

Probability and Truth In Aristotle's Doctrine of the Enthymeme

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ABSTRACT

In Aristotle's The "Art" of Rhetoric, the basis of rhetoric is the enthymeme and the heart of the enthymeme is a Greek word, *endoxa* [ενδοξα]. This essay suggests a new consideration of the word as meaning "that which is most probably true" instead of "probability." The difference in meaning has significant implications in our discipline's understanding of the enthymeme and its role in persuasion.

Probability and Truth

In Aristotle's Doctrine of the Enthymeme

It is obvious, therefore, that a system arranged according to the rules of art is only concerned with proofs; that proof is a sort of demonstration, since we are most strongly convinced when we suppose anything to have been demonstrated; that rhetorical demonstration is an enthymeme, which, generally speaking, is the strongest of rhetorical proofs.... For, in fact, the true and that which resembles it come under the purview of the same faculty, and at the same time men have a sufficient natural capacity for the truth and indeed in most cases attain to it; wherefore one who divines well in regard to the truth will also be able to divine well in regard to probabilities. (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355: 5-15, trans. Freese, 1959)

Rhetoric has long labored under the idea that its subject matter is “drawn, not from universal principles belonging to a particular science, but from probabilities in the sphere of human affairs” (Hunt 1925, 50). The preceding quote from Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric* [Τεχνῆς Ρητορικῆς] seems to draw a clear distinction between discerning truth and probabilities, as if they were of two kinds, or opposites. At the heart of Aristotle’s rhetoric is the enthymeme and at the heart of the enthymeme is the notion that it deals with probabilities. I will suggest in this essay that the Greek word *endoxa* [ἐνδοξά] that was commonly translated “probability” would be better translated as “that which is most probably true.” I do not presume to have come across the true meaning of the word as Aristotle intended, but I do propose that in order to understand the

enthymeme, we must first understand what Aristotle meant by the term *endoxa* [ενδοξα] and its relationship to *alethes* [αληθεις] or truth.

For a moment let us return to the historical context in which Aristotle was observing and describing both rhetoric and science. The law courts were arguing cases and the legislative assemblies were debating issues. A law court, for example, might debate whether Demetrius stole a cow belonging to Archippus. The legislature might be debating a new tax to fund an aqueduct for the city. In the city square, an orator may be extolling the recent victory of a general. In all of these cases there is not a certain or clearly observable truth, *alethes*, to be determined. The jury will never know with absolute certainty the truth of the cow's owner. They can only decide, with as much certainty as possible, based on the available evidence, who is most probably the true owner of the cow. The benefit of the new aqueduct cannot be ascertained with certainty until it is built, but wise legislators can conclude that it will most probably be beneficial. The citizens in the square may not have been at the battle but may be persuaded that the general was most probably a brilliant tactician and worthy of honor, even posthumously.

Contrast these examples with what Aristotle would have seen as the certain truth, *alethes*, of mathematics or biology. The degree of an angle can be ascertained with far more certainty than the ownership of a cow or the benefit of an aqueduct. The parts of a plant or animal can be identified and named without the work of a jury or legislature. *Alethes* is the province of science and the syllogism, while enthymeme is used by rhetoric and its province is *endoxa*. For Aristotle observed that an informed, knowledgeable, learned individual can be facile in making distinctions between the *alethes* of science (the degree of an angle) and the *endoxa* of rhetoric (who stole the cow).

The translation of the word *endoxa* as “probability” was done by W. Rhys Roberts, in the 20s and is a commonly quoted version (Bizzel and Herzberg 1990). In the Loeb edition of Rhetoric (Freese, 1959) also translated word *endoxa* as “probability,” but in his own footnote, Freese described it as literally meaning, “resting on opinion.” What is the connection between the notions of opinion and probability? The statistical concept of probability encompasses the odds that a given outcome will occur. Thus, by this line of logic, it would lead us to believe that rhetoric deals with the probability that a thesis is true or false (Demetres stole the cow) or the probability that a certain event will occur, given particular criteria (a well constructed aqueduct will be beneficial). The certainty of the past or future events is something that must be decided and not merely observed as one would observe the degree of an angle. The decision is made by people, and is in the minds of the people, not in the observable phenomenon therefore it is closer to “opinion” than observable fact. But the word “opinion” is far less perspicuous when related to the context of the original Greek. The context indicates Aristotle meant something more certain than “mere opinion” or *doxa* [δοξα].

So we can see that there is more to *endoxa* than its absolutely literal meaning of “resting on opinion.” George Kennedy, a prominent classical scholar, more recently translated the passage differently than Roberts or Freese.

...for it belongs to the same capacity both to see the true and [to see] what resembles the true, and at the same time humans have a natural disposition for the true and to a large extent hit on the truth; thus an ability to aim at commonly held opinions [*endoxa*] is a characteristic of one who also has a

similar ability to regard the truth. (Kennedy 1991, 33; brackets in original text)

Here we can see Kennedy translated *endoxa* not as “probabilities” but as “commonly held opinion.” His own footnote expressed frustration with this passage, just as Freese did.

He based his decision for the translation of *endoxa* on the literal translation of enthymeme as “held in the mind,” concluding that opinion was held in the mind too. But note, we do not translate enthymeme literally into English, for there is no adequate counterpart, and in Kennedy’s text he retained the Greek for several terms including *endoxa*.

There is a strong precedence for Kennedy’s decision. The word *endoxa* has the same root as the word *doxa*, which means “opinion” or “mere opinion.” The prefix “en-” [εν–] can mean “in” or possibly “before” (as in appearing before, in front of, a king) so *endoxa* literally could mean “in opinion.” Frederick Solmsen dealt with the relationship between the words *doxa* [δοξα] and *endoxa* (1968, 68). He considered *doxa*, as it was used by Plato and Aristotle, to mean opinion. He also said that it was hard to translate *endoxa*, but he agreed that Aristotle seemed to use it in conjunction with *alethes* [αληθες] or truth. It is clear from the passage as translated by Kennedy, that the capacity of a person to discern between *alethes* and *endoxa* is alike in the nature of that person, so the two are related not opposing. The English terms “truth” and “opinion” could connote an opposition, such as “fact” versus “opinion” and a “fact” is a “truth.” But this sense of opposition, or versus, is clearly not in the context of the passage. Now we may look to other authors and see how the term was used.

Liddel and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon (1953) traced the meaning of *endoxa* over the years. In the writing of Xenophon it meant "famous in a thing." Demosthenes used it to mean "by common opinion, probable." Aeschines used it to mean "glorious." Others used it the mean "public acclaim." By the time of the writing of the New Testament the word *endoxos* [ενδοξος] had come to mean "honored, notable," or "memorable" (Perschbacher 1990, 140). We can see the connection of "honored" to "famous in a thing" or "glorious" (literally "in glory"). In the same way, we can see that "common opinion" can relate to "public acclaim." But we do not see a sense of probabilities as opposed to certainties.

Clearly, the etymology of the word *endoxa* did not grow to "honored" by way of a connotation of statistical probability. Kennedy translated *endoxa* as "commonly held opinion", and the context treats it as akin to truth, a kind of rhetorical truth, as accepted by learned and wise individuals, who have a capacity for discerning both *alethes* and *endoxa*. The connection is now apparent. The conclusion of the wise individuals, thus, becomes a source of honor. Return to our example. In the law court, the winner of the case was honored with a victory. Archippus got the cow back. The supporters of the legislation were honored with a new aqueduct. The general was honored by the ceremonial speech. Thus we can see the logical development of the meaning of *endoxa*, commonly held opinion brought honor and glory and became a commonly held truth.

Let us now attend to Aristotle's concept of truth, *alethes*. In the Rhetoric he says, "Men have a sufficient natural capacity for the truth" (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355: 15, trans. Freese). However, Aristotle was realistic in his understanding of the courts and the legislature, when he explains that the truth of who committed an offense or what

legislation will truly achieve the desired ends is not the same as the truth in an objective or scientific sense. Legislators and courts used rhetoric to establish the truth and falsity of past events and future policy.

The statement “the true and that which resembles it come under the purview of the same faculty,” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355:15, trans. Freese) indicates a differentiation between the certainly true, *alethes* and a truth that “resembles” it. If one thing resembles another then it appears to be the same or similar so we could consider this phrase as “apparent truth,” or as Kennedy translates it as that which “resembles the true,” (1991, 33). This can give us an important clue to the most accurate contextual meaning of *endoxa*. But, first, we must also consider how Aristotle uses the term *endoxa* in Topics:

Things are true and primary when they are persuasive through themselves, not through other things; for in the case of scientific principles there is no need to seek the answer to *why*, but each of the first principles is persuasive in and by itself. Generally accepted opinions [*endoxa*], on the other hand, are those that seem right to all people or most people or the wise – and in the latter case all the wise or most of them or those best known and generally accepted as authorities [*endoxoi*]. (Kennedy 1991, 290)

In human affairs the learned and wise can make decisions based on the available evidence, or that which is apparent. Tomorrow new evidence may appear that contradicts their decision, but they make the best judgement they can. They are not deciding what is objectively true, *alethes*, but what is most probably true, *endoxa*, and that decision is the “generally accepted opinion.” Thus a paraphrase of the last sentence would be “That

which is most probably true [*endoxa*] is that which is accurate to the wise or authorities on the matter.”

Aristotle is optimistic in his view of the ability of the wise to discern the truth: “and at the same time men have a sufficient natural capacity for the truth and indeed in most cases attain to it” (Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1355: 15, trans. Freese). Unlike Plato, Aristotle trusted the informed opinion of humans, and admitted their capacity to know the truth. As a skilled observer, Aristotle must have seen many decisions by the courts and the legislatures, and then assessed their results, in order to come to the conclusion that their decision making ability was good enough to get at the truth. It earned his confidence in that it was usually proven correct. When a decision seemed incorrect, Aristotle blamed the orator, “Rhetoric is useful, because the true and the just are naturally superior to their opposites, so that, if decisions are improperly made, they must owe their defeat to their own advocates; which is reprehensible” (Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1355: 20, trans. Freese).

Aristotle demonstrated the relationship between rhetoric and the truth. Rhetoric serves the important function of allowing truth and justice to evidence themselves in human affairs. If there is a miscarriage of justice, it is due to the ineptness of the orators and not the truth itself, for that which is most probably true can be apprehended by the learned and wise when presented equally with that which is most probably not true. When truth and untruth are weighed by a legislative or judicial body, and the skill of the orators is relatively equal, then the truth should naturally be the result of the rhetoric. The learned opinion of the wise, based on their ability to discern the truth, has exercised itself in the presence of rhetoric, the means is the enthymeme and the basis is *endoxa*.

So now our discussion has examined *endoxa* and truth, *alethes*. Considering both literal and contextual cues, we can see that *endoxa* is more accurately understood to mean “that which is most probably true.” Now the issue becomes, what does this mean to our understanding of the enthymeme? Let us look at some of the interpretations of the enthymeme, and examine them in the light of our understanding of *endoxa*.

In spite of the voluminous discussion on the enthymeme, and variety of disparate definitions (Golden et.al. 2000, 30), Aristotle knew exactly what he meant:

It is obvious, therefore, that a system arranged according to the rules of art is only concerned with proofs; that proof is a sort of demonstration, since we are most strongly convinced when we suppose anything to have been demonstrated; that rhetorical demonstration is an enthymeme, which, generally speaking, is the strongest of rhetorical proofs; and, lastly, that the enthymeme is a kind of syllogism. (Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1355, 5, trans. Freese)

“Rhetorical demonstration” is an enthymeme and must be based on reasoning and the truth as we have already discussed it. *Endoxa* is not divorced from the logic of a syllogism, but is related to it in “kind.” Later in the Topics, Aristotle describes the syllogism as being part of the reasoning process and necessary to dialectic in that the premises must be first laid down in order for a discussion of opinion to work towards the truth (Kennedy 1991, 290).

Few of the definitions and descriptions of an enthymeme in the literature address the concept of rhetorical demonstration. Historically, most scholars of rhetoric appeared to focus on form and function of the use of the enthymeme.

Everett Lee Hunt described the enthymeme as “a rhetorical syllogism; that is, a syllogism drawn, not from universal principles belonging to a particular science, but from probabilities in the sphere of human affairs” (1925, 50). He seems to have considered in his definition translation of *endoxa*, as “probability” rather than the more literal “generally accepted opinion.” He could have said “the generally accepted opinion in the sphere of human affairs.” But by using “probabilities” Hunt seems to prejudice rhetoric as more distant from certain truth than even a consensus truth, which would be indicated by ‘generally accepted opinion.’ But Aristotle does not share such prejudice and indicates that rhetoric has a role to be in discerning truth: “Rhetoric is useful, because the true and the just are naturally superior to their opposites, so that if decisions are improperly made, they must owe their defeat to their own advocates” (Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1355: 20, trans. Freese). Truth is a part of human affairs, and when properly presented rhetorically, it will be superior to falsehood.

Lane Cooper focused on the practical, doing justice to the practical philosophy of Aristotle, and defines the enthymeme as “The arguments good speakers actually use in persuasion” (1932, xxvii). He seemed to look at the enthymeme’s relationship to other arguments, proofs and the syllogism. but he does not address the idea that rhetoric plays a role in determining the truth through a rhetorical proof which is the enthymeme. He told how it is used and where it is found, but does not explain its nature, which, as we have seen, is based in *endoxa*.

Charles S. Baldwin focused on the form of the enthymeme as “concrete proof, proof applicable to human affairs, such argument as is actually available in current discussions” (1924, 9). He dealt with the elements of proof and seemed to indirectly

suggest the concept of *endoxa* when he mentioned human affairs and current discussions. He does not have a grasp on the connection between *alethes* and *endoxa*, but rightly put the nature of the enthymeme in the sphere of public knowledge. He made the distinction between a syllogism and enthymeme too rigid. Like many scholars, he tried to understand the enthymeme by looking first at the syllogism, of which enthymeme is a kind. But in doing so, the scholars tended to define enthymeme in terms of syllogism, and not in terms of proof, demonstration and truth. This yielded a view based on structure and function, which is how the enthymeme differs from the syllogism, but does not explain its nature as a rhetorical proof, which is explained by our understanding of *endoxa*.

Edward Cope and Thomas DeQuincey both focused on probability and described a syllogism as being based on certainty and the enthymeme on probability. DeQuincey calls the nature of the enthymeme as “simply probable, and drawn from the province of opinion” (1890, 90). But their conclusion is not consistent with Aristotle’s discussion of how we come to know and deal with truth. Aristotle himself described enthymemes that dealt with certainty. Mere opinion, or *doxa*, is distinctly different for Aristotle than the learned opinion of *endoxa*.

James McBurney said the enthymeme is drawn from “probabilities, signs (certain and fallible) and examples” (1936, 58). He also described the enthymeme as lacking formal validity, in that it did not have the form of a syllogism. Aristotle described the enthymeme as a “kind” of syllogism, but not as separate and distinct from a syllogism. Focusing on the audience, Aristotle saw some arguments and elements in a syllogism are accepted as true by the audience, and since rhetoric does not have the exchange that

dialectic does, the enthymeme is a demonstration of an argument or logic, not the enjoining in a logical process of dialectic. Thus McBurney made the same mistake as Cope and DeQuincey in focusing on the difference between the syllogism and the enthymeme, rather than looking at *alethes* and *endoxa*.

More recently Lloyd Bitzer analyzed several of these definitions and then focused on the differences between the demonstrative and dialectical-rhetorical syllogisms. The former must have premises laid down and the latter must begin with premises held by the audience: “because persuasion cannot take place unless the audience views a conclusion as required by the premises it subscribes to” (1959, 405). Bitzer was closing in on the difference in interpreting *endoxa* as the accepted probable truth. And he accounted for the nature of proof in the enthymeme, in order to prove or demonstrate a truth before an audience, one can build on what they generally hold to be true: *endoxa*.

Bitzer explained that enthymemes “occur only when speaker and audience jointly produce them. Because they are jointly produced, enthymemes intimately unite speaker and audience and provide the strongest possible proofs” (1959, 408). Bitzer defined the enthymeme as “a syllogism based on probabilities, signs, and examples, whose function is rhetorical persuasion. Its successful construction is accomplished through the joint efforts of speaker and audience, and this is its essential character” (1959, 408). This definition accounted for the nature of demonstration and proof, as Aristotle included in his earlier description of the enthymeme. He also addressed the nature of the *endoxa* and that which the audience holds as true.

Bitzer did justice to Aristotle’s use of *endoxa* in his definition of the enthymeme. He accounted for its power in persuasion. It draws its power from the shared beliefs of

the learned public. Like the syllogism it has premises, but what the audience already accepts does not necessarily need to be stated by the orator to develop the reasoning in a syllogism. Since the proof is already a part of the audience, the rhetorical demonstration of the proof is much stronger than that of dialectic, where the premises are jointly laid down and then accepted or rejected.

James Raymond accepted Bitzer's definition of the enthymeme, but he more directly dealt with Aristotle's view of truth and its relationship to the enthymeme: "Aristotle assumed that there was a truth to be discovered through rhetoric, even though it could not be discovered with the certitude of science" (1984, 149). Aristotle said that not only do people have a capacity for the truth, but in rhetoric "that which is true and better is naturally always easier to prove and more likely to persuade" (Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1355: 20, trans. Freese).

The Rhetoric of Western Thought continued in the traditional misrepresentation of *endoxa* as probability. "The enthymeme deals with probable knowledge, whereas the syllogism is concerned with scientific truths" (Golden et.al. 2000, 30). But they have rightly focused on the relationship of *alethes* and *endoxa* rather than the functional difference between the syllogism and the enthymeme.

By understanding the context and connotation of the word, *endoxa*, we can better understand the power of the enthymeme. The enthymeme is not based on probability. The etymology of the word clearly precludes an interpretation of *endoxa* as some form of statistical probability. We have seen that in the context of Rhetoric, Aristotle did not oppose truth with probability, but he connected certain truth with most probable truth. They are two kinds, or variations, of the same thing, not two opposite things.

From our examination of some viewpoints on the enthymeme, we can see that a focus on function of the enthymeme has propagated the misunderstanding. The enthymeme draws its persuasive power from the involvement of the audience in the rhetorical demonstration. They insert their own feelings, attitudes and beliefs as the orator presents the case. They come to a conclusion as to the whether or not what the orator is saying is probably true, based on what they hear, and what they already hold to be true. The enthymeme is not less than a syllogism, but it is a kind of syllogism based on that which is most probably true for those participating in the enthymeme.

So let us return to part of the quote from the Freese translation of Aristotle's Rhetoric that started this essay:

And at the same time men have a sufficient natural capacity for the truth and indeed in most cases attain to it; wherefore one who divines well in regard to the truth will also be able to divine well in regard to probabilities. (1355: 5-15, 1959)

And so we might better understand Aristotle's description in the following paraphrase, which includes our understanding of *endoxa*:

At the same time humans have a natural disposition for the truth and to a large extent hit on the truth; thus an ability to discern that which is most certainly true is a characteristic of one who also has a similar ability to regard that which is most probably true.

Thus we can conclude there the distinction between *alethes* and *endoxa* is not one of type but of degree. They both deal with the truth. One is the certain truth of the directly observable object, like a mathematical equation or geometry proof. The other is the probable truth of something in the past, like the owner of a cow is a civil dispute, or the

probable truth of a course of action in the legislature. It is not in the scope of this essay to plumb the depths of the nature of truth, but it does defend the notion that the Aristotle draws a connection between two variations of truth: That which is most certainly true, and that which is more probably true. It is the difference between the truth found in mathematics which asks a question like: “What is 2+2?” And a question of the truth found in the law courts which asks a different question like: “Who stole the cow?” And a question of the legislature which asks a different questions like: “Should we build an aqueduct?” These questions each have a true answer, one certainly true and the others are probably tre.

The implication is that the age old distinction between rhetoric and science, which usually denigrates rhetoric, does not find a warrant in Aristotle’s Rhetoric.

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