

Aristotelian Views of the 20th Century

Presidential Address November 22, 1983

H. W. Hildebrandt

The University of Michigan

Dear Aristotle:

My name is Phaedrus—student as you know of Socrates, and friend of Plato who gave me literary life. It is my hope, sir, that as I view the 20th century my words may suggest how your concept of communication has been altered since the ancient rhetoricians and sophists sat on the banks of the Illissus or in a garden in the Northwest section of Athens. Please tell the others, of your time, how rhetorical principles have changed.

Cicero, I know, and Quintilian, would be displeased should I begin this epistle without a *divisio*. My points will therefore be three: an overview of communication as it is now taught; some differences in communication compared to what we learned in those ancient days; and finally some suggested principles which my modern friends should not forget.

I

Let me begin with a quotation from the essay named after me, the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates describes where we had class:

... a fair resting-place, full of summer sounds and scents. Here is this lofty and spreading plane tree, and the agnus castus, this high clustering in the fullest blossom and the greatest fragrance; and the stream that flows beneath the plane-tree is deliciously cool to the feet. . . . But the greatest charm of all is the grass, like a pillow gently sloping to the head.¹

My dear Aristotle, things have changed since you in your Lyceum and Plato in his Academy chatted with groups of five, or seven, or more because some had courage to teach in the Agora. Today they teach within buildings, within four walls, with lights, with desks, with fewer opportunities to lie on one's back and simply listen to the argument going on around them. Where we had dialogue, they have lecture; we had few students, they have many; we searched for truth, they search for I know not what. . . .

And their teachers, Aristotle, carry different titles: Professor, Associate Professor, Assistant Professor, Adjunct Professor, all coupled to a concept we never heard about—tenure. We, as you know, had sophists, itinerant teachers who moved from village to village in search of pupils. We were paid directly by our students. Remember, how all

were so envious of Protagoras when he received ten thousand drachmas (about \$300 today)? By the time of Isocrates the fees had dropped to a thousand. I hear similar complaints in this century: teachers are underpaid for what they do.

And books by the hundreds, authors such as Himstreet and Baty; Wilkinson, Clarke, and Wilkinson; Sigband and Bateman; and Lesikar; and a recent alliance of a German with an Irish name of Murphy and a German with the name of Hildebrandt—all strange names when compared to works more familiar to me: *Gorgias*; *Phaedo*; *The Rhetoric*; *The Republic*; *The Institutes*; the *ad Herennium*.

So, Aristotle, you can see that the movement of ideas is now primarily via the written word while we in the ancient world moved our ideas through speech. I remember well the Homeric tales, the drama of the *Iliad*, the powerful speeches, the moving plea of the teacher Phoinix to his pupil Achilles, when he says:

If indeed thou ponderest departure in thy heart, glorious Achilles, and hast no mind at all to save the fleet ships from consuming fire, because that wrath hath entered into thy heart; how can I be left of thee, dear son, alone thereafter? To thee did the old knight Peleus send me the day he sent thee to Agamemnon forth from Pitthia, a stripling yet unskilled in equal war and in debate wherein men were preeminent. Therefore sent he me to teach thee all these things, to be both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds.²

Those words, Aristotle, I told to my son, then he to his son, then to his son, and his son, and his son. Our world was oral; theirs is heavily written, with memos, reports, letters, telexes, collection letters, good news/bad news—all strange to my ear, and eye.

And sadly I also miss the words and vocabulary which were so much a part of my schooling. I doubt, Aristotle, if any of their printed books in business communication carry such familiar ancient terms which were the core of our communication: antilogy; progymnasmata; enthymeme; sophist; dialectic; eristics; ethos; pathos. Even sadder, their students do not learn of our great ancient names, persons who knew that communication was the core of our being and way of life. I think fondly of Gorgias of Leontini; Corax and Tisias; Protagoras of Abdera; Socrates; Isocrates; you, Aristotle; and the equally important Cicero and Quintilian. Gone, sir, are these famous communicators who laid the very foundation of what they call communication.

II

Before I weary you with my long note, let me turn to how in their 20th century they honestly differ from what we taught and learned under

the rubric of communication. Oh, communication is taught, but many teachers are seemingly uninformed of their heritage, of their dependence on us ancients who knew that ideas moved according to prescriptions, all based on the oral transmission of ideas.

To us communication meant rhetoric, or as you defined it: "The faculty of discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion."³ Cicero put it this way: "There is to my mind no more excellent thing than the power, by means of oratory, to get a hold on assemblies of men, win their good will, direct their inclinations wherever the seeker wishes, or divert them from whatever he wishes."⁴

My perception of the 20th century is that there is a diminution of the oral in business communication. Why that is so I do not know—for you and I know that even the written has its lineage in the oral world of the Greeks and Romans. So for the next few moments let me tell you what has happened to some of our ancient rhetorical principles: how some are gone and how some are faintly reflected in this century.

Inventio, we said first, was searching out the best available evidence in support of a proposition. This was a mental exercise, the speaker-debater locating proof needed to argue a position orally. I sense a parallel concern in the history of letter writing. Erasmus believed in *inventio*, as did Blount, as did Angell Day who some term the earliest writer in English for business letters. *Inventio* is here today. Lost may be the term, yet headings such as "Formulating Your Message"; "Giving Facts, Not Opinions"; and "Consider Your Evidence" suggest a dependence on us ancients.

There may be a fragile cohesion between us over time, yet one cannot deny, with pleasure, that what we learned in B.C. is reflected, though dimly, through the ages of what they call A.D. 1983.

As the term *inventio* is lost to some business communicators, so is the second term in our classical concept of communication, *dispositio*. That, as you know, we defined as organizing arguments persuasively. I happen to like Quintilian's statement:

Nor is it without good reason that arrangement is treated as the second of the five departments of oratory, since without it (*inventio*) is useless. For the fact that all the limbs of a statue have been cast does not make it a statue: they must be put together . . . even a slight dislocation will deprive a limb of its previous use and vigour, . . .⁵

And how well I remember the names of the various parts of an oration, particularly the *exordium* or introduction and the *conclusio* or conclusion.

I must report that time has but all erased our terms from their vocabulary. Yet, they are concerned with adapting material to the reader or listener; they do know that getting attention, that setting the tone or mood, affects the receiver. I confess to being moved by some of their openings, and words, as I was by the stirring words of those of our day.

They had a Lincoln who began, "Fourscore and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation . . ."

They had a Kennedy who said, "Ask not what your country can do for you . . ."

They had an Ingersoll who began, "The past rises before me like a dream. Again we are in the great struggle for national life . . ."

All of these are faint echoes of an earlier time of a Cicero, a Pericles, or the letters of Paul.

And so forth through conclusions, and summaries, and executive summaries which tell me they are aware of how to end, how to conclude with force, dignity, and in the truest sense of their forebears.

But style, Aristotle, the third part of our ancient canon of rhetoric, which we also called *lexis* or *elocutio*, has been severely altered since our time. Style no longer dominates, overwhelms, as it did in Cicero's *Orator* or in his *De Oratore* wherein is found a most 20th century definition:

Now what better style of expression can there be—than that our language should be correct, lucid, ornate, and suitably appropriate to the particular matter under consideration.⁶

More clearly remembered, however, is most of your four tenets of style, such as clear, correct, appropriate, and some of the ornate. Indeed, your words—written around the 4th century B.C.—have the sound of modernity:⁷

Being clear: The proof is that language which does not convey a clear meaning fails to perform the very function of language.

Being correct: Purity of language depends on correct connective words; specific words; avoidance of ambiguous language; proper gender; and agreement in grammatical number.

Being appropriate: Words are like men; they must be adapted to the individual and the subject.

I see parallels to the above in the five "C's," or what some call the seven "C's": correctness, conciseness, clarity, completeness, concreteness, consideration, and courtesy.⁸ And grammar continues, with its obligatory rules which govern the movement of thought in either the oral or written medium.

What I see lacking in business communication today is ornateness—the flowers of rhetoric, the schemes, the tropes, the figures of thought; the figures of language no longer propel a thought along with the brilliance that Quintilian wished. Few business communication texts discuss, perhaps their authors do not know, that many of their predecessors in the Renaissance felt that ornateness was a part of a letter, even suggesting that rhythmic cadences were important in written communication.

Forgotten, I am sure, is the fact that in England ornateness for writing reached its zenith. Quintilian stood supreme. Indeed, scholars laud him as the most revered of English grammar school authors, whose influence, even on Shakespeare, was acknowledged to be far beyond the classroom. At a school called Eton in England, around 1530, a Dutch writer Erasmus strongly influenced the practice of letter writing, suggesting that arguments, proof of arguments, amplification, and other features were a major part of idea movement. Our friend Cicero was also to be emulated, copied, imitated—for stylistic purposes, with embellishments also to be learned from Erasmus' *De Copia*. Imitation became a pedagogical device at other schools—including Ipswich, Cambridge, Bury St. Edmunds, Harrow, East Retfore, and other English schools.

A scholar, C. S. Baldwin, wrote: "Sometimes in effect essays, sometimes almost orations, they (letters) are sometimes themes. The favorite model is Cicero; and in extreme cases the letter seems to consist of style. It is hardly a letter; it is an exercise."⁹ A follow-up conclusion by Clark ends with, "When it is understood how the Latin Epistle was taught as an exercise in the grammar schools, it is not difficult to understand how the Latin Epistles of mature scholars naturally retained traces of school training in letter writing."¹⁰

I must further report, Aristotle, the absence of one other element pertaining to style: to my eye I do not see any discussion of the triad of rhetorical styles; namely, the grand, the middle, and the plain, as originally applied to oratory and then later to the written word as prose, poetry, and letter writing. The Renaissance knew and applied the three levels of style to letter writing as found in Italy, Germany, and England, for example. And in only a few places do we learn of the grand style, with its ornate words moving people to action, or the middle style which borrowed from the ends of the stylistic continuum.

What is stressed is the plain style, the words, the expressions of everyday life. That is the goal: clarity of thought. And, Aristotle, as some have attempted this plain style strange things in logic and sense have

occurred in their language, or so suggests one John Gould in a paper he presented:¹¹

I blew my horn but it would not work as it was stolen.

Wanted: Woman to sew buttons on the fourth floor.

For sale: big dog, beautiful animal, good watchdog; will eat anything; especially fond of children.

Anyone leaving exhibits in this building more than thirty days will be considered abandoned and will be destroyed.

Thus, they do smile, do chuckle at some of the very things which we too fell into.

With some haste I pass over the last two parts of ancient rhetoric. Memory is nowhere in their curriculum: the art of mnemonics has little place in what they call business communication. And, only recently do we see chapters in their texts on our fifth canon of rhetoric, delivery. Some authors have begun to recognize that the oral mode is part of communication, is a medium just as capable of transmitting ideas, and hopes, and fears, and dreams. For us, Aristotle, it was *the* means to convey thought.

III

Before I close this epistle, I said I would do one final thing: summarize those principles I hope those in the 20th century would not omit.

First, they cannot forget that communication has a long lineage, the genesis of which has some of the proudest names in the history of mankind: Plato and his concepts of philosophy; you, Aristotle, and the use of right reasoning in support of ideas; Cicero and his multivariied concepts of moving mankind on the wheels of persuasion; Quintilian—that master pedagogue—who believed that communication was the good man speaking well. All these, and innumerable others, should not be forgotten as the communication forebears of what today they call English, speech, linguistics, and even business communication.

Second, they cannot forget that the oral word, the oral delivery of ideas is as powerful a tribune of the oppressed as of the successful. The words of our ancient age, and our orators, are infrequently read. Thus they cannot believe that the fortunes of an ancient nation hung in the balance to rise or fall on the weight of someone's eloquence.

I yearn to hear again the stentorian tones of a Cicero speaking against Catiline; of Caesar's oration on punishing conspirators; of Achilles declaiming to the Envoys; or hearing the first Philippic of Demosthenes.

Speakers in our day were revered for their speech, as Odysseus says: "For one man is in form inferior, but God crowns his work with beauty, and

men behold him and rejoice; with sure effect he speaks; he shines where men are gathered and as he walks the town men gaze as on some god."¹²

But they too, Aristotle, have persons of good speech: John Kennedy's Inaugural Speech; Martin Luther King's I Have a Dream; or Edmund Burke's orations in the British Parliament. So, some have not forgotten that the sounds of meaning can also move people: in a conference, a classroom, a business meeting, a seminar.

Third, they cannot forget that logic must accompany the fundamental tools of business communication. The ancient trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and logic is present, but there is a steady seepage of the latter into classes on philosophy. They as communicators have every right, as did we, to test our propositions and arguments according to the rules of logic: for persuasion, for getting persons to willingly agree with us, for readers to accept our thesis.

Fourth, they cannot forget that persuading of people was and could be the centrality of communication. The combative spirit of what they call business—which we called commerce—is competitive, an arena for testing our propositions against one another. Aristotle, your message was succinct: state your proposition and then prove it. More of that belief is needed to market an idea; to support a proposition on a scaffolding of logic; to organize a letter, not a tepid endorsement of an idea, rather as a conspicuous force that is at once clear and persuasive. For just as we knew what moved persons of our day, just as we saw the effects of persuasion, so now they—in teaching, in writing, in research, in speaking—must more often go beyond informing and reporting, to know those elements which move mankind.

Last, they cannot forget that the pillars of business communication, of literacy, can rest on reviewing examples: from the past and the present. The Renaissance had its commonplace books, we had our exercises in progymnasmata. They have theory, perhaps to excess, when the pragmatic, through the example and the illustration, can teach more than coils of figures devoid of examples. The pithy example can also be eloquent.

It was my privilege, for even brief moments, to remember communication as you and I knew it and as parts of it, though pale, continue in their time. To be honest, I am pleased: their teachers give effort with quiet diligence; they are decent persons who touch with care so personal a thing as communication; they are imbued with an ambition to do well; and as their unspoken thoughts find voice, their love for excellence fulfills a prophecy penned so long ago by our old friend Seneca, on another theme:

The time will come when diligent research over long periods will bring to light things which now lie hidden. A single lifetime, even though entirely devoted to the sky, would not be enough for the investigation of so vast a subject . . . And so this knowledge will be unfolded through long successive ages. There will come a time when our descendants will be amazed that we did not know things that are so plain to them . . . Many discoveries are reserved for ages still to come, when memory of us will have been effaced. Our universe is a sorry little affair unless it has in it something for every age to investigate . . . Nature does not reveal her mysteries once and for all.¹³

And so I wish you well, with affection, with gratitude, with love, with knowledge that though seasons of time separate us, the words of ancient communicators still speak today of things enduring. That, Aristotle, is a good thought and for all of us a noble calling.

Your friend,

Phaedrus

NOTES

1. Plato. *Phaedrus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, with introduction by William Chase Green. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1927), p. 438.

2. Homer. *Iliad*, trans. Lang, Leaf, and Myers. (New York: MacMillan, 1934), p. 159.

3. Aristotle. *Rhetoric*, trans. Lane Cooper. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1932)
1.2. A fuller discussion of the philosophy behind Aristotle's definition is in Cope: "That which gives its peculiar and distinctive character to his [Aristotle's] treatment of Rhetoric is, as he himself tells us, that he has established its connection with Dialectics, the popular branch of Logic, of which it is a 'branch' or 'offshoot' or 'counterpart' or 'copy,' which enables him to give a *systematic* and scientific exposition of it as a special kind of reasoning and mode of proof. . . ." Cope, E. M. *An Introduction to Aristotle's Rhetoric*. (London: Macmillan, 1867), reprinted by William C. Brown, (Dubuque, IA: Reprint Library, n.d.), p. 6.

4. Cicero. *De Oratore*, trans. W. W. Sutton. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), I.viii.30.

5. Quintilian. *Institutes*, trans. H. E. Butler. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 8. Pre.2.

6. Cicero, *De Oratore*, 3.10.37.

7. See Aristotle, 3.ff. One of the better discussions of Aristotle's concept of style is found in the following survey work: Kennedy, George. *The Art of Persuasion in Greece*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 103ff.

8. See Herta A. Murphy and Herbert W. Hildebrandt. *Business Communications*. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1984), 4th edition.

9. Baldwin, Charles Sears. *Renaissance Literary Theory and Practice*. (New York: Macmillan, 1939), p. 41.

10. Clark, Donald Lemen. *John Milton at St. Paul's School*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), p. 186.

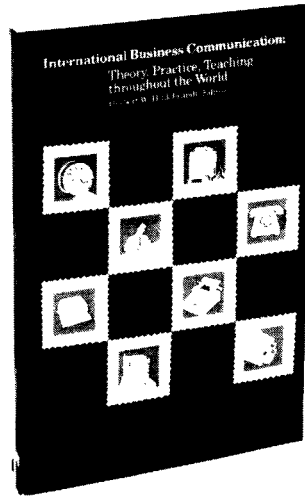
11. Gould, John. "Quotations That Liven a Business Communication Course," Manuscript, n.d.

12. Homer. *Odyssey*, trans. George Herbert Palmer. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1921), 8.159.

13. Seneca. *Natural Questions*, trans. Thomas H. Corcoran. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 7.25.4,5; 7.30.5,6.

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