

Aristotle's Manipulative Maxims

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Abstract: In actual regimes as described by Aristotle, authoritative civic choices were not the outcome of speech among citizens about the noble things and the just things. Rather, he saw them as products of the flawed presuppositions and misperceptions of dominant factions. Since he held that the human good was dependent on the persistence of lawful systems of rule, no matter how flawed, he viewed the tendency of dominant factions toward regime-destructive extremism as the fundamental political problem. His short-term response was to teach manipulative rhetoric and the outline of a strategy for regime preservation to his students. This equipped his students to prevail against the speech of the ignorant and malevolent and impressed those students with the need to acquire political knowledge. His long-term response was the initiation of a system of education that would turn citizens away from regime-destructive predilections.

Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* defines a maxim (*gnōmē*) as a universal statement about which actions should be chosen and which avoided (*Rhet.* 1394a22–29).¹ It is the “part of an enthymeme” (1393a25–26) that advocates or opposes action, stripped of supporting reasoning (1394a27–34). I will argue that Aristotle assigns maxims a crucial role in the practice of the rhetorical art.

Considering the resurgence of interest in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* over the past forty years, attention to maxims has been surprisingly scant. A Google Scholar search of “Aristotle maxims” turns up very few publications. One of these is an exploration of the importance of the right time and situation (*kairos*) in the *Rhetoric*'s chapter on maxims.² This is a discussion of the right

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¹Quotations and paraphrases from Aristotle's texts are from the following: *Ars Rhetorica*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963); *Ethica Nicomachea*, ed. I. Bywater (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1894); *Politica*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957); *Topica*, ed. E. S. Forster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); *De Anima*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).

²James L. Kinneavy and Catherine Eskin, “*Kairos* in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*,” *Written Communication* 17 (2000): 432–44.

rhetorical situation.³ My interest is in the right *political* situation. Another scholarly publication on maxims argues that maxims can convey a phronetic sense of “world irony.”⁴ But this applies to collections of maxims, not the isolated maxims that Aristotle’s students are instructed to employ at *Rhet.* 1394b19–1395b25. Commentaries on the *Rhetoric* by Arnhart, Garver, and Grimaldi discuss Aristotle’s treatment of maxims;⁵ the reading that I will offer differs from all three in that it emphasizes the manipulative purpose of maxims in Aristotle’s art of rhetoric and its protreptic aim of bringing students of rhetoric to a recognition of their need for the guiding art of *politikē*.

I will begin by challenging claims by respected scholars that Aristotle saw little or no need for manipulation in the governance of existing cities. After a summary of scholarship that is more consistent with my claims, I proceed to an analysis of the *Rhetoric*’s framing of its passage on maxims, the examples of maxims that Aristotle provides, and his discussion of maxims. I conclude by considering the promise and pitfalls of aristocratic rule as avenue to the establishment of governance without manipulation through a system of education that turns citizens away from their regime-destructive predilections.

The Speaking Animal, the Interested Deliberator, and the Wisdom of the Multitude

In recent years, several of the most careful and insightful readers of the *Politics* and the *Rhetoric* have read those texts in ways that preclude a significant role for manipulation in the governance of actual cities. One passage that has been used to support the view that the city can and should be governed by frank deliberation by and among the citizens rather than through manipulative rhetoric is the following:

And the reason why man is more of a political animal than any bee or herd animal is clear. For, as we say, nothing that nature does is pointless. While in fact voice signifies pleasure and pain and belongs to the other animals . . . , speech is for the purpose of showing what is advantageous and what is harmful and therefore also what is just and what is unjust. For in contrast to the other animals, this is true only of man. He is alone in having perception of the good and the bad and the just and the unjust and all the other such things. And a sharing of these [perceptions] makes a household and a city. (*Pol.* 1253a7–18)

³Ibid., 440–41.

⁴Ray Nichols, “Maxims, ‘Practical Wisdom,’ and the Language of Action: Beyond Grand Theory,” *Political Theory* 24 (1995): 687–705.

⁵Larry Arnhart, *Aristotle on Political Reasoning* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1981), 145–46; Eugene Garver, *Aristotle’s “Rhetoric”: An Art of Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 197–202; William Grimaldi, *Aristotle, Rhetoric II: A Commentary* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1988), 259–73.

This passage has been cited by scholars such as Bickford, Garver, Waldron, and Yack to support a more participatory and egalitarian reading of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* than the one I offer, one for which rhetoric is the process by which the citizens develop and apply the norms by which they will rule.⁶ At the risk of oversimplifying the work of these scholars, I would characterize the root of what I take to be their egalitarian reading of this passage as Aristotle's observation that all human beings have perceptions of the good and the bad and that these perceptions are refined and corrected through dialogue. My response is that Aristotle explicitly states that in the regimes that he sees about him, predominantly oligarchies and democracies, the dominant factions, the rich and the poor, suffer from distorted ethical perception and that only the "serious," as opposed to "the many," are receptive to argument (*Pol.* 1295b5–11; *EN* 1179b8–10, 16–20).

It is indeed true that, from the perspective of *politikē*,⁷ the *telos* of the human faculty of speech is "showing what is advantageous and what is harmful and therefore also what is just and unjust." But this concerns speech in the city as such, depicted in book 1 of the *Politics*. The actual cities depicted in *Politics* 2–7 are politically polarized, rent by faction and vulnerable to demagogues (*Pol.* 1279b7–10, 1290a13–16, 1301a35–39, 1310a2–20).⁸ In these cities the ends of political speech are generally partisan or private and not concerned primarily with what is just and beneficial to the political community. Speech among citizens of the dominant group will tend to exclude other perspectives and interests. But "if a form of government is going to survive, all the parts of the city have to want it to exist and to continue along the same lines" (*Pol.* 1270b21–22). It falls to the orator/statesman, informed by the broader perspective of *politikē*, to use speech to persuade the citizens of the dominant group to choose what is just and advantageous for the preservation of the regime even when that means opposing their natural inclinations.

Another passage that has been interpreted in a way that makes manipulation by a speaker informed by *politikē* superfluous is found at *Rhetoric* 1354b27–31.

⁶Susan Bickford, "Beyond Conflict: Aristotle on Conflict, Deliberation, and Attention," *Journal of Politics* 58 (1996): 400; Garver, *Aristotle's "Rhetoric,"* 133; Jeremy Waldron, "The Wisdom of the Multitude: Some Reflections on Book III, Chapter 11 of Aristotle's *Politics*," *Political Theory* 23 (1995): 576; Bernard Yack, "Rhetoric and Public Reasoning: An Aristotelian Understanding of Political Deliberation," *Political Theory* 34 (2006): 423.

⁷I will not translate *politikē*. "Political art" would be inappropriate because "art" is the best translation of *technē*, which, in Aristotle's usage, involves production (*EN* 1140a6–16). "Political science" is not appropriate either, because "science" is used to translate *epistēmē*, by which Aristotle denotes knowledge of unchanging things (1139b19–24), which he denies to *politikē* (1094b14–19).

⁸This is true even of the model oligarchies of Carthage, Sparta, and Crete as discussed in *Politics* 2.

Speaking outside the matter at hand is less useful [*hētton esti pro ergou*] in addressing the deliberations of the assembly of the *dēmos* and such speech is less mischievous [*hētton esti kakourgon*] than speeches in the lawcourts. This is because it addresses matters of common concern. For in the assembly, the judge is making judgments about his own interests. Therefore, nothing is necessary except to demonstrate that the situation is what the one giving counsel says it is.

Scholars such as Garsten and Yack hold that the “situated judgment” and “reasoning informed by the emotions” at work when the member of the assembly considers “his own interests” render that body capable of making wise choices without much need for manipulation by a speaker informed by *politikē*.⁹ But note that the passage begins with the phrase “it is *less*” (*hētton esti*). Aristotle did not say “it is *not* useful to speak of things outside the subject in deliberative situations” in those settings. Note also that immediately preceding this passage, Aristotle states that unlike the legislator,

the member of the assembly and the member of the jury are actually making judgments about what is at hand and definite. And for those men, friendship and hostility and private interest are actually often involved. Therefore, they are no longer able to sufficiently see what is true. Rather, private pleasure and pain cast a shadow over their judgment. (*Rhet.* 1354b6–11)

The context of this passage is a contrast between the superior judgment of the lawmaker and the inferior judgment of both the member of the assembly and the member of a jury (1354a31–b11). Aristotle asserts here that there is no qualitative difference in ability to perceive the truth in the two settings. Therefore, the need for speeches that obtain support for regime-supportive choices selected beforehand by a wiser speaker is essentially the same in both.

The third passage often read as an assertion by Aristotle that the citizens can deliberate sufficiently well is an extended series of metaphors found in at *Politics* 1281a42–1282a23. The metaphors are of dinners provided by the contributions of many, a single creature with many hands, feet, eyes, and senses, the judgment of poetry from the perspective of many judges, the improvement of a large amount of impure food by the addition of a small amount of pure food, and the possible superiority of the judgment of those who use the product of an art to that of the artisans who make the product. The context is Aristotle’s consideration of the possibility that “a certain kind of multitude” may be better at judging proposals for civic action than a single individual superior to any member of that multitude (*Pol.* 1281b20–21). This interpretation was influentially stated by Waldron. If his reading is right, then the substantive measures offered by *politikē* are superfluous, because

⁹Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 125–27; Yack, “Rhetoric and Public Reasoning,” 432–33.

deliberation among the many is a way of bringing each citizen's ethical views and insights—such as they are—to bear on the views and insights of each of the others, so that they cast light on each other, providing a basis for reciprocal questioning criticism, and enabling a position to emerge which is better than any of the inputs and much more than an aggregation or function of those inputs.¹⁰

But Aristotle never claims that the citizens of actual states behave in this manner. He makes no mention of their learning from one another, and certainly no mention of their critical examination of their own opinions. Daniela Cammack notes that citizens did not exchange views or information with one another in their roles as members of the assembly or juries.¹¹ She argues that in the analogies of the dinner and aesthetic judgment, what each citizen contributes is his portion of virtue, not knowledge. Although I disagree with her contention that the virtue of the citizens sufficiently informs the judgment of the multitude,¹² her argument is consistent with my claim that if the city's choices were to be informed by knowledge, that knowledge would have to come from orators who had already benefited from *politikē's* guidance. Given the politically polarized cities that the middle books of the *Politics* describe, it is hardly surprising that frank debate leading to mutual sharing of perspectives was far from the typical form of political discourse. Waldron is surely mistaken in claiming that deliberation by the citizenry in the actual regimes with which Aristotle was familiar was somehow equivalent to the critical assessment of *endoxa* from which Aristotle's *politikē* emerged.¹³ James Wilson is more attuned to Aristotle's ambivalence about the rule of the many, noting that it is not achievable in all democracies. He claims that it depends on how groups of citizens are politically organized.¹⁴ This is an aspect of the regime, but not the one that Aristotle holds to be the most important one, the education of the citizens "with a view to their form of government" so that the form of government might be preserved (*Pol.* 1310a14).

Schwartzberg, Cammack, and Cherry avoid attributing epistemic competence through exchanges of opinions and perceptions to the multitude.¹⁵

¹⁰Waldron, "Wisdom of the Multitude," 569–70.

¹¹Daniela Cammack, "Aristotle on the Virtue of the Multitude," *Political Theory* 41 (2013): 181.

¹²Ibid., 184–86.

¹³Waldron, "Wisdom of the Multitude," 569–70. Waldron qualifies his claim by saying that there is no wisdom of the multitude when the regime is so corrupt that citizens "are talking at or past one another" (578). This type of regime is the rule rather than the exception in the cities observed in the middle books of the *Politics* and described by Aristotle in *The Constitution of Athens*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 2, 5, 8.5, 13.4–5, 28.2–4.

¹⁴James Lindley Wilson, "Deliberation, Democracy, and the Rule of Reason in Aristotle's Politics," *American Political Science Review* 105 (2011): 260, 267.

¹⁵Melissa Schwartzberg, "Aristotle and the Judgment of the Many: Equality, Not Collective Quality," *Journal of Politics* 78 (2016): 733–45; Cammack, "Virtue of the

Schwartzberg holds that it is Aristotle's position that individual citizens are essentially equal in their capacity of judgment (*krinein*). In her view, the city judges well because its individual citizens are equally and sufficiently competent at judging, not because they deliberate collectively or because of the rhetorical effectiveness of someone whose understanding of politics is superior to that of any member of the multitude.¹⁶ Cammack holds that the virtue of the citizens can sufficiently inform the city's deliberations.¹⁷ Cherry holds that the virtue in question is the intellectual virtue of judgment (*sunesis*), generally acquired through military service.¹⁸ But Aristotle's *Politics* is ambivalent about the deliberative competence of the many, whether informed by the epistemic competence of individual citizens, as Schwartzberg holds, or through mutually reinforcing virtue, as Cammack and Cherry hold, even if, as Cherry maintains, the virtue is the judgment of the arguments of others (*sunesis*), rather than the more demanding and rare virtue of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). For in addition to considering the possibility that the judgment of the multitude may be better than that of a superior individual, Aristotle advocates the inclusion of the many not because of their deliberative competence, but so that the city will not be "filled with enemies" (*Pol.* 1281b25–30). If this is the reason for including the many, then manipulation cannot be ruled out. Furthermore, it is entirely possible that the "certain kind of multitude" capable of deliberation is only a rare, or even only hypothetical exception to the general rule.¹⁹ This interpretation would be consistent with the characterization of the desires of the many as no higher than the bovine pleasure of a full belly at *EN* 1095b16–20. Taking the "certain kind of multitude" as a rare exception to the general rule is also consistent with the specification of the fundamentally flawed conceptions of justice at the heart of the two regimes that predominated in Aristotle's day and the criticism of their systems of education on the grounds that they are contrary to the preservation of lawful rule (*Pol.* 1310a12–14). Indeed, after weighing the pros and cons on the question of the deliberative competence of the multitude, Aristotle's final word is the following:

Examining the conduct of officials and electing those who rule is the greatest thing. . . . Thus it is just that the many have authority over greater matters. For the assembly and the council and the lawcourt are drawn from the multitude. And the assessed value of the property of all of them taken together is more than that of the individuals or small numbers of those who rule great offices. And so indeed, let these matters be determined in this way. (*Pol.* 1282a26–27, a38–b1)

Multitude"; Kevin M. Cherry, "Aristotle's 'Certain Kind of Multitude,'" *Political Theory* 43 (2015): 185–207.

¹⁶Schwartzberg, "Judgment of the Many," 741.

¹⁷Cammack, "Virtue of the Multitude," 181, 185, 187.

¹⁸Cherry, "Certain Kind of Multitude," 187.

¹⁹Schwartzberg takes note of this possibility. See "Judgment of the Many," 741.

In the final analysis, Aristotle assigns the greatest political functions, electing and reviewing those who rule (but not the function of devising civic choices), to those drawn directly from the multitude because of its numbers and aggregate property holdings. His concluding determination of the matter makes no mention of the multitude's wisdom or virtue. This looks like a strategy of cooptation, a prudential consideration, perhaps connected to the multitude's contribution to the city's military strength and the possibility that it might turn that strength against the regime. The *Rhetoric* is less ambivalent than the *Politics*. Its characterizations of the wisdom of the multitude are invariably negative (*Rhet.* 1395b2, 1395b24–30). Aristotle does not deny that in democracies the many may deliberate and judge. But he never claims that they do so wisely enough to preserve a system of lawful democratic rule.

In addition to respected scholarship that is at odds with my reading, there is also respected scholarship that is basically consistent with it. Bartlett states that "the rhetorician as such will not know what the true statesman knows (recall 1359b12–16). . . . Rhetoric, then, is not distinguished by the prudence or truth that is its own."²⁰ Lord notes that the character of Aristotle's rhetoric "is determined above all by the requirements of persuading the mass."²¹ Jörke notes the centrality of manipulation to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, but does not appreciate the significance of Aristotle's subordination of rhetoric to *politikē*.²² Rupcic, on the other hand, observes that Aristotle is "skeptical about the reliability of collective judgment" and that his art of rhetoric "bolsters the laws and legislative intent."²³ Reeve states that "persuading the bad to pursue the good involves corrective deception, noble lies, full-blown rhetoric."²⁴ Arnhart recognizes a role for manipulation in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, at least in certain circumstances.²⁵ My contribution is to specify a central mode of manipulation in what the *Rhetoric* calls "the most authoritative proof" (1356a13) and to consider Aristotle's response to the regrettable need for manipulation.

Aristotle holds that if the human good is to be actualized, there must be a stable system of laws to guide the inculcation of the habits of virtue (*EN* 1129b19–25; *Pol.* 1269a14–24). This requires the achievement of "the greatest or only task" (*Pol.* 1319b34–35), the preservation of any regime that

²⁰Robert C. Bartlett, "Interpretive Essay," in *Aristotle's Art of Rhetoric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 223.

²¹Carnes Lord, "The Intention of Aristotle's 'Rhetoric,'" *Hermes* 109 (1981): 334.

²²Dirk Jörke, "Rhetoric as Deliberation or Manipulation: About Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and Its Misuse in Recent Literature," *Redescriptions* 17 (2014): 68–85.

²³Tina Rupcic, "Founding Speech: Aristotle's *Rhetoric* as Political Philosophy" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2017), 223, 224, <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/79454>.

²⁴C. D. C. Reeve, "Philosophy, Politics, and Rhetoric in Aristotle," in *Essays on Aristotle's "Rhetoric,"* ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 202.

²⁵Larry Arnhart, *Aristotle on Political Reasoning*, 26, 84.

can fulfill this function. The citizens of oligarchies and democracies are inclined to adopt maximalist agendas that undermine their regimes (1309b35–1310a12). A statesman/orator who has come to appreciate this and learned the general outline of what he must attend to for the sake of regime preservation must be able to persuade the citizens of the flawed regimes to make choices for the city that are more moderate and inclusive than they would otherwise accept. This outline includes concessions to the interests of the political opposition (1310a2–12), the cooptation of potential leaders of the opposition (1308a3–9), depositing the proceeds of fines with the temples rather than dividing them among the citizens (1320a7–9), the segregation of religious from political authority (1299a17–19, 1329a27–34), providing the poor with the means to support themselves (1320a29–b1), the recognition of incipient threats to regime stability from demographic or economic changes (1308a31–35, 1309b35–37), support for the influence of the middle class (1295b34–37, 1296b34–40), and the exaggeration of foreign threats to the regime so that citizens will become more vigilant on its behalf (1308a24–30). But if manipulative rhetoric remains a possibility, and if, as I will argue, it is to be what the *Rhetoric* teaches, then the manipulators must be guided by *politikē* if the rhetorical art is to be subordinate to it, as it should be (*EN* 1094b2–7). I hold that through his teachings on rhetoric, Aristotle directed his students to the study of *politikē* and prepared them to obtain assent to measures that it identified as conducive to regime preservation from the dominant factions of existing regimes. I claim that his treatment of maxims was central to both projects.

The Role of Maxims in Aristotle's Art of Rhetoric

There are two reasons why maxims play a central role in Aristotle's art of rhetoric and in his political project more generally. The first is that Aristotle defines the maxim as a type of enthymeme. The enthymeme is the essential "body" of his art of rhetoric. It carries the content of the effort to persuade (*Rhet.* 1354a15),²⁶ leading listeners to the position that the speaker intends. The second reason is the rhetorical power of a well-chosen maxim. It is an enthymeme presented in a form that is especially pithy and striking and therefore particularly effective in convincing an audience (*Rhet.* 1394a27–29). As will be evident when we consider the examples of maxims that Aristotle offers, they merit special attention because effective maxims combine all the qualities that make rhetoric powerful. They are brief but not truncated (1309a35–b9). They do not involve long chains of argument (1357a3–4). They appeal to existing opinions (1395b1–4). Since many maxims are drawn from poetic sources, they often employ lively and

²⁶For reasons I will discuss below, I will not paraphrase or translate *pisteōs* here, or any other occurrence of forms of *pistis* as "proof."

engaging metaphors that place a matter “before the eyes” of an audience (1411b22–23). They are effective in speaking to the passions (1395a7–9, 23–24). They afford the listener the pleasure of easy learning (1410b10–13) by discovering their relevance to the matter at hand (1412a18–25). Most significantly, they establish the trustworthy character of an orator in the eyes of the citizens he addresses (1395a21–31). The importance of this cannot be overstated. It is trust in the character of a speaker that is the most “authoritative” means of persuasion (1395b10–18, 1356a4–13). More than any other part of the *Rhetoric*, the treatment of maxims showed Aristotle’s students how to gain the trust of their audiences. When a speaker attempts to induce his listeners to accept a course of civic action for reasons other than his own, the employment of maxims is the rhetorical technique par excellence. They are the primary instrument that the art of rhetoric provides to *politikē*.

Unfortunately, the erroneous presuppositions (*Pol.* 1301a25–36) of the prevailing regimes, oligarchy and democracy (1290a13–19), along with the distorted perception of the dominant factions in them (1295b5–11) and the cognitive limitations of citizens in general, incline those regimes toward extremism and the exclusion of the interests and perspectives of weaker factions. It is Aristotle’s view that this tendency, if unchecked, will result in the destruction of lawful regimes and consequent harm to the possibility of human excellence as well as the security of life itself.

I will argue that his response to this problem is to obtain the support of the dominant faction for regime-preserving civic choices through rhetoric that is manipulative. My working definition of manipulative rhetoric is speech that obtains assent to a choice without threat or bargaining but through claims or arguments unrelated to those by which the speaker arrived at that choice. I hold that the manipulation advocated by Aristotle is a benign manipulation through the practice of rhetoric informed by *politikē*. The practical contributions of *politikē* are appreciation for the importance of regime preservation and a general outline of measures that conduce to it.²⁷ Only the few who have been well raised are generous, free, and therefore capable of being guided by rational accounts (*logoi*) (*EN* 1179b4–16). Since *politikē* is an extended rational account, these are the only citizens capable of acquiring it and being guided by it as long as the education provided to other citizens

²⁷See André Luis Cruz Sousa, “Thoughts on Leo Strauss’s Interpretation of Aristotle’s Natural Right Teaching,” *Review of Politics* 78 (2016): 419–22. Sousa calls attention to Strauss’s claim that under circumstances of “exceptional threat,” the boundaries of legal right must extend to include actions that are otherwise ruled out. I would add that it is Aristotle’s position that threats to regime preservation should be viewed on a continuum of severity. The desires and demands of individual citizens and factions can present incipient threats to regimes on a regular basis. When addressed promptly, such threats generally do not require “exceptional” responses. A prudent statesman’s deceptive rhetoric is one of the responses that may suffice in such situations.

is defective. If the ruling factions of the rich or the many are to adopt civic choices that preserve the regimes, it will have to be against their short-sighted, self-indulgent inclinations based on nothing but narrow perspectives derived from only their own limited experience (*Pol.* 1309b18–22, 1310a7–12). Therefore, if systems of lawful rule are to be preserved it must be through benign manipulation in which the effective use of maxims plays the crucial role of acquiring the trust of the dominant faction of citizens.

A close look at Aristotle's treatment of maxims, especially the examples that he selects, indicates that his aim is not only to prepare his students to affect their prospective audiences. It is also meant to warn his students of the power of rhetoric, of its great potential to confuse and harm the city as well as to educate and benefit it. Taken together with references to the epistemic limits of the rhetorical art and its need for guidance by the "more phronetic and truthful" *politikē*,²⁸ this warning would impress serious and responsible students with the need to undertake an earnest study of the latter.

It might be argued that the practice of rhetoric described above is not really manipulation but simply effective public persuasion or even leadership. But there is a difference between speech that is manipulative, benign or otherwise, and frank, transparent speech in which the reasons for the speaker's position are shared with the audience. It is a difference of great significance for the character of political life. If the true reasons for a speaker's position are not presented to the citizens, if they come to accept the speaker's position only because his artfully chosen maxims have charmed them and won their trust, then we cannot say that their choice was a product of public deliberation or public reason. We must then reconsider the way the practice of Aristotle's art of rhetoric and of political life more broadly have been understood by some of the most careful and influential scholarship of recent years. I have argued that claims that Aristotle had confidence that the wisdom or virtue of the multitude was sufficient for rule by public deliberation or public reason are questionable. But in agreement with those holding this more sanguine opinion of Aristotle's view of the political capability of dominant factions, I concur that Aristotle saw rule through manipulation as incompatible with the life of profoundly political animals such as we are. It is our nature to speak to one another and make decisions about the just and the advantageous (*Pol.* 1253a7–18). However, I argue that, given his assessment of the prevailing regimes of his day, Aristotle saw manipulative governance as a palliative unfortunately made necessary by the self-destructive errors of existing regimes. His comments on the political role of education indicate that he saw an education that would turn dominant factions away

²⁸Bartlett (*Art of Rhetoric*, 223) notes that Averroës identifies the "more phronetic and more truthful art" referred to in this passage as "philosophy." However, given the concerns of the *Rhetoric*, it is more likely a reference to *politikē*.

from extremism as much to be preferred, though difficult to institute.²⁹ Absent the institution of such an education, Aristotle saw no alternative to rule through manipulative rhetoric that would turn dominant factions away from their regime-destructive tendencies. The use of effective maxims played a central role in Aristotle's manipulative rhetoric.

Aristotle on Maxims

The text surrounding the discussion of maxims, the examples of maxims that Aristotle selects, and his discussion of maxims all point to dimensions of the problem that rhetoric poses for politics. Aristotle does not flinch as he looks at the hard reality of the problem. The passages framing the discussion of rhetoric deny that it has any inherent tendency to uncover what is true, good, or just. The examples of rhetoric that Aristotle provides highlight the tremendous potential of rhetoric to do evil and its fundamental lack of practical wisdom. In Aristotle's discussion, the basic cause of rhetoric's epistemic insufficiency and consequent susceptibility to employment by the ignorant and malevolent is identified. It is the effectiveness of rhetoric that takes advantage of the human tendency to attribute universality to one's own particular opinions and unexamined experience. Having specified the problem, Aristotle does not surrender to the amorality of sophistic rhetoric. The problem is narrowness of perspective. The solution is therefore a broader perspective: in the short term, a broader perspective as provided by *politikē* on the part of wise and effective speakers, in the longer term, an education that can instill a broader perspective on the part of the citizens as well. In my concluding remarks, I observe that this two-part solution is not without problems of its own.

Framing the Discussion of Maxims

The examination of maxims in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is found at 2.21 1394a17–1395b20. It is part of book 2's discussion of the ways that a speaker can present himself to his listeners in the lawcourts and the assembly (*Rhet.* 1393a23–26) as someone who has goodwill toward them and is virtuous and knowledgeable (the components of persuasion by character [*ēthos*] (1378a7–11). The preceding chapter divides ways of persuading an audience (*pisteis*) into the classes of examples (*paradeigmata*) and enthymemes (1393a23–1394a18).

The *Rhetoric* states that an enthymeme is "the most authoritative way of gaining trust" (1355a6–8). In contrast to the syllogism, which aims at the

²⁹This implies an increase in the aristocratic component of the regime because aristocracy prioritizes "things related to education and the traditions of law" over liberty, wealth, or the preservation of the ruler (*Rhet.* 1366a2–6).

truth, the enthymeme aims at *ta endoxa* (1355a17). In the *Topics*, Aristotle states that *endoxa* are what is believed by the wise, by most of the wise, by all, or by most (*Topics* 100b21), not what is objectively probable.³⁰ Within the context of a regime, it is generally aligned with authoritative opinion. When used by *politikē*, *endoxa* is the starting point for sustained critical examination that identifies difficulties and inconsistencies, leaving a remainder that is more coherent, and thus closer to knowledge than the initial unexamined opinion with which it started (*EN* 1145b2–7). But the rhetorical art includes no such process of examination. Rather, it aims at reflecting the opinions of an audience.

Although chapter 20 declares a preference for maxims over examples, it classifies both as *pisteis* common to all three genres of rhetoric³¹ and then states that examples can be invented to suit the occasion (*Rhet.* 1393a28–30). In other words, the *pistis* of an assertion can be an invented example, something that never actually happened. The path of inference is from example (possibly invented) to generalization, to application to the case at hand, thereby conflating the particular and the universal. Contrast this to the emphatic warning about the difficulty in stepping from *politikē* to the level of precision required for its application at *EN* 1094b25–27. *Politikē* is serious and cautious where the rhetorical art is facile. What qualifies as a *pistis* in the context of the *Rhetoric* is not only less dispositive than a mathematical proof, but also epistemically inferior to *politikē*. The *pisteis* of Aristotle's rhetorical art are far less demanding than any grounds for belief corresponding to the English word "proof."

Immediately following the discussion of maxims in chapter 21, Aristotle turns in the next chapter to the subject of enthymemes in general, including maxims (1395b26–1397a6). Like chapter 20, chapter 22 focuses on what is effective in gaining the assent of an audience, not on making the choice most conducive to the good of the citizenry. Long chains of reasoning are to be avoided because they are unclear to the audience. Brevity is one way that orators can approximate the style of the uneducated, who are generally

³⁰See Luis Vega Renon, "Aristotle's *Endoxa* and Plausible Argumentation," *Argumentation* 12, no. 1 (1998): 95, 96, 103. He notes that *endoxa* are "plausible propositions" that may or may not "involve certain 'empirical' references, e.g. to 'for the most part' regularities that people know or believe." See also Jacques Brunshwig, introduction to *Topiques, Livres I–IV*, trans. Jacques Brunshwig (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1967), cxiii, note 3, cited by Marta Spranzi, *The Art of Dialectic between Dialogue and Rhetoric: The Aristotelian Tradition* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2011), 181. Brunshwig maintains that Aristotle values *endoxa* for the authority of those who endorse them rather than for their "inherent qualities." For a dissenting view, see Tobias Reinhardt, "On *Endoxa* in Aristotle's *Topics*," *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 3, no. 4 (2015): 225–46.

³¹These are the forensic rhetoric that establishes what is just, the deliberative rhetoric that establishes what is beneficial to the city, and the epideictic rhetoric that establishes what is noble and base (*Rhet.* 1358b6–13).

more effective than the educated in winning the support of “mobs” (*ochloi*) (1395b24–30). Negative characterizations of the audience such as this suggest that the *Rhetoric* is about persuasion as a practical art that takes the flaws of the regimes that Aristotle observed about him into account, a weapon that can be used for good or ill (1355a19–23, a38–b2). The *Rhetoric*'s practical orientation accounts for its inclusion of manipulative rhetorical techniques.

Aristotle acknowledges the need to identify and obtain knowledge of underlying circumstances (*ta huparchonta*) pertaining to the deliberations of citizens (1396a6). But, as noted above, the things that must be known for the purpose of those deliberations are only briefly enumerated at 1359b19–36 and immediately followed by the statement that “all these things belong to *politikē* and are not the function of the art of rhetoric” (1360a37). Aristotle repeatedly advises the orator to use accounts of what only *seem* (to the audience) to have happened. For example, he tells his students that they must have a knowledge of what has happened (*ta huparchonta*) because “all [orators] praise the noble things that have happened or *that seem* [*ē dokountōn huparchein*] to have happened” (1396a15–16; see also 1396a18, 1396a28).

In contrast, there is no seeming when Aristotle addresses students of *politikē* about the important matter of regime preservation as in the following assertion: “but of all the things that have been mentioned for making governments endure, the most important one, which everyone now belittles, is for people to be educated with a view to their form of government” (*Pol.* 1310a12–14). There is a clear line of demarcation between the domain of rhetoric and that “inquiry that one leaves to the science of politics” (*hupoleipei skepsin tē politikēi epistēmēi*³²) (*Rhet.* 1359b17). What one tells the citizens in order to persuade them and what one discovers through sustained observation³³ and reasoning³⁴ about political things are not the same. If Aristotle considered maxims, and the rhetorical art generally, to provide insufficient practical wisdom for the guidance of the city, one might well ask why he did not say so explicitly. A plausible answer is that to explicitly characterize maxims this way would entail a more direct challenge to authoritative opinion and thus to existing regimes than Aristotle was willing to undertake.

Only the most obtuse of teachers could have been unaware that those of his students who were motivated by the desire to know or by a sense of

³²While it is certainly true that Aristotle does not see *politikē* as an *epistēmē* in the technical sense of knowledge of unchanging things, he never refers to rhetoric as an *epistēmē*. This reference to *politikē* as an *epistēmē* suggests that, at a general level, certain features of political life are permanent, or at least permanently associated with certain forms of human association.

³³See book 2 on Sparta, Crete, Carthage; book 5 on causes of faction and revolution.

³⁴See the discussion on the nature of citizenship, including its use of the function (*ergon*) argument, found at *Pol.* 1275a1–b21.

responsibility to their city must have found the rhetorical art's exclusive concern with what will persuade an audience quite unsatisfying. An intelligent teacher could only have induced this sense of dissatisfaction intentionally and for a reason. Given *politikē's* offering of strategies for preserving lawful regimes, it is likely that Aristotle's purpose was to intensify his students' desire to find what would truly benefit their city. At the same time, the framing of the discussion in chapter 21 of maxims would have impelled those students to acquire the techniques that would enable them to do battle with the ignorant and the unprincipled.³⁵ The clever use of maxims was one such technique.

The Examples of Maxims

Chapter 21 provides seventeen examples of maxims, nine from poetry, one from Thucydides, five invented, and two of unknown provenance.³⁶ The maxims that are not derived from lyric, epic, or tragic poetry have the poetic quality of striking pithiness. We find that Aristotle's advocacy of a poetic element in rhetoric is not limited to book 3's discussion of the *style* in which arguments are presented. Here, since the maxims are the major premises and conclusions of enthymemes, it is the arguments *themselves* that are chosen because of their pleasing quality. This means that the charge of pandering leveled in the *Gorgias* (462c4–7) is answered not by denying the pleasing character of the fare provided but by employing the skill of pleasing the palate for the sake of providing healthy nourishment that the eater might not otherwise accept. The cook does indeed supply relishes. But he need not be without knowledge. With the requisite knowledge, he can manipulate for a good purpose.

Taken as a whole, the examples of maxims offered by Aristotle called the attention of his students to the power of rhetoric and its consequent need for guidance by the art to which it is subordinate. They highlight the epistemic insufficiency of the means by which an orator's trustworthiness was established and the ways his advice was flavored with the spice of a pleasing style. In these ways, Aristotle gestured his students subtly but powerfully toward the more phronetic and truthful knowledge found in *politikē*.

The first example given is "A man of sound mind must never have his children taught to be excessively wise [*sophous*]" (1394a29–30). Aristotle notes that to make this statement into an enthymeme, it is necessary only to provide the unspoken reason, which is that, in addition to making them idle and lazy, excessive wisdom will incur "the hostile envy" of "one's townsmen" (1394a33–34). Kennedy identifies the source as Euripides's *Medea*, lines 294–97.³⁷ By citing this passage, Aristotle calls the attention of his students to

³⁵ Arnhart, *Aristotle on Political Reasoning*, 26, 84.

³⁶ This account is derived from *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. with introduction and notes by George A. Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 182, 183, 185.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

the tension between wisdom and the citizenry, and thus to the shortcomings of unexamined conventional opinion as source of guidance to the city. In addition, read in the context of the play, the lines tell of the dangers of eloquence unguided by *politikē* through a chilling contrast between rhetorical effectiveness on the one hand and the prudent pursuit of the city's good on the other. For the lines are spoken by Medea as she persuades King Creon to delay her exile by one day. She will take advantage of the delay to murder Creon, Creon's daughter, for whom Jason has spurned her, and her own children. After the murders, Medea will start a new life in Athens, the home of eloquent speech. By associating eloquence with a threatening woman, the use of this example probably impressed Aristotle's students, all of whom were male, with the need to tame rhetoric by placing it under the control of an art that was "more phronetic and more truthful."³⁸ At the same time, it brought Aristotle's students toward greater self-awareness by subtly undermining their unexamined preference for the ways of their own city through an implied suggestion that they reconsider the pride that they took in being citizens of eloquent Athens. By calling the unthinking patriotism of his students into question, Aristotle began to remove one of the obstacles to their critical study of the city.

The next two maxims are "There is no man who is prosperous [*eudaimonei*] in every way" and "There is no man who is free [*eleutheros*] . . . for he is a slave of money or chance" (1394b2, 4–6). The stated purpose for which Aristotle presented these maxims was a classification of maxims. The classification was not with regard to their applicability to various situations, but only with regard to whether they needed further explanation because they were disputed or unclear (1394a26–b25).

The couplet was spoken at lines 864–65 by Hecuba in Euripides's tragedy of that name.³⁹ Like Medea, Hecuba was an eloquent woman who persuades a king so that she can execute her plan of revenge. However, unlike Medea, her plan was to avenge her children rather than murder them. So, despite the dehumanizing effect of her rage,⁴⁰ she is a more sympathetic character than Medea. Therefore, her eloquence served a purpose with which audiences could sympathize. Aristotle's juxtaposition of these two eloquent women presented rhetoric as charming to the city but capable of serving brutal ends that were in some cases beyond the pale, while in others, justifiable, a powerful weapon requiring guidance by a more authoritative knowledge.

³⁸This is a move indicative of Aristotle's misogyny or that of his students or both. The misogyny lies in associating irresponsible eloquence with women, not in seeking to place eloquence under the control of *politikē*.

³⁹Kennedy, *On Rhetoric*, 183.

⁴⁰At the conclusion of the tragedy, after having blinded the murderer of her son and killed his sons, Hecuba is told of the prophecy that she will become "a dog with blood-shot gaze" (Euripides, *Hecuba*, in *Children of Herakles, Andromache, Hecuba*, ed. and trans. David Kovacs [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995], line 1265).

Aristotle proceeded to offer “for it seems to me that the best thing for a man is to be healthy” as an example of a maxim that did not require further explanation “for thus it appears to the many” (*Rhet.* 1394b13–14). But even as he advised his students to articulate the existing beliefs of the many in order to gain their trust, Aristotle distanced himself from this unexamined opinion with the insertion of the equivocating “it seems to me.” In this way, he guided his students toward the sustained inquiry of the *Nicomachean Ethics* into the true nature of the human good, an inquiry that started with unexamined opinion but did not end with it.

The formalistic discussion of maxims that do and do not require explanation continues along with the selection of maxims that raise questions beyond the scope of rhetoric but will be addressed by Aristotle’s *politikē*. The passage that comes next introduces a triad of maxims that concern mortality and the limits of knowledge. The first is “No one is a lover [*erastēs*] who does not love [*philei*] always” (1394b16).

As Kennedy notes, this maxim is taken from Euripides’s *Trojan Women*, line 1051. It is part of an eloquent critique of eloquence⁴¹ in which Hecuba urges Menelaus to have Helen executed on the spot after Helen has given a crafty speech in which she blames the gods, Priam, Paris, and Menelaus himself for her infidelity. Hecuba has soundly rebutted Helen’s speech, but is afraid that *erōs* will lead Menelaus to pardon Helen. Her fear appears to be justified, since Menelaus initially intends to have Helen return to Sparta on his own ship. But after Hecuba tells him that “no one is a lover who does not love always,” Menelaus accepts Hecuba’s advice, probably because he recognizes that he remains the lover (*erastēs*) of Helen. Hecuba’s success in getting Menelaus to have Helen travel on a separate ship highlights the potential power of eloquence informed by practical wisdom to overcome crafty speeches (*Rhet.* 1355a38–b2). On the other hand, her failure to have Helen executed speaks to the limits of rhetoric when opposed by passion.

A thoughtful listener would respond to Hecuba’s equation of erotic love to perpetual friendship by sighing inwardly, “if only it were so.” It was certainly not the case for Medea, the erstwhile lover of Jason. However, in the case of the cuckolded Menelaus, Hecuba has a point. Nevertheless, this facile equation of erotic love to perpetual friendship should cast some doubt on the epistemic sufficiency of appealing maxims.

The next two maxims subtly induce a receptivity to teachings found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The first of the two is “Being mortal, do not maintain immortal anger” (*Rhet.* 1394b22). It is consistent with the turn away from the ethos of Homeric heroes toward the more civic virtues of moderation, prudence, justice, and courage as steadfast devotion to the city’s laws. These are

⁴¹Given Gorgias’s praise of what he takes to be the supreme power of rhetoric in the *Encomium of Helen*, Aristotle’s selection of Hecuba’s refutation of Helen’s crafty speech, a refutation based on knowledge of human nature, may be read as a particular attack on unguided rhetoric within the larger general attack.

the moral virtues specified and praised in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Having raised the issue of human mortality, Aristotle follows that maxim with "A mortal must have thoughts [*phronein*] of mortal things, not of immortal things" (1394b25), which is itself an immortal, self-aware thought about the scope of human thought. This maxim would have given rise to some dissatisfaction in Aristotle's most serious students, men who may have had some desire to think immortal thoughts. They were thereby primed to experience relief from that dissatisfaction when, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle would explicitly reject the maxim that "a mortal should think mortal, not immortal thoughts" (EN 1177b31–34).⁴² Thoughts should be immortal, not anger.

The next maxim is "The Locrians . . . should not be insolent, lest their cicadas chirp from the ground" (*Rhet.* 1394b–1395a2). It was originally a pithy warning by the lyric poet Stesichorus to the Locrians that if they were to resist a larger, more powerful city, even their trees would be leveled. But although effective, this maxim is certainly not universal in application, but rather contingent upon considerations beyond the ken of the art of rhetoric. For the next two maxims will be admonitions to fight and Aristotle will interpret one of them as advice to fight an apparently stronger foe.

The maxims that follow are explicitly characterized as useful for persuading the many once one has already decided what to do. This means that an art of rhetoric that relies on maxims for its authority, as Aristotle's does, cannot be a form of "public reason." Rather, the quality of the advice that it provides depends on the quality of choices that the orator has made prior to addressing the citizens. The first of this series, "One omen is best, to defend the fatherland" (1395a14), is taken from *The Iliad* 12.243.⁴³ According to Aristotle, it is useful for encouraging one's troops *if* one has decided that it is best to fight at that time. It was spoken by Hector after Polydamas, a Trojan comrade in arms, saw an eagle drop a bloody snake to the ground after the writhing snake struck the eagle a painful blow. Polydamas interpreted this as an omen warning the Trojans not to engage the Greeks in battle at that time. Aristotle introduces Hector's reply by stating that it is appropriate "*if one is exhorting [troops] to face danger without first sacrificing to the gods*" (*Rhet.* 1395a12–13, italics added).

Aristotle recommends the next maxim, "The War God is even-handed," "*if one has decided to engage the enemy despite being outnumbered*" (*Rhet.* 1395a15–16, italics added). It therefore contradicts the maxim that quotes the advice given to the Locrians. Like the maxim that immediately precedes it, this maxim is a statement made by Hector in *The Iliad* (18.309). Hector makes this statement immediately after declaring that he is ready to challenge Achilles (18.305–8), a challenge which will result in Hector's death and the

⁴²See Bartlett, *Art of Rhetoric*, 266.

⁴³Kennedy, *On Rhetoric*, 185. References to *The Iliad* are from Homer, *The Iliad*, 2 vols., trans. A. T. Murray (London: Heinemann, 1924).

rout of the Trojans (20.380–22.335). Homer recounts that the Trojans cheered Hector's speech, but that this was only because Athena had taken away their wits (18.310–11). Maxims are useful for persuading audiences, especially witless ones. But for good advice, one must look further, beyond the art of rhetoric or the poet's art to the arts of military strategy and *politikē's* attention to one's resources relative to those of one's enemy (*Rhet.* 1359b33–1360a37). By calling attention to the insufficiency of Homer's guidance, in a move reminiscent of Socrates's criticism of the poet in the *Republic*, Aristotle is undermining Homer's authority as "teacher of the Greeks," thereby creating a space for his own teachings in the minds of his students.

"He who allows the children to live after having killed the father is lacking in foresight" (1395a19) is also a maxim that is recommended "if advising to kill the children of the enemy, *even though they have done nothing unjust*" (1395a17–18, italics added). Once again, there is a frank assertion of the conditional nature of advice provided by maxims. Furthermore, if the security of the one who had slain the father were the only consideration, the innocence of the father's children would have been immaterial, not worthy of mention. But by stating the maxim as he did, Aristotle confronted his students with the complexity of praxis. The requirements of the city's security may come into conflict with the requirements of its justice, or, to put it more generally, necessary means may undermine the higher end of the good. This foreshadows the discussion in the *Nicomachean Ethics* of regrettable actions which one is compelled to take by circumstances but which are nevertheless essentially voluntary and therefore regrettable (*EN* 1110a4–14). This tension between the necessary and the good also defines the fundamental problem of the political effects of rhetoric: necessary manipulative means undermine the higher end of political life that those means serve. For the decent student, the example of the murder of the innocent children of one's enemy fosters an appreciation of the contradiction between the requirements of security and the higher end of justice. For such a student, this would contribute to a self-aware consciousness of the limited goodness of the politically necessary, and thus to the moderation at the core of Aristotle's *politikē*.⁴⁴

Aristotle continues to instigate the self-awareness necessary for the ascent to *politikē* by presenting "an Attic neighbor" as a maxim (*Rhet.* 1395a21).⁴⁵ This seems odd, since it is not, at first glance, a statement of general applicability regarding a course of action. However, an audience-centered reading enables us to see how this verbless phrase might imply a course of action and at the same time prime Aristotle's students to undertake the study of *politikē*. Its source is a speech reported by Thucydides in which a

⁴⁴See Aristotle's rejection of a life devoted to the acquisition of political power for the sake of doing noble things at *Pol.* 1325a31–b10.

⁴⁵Kennedy (*On Rhetoric*, 185) identifies Thucydides 1.70 as the source. Bartlett (*Art of Rhetoric*, 126) does not attribute it to Thucydides but claims that it is a traditional proverb understood as a criticism of Athenian imperialism.

Corinthian attempting to recruit allies against Athens described that city as troublesome to its neighbors. By recommending this criticism of Athens as a maxim, Aristotle obliquely challenged the Athenian chauvinism of his students, thereby preparing the way for the deeper self-awareness and expanded perspective required for *politikē*. The phrase also implies that the city should be less troublesome to other cities. This suggestion may have had some intuitive appeal to Aristotle's more thoughtful students. But it is in the *Politics* rather than in the *Rhetoric* that Aristotle will advocate a turn away from efforts to dominate other cities (*Pol.* 1325b23–32).

Chapter 21 of book 2 concludes with the presentation of five maxims invented by Aristotle. The first invented maxim is to be spoken as if in a rage so as to impress the audience with the speaker's seemingly sincere sense of outrage and elicit the same outrage in the members of the audience: "It is a lie that a man must know himself: at any rate, if this man knew himself, he would never have thought it fitting to assume military command" (*Rhet.* 1395a21–26). Aristotle states that the purpose of employing this maxim is to win an audience over by feigning a passion so intense that the speaker has no choice but to courageously contradict the respected maxim, "Know thyself." Because its use is explicitly characterized as insincere, it can play no role in a process of public reason. But if employed by an orator who understands the good of the city and its citizens, it can serve a benign purpose.

The next three invented maxims concern the permanence of love (*philia*) and imply the need for knowledge. They are:

One must not, as they say, love [*philein*] as if one would later hate, but rather hate as if one would later love [*philēsontas*]. (1395a27–28)

One must love, not, as people say, but as if one would love forever, for to love in the other way is treacherous. (1395a30–31)

The saying [that one must love as if one would later hate] does not please me for the true friend must love as if he would love always. Nor [am I pleased by] "nothing extremely" for one must extremely hate the wicked. (1395a31–34)

It is not really courageous to oppose what "they say," because there is no consistent content in it. The "extreme," undying hate of the evil endorsed in the third maxim is not compatible with the hate that can turn to love in the first maxim. The second maxim and its subsequent restatement contradict themselves. For to love "as if one were going to love forever" (*hōs aei philēsonta*) is not the same as loving forever simply. It is, in fact, giving the mere appearance, perhaps even to oneself, of eternal love. It is, in fact, treacherous. This self-contradicting set of maxims might be effective in displaying a speaker's character in ways that would gain the confidence of audiences. But they cannot provide reliable guidance for citizens.

The framing of the final maxim in chapter 21 is a frank admission that maxims are useful because they please and flatter those to whom they are addressed by asserting that their particular experiences are universal and that therefore their particular opinions are wise. Aristotle puts it this way:

Thus it is necessary to guess what kind of assumptions [his hearers] happen to have and then speak accordingly about these things in general. For in fact the maxim, as has been said, is a general statement, and people enjoy general statements that happen to coincide with a part of what that they already assume. If someone is furnished with bad neighbors or children, he would accept a speaker's saying that nothing is more difficult than having neighbors or that nothing is more foolish than having children. Thus it is necessary to guess what kind of assumptions [his hearers] happen to have and then speak accordingly about these things in general. (1395b5–12)

This can only be taken as instruction in pleasing and manipulating the citizens. Surely, knowledge that is more phronetic, truer, and more authoritative than rhetoric is required if the city is to be understood and well advised.

What is most noteworthy about the five invented maxims is their strong and consistent emphasis on establishing the character of the speaker. The use of these maxims in speaking to the right audience would enable an orator with an agenda that the citizens did not share to gain their trust. Whatever wise guidance was provided would have to be supplied by what the orator knew and was aiming at, not by words intended to feign a character with which the citizens would be comfortable.

Considered as a whole, the trajectory of the chapter is a shift away from reliance on the received store of sayings chosen for their reputed wisdom to the invention of mere wise-sounding generalities created on the spot to fit the immediate purpose of the speaker, guided only by the prejudices of "mobs" whose judgment is perverted by extreme vulgarity (*phortikotēta*, 1395b2), more receptive to the speeches of the uneducated than the educated (1395b24–30), and unable to follow long chains of reasoning (1357a3–4). Such a shift would be palatable only if the speaker possessed at least a general, partial, and provisional knowledge of the true good of the city and if pandering to existing prejudices was necessary because of the corrupt state of existing regimes and the associated cognitive and ethical limitations of the citizens. It might have been necessary, but it was certainly not good.

The Discussion of Maxims

Aristotle introduced the discussion of maxims by stating that his concern was with ascertaining what subjects, occasions, and speakers were fitting with regard to the employment of maxims (1394a19–22). The key word is "fitting" (*harmottei*) at 1394a21. It will become very clear that the concern is with what is fitting for the purpose of gaining the support of an audience,

or, perhaps, with what is fitting according to standards of the art. But there is emphatically and remarkably no concern with what is fitting to the situation to which maxims are applied. That is a huge lacuna that would have been troubling to a student of the art of rhetoric in direct proportion to that student's desire to know what was truly good for his city. Aristotle was quite explicit about the epistemic insufficiency of maxims. He recommended the use of "trite, meaningless and common maxims *if they are useful*, for because they are common, they *seem* [*dokousin*] to be correct, *as if* [*hōs*] everyone agrees with them" (1395a10–12, italics added). Students concerned with what was truly good for the city could only have concluded then that rhetoric's value lay in gaining support for choices arrived at through an art more authoritative and wiser than the art of rhetoric (EN 1094a26–27).

The chapter on maxims concludes with the following assertion that the purpose of maxims is to establish the trustworthiness of the orator in the eyes of the citizens: "If the maxims are effective [*chrēstai*], they make the speaker *appear* [to his audience] to be well-disposed [*chrēstoēthē phainesthai*]" (1395b17–18). The key term in Aristotle's concluding thought on maxims is *phainesthai*. It is necessary to note that Aristotle explicitly allows for the possibility of false appearances. "But things about which one has a true belief may also appear in a false way [*phainetai de kai pseudē*]. For example, the sun appears to be a foot wide even though one is convinced that it is larger than the inhabited world" (*De anima* 428b2–4).⁴⁶ *Phainesthai* can mean "falsely appear" rather than "be shown." Therefore, when Aristotle advises his students to employ techniques that will make their character *phainetai* as trustworthy, we are on firmer ground if we interpret that as artful image construction rather than frank self-disclosure. Rhetoric that places a premium on the artful projection of a strategically constructed persona is hard to reconcile with anything that can be called "public reason."

Most importantly, the treatment of maxims is unique among the *Rhetoric's* "means of persuasion" in a way that carries great political significance. According to the *Rhetoric*, when a speaker employs a maxim, he attributes universality to a characterization of action that is not in fact universal (*Rhet.* 1395a7–9). Other deceptive techniques in the *Rhetoric* that have received more attention than this.⁴⁷ But it is only in the treatment of maxims that Aristotle explicitly points out the nature of the epistemic insufficiency of *endoxa* as he relegates them to an instrumental rather than a guiding political role. To relegate *endoxa* to a subordinate, instrumental role is also to relegate the citizens, the holders of unexamined opinions, to a politically subordinate role. As a result, civic choices cannot be the product of frank discussion

⁴⁶I am indebted to Martha C. Nussbaum, *Aristotle's De Motu Animalium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 248, for calling my attention to this passage.

⁴⁷For example, the attribution of virtues and vices to persons who do not actually possess them (*Rhet.* 1367a32–b3, cited by Robert Wardy, "Mighty Is the Truth and It Shall Prevail?," in Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's "Rhetoric,"* 75).

among the citizens of the just and the advantageous as they apply to the decisions before them. A political process without a frank exchange of views among citizens is at odds with the full flourishing of the speaking animal.

In the *Rhetoric's* discussion of maxims we find Aristotle's reason for accepting this regrettable state of affairs. There, he depicts human beings as decidedly disposed to employ their own limited experience and unexamined opinions as the lens through which to view all civic choices (*Rhet.* 1395b1–13). We must turn to the *Politics* to see why he does not accept rule by unexamined opinions. He asserts that the narrow perspective of the dominant faction will tend strongly toward political extremism, and thus the destruction of the regime. The few who are wise and decent cannot overcome a dominant faction by force. But if they are sufficiently skillful in the art of rhetoric, they can persuade the dominant faction to make choices that are less extreme and less inimical to the preservation of the regime than it would otherwise make.

The benign manipulation of the citizens that I have outlined amounts to a turn to aristocracy. It carries with it the inherent problems of aristocracy, of which Aristotle was well aware. Those who are not judged to be excellent and are excluded from power may become enemies of the regime (*Pol.* 1306b27–37). Moreover, as noted above, aristocracy by means of even the most benign manipulation deprives the citizens of the human function of speaking to one another of the just and the advantageous for the sake of collective decision-making. Regime preservation can maintain what is required for mere life. It can even provide what is needed for private virtue and the lower public virtues. But it affords no opportunity to develop and exercise political prudence. It is because his response to the problem of political extremism is unsatisfactory that Aristotle insists on a different solution as his ultimate response. This is an education for the citizens that brings them to a perspective broader and higher than that afforded by their own limited experience and sayings accepted by their particular milieu. Through such an education, citizens can become disposed to pursue the good of the city as a whole rather than extreme partisan or personal agendas that are destructive to systems of lawful rule.

But there is no assurance that any cohort of aristocrats will be sufficiently excellent to fulfil its function of educating the citizens, thereby making itself superfluous. If not overthrown by the many, aristocracies tend to degenerate into oligarchies (1307a20–23). Read in the context of the knowledge to which it is subordinate, Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, especially its pivotal discussion of maxims, brings clarity, but no conclusive solutions to the problems of politics.