The Audience for Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*¹

Abstract: Although there is general consensus that knowledge of Aristotle’s intended audience is important for understanding the *Rhetoric*, there is no consensus about who that audience is. In this essay, four of the most widely accepted theories are investigated: that Aristotle is writing for the legislator of an ideal city; that Aristotle is writing for the Athenian public or an elite subset of that public; that Aristotle is writing for his students; and that the *Rhetoric* was written for multiple audiences over an extended period of time. Ultimately, the most plausible of these explanations is that he is writing for his students.

It is widely accepted that our understanding of Aristotle’s political and ethical works is improved if we keep the primary audience he intended to receive these works in mind as we read them.² However, there is no consensus about exactly

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who that audience was. Essentially four different answers have been given to this question as regards the *Rhetoric*, and in this paper I will consider each of these answers in order to determine which of them is the most plausible. First, it may be that Aristotle is writing for the legislator or resident of the ideal city. Second, I will discuss the possibility that Aristotle’s intended audience is his students in the Academy and, later, the Lyceum. Third, I will examine the viewpoint that includes the *Rhetoric* in Aristotle’s so-called “afternoon lectures” to a larger public audience in Athens. Finally, I will consider the position that there is no intended audience for the *Rhetoric* because it was written at different times for different purposes and thus is not a coherent whole with a unified purpose. My conclusion is that of these options, the possibility that Aristotle intended the *Rhetoric* for his students is the most likely. Given that there is inevitably speculation involved in exploring these issues, I want to make it clear that I do not intend to resolve this question once and for all. My goal is simply to consider the alternatives and elaborate a configuration of ideas that I hope will be useful.\(^3\)

Before looking at the merits of the case for each of these audiences, I want to point out that focusing on Aristotle’s intended audience is strongly consistent with his own approach. In his ethical and political works he frequently points to the importance of having the correct audience if any kind of teaching in these areas is to be effective. He is clearly aware of the importance of tailoring one’s message to the audience that will be receiving it so that they can properly understand it.\(^4\) In order to do that one must take into account (among other things) the knowledge that the audience already has, the reason that they are interested in learning what one

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\(^3\)For a discussion of some of the questions and disputes surrounding the text and the difficulty of resolving them, see Michael Leff, “The Uses of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* in Contemporary Scholarship,” *Argumentation* 7 (1993): 313–327.

\(^4\)Politics VIII, especially VIII.1; *Nicomachean Ethics* I.3. All references to the *Politics* are to the Carnes Lord translation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). All citations to the *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereinafter the *Ethics*) are to the translation by Martin Ostwald (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1962).
is teaching, and how a particular lesson relates to one’s own larger teaching project. These ideas will be central to my analysis.

Within the Rhetoric, Aristotle discusses how important it is for the speaker to know the characteristics of his audience. So, for example, Rhetoric I.8 lists and briefly discusses the types of political constitution that exist so that the speaker will know how to appear persuasive to an audience in any city. Rhetoric II.12–17 offers advice on appealing to audiences who are young, middle-aged, or old, wellborn or not, rich or poor, powerful or powerless. Each type of audience must be addressed differently if one is to be persuasive. Without knowing one’s audience, an argument cannot be prepared and presented in the best possible way for achieving one’s goals. I do not mean to say that the Rhetoric is itself rhetorical. Indeed, my argument relies on the idea that Aristotle is writing for an audience that is different in kind from one that would be listening to a speech in a courtroom or assembly. But given the persistence of this idea in his writings, I believe that it is reasonable that Aristotle would have kept in mind his intended audience when writing the Rhetoric. It would therefore have been written for a particular audience, and this would affect Aristotle’s message. Consequently, it should also affect how we should read the text.

In order to provide the context for my consideration of the Rhetoric’s intended audience, I will begin with what is perhaps the most well-known problem in interpreting the Rhetoric: whether Aristotle understands rhetoric to be a moral, amoral or immoral undertaking. Aristotle begins the Rhetoric with the clear position that rhetoric is only to be used for morally appropriate ends. Aristotle gives the following as the very first reason rhetoric is useful: “The true and the just are by nature stronger than their opposites, so that if judgments are not made in the right way [the true and the just] are necessarily defeated [by their opposites]. And this is worthy of censure.” The speaker, through his use of speech, must help the
audience make proper judgments by properly arguing for the true and just. Soon after this Aristotle says that while “one should be able to argue persuasively on either side of a question” this is only the case “in order that it may not escape our notice what the real state of the case is and that we ourselves may be able to refute if another person uses speech unjustly.” Not only is the speaker to pursue only the true and just, he must do so by using speech in the appropriate way, avoiding falsehood and deception. The speaker is not to argue in favor of injustice or what is false and must oppose those who do. He is also to avoid manipulating the emotions of the audience “by leading them into anger or envy or pity” to keep them from perceiving the truth. Anyone who uses Aristotelian rhetoric, it would seem, is to use it only in the right way and for the right reasons: to defend the true and the just and to make sure they prevail over falsehood and injustice. He must avoid deception and manipulation regardless of their effectiveness.

But elsewhere in the Rhetoric Aristotle seems willing to accept, or even to encourage, the speaker’s manipulation of the audience’s emotions and the use of arguments which the speaker knows to be partially or entirely untrue, provided they are effective. Rhetoric I.9.28–32 explains how to make misleading statements, and I.15.17–33 shows how the speaker can put the best spin on a situation. For example, witnesses can be made to seem crucial to a case if the speaker happens to have them, while they can be made to seem irrelevant or misleading if he does not. This instruction certainly seems questionable from an ethical point of view. Rhetoric II.23 lists commonly useful lines of argument, the truth and falsehood of which are not addressed, for the speaker to draw on as they seem useful. Elsewhere in Book II Aristotle describes in some detail how to manipulate the audience’s emotions in exactly the way he condemned in the beginning of Book I; and Book III includes advice on how to present oneself to an audience in order to appear to have a good ethos, including advice on speaking style: “Those [performers who give careful attention to [volume, change of pitch, and rhythm]] are generally the ones who
win poetic contests; and just as actors are more important than poets
now in the poetic contests, so it is in political contests because of
the sad state of governments.” He goes on to say that “Since the
whole business of rhetoric is with opinion, one should pay attention
to delivery, not because it is right but because it is necessary, since
ture justice seeks nothing more in a speech than neither to offend nor
to entertain; for to contend by means of the facts themselves is just,
with the result that everything except demonstration is incidental;
but, nevertheless, [delivery] has great power, as has been said, be-
because of the corruption of the audience.” The moral perspective on
rhetoric, as it would be practiced in the ideal city where “everything
except demonstration is incidental,” is strongly emphasized at the
beginning of the Rhetoric, but by the end of the text Aristotle appears
to have endorsed unethical uses of rhetoric if they will lead to
success. Rather than explaining how the “sad state of governments”
can be improved, Aristotle offers advice on how it can be exploited.
How can these conflicting views of rhetoric be reconciled, if they can
at all?

Let us consider the first possible audience mentioned above. It
has been suggested by C. D. C. Reeve, among others, that Aristotle
is writing for the legislator: the man who is learning about politics
in order to establish the best laws for a city and to rule in accord
with those laws. In the Ethics, politics is defined as the “master” or
“architectonic” science that orders all the others and sets boundaries
for them, and rhetoric is specifically mentioned there as a science
that is subordinate to politics. Therefore, it can be argued that the
legislator with the opportunity to give the best laws to a city needs
to know about rhetoric in order to regulate it and set boundaries

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  \item \textsuperscript{9}Rhetoric III.1.4.
  \item \textsuperscript{10}Rhetoric III.1.5.
  \item \textsuperscript{12}For a review of some of the arguments for the morality and amorality of the text, see J. Robert Olian, “The Intended Uses of Aristotle’s Rhetoric,” Speech Monographs 35 (1968): 137–148.
  \item \textsuperscript{14}Ethics I.2.
\end{itemize}
for its use, just as he would need to do with all the other sciences. Because rhetoric ought ultimately to be in the service of the highest good, which is the development of the citizens’ virtue and therefore their happiness, the legislator will need the *Rhetoric* in order to turn rhetoric in the ideal city to that end and ensure that it is properly established and limited.

Aristotle might even be thought to give an example of how rhetoric is to be treated in the ideal city. He explains at *Rhetoric* I.1.7–8 that ideally the city will determine as much as possible by laws rather than leaving things to the discretion of judges; therefore, the scope of matters about which the speaker can speak in such a city will be significantly circumscribed. However, while this may diminish the scope of rhetoric in the judicial arena, it does not apply to the assembly where laws would be made, so that even with such a prohibition there would still seem to be a place for rhetoric in such a city. Indeed, Aristotle says in the course of his discussion of the ideal city in the *Politics* that one of the things “without which a city could not exist … and the most necessary thing of all [is] judgment concerning the advantageous things and the just things…” Therefore, there is a need for judgment in the ideal city, and citizens should engage in this process of judgment, ruling and being ruled in turn.

However, in the best city (which Aristotle calls the city for which we would pray and which he describes in Books VII-VIII of the *Politics*), the only role of rhetoric, whether in a trial or a speech made before the assembly to suggest a course of action, would be to demonstrate “that circumstances are as the speaker says.” In such a city the citizens will understand politics and ethics, and their discussions will be conducted and judgments rendered according to the rules of those sciences rather than rhetoric. So, for the legislator interested in creating laws for the best city, Aristotle’s advice about rhetoric will be irrelevant, so long as his other advice for the ideal city is followed.

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15 But see *Rhetoric* I.13.13, where Aristotle qualifies this in his discussion of fairness, “justice that goes beyond the written law.”
16 *Politics* VII.8.7.
17 *Rhetoric* I.1.10.
18 Schurumpf in Furley and Nehamas, eds., cited in n. 11 above, p. 105. Walzer (in Gross and Walzer, eds., cited in n. 11 above, p. 51) writes: “The ideal deliberators of the *Politics* differ from the audience typically assumed in the *Rhetoric* as the citizens of Aristotle’s ideal polity differ from the contemporary citizens (as Aristotle regarded them) of democratic Athens.”
Rhetoric, Aristotle says, is practiced “among such listeners as are not able to see many things all together or to reason from a distant starting point.” This, in fact, is one of the main reasons rhetoric is useful in cities as they now exist, according to Aristotle: “Even if we were to have the most exact knowledge, it would not be very easy for us in speaking to use it to persuade some audiences.” But things would be different in the ideal city. A speech in the assembly or law-court in such a city would demonstrate the actual truth about the matter at hand rather than deceiving or misleading the audience; the reasoning used to arrive at the conclusion would be correct; and the audience would judge accordingly. In this situation, rhetoric will not be taking place at all; instead there will be the exercise of philosophy, specifically political philosophy, since it will involve actual truth (insofar as this is possible in human affairs) rather than opinion. It is therefore unlikely that Aristotle would have written this book on rhetoric if his intended audience was the legislator with the opportunity to create the ideal city. In such a city, the speakers and audience would all draw on political and ethical knowledge in making legal and political decisions, and there would be no need for rhetoric. So, the first alternative for Aristotle’s audience seems to be unrealistic.

If rhetoric is to exist at all, then, it must exist in a city that is less than ideal, and Aristotle’s audience must be found there as well. Athens, where Aristotle spent most of his teaching career and much of his life, would certainly fit into this category. Of all the Greek cities, it was the one that provided the greatest scope for the aspiring orator. Such a man could make a name for himself, and potentially gain wealth and power, by delivering speeches in
the courts and in the assembly.\textsuperscript{23} Both the importance of rhetoric in Athenian life, and the temptation it would have represented for the unscrupulous, would have led Aristotle to treat the subject very seriously in this context.\textsuperscript{24} Aristotle clearly did not believe that Athens was the ideal city. In fact, he frequently disparages the quality of the audience that the orator must address, presumably based on his experience in Athens.\textsuperscript{25} Unlike the audience in the ideal city, such an audience is susceptible to a speaker’s misuse of rhetoric. Aristotle points out that Athens did not have the kind of laws that would prevent the misuse of rhetoric in the law courts.\textsuperscript{26} As regards the Athenian assembly, space does not allow me to describe thoroughly the actual practice of rhetoric there.\textsuperscript{27} We can get a sense of it from Thucydides’ famous Mitylenean debate. In the course of that debate, Thucydides has Diodotus say to the Athenians “[Here in Athens] a state of affairs has been reached where a good proposal honestly put forward is just as suspect as something thoroughly bad, and the result is that just as the speaker who advocates some monstrous measure has to win over the people by deceiving them, so also a


\textsuperscript{24}For a satirical comment on these points, see Aristophanes, Clouds.

\textsuperscript{25}Examples include Rhetoric I.2.13, II.21.15, III.1.4, III.1.5, III.14.8, and III.18.4. This awareness of the quality of the audience to be addressed also makes the theory that Aristotle is writing for the legislator less likely. See also Jurgen Sprute, “Aristotle and the Legitimacy of Rhetoric,” in Furley and Nehamas, eds., 117–28 (p. 121–2), and Halliwell in Furley and Nehamas, eds., p. 213. But see Politics III.11 and III.15.

\textsuperscript{26}Aristotle does make an exception: the restrictions in effect in the Aeropagus for murder trials (Rhetoric 1.1.5). The fact that this is the only institution he praises would seem to indicate the degraded nature of the others. The surviving speeches given in the Aeropagus show that even these restrictions were often breached. See references below.

man with good advice to give has to tell lies if he expects to be believed.\textsuperscript{28}

If we accept that Aristotle’s audience was to be found in Athens, then there are two possibilities. One is that Aristotle intended the \textit{Rhetoric} for a small body of students who would be pursuing a course of study at the Academy or, later, the Lyceum,\textsuperscript{29} and the other is that he intended it for the Athenian citizens generally during his “afternoon lectures.”\textsuperscript{30} Let us first ask what message Aristotle intended if his audience was made up of his students in Athens.

As we do so, it is important to keep in mind that for Aristotle the goal of an individual learning about ethics and politics is to acquire the knowledge and training necessary to behave virtuously; therefore, it makes sense to assume that his purpose in teaching ethics and politics was primarily to help his students become men who would behave virtuously throughout their lives (and potentially to share their knowledge and training with others). Since rhetoric is explicitly linked to ethics and politics in the \textit{Rhetoric}, which defines it as “a certain kind of offshoot [\textit{paraphues}] of dialectic and of ethical studies (which it is just to call politics),” his teaching of rhetoric should be seen as part of an education in virtue.\textsuperscript{31}

To see how this is the case, consider again the seeming contradiction in Aristotle’s teaching about the moral nature of rhetoric with which I began this essay. Can the Aristotelian speaker in the flawed city of Athens use techniques of misrepresentation, manipulation, and deception? If not, is he doomed to defeat at the hands of those who are willing to use them, as Diodotus suggests, or are the morally

\textsuperscript{28}Thucydides, \textit{History of the Peloponnesian War}, translated by Rex Warner (London: Penguin Books, 1972) III.43. Of course, Thucydides is not reporting an actual speech, but the position he puts in Diodotus’ mouth must have been widely held in Athens for it to seem plausible to Thucydides’ audience. Other contemporary criticisms along these lines can be found in Yunis.


proper techniques of rhetoric more likely to lead to victory after all? Is the fact that the student of philosophy genuinely knows the truth about ethics and politics—or at least more of the truth than others—a help or a hindrance when he is speaking in front of his fellow citizens in a law court or assembly? These questions would have been relevant for Aristotle’s students, especially those with political ambitions (more will be said about this below when discussing Aristotle’s “afternoon lectures”). Advancing those ambitions in Athens would require the ability to speak well in public. There are two observations to be made here. First, if it could be shown that philosophical training hinders the use of rhetoric, it might cause us to question the likelihood that his main audience was his own students, since such training would have much less appeal for them. On the other hand, if philosophical training helps the student as an orator, we might be more inclined to believe that Aristotle intended the *Rhetoric* for his students. Second, we need to answer the question of whether Aristotle’s students would have approached or used rhetoric differently from those who were not his students in some way that Aristotle would find desirable. If so, it would also add to the likelihood that his intended audience was comprised of his students.

In order to answer these questions, we must consider in some detail the concept of *endoxa*. This word is generally translated as “commonly held opinions,” but for Aristotle it includes not only those opinions widely held among the masses of common people but also those opinions held by the noble and the wise.32 The *endoxa* have an important part to play in the *Rhetoric*, as well as in the *Ethics* and *Politics*. This is another reason for thinking about these three works as part of a unified course of study and putting the *Rhetoric* in that context. However, the *endoxa* perform a different function in the *Rhetoric* from that of the other ethical and political works and this difference is crucial to understanding the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy and between the rhetorician and the philosopher. Ultimately, it is the training the philosopher receives regarding the *endoxa* that makes him a more proficient speaker than someone who does not have this training; and he will use this training to pursue a different agenda. Both are important points.

In the *Ethics* and *Politics*, the *endoxa* serve as the starting points for philosophical inquiry. Aristotle claims that opinions held by a large number of people, or which have been held by people for a long time, or which are held by the wise, are unlikely to be completely without

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32Topics 100b21 and 104a8.
truth. But the existence of numerous conflicting endoxa means that we cannot simply accept all of them as true without reservation. In order to derive the truth from them, we must carefully examine them, clarify what they mean, and resolve the conflicts among them as best we can. This leads to a preliminary conclusion about the matter at hand. Having done that, we test the conclusion we have arrived at against the endoxa we began with, and if the conclusion fits with those endoxa we can judge our work a success. Aristotle says that “if the difficulties [arising from different beliefs] are resolved and current beliefs are left intact, we shall have proved their validity sufficiently.”

So the endoxa are not true, unless by chance, but to the philosopher studying ethics and politics they serve as the starting point in searching for truth. The speaker uses the endoxa not primarily to advance the truth but in order to present an effective argument to the audience based on what they already believe to be true. He learns the facts about a particular legal or political situation and then chooses the endoxa that will most effectively (not necessarily truthfully) present the facts so as to lead the audience to the conclusion he wants: “One should guess what sort of assumptions people have and then speak in general terms consistent with these views.” This is one reason why it is important to know the characteristics of the audience; someone with this knowledge will be more able to determine the assumptions the audience has and will be able to tailor his speech to take advantage of those assumptions. The audience will be convinced, and the speaker will have succeeded, if a particular argument is believed by the audience to be true because it conforms to what they already believe, and is therefore persuasive, regardless of whether or not it actually is true in the sense in which a philosopher would use that word. Thus, when making a speech, the speaker should not go through the process needed to derive the truth from the endoxa—that is, he should not philosophize. This can only confuse and anger, not persuade.

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33Ethics VII.1.
34Rhetoric I.1.11.
36Rhetoric II.21.15.
37Rhetoric I.2.6 and I.2.11. See also Most in Furley and Nehamas, eds., p. 181.
The speaker will also not be able to use speech to educate the audience, for Aristotle clearly believes that most people cannot be educated to virtue by speech alone, and indeed this is one of the reasons rhetoric is useful in cities such as Athens: it can persuade where education is not possible. Nor should the speaker demonstrate how the particular endoxa used are true, or the degree to which they are true, for this is the work of ethics and politics (and the Ethics and Politics). Most summarizes this nicely: “The most important difference between [the Rhetoric and Ethics] regards the kinds of endoxa examined and the methods by which they are treated: the Rhetoric collects only those endoxa that are compatible with popular opinion and then stops short; the ethical treatises attempt to apply Aristotle’s doctrines to the endoxa, both philosophical and popular, to test their truth and seek mutual confirmation, and at least sometimes and at least programmatically attempt to use those endoxa as a source from which to derive those doctrines.”

If successful persuasion relies on the speaker’s use of the endoxa about ethics and politics, then the person who has the most complete mastery of these endoxa—the person who has actually used them in the study of philosophy—would be the most successful speaker. He would be the one who would know the elements of truth and falsehood present in each of the endoxa and therefore would best know how to deploy each of them in a given case or debate: “Since widely shared beliefs might be used to support either of two incompatible conclusions, orators must be able to decide which beliefs they should appeal to on a particular occasion. This is why Aristotle believes they ought to rely on the conclusions of political science.” So the true expert, the one who has really studied the endoxa, is not the rhetorician but the philosopher. Thus, while it is possible to learn and use at least some of the techniques of rhetoric without being a philosopher,

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38 Irwin in Rorty, ed., p. 149.
40 Rhetoric I.4.4, I.4.13, I.6.17, I.8.7, I.9.2, and I.10.19. Therefore the degree of precision in the argument that is necessary and appropriate in the Rhetoric is less than it would be in a work that was actually concerned with the truth for its own sake; see Ethics I.7 on the appropriate level of precision in an argument. See also Garver, Aristotle’s Rhetoric, cited in n. 13 above, p. 82; Most in Furley and Nehamas, eds., p. 181.
41 Most in Furley and Nehamas, eds., 181–2 (emphasis his). See also Irwin in Rorty, ed.
42 Irwin in Rorty, ed., 154.
this is a limitation and not an advantage: “the better an argument is philosophically, the better it will be oratorically and the likelier it is to win.”

According to Aristotle, the rhetorician needs to know quite a lot. The need to know about the endoxa and the need to know about different kinds of audiences one might face have already been discussed. In addition to politics, he should know dialectic, a difficult subject. Rhetoric I.4.7 lists the important political subjects on which the rhetorician might be expected to give advice in the assembly and which he therefore must know about: “finances, war and peace, national defense, imports and exports, and the framing of laws.” When speaking in a jury trial, the speaker must know about the relevant laws and principles of justice. He must know about the various things held to be good. He must understand psychology, so as to be able to create and change emotions in the audience. He must know about rhetorical technique, which means knowing about the Greek language, its rhythms, parts of speech, and so on. And he must understand the principles of argumentation. All of these things must be thoroughly understood for the rhetorician to have the kind of general knowledge he can apply successfully to the particular matter about which he is speaking. In Ethics X.9, Aristotle says that mastering a skill or art means going to a universal principle; the physician and the boxer who know the general rules of their arts are best able to bring about success in those arts when applied in particular cases. This would also be true of the rhetorician, whose general rules are to be found in the spheres of dialectic and ethics and politics. In the Topics, Aristotle says that “[P]eople are likely to assent to the views held by those who have made a study of these things; e.g. on a question of medicine they will agree with the doctor, and on a question of geometry with the geometrician, and likewise also in other cases.” This too will enhance the success of the speaker who has learned philosophy. As they succeed in giving good advice, their reputation will grow, and this would enhance their ability to persuade. Anyone who had learned enough to be a really effective speaker would have gone a long way towards being a philosopher. And the converse is also true: the philosopher will be a good speaker.

43Most in Furley and Nehamas, eds., 187.
44As discussed in Rhetoric I.5 ff.
45Topics 104a34.
As Mary Nichols says, “Because it is based on a comprehensive understanding of human nature, [philosophers’] rhetoric will be persuasive. And because of that same comprehensiveness, it will be both true and just, to the extent that human affairs permit.”

Let us now apply these different uses of the endoxa to the question of whether the rhetorician can permissibly manipulate an audience, and if so, in what way. Aristotle says at Ethics VI.7 that we must aim at the best of the good things that are attainable by action. The education of an audience cannot be attained through rhetoric. Therefore the rhetorician cannot bring his audience to virtue, which would cause them to do the right thing for the right reason. Perhaps, however, the audience can be brought to do the right thing for the wrong reason, as the rhetorician uses his knowledge of rhetorical technique to persuade people to act correctly. Persuading citizens of less than ideal virtue to pursue good ends might well mean manipulating them, and to succeed in this the rhetorician must be willing to subordinate truth to victory, not in the sense of speaking falsehoods, but in the sense of not using the endoxa to discover truth as he would if he were engaging in philosophy. He limits himself to using the partial truths of the endoxa that support the complete truth that the audience cannot be made to see and is not interested in seeing. Subordinating truth to victory does not automatically mean sacrificing the just outcome to an unjust outcome or right to wrong; instead, it means that the rhetorician must draw on imperfect beliefs in order to persuade an imperfect audience.48

The vulnerability of citizens to the techniques of rhetoric leads us again to the question of rhetoric and morality. To what degree can the rhetorician deviate from the truth? Certainly rhetoric has great power, and therefore the potential for great harm. Aristotle anticipates this concern early in the Rhetoric and has a response: “And if it is argued that great harm can be done by unjustly using such power of words, this objection applies to all good things except for virtue, and most of all to the most useful things, like strength, health, wealth, and military strategy; for by using these justly one


48 See also Sprute in Furley and Nehamas, eds., cited in n. 25 above, p. 126; Reeve in Rorty, ed., cited in n. 13 above, p. 202 ff. It is worth noting in this context that Aristotle gives the following as one of the reasons people do wrong (Rhetoric 1.12.31): “[They wrong] those for whom they can do many just things after they have wronged them, thus easily remedying the wrong, as Jason of Thessaly said he had to do some few unjust things in order to do many just ones.”
would do the greatest good and unjustly, the greatest harm.” 49 But
Aristotle believes that the man who really knows ethics and politics
will have an advantage in using rhetoric, and for Aristotle the man
who really knows ethics and politics will aim at the best possible
ends by definition. Remember that the reason for studying ethics
and politics in the first place is in order to behave ethically. 50 And
for whom would Aristotle have higher hopes on this point than
his own students, who he must have believed would, as a result
of his teaching, have the character and knowledge to use rhetoric
for good ends? 51 As Hill says, “It is no doubt true that Aristotle
expected the graduates of the Lyceum to be superior to others at
making ethical decisions.” 52 If this is Aristotle’s intended audience,
then the difference between the moral outlook of the early chapters
of Book I and that of Books II and III is easier to explain. In Book
I Aristotle reminds the student of his moral obligations in order to
put him in the right frame of mind for learning in Books II and III
the strategies that will unfortunately be necessary in his struggles
to bring about the good for the city. 53 Aristotle’s students would
have been educated in order to improve their characters by learning ethics
and politics, and this education would improve their ability to argue
well. 54

In addition, when used by Aristotle’s students, the nature of
the endoxa will also help bring about a good outcome. Since the
endoxa contain some element of truth, there are limits to how far
the rhetorician can deviate from morality when using them. 55 Those
who do not know or use the endoxa can deviate much further, but
fortunately for the city rhetoric which avoids the endoxa is not as
effective. Successful rhetoric relying on the use of endoxa is not that
dangerous because it cannot depart very far from philosophy after

49 Rhetoric 1.1.13. Household management, strategy, and rhetoric are the three
useful arts explicitly mentioned as subordinate to politics in Ethics 1.2.4–6.
50 Ethics 1103b25; Ethics 1179b.
51 See Lord, “The Intention of Aristotle’s Rhetoric,” p. 338–9; Larry Arnhart,
Aristotle on Political Reasoning: A Commentary on the “Rhetoric”, (DeKalb, IL: Northern
Illinois University Press, 1981) 26; Self, “Rhetoric and Phronesis,” cited in n. 31 above,
p. 130–45.
53 Sprute in Furley and Nehamas, eds., p. 119; Schutzrumpf in Furley and Nehamas,
well and so argue well takes phronesis and ethos.”
669.
The scope of its possibility for deception is limited. It is certainly possible to argue on either side of a question using the *endoxa*, but the more extreme and unrealistic claims on either side are excluded by the rhetorician’s adherence to public opinion. Recall in this context Aristotle’s claim that the truth is naturally stronger than falsehood, and that truth will be free of inconsistencies (which an opponent might attack) while falsehood will not be. Thus the truth has a built-in advantage in debate, and successful rhetoric, as well as the successful speaker, will incline towards truth as much as the circumstances will allow. This is a function of the demands of rhetoric itself and not just the speaker’s character. The more fully the *endoxa* are known and used the more true this will be. And it is true to the greatest extent if the speaker has had the proper education to fully understand the *endoxa* in the way that philosophers do—an education such as the one he would have received from Aristotle. So it makes sense to envision Aristotle’s students as his intended audience, since his theory of rhetoric makes the most sense in the context of his curriculum as a whole, especially that portion devoted to ethics and politics.

The third position to consider is the position that Aristotle’s intended audience is the citizens of Athens. Evidence to support this position can readily be drawn from examination of the historical record. Several authors from antiquity, though significantly later than Aristotle, claim that Aristotle would lecture to his own students in the morning and lecture to a public audience in the afternoon. Further, the ancient authors claim, the public lectures included lectures on rhetoric, which Aristotle included in order to draw students away from the Athenian teacher of rhetoric Isocrates, who also had a school and whose teachings Aristotle found objectionable. (Indeed, some modern scholars go so far with this evidence as to argue that the *Rhetoric* as a whole should be read first and foremost as a response to Isocrates’ theories of rhetoric). From this evidence it is possible to conclude that the *Rhetoric*, at least in part, was intended for and

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57Engberg-Pedersen, in Rorty, ed., cited in n. 21 above, p. 128; Arnhart 11, 34, 160.
addressed to an audience of Athenian citizens—not all of them, but the young men who had leisure to spend their afternoons listening to public lectures.

Obviously, it is important to take seriously what the historical record has to say about Aristotle, and this material can be useful. But its accuracy and reliability is an extremely difficult issue to address and one which cannot fully be explored in the context of this paper. As Richard Kraut notes, “The relation between Aristotle’s written works and his oral teaching is difficult to determine, for there is little basis for forming a hypothesis.” All I wish to suggest here is that the historical record, while it should not be ignored, also should not automatically be assumed to be more accurate or valuable than other approaches to determining Aristotle’s intended audience. The first thing to be said is that the authors who presented this account are not contemporaries of Aristotle. For example, Aulus Gellius wrote nearly five hundred years after Aristotle lived. Thus there is reason to doubt the reliability of the information they present, and reason to be reluctant to rely solely on the historical approach. Second, even if Aristotle did give some kind of afternoon lectures about rhetoric, it does not mean that the Rhetoric or any part of it was the text from which he lectured (though, of course, it is also impossible to show that it was not).

In addition to the two problems mentioned above, the many controversies that exist among scholars today about the Rhetoric’s purpose and meaning would certainly seem to lead to the conclusion that it is not an easy book to read and understand. Kraut argues that it is “difficult to believe that works as dense and complex . . . [as] Aristotle’s ethical and political writings” could have been delivered orally.

60 For the claim that the ancient sources are unreliable, see Kraut and Lord, “The Character and Composition of Aristotle’s Politics,” 462.
61 Kennedy says that Aristotle “wrote different parts of the work at different times and his ideas or point of view changed as he taught different groups of students.” Kennedy (1991) xi; see also Kennedy in Johnstone, ed., cited in n. 2 above, p. 176–80. Most rejects this chronological approach (Most in Furley and Nehamas, eds., p. 187–8).
Many of the arguments in the *Rhetoric* are subtle and complicated, and would require the audience to follow long, complex reasoning—an ability that Aristotle has repeatedly suggested Athenian citizens lack. In addition, if we assume a general audience, we must assume an audience that has not necessarily previously been exposed to Aristotle’s methods and conceptual language, thus making the task of comprehending Aristotle’s lectures even more difficult. Is it likely that Aristotle would have expected the Athenian audience to have been able to achieve this comprehension given his disdain for their abilities? It is difficult for me to believe that he would have. Further, Aristotle’s students would probably have had access to Aristotle’s writings, while the general public would not have had such access. This would mean that his students would be able to go back and more closely examine Aristotle’s teachings, improving their understanding in a way not possible for the general public. The students would also, of course, have had direct access to Aristotle himself. Finally, even the Athenian elite would not necessarily have had the mental or ethical qualities needed to benefit from their teaching. To believe otherwise means ignoring *Rhetoric* 2.15–17 where Aristotle is extremely critical of the characters of those of good birth and wealth, stating for example that many of the well-born are “worthless,” and that the wealthy are “insolent and arrogant.” He is similarly critical of the elites at *Politics* 4.11. Thus, it seems reasonable to question the efficacy of lecturing directly from the *Rhetoric* to a general audience. A difficult work on a complicated subject, presented orally to an unorganized group of haphazardly educated and questionably ethical individuals, would have been unlikely to do much good.

I can think of only one reason Aristotle might indeed have given public lectures on the topic of rhetoric. It is possible that Aristotle used public lectures on rhetoric to recruit students for his school. Isocrates and others were attracting students with their ability to teach rhetoric, because ambitious young men wanted to master rhetoric in order

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65 Lord, “The Character and Composition of Aristotle’s *Politics*,” 461.
66 Some, such as Olian, cited in n.12 above, take the position that Aristotle’s audience was an elite subset of the Athenian citizenry and that they would have shared the values that Aristotle praises.
67 Most in Furley and Nehamas, eds., cited in n. 2 above, p. 188; Chroust in Erickson, ed., cited in n. 58 above.
to attain popularity, power, and wealth. These young men might also have chosen to listen to Aristotle’s lectures in order to pursue these goals. After hearing Aristotle speak generally on the subject in public, they may well have wanted to learn more from him, which would then require admission to Aristotle’s school. Aristotle claimed that a proper moral character was necessary in order to get any benefit from studies of ethics and politics (of which rhetoric, recall, is an “offshoot”). Perhaps some of the young men who sought power, popularity, and wealth had the proper character to be brought around to philosophy, at least potentially; these would be the young men that Aristotle would recruit and later admit to his school. The process of becoming a philosopher and not just a rhetorician might even start to happen without the student knowing it; in studying everything essential to being an effective rhetorician, he might come to realize that he was becoming a philosopher and that this was a higher and better calling than rhetoric. Aristotle would therefore be attracting students for one reason in order to turn them to another purpose, sharing part of the truth with them to lead them to desire all of it. However, even here my reservations about the likelihood of public readings of the *Rhetoric* hold; he could not have used this text effectively to recruit students because it assumes that they already have the kinds of knowledge they would need to learn from him as his students.

One further possibility must be considered, which is that finding a unified audience for the *Rhetoric* is impossible because it was not written all at one time for a single audience but rather over a period of many years for different audiences. George A. Kennedy is the most forceful and thorough advocate for this position; I will therefore focus on his argument here. In his 1996 essay Kennedy asserts that “there are clear signs of two different audiences envisioned in the *Rhetoric*.” He has done a very thorough job, drawing on the work of John M. Rist, of describing Aristotle’s life and using this to determine the times at which he might have written various parts of the *Rhetoric*. In the end, he concludes, “The form in which the treatise was left incorporates his...

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46 *Ethics* 1.3–4.
47 Cooper in Furley and Nehamas, eds., cited in n. 46 above, p. 207.
It is difficult to respond to this argument; as with the last possibility we considered, there is a degree of speculation involved. Indeed, Kennedy himself says of his arguments that “these matters remain hypotheses.” Let me simply suggest some difficulties with Kennedy’s position here. First, the objections given above to the idea that Aristotle was writing for a general audience still remain whether the argument is that the Rhetoric was entirely or only partially aimed at such an audience; we cannot be sure that the text of the Rhetoric was used in the public lectures. Second, Kennedy believes that the Rhetoric is fundamentally inconsistent, and so seeks to explain inconsistency. If we begin with the belief that it is fundamentally consistent, as I have here, then there is no need to explain inconsistency. In his 1991 work, Kennedy says that understanding the Rhetoric as a unified whole can be done but “require[s] the conscientious reader to exercise considerable ingenuity in interpreting some passages to mean something different from what they literally say.” But many commentators have successfully made the Rhetoric appear as a unified whole, arguably without needing to make any passages say anything that they can’t be read as literally saying.

Kennedy also says that “Aristotle thinks of rhetoric as an aspect of politics. His political, ethical, and rhetorical treatises, taken together, seek the means to secure the good life and human happiness.” On this point Kennedy and I agree. Given that Aristotle does so, there is something to be said for a viewpoint such as the one I have suggested that fundamentally understands the Rhetoric in light of these goals. Kennedy argues that “It is perhaps a weakness of the Rhetoric that it fails to articulate this goal fully.” But if as I have suggested the Ethics and Politics were part of the students’ intellectual background there would be no particular need for Aristotle to articulate that goal

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22 Kennedy, in Johnstone, ed., 181. See also Kennedy (1994) 54.
23 As Chroust (in Erickson, ed., 27) notes, “scholars apparently have failed to reach what even remotely might be called an agreement as to the chronology underlying the evolution of Aristotle’s views concerning rhetoric.”
26 For example, Arnhart and Garver have each made book length arguments doing so, both of which have been cited above.
27 Kennedy, Aristotle On Rhetoric, p. 312.
in the *Rhetoric*. A reminder of the importance of this perspective at the beginning of the work would suffice.

Even if, as seems likely, Aristotle did write the *Rhetoric* at different times, it is hard to imagine him abandoning his fundamental ethical beliefs at any point in his life. There is no evidence in his writings or in the biographies of his life to indicate that he ever did so. These beliefs are what make the *Rhetoric* a consistent whole and unite it to the *Ethics* and *Politics*. One can describe a *Rhetoric* written and revised over an extended period without arguing that there has been a change in the basic concepts and commitments which underlie it.

This paper has assessed the four main claims concerning the audience Aristotle intended to receive the *Rhetoric*. The idea that it was written for a legislator seeking to create rules for rhetoric in the ideal city misunderstands the nature of such a city as Aristotle conceives it. The possibility that he intended it to be received by an audience of Athenian citizens underestimates the complexity of the work and Aristotle’s consistent ethical and political worldview. The claim that the *Rhetoric* was written over an extended period of time, while likely true, does not require the conclusion that different parts of it were written for different audiences or with different intentions. It is Aristotle’s students who make up his intended audience; they would be the most talented speakers, the ones who would gain the most from study of the subject, and the ones who would be most likely to use it for good ends. All of these concerns would have been important to Aristotle as he wrote the *Rhetoric* and I believe it should be seen in this light.

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79 But see Whitney J. Oates, “Aristotle and the Problem of Value,” in Erickson, ed., 102–16; his position (p. 112) is that the *Rhetoric* becomes amoral and even immoral because Aristotle has no “theory of value.”
