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Aristotle's "Special Topics" in Rhetorical Practice and Pedagogy

One feature of classical rhetoric that is enjoying a revival is the concept of the topic, or *topos*. This revival has led many rhetoricians to re-examine Aristotle's discussion of topics and to study their subsequent treatment in rhetorical history. One question that even a cursory review of the history of topical theory raises is why the career of what Aristotle called the "special" or "particular" topics is such a blank. Addressing this question raises many others, such as what are special topics, exactly? what makes them special? how special is "special"? special to what? While I can't answer all these questions here, I hope to provide a perspective on them in pursuing the focal question of this essay: what is the significance of the bleak history of the special topics?

The answer I will propose has to do with the relationship between rhetoric and the academy, between rhetorical practice and rhetorical pedagogy. The special topics are not useful, or manageable, I suggest, in rhetoric conceived of as an academic subject; instead, by serving as conceptual connections between human reasoning and the particularities of practical situations, they lead our attention outside the academy to rhetoric as it occurs naturally in human societies. As rhetoric became academicized, the topics became "academic" (that is, they lost their relation to social situations), then scorned for being academic, and finally abandoned. This trend points to an unfortunate conflict between rhetorical pedagogy and rhetorical practice. It would be beneficial to try to recover the spirit in which Aristotle first delineated the concept of special topics for what it can show us about the relationship between rhetorical teaching, theory, and practice.

A Brief History

What little does the history of rhetoric tell us about the special topics? This question can be addressed only by examining the history of topical theory as a whole for evidence of the distinction between special and common topics, and my brief treatment here is necessarily superficial. Aristotle initially made the distinction by suggesting that some mental "places" would be useful in finding arguments of any sort and that others would have more restricted utility. Once made, this distinction had very little effect on

subsequent developments in rhetorical theory. Until recently, topical theory as a whole has been in decline since late antiquity: the scholarly consensus not very long ago was that topics were deservedly dead. In his commentary on Aristotle of 1923, Sir W. D. Ross said that topics belong "to a by-gone mode of thought; [they are] one of the last efforts of that movement of the Greek spirit toward a general culture." In fact, he suggests, Aristotle's own treatises on logical method "made his *Topics* out of date." (1) In his history of invention of 1948, Elbert Harrington concluded that the topics have "proved to be a barren approach. . . . topics, instead of an aid to good thinking, are often a substitute for good thought." (2)

Topical theory, most vigorous soon after Aristotle, provided the foundation (along with *stasis* theory) for the systems of invention of most Hellenistic and Roman rhetoricians. However, according to Michael Leff, Cicero abandoned Aristotle's distinction between common and special topics and focussed on topics of the person and the act, which provided common materials for all kinds of rhetorical arguments. (3) The thorough liberal education that both Cicero and Quintilian deemed essential to the orator effectively supplants the special topics; the materials of argument specific to different areas of knowledge and forums of discussion are placed outside the province of rhetoric and within the other subjects the orator must know--politics, history, literature, and so forth.

Medieval treatises seem to have adapted classical doctrine to meet the narrower needs of medieval rhetorical practice, quietly transforming the special topics into formulas. The medieval handbooks of letter-writing and preaching often connect rhetorical precepts to the rhetorical problems of the secretary or preacher by giving lists of strategies or suggestions for things to say in particular situations. For example, James J. Murphy describes the preaching manuals of Gregory the Great (591) and Alain de Lille (c. 1199) as literal catalogues of doctrine: virtues and vices, themes appropriate to various listeners, relevant authorities, scriptural quotations. In his *Summa de arte praedicande* (c. 1210-15), Thomas of Salisbury makes this point explicit: "the sacred page," he says, "has its own special topics beyond those of dialectic and rhetoric." (4)

The Renaissance revival of classical theory did not accord Aristotle's *Rhetoric* an important place, (5) and the implications for Renaissance rhetorical practice of the distinction between common and special topics were left undeveloped. The use of topics tended to be quite mechanical, for several reasons: the greater interest in style than in invention, the elementary place of rhetoric in education, and

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the influence of such authorities as Cicero at the expense of an empirical approach to practice. Special topics do appear as formulas for composing various genres, both oratorical and poetic, but there is no corresponding development of topical theory.

Possibly the failure of recovered theory to engage contemporary practice provoked the subsequent rationalist criticism of theory. Peter Ramus assaulted rhetorical invention in general, and Bernard Lamy (identified with the Port Royalists) levelled an attack on the topics themselves (in *L'Art de Parler*, 1676), an attack that was so destructive, according to Wilbur Samuel Howell, that nearly a century later John Ward's conventional treatment of topics (in *A System of Oratory*, 1759) required an "embarrassed apology for them as being useful to those without genius or opportunity to find stronger arguments by more direct investigation." (6)

The reorientation of rhetoric in the 18th century was the last straw. Douglas Ehninger claims that George Campbell's "major revolution in . . . inventional theory . . . swept away the last remnants of an *inventio* that had constituted the supreme achievement of ancient rhetorical thought." (7) According to Ehninger, "the whole paraphernalia of states and topics--the very substance of classical *inventio*--lose their importance" in Campbell's shift from subject-oriented analysis to audience-oriented analysis: in such analysis "a detailed knowledge of substantive topics will be of less importance than a familiarity with the various habits of mind" of the audience (p. 274). Hugh Blair also rejected the topics as an "artificial system of oratory" that might "produce very showy academical declamations [but] could never produce discourses on real business." (8) He viewed invention as related to native genius and not subject to art or instruction. By this time, then, rhetorical topics are understood as thoroughly "academic"--"remnants" as Ross called them. In the 19th century, the common topics became formalized as modes of arrangement, and the special topics remained outside rhetoric, as method, inquiry, and prerequisite knowledge of one's subject.

Topical Theory

One of the continuing issues in rhetorical theory, as Leff has pointed out, is the tension between two perspectives on rhetoric, which he calls the inferential and the materialist. The inferential perspective treats rhetoric as a distinct art of persuasion, separate from the substantive issues it addresses; the materialist perspective treats rhetoric as an art enmeshed in varying particular circumstances and issues that determine the nature of persuasion. Neither perspective,

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says Leff, is entirely satisfactory, and no one has successfully integrated the two. Leff draws this distinction in the context of a discussion of the rhetorical *topos*, which he suggests is a "confused notion," one with "a bewildering diversity of meanings" (p. 23). Among the problems he describes is the conflict between the need for topical systems to be memorable (and thus compact and simple) and the need for them to be relevant (and thus detailed and complex). The need for simplicity reflects the inferential perspective on rhetoric and leads us to the universal, or common, topics (the *koinoi topoi*); the need for relevance reflects the materialist perspective and leads us to the special, or particular, topics (the *idioi topoi* or *eide*). (9)

When we examine the genesis of topical theory in this context, we can understand better why Aristotle described special topics the way he did. The burden of his argument in historical context, as George Kennedy explains it (although he doesn't use Leff's terms), is to establish the inferential perspective on rhetoric, in opposition to the prevailing materialist perspective (p. 66; Grimaldi makes a similar point, p. 119). The first chapter of the *Rhetoric* argues against those who treated rhetoric as the art of political discourse alone and not as an art applicable to any contingent issue (a position most notably caricatured by Plato in the *Gorgias*). But Aristotle gets caught between the two perspectives--between his own clear desire to characterize rhetoric as an art based on universal principles of persuasion and his empirical observations of persuasion as materially grounded in the resources of particular situations. The special topics are, in essence, his attempt to solve this dilemma, but the solution turns out to be an unstable one.

The system of the *Rhetoric* relies heavily on this solution; the bulk of Books I and II constitutes a discussion of special topics. Aristotle defines the special topics as those "derived from the propositions relative to a particular species or class of things" (I.2.1358a). But the examples he gives immediately--that a proposition from physics cannot form arguments in ethics and vice versa--concern what he considers substantive disciplines rather than probable reasoning and thus tilt the system toward the materialist perspective. He goes on to warn that it is easy to slip from the special topics into the principles of specific disciplines--almost without knowing it: "As for the particular *topoi*, the better our choice of propositions, the more we imperceptibly glide into some discipline other than Dialectic and Rhetoric: for if we light upon true scientific principles [*archai*], the art is no longer Dialectic or Rhetoric but is the discipline based upon those principles" (1358a). (At two other places, he catches

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himself in this very act--"gliding" toward substantive issues in politics [I.4.1359b5-7 and I.4.1360a13].) There is an instability in this system: because it is weighted against the common topics (from which, he says, not many arguments are actually formed) and towards disciplinary principles (which he clearly prefers), it weakens the very conception of rhetoric as a general faculty that Aristotle was attempting to develop.

The special topics are vulnerable: as Aristotle creates them, they are squeezed between the common topics and disciplinary principles, between the *koinoi* and the *archai*. In the tension between the materialist and inferential perspectives at either end of this three-part system, the special topics tend to drop out, or simply move toward disciplinary principles and become assimilated to them, outside the realm of rhetoric. In this way, the special topics become a sign of the strength of the materialist perspective in rhetorical theory. When the materialist perspective flourishes, there is room for and need for special topics within rhetoric. When the inferential perspective flourishes, they recede or migrate outside. What I have been suggesting about the more rapid and complete decline of the special as opposed to the common topics in rhetorical history as a whole further suggests a general historical movement from the materialist perspective to the inferential, from the situational foundation of rhetoric in social practices to the elaboration of a coherent and systematic art.

We see in Aristotle's treatment a tension between his aims as a systematizer and teacher and his typical methods as a careful observer, a tension analogous to that between the inferential and materialist perspectives. For the inferential perspective is clearly advantageous to the teacher--it provides convenience, coherence, and limitations; it permits isolation and elaboration. The materialist perspective, in contrast, emphasizes the diversity and complexity of rhetorical practice. To oversimplify a bit, the materialist perspective belongs to rhetorical practice, and the inferential perspective belongs to rhetorical pedagogy.

The Effect of Pedagogy

The history of rhetorical education provides additional hints about the fate of special topics. Marrou's history of education in antiquity shows that after the classical period in Greece a separation developed between rhetorical education and endemic rhetorical practice. He says about the Hellenistic period that "the most characteristic thing about teaching was that it gradually forgot all about its original aim, which was to prepare the would-be orator for

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real life by teaching him how to compose speeches that he would actually need for serious occasions." (10) And indeed the "serious occasions" for rhetoric had changed: deliberative and judicial rhetoric declined and epideictic flourished, in the form of the public lecture or set piece. The rhetorical exercises, or *progymnasmata*, that provided the student with occasions for practice were usually designed for imaginary situations and on improbable subjects. Roman rhetorical education used the same system, considered artificial and absurd even then (Marrou cites Petronius, Quintilian, and Tacitus, p. 287); the exercises were apparently designed to be more difficult and therefore more profitable than situations that emulated real life. These exercises were virtually indistinguishable from the lectures and oratorical displays that constituted the limited role of rhetoric in public life. Rhetoric became a form of public entertainment, an art for its own sake rather than a vital means of engaging in public affairs.

There was thus a rift between the rhetorical practice of late antiquity and the rhetorical theory derived from the rhetorical practice of an earlier time. Rhetoric retreated from the forum, where she was no longer welcome, into the academy, retaining an outmoded theory and a pedagogy that became its own justification. By the 11th and 12th centuries, the place of rhetoric even in the academy had declined, as logic came to dominate the trivium; rhetoric lost its "educational vitality," in the words of Charles Sears Baldwin. (11) As part of the academic setting, with or without vitality, rhetoric lost its empirical connection with rhetorical practice. As an academic subject, rhetoric has often neglected the natural functions of discourse outside the academy, and it has been reluctant to examine the discourse of the academy. My guess is that the special topics--the points of connection between reasoning and the particularities of practical situations--are the victims of the academicizing of rhetoric.

Revival of Topical Theory

Recently, however, there has been a revival of interest in topical theory and (not coincidentally) a shift toward the materialist perspective on rhetoric. Participants in the 1970 National Developmental Project on rhetoric, for example, expressed concern about both the status of invention and the place of subject matter in rhetoric. (12) Lloyd Bitzer asked, "How can we engage rhetoric with subject matter?" (p. 202). Karl Wallace said he was "appalled at the separation of rhetoric from subject matter" (p. 19). In a later essay, Wallace explored the problem of developing a modern set of topics and directed attention to the work of Chaim Perelman as just this kind of effort. (13) In 1973,

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Ross Winterowd claimed that "everyone uses 'topics' . . . all the time; . . . the concept of topics . . . is not trivial. . . . it is time to revitalize the concept of topics." (14) And more recently, Charles Kneupper and Floyd Anderson have claimed that "in specialized areas of inquiry . . . features such as the methods in use, the prior knowledge, kind of issues . . . function as special *topoi*." (15)

An art of invention based closely on contemporary rhetorical practice and involving explicitly the substance of discourse might be revived by reconceiving the special topics. Elsewhere, I have proposed in some detail how this reconception might be achieved by following Aristotle's method--applying the principles by which he distinguished the special topics in his rhetorical environment to our own rhetorical environment, which is certainly different and probably more complex. (16) In brief, we find in our environment an indeterminate number and variety of recurrent rhetorical situations--those arising, for example, not only in political affairs, but also in business, industry, government, and the mass media (as well as the academy). The principles underlying Aristotelian special topics suggest that such topics have three sources: conventional expectation in rhetorical situations, knowledge and issues available in the institutions and organizations in which those situations occur, and concepts available in specific networks of knowledge (or disciplines). Any of these can serve as conceptual places that yield arguments possibly useful in a rhetorical situation related to the genre, institution, or discipline.

Academic rhetoric has not produced a system acknowledging the influence of situational particularities on argumentative effect; its pedagogy relies heavily on techniques that are independent of situations outside the classroom; its theory is just beginning to deal with ways of differentiating, rather than unifying, rhetorical practice. This situation reflects the influence of two versions of 20th-century formalism: neo-Aristotelianism in speech communication and the modes of discourse in English composition. Surveys of contemporary textbooks in public speaking show that in those few with any extended treatment of invention at all the emphasis is on common topics, research methods, or on a repetition of the special topics from Aristotle. (17) Similarly, a recent review of best-selling composition textbooks found little attention to invention and most of that premised on general classroom contexts; such treatments involve common topics and prewriting procedures applicable to any situation. (18) However, the recent writing-across-the-curriculum movement has produced several textbooks that do treat the methods and goals of different disciplines as

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part of substantive rhetorical instruction. (19) And most notably, Toulmin, Rieke, and Janik's *Introduction to Reasoning* attends closely to the differences in argumentative resources and materials among forums and subjects. (20) Toulmin's method of analysis includes a place for special topics--as the "backing" that provides "assurance" that a warrant is applicable. Toulmin points out that backing is generally tied very closely to the conceptual structure of a discourse community; in his terms, backing is "field-dependent." This is, of course, precisely the nature of special topics. Toulmin's empirical approach to contemporary rhetorical practice in nonacademic settings could provide a way for academic rhetoric to reconnect classical theory and contemporary practice.

George Kennedy has also speculated about the relationship between rhetorical practice and pedagogy. He begins with a distinction between "primary" and "secondary" rhetoric. Primary rhetoric is what I have characterized as endemic or "natural" rhetorical practice, and historically, Kennedy says, it has been oral, civic, persuasive, and enacted in specific situations. Secondary rhetoric is "the apparatus of rhetorical techniques clustering around discourse . . . when those techniques are not being used for their primary oral purpose" (p. 5). Kennedy claims that a persistent characteristic of classical rhetoric has been its tendency to move from primary to secondary forms, a phenomenon he labels *letteraturizzazione*, or what in English would be rendered "literaturization." This movement, he suggests, is probably the result of teaching rhetoric by rote to young children rather than making it a more demanding intellectual pursuit.

What I have been claiming here about the weakening of the special topics and the materialist perspective on rhetoric by pedagogy is related to Kennedy's claim. I'd go further, however, and say that any attempt to teach, whether to young children or to graduate students, leads away from primary rhetoric, from the situation-based materials of discourse, toward a secondary, systematic, self-contained art of discipline. In order to give more room to the materialist perspective, rhetorical pedagogy needs to concentrate less exclusively on techniques for producing discourse and more on observation and interpretation of primary rhetoric, the discourse by which society creates itself (I would contend that today such rhetoric is not always oral and civic, as Kennedy defines it, however). Perceptive observation and interpretation are fostered by rhetorical criticism, which should help students understand the functions and effects of the discourse they create and the discourse they read and hear. The special topics, I believe, are keys to such understanding, since they help explain the dependence of argumentative force upon subject, audience, and circumstance.

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In promoting such understanding, criticism can help mediate between the needs of pedagogy and the barnyard of rhetorical practice.

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Notes

(1) W. D. Ross, *Aristotle* (1923; rpt. Barnes and Noble, 1949), p. 59.

(2) Elbert W. Harrington, "Rhetoric and the Scientific Method of Inquiry," *University of Colorado Studies in Language and Literature*, 1 (1948), 60.

(3) Michael C. Leff, "The Topics of Argumentative Invention in Latin Rhetorical Theory from Cicero to Boethius," *Rhetorica*, 1 (Spring 1983), 23-44. In his *De Partitione Oratoria*, Cicero gives a list of common topics much like Aristotle's but does not mention the special topics (ii, 7).

(4) Quoted in James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Univ. of California Press, 1974), p. 323. Murphy also points out the very slight influence that Aristotle's *Rhetoric* had on the medieval *artes*.

(5) George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1980), p. 204; also Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Logic and Rhetoric in England, 1500-1700* (Russell and Russell, 1961), p. 64.

(6) Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Eighteenth Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 93.

(7) Douglas Ehninger, "George Campbell and the Revolution in Inventional Theory," *Southern Speech Journal*, 15 (May 1950), 270.

(8) Hugh Blair, Lecture 32, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. Abraham Mills (New York: G & C & H Carvill, 1829; rpt. 1833), p. 354.

(9) This is not to suggest, as Leff does not, that common topics are necessarily formal and special topics substantive, although some see this equivalence in Aristotle (most notably, William M. A. Grimaldi, S. J., *Studies in the Philosophy of Aristotle's Rhetoric* [Franz Steiner Verlag GBMH, 1972]). In fact, Leff reads the Ciceronian topics of the person and the act as *substantive common* topics; research

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in discipline-specific reasoning may yet lead us to posit *inferential special* topics. My point is simply that the inferential perspective favors common topics for their universal application, and the materialist perspective favors special topics for their differentiation.

(10) H[enri] I[renee] Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (1956; rpt. Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p. 202.

(11) Charles Sears Baldwin, *Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic* (Macmillan, 1928), p. 151.

(12) Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black, eds., *The Prospect of Rhetoric: Report of the National Development Project* (Prentice-Hall, 1971).

(13) Karl R. Wallace, "*Topoi* and the Problem of Invention," *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* 58 (1972), 387-95.

(14) W. Ross Winterowd, "'Topics' and Levels in the Composing Process," *College English*, 34 (February 1973), 707-708.

(15) Charles W. Kneupper and Floyd D. Anderson, "Uniting Wisdom and Eloquence: The Need for Rhetorical Invention," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 66 (1980), 325.

(16) Carolyn R. Miller and Jack Selzer, "Special Topics of Argument in Engineering Reports," in *Writing in Nonacademic Settings*, ed. Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami (Guilford, 1985), pp. 309-41.

(17) Kneupper and Anderson, page 320; Richard C. Huseman, "Modern Approaches to the Aristotelian Concept of the Special Topic," *Central States Speech Journal*, 15 (1964), 21-26.

(18) Donald C. Stewart, "Textbooks Revisited," in *Research in Composition and Rhetoric: A Bibliographic Sourcebook,* ed. Michael G. Moran and Ronald F. Lunsford (Greenwood Press, 1984), pp. 453-68.

(19) See, for example, Elaine P. Maimon et al., *Writing in the Arts and Sciences* (Winthrop, 1981), and Charles Bazerman, *The Informed Writer: Using Sources in the Disciplines,* 2nd ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 1985).

(20) Stephen Toulmin, Richard Rieke, and Allan Janik, *An Introduction to Reasoning* (Macmillan, 1979).

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