Thank You for Arguing:

What Aristotle, Lincoln and Homer Simpson Can Teach Us About the Art of Persuasion

Author: Jay Heinrichs

One of my father’s favorite games when my siblings and I were young was to debate us. What made it a game is that he would switch sides in the middle of the argument, baffling us into then arguing the opposite of our original position. He considered it quite entertaining. I am sure you can imagine our frustration, but it had a positive side. I became quite good at making arguments to support my opinions. However, having never studied rhetoric formally, I thought it would be interesting to read “Thank You for Arguing: What Aristotle, Lincoln and Homer Simpson Can Teach Us About the Art of Persuasion” by Jay Heinrichs. I chose the updated and revised version that was printed in 2013.

Book Summary

Heinrichs sets the tone for his discourse on rhetoric by describing an argument between himself and his son over who used the last of a toothpaste tube. Heinrichs asks who used up the last of the toothpaste and his son responds that it doesn’t matter who used it, but asks rather how will they avoid this situation in the future. Heinrichs concedes that his son is right and then the son fetches a new tube of toothpaste without further adieu. This scenario describes what is often misunderstood about rhetoric. The goal is to persuade and drive to action, not to win. Often, people debating an issue assume that winning means not only persuading the listener, but also being known as the ‘winner’ of the argument. This book opens with explaining the premise that the goal is to persuade and that tools like concession are often critical to achieving rhetorical success. That success is defined by motivating the audience to action.
The author divides the art of rhetoric into three main sections: offence, defense and advanced tools and highlights specific tools in each section. He starts by defining the three main types of argument defined by Aristotle: ethos, pathos and logos. (Heinrichs, 2013, pp. 55-56) Putting this in more modern terms, ethos is the argument by character, pathos is argument by emotion, and logos is argument by logic. Each of these types of argument are meant to build common ground between the orator and the audience so that the audience is inclined to agree with the orator and to take his suggested course of action.

Some ethos tools that Heinrichs describes are:

- Decorum – fit in with the audience’s expectation of character and behavior
- Values – embody the values of the audience
- Practical wisdom – show that you have experience and be moderate

Some pathos tools that Heinrichs describes are:

- Sympathy – have concern for the audience and their experience
- Volume – use tone and volume to convey emotion
- Passive voice – place the action away from the actor to direct anger away

Some logos tools that Heinrichs describes are:

- Deduction – use logic to draw conclusions from general principles
- Concession – give way to gain ground
- Framing – define the argument to your advantage

The author goes into considerable detail in defining each of the tools mentioned, and gives some pop culture and historical examples to demonstrate the use and utility of each. In
addition, he has a summary section at the end of the book to restate this set of tools and has a
glossary section of the technical terms, many of which are from the Latin.

The sections on offense demonstrate how to use these tools as a persuader and the
sections on defense demonstrate how to recognize these tools in use. Heinrichs considers these
tools rhetorical tips and tricks that are useful for both the persuader and the audience. Clearly we
are either persuader or audience in many situations and flip between these roles often.

Leadership

The best lesson on leadership to be learned from this book is that persuasion is an art that
is extremely useful in building consensus and motivating people to action. I am often astonished
by the brute-force arguments that are the common means of so-called debate in American society
today. If one argues loudly enough or long enough, the audience may just give in because they
are sick of hearing the voice or the vehement argument. Heinrichs demonstrates that the ancient
philosophers clearly understood that exactly the opposite is true. Subtlety is far more powerful
as a rhetorical tool than a loud volume and brute strength.

The author concludes the book by arguing that the loss of the liberal arts education and
the lack of study of rhetoric in particular have made politics in the United States of America
today an intractable mess. He argues that bringing back an education in rhetoric would vastly
improve not only our political system, but also makes us less susceptible consumers since we
would be better able to recognize rhetorical tricks when we see them and make our own
rhetorical arguments. (Heinrichs, 2013, p. 351) I will certainly be more aware of the use of
rhetorical tools and tricks after reading this book and will try to employ them better myself.

Conclusion
The biggest disagreement I have with this book is the subject of character and virtue. The author argues that it is not important that the orator have the ethics he or she argues for or the same virtues as the audience, but rather he or she should appear to have the same ethics, values, or virtues as the audience. Heinrichs uses Abraham Lincoln as an example of this principle. He mentions that while Lincoln worked to abolish slavery, he was known to make racial jokes and to use racial epithets within certain audiences. The argument Heinrichs makes is that it was necessary that these people believe that Lincoln was ‘one of them’ or similar enough to them that they could be persuaded to follow his lead. Had Lincoln not acted in this manner, he would have alienated this bigoted audience that he desperately needed to persuade. (Heinrichs, 2013, pp. 78-79)

I understand the author’s point and agree that the perception of ethics and values matters, but I would argue that the actual ethics and values that the persuader follows also matter. Having spent nearly a decade in management, I recognize that keeping up the ruse of having the same principles as my audience (employees I supervised as well as co-workers and my supervisors) would have been an enormous amount of work. I also believe that they would eventually have seen through the ruse to my real values. Heinrichs’ point that the persuader needs to appear to embody these values works in the short term. In the long term, however, the ethics and values of the persuader and the audience actually need to fall into line in order to continue to persuade the audience.

What I found most valuable about the book was learning that the types of rhetorical techniques I had been using throughout my life work for a reason and not because I am particularly adept at persuading. This is valuable because it means that I can learn to be a better speaker and a better leader by studying these tools and implementing them more effectively.
Most importantly, I appreciated the author’s discussion of using the verb tense to direct an argument. Heinrichs notes that verb tense indicates some particular things. For example, past tense tends to indicate blame, the present tense concerns defining values and the future tense focuses on solutions and choice. (Heinrichs, 2013, p. 43) It seems obvious once it is pointed out as neither the past nor the present offer an opportunity to make a choice – and choice is the goal of argument in the rhetorical sense.

I would definitely recommend this book to other readers. Every day is filled with both the opportunity and the necessity to persuade, find consensus and drive people to action. This book uses simple, friendly and clear examples in addition to very specific terms to define and demonstrate the tools of rhetoric in action. I would, however, give this recommendation with a caveat. The author uses many examples from popular culture that make the book more friendly and fun to read, but if you are not familiar with these cultural references, this book would probably be quite confusing. If you don’t watch American television, or are not of a certain age, the examples in the book will probably not help to explain the concepts. The author clearly has a fairly broad liberal arts education and combines historical examples from ancient philosophers, the American Founding Fathers and current pop culture well. But, if you don’t know who he is talking about, you might find this annoying. Secondly, Heinrichs interjects boxes in the text to point out tools he is using in the chapters. Occasionally, these interrupt the flow of reading and cause the reader to have to reverse course and re-read a prior section. Overall, I found the book informative, instructive and fun to read despite these two complaints.
Works Cited