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Passions and Persuasion in Aristotle's Rhetoric. Oxford Aristotle Studies.

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Considering the rhetorical tactics of politicians both ancient and modern, one might wonder if there is such a thing as a legitimate expertise of rhetoric. In his book *Passions and Persuasion in Aristotle's Rhetoric*, Dow argues that Aristotle presents such an expertise (*technē*) of rhetoric, one that is ethically neutral but that upholds certain epistemic standards. Dow's arguments, and the issues he raises, are therefore as relevant today as they were in ancient times.

A central thesis of Dow's book is that emotion-arousal is a legitimate part of the orator's skill. According to Dow, Aristotle aims to stake out a middle ground between 'the handbook writers', whom Dow argues are to be identified with Gorgias and Thrasymachus, and Plato. Gorgias and Thrasymachus think that anything goes when it comes to persuasion, whereas Plato, in the *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus* respectively, suggests (a) that the orator ought to aim at the good and (b) that the orator must know the truth about the subject matter of his speech. It is not clear how Gorgian and Thrasymachean rhetoric will benefit a city, and Platonic rhetoric is perhaps too idealistic, but, according to Dow, and of most interest to readers of *Polis*, Aristotelian rhetoric is 'a skill in discharging an important role in the state – namely a role contributing to good judgments in law courts and political assemblies' (p. 9).

According to Dow, Aristotle does not provide an ethics of rhetoric, how rhetoric ought to be applied virtuously, but his rhetoric is normative in conforming to certain epistemic standards. In particular, the orator is to provide *pistis*, which Dow understands as 'proper grounds for conviction'. The last third of the book is devoted to Aristotle's account of the emotions and the elusive phenomenon of *phantasia* as discussed in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and in other works too. According to Dow, emotions are pleasures or pains that are representational states and involve the subject affirming that things are the way that they are represented (p. 202). (There is a helpful chart on pp. 156-57.) Therefore, the orator can use emotion-arousal in providing premises for 'proper grounds for conviction'.

Dow also sides with the controversial view that Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is consistent: When, for example, Aristotle says that slander, pity, anger and emotions are not about the subject at hand, but aimed at the juror, and that one shouldn't warp the juror in that way (*Rh.* I 1 1354a16-18, 24-26), he has in mind only a certain way in which the emotions are aroused, for example, by stirring up hostility because of someone's racial origins and so forth. On this view,

Aristotle's comments are directed against the set pieces of the handbook writers that are irrelevant to the main issues, not at emotion-arousal in general.

As is clear from the above, Dow's book covers a wide range of topics, each of which would be sufficient for a whole review. Dow's discussion in the third part of the book alone has already received a good deal of attention, as it should. I wish to focus on Dow's view that Aristotelian rhetoric is not intended to 'warp the jurors' but to facilitate good judgments in law courts and assemblies, judgments that are epistemically good. According to Dow, an epistemically good judgment is based on Aristotelian *pistis*, proper grounds for conviction. The *pistis* has to be based on reputable premises and is a device conferring good standing on the conclusion. It aims at inclining the listener to accept the conclusion on the basis of the premises. As Dow says, 'A *pistis* consists of premises that are acceptable to the listener and that stand in the right kind of relations to the judgment for which they are offered as a *pistis*' (p. 54).

Now, if *pistis* is based on premises merely found acceptable by the listeners, whether these premises should be accepted or not, it is not clear why it should constitute *proper* conviction, although it may be highly effective as a method of persuasion. On the other hand, if the premises must be reputable and not just be thought to be reputable, (as contingent truths, they need not be known but must nevertheless be likely to be true), how well informed should the speaker be, and will what the speaker says be persuasive to the average listener?

In earlier chapters of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle presents grounds for pessimism and optimism. At one point he says that the jurors' remit should be restricted so that they have least opportunity to be swayed by personal pain or pleasure (*Rh.* 1 1 1354b10-11), but elsewhere he comments that humans 'have a natural disposition to the true and to a large extent hit on the true' (*Rh.* 1 1 1355a15-17), a passage cited by Dow himself (p. 60), which suggests that, after all, the truth will out. When it comes to being well-informed, Aristotle argues that a speaker engaged in deliberative oratory should have an impressive grasp of the economics and international relations of the *polis* (*Rh.* 1 4).

It therefore seems as if there is an ambiguity affecting the epistemic status of the premises the listeners must accept, which in turn casts doubt on the epistemic merit of the conclusion.

A further problem arises when Dow spells out what a *pistis* would look like. He presents the following example:

Sign: that Helen went often to the hospital and visited the sick.

Signified 1: that Helen makes fully fledged *prohairesis* to visit the sick in hospital, i.e. that she chooses these actions because they