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Aristotle to Donald Trump: Lessons in rhetoric

Introduction

“When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending the best. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems to us. They’re bringing drugs.

They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”

- Donald Trump

Though this is one of the many rhetorical statements, the Republican presidential hopeful resorted to while campaigning, it has drawn much attention and debate. The above presented views were expressed by him, as an evaluation of the existing US-Mexico relation. He used it as a prelude to sharing his plans for regulating the relation if he was to become the next President of the United States. This is one of the many rhetoric of Mr. Trump that has left voters, experts and observers divided. While some are all praise for his ‘calling a spade a spade’ attitude, others are more dismissive of his slander filled rhetorical style. His critics feel such outbursts will alienate voters and jeopardise chances of Republicans gaining Presidency in 2016. But such apprehensions are probably misplaced or so indicate statistics. He is still the frontrunner among Republican presidential hopefuls having bagged 29% Republican votes and is trailed by Dr. Ben Carson with 14 % and Carly Fiorina with 11% (Tyrrell 2015). Though criticized and scoffed at, Donald Trump is probably the most vibrant of Republican candidates successfully gaining visibility, media space and also mind space.

But will he manage to have the last laugh in the Presidential race? Will Mr. Trump’s rhetoric ensure his entry into White House as the next US President? His critics and sceptics would probably say no. And if alive, Aristotle the great philosopher and author of *Rhetoric* would have probably held similar views. He would have surely counselled Mr. Trump about how to make his campaign effective without being dismissive and how he can convince and persuade supporters and critics alike. It is interesting to ponder about the facets that Aristotle would

have drawn Mr. Trump's attention to. Would he have asked him to become more restrained in his public speeches or would he have asked him to become more incisive and realistic? This paper attempts to crystal ball gaze an interaction between Aristotle and Donald Trump.

Overview about rhetoric

Rhetoric is the art of identifying and using the best available means in a given situation

to ethically persuade an audience

- Aristotle

Prior to crystal balling gazing, it is desirable to develop an understanding about rhetoric and its various facets. Rhetoric is considered to be one of the three most ancient arts of discourse with grammar and logic being the other two. Rhetoric can broadly be defined as an art of public discourse through which speakers aim to inform, persuade and also motivate their audiences in particular situations (Corbett 1990). Within European traditions, rhetoric played a significant role both as a subject of study and also in civic activities. In classical Roman works one finds mention of the five pillars of rhetoric which was traditionally used in the development of persuasive speeches. These pillars were identified as invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery. Though the word rhetoric has its roots essentially in the Greek language, it is interesting to note that it is not derived from a single Greek word but from a combination of different words like public speaker, oratorical and anything which is said or spoken (Liddell & Scott, 1940). And probably that is why it formed an integral part of the Western education system to train speakers and writers to sway audiences and readers with the skill of arguments and presentations. This practice was much in vogue till about the late 19th century. Historically the term has always been surrounded by controversies resulting in different philosophical debates over the years (Johnstone 1995). This has undoubtedly

contributed to the formulation of different theories around rhetoric which has only enriched its application and essence.

Apart from the meaning and essence of rhetoric, scholars have also differed on the scope of use of rhetoric. While traditional scholars restricted its application to public speaking within the political domain and courtroom debates, modern scholars feel that rhetoric can be applied to a wide array of subjects like social sciences, natural sciences, religion, history, fine arts, journalism and even architecture (Nelson et. al., 1987). Like the varied subjects that rhetoric can be applied to, modern scholars feel that different professionals like public relation experts, lobbyists, marketing executive, professional and technical writer and advertising professionals can also resort to rhetoric. If we closely analyse this line of thought and the specialities each of the above mentioned signify, we can decipher the soundness of their logic. That rhetoric belongs only to political public speaking has been contested by renowned philosophers like Gorgias and Aristotle who believed that a successful rhetorician has the ability to speak on any topic and convince listeners irrespective of the speakers experience in the area. (Sprague 1972). However Plato took a more cynical view of rhetoric and viewed it as a means of influencing the ignorant masses in courts and assemblies. In his view rhetoric was merely a form of flattery which was used to cover up the real truth or to prevent masses from discovering the real truth. To him it was a means of deceit and therefore any speech or writing which had any connotation of flattery was rhetoric. Subsequently an interesting aspect of rhetoric was introduced by James Boyd White who viewed rhetoric within an extended domain of social experience. According to him language is influenced by people as much as people are influenced by it. In that sense language is socially constructed and hence it cannot be rigid. He also put forward the argument that language is what people interpret it to be and since this interpretation can vary according to the situation, the usage of language itself is rhetorical (White 1984).

This debate about the scope of rhetoric extended beyond the lifetime of these philosophers with their students and followers remaining as divided as their masters were. It is pertinent to remember that the word rhetoric originated from ancient Greece where participation in political life by citizens was considered valuable. Rhetoric was used to convince the public to participate in politics and probably that is why its application was considered restricted within that domain. However, if we reflect on our experiences and also our actions under different circumstances, we will realize the holistic application of rhetoric as was suggested by several philosophers. Therefore in conclusion it can be held that though rhetoric is still predominant within the political ambit and is commonly associated with political public discourse, its scope is wide and any individual can resort to rhetoric to convince his or her listeners irrespective of the subject being discussed or debated.

Aristotelian view of rhetoric

While the above section provides us insights about what is meant by rhetoric and the debate about its application and scope, it is important for us to develop an understanding about Aristotle's views on the subject. Such knowledge will help us better decipher suggestions that the philosopher would have likely offered to presidential aspirant Donald Trump.

Over the years different philosophers have put forward their thoughts and concepts about rhetoric and its impact on audiences. But of all the theories propounded, the most impactful has been the ones propagated by Aristotle. A student of Plato, he took forward the ideas of his teacher and further developed on them to enhance the scope and effect of this mode of public speaking. Aristotle's ideas are enshrined in his treatise *Rhetoric* and this work has significantly contributed to the development of the art of rhetoric (Christof 2010). The value of this work can be judged from the fact that philosophers like Cicero and Quintilian often drew on concepts outlined. The importance of Aristotelian rhetoric stems from the fact that it

encapsulates several evolutionary concepts. While deliberating on rhetorical arguments he applied the doctrine of *sullogismos*, on which he had based his theories of dialectic, logic and demonstration (Christof 2010). The insight he offers about emotion is also best captured in his works on rhetoric and is more illuminating than Aristotelian ethics. Also it is through *Rhetoric* that he puts forward his views about cognitive applications like language and style. This precisely signifies why this treatise is considered so important when it comes to the study of the art of rhetoric.

Aristotle believed that there are three species of public speaking. The first is called deliberative, where the speaker advises his or her audience to act in a specific way or warns them against acting in a specific way. Audiences, under the influence of rhetorical speech, decide to act or abstain after. Such decision translates from perceptions of outcome of the act. The second species is judicial and is more restricted to courts and assemblies. The speaker either accuses someone or defends someone. Based on such judicial rhetoric, the jury decides whether a particular activity was legal or not. Both approaches are strategic public speaking to influence decision making (Christof 2010). The third species, epideictic speech, doesn't influence decision making but merely eulogizes or censures an individual or organization. Whatever be the form, the speaker tries to convince his or her audience either by *ethos*, *pathos* or *logos*. *Ethos* refers to when the speaker aims to lend credibility to himself through his speech. He or she attempts at a specific image creation (Christof 2010). As the speaker is considered credible, the audience is more likely to accept whatever he says as truth and abide by it. To project such credibility the speaker must demonstrate practical intelligence, virtuous character and goodwill. Interplay of all the aspects is important for image creation can get impacted for want of any credibility quotient. *Pathos* refers to the use of rhetoric appealing to the emotional disposition of audience. It is known that reactions depend on emotional state. And rhetorical speeches are delivered to stimulate desired response. How can speakers

influence emotions? According to Aristotle, speakers need to understand the nature of emotion, towards who is it inclined and contributing reasons. Once these are deciphered, the elements can accordingly be incorporated in the speech. The third mode of persuasion or logos refers to the arguments put forward by speakers. When audiences perceive strengths within such arguments they are more easily swayed to act in the desired way (Christof 2010). Inductions and deductions are the two forms of arguments identified by Aristotle. Deductive arguments refer to a range of sentences some of which are premises while the others are conclusions. Derivation of conclusions is guaranteed by the premises. Deductive arguments, also known as enthymeme, must therefore consist of a premise-conclusion structure. Aristotle held that enthymeme is the proof of demonstration in a speech which influences the audience.

Another important aspect of Aristotle's work on rhetoric is the relation between rhetoric and dialectic. According to him dialectic and rhetoric are counterparts and this relation is significant in our understanding about rhetoric. It can be noted from the works of other philosophers that though dialectic is not subject bound, it none the less is based on described methods. By employing such methods, dialectic determines reasons which lend credibility to some arguments while negating others. Since dialectic and rhetoric are complimentary, in the context of public speech, the later should therefore be based on proper investigation of what is persuasive and what is not. Additionally both should also deal with arguments arising from acknowledged premises and therefore rhetorician using arguments and proofs and adapt dialectic equipments. This led Aristotle to opine that rhetoricians should be able to perceive what will persuade audiences and what will not.

From the above discussion we can therefore conclude that Aristotle believed that audiences can be persuaded either by the credibility of the speaker or through arousal of specific emotions or through the strength of the argument and therefore it is necessary for the speaker to identify which of the aspects will move his audience and then play accordingly. He also

held that since dialectic and rhetoric are counterparts, the latter must involve a study of what is persuasive as the former involves a study of what is reasonable and what is not. Like dialectic, rhetoric should be based on reasons from which the premise-conclusion structure of enthymeme will evolve. Arguments put forward by the speaker, will thus become credible able to convince audiences into desired action.

Rhetoric of presidential hopeful Donald Trump

Having gained insight into Aristotelian rhetoric let us compare its tenets with the oratory style of Republican hopeful Donald Trump. Ever since his first campaign event, he has been consistently making headlines and have both patrons and critics watching his moves closely. While critics hold that his remarks can cost Republicans the Presidential race, Donald Trump continues to surge ahead in popularity mirrored by the percentage of votes received. That leaves one to ponder, what is it about this orator that makes him popular inspite of his eyebrow raising opinions? What seems to be working in his favour is his boldness and ability to speak his mind. He is raising rarely discussed issues at his event. He is also projecting his solutions to address them to enhance citizen security (Tyrrell 2015). Tax plans are meant to extend economic security and through immigration regularization he offers social and cultural security. He thus attempts to invoke an emotion within his audience exploiting the inherent feeling of insecurity. To achieve this effect he uses simple and short sentences which are easy to understand. He is easily comprehensible to voters hence strengthening the connect, enhancing his popularity and acceptance. Some media observers also feel that Mr. Trump knows the points of persuasion of his voters and therefore he has focused on the issue of immigration and tax reforms which are points of contention. His views on such issues are finding resonance among sections of enchanted citizens furthering his popularity (Lane 2015). It may be recalled that Aristotle rates the ability of rhetoricians to identify persuasion

points highly. Mr. Trump seems to adhere to this aspect of Aristotelian rhetoric. Aristotle had identified pathos as a means of persuasion and this has certainly been adopted as a path by Donald Trump. Through his pointed attack against immigrants, he is trying to rouse the feeling of insecurity and anger among citizens. His speeches are projecting an immigration situation which is undesirable, thus triggering an emotion state of fear, uncertainty and uneasiness. But to placate such emotions he is also, intelligently, providing solutions. In doing so he is trying to warn voters, to elect him or prepare for tough days. A deliberative approach, it may be recalled. Simultaneously he is also criticizing the looks of Carly Fiorina or the attitude of Megyn Kelly to capitalize on pathos of those critical of these personalities. This is precisely where the first fault line is. Strangely he seems to be swinging between the deliberative and epideictic styles. He is deliberative when speaking about immigration and tax policies but he is epideictic when attacking his detractors. According to Aristotle while deliberative influencing decision of the audience, epideictic speeches doesn't contribute to that end. While such speeches can appeal to emotion they are not influential. Considering the stature of Presidential Elections, the relevance of epideictic speeches can surely be questioned. If such speeches fail to persuade audiences, then where lies its effectiveness and relevance? Mr. Trump's dependence on this speaking style will rabble rouse but will probably not translate into a mandate for Presidency. For that he needs to influence his audience to decide in a particular way, vote for him.

His fame as a successful business personality implies social trust. And through his speeches he has tried to consolidate this trust by highlighting his corporate achievements. This has been strategically planned by Mr. Trump to garner voter support for his agenda. Through projection of past achievements he is trying to construct an image of a leader competent to handle affairs of the United States. If he could do it for his business why can't he do it for his nation? Proving that he can is his roadmap for the future communicated through his vision

and plan. Thus through ethos or credibility creation as a leader, he is convincing his audience he can steer the nation to greater heights (Lane 2015).

Yet his attempt seems partial because being a successful business personality does not necessarily mean a successful President. There's a world of difference between running an organization and negotiating with China over border disputes with India or strategizing to counter ISIS aggression (Poonawalla 2015). While he has spoken much about some issues he has not managed to influence audiences about his depth of understanding. His foreign affairs outlook is not without major faults and nor are his views on internal security. These are critical policy making areas which Presidents are expected to guide to create a beneficial international environment within which the US can flourish. Mr. Trump's vision appears myopic or blurry. His internal security agenda is more immigration dependent than terrorism, example. And he has not been able to set straight his envisaged world order. To construct credence it is necessary for presidential contestants to impress upon voters that they can guide the nation deftly across all aspect. For the Republican front runner this is the second fault line. Though he is respected for his business acumen and success, this political acumen hasn't been convincing. He lacks prior experience in politics and in public service and therefore envisioning him as future President cannot be based on facts (Poonawalla 2015). His constant jibes against women and critics portray his intolerance to opposition, which doesn't augur well for someone aspiring to be President of United States. Such positions are always scrutinized and criticized but aggressive reactions are not always advisable. Mr. Trump's indulgence in caustic and personal jibes does not place him well as a future leader of the nation (Bolton 2015). Hence his attempt to tread the ethos route through rhetoric seems handicapped.

Apart from the apparent lack of ethos, Mr. Trump's public speeches also lack the aspect of logos as highlighted by Aristotle. His arguments are not convincing, lacking persuading

power. Many of his statements and claims lack evidence and hence do not fall within the purview of fact and reason based persuasion implied through logos. An example is his claim about Mexican immigrants being rapists and carrying diseases in support of which he has not been able to provide details and clinching evidence (Walker 2015). He has also not cited convincing proofs of international border walls like he has proposed between America and Mexico. The Great Wall of China was not built in modern times and therefore doesn't justify such a plan. Technically there is no proof to validate that what Mr. Trump has proposed or spoken about is feasible in reality. That has precisely been the problem with much of what he has spoken in his addresses. They have lacked proof and thus persuasion towards feasibility of the proposals is feeble (Walker 2015).

Mr. Trump's speeches also seem to lack the aspect of enthymeme as was elucidated by Aristotle. And probably this is reason why his speeches lack the power of persuasion. It can be recalled that *Rhetoric* identifies enthymeme as a deductive argument based on premises and conclusions. Based on the premises one can derive the conclusion which remains inherent within the premises. If we compare Mr. Trump's comment against Carly Fiorina's with the enthymeme approach, it would mean that Presidents should be chosen by looks or alternatively President's should be good looking (Helling 2015). From the premise that Mexicans are rapists and drug dealers, he derives the conclusion that they should be restricted through construction of the border wall. Both instances portray faulty premises and therefore faulty conclusions. If reason is faulty can emotion alone convince or persuade? Can looks become the premise on the basis of which voting patterns can be concluded or candidature for that matter? The answer clearly is no. Even his remarks against immigrants defy the structure of enthymeme because actions of some immigrants can never be generalized to reach a conclusion.

Aristotle's advice

Flowing from the above it can be crystal gauged that Aristotle's first advice to Mr. Trump would be to determine his preferred specie of speech. Since epideictic doesn't influence decision Aristotle's advice would be to discard it entirely. Hence Mr. Trump will have to restrict himself from individual or organizational praising or criticizing. Attacks against opponents should no longer figure in his speeches as it merely emotes but never convinces. Of the two influence regulating approaches, Aristotle would advice Mr. Trump to adopt the judicial approach over the deliberative approach. He can thus defend the vision and agenda of his party and himself putting forward logical, precise and fact based arguments to influence the jury, voters in this case, to decide in favour of his candidature and the Republican Party. The judicial rhetoric style will help build consensus towards his presidential nomination as also for other party members, ushering in the opportunity of majority representation. Therefore Aristotle's first advice would be adoption of judicial rhetoric.

Aristotle's second would entail inclusion of more deductive arguments in speeches of Mr. Trump. The philosopher would have counselled the Republican hopeful about focusing on premises that translate into definitive conclusion and abstain from making statements which lack validation. Such statements can cost him his popularity and the Grand Old Party their race to the White House. Aristotle would advice him to base his immigrant criticisms more factual and less envisioned. If he believes they are drug dealers he should make public evidences to support this view. Only then will he make real sense and force to voters to sit up and take note, thus influencing their decision. Otherwise it constitutes nothing more than wishful thinking. And that rhetorical style is not what Aristotle prescribed. This is important if Mr. Trump wants to dent into the key state of Florida which houses large Hispanic population (McGreal 2015). Latino vote share is shrinking for the Grand Old Party in the state and further erosion can spell doom (McGreal 2015). Thus Aristotle's prognosis – use of

deductive arguments based on thoroughly investigated premises from which valid conclusions can be drawn.

Aristotle's third advice for Mr. Trump, reduce over dependency on pathos as a means of persuasion. The philosopher is most likely to counsel Mr. Trump about working on projecting himself worthy of Presidency, proving his abilities and acumen in comprehending and strategically thinking about issues which are of national interest. Aristotle would counsel Mr. Trump to include in his speeches his vision about international relations, counter terrorism, climate change, internal security and others. Such vision should be founded on precise understanding of dynamics, pressures and priorities and not superficially acquired notions. His speeches should convey direction of future policies, their rationale and relevance. Only then will he come across as a leader with the insight and far-sight to ably steer the country ahead. Aristotle would also discourage Mr. Trump from reacting aggressively to critics and opposition. The philosopher's advice would be to judiciously neutralize opposition that matters and let go those that don't. The Republican candidate, as per Aristotle should concentrate on outmanoeuvring his opponents with logical rebuttals rather than slander. He should win voters through arguments and not personal vilification. That will enhance his credibility and project him in desired light.

Therefore Aristotle's advice for Donald Trump would be to more adeptly combine ethos, pathos and logos in his rhetorical speeches. The teacher is expected to communicate to his student that equivalent intermingling of all three aspects produces a successful, convincing and persuasive rhetoric. Only through such approach will Mr. Trump be able to make real and effective impact. Lack of any will not be acceptable to voters for too long.

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