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**Bridging the Past and the Present: Enthymematic Arguments in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* and the Rhetoric of the Bathroom Debate**  
A Research Paper by Dan Minion

**I. Theoretical Frame**

As our course in Rhetoric started out examining the voices of the Greek Classics, it is in my opinion that there was no stronger voice than that of Aristotle. His rhetorical concepts, originating over 2,000 years ago, are still incredibly influential and pervasive in the modern world. For example, Aristotle is the architect behind the rhetorical scheme of Ethos, Pathos, and Logos, a concept so fundamental to rhetoric that I have heard it sermonized in a wide range of my college courses from public speaking to technical writing. Perhaps the most meaningful contribution to my understanding of rhetoric is Aristotle's explanation behind the power of the enthymeme. In his work *Rhetoric*, Aristotle discusses the nature behind the power of rhetoric while giving us many banger quotes like "For the true and the approximately true are apprehended by the same faculty".

In Part 1, Book 1 of *Rhetoric*, Aristotle begins with the idea that "rhetoric is the counterpart of dialectic", or that persuasive and logical arguments are beholden to similar principles. He also claims that scholars on the art of rhetoric are misguided in the idea that "The modes of persuasion are the only true constituents of the art: everything else is merely accessory" (*Rhetoric*, P1, L1). Aristotle is basically saying that people are wholly overlooking the power of rhetoric in oratory debates, claiming that despite what people believe to be the sanctity of forensic oratory in the courts, "[juries] will often have allowed themselves to be so

much influenced by feelings of friendship or hatred or self-interest that they lose any clear vision of the truth and have their judgment obscured by considerations of personal pleasure or pain” (*Rhetoric*, P2, L9). With that, Aristotle then says that rhetoric’s “function is not simply to succeed in persuading, but rather to discover the persuasive facts in each case” (*Rhetoric*, P3, L10). In this idea, Aristotle is proclaiming that through employing rhetoric, we can achieve a greater understanding of the world around us.

In Part 2, Book 1 of *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines “the systematic principles of rhetoric itself”. A big claim that he makes is that everyone “who effects persuasion through proof does in fact use either enthymemes or examples: there is no other way. And since everyone who proves anything at all is bound to use either deductions or inductions, it must follow that each of the latter is the same as one of the former” (*Rhetoric*, P5, L6). What Aristotle means by this is that to use proof in an argument, it must come from the induction of an example or through the deduction of an enthymeme. Before we go any further it is important that we have a collective understanding of what exactly an enthymeme is. American Rhetoric: Rhetorical Figures in Sound defines an enthymeme as “*A figure of reasoning in which one or more statements of a syllogism (a three-pronged deductive argument) is/are left out of the configuration; an abbreviated syllogism or truncated deductive argument in which one or more premises, or, the conclusion is/are omitted... However, all syllogisms are similar in that they contain at least three statements -- two premises followed by a conclusion.*” This is a very long-winded explanation which I believe can be described more simply as “an argumentative statement that hinges on an implicit assumption”. Aristotle writes that “enthymemes are the substance of rhetorical persuasion”, and I’m inclined to agree with him. The enthymeme dually wields the power of Pathos and Logos, or as Aristotle defines them: “putting the audience into a certain frame of

mind”, and “proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself”, respectively. But how is this achieved? Aristotle explains that “the enthymeme must consist of few propositions, fewer often than those which make up a primary deduction. For if any of these propositions is a familiar fact, there is no need even to mention it; the hearer adds it himself”. So, an effective enthymeme requires the audience to form their own deduction from the few propositions the orator presents. Youtuber *Give Me Five* explains why this is effective, as “This surrogation of the argument to the audience gives them a sense of ownership, making them feel as if the argument is their own”. Thus, over the last 2,000 or so years, the enthymeme has become a rhetorical device that is capable of incredible persuasion in conjunction with a logical argument.

## **II. Context**

In March of 2016, the North Carolina legislature passed a bill “banning trans youth from using the bathroom aligned with their gender identity and restricting their access to the facility corresponding with their gender assigned at birth” (IFJ). This ignited what was already a long-simmering debate on the legal rights afforded to trans people in America, specifically the right to use the restroom of the gender they identify with the most. Just last month, Florida Governor Ron Desantis expanded his infamously nicknamed “Don’t Say Gay” bill, further limiting the ability of teachers in public schools to discuss LGBTQ+ related topics with their students, in addition to limiting bathroom usage to a person’s biological gender. Also in March of this year, Laura Barrón-López from PBS reported how “Arkansas banned transgender students from kindergarten through high school from using public school bathrooms that match their gender identity” and that “just this year, more than two dozen bathroom bills have been filed by

Republicans in at least 15 states, more than any other year”. Florida Education Commissioner Manny Diaz Jr says on his bill, “We’re not removing anything here. All we are doing is we are setting the expectations so our teachers are clear: that they are to teach to the standards” (AP New, 2023). Republican Rep. Chase Tramont goes a bit further explaining what this bill is meant to ‘clarify’: “You are either male or female. This is not subject to one’s opinion. It is a demonstrable fact” (AP News, 2023). On both sides of the debate, arguments are made using “proof”, but if both sides are technically proving something, who is right? Well, it’s not that simple and the lack of consensus has prompted some states to act in dramatically different ways. From ballotpedia.org: “As of June 2018, according to the American Civil Liberties Union, 19 jurisdictions (18 states plus Washington, D.C.) had adopted laws prohibiting discrimination against transgender individuals in employment, housing, and public accommodations”. Only 18 states out of 50... 36%. This number closely correlates to a Pew Research survey from 2022 in which “41% would favor requiring transgender individuals to use public bathrooms that match the sex they were assigned at birth rather than the gender they identify with; 31% say they would oppose each of these”. For the last seven or so years, this highly politicized debate on trans rights has become grounds for satirization.

Since premiering in 2005, the television program *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* has been proficient at satirizing issues in the national sphere. The show uses their distinctly narcissistic characters (Mac, Charlie, Dennis, Dee, and Frank) who affectionately refer to themselves as “the gang” to explore rhetoric that argue different sides of any given issue in America. A classic example of this formula would be in the Season 9 episode *Gun Fever Too: Still Hot*, in which the characters find themselves divided surrounding gun control laws. Mac and Charlie begin the episode with the presumption that guns are a protected right and actually make

places safer, going so far as to recruit middle school kids for a weapons demo. This is contrasted by Dennis and Dee who begin the episode whose defeatism for how loose gun restrictions are prompt them to go on a sardonic journey to find out just how easy it is to obtain a firearm. By the end of the episode, the groups end up switching sides as Mac and Charlie saw the dangers of kids with weapons whereas Dennis and Dee found that it was much harder to obtain guns than they thought. All the while, Frank was appearing on the news emotionally promoting the second amendment, which was entirely a ruse to increase the value of his stake in a local firearms retailer. This is just one simplified representation of how the show embodies the rhetoric we hear on a given debate to highlight the inconsistencies and hypocrisies that are ripe in modern political oratory.

One of my favorite episodes in recent years that I will be analyzing is *The Gang Solves the Bathroom Problem*, in which the entire twenty-two minutes is spent debating who gets to use the nicer bathroom in the bar, serving as a thinly-veiled allegory to the trans rights debate. In my opinion, this episode was able to perfectly encapsulate the absurdity of the opposition to trans rights to bathrooms by asking questions like “Is comfortability a protected right”, “Who is deserving of special treatment”, and even “Why do we separate bathrooms by gender when we all use it for the same purpose”.

### **III. Analysis**

Season 13, Episode 6 of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* begins with our main characters Mac, Dennis, Dee, Charlie, and Frank preparing to close the bar before going to tailgate a Jimmy Buffet concert. The conflict of the episode arises when Mac (a biological man) exits the women's restroom which is far cleaner than the men's room. Dee, the only woman of

the bunch, scolds Mac saying, “It’s my bathroom and you’re a man”. Mac responds that “as a gay man I feel more comfortable in the ladies room”, to which Dee retorts that “it makes me uncomfortable that you’re in there using my bathroom.” In this quick debate, Mac and Dee provide what are essentially the main arguments for each side of the trans bathroom debate: one side feels comfortable practicing inclusion of chosen identity, while the other side feels comfortable practicing exclusion based on “legal” identity. As the gang doesn’t want to ruin the vibe before they go to the Buffet Concert, they set out to “solve the bathroom problem”.

Mac is the first to begin the formal arguments, and he begins with an enthymeme among all things. He posits, “A: [Women and I] both like dudes. And B: [Women and I] both find women’s bodies disgusting so there’s no hanky panky.” In this enthymematic argument, Mac’s 2-pronged explanation of similarities he has with women is prompting us the gang (audience) to reach the third prong, or conclusion, that he should be allowed to use the women’s restroom. Dee retorts with her own enthymeme, “A: not all women like dudes... lesbians, for example. And B: I find you disgusting.” Both Mac and Dee are using enthymematic arguments (a marrying of persuasive rhetoric and logic) to convince the rest of the gang to join their side, but because their arguments are based on their respective preferences, they need additional persuasive devices. Mac attempts to use such a device in the form of yet another enthymeme when he claims that he has been “pooping next to Dee for months” because she could see Dee in her pink heels. This enthymeme is based on two premises:

1. Mac has been pooping next to someone wearing pink heels for months.
2. Dee wears pink heels.

Which together form the logical conclusion that:

3. Dee must be ok with Mac using the women’s room.

When Dee is confused by this statement, it forces Charlie to reveal that Mac is operating with an incorrect assumption that Dee wears pink heels and that it is Charlie himself who wears the heels. Flabbergasted by these statements, the gang forces Charlie to demonstrate to them how Mac's premise is incorrect. Charlie then reveals to the gang that he only poops wearing women's clothing stemming from the countless times his mother took him to the women's room as a young child. Dennis uses this information together with Dee's earlier comment about how she is fine with letting a transgender woman use her bathroom to make his own persuasive enthymeme:

1. "Dee you did mention moments ago that you would be comfortable letting a transgender woman use your bathroom.
2. "Charlie identifies as a woman when he poops."

Which together form the logical conclusion that:

3. Mac is correct in that the current binary system in place for bathrooms is antiquated, and anyone should be allowed to use any bathroom.

Based on the persuasiveness of his logical argument, the majority of the gang (sans Dee) votes to abolish the binary system of bathrooms.

The success is short lived when the gang begins to debate on the proper signage to have for their new all-inclusive restrooms. Aristotle himself wrote that "the materials of enthymemes are probabilities and signs" (*Rhetoric*, P6, L32). He further explains that by "necessary signs I mean those on which deductions may be based; and this shows us why this kind of sign is called an evidence" (*Rhetoric*, P7, L5). Now, while Aristotle isn't talking about literal signage like bathroom signs or traffic signs, the same principle applies. For instance, when you look at a stop sign, you automatically go through this thought process:

1. Signs are symbols that communicate pertinent information.

2. This red octagonal sign means I should stop.

Leading you to reach the logical conclusion:

3. This stop sign is evidence that I should stop here.

Signs all hinge on the assumption that we understand what the sign is communicating to us, and that we will logically follow the sign to a conclusion. But what happens when one of these assumptions is broken by a misunderstanding? *It's Always Sunny in the Valley* shows us the dangers of working with a misunderstood sign (literally):

Pictured here on the right is Dennis' first attempt at creating signage to communicate that the bathroom is for everyone. The sign shows a silhouette that is a composite of the traditional male and female figure we see on bathroom signs, along with a handicap symbol, and finally in the top right corner what is supposed to symbolize a baby. The entire gang



Screenshot from *The Gang Solves the Bathroom Problem* (2018).

misunderstands Dennis' sign, with Charlie asking "What's with the floating starfish trying to eat the rock" referring to the baby. When Dennis covers up the baby for them, Frank explains that he feels like "You either have to be in a wheelchair or a he-she to poop in there." While Frank's comment is offensive, it exemplifies how signs are instruments for deduction, and the clearer they are the clearer the conclusive deduction is.

After much deliberation, Dee suggests that they put signs on each bathroom labeled "TOILET", which everyone agrees on. However, when Dee starts to enter the dirtier men's room on the basis that she's "about to do some real damage", Frank rescinds his approval as he's "uncomfortable with that" and that "a woman is not a lady when she's dumping up a john." This



enthymeme arguing Frank's discomfort inspires the gang to create a system which emphasizes privacy to ensure comfortability, creating floor to ceiling barriers for all of the stalls and playing screaming noises so as not to hear people doing their business in the bathroom. When it is shown that Frank holds a gun on the toilet, claiming that if he doesn't he "can't make", he provides a parallel to the anti-trans debate in the form of clinging to institutionalized ideas. Frank claims that it is his second amendment right to hold a gun on the toilet, and further expresses they should consult the constitution in this debate, where he ends up citing the 3/5ths Compromise. The gang immediately discounts this idea as he is abusing the logic of past doctrines, and presenting them as evidence. Ultimately, the gang finds a solution to their problem by collectively understanding the following premises:

1. Everybody poops
2. Pooping is an inherently shameful act.

Which reaches the logical conclusion that:

3. No one deserves to feel comfortable in the bathroom.

With that, they formally agree on labeling the bathrooms with signs saying "ANIMAL SHITHOUSE".

#### **IV. Why is this important**

"For the true and the approximately true are apprehended by the same faculty" says Aristotle regarding the persuasiveness of enthymemes. This is one of Aristotle's quotes that feel incredibly poignant in today's political debates. When people like Chase Tramont try to discount the experience of trans individuals, they use the tired expression that "there are only two genders". This is an approximately true statement, in the sense that when a person is born they're

identified by their respective genitalia, which unless you are part of the rare group of intersex people, you will be assigned male or female. It is this approximately true statement which leads a significant amount of the population to reach their logical conclusion that people should only use bathrooms corresponding to their born gender. However, it is entirely evident that there are an exceedingly large number of people in the world who no longer wish to be restricted to a binary system, expressing to everyone that it isn't as simple to live assigned to your biological gender. *It's Always Sunny* attempts to demonstrate this non simplistic concept with Charlie, who is confined to the idea that he can only go to the bathroom in women's clothing, and thus should be allowed to use the women's room. While it's certainly not a 1-to-1 comparison with transgender people, both arguments are beholden to the nature of identity. Through Charlie, *It's Always Sunny* makes a compelling case for the removal of antiquated bathroom laws, as our society no longer exists within the binary structure of identity we had been so accustomed to.

In the *It's Always Sunny* episode, the throughline of the debate is comfortability, as shown by each character's unique take on the issue, which aptly identifies that the basis of the real-world trans bathroom debate is to prove the decision which makes the most amount of people comfortable, or rather just. The people who proclaim that there are only two genders use this idea to justify their discomfort with trans people choosing whichever bathroom they identify with, and that their discomfort is grounds to limit the validity of trans identities. On the reliance of institutions, there is a moment in this episode where Frank suggests they should follow the US constitution to guide them on the issue, citing the "3/5ths Compromise" to persuade the gang to restrict bathroom usage to anyone who is not a white, land-owning male. This is immediately shot down by the rest of the gang, implying how the anti-trans side of this debate uses institutional ideas like "there are only two genders" to validate their argument, when those

“facts” are widely considered to be antiquated and unconstitutional. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of rhetorical oratory, in that it serves to unlock the truths we search for in life, and by clinging to ideas originating before us without questioning them, we are paralyzed from that search and limited to the “approximately true”.

As Aristotle wrote regarding rhetoric, “its function is not simply to succeed in persuading, but rather to discover the persuasive facts in each case” and *It’s Always Sunny* does just that through their enthymematic arguments. As the gang progresses through their debate, they reach important questions like “Why do we even care about what is going on in the bathroom?” and “If using the bathroom is an inherently shameful act that we do behind closed doors, why are we attributing so much emphasis on which gender can use which bathroom?” These questions are answered in the conclusion of the episode where the gang ultimately decides to label both of the bathrooms with signs that read “ANIMAL SHITHOUSE”, sardonically implying that regardless of your identity, gay or straight or cis or trans, we are all human beings taking part in this animalistic shameful act of going to the bathroom. *It’s Always Sunny* masterfully discovers the persuasive facts in the case through argument, slicing through the approximately true to reach a logical conclusion.

If America is truly a free country where personal expression remains a national liberty, why is it so important to some that this liberty can be restricted by a bathroom sign?

## **V. External Research**

Apart from my primary research from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and *It’s Always Sunny*’s “The Gang Solves the Bathroom Problem”, I wanted to gather secondary sources to further clarify Aristotle’s rhetorical concepts as well as the claims I make regarding stances on the bathroom

debate. As Aristotle doesn't really provide a concrete definition of an enthymeme, I cited our class resource of *American Rhetoric: Rhetorical Devices in Sound*, and their definition of an enthymeme. To help me develop a modern interpretation of Aristotle's enthusiasm for enthymemes, Youtube channel *Give Me Five*'s video "How to Argue Effectively" provides a solid explanation behind the power of an enthymematic argument. To demonstrate the legal prominence of the bathroom debate, I pulled information from the Southern Poverty Law Center's *Learning for Justice* site, featuring the article "TRANS RIGHTS AND BATHROOM ACCESS LAWS: A HISTORY EXPLAINED". The specific quote I used from the article was from a timeline enumerating legislative decisions regarding trans bathroom rights to emphasize how prevalent and incendiary this debate has become in the public sphere. Because this debate and resulting legislation is ongoing, I was able to find quotes from PBS and AP News which highlighted recent efforts by Republican legislators to discriminate against transgender people through "bathroom bills" in just March of this year. To illustrate that this is a debate, and not a one-sided issue, I used data collected from both ballotpedia.org as well as surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center exemplifying the divide on the issue.

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