An Exploration of Invitational Rhetoric

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Assignment Description: Take an aspect of the course (Argumentative Prose Writing) and write a final paper demonstrating what we learned/got out of the course.

Argument can take on many forms and features; there are several different types of arguments, and general ways to get one’s point across. Upon hearing the word ‘argument’, there can be several connotations associated with it, from the knock-down, drag out fights seen in the media, to conversations carried out to get something done, to closing arguments in the courtroom. This writing will attempt to examine argument as rhetoric, argument through Aristotle’s eyes, and our constant fluctuation between the rhetorical argument styles of conquest, conversion, advisory, and invitational and their comparison to a rhetor’s maturity level.

The word ‘argue’ finds its roots in Greek, meaning “to see”. (Notably, not “to fight”.) There are many purposes for argument, including the following: to inform or convince, to make a point, to explore a thought or idea, and to make distinctions. Certainly not an exhaustive list, it is a good place to start. Using an argument to inform or convince someone could be seen in everyday life: on a talk show, in the nightly news, or during election time. Making a point is probably one of the most popular forms of argument as everyone wants to be heard and listened to, and to have their points deemed as valued and acceptable. Exploring a thought or idea through argument usually takes two or more people wanting to arrive at a common ground or solution. Finally, making distinctions through argument is, for example, making the distinction between what is ‘good’ and what is ‘bad’ or unacceptable behavior.

There is no argument without rhetoric. Rhetoric can be loosely defined as finding the best available means of persuasion. According to Aristotle, there are three components of rhetoric that all arguments must have to be successful. Ethos, or character, depends on the credibility or personality of the speaker. This can be seen in, say, celebrity spokespeople because they are someone the audience knows and trusts. Pathos, in rhetoric, deals with the emotions and connections made with the audience. This is most commonly used in advertisements as they invoke emotions in their audience. Logos, or logic, is seen as the message the speaker wants to share, the bottom line.

With that being said, by exploring the types of argument presented in Foss and Griffin’s 1993 article, “Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric”, we can clearly draw a line of rhetorical maturity traced through the following four taxonomies: conquest, conversion, advisory, and invitational rhetoric.

Beginning with conquest—as most people who argue do—the arguer is in for a fight. A death match, even. Conquest rhetoric is what we see on television, what we hear on the radio, and what we mostly see in everyday life. The arguer’s goal is to: secure an idea, claim, or argument as the best, strongest, and most
powerful among competing positions— in other words, to achieve a rhetorical prize. Such interactions produce winners and losers; winners, ideas or beliefs prevail, and losers' arguments or positions are overturned and discredited. The goal of conquest rhetoric, then, is to win an argument more than to affect listeners or to change their image of a subject in some significant way. (Foss & Griffin 3, my italics)

In a society where winning is everything and our opinions must conform to one side or another, it is easy to see why conquest rhetoric is the most common. In order to conquer our opponent, we must dominate that person with our opinions, sometimes so much that it either drives them away, or they agree in order to avoid further pestering. Obviously, this solves nothing, and the other person's opinion is deemed invaluable, and certainly not worth considering. Ironically, this is the model we use, and the model mainstream media adopts. Is it the drama of the situation that makes conquest rhetoric so appealing? Perhaps so, even if it solves nothing except one person being right and the other wrong. Such a binary concept is seen in everyday life, one must always pick a side. Republican or Democrat; for or against; right or wrong; yes, or no; black or white; society is constructed in such a way that there must only logically be two sides to every argument and one must choose a side and valiantly carry that flag until their opponent is destroyed. Those who choose to remain neutral, or choose to pick an alternative, are quickly dismissed and crushed along the way of the conqueror's rhetorical battle.

It can take a lifetime to recover from conquest rhetoric. After all, this is what is socially accepted, and this is the way people act. Conversely, those who do mature from conquest rhetoric and take a step in the right direction may find themselves adopting the conversion form of rhetoric, which is comparable to a sneakier form of conquest. Conversion rhetors are conquerors with a bit more finesse, a little more skill than those who adopt conquest rhetoric:

Conversion rhetoric involves the effort to construct arguments or claims so compelling that they cannot be refused—arguments that are appealing to audiences because of their substance and/or presentation. This rhetoric is exemplified in the discourse of advertisers, politicians seeking votes, and sales representatives. (Foss & Griffin 5)

Thus, the rhetor is presenting an idea with the intention of selling, either a product, idea, or themselves, essentially “conquering” their audience by convincing them, rather than attacking.

The shift to advisory rhetoric can be seen as an enormous change, as it is a more compassionate form of argument; its rhetor argues from the heart, and with its audience’s best interests in mind. Through experiences and their own life lessons, the advisory rhetor attempts to persuade their audience, but is open to suggestions and may be open to change their own opinion:

Although rhetors who employ advisory rhetoric seek change in their audiences and see it as beneficial, they do not insist that such change occur. Such rhetors see themselves as helpers of the actualizing forces of their audiences. Because they do not insist that others adopt their positions, advisory rhetors listen to the perspectives presented by others, consider them seriously, and even may adjust or reverse their original
positions as they take them into account. (Foss & Griffin 6)
And so, advisory rhetors have the audience’s best interests at heart, yet still try to persuade. They can be seen in parents, teachers, or coaches, often adopting the role of mentor in order to guide their audience, rather than convert or conquer them.

Finally, at a rhetor’s most mature stage - a difficult feat to achieve by anyone in any means - is the invitational rhetoric. Invitational rhetoric should be seen as the highest goal in argument, the highest taxonomy that one can master. Invitational rhetoric completely deconstructs the entire notion of arguing and persuading, viewing it as an attack, rather than a well-intentioned conversation. This is because the mere act of persuading is seen as, “an act of violence in that it violates, damages, or abuses the inherent value and integrity of the self... any intent to persuade is an act of violence... [w]hen we seek to change any other entity... we invade and violate the integrity of that person or thing and our own integrity as well” (Foss & Griffin 8). Therefore, attacking someone in such a way will eventually turn them off not only to the one trying to persuade them, but also to their argument. Taking that idea further, any view the rhetor holds can be discounted in such an assault, as the rhetor loses credibility with the audience if they feel they are being attacked. Also, the rhetor sometimes does not understand that he or she does not have power over the audience, unless the audience relinquishes power unto the rhetor. Therefore, the rhetor really does not have the control to change the audience, only the audience holds such power, should they choose to do so.

And so, argument as we know it has become dismantled. Instead of attacking or influencing, argument should be seen as a gift, an offering of opinion, rather than a persuasive mechanism. But one may ask, how does one accomplish anything by ‘offering’ an argument? The two ways presented in the article are modeling and the external conditions for change.

Modeling is something we are all familiar with, we use modeling more often than we think we do. Modeling presents an example to another that is beyond words; it is a presentation of argument. The strongest example available for modeling would be the parent/child relationship. Not to be confused with advisory rhetoric, modeling within the relationship between parents and their children is used when parents would like their children to behave, to act or speak a certain way, or to teach them how to carry themselves. Children, who are especially impressionable, pick up on their parents’ behaviors and depending on how the parents act, their children will more than likely pick up on a good deal of their character traits. Basically, the main idea of modeling is arguing by example. Certainly modeling is not closed off to parenting. If, say, I would like my girlfriends to shop at the clothing store in which I work, I would wear the clothes from that particular store and perhaps throw in some information on some of the sales the store is running (because, I have not yet perfected my transition to invitational rhetoric, and by talking about the sales the store is running, I could be seen as getting a little too close to persuasion). With that being said, invitational rhetoric permits that I ‘model’ the clothes in order to allow my girlfriends to decide whether they want to shop at the store or not.

Invitational rhetoric cannot survive without the external conditions for change. One cannot be argued, modeled, or persuaded without having the opportunity to change. If someone is being attacked within any of the three aforementioned taxonomies and do not have the external conditions for change, that is, they are not in an environment that allows such to occur, the
rhetor will be wasting his or her time. External conditions for change operate in conjunction with safety, value, and freedom. Safety allows both the rhetor and audience to find a common ground, and have a common understanding:

Rhetoric contributes to a feeling of safety when it conveys to audience members that the ideas and feelings they share with the rhetor will be received with respect and care. When rhetoric establishes a safe context, the rhetor makes no attempt to hurt, degrade, or belittle audience members or their beliefs; audience members do not fear rebuttal of their most fundamental beliefs or retribution because they hold them. (Foss & Griffin 13-14)

When all members of discussion are in such a safety zone, they are given an opportunity for change and for their voices to be heard. Value within the external conditions for change establishes each member’s worth within the conversation, and freedom “is developed when rhetors do not place restrictions on an interaction. Participants can bring any and all matters to the interaction for consideration; no subject matter is privileged subject matter, and all presuppositions can be challenged” (Foss & Griffin 15). With these three components intact, the line between the rhetor and audience is most often blurred, if nonexistent. Both must have the external conditions of change in order to accomplish a successful argument.

After examining the taxonomies presented in the Foss & Griffin article, we can apply this to societal norms of argument. Some may stay in conquest their whole lives, bullying others into conforming to their beliefs and ideas. The most popular and most often adopted style of argument, conquest rhetoric contains strong held opinions and frankly, a whole lot of immaturity. Conversion and advisory take a step in the right direction, and it is my opinion that most people fluctuate between these three throughout their lifetimes. Because invitational rhetoric is not seen as socially accepted, and the fact that it is so hard to get a grip on, speaks volumes in the maturity reached in argument styles, however, it is not unattainable. By following the ideas presented within the article, people in society would have a much better understanding of argument and persuasion, and perhaps get more accomplished. This is solely up to the rhetor. Examining argument from Aristotle’s time all the way through how we argue today can help one to re-examine their own argument style, and which they see fit as acceptable in their own lifestyle.

Work Cited