Aristotle's Rhetoric

Bro. David Freeman

The seven liberal arts and sciences; Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy which are known as the Quadrivium (the road of four paths) and Rhetoric, Logic, Grammar the Trivium (the road of three paths) are cornerstones in our focus of education.   Once believed to be the sum of education and referred to in the writings of Plato, geometry is a foundation of our Craft, music and mathematics are connected through numbers such as rhythm and tempo and astronomy provides many of our symbols. Logic allows us to make true inferences from what we hear or read and grammar is the entire system and structure of language.

Aristotle declares the union of fact with emotion for the purpose of persuading an individual to a particular point of view is Rhetoric's foundation. He emphasizes Rhetoric provides a platform for things that are true and just to prevail over things which are untrue and unjust. The singular point in Rhetoric is its purpose to discuss truth and good.

Aristotle developed Rhetoric in 350 BCE 2,058 years before the founding of the bureaucracy of our Craft, yet men still make the same fatal errors in their discourse that prompted Aristotle to write his treaties. Since Aristotle's discovery of the error which suggested his solution, learned men of language have created 48 categories with their subcategories of error in Rhetorical discourse. These are known as the fallacies of the science of Rhetoric.

These fallacies are too many to discuss in this short paper. However, there are many papers and books written about Rhetoric that would be worth the time and effort if the reader is interested in pursuing the topic. The Art of Rhetoric (Penguin Classics) by Aristotle which launched Rhetoric as a science and The Essential Guide to Rhetoric by William M. Keith and Christian O. Lundberg are just two examples.   Fallacies of appeal to fear, or appeal to flattery are so obvious as not to warrant discussion. The fallacy that first stimulated Aristotle to develop Rhetoric and which is still being exploited in the present day in attempts to persuade individuals is the factual error fallacy. In our millennium it usually starts with the phrase "I read on the internet" or "in the newspaper" or "the WM said", or the "GM said" or someone in supposed authority with assumed knowledge said.

We do not know unless we research a statement that it is a fact. Because one of our WM's or former WM's or GM's or former GM's or Brother, friend, spouse or colleague provides an opinion or report, even though it may be published in a Newspaper, on the internet, discussed in Lodge or even is part of a learned article does not mean it is creditable. It is our responsibility to ensure anything we pass on is based on fact.

It is objectionable to reiterate what has been heard before researching its credibility even if it is restated to those who can or should be able to discern its trustworthiness. It is even less agreeable if a distortion is given substance based on our own status or we repeat it in a Rhetorical statement and a Brother changes their actions, behaviour or opinion based on the falsehood. We must never make people believe what is erroneous.

William Stern in 1902 is credited with defining "misinformation" as simply false information and "disinformation" as deliberately false information both of which Stern labeled rumours. Misinformation or disinformation passed on as fact coupled with emotion for the purpose of persuading an individual to a particular point of view or action is Rhetoric. But not Rhetoric as Aristotle intended.

Authentic Rhetoric as advanced by Aristotle's doctrine, is a manner of speech utilizing emotion and truth for the proliferation of factual knowledge. To use Rhetoric for the purpose that Aristotle intended we must have knowledge of the 48 categories of fallacies, so we do not contribute to the misleading of our Brethren or our society. Without this knowledge we do harm contrary to our ancient landmarks particularly as delineated by our Brother Anderson.

Aristotle designed rhetoric as an instrument of persuasion for the betterment of culture and truth. Today it still has this purpose and as men of honour we must always use Rhetoric only for this purpose. However, because Rhetoric is used by advertisers, politicians, criminals, children, spouses, and friends and yes even some Brethren to manipulate individuals, as Men and Freemason's we must remain continually conscious of the boundaries of Aristotle's Rhetoric to gird ourselves against either being taken in by false Rhetoric or using false Rhetoric for our own purposes.

1. Never accept a statement of supposed fact which you have not verified.

2. When the speaker is emotional or touches our emotion know to be cautious. What is really the agenda and how will it affect our decision making, behaviour and thought patterns.

3. Do not get habituated by the status of the speaker, the show that he puts on or his suggested credibility for the subject. Since he has great success in one or another topic does not mean he has any greater knowledge in the subject under discussion.

A Freemason to be consistent with the Ancient Charges, and his obligations to the Craft must always avoid giving a fact when it has not been verified as a fact or using false reasoning to persuade a Brother. He must when preparing to make a Rhetorical statement ask himself "Are these true facts I am disseminating?" and "Is the focus of the emotions I am exhibiting accurate?"

When both these trials indicate the proposed Rhetoric is an instrument of persuasion for the betterment of society, truth and integrity it is Authentic Rhetoric and the speaker is a genuine Aristotelian empiricist, a mature Brother in the Craft and a credit to Aristotle's work.

Rhetoric is a science by which a man can assess what he is told and prevent himself from being manipulated with false statements and emotions. Rhetoric is also an art by which a man can defend his ideas, beliefs, and philosophy with speech and reason persuading others utilizing truth to the benefit of mankind.