

Politics Of Rhetoric

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Abstract: *The idea of rhetoric has long been presented as something which is evil and should be done away with. The same goes with the idea of politics. Politics is understood to be something as bad, cunning, and misuse of power. Although, politics and rhetoric have some deeper similarities but when we look at them closely, we find that both appear in different lime light altogether when they are used for a good purpose combined with pious motive. No matter how hard we try, we cannot escape politics and rhetoric as they form the very basis of our daily routine life. Whether it is our mood, emotions, thoughts, writings, gestures, facial expressions, decision making ability, or even silence, we find it hard and nearly impossible to escape from the periphery of politics and rhetoric. The aim of this paper is to study the idea of politics and rhetoric, compare and bring out their hidden good qualities and relevance, which have been kept away from our understanding. Politics and rhetoric mostly are presented as something negative and non essential. This paper employs a logic through which it understands politics and rhetoric shape our today and what implications do they have on our tomorrow when combined and distilled with the development in the area of digital media, social media, internet and technological advancement made by us.*

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I. POLITICS OF RHETORIC

Rhetoric has been a part and parcel of our daily life much before the period of Homer. Rhetoric was actively used in Greek Literature by Homer and it was already a feature of politics and the legal system then. We pursue rhetoric blindly these days but it is not something new that we have been doing. Rhetoric can be defined as art of persuasion, a technique of speaking well. It wouldn't be wrong to state that rhetoric is an art of deceiving others by making them feel that they are reaping huge profits whereas they are actually being robbed. Michelstaedter defines rhetoric: he states, "Rhetoric, as contrasted with persuasion, refers to all methods by which humans conceal their true condition from themselves and each other." On ancient rhetoric, Aristotle comments: "It would be hard to deny that the ability to persuade, convince, cajole or win round is one of the most useful skills in human life. It is a capacity that shows its importance equally easily in the market, the court, the council chamber and the bedroom." Barilli comments on the technical character of rhetoric: he

says that rhetoric becomes a mere body of rules on elocution or even *dispositio* (arrangement), the latter understood primarily as the stylistic decoration of phrases and sentences.

Rhetoric is putting one's oratory skills to use to get things done. Rhetoric is often used as a decision making tool and hence it is concerned with power, power to persuade people. "The idea of rhetoric as a distinct branch of knowledge has its origins in Athens in the second half of the fifth century BCE. The innovators were a group of teachers known as Sophists, who came from different parts of Greece. Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, and Thrasymachus are the key figures remembered today; the Sicilians, Corax and Tisias, were their predecessors." According to Protagoris, "They (Sophists) specialized in the art of rhetoric, since primarily through speaking well that you persuade others to agree with your opinion."

Rhetoric is not concerned with truth or true knowledge. It is only concerned with getting its job done. It is concerned with the ends and not the means. Wayne C. Booth narrates a scene from Plato's *Phaedrus* where Socrates and Sophists are

arguing on rhetoric and Sophists says “He who would be skillful rhetorician has no need of truth.” Any person having a good knowledge of rhetoric i.e. rhetorician may use it to manipulate others. A rhetorician also knows how to employ knowledge in order to put his skills at use. It is after knowing some truth a rhetorician uses his skills at oratory politically to serve his interest. We cannot call a rhetorician a liar in this regard, as he is not telling a lie but is not disclosing the entire truth. Rest, it is our psychology that does the job of assuming what has not been told. The person or community upon whom the rhetoric has been used, is known by nature and psyche to the rhetorician who has exercised power upon him/them. The rhetorician knows or judges how a person upon whom he is exercising power would react or where the rhetorician’s cover will be blown. Therefore, Rhetoric is political. Plato understands rhetoric as the adversary of logical discourse. He says that one should not treat rhetoric as a process that occurs overtly and thereby ignore it completely.

Today most of the politicians around the world can be considered as a fraction among other rhetoricians like writers, authors, analysts, bureaucrats and individuals etc., rather very skillful and sharp rhetoricians among others. They promise the citizens of their countries about bringing the glorious past of their countries back or develop good future and then deliver nothing when they have inhaled power. They manipulate others through their skills at oratory. Iain Gately mentions an interesting fact about the relationship between wine, oratory and politics during an early Greek period: “...inappropriate sobriety was thought highly suspect. Some skills, such as oratory, could only be exercised when drunk. Sober people were coldhearted – they mediated before they spoke and were careful about what they said, and therefore, according to logic, the new science of reason, did not really care about their subject.” To explain further, it means that people or politicians who gave public speeches after getting drunk would say truth and the ones those who would do oratory without getting drunk were considered mean and cunning politicians who were there to serve their own selfish purposes. Gately explains that such teetotaler politicians were called water drinkers’ which was like an insult, declaring the politician to be lacking passion and zeal to serve people. On the other hand, we wouldn’t want our contemporary politicians to follow by the wine, oratory and politics’ example though.

Knowingly or unknowingly we all are compelled to connect with rhetoric at some point in our daily life whether we choose or choose not to participate in listening to the speeches given by the politicians in public or speaking in public ourselves. We are constantly surrounded by rhetoric. Rhetoric is the routine thing, the newspapers or books that we read, the programs or serials that we watch on the television or the messages we like, post and share on Facebook and Whatsapp or any other such software applications are like vessels containing rhetorical ingredients. It becomes essential to know whether we are playing with rhetoric and whether we are being played by it. Rhetoric is used many times to cover erroneous decisions people take and sometimes to hide the real intent of the writer or a politician or an actor.

According to Toye “The term ‘rhetoric’ may properly be taken to encompass writing as well as speech (oratory). The latter is the main, but not exclusive, focus here. After all,

speeches are often biased on written texts and may sometimes be read in print form by many more people than actually hear them in person. The Spoken word, though, does have its own particular interest, deriving partly from the theatre that surrounds it. Rhetoric cannot be conceived purely in terms of text and language, separate from the technical means by which it is conveyed to listeners and readers.” Rhetoric works subconsciously through our speech and writing. It influences us in a way we don’t realize. It has a culture of its own and it is reinforced in our culture without us getting to know about it. This culture may be represented in a form of newspaper advertisement, for instance, the Indian Army advertisement encouraging country’s youth to enroll by its provocative ad line: Do you have it in you? Or a TV ad which compels you to drink its cola pretending it to be refreshing and healthy for you or the way you have dressed today may be a part of a rhetoric which persuaded you to buy stuff that you are wearing! In the *Gorgias*, a dialogue by Plato, Toye mentions, “Socrates argues that rhetoric is not a *technè* (craft/art) but merely a knack. It is a form of superficial ‘flattery’ comparable to cookery, which teaches what is pleasurable rather than what is actually good for you.”

Rhetoric encircles us in our day to day life. Isocrates in his work *Against the Sophists* brings out a connection between rhetoric and the logic of the inner mind: “the same arguments which we use in persuading others when we speak in public, we employ also when we deliberate in our own thoughts; and, while we call eloquent those who are able to speak before a crowd, we regard as sage those who most skillfully debate their problems in their own minds.”

It is an art for rhetors that knowingly make use of the sophistry to achieve their hidden agendas under the pretense that their decision is actually selfless and is directed towards the upliftment of all/others. Nothing escapes from the periphery of the rhetoric. Even this article is rhetoric. I have no intentions of declaring rhetoric as completely bad or negative; on the other hand it is neither completely good nor positive. Socrates claims that in the entire Athens he is the only one who practices true political statesmanship which is concerned with the moral improvement rather than gratification and pleasure is always the reason for him saying anything. By this, “Socrates does in fact admit the theoretical possibility of a noble type of rhetoric aimed at improving the souls of the citizenry, but he denies that any orator, living or dead, had ever actually practiced this form.”

Many like Isocrates would love to defend the use of rhetoric. They bring out the relevant side of the rhetoric and explain that why to make use of rhetoric in the first place. Aristotle in one of his work the *Art of Rhetoric* explains that not everyone is capable of following the formal logic and therefore it is necessary to make use of rhetoric when attempting to persuade people through the concepts that were available to everyone. Rhetoric likewise becomes a concept digesting aid for a layman. Aristotle emphasized in the need of the rhetoric. He believed that contradiction was necessary not only because one could make people aware of evil motives but also so that unjust arguments could be rejected. Rhetoric in this way is the main machine of which dialectics is the gear which is required to produce truth. It is through dialectics that two individuals discuss a concept to reach the conclusion

about its aptness and validity. For instance, upon seeing a rocket take off, two individuals argue, A says the rocket is flying up and B argues that the earth is being pushed down. This argument requires dialectics and it is through the use of rhetoric one may come to a conclusion but it is not necessary that it may be true. To clarify, if B is a good orator but his argument is wrong then for the sake of winning the argument he may win it but in reality he will be wrong. This example is of putting a bad case persuasively. Rhetorical skills have been misused here and have not been put to some good use as mentioned by Socrates i.e. 'moral improvement' or 'noble type of rhetoric'.

There is tons of literature available on Rhetoric. Most of which brings out the negative side of rhetoric stating it is just plain cheating, deception, dishonesty, manipulation, persuasion, something that only wants to do us harm. The aim of this paper is not to add more of negativity to the idea of rhetoric which has already been done by most rhetoricians. Booth brings out this concern about rhetoric with passion. He asks the questions to those who condemn rhetoric, "Can the condemners be woken up to see that "rhetoric" covers, not just rhetrickery – the art of *producing* misunderstanding – but what I.A. Richards calls "the art of *removing* misunderstanding"? Can we hope that more and more will see rhetorical training as essential in learning not only how to protect against deception, but also how to conduct argument that achieves trustworthy agreement and thus avoids the disasters of violence?"

By stating that that rhetoric is only concerned with deception would be unjust. Rhetoric cuts across various disciplines and there would have been no discipline without the use of rhetoric. Booth states that "Rhetoric is employed at every moment when one human being intends to produce, through the use of signs or symbols, some effect on another – by words, or facial expressions, or gestures, or any symbolic skill of any kind. Are you not seeking rhetorical effect when you either smile or scowl or shout back at someone who has just insulted you?" Even being silent can produce effect on another and therefore we cannot deny that saying nothing is non rhetorical. Anyone trying to communicate with anybody is participating by the means of rhetoric and is very much part of it.

We cannot escape from rhetoric and when we use it, it doesn't imply that we always have some mean or other hidden motive of harming the others, as human beings we have emotions like love and care apart from being jealous and cunning and it is also intrinsic to rhetoric. For instance, when we care for someone and want that person to agree to our idea of care for them and when they disagree we do try to persuade them in agreeing to our idea. Here we do not mean harm to them. It is what human values consist of, some, if not all.

Booth, states further that "Even a deliberate murder can be considered as rhetoric if the intent is to change the minds of the survivors." An activity and idea of terrorism also falls within the periphery of rhetoric. A terrorist looks forward to create terror within those who are alive by killing a fraction of people among their community/nation. Here the need of the hour is to bring out the positive side of rhetoric on the platform. Rhetoric can be used for ethical purpose, emotional purpose, moral purpose and just purpose etc. Persuasion can't be only bad but for good effect too. Therefore to universalize

rhetoric as something which is evil would be based on the poverty of our thought. Booth rightly expresses his concern for the dilemma of deciding whether the rhetoric employed for a purpose is good or bad. He comments on judging rhetoric, "No critical judgments can be more complicated than trying to distinguish good rhetoric from bad. We all make those judgments daily, hourly..."

There are many similarities between politics and rhetoric. Rhetoric is political. According to Chantal Mouffe politics and the political are two different concepts, he brings out their difference by the following argument, "...by 'the political' I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by 'politics' I mean the set practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political." As politics is about conflict resolving, we need to ask this question that why does conflict arise? Conflict arises due to different sets of self interests between the self and the other and in order to achieve one's self interest one has to decide. Who decides? The powerful decides. Same way rhetoric is used as a tool for persuasion.

Persuasion is not good or bad and similarly power is also not good or bad. It completely depends on the motive of the person using these instruments i.e. power and rhetoric. The reason I am saying that rhetoric is political is because of the nature of manipulation that rhetoric has, which is very much similar to the nature of politics. Both do not have a bad nature, per se, but it is the motive and the purpose for which it is used. There are millions of messages and posts being shared and posted on Facebook or any other social media platform as we discuss about it and same goes for Whatsapp and other such software applications which are being used by billions of people across the globe. The posts, information, news, stories and the quotes they share or pass on, they do it without verification, without checking whether the information they are passing on is authentic or fake. This communication may have been initiated by a rhetorician who wants to persuade people of lower intelligence in believing that whatever information they are reading must be true and therefore worth sharing across their friend circle and community and thereby adding to the dumbing down of more people who read such literature or piece of visual art. Rhetoricians, compulsorily are intelligent.

I am arguing here that rhetoric is not negative per se but its image has become so due to most people misusing it. Not everybody in the society is well read and intelligent. Intelligence is not an innate quality we are born with. One has to work hard and read more literature and do more stuff to gain intelligence, which most people are not ready to do or are not interested in doing it. For example, I could never understand mathematics after a certain level during school, even today I am not very good at it as I am not interested in it and I find it to be a dry area, it can be any reason for not understanding formal logic, even lack of will being one of the reason, which is true in my case.

Although I do not mean that logic is limited to mathematics or science, logic is also in philosophy, literature, sociology, anthropology etc. Logic is the sum of our total knowledge gained, whether through books, TV, internet or

personal experiences, which are again conditioned by rhetoric. For instance, if my source of intelligence is literature which is being circulated carelessly across social media platforms then I am just being a pawn at the hands of some really intelligent rhetoricians, forget anywhere being close to becoming intelligent. I believe that Aristotle is right in stating that formal logic is not everyone's cup of tea and it is for the rest people who are unable to understand the formal logic that rhetoric is required to explain some tough concepts or make complicated concepts clear. I am not saying that unintelligent people or laymen misuse rhetoric, since they don't have a good grasp over the formal logic and hence they cannot misuse it to create a harmful/bad rhetoric. They are already grappling with false or incomplete formal logic.

As discussed in the paper, rhetoric can only be used by individuals who know certain truth about certain thing or reality. They probably know certain truth or they for sure know that they do not know and to what extent or depth is their ignorance posited. Hence the person who could use or has a high possibility of using rhetoric is the person who understands formal logic or is an intelligent person, who has reached this stage after putting in hours of labour which is required to become intelligent. To get a knack of it, to put it in simple words. For instance, we see government authorities putting on internet and SMS (short message service) curfew/ban during some religious processions or during local communal riots showcases the pragmatic harm done by the misuse of rhetoric. One intelligent individual initiates the communication and the rest non intelligent individuals or communities pass it on and become the ultimate weapon at the hands of terrorists or goons who very much want it to be like that.

Although, what is the definition of intelligence? Is a highly contested query. The politics of rhetoric is highlighted in through this pattern. Politics is not good or bad like rhetoric, but mostly rhetoric is used to decide the imbalance of the power of decision making in one's favor. We should avert from carelessly making use of rhetoric and if we are acting carelessly then we are actually finishing someone's incomplete job. With the changing face of technology and progress made by information sharing platforms we have higher chances of falling prey to unethical and immoral use of rhetoric.

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