean might be purely quantitative in mathematical expression, Oates attempts to develop an equation in which the mean could be represented. After failed attempts, she concludes that it is a mathematical metaphor utilized to make the mean more comprehensible to others. She
states, “Therefore one may conclude that there is both a qualitative and a quantitative phase to Aristotle’s ethical mean, the latter being unduly emphasized because the vehicle of expression is a mathematical image, or, as we have said before, a metaphorical formula” (p.393). Finally, the question of whether Aristotle’s virtue is either an image or an entity is also represented in having elements of both. While not seen as a Form or an Entity as expressed by Plato, Aristotle’s mean does take on a form or what Oates calls a “qua entity”. It is not viewed as transcendental but Aristotle’s discussion on the virtue of a sense organ demonstrates that there is form in which something takes in order to be the best and fully developed self. This study will utilize this concept of the mean, as the findings are similar. Aristotle was using mathematical language in order to aid the comprehensibility of his qualitative expression. Furthermore, while the mean or virtue does not exist in transcendental Form, Aristotle recognized some objective enactment of the mean subjectively determined by the phronimos.

Beyond inconsistencies in interpretations of whether the mean is qualitative or quantitative, the form of Arisototle’s ethical triad (defect—excellence—defect) has been called to question. Again using the popular example of andreia (bravery, courage), Aristotle states that when faced with difficult situations rashness and cowardice were extreme opposites in which courage would be the virtuous mean. Arguing that rashness was not opposite to cowardice, Ross argued that the triad should be changed into two dyads (as cited in Urmson 1973, p.229). For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defect or ‘vice’</th>
<th>Excellence or ‘virtue’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rashness</td>
<td>Caution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cowardice</td>
<td>Courage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

42
Stating that rashness is not the opposite of caution but rather an insufficient amount of caution, his dyads set out to correct the perceived deficit in his theory. However, while J.O. Urmson (1973) did find Aristotle’s triad insufficient in the discussion on bravery, he disagrees with Ross regarding the use of two dyads. Keeping closer in line with Aristotle’s triad, he proposed two triads:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defect</th>
<th>Excellence</th>
<th>Defect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>over-caution</td>
<td>caution</td>
<td>rashness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cowardice</td>
<td>bravery</td>
<td>insensitive fearlessness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, rather than looking at the theory as deficient, he simply applies it twice to further break down the terms and apply greater precision. He states, “we should distinguish these two triads and not run them together as Aristotle does. But he incorrectly applies his theory, rather than, as Ross suggests, applying an incorrect theory” (p.71). Rather than fix the metaphorical formula, he simply applies it again. Even though this seems to nicely wrap up the issue regarding the andreia triad issue, Rosalind Hursthouse (1980-1981) takes refuting Urmson’s argument as her primary focus. She states that the defects of excess or deficit are not simply “too little” or “too much” of one thing. It is not that a vice is “too…” but that the vices in themselves are objectively wrong. She states “The fact that many vices can be characterized in terms of ‘too…’. Is a fact that has its own interest, but it does not serve to support the doctrine of the mean” (p.71). While I do agree that Aristotle meant for the vices to be intrinsically ‘bad’ and not just too much of something is bad, I also believe that Urmson’s faith in the Aristotelian model and the breakdown for precise definitions is also useful. Rather than use words that say “over” or “too-much” we could remedy this issue by simply choosing a word that represents the misuse of whatever action that represents.
We have covered an interpretation of Aristotle’s ethical theory as represented in the Nichomachean Ethics, discussed in depth the doctrine of the mean as well as some current usages of the theory, as well as demonstrating some current controversies surrounding the doctrine. While the main issues are represented, an exhaustive list of critiques, attempted remedies, and revivals of Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean would be overkill. While many have attempted to alter the model—make it two dyads, three triads, a mathematical equation—we will maintain Aristotle’s original model of a single triad in which the mean lies between two extreme vices but aim for precision in our terms for the defects. Furthermore, we will continue maintaining that he was utilizing a mathematical metaphor in order to make a qualitative endeavor comprehensible. While many of the positions regarding the controversies surrounding the doctrine of the mean might uncover more questions than answers; that might be the point. Aristotle states in the *Nichomachean Ethics* “our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of; for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions” (1094b11). Considering the subject of ethics is not a clear-cut and easily understandable enterprise, an exact prescriptive solution might not be appropriate. This could easily be embodied in the fact that thousands of years after Aristotle wrote the Nichomachean Ethics we are still continuing to question the application or form of his proposition. The lesson might be that we should continue to just do that—to continuously challenge ourselves and maintain a conversation regarding what we are doing, why we are doing it, and what are the bases for our actions? That in itself can be a lesson of virtue.
Chapter 5: Aristotle’s Rhetorical Theory

Aristotle’s Rhetoric has long been used as a canonical text for students of rhetoric and is frequently used as an informative text for other disciplines. One of the allures of this work is not only the originality of the piece at the time, but also the way in which the text has been presented to us today. George Kennedy (2007) explains that the nature of the presentation of the text can be perplexing: transitions often need to be added for clarity, the compressed nature of the piece, and most important to this study—the apparent inconsistencies in the work. Most scholars today tend to agree that these were lecture notes and that they were written at different times throughout his life, and considering they were potentially composed years apart, it would be natural to assume that his opinions on the subject changed over time. The lack of a unified, composed piece plays a significant role for the varied interpretations of the work and a potential reason for the varied responses regarding the ethical implications of the treatise. Carol Poster (2004) argues that Aristotle’s Rhetoric:

“is provided as a manual for the student trained in dialectic who needs, particularly for self-defense or defense of Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy, to sway an ignorant or corrupt audience or to understand the functioning of rhetoric within the badly ordered state. The techniques described are dangerous, potentially harmful to both the speaker and audience, and ought not be revealed to the general readership of Aristotle’s dialogues, but only taught within the controlled environment of Aristotle’s school, as part of the esoteric corpus of Platonic-Aristotelian teaching” (p.244).

This statement is problematic in that it aligns Aristotle strongly with Plato and states that he taught the subject of rhetoric to his students solely to prevent them from being vulnerable to the attacks received outside of the school. Furthermore, this critique supposes that he was actually teaching techniques in which he thought to be unethical in
order to preserve his students. While Poster no doubt creates a compelling argument, there are many consistencies between the *Rhetoric* and Aristotle’s ethical teachings described in the *Nichomachean Ethics* that does not support the argument that he aligned with Plato’s concept of rhetoric and was teaching tactics in which he perceived to be unethical. By placing it in the historical and ethical context at the time and holding the *Rhetoric* against the ethical schema presented by Aristotle, and not that of the Sophists or Plato will hopefully display that he was attempting to teach rhetoric based in his perception of virtue and that both his ethical teachings and rhetorical teachings attempted to mediate and find a virtuous mean between the two poles (Sophistic and Platonic ethics/rhetoric) before him.

Considering the prior orators have been established in their historical context, Aristotle will be no exception. Just as the prominence of the Sophists informed (or directly resulted in his mission to tear them down) Plato’s concept of rhetoric, the rhetoric of the Sophists and Plato influenced the development of Aristotle’s rhetorical theory. Dissatisfied with the Sophistic rhetoric which (to him) was more concerned with demonstrating linguistic skill as opposed to promoting knowledge and with Plato’s ideal rhetoric which is non-existent, Aristotle developed a theory that satisfied his desire for a rhetoric that was useful in daily matters, clearly defined, and had a methodology for practice.

The *Rhetoric* consists of three books: the first two dealing with *pisteis* or rhetorical proofs, and the third is a discussion on delivery, style, and arrangement. The first book orients and introduces the student to the subject of rhetoric and in this portion Aristotle provides certain concepts that have received much attention and become a large
focus of his theory. First, the opening statement of the work is “Rhetoric is an
antistrophos (often translated as ‘counterpart’) to dialectic” (1354a1). Not only does this
statement receive much consideration from scholars such as Brunschwig (1996) and
McAdon (2001), it demonstrates a strong shift from the Platonic perception of rhetoric as
“flattery” or “base” as expressed in the Gorgias and the Phaedrus, to one that holds it in
similar regard to dialectic. As opposed to seeing rhetoric as inherently debase or corrupt,
Aristotle recognizes both dialectic and rhetoric to as methods/faculties/or capacities. For
Aristotle, “all people, in some way, share in both; for all, up to a point, try both to test
and uphold an argument [as in dialectic] and to defend themselves and attack [others, as
in rhetoric]” (1354a1). While this statement—particularly the use of the words ‘defense’
and ‘attack’—might cause some to see rhetoric as a necessary evil, Robin Smith (1995)
states that for Aristotle, “rhetorical arguments are, for him, just arguments in another type
of dress” (found in Barnes p.64). They are both arguments but different in that dialectic
deals with subject matter that is probable and rhetoric deals with what is contingent.

Both dialectical and rhetorical arguments include premises, reasoning, and
solutions. In dialectic practices, two students or a student and teacher would begin with a
statement followed with a series of questions with yes or no responses in an attempt to
test the premises in which the argument was based upon. The premises in dialectic are
believed to be probably true and the methods are believed to be certain. If the argument
held up to the questioning, it was seen as an accurate statement. If the questions came
across fallacious reasoning or another error in logic, it would be dismissed as false.
Dialectic involves arguing from specifics toward the general because dialectic deals with
what is generally good or not. Rhetoric, for Aristotle, was also based on premises that
are probable but methods that were also probable. Rather than premises determined by back and forth questioning, these premises were in relation to the context and are viewed as being accurate or at least largely perceived as true by the rhetor and the audience. An example of commonly held understandings provided by Aristotle would be reminding the audience that winning the Olympic games results in a crown—everyone knows this so reminding them of these types of facts would appear tiresome, pedantic, and eventually lose the audience. Again, where rhetoric and dialectic differ is that dialectical argument works backwards towards the premises and tests them; rhetoric rests on premises that are largely held to be true to that audience. Robin Smith (1995) states:

“Rhetoric combines the argumentative procedures of dialectic with a study of the types of audiences one might encounter and the premises each type will find persuasive…. Orators [as opposed to dialecticians], however, do not ask questions but make speeches, and they must therefore be able to judge on their own whether their premises are agreeable to their audiences. Consequently, they must make a careful study of what will be persuasive to which type of audience” (found in Barnes p.64).

It is the role of the rhetor to understand their audience and discover these premises; for one who can uncover these would be the most effective in speech. Considering enthymemes are crucial (for Aristotle) for making speech effective, the process and ability to uncover them are foundational to his theory of rhetoric.

Similar to dialectical argument which includes induction and syllogism (and apparent syllogisms which are fallacious), rhetorical argument consists of an example (induction) and the enthymeme (a kind of syllogism) (1356b8). Aristotle states, “since it is evident that artistic method is concerned with pisteis and since pistis is a sort of demonstration [apodeixis] (for we most believe when we suppose something to have been demonstrated) and since rhetoric apodeixis is enthymeme (and this is, generally speaking,
the strongest of the *pisteis*) and the enthymeme is a sort of syllogism”. After demonstrating the similarities or parallels that exist between rhetoric and dialectic and arguing for their place next to each other, Aristotle moves to define what rhetoric is and what are its essential features.

Aristotle defines rhetoric as, “an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (1356a1). Also translated as “faculty” or “capacity”, the function of rhetoric is not persuasion itself, but the “ability” to see the means of persuasion. For Aristotle, this ability is something that can be born with but can also be developed through training. Focusing on capacity proposes a drastic distinction considering it places large emphasis on the role and capability of the rhetor—that they understand the common beliefs held by the audience and discover the means to persuade them. He states, “it is clear that he who is best able to see, from what materials, and how, a syllogism arises would also be most enthymematic” (1355a11). Therefore, through natural ability and training one could be more persuasive as a result of recognizing the available means as well as avoid fallacious arguments.

After defining rhetoric, Aristotle classifies what the “means” are in the form of *pisteis* or ‘proof’s. Regarding proofs as a whole they are divided into inartistic and artistic proofs. Inartistic proofs are not created by the orator and examples in a court setting might be witness testimony or contracts. Artistic proofs are created by the orator and include: invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory (as coined by Cicero). Of those artistic proofs, invention is further broken down into subcategories: ethos, pathos, and logos. These are the means of persuasion available to the rhetor. Furthermore, like the “great classifier” that he is, Aristotle breaks down rhetoric into a
genus and provides three species—the genus being oration and the species being forensic or judicial speech, epideictic speech, and deliberative speech. Through numerous examples of various situations in relation to each species, the methodology of discovering the available means of persuasion is laid out in an extensive list of “topics” which are reoccurring concepts in speech.

The remainder of Books 1 and 2 elaborate on the concepts introduced in the beginning of the work both by extending the conceptual understanding as well as continuing to provide an exorbitant amount of examples or means. Finally, the third book is dedicated to a discussion on delivery, arrangement and style. While multiple aspects of the Rhetoric raise concerns about the consistency of the work, the difference between Book 1 and Book 3 tend to cause the most issues. While the second book supplements much of the discussion in Book 1, many of the controversies that will be addressed are featured in those chapters.

In order to begin to analyze the ethical consistency of Aristotle’s rhetoric, this study will attempt to evaluate some of the claims made against him. Book 1 Chapter 15 has been accused as being too tolerant of sophistry (Kennedy 2001). He states, “[one can say] that to use [the jurors’] ‘best understanding’ is not to follow the written laws exclusively; and that fairness always remains and never changes nor does the common law (for it is in accordance with nature) but written laws often change” (1375b5-6). He continues at length regarding the nature of written laws and the ways in which they may be challenged but it is not represented as a means of evil. It represents the world at the time rather than focusing on a Platonic ideal world that we cannot reach. It states that written laws, when unclear, contradictory to another or itself, or any other flaw should be
remedied. However, this does not throw itself straight into Sophistic concepts of social constructionist either in that the laws are only changed if proven defective in some way. The focus of the courts is to uphold justice; as such the laws will only change if another one can prove more just. Considering rhetoric is the ability to see the available means of persuasion, he is again demonstrating the various means and still holds that arguments that are closer to the truth will prevail over others. In this case, if a written law is defective and an argument changes it; it is because that one was closer to the truth. Finally, this portion of the book demonstrates various means that involve the use or avoidance of quotations from poets, oracles, and witnesses as well as when to use or not use contracts. While it may appear that he is proposing a Sophistic “up in the air, whatever works” mentality, he is instead simply displaying the means, not stating that anyone should use them in violation to what is just or when inappropriate.

Another attack made against Aristotle is regarding his concept of ethos. Ethos is your moral character—the demonstration of your values through your speech. While the topics and logical arguments expressed influence the decision of the audience, it is not the only aspect. Aristotle states, “it is necessary not only to look to the argument, that it may be demonstrative and persuasive but also [for the speaker] to construct a view of himself as a certain kind of person” (1378a2). Ethos is expressed by what you say in your speech and orients the audience towards whether or not you possess characteristics such as being trustworthy, knowledgeable, and maintaining the best interest of the audience in mind. If the audience does not believe you possess these characteristics they will be less inclined to listen to your speech.

Stating that ethos “should result from the speech” has led Marsh (2001) to read
this passage as Aristotle teaching, “the belief-inducing character of the speaker, need exist only in the speech—not, necessarily, in reality” (p. 87). While this may provide the illusion that it is acceptable to simply act well, this is not the case. For Aristotle, speech portrays character; when you speak you reveal your character. If you have high character you speak so that it is apparent. He states:

“There are three reasons why speakers themselves are persuasive; for there are three reasons why speaker themselves are persuasive; for there are three things we trust other than logical demonstration. These are practical wisdom [phronesis] and virtue [arête] and good will [eunoia]; for speakers make mistakes in what they say through [failure to exhibit] either all or one of these; for either through lack of practical sense they do not form opinions rightly; or through forming opinions rightly they do not say what they think because of a bad character; or they are prudent and fair-minded but lack good will, so that it is possible for people not to give the best advice although they know [what] it [is]” (1378a5-6).

Here we can not only see elements consistent with his ethical theory in the *Nichomachean Ethics* (phronesis), but stating that a lack of possessing the above qualities is what results in the inability to demonstrate them. Just like in his ethical works where one cannot determine the appropriate action without practical wisdom, one cannot be an effective speaker without it as well. One cannot pretend to act with practical wisdom, virtue, and good will because the absence of those qualities will result in the inability to demonstrate them. Furthermore, Aristotle discusses the nature of people; the just will do what is good out of character or emotion and the unjust will do what is evil out of character and emotion, places responsibility on the intention of the individual in general. While people might criticize Aristotle for stating it is acceptable to tell lies or that it is okay to demonstrate good character through the speech without acting in accordance with it or believing in it, it is not supported throughout his work.

Another perceived issue is another mode of invention—logos. Logos are rational,
logical appeals that offer reasons to believe the claim. These are demonstrated in the
topics and take the form of paradigms and enthymemes. Considering that Aristotle offers
numerous examples of these appeals in which different sides of an argument are
presented, Wardy (1996) states they can include “wanton falsification in epideictic”
speeches (p. 80). Stating that the function of rhetoric is to see the available means of
persuasion and not persuasion as an end causes his theory to allow for these dual
arguments. If one can see the available means of persuasion, then they should also be
able to see “the persuasive as well as the apparently persuasive”. While the section
regarding how to employ topics of praise and blame might seem to lack moral
consideration, it has already been assumed prior that one who is able to see these
available means of persuasion has to have virtue and ethics in mind. Furthermore,
Aristotle states:

“One should be able to argue persuasively on either side of a question, just
as in the use of syllogisms, not that we may actually do both (for one
should not persuade what is debased) but in order that it may not escape
our notice what the real state of the case is and that we ourselves may be
able to refute if another person uses speech unjustly” (1135a12).

At first sight, this might seem similar to the Sophistic trait of being able to argue both
sides of an argument to demonstrate literary skill without concern for truth-value.
However, not only does he state that, “one should not persuade what is debased”, but also
that these arguments would not equally hold up. He states, “of course the underlying
facts are not equally good in each case, but true and better ones are by nature always
more productive of good syllogisms and, in a word, more persuasive”. Again,
considering rhetoric for Aristotle was epistemic through rhetorical practice the argument
that was closer to the truth will prevail.
A main issue with the consistency of Aristotle’s rhetorical instruction is whether or not stylistic techniques are contradictory to his ethical standards. In the *Gryllus*, Aristotle had stated that all techniques of style were base and related to Sophistic rhetoric. Additionally, he expresses in the beginning of the third book that the need for the use of style is a result of having to communicate with less than ideal audience members. While it is believed that portion of the Rhetoric was added on by one of his students (Kennedy 2001), other areas of the Rhetoric support that the use of style as described by Aristotle is consistent with his ethical teaching. An example of the mean as the desired stylistic position in rhetorical transaction can be seen in book three of the *Rhetoric*. Here, Aristotle states that “it is not enough to have a supply of things to say but it is also necessary to say it in the right way” (*Rhetoric* 3.1.2). We can see that Aristotle is advocating the position for an appropriate effective style, not one for the sake of itself that is inconsistent with the message. Even if we have absolute knowledge, it is not necessarily easy to communicate to certain audiences, in this way again, the emphasis is put between the interaction of the rhetor and the audience in that the rhetor needs to know the premises from which the audience would largely hold to be true and start from there. Furthermore, in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle does not make the claim that one can use style alone in order to mislead an audience. Rather, it is the means in which one can make their message heard by an audience who will not listen to logical or rational arguments alone. Aristotle is advocating a rational and appropriate stylistic adaptation that also demonstrates his search for the mean and emphasizes his students to mediate between extremes.

Furthermore, in the chapter on style Aristotle states, “let the virtue of style be
defined as “to be clear” and neither flat nor above the dignity of the subject, but “appropriate” (*Rhetoric* 2.12). Here we can see that Aristotle is arguing for a mean between the poetic style of speech and a prose style of speech. He continues this discussion stating how poetry is not flat, but not always fitting to the discussion and prose might be fitting but flat. This again mediates the deficiencies found in Sophistic and Platonic rhetoric. Considering that the lofty language of Sophistic rhetoric conceals the message, valuing clarity and correcting argumentative fallacies fixes his perceived issues. Furthermore, stating that there is virtue in style which emphasizes clarity also addresses the Platonic critique that there is no virtue in rhetoric. The challenge to the rhetorician is to be able to operate within these constraints to find the appropriate tone for the speech. Focusing on what is appropriate and avoiding defects present in the stylistic extremes is consistent with his ethical standards.

Another example of striving to avoid the Sophists excessive use of style can be seen in Aristotle’s chapter on *Ta Psykhra* or Frigidities. Here, Aristotle states that when using poetic language and long and frequent epithets one “should aim at the mean” (*Rhetoric* 3.3). Furthermore, he discredits Alcidamas (a Sophist) in stating that he “uses epithets not as seasonings but as the main course, so frequent, extended, and conspicuous are they” (*Rhetoric* 3.3). Here we can see that Aristotle is crediting the breech of excess to the Sophists. Aristotle states, “thus, by speaking poetically in an inappropriate way [Alcidamas and other Sophists] impart absurdity and frigidity, and also lack clarity because of their verbiage” (*Rhetoric* 3.3). As stated prior, lacking the virtue of clarity causes Alcidamas and other Sophists to discredit themselves.

An example of the Platonic avoidance of emotional appeal is best demonstrated in
Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*. Socrates states that he had refused to use pathetic appeals in his trial in that he had not “besought the judges with many tears, having brought before the courts not only his own children, in order that he might be pitied as much as possible, but also many of his relations and friends” and he had not resorted to these type of appeals even in grave danger. His avoidance of these types of tactics could be depicted as noble and an ideal, but it was also rhetorically ineffective in that the truth was not received and Socrates was sentenced to death. While it is not stated explicitly in Aristotle’s works, it is arguable that these types of stories are what helped shape Aristotle’s need for effective style in his rhetorical instruction. If Socrates had used strategies appropriate to the situation, as described by Aristotle, he would likely have been heard by the jury and avoided death.

In his ethical writings, Aristotle states that emotions are also subject to the doctrine of the mean; “fear, confidence, appetite, anger, pity, and in general pleasure and pain can be experienced too much or too little, and in both ways not well” (*Nichomachean Ethics* 2.6). Therefore, stating that one should avoid using emotions when appropriate would be inconsistent with his ethics. Furthermore, Aristotle states that “virtue is concerned with feelings and actions, in which excess and deficiency constitute misses of the mark, while the mean is praised and on target, both of which are characteristics of virtue” (*Nichomachean Ethics* 2.6). In the case of rhetoric, the target would be persuasion and avoidance of emotions would be an extreme which would make it miss its mark. Furthermore, Aristotle argues that one should advance an appropriate emotional position according to the subject, not one that is out of context and exists only to manipulate an audience.
A distinct quality of rhetoric expressed by Aristotle is what the function and virtue of rhetoric was. In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes virtue is a state and “every virtue causes that of which it is a virtue to be in a good state, and to perform its characteristic activity well” (*Nichomachean Ethics* 2.6). One example given is of the virtue of eyes, he states “the virtue of the eye, for example, make it and its characteristic activity good, because it is through the virtue of the eye that we see well” (*Nichomachean Ethics* 2.6). Furthermore, he states that the characteristic of a human being that makes them good would also be their virtue. How does this definition then apply to rhetoric?

For Aristotle, the species of rhetoric also have ends: the function or end of judicial rhetoric is justice, the end of deliberative is the best interest of the audience, and the end of epideictic rhetoric is praise or blame (Kennedy 2001). Each of these species of rhetoric actualizes when reaching their end.

Another departure from the Platonic notion of rhetoric is an art and as such does not focus to pander or adapt to each individual person, but speaks to the values held by groups. He states:

“Since no art examines the particular—for example, the art of medicine does not specify what is healthful for Socrates or Callias but for persons of a certain sort (this is a matter of art, while particulars are limitless and not knowable)—neither does rhetoric theorize about each opinion—what may seem so to Socrates or Hippias—but about what seems true to people of a certain sort, as is also true with dialectic” (1356b11).

Plato’s requirement that the ideal rhetor possess knowledge of all types of souls renders it ineffective. Rather than objective knowledge, one needs to study the psychology of the audience and demonstrate values consistent with them in order to gain their favor.

As stated, rhetoric for Aristotle did not deal with absolute truths. Barns states “Their [orators] concerns are with what men do—and in the world of action there are no
exceptionless rules, and things do not invariably turn out in the same way. Hence the premises of an orator’s arguments will consist mostly of propositions which hold ‘for the most part’” (p. 270). Rhetoric is utilized in contingent situations and reveals much of what makes his theory unique and demonstrates his desire to correct defects in Platonic and Sophistic rhetoric. He states, “we debate about things that seem capable of admitting two possibilities; for no one debates things incapable of being different either in past or future or present, at least not of if they suppose that to be the case; for there is nothing more [to say]” (1356b12). Rhetoric deals with things that are “customarily debated” (1356b11) and is “useful, [first] because the true and the just are by nature stronger than their opposites, so that if judgments are not made in the right way [the true and the just] are necessarily defeated [by their opposites]” (1.1.23). Not only does his conception of rhetoric as contingent mitigate the issues with non-existent Platonic rhetoric dependent upon absolute Truths, but it also demonstrates the strength of truth in contingent situations which addresses his issue with the relative views of the Sophists. He states:

“It is true, that rhetoric is a combination of analytical knowledge and knowledge of characters and that on the one hand it is like dialectic, on the other like sophistic discourses. Insofar as someone tries to make dialectic or rhetoric not just mental faculties but sciences, he unwittingly obscures the nature by the change, reconstructing them as forms of knowledge of certain underlying facts, rather than only speech” (1359b5).

Rhetoric is meant to be contingent and not an exact science. While others tried to pin it down as such, by switching its domain, Aristotle corrected many of the problems he saw as created by the theories of those prior.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

The study of Classical Greek philosophy has intrigued people since its conception. Considering that Aristotle acknowledged that we build upon existing bodies of knowledge, it would not be a surprise for his (as well as others) theory of rhetoric to be informed by and shaped as a result of those who communicated and taught others about the subject before him. Present before him were the absolute moral standards of Plato and the expedient relativist standards of the Sophists. It is no shock that he created an ethical and moral theory based in avoiding extremes.

This study sought to address several issues: Aristotle’s rhetorical theory was being analyzed by ethical standards other than his own, attacks against Aristotle’s rhetoric theory as being ethically inconsistent, and that Aristotle was teaching rhetorical techniques to his students that he believed to be unethical. In order to accomplish this task the study sought to first historically situate the Sophists, describe the ethical standards attributed to the group, and provide their views of rhetoric. Second, largely influenced by the need to correct the perceived corruption caused by the Sophists, the ethical and rhetorical theories of Plato were revealed through analyzing the Gorgias and the Phaedrus. Third, in order to understand Aristotle’s ethical theory, a synopsis of the Nichomachean Ethics was provided with specific emphasis on the doctrine of the mean. Finally, in order to address the consistency between his ethical and rhetorical works, a summary of his rhetorical theory as expressed in the Rhetoric as well as a comparative textual analysis between the ethical and rhetorical texts was performed.

When observed as a whole, the Rhetoric is not inconsistent with Aristotle’s ethical standards as expressed in the Nichomachean Ethics. Many of the attacks against
him focus on a limited number of small statements perceived as revealing an ethical inconsistency as opposed to situating that statement within the dialogue as a whole. When approached holistically, this analysis demonstrated that Aristotle had a strong concern for the truth on an issue as well as developing skills useful in uncovering that truth in contingent situations. In this he has successfully achieved his “virtuous mean” combining the search for, or uncovering of the truth, with the knowledge of appropriate methods of delivery and style necessary to make their message effective, as well as to refute the arguments posed by others when not based on truth. The fact that he taught technique to his students does not alter the purpose of the pursuit, but rather enables the student to engage with others and “come to know”.

While the main purpose of the study was to mitigate the attacks made against Aristotle, the analysis demonstrated an interesting concept—that Aristotle was not only seeking to correct or refine the rhetorical theories of Plato and the Sophists, but that his rhetorical theory was an embodiment of the doctrine of the mean considering it sought for a mean between their rhetorical extremes. As stated, In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle defines the doctrine of the mean as:

“A state involving rational choice, consisting in a mean relative to us and determined by reason—the reason, that is, by reference to which the practically wise person would determine it. It is a mean between the two vices, one of excess, the other of deficiency. It is a mean also in that some vices fall short of what is right in feelings and actions, and other exceed it, while virtue both attains it and chooses the mean” (1006b 36-37).

As applied to his rhetorical theory, one could argue that Aristotle perceived Plato’s concept of rhetoric as deficient and Sophistic rhetoric as excessive. This can be demonstrated in a few ways. First, considering Platonic ideal rhetoric will never be actualized—it is deficient. While Aristotle perceives the Sophists as practicing without
restraint, they participate in the vice of excess. For Aristotle, rhetoric exists in contingent situations and therefore is not utilized outside of those qualifications. Second, while Plato in the *Phaedrus* states that anyone who is interested in rhetoric will never have any desire to learn what is necessary to become one qualified to do so, there are no participants and again ends up deficient. The Sophists have professed to be able to speak about any subject either without knowledge of it or they develop a small amount of knowledge about many subjects. Here, the Sophists again are excessive in their practice. In order to remedy the issue of no participants or uneducated ones, Aristotle provides endless examples of topics including the specific topics which demonstrate that if one wishes to speak about a certain subject they need to learn the corresponding topics. Third, again considering Plato’s ideal rhetoric will never be seen, the language is literally deficient. However, the language of the Sophists is excessive in that the use of lofty, flowery language lacks clarity and therefore conceals the message of the speech. Aristotle’s mean regarding language is that virtue is found with clear language communicated appropriately in regards to the situation. Finally, while Plato’s rhetoric is again deficient in its absence in that one needs to be possessed and animated by the Gods to demonstrate it, Sophistic rhetoric is utilized (in Aristotle’s opinion) at a whim and therefore excessive. By making the end of rhetoric the capacity to see the available means of persuasion and not persuasion itself, Aristotle strives for the virtuous mean because for him, rhetoric involves choice—both internal and external. For the ethical rhetor as described in the Rhetoric and the ethical being described in the Nichomachean Ethics, both intention as well as action determine moral standards.
While thousands of years later, the study of Classical Greek ethical/rhetorical theory is insightful and applicable today. Not only is it a skill to be an effective communicator, but also it is of immense importance to analyze the value and merit of the purpose and message which we are communicating. This study contributes yet another addition to the work done before it but will hopefully inspire a new perspective regarding the relationship between Aristotle’s ethical and rhetorical theory. Furthermore, this study seeks to contribute to the research regarding how historical context can help shape philosophical thinking. Regarding future research, considering politics played such an influential role in the theories of the Sophists, Plato, and Aristotle. Continuing this study in relation to their political theory could further illuminate the theories in relation to each other.
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