Endoxa, Epistemological Optimism, and Aristotle's Rhetorical Project

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Aristotle's crucial role in institutionalizing the art of rhetoric in the fourth century BCE is beyond dispute, but the significance of Aristotle's rhetorical project remains a point of lively controversy among philosophers and rhetoricians alike. There are many ways of reading and evaluating Aristotle's *Rhetoric* that depend on the philosophical, theoretical, and pedagogical purposes of the scholar.[1] Most philosophical and rhetorical exegeses of the *Rhetoric*, however, while focusing on the text's connections to Aristotle's corpus and to the rhetorical tradition before and after Aristotle, seem to lack a critical perspective on Aristotle's relationship with his cultural context. Yet, like other parts of Aristotle's encyclopedic intellectual endeavor, much of *Rhetoric*'s cultural content was provided by *endoxa*, "reputable or received opinions."

Since G. E. L. Owen's essay "Tithenai ta phainomena" (1961) many scholars have accepted the claim that endoxa, rather than empirical observations, are the source of Aristotle's own philosophical principles. The "linguistic" turn within Aristotelian studies has drawn attention to the role of "facts" of language and ordinary experience within Aristotle's philosophical method. As a result, a view of Aristotle as a hard-core empiricist has given way to a picture of a humanist who is attuned to the nuances of his cultural milieu. Still, this new portrait fails to take into account that Aristotle's manner of selecting and categorizing his linguistic resources allows him to transform what we would consider cultural beliefs into natural, and hence, atemporal premises. This pattern can be explained by Aristotle's "epistemological optimism," in itself a blend of several cultural assumptions about perception in general and vision in particular, the function of language, and the cyclical nature of human history. Part of this essay's objective, then, will be an explanation of these components of Aristotle's epistemological optimism. By appreciating Aristotle's differ-

ence on these issues from our modern assumptions, we will be in a better position to understand why Aristotle relies on endoxa on all three levels of philosophical discourse (theoretical science, moral philosophy, and productive arts of poetics and rhetoric). Aristotle remains consistent in his treatment of endoxa throughout; rhetoric, however, presents a major challenge to Aristotle's epistemological optimism and his conception of language. I shall argue that Aristotle recognized this challenge and that he answered it by isolating proofs and rhetorical genres from their linguistic medium (*lexis*), and postulating linguistic transparency (*saphēneia*) as a stylistic norm.

I.

Aristotle's openness to appearances (*phainomena*) and opinions (*endoxa*) was accorded prominence especially thanks to the work of G. E. L. Owen and Martha Nussbaum. Owen was first to defend a linguistic translation of Aristotle's phainomena as "ordinary beliefs" and "appearances" against the then-prevalent rendition "observed facts." In so doing he asserted the crucial impact of the philosopher's cultural context on the formation of speculative discourse. Owen (1961) nonetheless demanded that phainomena be understood as empirical observations in Aristotle' treatises on biology and meteorology (84–86), so as to preserve the methodological and epistemological distinctions between inquiries into the natural world, on the one hand, and the world inhabited by human agents, on the other. Nussbaum (1986) went much further than Owen in asserting the role of phainomena and endoxa in Aristotle's inquiry. Unlike Owen, Nussbaum sees no fundamental difference between "experiences" of a philosopher and linguistic expressions of cultural beliefs and interpretations—his discursive data— from which Aristotle constructs his philosophical accounts. Nussbaum's chief (and highly influential) claim is that Aristotle's method is marked by a deep concern for the experiential world of his fellow men and their language. Aristotle's philosophical insights into the human condition, on this reading, echo and amplify classical Greek tragedy, despite the austere diction of Aristotle's extant treatises. Owing to this openness to the world of ordinary beliefs, Aristotle seems to depart from the Eleatic and Platonic distrust of human discourse, whether mundane or poetic.

Nussbaum reads Aristotle's departure from Plato and Parmenides with regard to appearances as an indication of a profound commitment to

the ways of his cultural and linguistic milieu. Referring to Aristotle's key passage on endoxa in the *Nicomachean Ethics*,[2] Nussbaum suggests:

> Viewed against the background of Eleatic and Platonic philosophizing, these remarks have . . . a defiant look. Aristotle is promising to rehabilitate the discredited measure or standard of tragic and Protagorean anthropocentrism. He promises to do his philosophical work in a place from which Plato and Parmenides had spent their careers contriving an exit. He insists that he will find his truth inside what we say, see, and believe, rather than 'far from the beaten path of human beings' (in Plato's words) 'out there.' (1986, 242–43)

Because Aristotle aspires to set down "appearances" articulated by his "linguistic community," Nussbaum reasons, he elevates the epistemological status of everyday utterances even as he seeks to order them. Citing the praise of the natural human desire to know in the opening of the *Metaphysics*, she proposes that Aristotle differs from "the ordinary person in the agora" only in "the thoroughness and the dedication with which he presses, in each area, the human demand to see order and to make distinctions" (1986, 261). Nussbaum's account, however, leaves out the sources of Aristotle's epistemological optimism. Aristotle's optimism about the human desire and aptitude for learning and his philosophical process of "making distinctions" cannot be separated from his culturally and historically rooted beliefs about perception, language, and human history. The remainder of this section, then, reviews the epistemological, linguistic, and cultural underpinnings of Aristotle's trust in endoxa.

First, one must take into account Aristotle's theory of perception and vision. Human *psuchē* for him is a kind of a mirror of the real, as the passage in *On the Soul* suggests: "In a way, the soul is all the things that there are. For the things that there are can be either perceived or thought; and understanding is in a way the things understood, and perception, the things perceived" (431b21–23). Perception for Aristotle is not a complex process involving external stimuli affecting our neurological apparatus. Like other ancient Greeks whose theories of perception survived for posterity, Aristotle developed his own in the absence of knowledge about the existence of the nervous system, or of the anatomical structure of the eye, the auditory apparatus, and the brain (Beare 1962). Unlike many of his philosophical predecessors and contemporaries, however, Aristotle was confident in the ability of human senses to perfectly grasp all the relevant aspects of the phenomenal world. For him, perception is an act of grasping objects and qualities that exist independently of our presence or attention. Aristotle believes that most human beings are perfectly equipped to form adequate

perceptual awareness of things out there. Our senses are like a wax-block that receives an imprint of the "sensible form" of the object of perception (*On the Soul* 424a17–24).[3]

Vision for Aristotle is a supreme sense, because unlike touch or smell it allows humans to contemplate an object of perception rather than merely to react to its impact on the organ. "Sight," he says in the *Metaphysics*, "gives us knowledge of things and clarifies many differences between them" (980a23–26). Yet much of what Aristotle asserts about human visual perception, points out Nicholas Denyer (1991), hinges on his rather erroneous, from a modern standpoint, understanding of the workings of light and vision. *On the Soul* describes an array of various media through which we see things, such as water, air, and some solid bodies. Each of them is a medium insofar as it is potentially transparent; and all of them become actually transparent if illuminated (418b4–31). Light is the condition of our perception, then, because it renders media transparent and allows us to see things the way they are. Aristotle stresses that under optimal conditions (such as the presence of light) senses always get things right, and illusions (which Plato had attributed to a combination of perceptual image and opinion) result from errors of inference (*On the Soul* 418a14–17).

Perception is directly linked to language, the latter serving the function of representation of mental states that result from perception.[4] This connection is sketched at the beginning of Aristotle's *On Interpretation*: "Words spoken are symbols or signs of affections or impressions of the soul; written words are the signs of words spoken. As writing, so also is speech not the same for all races of men. But the mental affections themselves, of which these words are primarily signs, are the same for the whole of mankind, as are also the objects of which those affections are representations or likenesses, images, copies" (16a3–8). Because perception is always of particulars, language plays a crucial role in the construction of a general picture of the real and thus paves the way for a systematic understanding. For Aristotle, systematic understanding, when expressed in language, would take the form of generalized propositions about essences and attributes of classes of objects, not about particular features of an immediate object of perception. As Burnyeat puts it, Aristotle "wants to know why the sun is eclipsed at all, i.e. why there are solar eclipses, rather than why it is eclipsed today" (1981, 109).

The process of collecting and ordering endoxa thus amounts to reconstructing the true signification of words and assertions. As T. H. Irwin argues, when Aristotle assembles endoxa in his inquiries, he is interested

not in a speaker's communicative intent or in a particular assertion's meaning for an audience at a specific point in time, but in the degree of truthfulness of this assertion vis-à-vis other assertions regarding the same (extra-linguistic) subject. Irwin explains Aristotle's acceptance of ordinary beliefs as an initial step of an inquiry aimed at the reconstruction of essences: "He multiplies assertions to make clear the relations of the subject and the properties talked about. His ontology determines his account of the structure and nature of assertions. . . . His criteria for counting assertions are guided by the real natures that are signified" (1986, 252–53).

Accordingly, the wealth of linguistic statements about the world can be distilled to a set of definitions that would both elucidate the nature of things and explain this nature to others. Denyer summarizes the remarkable rationale for preserving endoxa as a way of reaching truth:

> Aristotle is loath to abandon any respectable opinion and deny it outright as containing not a glimmer of truth. He prefers instead to resolve the conflicts among respectable opinions by giving a judiciously qualified formulation of the issue, so that at least in some sense and to some degree each side will turn out to have been correct. . . . By his judiciously qualified formulations, Aristotle brings out the various truths behind the conflicting opinions, and shows them all to be mutually consistent. Moreover, by finding some truth behind even the false opinions that some have adopted, Aristotle can give, in fine style, what he calls 'the explanation of the falsehood.' (1991, 209–10)

Whereas perception and language allow for articulate understanding and are shared by all, only few achieve the most perspicuous explanation. Such ability results from *paideia*, as Aristotle affirms in the *Parts of Animals* (639a4–15). If Aristotle's optimism extends to perception and the relation between perceptual states and linguistic expression, he is less sanguine about the ability of the many to provide a perspicuous and ordered explanation of natural and social phenomena.[5]

Nussbaum's claim about the anthropocentrism of Aristotle's method, therefore, should be amended. While it is true that Aristotle is anti-Platonic in his "presumption that the nonphilosophical multitude is far from ignorant" (Wardy 1996, 58), he does not make the ordinary person in the agora the measure of all things. Indeed, Denyer calls Aristotle's approach to appearances "an offbeat Protagoreanism": "a Protagoreanism, since in a sense it makes man the measure of all things; but an offbeat one, since it does not make each distinct individual a measure of that individual's own distinct and private reality, but instead makes the human race as a whole the mea-

sure of how things are absolutely" (1991, 212). In other words, Aristotle's method is anthropocentric insofar as it relies on the idea of the human *psuchē* as a mirror of the phenomenal world. However, this does not make Aristotle into a cultural relativist or symbolic constructionist. On the contrary, as Burnyeat suggests, Aristotle believes that what he presents in his treatises is "not just a preferred ordering of humanly constructed knowledge, but a mapping of the structure of the real" (1981, 126).

Why, then, are endoxa valuable sources of insight into the "structure of the real," besides their potential to signify real natures? To answer this, one must consider Aristotle's cultural beliefs about history and human knowledge. As *On the Heavens* explains it, "the same ideas, one must believe, recur in men's minds not once or twice but again and again" (270b20). Aristotle holds that the world is eternal, but that the human race is periodically visited by cataclysms that destroy most of the accumulated knowledge. Each age, however, generates the same ideas about the world, and these ideas are preserved, if only partially, in the form of sayings, maxims, and myths. Aristotle's task, then, is not to advance understanding to a new level, but to distill the truth implicit in preserved opinions. Aristotle's endoxology is thus inextricably linked with his cyclical view of history. "[H]is endoxic method allowed for a wide range of beliefs, theories, and stories, including some labeled as '*muthoi*,' to count as data. . . . The justification for allowing *muthoi* into the rational fold in this way rested ultimately on the doctrine of periodic cataclysms, which explained why *muthoi* could contain rational insights. It is perhaps ironic if this doctrine today seems to us, in the pejorative sense, a mere *muthos*" (Johansen 1999, 291).

If we take stock of the "mythological" sources of Aristotle's method and theories, we may find Nussbaum's portrait of endoxology a bit too good to be true. Nussbaum seems to ascribe to Aristotle the sort of humanistic pluralism that she wants contemporary philosophers to profess. On the other hand, to declare Aristotle hopelessly antiquated by the "advance of knowledge," as Denyer suggests, may give us a false sense of confidence in our own skeptical rationality. Either way, we are left with little else to celebrate (or dismiss) than Aristotle's premises and conclusions in various areas of inquiry. On the other hand, if Aristotle's endoxic method is viewed as a process of assimilation and differentiation of his linguistic resources, one would be able not only to assess the philosopher's knowledge claims, but also gain insight into how the boundaries among different areas of knowledge are drawn and defended.

II.

The previous section explained why Aristotle's epistemological optimism allows him to treat a variety of nonscientific endoxa as potential data for the construction of a more rigorous system of knowledge. In what follows, I comment on how endoxa are treated in all three areas of knowledge as delineated by Aristotle—theoretical science, moral philosophy, and productive arts of poetics and rhetoric. I contend that Aristotle consistently assimilates culturally and historically specific opinions to a system of knowledge that is meant to reflect natural stability of the cosmos, social institutions, and human behavior. In the case of the art of rhetoric, however, his approach to endoxa collides with contemporary rhetorical practices, whose own claims to social knowledge threaten Aristotle's hierarchical partitions between proper objects of inquiry.

In the *Topics*, Aristotle defines endoxa as "the things believed (*ta dokounta*) by everyone or by most people or by the wise (and among the wise by all or by most or by those most known and commonly recognized)" (100b20). Two elements of this definition are worth noting. First, endoxa are described in terms of their subject matter rather than their social function; second, received opinion is stratified a priori between the multitude and the wise. Aristotle approaches endoxa as objects of belief and not as statements expressing beliefs in various social contexts and through a diversity of genres. In so doing, he removes from endoxa their social and cultural markers. The relative status of received opinion is still conveyed by the respective social standing of opinion carriers, however. I suggest that these two dimensions of endoxa reflect the dialectic of assimilation and differentiation in Aristotle's discourse. By taking endoxa out of their cultural context, Aristotle is able to reassemble bits of popular wisdom contained in them in order to shape a system that is intended to minimize, if not exclude, contradiction or conflict. On the other hand, status differences among sources of opinion provide a background against which Aristotle can set up his own philosophical authority. For if Aristotle can show himself to be more insightful than "the wise," he would have established not only the true view but also his own status.

In pursuing endoxa, Aristotle tries to boil down the multitude of possible viewpoints on any subject to a definition, which will in turn stand as a reflection of reality (*pragmata*). In order to reduce contradictions among the many relevant fragments of discourse, he reconstructs the things said in terms of agreements and oppositions. Those views that seem to cancel

each other are jettisoned, and the ones that appear unanimous are saved. This procedure inevitably removes the original context of the utterances. Aristotle assimilates judgments about X stated by "the many or the wise," but their motives and biases will be obscured in a propositional formula "All X are Y." In other words, left standing at the end of endoxic procedure is a referential statement devoid of markers of situation, purpose, and audience.

As distinct from the pre-Socratics, Plato, and Isocrates, Aristotle's canvassing of endoxa is carried out in the spirit of investigation, rather than contest or public performance.[6] In so doing, Aristotle treats his predecessors and contemporaries as depositories of information in need of proper labeling and cataloging. When references to myth and poetry occur in Aristotle's writings, they are almost invariably stripped of their performative context. This tactic is evident in cases where a poetic utterance is cited to illustrate a theoretical point. Reviewing the claims of the "first philosophers" in the *Metaphysics*, for example, Aristotle turns to Empedocles to point out that "if we follow Empedocles's argument, and do not confine ourselves to his mumbling way of expressing it, but attend to what he has in mind, we will find that love is the cause of good things, and strife of bad" (984b30–985a5). The desire to get to the propositional content of the argument dominates the endoxic procedure. As a result, Aristotle turns his predecessors into "lisping Aristotelians" whose utterances seem like "stammering attempts to express" his own principles (Cherniss 1976, xii–xiv).

It could be objected, of course, that the amputation of text from context and a tendency toward abstraction are the products of "the literate revolution," rather than a deliberate strategy on Aristotle's part. Havelock's account of the pre-Socratics' reliance on the oral tradition of Homer and Hesiod insists on the transitional nature of speculative thinkers like Heraclitus, Xenophanes, and Parmenides: "the significance of these early speculative systems . . . may lie centrally in the demand that they do make for a new syntax and a new use of language, a new method of making statements about our physical environment" (1982, 256). The trajectory is, presumably, from a more performative to a more referential use of language. On this account, we should expect Aristotle's inquiries to display a complete substitution of poetic diction and vocabulary by a set of logical categories.

But abstractions can, and often do, serve a polemical end in Aristotle. Consider, for example, the opening of a passage in *On the Heavens*, where Aristotle lines up endoxa on whether "the heaven is ungenerated or generated, indestructible or destructible":

> Let us start with a review of the theories of other thinkers; for the proofs of a
> theory are difficulties for the contrary theory. Besides, those who have first
> heard the pleas of our adversaries will be more likely to credit the assertions
> which we are going to make. We shall be less open to the charge of procuring
> judgment by default. To give a satisfactory decision as to the truth it is neces-
> sary to be rather an arbitrator than a party to the dispute. (279b5–15)

Here, Aristotle clearly aspires to appear judicious in his treatment of
available opinions, thereby establishing his authority with respect to the
presentation of the subject matter. By putting himself above the fray, he
indicates that his formulation of the issue is not tainted by bias. The formu-
lations on which Aristotle settles at the end seem more authoritative pre-
cisely because they appear to have been reached by a disinterested party.
Aristotle is able to discredit the sources of some endoxa as mere stories
(*muthoi*) while granting other stories more authority by associating them
with his own judicious view. For example, in the *History of Animals*,
Aristotle draws on Herodotus in some cases but discounts him as a fable-
teller (*muthologos*) when he disagrees with him. As Johansen remarks,
"Aristotle seems to borrow, without acknowledgement, from Herodotus
with one hand and repel him with the other" (1999, 282). More impor-
tantly, however, "what decides which account Aristotle picks out as *muthos*
seems to be not so much the degree of empirical evidence available for the
account as whether or not the account fits with Aristotle's theoretical pre-
suppositions" (282).[7]

Aristotle's established status as an "arbitrator" is therefore a coun-
terpart of the rational reformulation of received opinions. The former can
also sanction the latter, with a result of granting status to received opinions
that are politically and culturally partisan. One is less likely to sense bias
when the subject of discourse is the shape of the heavens or the reproduc-
tive system of the fish, but when the issue is politics, Aristotle's position
may strike most modern readers as strange or even offensive:

> By nature, of course, female and slave are distinct. . . . Among the barbarians,
> however, the female is in the same position as the slave. But that is because
> there is nothing among the barbarians with the natural capacity to rule, and
> their community is that of male and female slave. Therefore "it is reasonable
> for Greeks to rule barbarians," say the poets supposing that to be barbarian
> and to be a slave are by nature the same thing. (*Politics* 1252a34)

The reference is to Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* (1400–1401), and
Aristotle cites it quite nonchalantly. The *endoxon* itself reflects contempo-

rary Greek attitudes, as exemplified by poets and tragedians of the classi-
cal period. However, many readers are likely to ask "why Aristotle, ordi-
narily critical of ill-conceived and empirically dubious claims made by the
Greek tradition and/or by philosophical rivals, uncritically accepts these
notions (which do not, on the face of it, seem to be *endoxa* necessary as
premises to a philosophical argument)?" (Ober 1998, 305–6n). Aristotle
takes this opinion for granted, indeed as a backing for his own claim, and
so precludes the opportunity of questioning the historical circumstances of
its performance as well as its political intention. A politically freighted
statement has transformed into a fixed assertion. As Havelock puts it, "the
narrativized usage has turned into a logical one" (1986, 105).

Havelock finds in the *Politics* the expression of the same sentiments
about the nature of humans as political animals as are present in Hesiod
and Sophocles, only conveyed through a different syntax. This account of
the effects of literacy on philosophical discourse does not explain, how-
ever, why Aristotle chooses to authorize this particular view, and not the
one that regards slavery as a culturally created institution. Aristotle ac-
cepts "natural slavery" argument as a given and regards the "convention-
ist" position as extreme because the latter is at variance with his natural
and logical premises. For Aristotle, polis is not a historical entity, but a
natural one. According to Peter Simpson, "the *Politics* . . . is not about a
historical phenomenon, nor is it about a Greek phenomenon. It is about a
natural phenomenon which, if prominent in ancient Greece, could in prin-
ciple exist in any place and at any time" (Aristotle 1997, xxi; emphasis
added). Similarly, Ober describes Aristotle's understanding of politics as
"overtly foundationalist, naturalistic, teleological, and hierarchical" because
it rests on three premises: (1) "that which arises naturally from its begin-
ning and achieves its final form (*telos*) is best"; (2) "a compound 'whole,'
once it has achieved its *telos*, is necessarily prior to each of its constituent
'parts' "; and (3) "in any complex whole (whether that whole be an animal,
a human soul, or a political organization), there must necessarily be an
authoritative, governing element and a ruled-over, governed element" (1998,
295).

Moreover, for Aristotle the role differentiation (husband-wife, par-
ent-child, master-slave) is both natural and logical. In the *Categories*, the
treatise explicating the function of predication, Aristotle tellingly uses
"master" and "slave" to illustrate the proper application of reciprocal terms:
"Take the attribute 'master' from a 'man': then, indeed, the correlation
subsisting between 'man' and 'slave' will have vanished. No master, in

short, no slave" (7b4–7). Aristotle's usage authorizes the relationship between the subject and the predicate by rendering it natural and necessary. In other words, Aristotle's procedure, dependent as it is on epistemological optimism and the assumption of referential transparency of linguistic signification, attributes to nature the results of human political interactions.

If the use of endoxa in the *Politics* supports the taxonomy and teleology that naturalize the social order, what can be said of *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*? If Aristotle's epistemological optimism extends to the two areas that seem less amenable to logical and natural categorization, what are the consequences of this assimilation? I shall argue that in both cases Aristotle decontextualizes the forms of culturally significant speech associated with poetic ritual and civic rhetoric. However, because Aristotle considers poetry more conducive to the life of contemplative leisure, he grants poetic genres, especially tragic drama, greater status in his hierarchy of knowledge. By contrast, rhetorical practice for Aristotle is not in itself a source of ethical or cultural illumination.

From Aristotle's standpoint, poetry is an extension of a natural human aptitude for imitation and learning. His depiction of the two natural causes (*aitiai*) of poetry echoes his praise of human desire to know and our liking of the senses in *Metaphysics*:

> It is an instinct of human beings, from childhood, to engage in mimesis (indeed, this distinguishes us from other animals: man is the most mimetic of all, and it is through mimesis that he develops his earliest understanding); and equally natural that everyone enjoys mimetic objects. A common occurrence indicates this: we enjoy contemplating the most precise images of things whose actual sight is painful to us, such as the forms of the vilest animals and of corpses. The explanation of this too is that understanding (*manthanein*) gives great pleasure not only to philosophers but likewise to others too, though the latter have a smaller share in it. This is why people enjoy looking at images, because through contemplating them it comes about that they understand and infer (*manthanein kai sullogizesthai*) what each element means, for instance that "this person is so-and-so." For, if one happens not to have seen the subject before, the image will not give pleasure *qua* mimesis but because of its execution or color, or for some other such reason. (*Poetics* 1448b3–18)

Aristotle outlines the trajectory of human cognition from perception and imitation to understanding. Notably, understanding, as in the rest of the Aristotelian corpus, denotes the grasp of the constitutive elements of the object of observation. As such, it is abstracted from the visceral experi-

ence of a particular object, such as a corpse or an animal. The knower, as Havelock might put it, is separated from the known (see 1986, 98–116).

Similarly, the genealogy of poetic genres is presented as a natural evolution from inchoate forms of imitation to mature representations. Mimesis progresses from imitation conceived in terms of gesture, tune, and rhythm to a type of representation where the object of mimesis can be contemplated apart from the setting, spectacle, dancing, singing, and diction—traditional aspects of performed poetry. It may be argued that the definition of tragedy and the relative value of its constituent elements in the *Poetics* reflect the process by which a mature philosopher (as distinct from an average Athenian spectator) should partake in tragic learning.

The tendency toward the representational and the abstract (rather than the performative and the culturally specific) privileges the plot (*muthos*) as the "soul" (*psuchē*) of tragedy (1450a38). As an arrangement of incidents, the plot performs the function of clarifying cause-and-effect relationships in represented human action. Owing to its abstractness, the plot "is a kind of universal—an action-type—and can be instantiated many times both in real life and in make-believe contexts" (Armstrong 1998, 455). Spectacle and song making, while most performatively compelling (Aristotle calls spectacle *psuchagogikon*), are considered parasitical upon the substance of tragedy. When speaking of a live performance, Aristotle admits that "fear and pity sometimes result from the spectacle, and are sometimes a result of the arrangement of the events [i.e., the plot], which is preferable and a mark of a better poet" (1453b1–2). It follows that a better spectator (or reader) should seek not all kinds of pleasure in a tragedy, but only the proper pleasure (1453b4–5). Accordingly, Aristotle stresses the relative insignificance of acting in fulfilling the function of tragedy and suggests that its quality can be judged by reading (1450b28, 1462a8). If indeed "the incidents and the plot are the end at which tragedy aims" (1450a13), tragic catharsis should be understood as intellectual illumination rather than as a release or purgation of emotions.[8]

Similar to the discussion of constitutions in the *Politics*, the *Poetics* treats poetic genres as a result of natural development, not as agglutinations of performance traditions. As such, Aristotle's compartmentalization of poetic genres and their functional parts leads to what some scholars termed "desacralization" of poetry; i.e., amputation of culturally unique aspects of poetic performance (e.g., Massenzio 1972, Garcia 2002). Aristotle removes poetic genres from the context of religious rituals in which they were performed, and minimizes the role of diction, singing, and, impor-

tantly, the role of community in the composition and reception of ritual speech.

Thus severed from its cultural and performative context, the husk of performance becomes more congenial to ethical inquiry. On this basis, Aristotle is able to claim poetry as "more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars" (1451b5–6). By virtue of their universality, statements made by tragic characters represent more suitable endoxa for a philosopher than, for instance, stories narrated by Herodotus. Significantly, the style in which these statements are conveyed is of no consequence to Aristotle. He even proposes a hypothetical scenario to accent this contrast between history and poetry: "Herodotus' work could be versified and would be just as much a kind of history in verse as in prose. No, the difference is this: that the one relates actual events, the other the kinds of things that might occur" (1451b1–4). In Aristotle's reckoning, then, it is not the medium or the style of representation, but its object—human action—that ultimately justifies poetry's higher philosophical status among other verbal arts.

By contrast, rhetoric lacks a stable object that would make it into a philosophically legitimate discourse—or so Aristotle argues when he compares rhetoric with politics and ethics. Rhetoric's purview, like that of dialectic, is mere words (*Rhetoric* 1359b4–7). Moreover, "in the chain of relationships of disciplines that comprise Aristotelian philosophy, rhetoric seems to be a dead end: one can arrive at it from others, but Aristotle does not seem to indicate how one can get to these others from it" (Most 1994, 169). When Aristotle defines rhetoric as "a capacity (*dunamis*) to observe all available means of persuasion," he is not describing social action or civic ritual, but a cognitive disposition of a philosophically trained statesman.[9] The apparent empiricism of *The Art of Rhetoric* is, in actuality, a symptom of a tension between Aristotle's epistemological optimism and his attempt to come to terms with rhetoric as a culturally and contextually specific social institution.

The tension between the philosopher's epistemological optimism and the cultural context facing philosophically trained students is famously expressed in the following passage:

> Nevertheless, rhetoric is useful, because the true and the just are naturally superior to their opposites, so that, if decisions are properly made, they must owe their defeat to their own advocates; which is reprehensible. Further, in dealing with certain persons, even if we possessed the most accurate scientific knowledge, we should not find it easy to persuade them by the employ-

ment of such knowledge. For scientific discourse is concerned with instruction, but in the case of such persons instruction is impossible; our proofs and arguments must rest on generally accepted principles. (*Rhetoric* 1355a12)

The passage both affirms the natural superiority of truth and describes rhetoric as something separate from and inferior to scientific and ethical deliberation. Early on, Aristotle dismisses the claims of some of his contemporaries (most likely Isocrates) that political and ethical training fall under rhetoric's purview. The derivative and subordinate position to which Aristotle assigns rhetoric entails that no substantive knowledge claims can be distilled from endoxa.

Still, Aristotle grants legitimacy to endoxa as the substratum of generally accepted principles, which in turn function as premises in rhetorical enthymemes. In contrast with treatises on moral philosophy and science, Aristotle is not interested in winnowing down the wealth of endoxa to a definition, nor does he offer any criticisms of the opinions he catalogues. In addition, as Most (1994) points out, Aristotle insists on including the opinions of the many and not those of the wise, again in direct contrast with the rest of the corpus. Much has been made of the fact that in his enumeration of the resources of enthymemes Aristotle doesn't hasten to rein in the multiplicity of seemingly arbitrary cultural norms. It has been argued that after an obligatory paean to the natural priority of truth and a promise to discipline rhetoric in the first chapter, Aristotle adopts a strictly pragmatic approach to the means of persuasion. In so doing, he supposedly drops the strict measuring stick with which he critiqued his cultural sources in other disciplines and embraces the cultural vocabulary sustained by Athenian rhetoricians and their audiences.[10]

To be sure, Aristotle catalogues popular conceptions of the "good" and the "pleasant" in relation to deliberative and forensic genres, supplies a list of virtues that are typically praised by epideictic orators, and offers advice on techniques of style and arrangement. But Aristotle's immersion in cultural particularity is not so convincing once we consider how he qualifies the use of popular linguistic resources. Whereas Aristotle admits endoxa as materials of argumentative support (means of oratory), he does not allow them to figure as epistemologically legitimate articulations of social and ethical ends. The boundary Aristotle constructs between "mere words" and substantive politics and ethics does not dissolve after the first chapter of the *Rhetoric*—it is reinforced in the rest of the treatise thanks to the

decontextualization of endoxa and the separation of style from the discussion of proofs and genres.

Although in Aristotle's view rhetoric involves the ability to find means of persuasion to influence judgments about specific claims in particular contexts, he considers materials of persuasion apart from examples of persuasive discourse. In the *Rhetoric*, endoxa have already been neutralized by virtue of their classification into special and general commonplaces (*topoi*).[11] Aristotle examines these sources of proof separately from the actual speeches in courts and assembly. As Trevett (1996) has shown, Aristotle fails to cite correctly a single known speaker or speech. On the other hand, his access to written pamphlets leads to a predominance of illustrations from recorded poetry and published epideictic "speeches."

Similarly, the account of the three rhetorical genres not only omits important examples of actual oratory but also subverts the political context and style of a rhetorical act in favor of its propositional content. On its face, Aristotle's analysis seems attuned to the performative situation of rhetoric, for the genres are defined, among other things, by their audiences (1358a22–1358b3). The expressed link between the speech's end (*telos*) and the hearer (*akroatēs*) reassures us that even as we anatomize discourses, we believe that words do things to live people: they exhort or dissuade, accuse or defend, praise or blame (*Rhetoric* 1358b3). This impression vanishes, however, when Aristotle rearticulates the telos of each genre not in terms of the audience but in terms of the appropriate subject matter: the expedient and the harmful, the just and the unjust, the honorable and the disgraceful. Despite its ostensible grounding in practice, the conceptual vocabulary points away from the speech-act and its context towards its abstract topicality. The shift from audience and action-based classification becomes explicit when Aristotle concludes: "From what has been said it is evident that the orator necessarily must first have in readiness the propositions on these three subjects" (1359a7). The terms associated with the construction of propositions—"necessary signs" (*ta tekmēria*), probabilities (*ta eikota*), and signs (*ta sēmeia*) (*Rhetoric* 1359a7–8)—belong to the conceptual lexicon of Aristotle's logical treatises.[12]

Endoxa in the *Rhetoric* are situated midway between analytical categories of Aristotle's system of knowledge and concrete utterances, whose performative context and stylistic peculiarity have been analytically sliced off the topical core. Instead of viewing endoxa within a living and breathing chunk of culture, the Aristotelian speaker finds them already flattened out. Puzzled by this, Brunschwig remarks that in the *Rhetoric* Aristotle

"often uses the vocabulary of vision, as if the relevant object were already here, existing (*huparchon*), and just waiting to be brought into view" (1996, 44). However, this vocabulary of vision seems to go hand in hand with Aristotle's conviction that one's ability to discern the true (*alēthēs*) from that which resembles it is, in fact, a precondition for the capacity to "divine well in regard to *ta endoxa*" (*Rhetoric* 1355a15). A person who possesses articulate knowledge (in Aristotle's sense) will see through the opaqueness of common expression to the fundamental essence, and will be able to discount those utterances that contradict this knowledge.

Notably, the knowledge one expresses through the choice and deployment of endoxa is extra-rhetorical, for it precedes participation in civic rituals that construct and perpetuate cultural norms. Aristotle is careful not to grant rhetorical practice too much authority in defining the subject matter of the three genres: "But in proportion as anyone endeavors to make of Dialectic and Rhetoric, not what they are, faculties, but sciences, to that extent he will, without knowing it, destroy their real nature, in thus altering their character, by crossing over into the domain of sciences, whose subjects are certain definite things, not merely words" (*Rhetoric* 1359b4–7). It follows, then, that Aristotle's rhetorician must learn the principles of politics and ethics not from attending public speeches, but from Aristotle's lectures on these subjects.

In the light of the preceding discussion, it is not surprising that the performative apparatus is treated separately from the exposition of rhetorical proofs and genres. The verbal style (*lexis*) becomes a nonessential appendage once the general mechanism of persuasion is spelled out. The third book of the *Rhetoric* is somewhat of a curiosity shop for contemporary students: it is full of advice regarding appropriate stylistic strategies for each part of speech, but the tenor is generally dismissive: style is said to be necessary owing to the corruption of the hearer (1404a5–6). Although language of praise is preeminent in the genre Aristotle calls "epideictic," in book 3 display elements are dispersed among the three genres as stylistic embellishments. The *Rhetoric* disengages performative elements of public discourse from historical situations in which they functioned as summons and exhortations, thereby reducing them to style and formal arrangement.[13]

Throughout the *Rhetoric* Aristotle seems to be at pains to sever the persuasive power of performed speech from its function of signification. For him, language allows the expression of relationships among things; hence clarity (*saphēneia*) is the standard against which all expression must be judged: "This is shown by the fact that the speech, if it does not make

meaning clear, will not perform its proper function" (1404b1). Aristotle sees language primarily as a rational representation of natural relationships that exist independently of the symbolic world of the Athenian public culture, whose "unnatural" political status makes the democratic idiom philosophically untrustworthy. When discussing style, therefore, Aristotle must insist on the priority of facts over linguistic expression (*Rhetoric* 1404a1–12), just as he asserted the natural priority of truth over its opposite at the beginning of the treatise.

III.

This essay explored the underpinnings of Aristotle's epistemological optimism in order to dispute the claim about the anthropocentrism of Aristotle's endoxic procedure (defended by Martha Nussbaum) and to show how this procedure serves as not only a mechanism for mapping out the real but also a way of constructing and defending the borders between different areas of knowledge. The main contention of this essay has been that Aristotle's attention to popular beliefs and expressions as a discursive substratum of philosophical inquiry is motivated not by his respect for culturally situated opinions, but by a belief in the ability of the human species as a whole to accurately perceive the world and in the function of language to render perceptions clearly.

Epistemological optimism and the conception of language it supports permit Aristotle to treat a variety of culturally embedded discourses as materials for articulating the principles of sciences and moral philosophy. Even poetry becomes in Aristotle's rendition a vehicle for representing human action in general, rather than a form of Greek cultural self-definition. It is only in the *Rhetoric* that Aristotle's naturalistically conceived hierarchy of knowledge and his notion of language as a transparent medium are threatened by the exposure to popular audiences and democratic cultural practices. Indeed, out of the entire Aristotelian corpus, the *Rhetoric* may be the best indication that endoxology becomes vulnerable once it is thrust back into the context out of which it arose.

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Notes

1. For philosophically inflected studies of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, see Grimaldi (1972, 1980, 1988), Garver (1994), Furley and Nehamas (1994), and Rorty (1996). For historical and theoretical treatments by rhetoricians, see Leff (1993), Farrell (1993), Atwill (1998), and Gross and Walzer (2000). For a contemporary pedagogical perspective on Aristotle, see Neel (1994).

2. Aristotle's *Topics* explains that the method of reasoning from endoxa is applicable even to "sciences" whose first principles are "true and primary": "Further, it is useful in connection with the ultimate bases of each science; for it is impossible to discuss them at all on the basis of the principles peculiar to the science in question, since the principles are primary in relation to everything else, and it is necessary to deal with them through the generally accepted opinions on each point" (101a37–101b2).

3. For a debate on whether Aristotle's theory of perception is still philosophically (if not physiologically) credible, see Burnyeat (1992) and Nussbaum and Putnam (1992).

4. For an extensive treatment of this connection, see Modrak (2001).

5. Aristotle's optimism about human perception is attenuated by an apparent pessimism about people's ethical choices (e.g., *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095b14–22; *Politics* 1319b31–32).

6. See Thesleff (1966) on scientific style in early Greek prose; Press (1995) on Plato's dialogues as enactments; Verdenius (1985) on the style of Aristotle's writings; and Haskins (2001) on the performative aspects of Isocrates' writings. On the rhetoric of ancient scientific discourse, see van der Eijk (1997).

7. Aristotle is not the only one to employ "muthos" as a polemical term to put down rivals. On the extent of this practice in classical Greece, see Lloyd (1990).

8. For diverse interpretations of the "illumination" thesis, see Golden (1962), Nussbaum (1986), Halliwell (1990), Depew (1991), and Haskins (2000).

9. On the intended audience and purpose of the *Rhetoric*, see Lord (1981) and Poster (1997). By contrast, Grimaldi (1972) sees a much greater philosophical scope to the art of rhetoric.

10. See, for example, Most (1994) and Wardy (1996).

11. To be sure, even in this decontextualized form, commonplaces retain a degree of cultural particularity. See Warnick (2000).

12. Kennedy states: "the student [of rhetoric] is assumed already to understand, from earlier study of logic and dialectic, the concepts of *pistis, apodeixis*, and *enthymēma*" (1991, 33n23).

13. See Schiappa (1999) for a discussion of Aristotle's "disciplining" of the genre of epideictic.

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