

5-6-2018

Good Rhetoric from the Classical to the Jesuits; or On αγαθός λόγος

Andrew J. Wells

College of the Holy Cross, ajwell17@g.holycross.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/criterion>

 Part of the [Classical Literature and Philology Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wells, Andrew J. (2018) "Good Rhetoric from the Classical to the Jesuits; or On αγαθός λόγος," *The Criterion*: Vol. 2018 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/criterion/vol2018/iss1/8>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Criterion by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.

Good Rhetoric from the Classical to the Jesuits; or, On ἀγαθός λόγος

A number of Greek philosophers attempted to assess rhetoric in hopes of understanding the difference between ἀγαθός λόγος "good speech" and κακός λόγος "bad speech." Today, I draw upon a few Greek philosophers to further pursue the question of how to classify rhetoric as ἀγαθός. As a student at the College of the Holy Cross, I am also aware of the long-standing tradition in Jesuit education concerning the pursuit of *Eloquentia Perfecta*. While understanding *Eloquentia Perfecta*, I hope to unlock the dichotomy between "ἀγαθός" and "κακός" rhetoric by analyzing separate schools of thought from Ancient Greek Philosophy and then applying their analysis to the Jesuit tradition. Socrates, who believed good rhetoric accesses truth and virtue, and Gorgias, who believed good rhetoric accesses the intended audience as a result of an effective rhetorician, are my main two classical rhetoricians. Jesuit tradition holds rhetoricians accountable for both eloquence and virtue, tending to rely upon Quintilian for their understanding of "good" rhetorical practice, especially when striving for *eloquentia perfecta*.

Eloquentia perfecta is the pursuit of morally beneficial rhetoric. For the Jesuits, speaking well and convincing the intended audience was not enough to qualify the rhetoric as ἀγαθός. Instead, ἀγαθός rhetoric had to be achieved through *eloquentia perfecta*, so rhetoric was only ἀγαθός if the rhetorician spoke for the betterment of society. Patricia Bizzell provides a concise definition of *eloquentia perfecta* in her essay "Historical Notes on Rhetoric In Jesuit Education," "(...) That blend of verbal facility and ethical action known in the tradition as *eloquentia perfecta*," (Gannett and Brereton 39). The function of a rhetorician from the Jesuit perspective is to be a benefactor for the community and pursue

ethical growth. To discern "ἀγαθός" from "κακός" in terms of rhetoric is to assess whether or not the rhetorician speaks for the benefit of morally improving one's own society, while considering the experience and betterment of others.

From the Jesuit perspective, it appears the moral virtue of rhetoric is most important for accessing whether it is ἀγαθός or κακός / "good" or "bad." At times, it is a shame the English language has become so simplified, and the question of "good" or "bad" can be read as: effective or ineffective, beneficial or maleficent, or even virtuous or sinful. It is useful to continue understanding this question of "good" or "bad" rhetoric as ἀγαθός or κακός, not only to bring the Greek philosophers to the present, but also to understand the question of "good" with virtuous perspective. Ἀγαθός in Ancient Greek meant "good" in terms of virtue and honor. Κακός meant "bad" in the sense of evil and sinful.

Steven Mailloux, in his article "*Eloquentia Perfecta* in American Jesuit Colleges" believes the Jesuits accessed their understanding of *eloquentia perfecta* on behalf of the ancient rhetoricians. For his own evidence, he cites Charles Coppens in *Oratorical Composition* which asserts Jesuit tradition and then draws upon a Latin phrase for confirmation without providing an author of the phrase:

He then cites Blair: "In order to be a truly eloquent or persuasive speaker, nothing is more necessary than to be a virtuous man. This was a favorable position among the ancient rhetoricians: *Non posse oratorem esse nisi virum bonum*—"That no one could be an orator except a good man." (Gannett and Brereton 169)

Blair provided this quote without mention of Quintilian, its originator, so that his intended audience would understand the Latin quote to encompass the majority of ancient rhetoricians. Quintilian delivered this quote with the values of Cicero in mind, and it is true that this standpoint aids Blair, Coppens, and Mailloux, but to say the ancient rhetoricians

mainly favored *oratore* "orator" and *virum bonum* "good man" as necessary equivalents might be a bit of a stretch.

Gorgias turns to the effect of "ἀγαθός λόγος" in his "Encomium of Helen" as a way to rhetorically defend Helen. In the "Encomium," as translated by George A. Kennedy and presented in *The Rhetorical Tradition* (RT), Gorgias defines the dangers of effective rhetoric, personifying rhetoric saying, "Speech is a powerful lord, which by means of the finest and most invisible body effects the divinest works: it can stop fear and banish grief and create joy and nurture pity," (Bizzell and Herzberg 45, sic). This translation elevates speech through the verb *effect*, as if Gorgias states that speech is in its finest form when it causes an impact upon the feelings of the subject. According to Gorgias, speech and rhetoric may or may not be morally good, or even come from a *virum bonum*, but it is ἀγαθός if it is effective. Later in the "Encomium," Gorgias further defines the effect of speech explicitly: "The effect of speech upon the condition of the soul is comparable to the power of drugs over the nature of bodies," (Bizzell and Herzberg 46). In Kennedy's translation, he chooses to pair drugs and nature, which Gorgias may have well intended. The pairing between drugs and nature implies that effective speech has the ability to make humans lose control of their "bodies" and serves as a stated consequence of ἀγαθός λόγος.

As I build upon Gorgias in pursuit to access ἀγαθός λόγος, it is necessary to relate the tradition of defining effective speech for the ancients as ἔπεα πτερόεντα, meaning "winged-words." Often stated in the *Odyssey* by the Homeric Tradition, ἔπεα πτερόεντα is the idiomatic understanding of being able to swiftly reach the intended audience. Often a character of the *Odyssey* will have his speech described as ἔπεα πτερόεντα if he is able to influence his audience, and if he is unable, his words are described as "unwinged." If a

rhetorician is to be successful and achieve the consequence of speech Gorgias details, then the rhetorician must be able to put wings on his words. It is of no matter whether he delivers his words poetically, factually, emotionally, or blatantly, but more a matter concerning that if the rhetorician reaches his audience, then he has produced *ἀγαθός λόγος*.

But the Jesuits, in their pursuit of *eloquentia perfecta*, would hold the "Enconium of Helen" at arm's length, for words might have wings, but this by no means establishes these words as "*ἀγαθός*." To pursue *eloquentia perfecta*, the rhetorician must be in continual reflection over one's impact, striving for virtuous effect and moral improvement. In Paul Ranieri's article "Standing the Test of Time: Liberal Education in a Jesuit Tradition," the process of obtaining *ἀγαθός λόγος* and finding *eloquentia perfecta* explicitly involves continual reflection as he reflects on his Jesuit education:

Looking back, I realize that we addressed little in the way of rhetoric or even style, but clearly we came to value critical thinking continual reflection, and an essential need to act on our values, to tie thought to speech to act (think→say→do). (Gannett and Brereton 263)

Ranieri repeats value, first as a verb and again as a noun in principle. It is the pursuit of high moral value and the intention of influencing the audience with high moral values that encompasses *eloquentia perfecta*, and in hand achieves *ἀγαθός λόγος*. The Jesuits are not unaware of Gorgias' presented consequences of speech, and therefore they teach that speaking mindlessly or being unaware of impact is to do harm to an audience, presenting *κακός λόγος*.

In understanding the Jesuit perspective of good rhetoric, surely Quintilian lies at the heart of *eloquentia perfecta* and the pursuit of *ἀγαθός λόγος*, especially when considering *Non posse oratorem esse nisi virum bonum*. Although, considering continual reflection and

ethical value at the center of *eloquentia perfecta*, it would appear Socrates holds the essence of good rhetoric dearest to him. Socrates, as presented by Plato, regularly asserts the importance of continual reflection when he outlines the problems that arise when one speaks about what they do not know. Socrates also presents proper rhetoric and persuasion as the pursuit of "ἀρετή" which means "excellence" or "virtue" or even "truth." It is the benefit of the soul and seeking ἀρετή that a rhetorician must conduct his speech and act of persuasion. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg analyze Socrates's beliefs on Rhetoric in *The Rhetorical Tradition* to say:

To influence the soul, the rhetor must know the truth. To know the truth, the rhetor must first make distinctions among things, defining his terms carefully—that is, he must analyze—and then he must be able to recombine his ideas in an organic form, in which each part is necessarily linked to what comes before and after—that is, he must synthesize. Thinking and speaking seem to be interrelated here for Socrates. (Bizzell and Herzberg 85)

In Bizzell and Herzberg's analysis of Socrates, his connection with Jesuit rhetoric becomes clear, since Socrates is an advocate for think→say→do. Ἀγαθός λόγος is not simply pronouncing words elegantly, or even placing wings on words to reach the intended audience; but rather, ἀγαθός λόγος is composed by continual reflection and awareness of ἀρετή within the speech.

The pursuit of ἀρετή is often akin to rhetoric, for Socrates often asserts that the tradition of rhetoric is not only to pronounce the truth, but to access truth and virtue. In Plato's *Gorgias*, the two main classical rhetoricians I have focused upon come together in a discussion of rhetoric. In this rhetorical duel, Socrates asserts the definition of rhetoric a number of times, presenting the different perspectives he holds on defining rhetoric. Here, Socrates appeals to ἀρετή in *Gorgias*, saying, as translated by W.R.M. Lamb:

Then listen, Gorgias: I, let me assure you, for so I persuade myself—if ever there was a man who debated with another from a desire of knowing the truth of the subject discussed, I am such a man; and so, I trust, are you.
(Bizzell and Herzberg 91)

Gorgias does not refute this claim and instead chooses to prepare himself for the following argument. Socrates' point of this assertion is to reveal Gorgias as a rhetor interested in ἀρετή, while Gorgias believes rhetoric deals more with ἔπεα πτερόεντα. Socrates reveals his own rhetoric as a pursuit of ἀρετή rather than convincing the intended audience, but to Gorgias, as he put forth in the "Enconium of Helen," rhetoric is that of "effects [on] divinest works."

The question of ἀγαθός λόγος must arise again, for if rhetoric is the art of persuasion according to Gorgias, and rhetoric is the pursuit of ἀρετή according to Socrates, then must the ability to influence the intended audience to hear the rhetoric as truth define ἀγαθός λόγος? Yes, in fact, for imbedded in rhetoric from both Socrates' and Gorgias' point of view, is that of the intended audience. Socrates asserts that rhetoric is the process of finding the truth presumably in dialogue with an opponent, and Gorgias believes ἀγαθός λόγος can influence an intended audience as drugs over the body; therefore ἀγαθός λόγος is dependent upon the intended audience finding the words truthful.

Gorgias would be more inclined to agree with this standpoint since he believes rhetoric is the art of persuasion. Socrates would more likely hold this assertion at a distance, because he believes continual reflection is necessary for obtaining the truth. But if the rhetorician can maintain continual reflection, and if the rhetorician believes what he is saying to be for the betterment of society (ἀρετή), and if the audience receives the rhetoric as true, then I believe the rhetorician has achieved ἀγαθός λόγος. Key here in accessing the Jesuits' belief in "good" rhetoric is yet again the idea that the orator must be a virum

bonum. And so again, I assert that if the orator believes what he says is true and morally righteous, then he would be speaking with the intent of ἀρετή.

One might bring the popular examples of leaders who were obviously morally debased as counterexamples. An applicable case study would be Adolf Hitler of Germany, who many have regarded as effective in the art of persuasion, yet would agree that he was morally debased. Most would agree Hitler should not be considered *virum bonum*; however, many hold this belief because Hitler did not coincide with the moral values of overall society. Hitler's rhetoric is not immediately classifiable as κακός λόγος, for when we perceive Hitler's rhetoric from the viewpoint of the Nazi's, Hitler held his own society's interest above that of the rest of the world.

The unnamed author of *Dissoi Logoi* allows me to access this argument, since he puts forth the dichotomy on what is "good and bad." From the start of his essay he says, as translated by T.M. Robinson, "some say that what is good and what is bad are two different things, others that they are the same thing, and that the same thing is good for some but bad for others, or at one time good and at another time bad for the same person," (Bizzell and Herzberg 48). In this argument, the concept of perspective becomes the central decider for the difference between ἀγαθός and what is κακός. The unnamed author lists several examples, one most applicable to my proposal of Hitler is "The capture of Troy was good for the Achaeans, but bad for the Trojans," (Bizzell and Herzberg 49).

From the Jesuit belief, to only judge what is ἀγαθός based upon our own perspective without considering the experiences and beliefs of others would not be a pursuit of *eloquentia perfecta*. Therefore, I return to my assertion that ἀγαθός λόγος is up to whether the orator believes what he is saying to be true. There is no way to know for certain if Hitler

truly believed he was speaking the truth to his intended audience, and therefore I will not propose Hitler as an example of ἀγαθός λόγος, but neither can one assert that he is of κακός λόγος.

As a student of Jesuit education, the understanding of both effective rhetoric and good rhetoric continues to fall under the moral motivation of the orator. The continual reflection of (think→say→do) can help an orator remain in pursuit of ἀρετή. It is in the self-confirmed belief of ἀρετή and ability to place wings on the words sent to the intended audience that comes together to create what I confirm as ἀγαθός λόγος or "good" rhetoric.

Works Cited:

- Bizzell, Patricia and Bruce Herzberg. *The Rhetorical Tradition*. Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 2001.
- Gannett, Cinthia and John C. Brereton, editors. *Traditions of Eloquence: The Jesuits and Modern Rhetorical Studies*. Fordham University Press, 2016.