

Classical Rhetoric Term Paper: On Truth

Rebekah T. McKamie

College of Arts and Sciences, Liberty University

Author Note

Rebekah T. McKamie

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rebekah T. McKamie

Email: rtmckamie@liberty.edu

Abstract

Classical rhetoricians held varying beliefs about truth and to what extent humans can access it. These beliefs about truth often conflict with one another and with Scripture, but there are also areas where the beliefs converge. Thoughts about truth and man's ability to have knowledge of it have morphed over time. The Bible is considered the constant against which all truth and theory is measured. Under the model of Platonic-style dialogue, Plato, Aristotle, Quintilian, Augustine, and Paul (representing the Biblical constant) discuss truth as it relates to human knowledge. This hypothetical setting compares classical rhetoricians' ideas about truth directly against one another and Scripture. A study of truth as a theoretical shift among classical rhetoricians weighs heavily on ethos (the speaker's character) and epistemology (the theory of human knowledge and belief). Paul concludes that humans can obtain knowledge of the truth if acquainted with the Source of truth, that is, Christ.

Keywords: classical rhetoric, truth, ethos, epistemology

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A Meeting Place in Rome

AUGUSTINE: Paul! It is an honor to meet you here. Am I the first to arrive?

PAUL: The second, if we are counting all present company.

AUGUSTINE: Of course. And who else have you called here?

PAUL: I have called Plato, Aristotle, and Quintilian to join us.

AUGUSTINE: But not Cicero?

PAUL: Cicero has at least two admirers among us, yourself included (Bizzell et al., 2020, 463). If he has need to speak, his words will be represented.

AUGUSTINE: I see. And why have you called us here, Paul?

PAUL: I would like to pose a question.

AUGUSTINE: What question is that?

PAUL: Why don't we wait until everyone arrives?

AUGUSTINE: Do you think everyone will come?

PAUL: I do.

AUGUSTINE: I am still apprehensive about your choice of venue. This was a "stadium of blood" (Hopkins and Beard, 2005, p.vii). I'm told you witnessed it yourself.

PAUL: Yes. One day it will be "a powerful point of intersection between the modern religious world and the ancient" (Hopkins and Beard, 2005, p. 13). But a ruin, then, however powerful.

AUGUSTINE: I suppose all that is ancient will one day live on only in ruins.

PLATO: Not all things, I hope. Do words decay so quickly?

PAUL: Plato! You arrived. I see you've brought your former student, Aristotle.

ARISTOTLE: Or perhaps I have brought my former teacher. Quintilian is with us as well.

QUINTILIAN: I thank you for meeting here in Rome. Though, I suppose in present company we will be conversing in Greek?

AUGUSTINE: A burden, to be sure, but Latin must yield to Greek for correction and clarity (Bizzell et al., 2020, p. 499).

PLATO: What is this building... this structure where we are gathered?

PAUL: This colosseum is a place where many died for the entertainment of others.

AUGUSTINE: Many were martyrs for their faith, as history will likely forget (History, 2019).

ARISTOTLE: Many have died or been forced to flee for their philosophy. This is nothing novel.

PAUL: But these, Aristotle, died for the Truth.

PLATO: For what truth?

PAUL: The only Truth. That leads us to why I called you all here. I would like for each of us to get a chance to speak in the manner they find most comfortable. But first, let me pose the question.

PLATO: What question, Paul?

PAUL: A question for which the answer is able to be known to all. And therein lies the question: Can a man come to knowledge of the Truth, and by what means?

PLATO: May I be the first to respond?

PAUL: I would be honored to hear your response.

PLATO: I don't want to burden you with much rhetoric. Instead, I'd like to respond in questions. You will, in turn, respond. Do you agree with this form?

PAUL: Dialectic. I agree.

A Discourse Between Paul and Plato

PLATO: Your question regarded truth. Can a man come to knowledge of the truth, and by what means? My first question to you is about truth itself. To what truth are you referring? Before, when we were discussing the famous use of this structure where we have met, I asked for what truth those supposed martyrs died. Your answer was "The only truth". I cannot agree. Confirming a truth requires some kind of expertise on the subject area (Hardy, 2010, p.7). Do you agree?

PAUL: I suppose.

PLATO: Well, suppose we find two experts and their assessments of the truth conflict. How then can there be one truth? (Hardy, 2010, p.18)

PAUL: I suppose that one or both experts are mistaken in their view of the truth.

PLATO: But since truth requires expertise, and both are experts, perhaps it is the truth that is contingent?

PAUL: Is the truth more variable than a man? Even an expert is flawed. Every man is imperfect (*New King James Version*, 1982, Romans 2:23). A truth fickle than a man is not Truth at all.

PLATO: I suppose, then, that the truth to which you referred in the beginning is not a human, contingent truth. It is a transcendent Truth? (Bizzell et al., 2020, p.98)

PAUL: That could be one way of describing It. But how can a man access what is transcendent?

PLATO: By divine means alone, to be sure. This kind of truth is knowable by all men, of course. But it can only be remembered if we sift through carnality and temporality (Bizzell et al., 2020, p.98). We, of course, have nothing to say without a grasp of the truth, and we never will. (Bizzell et al., 2020, p.184)

PAUL: If truth is transcendent, how can a man grasp it enough to speak on the matter?

PLATO: Absolute Truth does exist, of course. But it is above our comprehension (Bizzell et al., 2020, p.201). The best we have is probabilities. Do you agree?

PAUL: I do not. But go on.

PLATO: I say that rhetoric, though it will not generate truth, is a necessary pathway to truth. Do you not see that the art of rhetoric is necessary in pursuing truth? (Bizzell et al., 2020, p.102)

PAUL: Truth exists with or without eloquent speech. Even so, there should be a distinction in the way one speaks. Eloquence can properly convey an existing truth where meaningless babble cannot. (1 Corinthians 14:8-9)

PLATO: Do you mean that eloquence may convince me of *your* truth? "...rhetoric... is a producer of persuasion for belief, not for instruction in the matter of right and wrong" (Bizzell et al., 2020, p.109). Do you agree?

PAUL: I agree. Rhetoric will not lead to truth. Truth exists without it. You have failed to answer my original question. Can a man learn the Truth, and by what means?

PLATO: To which I say that man knows the truth already. But if it is hidden from him, he cannot learn it by mortal means. He can merely investigate possible truths.

PAUL: And arrive at nothing?

PLATO: And arrive at possible truths. You see my apprehension then, with this idea of knowledge of one truth that is available to mortal men. Is that what you assert?

PAUL: Yes, that is my assertion.

PLATO: Do you consider yourself an expert in this subject matter then?

PAUL: In Truth? I am merely a witness. And if I bear false witness against this Truth, there are consequences. (Proverbs 14:5, Romans 9:1)

PLATO: A witness of Absolute Truth? Are you a god?

PAUL: No. My greatest title is that of chief... but only among sinners. (1 Timothy 1:15)

PLATO: Then are you a credible witness at all?

PAUL: The Truth needs no witness to be Truth.

PLATO: Having asserted that truth must be confirmed by experts, and even then only possible truths can be confirmed, and only contingently, I cannot agree that truth needs no witness.

A Discourse Between Plato and Aristotle

ARISTOTLE: If I may interject, my dear teacher. I agree that truth requires credible witness, but I propose another means of witnessing the truth.

PLATO: Please speak.

ARISTOTLE: I speak of evidence. Facts and data may act as a witness for the truth.

PLATO: Do you mean to say that a man can apprehend knowledge of absolute truth through corporeal means?

ARISTOTLE: Yes. In fact, “only scientific demonstration and the analysis of formal logic can arrive at absolute truth” (Bizzell et al., 2020, p. 201).

PLATO: And what if there is no tangible way of proving this truth? How then can it be deemed credible as absolute truth?

ARISTOTLE: Through analysis in a dialectic form, which will arrive at probable knowledge. And any truth in any sayings is caused by the way things are – the fact of the matter (Barnes, 2007, p. 25). Where such analysis is unavailable, probable truths can be reached by a careful use of rhetoric (Bizzell et al., 2020, p. 201).

PLATO: And when is dialectic analysis unavailable?

ARISTOTLE: “Where there is no fact of the matter, there is no truth and no falsity” (Barnes, 2007, p. 21). Where there is no truth and no falsity, a decision must be reached about the truth without the aid of fact. This is the case where a legal decision must be made. When a judge must consider all possible truths, rhetoric can help them to arrive at a decision – a probable truth.

PLATO: You mean to say that rhetoric can aid in truth?

ARISTOTLE: “Rhetoric exists to affect the giving of decisions” (Bizzell et al., 2020, p. 217). When the truth is unknown by the judge, the rhetoric of those presenting cases becomes the evidence of the truth.

PLATO: So, is truth then contingent not on time or space, as some might say (Barnes, 2007, p. 54), but on the persuasive prowess of a rhetor?

ARISTOTLE: The presentation of a case is, of course, persuasive. But only from the perspective of either a self-evident truth or a truth proved using other statements that are self-evident (Bizzell et al., 2020, p. 214).

PLATO: Can persuasive speech prove Absolute truth? I must disagree with you on that point. Absolute truth, by its divine nature, cannot be proven by man.

ARISTOTLE: “The use of persuasive speech is to lead to decisions (When we know a thing, and have decided about it, there is no further use in speaking about it)” (Bizzell et al., 2020, p. 222).

PLATO: Is truth dependent on the assessor then? If truth is defined as what is “good to believe”, doesn’t truth depend upon what the assessor has been persuaded to believe and not on the fact of the matter or “what is” (Macfarlane, 2014)? What if a judge reaches a decision, a probable truth, but it turns out to be falsehood that contradicts the fact of the matter? Meaning the speaker giving testimony is deceptive in his persuasion.

ARISTOTLE: I believe that a man’s character can be used as a source of conviction when persuading to a probable truth. His ethos (Bizzell et al., 2020, p. 202). “We believe good men more fully and more readily than others” (Bizzell et al., p. 213). However, since ethos can potentially be feigned in pursuit of persuasion, I fall back on my belief that “charm is unnecessary... when the argument is self-evident” (Bizzell et al., p. 207). Our friend Paul mentioned in your discourse that truth should be less fallible than man. And I agree. A probable truth is best presented using evidence, not charm.

PLATO: But suppose a man’s ethos is insincere, yet his rhetoric is skillful. He could, potentially, be a danger.

ARISTOTLE: How so if he has spoken on the fact of the matter? How can facts pose a danger?

PLATO: If spoken by a wicked man, anything can be a danger.

ARISTOTLE: Well, if a wicked man is going to speak, it would be far more expedient for him to ride on the credibility of self-evident arguments. That way morality is only breached

where logic can carry it without “metaphysical digressions” (Katz, 1992, p.203) as we find in your ideas of an Absolute truth that is divine, teacher.

PLATO: It seems to me that there would be danger in such expediency. If a man lacks ethos, but is skilled in rhetoric, could he not persuade others to do what is immoral, calling it a probable truth (Katz, 1992, p. 204)?

ARISTOTLE: Perhaps. But only if those others he is convincing have themselves chosen to leave the knowledge of Absolute and probable truth to the gods. Even after, they may not be able to analyze how such immoral deeds were done. Pursuing truth, then, even if it is only probable, is a necessity. (Katz, 1992, p. 198)

Quintilian Responds

QUINTILIAN: Perhaps it is best then, that a wicked man remain silent, leaving the pursuit of truth to good men. A wicked man will corrupt with any tool he is given. Given the art of rhetoric, he could cause much destruction.

My former teacher Cicero, as he is known, believed that a man need not be moral to be wise enough to speak (Bizzell et al., 2020, p. 290). That this concept of ethos was secondary to argument as you mentioned, Aristotle. But I disagree with you both. It is only a good man who can or should speak effectively at all (Bizzell et al, 2020, pp. 333, 345). Rhetoric is powerful, indeed, but can only take a man so far. An audience will not be tricked by empty rhetoric.

I will remind you all at this point that our companion Paul asked us a question. He asked us if a man can learn truth and by what means? I cannot say that I have an answer for this completely. What I do know is that since a good man is the only type of man who can speak well, that perhaps it is a good man that can learn the truth. The perfect orator is a good man who

can speak well, which requires both natural ability and training (Bizzell et al., 2020, p. 336, 344). Perhaps the truth, then, is what makes a man good, and knowing truth is what gives him the natural eloquence that lends itself to learning the art of rhetoric. For if falsehood, deception, and corruption are what make a man wicked, perhaps it is the truth that makes a man good.

I will further speculate that though “imitation is not sufficient of itself... and it is the mark of an indolent nature to rest satisfied with what has been invented by others” (Bizzell et al., 2020, p. 349), that if we are to imitate anything in a good man’s conveyance of the truth, let it “not be confined to merely words” (Bizzell et al., p. 351). If the truth makes him good and eloquence can be learned, let us imitate the character of the man himself, leaving eloquence for learning.

A Discourse Between Quintilian and Augustine

AUGUSTINE: I believe you might be onto something. By my assessment, “all human beings are called to live in and live out the truth. This implies that truth and goodness intersect” (Zuidervaart, 2018). A good man is good because of the truth. After which, I must challenge you, Quintilian. Since you have not answered Paul’s question about a man coming to knowledge of the truth, how can we know that a man has apprehended this truth? And thus, how can we confirm that he is a good man at all?

QUINTILIAN: A good man is clearly known by the purity of his speech.

AUGUSTINE: Do all good men speak? Or are all who speak eloquently good?

QUINTILIAN: I would prefer that all good men speak if the truth is ever to be conveyed to others. But by my calculation, they do not all speak. I maintain that only a good man can speak *effectively*. As Aristotle mentioned before, we more readily believe a good man.

AUGUSTINE: You believe that the perfect orator is a good man who speaks well. But I must further challenge this notion. There is no perfect orator among men. Even a good man who speaks well cannot speak perfectly, as there will always be some imperfection with language that prevents him from fully conveying truth, however perfect that truth (Bizzell et al., 2020, p. 487). A perfect orator must therefore be *perfect* and speak *perfectly*. Alas, such is not to be found among men. I agree at that point that even where eloquence or wisdom fail, a man's character must be able to speak for him when a perfect truth must somehow be conveyed (Bizzell et al., 2020, p. 540). In other words, we are imperfect, but perfect truth exists and will out despite us (Bizzell et al., p. 463).

QUINTILIAN: A perfect truth? Am I to assume that you believe you have an answer to Paul's initial question?

AUGUSTINE: Indeed, in some way it has been answered, while leaving out a gravely important detail. Plato came closer to truth than any of you (Bizzell et al., 2020, p. 463). I have heard some who came after Plato believe that the Truth, the very Source, learned from teachings of Plato. I think that is "the height of folly", and it is far more probable that Plato learned his truth from sources dear to me, to the only Truth (Bizzell et al., p. 507). Truth did not learn from Plato. Plato learned from the Truth.

QUINTILIAN: How can the Truth learn anything? Do I misunderstand?

AUGUSTINE: My sentiments exactly. Man can learn Truth, not the other way around. I will make it plain now. "The ultimate source of authority... is the triune God Himself, as He is made known to us through the word of the Bible" (Milne, 2009, p. 24). Further, "if God is our Creator, revelation in some form is overwhelmingly probable since we may confidently assume that God made us for a purpose" (Milne, p.26).

QUINTILAIN: For what purpose?

AUGUSTINE: To know the Truth.

QUINTILIAN: And so, the realm of the divine wishes for us to know the truth?

AUGUSTINE: Correct. As Plato made known, truth is only known by divine means.

“Knowledge can only be bestowed by God, who alone is not bound by the language-knowledge dialect” (Bizzell et al., 2020, p. 464). His words are perfect. Your perfect Oration and Orator. Language is imperfect, but that does not stop God’s perfection (Matthew 5:48). Because of God’s Word in the Bible, that truth is made known to us through language.

QUINTILIAN: You mean to say that all truth, absolute and eternal, is made known to us by the gods in a written form?

AUGUSTINE: Some things within Scripture are shrouded in mystery (Bizzell et al., 2020, 462). But there is only One true God. Furthermore, I venture to say that the only Man who could meet your criteria for a perfect orator would be God Himself, as He is the only Man not bound by a language barrier that would cause Him to speak imperfectly.

QUINTILIAN: How could a god also be a man?

AUGUSTINE: But He is. God became a Man, Quintilian. When He came to Earth and dwelt among us as our Lord Jesus Christ, whose blood was spilt to save us from our sins (John 1:14). Through Him, we too can meet the criteria for being a good man able to speak truth (2 Corinthians 5:18).

QUINTILIAN: Was His blood spilt here in this colosseum? Is He one of your martyrs?

AUGUSTINE: I believe that Paul said those martyrs died *for* the Truth. The Truth of God’s Word. Christ is the greatest of those truths.

QUINTILIAN: And your answer to Paul’s question?

AUGUSTINE: Can man learn the Truth? Of course. By grace, the truth exists despite us, and man can learn it by reading the Word of God.

Paul's Conclusion

PAUL: You have spoken well, Augustine, but allow me to speak on the matter. The knowledge of the truth has been defined and understood in numerous ways throughout history, from thinker to thinker, to those who would rather not think. From ancient times, we have understood that Absolute Truth transcends our understanding, and we must therefore grope in the darkness and grasp at the wind in an attempt to understand some portion of it (Ecclesiastes 1:17). It is true that if the Source of Truth remains silent, feeble man cannot know it fully. But Truth, my dear companions, men now wiser than before, is not silent. That is not the nature of Truth. Truth longs to be known, because by His power, we can be made free (John 8:32).

One man says that truth can only be divinely known. Another states that men can come to probable truths through logic. Another believes that truth is the quality that makes a man good. Another believes that only one Man can truly be good.

Augustine, you asserted that people were martyred here because of the truth of God's Word. While that is true, we both know that the Man Jesus Christ is not merely the greatest of those truths. He *is* the Truth for which they gave their lives.

Therefore, I will tell you the answer: Truth *is* a Man.

From your stunned expressions I gather that you are pondering how a Man could be Truth. Well, Augustine was good enough to have already mentioned this Man by name. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. And He is not only a good Man made good by truth, nor simply a perfect

speaker of truth. He *is* the Truth (John 14:6). And He meets every criterion for truth that has been presented.

Plato, you believe that Absolute Truth can only be made available to man through divine means. Augustine seconded this, stating that God made Truth known through His Holy Word. Jesus Christ is that Word:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it... That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth... And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him. (John 1:1-18)

If Jesus is the Word who became flesh, and God's Word is truth, then truth is a Man. Therefore, as we have seen, not only can Truth be received through Divine means, but man can only reach the Divine through Truth. None of you presented the notion of man reaching to

Heaven – only what we could receive from the Heavens and how. But I tell you that Jesus, the Truth, is our advocate. He is the perfect Orator who is able to plead our case to the Almighty God (John 17:24-26). Only Absolute Truth could achieve this.

Aristotle, you rightly spoke that man can discover truth. Because Truth is a Man, and man is knowable by other men. His death, burial, and resurrection bear witness (1 Corinthians 15:3-5), and our faith is the evidence (Hebrews 11:1). Though I often reject using rhetoric or the wisdom of this world to plead the cause of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:19), many have credited me as a skilled rhetor in my faith (Kennedy, 1994, p. 9). I have written the logic, the self-evident facts. The Truth is not only known by Divine means, He is knowable by the human heart and mind (Matthew 22:37). Therefore, Aristotle, Christ meets your criteria for truth.

Quintilian spoke well in saying that it is a good man who most effectively conveys the truth. Jesus Christ was a perfect Man, and taught with more perfection than the lot of us combined. Not only that, but because of Christ, who is the Truth, any man who is in Christ can speak His truth. And as Augustine would agree, we should do so with eloquence, if possible (Bizzell et al., 2020, p. 515; Colossians 4:6).

Augustine spoke best in saying that the Truth comes from God. I say the Truth is God, and God became a Man.

In the beginning, in this place where those acquainted with Truth were martyred, I asked a question. I asked you if man can learn the truth, and by what means. Since I have now revealed that Truth is a Man, how can He then be learned?

If Truth itself is the teacher, we have but One Teacher of Truth - the Christ (Matthew 23:8-10). Man can learn the Truth, therefore, because man can know his Teacher. To know Jesus is to be acquainted with the Source of Truth – God (John 14:6). Because Christ is the Word, and

we are given the Word of God, we can learn the Truth by reading God's Word, as Augustine mentioned. And though many of you are lacking the Truth, and since many lack the understanding of the Word, a man can also learn the Truth from wiser men acquainted with Him.

Seek a wiser Man. My recommendation is the Truth Himself.

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