Aristotelian Rhetoric, Pluralism, and Public Administration
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This article discusses how Aristotle’s thought on rhetoric can help public administrators deal with situations that involve conflicting and irreconcilable values. We argue that Aristotelian rhetoric can be helpful to public administrators in dealing with value conflicts, because it promotes a greater self-consciousness among administrators about their own values, encourages them to seek ways of accommodating their values to the values of others, discourages any sense of finality in resolving value conflicts, and requires that administrators take account of the concrete specifics of particular practical situations in dealing with value conflicts.

Keywords: public administration; political theory; philosophy; Aristotle; rhetoric; ethics

Born the son of a Macedonian physician in 384 B.C., Aristotle lived during one of the most remarkable eras of human history. By the time of his birth, the Greeks had established a cultural heritage that extended back many centuries. The fields of art, history, poetry, architecture, politics, music, drama, and, of course, philosophy all had rich and established traditions in the classical Greek world of Aristotle. As a young man, he studied at the Academy under Plato and later served as the personal tutor of Alexander the Great. Upon Alexander’s ascension to the throne, Aristotle founded his own school, the Lyceum, in the ancient city-state of Athens. Writing nearly 25 centuries ago, Aristotle developed a prolific corpus of work covering a vast array of subjects, much of which still has great relevance for us today. Nearly every college and university in the Western world, for example, offers an introductory logic course that, in every important respect, would be thoroughly recognizable to Aristotle as the system of reasoning that he created. As such, his influence on the devel-
opment of Western intellectual thought is immeasurable. Scholars in
the West, ranging from Thomas Aquinas (who referred to him simply
as The Philosopher) to Alasdair MacIntyre, have for many centuries
acknowledged a strong intellectual debt to this masterful thinker
(MacIntyre, 1984).

But what, if anything, could Aristotle possibly have to say to modern
American public administration? The answer is a great deal. In particular,
as we shall argue, Aristotle’s writings on the subject of rhetoric can be
a valuable source for contemporary public administration. In recent years,
a number of scholars have begun to examine the relevance of rhetoric to
the study and practice of public administration (Farmer, 2003; Farmer &
Patterson, 2003; Green & Zinke, 1993). Much of this discussion has
focused on more contemporary writings in rhetoric including those of the
so-called New Rhetoric. However, Aristotle’s ideas on rhetoric also merit
closer examination. After all, as Farmer and Patterson (2003) noted in
their recent examination of the relevance of rhetoric to public adminis-
tration, “If anyone was the father, the father of rhetoric was Aristotle”
(p. 106). Moreover, as we shall argue, Aristotle’s ideas on rhetoric may be
especially helpful to public administrators when dealing with problems of
value pluralism. This is because Aristotle, in discussing rhetoric, made
clear the unavoidably normative, social, and tentative character of politi-
cal discourse. We begin by examining Aristotle’s ideas on rhetoric and
show how these are connected to his ideas on ethics. Following this, we
explore some parallels between Aristotle’s thought and writings in the
public administration literature. We then discuss the idea of value plural-
ism and the problems it poses for contemporary public administration.
Finally, we examine how an Aristotelian approach to public administra-
tion discourse can be useful in helping public administration deal with
value pluralism.

ARISTOTLE AND RHETORIC

By all accounts, the study of rhetoric has fallen on hard times. One	en often uses the term rhetoric to describe inflammatory speech that is meant
to win the public over to some cause through incitement, fear, or anger.
Rhetoric, however, was subject to these same criticisms in Aristotle’s time
as well as our own (Nichols, 1987). In The Clouds (1994), for example,
Aristophanes accused those who use rhetoric of attempting to subvert
justice by making a weak argument seem compelling. Aristophanes had his character, Koryphaios, exclaim,

Now then, I freely admit that among men of learning I am—somewhat pejoratively—dubbed the Sophistic, or Immoral, Logic. And why? Because I first devised a method for the Subversion of Established Social Beliefs and the Undermining of Morality. Moreover, this little invention of mine, this knack of taking what might appear to be the worse argument and nonetheless winning my case, has, I might add, proved to be an extremely lucrative source of income. (1994, p. 103)

In *The Clouds*, Aristophanes portrayed Socrates as an amoral Sophist who teaches men to cheat through the use of rhetoric. Similarly, in *Gorgias* (1999a), Plato had Socrates condemn rhetoric by confronting its famous master, Gorgias, and demonstrating that, although Gorgias claims to be a teacher of justice, he does not even know what justice is. Plato had Socrates argue that rhetoric is like cooking. Cooking, Socrates points out, gives pleasure to the body without reference to what is actually good for it. Likewise, rhetoric provides gratification to the soul without reference to what is good or true. However, in a later work, *Phaedrus* (1999b), Plato did lay out what he saw as the requirements for a true art of rhetoric by finding, in part, that it can only involve private speech, because public speech does not take into account the differences between men.

Nichols (1987) has argued that Aristotle’s treatise, *On Rhetoric*, can be seen as a defense of rhetoric against the attacks made by Plato and Aristophanes. Contrary to the charge that rhetoric subverts what Aristophanes called “established social beliefs,” Nichols argued that the Aristotelian conception of rhetoric subordinates itself to “commonly held opinions about what is good, noble, and just” (1987, p. 660). She pointed out, however, that, according to Aristotle, the rhetorician must move beyond common opinion, because “common opinion is not homogeneous,” and is “composed of a diversity of elements, which may be in contradiction with one another” (Nichols, 1987, p. 660). In a similar vein, Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos (1999) has argued that an Aristotelian conception of rhetoric is a “valuable source for contemporary theorists of the public sphere” (p. 741). He found the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. to be an example of the type of rhetoric described by Aristotle, and that they provide an alternative to rational and agonistic models of speech in the public sphere. He argued that, insofar as King’s public speeches represent “emotionally charged appeals to a specific community’s collective
conscience” (Triadafilopoulos, 1999, p. 754), they epitomize the type of political rhetoric advocated by Aristotle.

Aristotle began his famous treatise, On Rhetoric (1991), by explaining that rhetoric is the counterpart to dialectic. For the most part, neither rhetoric nor dialectic contain knowledge specific to themselves but, rather, they draw upon knowledge from other subjects—primarily ethics and politics. Whereas dialectic is the art of logical argument about general issues through the use of question-and-answer dialogue, rhetoric is defined as the ability “to see the available means of persuasion” in particular cases (Aristotle, 1991, 1.2.1). These “available means of persuasion,” or pisteis, as Aristotle termed them, may be divided into two classes: the nonartistic and the artistic. Laws, witnesses, and contracts are all examples of nonartistic means of persuasion, because they involve no creative element on the part of the speaker; rather, they are given. In contrast, artistic means of persuasion are those methods that are invented by the speaker. It was these artistic means of persuasion that Aristotle was chiefly interested in exploring in On Rhetoric.

Aristotle identified three means of artistic pisteis: (a) the personal character of the speaker, (b) the emotions aroused in the audience, and (c) the logical argument presented by the speaker. Regarding a speaker’s character, persuasion occurs when a speech is delivered in such a way that the speaker is deemed credible or trustworthy. As Aristotle observed, “We believe fair-minded people to a greater extent and more quickly [than we do others] on all subjects in general and completely so where there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt” (1991, 1.2.4). Moreover, as Aristotle pointed out, the judgments we render regarding an issue may differ depending upon whether we feel grief or joy, hostility or friendship. Thus, persuasion occurs through the emotions that are aroused in an audience by the speaker. Finally, persuasion occurs through the arguments themselves when a speaker successfully demonstrates the truth, or at least the apparent truth, from whatever proves to be persuasive in each particular case.

As Aristotle explained, in rhetoric and dialectic alike, there are both inductive and deductive means of proof. Induction involves reasoning from particular facts or cases to general principles. By making many observations, for example, that individual human beings die, one may reasonably be led to the conclusion that all human beings are mortal. Deduction, on the other hand, involves reasoning from general principles or premises to a logical conclusion (in a specific case). For instance, the
major premise that all human beings are mortal, when coupled with the minor premise that Socrates is a human being, leads to the conclusion that Socrates is mortal. For Aristotle, in rhetoric, inductive reasoning is demonstrated through the use of paradigms, and deductive reasoning is demonstrated through the use of rhetorical syllogisms or enthymemes.

Aristotle identified two types of paradigms. The first type speaks of things that have happened in the past, as in an argument where it is necessary to take some course of action on the basis of lessons that can be learned from past experience. Contemporary arguments against appeasing aggressive nations, for example, are often rooted in our historical understanding of the consequences that resulted from appeasing Adolf Hitler in the 1930s. An instance of this is reflected in the following: “We must not allow Iraqi aggression in Kuwait to stand, for Germany’s invasion of the Sudetenland was soon followed by its invasion of Poland.” Of the second species of paradigm, Aristotle indicated that there are two types: comparisons and fables. The argument that public officials should not be chosen by lot because that would be comparable to choosing athletes randomly, rather than on the basis of which of them is most skilled, is an example of using a paradigmatic comparison in rhetoric. With respect to fables, Aristotle saw Aesop’s fables as a good example of the type of paradigmatic argument that is useful in rhetoric. To illustrate his point, he related the following story:

Aesop, when speaking on behalf of a demagogue who was on trial for his life in Samos, told how a fox, while crossing a river, was carried into a hole in the bank. Not being able to get out, she was in misery for some time and many dog-ticks attacked her. A hedgehog came wandering along and, when he saw her, took pity and asked if he could remove the ticks. She would not let him and when asked why, [said], “These are already full of me and draw little blood, but if you remove these, other hungry ones will come and drink what blood I have left.” “In your case too, O Samians,” said [Aesop], “this man will no longer harm you; for he is rich. But if you kill him, other poor ones will come who will steal and spend your public funds.” (Aristotle, 1991, 2.20.6)

Notwithstanding the practical utility of paradigms, Aristotle ultimately favored the use of rhetorical syllogisms or enthymemes as a means of persuasion in public speech. For Aristotle, enthymemes are most properly regarded as abbreviated syllogisms, because the major premise is usually assumed and not explicitly stated as, for example, in the following: “Socrates is mortal, for he is a human being,” or, “Angela does not work, for she is only 8 years old.” The major premise here is not explicitly stated
because the speaker’s arguments are addressed to a particular audience, and the rhetorical syllogisms that are used are selected because they will seem true to the members of that particular audience. Although it might be difficult to imagine an audience for which it would not be safe to assume (as in the first example) that all human beings are mortal, the second rhetorical syllogism is much more culturally situated. To almost every American audience in the 21st century, it would be unnecessary to state the major premise that 8-year-old children do not work. Yet, there are many places in the world where 8-year-old children do work and where the use of that rhetorical syllogism would not make sense (e.g., an audience made up of third-world factory workers). The point is that, from an Aristotelian perspective, rhetorical arguments should be arguments that the speaker believes will ring true with the particular audience that they are addressing and not necessarily arguments that would be universally true. In fact, Aristotle was careful to point out that paradigms and rhetorical syllogisms express ideas that hold true only for the most part and not things that are necessarily true. Furthermore, Aristotle did not claim that the arguments made by rhetoricians would seem true to every member of the audience—only to most of the members. In his view, rhetoric, as an art, does not concern itself with what is persuasive to a particular person but, rather, with what is persuasive to a particular audience—that is, a particular sort of person. As he observed,

The art of medicine does not specify what is healthful for Socrates or Callias but for persons of a certain sort (this is artistic, while particulars are limitless and not knowable)—neither does rhetoric theorize about each opinion—what may seem so to Socrates or Hippias—but about what seems true to people of a certain sort, as is also true with dialectic. (Aristotle, 1991, 1.2.11)

For Aristotle, then, rhetoric is ideally used to form paradigms and enthymemes from things that would seem true to a particular group of people deliberating among themselves about how best to order their society. It is important to note here that, from Aristotle’s point of view, the subjects of rhetoric are concerned with things that admit more than one possible outcome. As he explained, rhetoric deals with matters that are open to debate and for which a speaker’s “listeners are not able to see many things all together or to reason from a distant starting point” (Aristotle, 1991, 1.2.12). According to Aristotle, “No one debates things incapable of being different either in past or future or present” (1991, 1.2.12). Deliberation, as he pointed out, is concerned with human action, and he
recognized that no human action is, in itself, necessary or inevitable. Rather, the logical arguments used in rhetoric through the use of paradigms and rhetorical syllogisms are probabilities and, therefore, true only for the most part. In other words, rhetoric is concerned not with necessary truths, but with “probabilities” and “signs,” with “things that can be other than they are” (Aristotle, 1991, 1.2.15). As Michael Oakeshott (1991) observed, in reflecting on Aristotelian rhetoric,

> Its argument is concerned with contingencies, not necessities; with probabilities and expectations, not with demonstrable certainties; with conjectures not proofs; with surmises and guesses not with calculations. It is reasoning designed to persuade to decision and action where proof or disproof of the propositions contained in the proposal is impossible to provide. (p. 80)

Aristotle identified three forms of rhetoric: deliberative, judicial, and demonstrative. Whereas judicial rhetoric is concerned with past events (as in proving guilt or innocence in a jury trial), demonstrative rhetoric is oratory speech that seeks to demonstrate praise, honor, or blame for an individual (as in a funeral oration). Through deliberative rhetoric, a speaker seeks to either exhort or dissuade members of a democratic assembly with respect to some proposed course of action. Aristotle favored deliberative rhetoric as the finest of the three species of rhetoric, and it was to this species that he devoted the greatest attention. Deliberative rhetoric is always concerned with future events—with what ought to be done to achieve some end. Of course, in Aristotle’s view, the ultimate end of all human action is happiness, and all ends should therefore be directed at promoting human happiness. He recognized, however, that happiness is never a unitary good but one made up of many parts or goods—for example, friendship, health, reputation, honor, and virtue—and, moreover, that this package of goods will vary both over time and from person to person. According to Aristotle, these goods that comprise happiness are chosen for their own sake, because they promote the highest good, namely, human happiness. Accordingly, speakers in the public square use deliberative rhetoric to persuade (or dissuade) members of a democratic assembly to pursue (or not to pursue) some course of action that they believe would be effective (or ineffective) in promoting some good that will produce human happiness.

The foregoing makes it clear that Aristotle’s ideas on rhetoric are intimately connected with his ideas on ethics. As Aristotle argued in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1999), deliberation involves the comparative evaluation
of what means will most successfully promote happiness. This, of course, 
begs the question, “How do we know what will promote happiness?” 
Aristotle recognized the difficulty of the question, finding that “honor, 
intelligence and pleasure have different and dissimilar accounts” and that 
“the good is not something common corresponding to a single idea” 
(1999, 1.6.11). Along these lines, Aristotle identified five ways—that is, 
five “virtues of thought”—in which the “soul grasps truth in its affir-
mations or denials” (1999, 6.3.1). These ways of knowing include scien-
tific knowledge, craft knowledge, prudence, wisdom, and understanding. 
Aristotle argued that scientific knowledge, understanding (apprehension 
of universal principles), and wisdom (a combination of scientific knowl-
edge and understanding) are all ways of knowing things that must be as 
they are and cannot be otherwise. Water, for example, can be known scien-
tifically as H2O. Modern scientists do not deliberate about the chemical 
composition of water; if it is anything other than two parts hydrogen and 
one part oxygen, then it is simply not water. In contrast, craft knowledge 
and prudence are concerned with things that do admit to being otherwise. 
For example, one would use craft knowledge to write a poem about water, 
and, in the process, one would need to deliberate about the length, words, 
style, and so forth. The poem can take any number of different forms and 
still be a poem about water. Similarly, prudence involves deliberation 
about the things that promote a healthy life. In Aristotle’s view, these 
things will be different for different people. As he put it while discussing 
the method of political science, the “fine and just things, which political 
science examines, differ and vary so much as to seem to rest on convention 
only, not on nature” (Aristotle, 1999, 1.3.2).

Thus, neither prudence nor craft knowledge are capable of grasping 
universal principles, because they are concerned with what admits of be-
ing otherwise. They are therefore always open to deliberation. As a result, 
unlike the content of scientific knowledge, the exact content of prudence 
will change depending upon the particular circumstances of a given indi-
vidual. Moreover, as Aristotle explained, because prudence is always 
directed toward action (what to do), it must be always concerned with par-
ticulars. Because it is rooted in the particular, it can only be acquired with 
difficulty, over time, and through experience. For Aristotle and the ancient 
Greeks in general, this type of practical knowledge was entirely distinct 
from scientific knowledge (e.g., see Scott, 1998). It was for this reason 
that Aristotle emphasized the importance of prudence as the means to 
bring about correct reasoning in ethical and political matters, that is, poli-
tical science. He also pointed out that the so called goods with which
political science is concerned also differ in many ways and may not always be so good, “for some have been destroyed because of their wealth, others because of their bravery” (Aristotle, 1999, 1.3.3). In this way, Aristotle pointed to the problems associated with any search for absolute certainty in defining political goods, and he concluded that we must always temper our expectations with this realization:

for the educated person seeks exactness in each area to the extent that the nature of the subject allows; for apparently it is just as mistaken to demand demonstrations from a rhetorician as to accept [merely] persuasive arguments from a mathematician. (Aristotle, 1999, 1.3.4)

Finally, as was noted earlier, the idea of rhetoric has always had a somewhat seedy or unsavory reputation. Aristotle, for his part, recognized that rhetoric was a tool and could be used for either good or bad ends. Nonetheless, he argued that “rhetoric is useful,” because “if judgments are not made in the right way [the true and just] are necessarily defeated by their opposites” and “this is worthy of censure” (Aristotle, 1991, 1.1.12). Furthermore, he observed that:

One should be able to argue persuasively on either side of a question, . . . not that we may actually do both (for one should not persuade what is debased) but in order that it may not escape our notice what the real state of the case is and that we ourselves may be able to refute if another person uses speech unjustly. (Aristotle, 1991, 1.1.12)

In this respect, therefore, to abandon rhetoric was to abandon a useful and valuable tool for the defense of what one believed to be true or good. It was to engage, as one might say, in an act of unilateral disarmament in the struggle for truth and good. As Aristotle argued, “It would be strange if an ability to defend oneself by means of the body is shameful, while there is no shame in an inability to use speech” (Aristotle, 1991, 1.1.12). Moreover, the fact that rhetoric could sometimes be used for harmful purposes was not really an objection per se against its use, because much the same could be said of most of the things that human beings make use of. As he noted,

This objection applies to all good things except for virtue, and most of all to the most useful things, like strength, health, wealth and military strategy; for by using these justly one would do the greatest good and unjustly, the greatest harm. (Aristotle, 1991, 1.1.13)
Aristotle presents us, then, with a quite distinctive way of looking at political discourse and values. It is an approach, admittedly, somewhat at odds with quite a lot of the public administration literature. Many public administration writers, following the lead of Herbert Simon (1976), have sought a more scientific approach to public administration—an approach, as Simon put it “concerned purely with factual statements” and in which “there is no basis for ethical assertions” (p. 253). Such writers aspire to the development of scientific propositions or laws “as to how men would behave if they wished their activity to result in the greatest attainment of administrative objectives with scarce means” (Simon, 1976, p. 253). They search for “principles of organization that will ensure correct decision-making” and “effective action” (Simon, 1976, p. 1). Certainly, this approach has not commanded universal assent, especially in recent years, but, as the late Dwight Waldo (1984) argued, “The belief that principles, in the sense of lawful regularities, can be discovered by scientific inquiry remains strong” (p. liii). This is evidenced in the field by repeated calls over the past 2 decades or so for more rigorous empirical and quantitative research in public administration. For instance, in a study of public administration journal publications, David Houston and Sybil Delevan (1994) argued that “the more rigorous use of the quantitative methods advocated by mainstream social science may well be more useful in public administration than their current use suggests” (p. 268). Laurence Lynn (1996) similarly has criticized much of public administration scholarship for its failure “to engage in empirical validation in any scientific sense” and has argued that “engaging in empirical validation of predictions, conjectures, and statements is central to any scholarly activity directed at professional performance” (pp. 164-165).

At the same time, nonetheless, there has always been a strong strain of thought that parallels the thinking of Aristotle. Perhaps the most prominent among these thinkers has been Waldo (1984) who observed “that the established techniques of science are inapplicable to thinking and valuing human beings” and that “administration is generally suffused with questions of value,” which are “not amenable to scientific treatment” (p. 171). Drawing clearly on Aristotle’s thought, Waldo argued that what public administrators needed was “common sense . . . conceived as general facility of thought, as balance of emotions, and ‘reasonableness’ of judgment, as adherence to and progress towards the Golden Mean or Wisdom”
According to Waldo, “Much of administrative study is, and must be, directed towards ‘common sense’ in cooperative effort” (1984, p. 177). Such administrative common sense, for Waldo, was “a sort of extension of ‘folk wisdom’ of the community” (1984, p. 177). Critiquing those who saw the possibility of a deterministic social science of administration and again seeming to echo Aristotle, Waldo asserted that “it is not ‘scientific’ to force upon a subject matter a method not suitable to it” and that “instead the nature of the subject matter must define the method” (1984, p. 178).

Echoes of Waldo’s Aristotelian perspective can also be found among a number of contemporary writers who, like Waldo, are critical of the positivist approach to public administration. Dale Wright and David Hart (1996), for example, have criticized our field’s overemphasis on the importance of measurement. According to Wright and Hart,

As a profession, we have come to believe that it is possible to measure all of the truly important aspects of human life, giving us the ability then to predict what they will do—and, quite dangerously, what they should do. (1996, p. 22)

Drawing specifically on Aristotle, they argued that “we must not place so much reliance upon measurability that we begin to measure the unmeasurable” (Wright & Hart, 1996, p. 22). More recently, Camilla Stivers (2000), writing from a more interpretivist perspective, sounded an Aristotelian tone when she observed that, “in the study of public agencies, . . . the impulse toward science is continually frustrated by the refusal of the subject matter to cooperate” and that “we need an approach that, instead of avoiding contradictory impulses, acknowledges—perhaps even embraces—their irresolvability as constitutive of public life and therefore as more suitable to an understanding of the workings of public agencies” (p. 14).

Richard Lindblom and David Cohen (1979) have expressed a similarly Aristotelian view of what they term “professional social enquiry” including public policy analysis. According to these writers, those who practice such enquiry, “despite the accepted convention that [they] are engaged in the pursuit of conclusive fact and proof, . . . are engaged in producing inconclusive evidence and argument,” because “problem complexity denies the possibility of proof and reduces the pursuit of fact to the pursuit of those selective facts which, if appropriately developed, constitute evidence in support of relevant argument” (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979, p. 81). Lindblom and Cohen called attention to:
the inevitably incomplete character of attempts at proof [in professional social enquiry], the consequent reduction of such attempts to informed argument, and the highly selective search for just those facts that bear on argument as evidence for or against the argued position. (1979, p. 81)

In other words, Lindblom and Cohen saw policy analysts, social scientists, and other experts in social enquiry, whether they acknowledged it or not, as engaged in what is essentially a process of rhetoric.

**VALUE PLURALISM**

Whatever the general relevance of Aristotle’s ideas on rhetoric for public administration, it is our belief that they would seem especially helpful to public administration when dealing with problems involving value pluralism. To see this more clearly, it is necessary to explain what value pluralism entails. Value pluralism, simply put, is the idea that many of the values or ends that we hold dear are incompatible and cannot be reconciled with one another. It is the idea, as Isaiah Berlin (1982) observed, that “there might exist ends—ends in terms of which alone everything else was justified—which were equally ultimate, but incompatible with one another, that there might exist no single universal standard that would enable a man to choose rationally between them” (p. 69). As Berlin’s definition suggests, there are two important, defining characteristics of value pluralism. The first of these is the idea of an incompatibility among certain human values. Value incompatibility means here simply that the pursuit of certain values must inevitably compromise or limit our ability to pursue certain other values. The more we seek to attain some of these values, the less able we are to attain the others. For example, at least beyond a certain point, the pursuit of liberty can become incompatible with the pursuit of equality, the pursuit of justice with that of mercy, and the pursuit of spontaneity with that of security. Value incompatibility entails then what John Gray (1996) has termed “a thesis of moral scarcity as applied to the virtues” (p. 44).

It should be noted here that conflicts between incompatible values can occur at different levels. As Berlin (1992) put it, values can “easily clash within the breast of a single individual;” but they can also be “incompatible between cultures, or groups in the same culture, or between you and me” (p. 12). In other words, value conflicts can make themselves known at personal, interpersonal, intergroup, and intercultural levels. This multifaceted character of value conflict is important, because it means that
value conflict presents individuals or groups with not simply a moral problem but also a political problem.

The second important defining characteristic of value pluralism is that of an incommensurability or an incomparability among certain values. Incommensurability between values, as Stephen Lukes (1989) has argued, means that:

There is no single currency or scale on which conflicting values can be measured, and that where a conflict occurs no rationally compelling appeal can be made to some value that will resolve it. Neither is superior to the other, nor are they equal in value. (p. 135)

Incommensurability denotes the absence of what Berlin (1982) termed “an infallible measuring rod,” one that might certify “one form of life as being superior to all others” (p. 70). As such, incommensurability among certain values limits the role that rational analysis can play in helping us make moral choices among them. It attests to what Joseph Raz (1986) has called “the indeterminacy of reason” or “the inability of reason to guide our action” in making such choices (pp. 333-334). This does not mean, of course, that we cannot make such choices or even offer our reasons for our choices. Rather, it means simply that some of the reasons we might offer in support of making a particular choice are incommensurable with other reasons we might offer were we to make an alternative choice.

Value pluralism can perhaps be better understood by contrasting it with its antithesis, that is, the idea of monism. Monism is the idea, dating back to Plato but also underlying much of modern Western philosophy, that, even though we may not always be able to see it, there is an underlying harmony in human values and that conflicts among them can be resolved by appeal to some higher principle or standard. As Berlin (1969) noted, it is the idea that:

All truly good things are linked to one another in a single, perfect whole; or, at the very least cannot be incompatible . . . and that the realization of the pattern formed by them is the one true end of all rational activity, both public and private. (p. x)

Monism entails “the notion of the perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things coexist” (Berlin, 1992, p. 13). It is this seductive idea, which has been so powerful in Western thought, that pluralism denies.
Why should we accept pluralism and reject monism? Although there is considerable controversy on this point among philosophers (e.g., see Archard, 1996), perhaps the most cogent answer is that, from our own ordinary experience of the world, we know that our values often do conflict with one another in irreconcilable ways and that, in the absence of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, there seems little reason to reject the reality of this experience. As Berlin (1969) once put it,

If we are not armed with an a priori guarantee of the proposition that a total harmony of true values is somewhere to be found...we must fall back on the ordinary resources of empirical observation and ordinary human knowledge. And these certainly give us no warrant for supposing (or even understanding what would be meant by saying) that all good things, or all bad things for that matter, are reconcilable with each other. The world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced between choices equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others. (p. 168)

In other words, the monist view that all conflicts among values are ultimately resolvable simply does not cohere with our moral experience as human beings. Especially revealing in this regard is the fact that, in a monist world, we would not be able to make sense of that feeling of loss or regret we so often feel when making difficult moral decisions. These involve the sorts of dilemmas where, as Raz (1986) put it, each option “involves wrongdoing” and “whatever the agent does he will do wrong” (p. 364). Aristotle (1999, 3.1.5), interestingly enough, described such a dilemma when he wrote of a ship captain who must throw the ship’s cargo overboard during a storm to protect his crew. Throwing the cargo overboard represents a tremendous loss financially as well as irreparable damage to the captain’s reputation—both important values. On the other hand, the lives of the crew are also of great value. Aristotle wanted to demonstrate here that choosing among goods or, for that matter, bads is not always a neat and easy process, and it often results in what has been called “dirty hands” (Stocker, 1989). As Aristotle explained, “It is sometimes difficult...to judge what [goods] should be chosen at the price of what [evils], and what [evils] should be endured as the price of what [goods]” (1999, 3.1.9).

Moreover, the argument can be made that value pluralism is particularly relevant to the ordinary experience of public administration where practitioners frequently have to grapple with and make judgments about value conflicts when making policy and administrative decisions. As
Berlin (1979) observed, some among the ends of human beings are “pub-
lic or political” and there is no reason “to suppose that all of them must,
even in principle, be compatible with one another” (p. 150). Indeed, there
is good reason perhaps to assert that value conflicts may be especially perva-
sive in public administration where statutes and regulations that seek to
reconcile multiple ends and values often present administrators with con-
flicting signals as to what they should do. As Hendrik Wagenaar (1999)
has argued, “Public programs are structured in such a way that they regu-
larly confront the administrator with difficult value choices” so that “re-
solving value conflict is an intrinsic part of administrative life” (p. 444).

If we accept that public administrators are often faced with making
choices or judgments among incompatible and incommensurable values,
the question arises then as to how are they to make such choices. This
clearly is not an easy question to answer, because, as explained above,
incommensurability among certain values limits the role that rational
analysis can play in making choices among them. In this regard, value plu-
ralism in public administration may be seen as placing limits on the instru-
mental rationalist approach taken by a great many writers, such as Simon
(1976), who seek to evaluate administrative actions and policies largely in
terms of their contribution to some given set of organizational or policy
ends or values and for whom, as Simon put it, “an administrative decision
is . . . correct if it selects appropriate means to reach designated ends”
(1976, p. 61). This is because, for such an approach to be helpful in admin-
istrative decision making, the values sought by administrators must ulti-
mately be either compatible or commensurable with each other. If the val-
ues sought turn out to be incompatible and incommensurable with one
another, then an instrumental rationalist approach simply cannot provide
administrators with any guidance in choosing among them. To his credit,
Simon himself fully recognized this fact when he observed that, in admin-
istrative theory, “unless activities are directed towards exactly the same
value, measurement of results cannot determine which course of action is
preferable” (1976, p. 176). Simon’s suggested remedy for this problem, of
course, was to determine “the relative weights of conflicting values”
(1976, p. 176). Where an agency pursued two conflicting aims, he argued
that, “in balancing the one aim against the other, and in attempting to find a
common denominator,” it was “necessary to cease thinking of the two
aims as ends in themselves, and instead to conceive them as means to
some more general end” (1976, p. 7). More broadly, Simon believed that
we could think of different combinations of competing values in terms of
the economist’s idea of “utility surfaces” (1976, p. 73), or indifference
curves that map the trade-offs between different values. However, the determination of such weights and such common denominators and the very existence of such utility surfaces would seem to posit the availability of precisely the type of common standard of value or measuring rod that value pluralism denies us. Indeed, if we accept the idea, as Berlin (1969) put it, that values cannot be “ranked on a single scale, so that it is a matter of mere inspection to determine the highest” (p. 171), then the idea of instrumental rationalism, as well as the idea of efficiency, becomes vacuous and loses all meaning. In other words, if value pluralism is correct, we are forced to recognize, in Berlin’s words, that “choices must be made for no better reason than that each value is what it is, and we choose it for what it is, and not because it can be shown on some single scale to be higher than another” (1982, p. 78).

Does the foregoing mean that choices among government and administrative policies and actions that promote incompatible and incommensurable ends must inevitably be arbitrary and that one choice is as good as any another choice? Berlin certainly did not believe so, and he provided what may be some useful advice here. He argued that, given conflicting values, we should make such choices or judgments in light of the overall pattern of our values. We should “decide in light of the general ideals, the overall pattern of life pursued by a man or a group or a society” (Berlin, 1969, p. 1). Furthermore, we must be willing to make compromises. Collisions of values, according to Berlin, “even if they cannot be avoided, can be softened” (1992, p. 17). As he argued,

Claims can be balanced, compromises can be reached . . . so much liberty and so much equality; so much for sharp moral condemnation, and so much for understanding a given human situation; so much for the full force of the law, and so much for the prerogative of human mercy; for feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, sheltering the homeless. Priorities, never final and absolute, must be established. (Berlin, 1992, p. 17)

In such a decision-making process, “rules, values, principles must yield to each other in varying degrees in specific situations” (Berlin, 1992, p. 17). In other words, the specific practical context in which values are found to conflict with one another must always be considered. As Berlin (1992) put it, “The concrete situation is almost everything” (p. 18). “The best that can be done, as a rule,” according to Berlin, “is to maintain a precarious equilibrium that will prevent the occurrence of desperate situations, of intolerable choices” (1992, pp. 17-18), and, as he noted, this will always be “an uneasy equilibrium, which is constantly threatened and in
constant need of repair” (1992, p. 19). In short, although we cannot make choices among competing values that are optimal in any rationalist sense of the word, we may be able, at least, to make these choices in tolerable ways that help us to consider a broad range of important human values and to avoid neglecting certain of them in the overly zealous pursuit of others.

ARISTOTELIAN RHETORIC, PLURALISM, AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

In reflecting upon Berlin’s advice to us here as to how we should cope with value pluralism, what is striking is its distinctly Aristotelian tone. In light of this, it is perhaps not surprising then that Aristotle’s ideas on rhetoric might have some relevance for public administration in dealing with incompatible and incommensurable values. Of course, some philosophers, including Berlin himself, have seen Aristotle as a monist rather than a pluralist. However, there are elements of Aristotle’s ethical philosophy, discussed above, that indicate a clearly pluralist dimension to his thought. Martha Nussbaum (1999) has noted, for example, that a number of proponents of virtue ethics, herself included, derive from Aristotle’s ethical philosophy the idea that “the goods that a human life appropriately values are plural and incommensurable” with one another and that “each must be pursued, as Aristotle explicitly urges, for its own sake” (p. 182). Jean-François Thébaud (1994), taking a postmodernist perspective, similarly found in Aristotle’s ethical and political writings the idea, quite contrary to monism, that, in matters of politics, “we are always in judgments of opinion and not in judgments of truth” and that “there is no science of the political, ... no metalanguage” that we can use “to ground political and ethical decisions” (Lyotard & Thébaud, 1994, p. 28). Finally, Oakeshott (1991) clearly discerned the pluralist dimension to Aristotle’s thought when observed that Aristotle’s idea of “eudaimonia” or “human happiness” is “not understood to be a simple, universal, unchanging condition of things, but to be composed of the complex changing condition of things, often discrepant from one another, which we are usually disposed to agree to be desirable” (p. 80).

There is much, then, in Aristotle’s thought that fits quite well with the idea of pluralism. However, regardless of whether Aristotle was really a pluralist, we would argue that Aristotelian rhetoric can still be quite useful to public administrators in dealing with value pluralism for the following reasons. First, because it is rooted in a discussion of different aspects of
the good, Aristotelian rhetoric brings to the surface an explicit consid-
eration of different values and the ways in which they can often conflict
with one another. Unlike the discourse of instrumental rationalism, Aris-
totelian rhetoric, when practiced by dissenting actors, does not attempt to
dodge the complexities and difficulties of value conflict by diverting our
attention away from contesting values and focusing it on the relative tech-
nical efficiency and effectiveness of administrative actions in securing the
attainment of some given set of precisely defined and mutually consistent
ends, objectives, or missions. Instead, it encourages us to face up to the
sometimes uncomfortable fact that different administrative choices or
judgments may affect different values in different ways in different situa-
tions. In contrast to the discourse of instrumental rationalism where val-
ues have no place, Aristotelian rhetoric encourages a value-rich rather
than a value-free discourse, one that requires the “speaker” to “be obser-
vant about characters and virtues” (Aristotle, 1991, 1.2.7) and hence is
more appropriate in a world of conflicting values. In doing so, it makes it
less likely that important values will be neglected.

Second, as an overt exercise in persuasion, as opposed to scientific
analysis, Aristotelian rhetoric encourages those administrators who en-
gage in it to be attentive to their audiences. In this respect, whereas the dis-
course of instrumental rationalism is impersonal, the discourse of Aris-
totelian rhetoric is necessarily both personal and empathetic. It requires a
speaker to demonstrate his own feelings and values to his audience in such
a way that his arguments are persuasive to them and, in turn, requires,
then, the speaker to also understand the feelings and values of his audi-
ence. As Aristotle observed,

It makes much difference with regard to persuasion . . . especially in delib-
erations . . . that the speaker seem to be a certain kind of person and that his
hearers suppose him to be disposed toward them in a certain way and in
addition if they, too, happen to be disposed in a certain way [favorably or
unfavorably to him]. (1991, 2.1.3)

The use of rhetoric, then, encourages administrators to assert their own
values but also to pay attention to the values of their audiences and to seek
ways in which these different values can be accommodated with each
other. As Nichols (1987) has argued, “By incorporating the various truths
embodied in common opinions into a more comprehensive point of view,
the rhetorician . . . can address the concerns of a greater number of people
and possibly be persuasive to them” (p. 669). As a result, rhetoric can fos-
ter pluralism in public administration by increasing the range of values
considered in deliberations and by encouraging public administrators to
discuss and argue for those administrative actions that do less damage to
important values.

Third, Aristotelian rhetoric, as well as the ethical theory it draws on,
embraces a sense of open endedness that is appropriate for public decision
making in the face of incompatible and incommensurable values. Speak-
ers who employ Aristotelian rhetoric, in an appropriate fashion, do so with
an understanding that rhetoric is not a tool for determining any final
proofs or solutions to political and administrative questions but, rather,
one to help reach reasoned agreement on particular decisions that need to
be taken despite the absence of such proofs or solutions. They recognize
that any lessons learned from past experience do not provide us with axi-
om or scientific laws that compel us to pursue certain courses of action
but, rather, simply offer us a set of useful maxims, some of which may
contradict others, that we might draw from to figure out what it is that we
wish to do next. Such maxims consist of “beliefs generally held to be true,
and values generally held to be important” (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 81). In
this respect, for example, even the so-called principles of administration
dismissed by Simon (1976) as akin to proverbs because of their contradic-
tory character may sometimes perhaps have their value in administrative
discourse, provided they are viewed as maxims drawn from administra-
tive experience rather than as universal laws.

More generally, as Aristotle (1991) put it, debate in rhetoric is always
about “things that seem capable of admitting two possibilities” and never
about “things incapable of being different either in past or future or present” (1.2.12). It involves questions of ethics that “have no fixed answers” (Aristotle, 1999, 2.2.3). It follows, then, that any agreements reached on
the basis of rhetoric are always contestable and open to revision. As a
result, the use of rhetoric allows participants to adjust the nature of agree-
ment on an ongoing basis in a manner that makes it less likely that impor-
tant values will be permanently ignored even if they may be temporarily
overlooked.

Finally, Aristotelian rhetoric is always about what we should do in par-
ticular situations. It involves, in Aristotle’s (1991) words, as was noted
earlier, the “ability in each [particular] case to see the available means of
persuasion” (2.2.1). It draws upon an approach to ethics in which “the
agents themselves must consider in each case what the opportune action
is, as doctors and navigators do” (Aristotle, 1999, 2.2.4) and where “the
goal of an action accords with the specific situation” (Aristotle, 1999,
3.1.6). As such, Aristotelian rhetoric encourages public administrators
using it to be sensitive to the particular circumstances or context in which choices among competing values must be made. As a result, the use of rhetoric helps administrators who make such choices to avoid what Berlin, as noted above, termed “desperate choices” and “intolerable situations” by making clearer the human consequences of value conflicts in particular situations rather than in the abstract. In doing so, the use of rhetoric involves a recognition that the weights Simon saw as so useful to administrators, in balancing competing ends or values, cannot be universally determined or often even specified in advance of decisions, but generally depend upon local circumstances of time and place.

Of course, one may ask here who precisely are the audiences for public administrators who engage in this type of rhetoric. The answer is admittedly a bit more complex than it was in the days of Aristotle’s city-state in which all citizens participated actively in political discourse. However, it is reasonable to suggest that the audiences with whom modern public administrators are likely to interact might include, in different situations, for example, fellow administrators, elected officials, various citizen groups, industry and trade groups, trade unions, professional associations, and others with whom public administrators are engaged in oral or written discourse. In some cases, these audiences might consist of participants in what Charles Fox and Hugh Miller (1995) have termed “policy networks,” in which, at least ideally, “public administrators, policy experts from industry groups and public interest groups, legislators, and other kinds of citizens . . . try to make sense, together of a situation . . . as a prelude to action” (p. 12).

CONCLUSION

Aristotelian rhetoric, therefore, can be of value to public administrators in dealing with value pluralism, because it promotes a greater self-consciousness among administrators about their own values, encourages them to seek ways of accommodating their values to the values of others, discourages any sense of finality in resolving value conflicts, and requires that administrators take account of the concrete specifics of particular practical situations in dealing with value conflicts. No doubt, some readers may feel that we have overemphasized here the importance of value conflicts in the day-to-day business of public administration. After all, not all public administration decisions involve value conflicts and not all value conflicts in public administration are really that important. The
choice among different decorating styles for government offices may arguably involve value conflicts, but such conflicts are hardly of the same order as those involved, for example, in racial profiling. However, as noted earlier, value conflicts within public administration may be more pervasive than we like to think (Wagenaar, 1999). Indeed, if Berlin (1982) is correct, then “ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other” and “entire systems of value may come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration, . . . not merely in exceptional circumstances, as a result of abnormality, or accident or error,” but “as part of the normal human situation” (pp. 74-75).

Moreover, the use of Aristotelian rhetoric by public administrators can be helpful in identifying both whether value conflicts exist in the context of particular choices and how serious such conflicts are. This is because Aristotelian rhetoric, as noted above, encourages a more explicit consideration of values, an increased attentiveness to the values held by different audiences, and a greater sensitivity to the circumstances of particular situations in which administrators must make judgments. The latter, in our view, is especially important, because there is no rulebook that can tell public administrators what to do in weighing either the extent or seriousness of value conflict. From an Aristotelian perspective, it is only in the context of the concrete details of particular cases that administrators can make judgments as to whether to hold fast to particular principles or to seek reconciliation and compromise among conflicting principles. As Charles Taylor (2001) has observed, an “Aristotelian framework,” because of its situational perspective, can be helpful in dealing with the problem of value pluralism, because it allows us to “weigh the relative importance of the goods that concern us, in some cases upholding one more strongly, and in others another” (p. 118).

We would argue, therefore, that both writers and practitioners in public administration might profit by a closer examination of Aristotelian rhetoric as well as the writings of more contemporary scholars on rhetoric. In this regard, it is worth noting that, over the past 2 decades or so, an increasing number of scholars in the social sciences, law, and humanities have expressed interest in the role that rhetoric plays in the discourse of scholarship and public affairs (e.g., see Nelson, Megill, & McCloskey, 1987). By drawing upon the writings of Aristotle and these scholars, students in public administration, for example, might engage in an examination of the different rhetorical strategies that they and others use in their oral and written discourse on public policy and administration. In doing so, in addition to developing their own rhetorical skills, they might become
more conscious of and reflect more critically upon the rhetorical styles, or what Farmer and Patterson (2003) term the “administrative signatures,” that they and others employ in discourse. This is not to assert that we should necessarily abandon conventional social scientific approaches to public administration but simply to suggest that a rhetoric-based approach is also important. Admittedly, the type of administrative discourse that rhetoric promotes cannot, as Simon wished, guarantee correct decision-making and correct action. However, in those cases where our values are incompatible and incommensurable with one another, we should not search for correct decision making and correct actions but, rather, simply for reasoned and defensible decision making and actions. To do otherwise is to engage in what is likely to be a fruitless search for, as Oakeshott (1991) termed it, “the emancipation of political deliberation from conjecture and opinion” (p. 81). It is, as Oakeshott argued, to:

corrupt us by suggesting that we do not have to make choices, sometimes on little more than the courage of our convictions, or by suggesting that we can pass off responsibility for making these choices upon some axiom or “law” for which, in turn, we have no responsibility. (1991, p. 95)

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