

# Aesthetic Austerity in Persuasion

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*How can we distinguish the permissible use of aesthetic features in persuasive communication from their manipulative misuse? The paper reconstructs the basic argument (proposed by Stoics and others in antiquity) that persuasive speech should be aesthetically austere. The argument, it is suggested, is fundamentally sound. But the view it sustains is subject to challenge, on the grounds that it is implausible and impractical in the real world. By making clear the grounds on which the “austere” view is justified, and by making precise the arguments that underlie those challenges, the paper identifies and evaluates three different possible responses to those challenges. The most promising of these accepts the argument for “austerity” but proposes a more moderate interpretation of its conclusion. In doing so, it takes up the challenge of providing a defensible rationale for distinguishing the permissible from the impermissible use of aesthetic features in persuasive communication.*

## 1. Introduction

If previous generations might have doubted that a ready wit and the ability to craft a well-turned phrase could be manipulatively misused, the present generation can be in no doubt. Asked to produce an example of a politician, business leader, or even academic dean whose slick way of putting things made them hard to disagree with, few would struggle. The frequent triumph of style over substance is not confined to the political sphere; it is everywhere. And yet public and organizational leadership requires an ability to persuade and foster agreement around the pursuit of common goals.<sup>1</sup> Hence it is particularly among leaders that we tend to find the ability to use, and also misuse, aesthetic devices in persuasive speech, and the resulting ability sometimes to secure a following whatever the merits of their case. Faced with this alarming phenomenon, it is tempting to be suspicious of all persuasive artifice and insist on plain speaking when it comes to discussing matters of importance.<sup>2</sup> But forbidding all aesthetic sophistication in persuasion is as implausible in one direction as permitting everything is in the other. There cannot be an obligation to be boring! On what principled basis can we determine *which* uses of aesthetic features in persuasive speech orators should avoid and which are unobjectionable?<sup>3</sup>

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1 Cf. the definition of leadership in a standard textbook such as (Northouse, 2007, p. 3).

2 This paper arises from studying the debates among thinkers in classical antiquity about the proper approach to rhetorical style. Many—not just the Stoics, but to a significant extent Socrates and Aristotle too—were reacting to what they saw as the misuse of stylistic persuasive devices among the orators of their own day (and the theorists that endorsed and handed on such methods). Cf. Atherton (1988) on the Stoics and Halliwell (1993) on Aristotle.

3 This issue is almost completely untouched in recent philosophical literature. Although there is a growing literature on manipulation (e.g. Mills (1995), Coons and Weber (2014), Gorin, (2014)), there is little on

This paper reconstructs the basic argument (proposed by Stoics and others in antiquity) that persuasive speech should be aesthetically ‘austere’ (in a sense to be clarified below). The argument, I suggest, is fundamentally a good one—it seems to proceed validly from true premises to its conclusion. But the view it sustains is subject to challenge—on the grounds that it is implausible and impractical in the real world. By making clear the grounds on which the ‘austere’ view is justified, and by making precise the arguments that underlie those challenges, I aim to trace and evaluate three different possible responses to those challenges.<sup>4</sup> The most promising of these responses accepts the argument for ‘austerity’ but proposes a more moderate interpretation of its conclusion. In doing so, it takes up the challenge of providing a defensible rationale for distinguishing the permissible from the impermissible use of aesthetic features in persuasive communication.

## 2. The Case for Aesthetic Austerity in Persuasion

In this paper, I am using ‘aesthetic austerity’ as a shorthand for the view (given roughly here, and to be sharpened up further below) that people should not persuade others using the aesthetic features of the medium they use for communication. I focus here on persuasive speech.<sup>5</sup> So, for example, people should not use such aesthetic features as the fine words or rhythms of a speech, as the thing that convinces others to adopt their point of view. The features of a speech that exert persuasive force on others should exclude its aesthetic features.

This claim, as I shall show, has seemed surprising and counter-intuitive to many today and in the past, and hence it faces serious challenge. But it is important to see that it is not unmotivated. The argument is set out below, but its key step is the observation that if (say) I am seeking to persuade you that such-and-such is the best available course of action, or that the accused is innocent (or guilty), the fact that my speech exhibits pleasing or impressive choices of words and rhythms is not something that ought to sway you one way or the other on the substantive question at issue—that is, the (comparative) merits of the proposal(s), or the innocence or guilt of the accused. And the point seems to generalize: we should seek to persuade people only by things that they ought to be swayed by.

1. Other things being equal, people should avoid persuasive methods insofar as those methods depend for their success on the audience’s evaluating the merits of

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aesthetic manipulation (Mills (2014) is focused on the emotional manipulation of film audiences). Stanley (2015) does not discuss the use of aesthetic devices in his discussion of propaganda. Arguments from antiquity remain the richest historical source of philosophical material.

- 4 Each of these responses can be traced in the discussions of rhetoric by philosophers, teachers, and practitioners in classical antiquity. I take up this task elsewhere.
- 5 The task of extending the account to other media used in persuasion must be taken up elsewhere.

- views and adopting verdicts in ways that are influenced by things other than good grounds for their verdict (i.e. good reasons/evidence).
2. Aesthetic features of the persuasive medium (the speech) are not themselves good grounds for their verdict (i.e. aesthetic features are not themselves good reasons/evidence).
  3. THEREFORE (from 1 and 2): [AUSTERITY] People should (other things being equal) avoid persuasive methods that depend for their success on the audience's evaluating the merits of views and adopting verdicts in ways that are influenced by aesthetic features of the persuasive medium.

The argument can be applied to the doxastic case of persuading someone to believe something, and to the practical case of persuading someone to do something.<sup>6</sup> The basic insight is that, except in unusual circumstances,<sup>7</sup> the relevant range of reasons for believing or acting will not include the aesthetic features of the persuasive medium (e.g. the speech). Insofar as someone is persuaded to a particular view by a speech, it should be its content—and the reasons for holding the view that are part of that content—that influences how they arrive at their verdict.

To focus on the doxastic case,<sup>8</sup> this view might be summarized as the view that the norms governing persuasion are determined by epistemology—how the persuader should persuade<sup>9</sup> is determined by how the believer on the receiving end should believe.<sup>10</sup> The right kind of persuasion improves the epistemic position of the listener and changes their mind by providing them with new evidence or helping them see the significance of particular reasons for holding one or another view (or helping them see that things they had taken

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6 This may not exhaust the range of possible cases. The argument may apply—for example, to persuading someone to feel a certain way.

7 Such as someone seeking to convince others of their artistic skill.

8 The focus on the doxastic case is particularly significant because there is at least an important range of cases of practical persuasion that is doxastic in form—that is, takes the form of persuading someone to believe that such-and-such is the (best) thing to do. The further issue of how aesthetic features of a speech should be used to elicit affective states and motivations, over and above what arises from beliefs of the kind just mentioned, is a complex question that would take us too far afield. But note that, in considering how we *ought* to move audiences to affective responses, one obvious aspect of how emotions ought to be cultivated is that the resulting emotions should be *justified*. And justified emotions are precisely those whose content the subject is justified in affirming (as part of their emotion). The doxastic case focuses precisely on the kind of persuasion that will result in audiences being justified in what they affirm as a result of being persuaded. So, to that extent, the discussion will be relevant also to the propriety of using aesthetic features to move audiences to affective responses. A fuller discussion of the use of emotion in persuasion is offered in Dow (2019).

9 There may be a different range of normative considerations that apply to the question of *whether* someone should, on a given occasion, undertake to persuade in the first place.

10 The *ceteris paribus* clause in the argument above allows that high stakes (e.g. lives at stake, or the need to prevent an atrocity) *might* sometimes make it (morally) right to persuade in ways get listeners swayed by things other than good (epistemic) reasons.

to be weighty reasons did not hold the significance they had thought). The wrong kind of persuasion involves getting the listener to make cognitive mistakes, such as taking things to be evidentially significant in a way that they are not, or taking something to be a reason (of such-and-such weight) when it is not. This could be as simple as deceiving the person (or exploiting ways in which they are deceived); it could be more complex, perhaps getting them to make a subtle inferential mistake; or again, it could be through a simple willingness to deploy whatever techniques will cause the audience to change their minds—using carefully chosen clothing, staging, flags, symbolism, tone of voice, or emotionally charged terms. But there will also be both unintentional and negligent cases of illegitimate persuasion, where the persuader is simply inattentive to (or unaware of) issues of propriety and uses persuasive methods that (in fact) work through the aesthetic features of the medium.

### 2.1. *The Significance of the Case for Aesthetic Austerity*

The idea that legitimate persuasion requires ‘aesthetic austerity’ has, to many, seemed counter-intuitive, and the following sections are devoted to exploring two important challenges it faces. So it is important, before we come to those challenges, to see that there is at least a credible case to be made *in favour of* aesthetic austerity in persuasion. It is a position that integrates our view of the aesthetic aspects of persuasion into an overall view of the kind of persuasion we think valuable and that we think people should engage in—that is, persuasion that works by getting us to respond to reasons and evidence in proportion to their significance.<sup>11</sup> Insofar as we think that (ordinarily) aesthetic features of a speech do not constitute reasons to adopt this or that view of its subject-matter, we think they should not sway us because this is something only good reasons should do; hence, those who persuade should not use these features to try to sway us.

The plausibility of the argument, and the attractiveness of the general view of persuasion that it upholds, are sufficient not only to establish some initial plausibility for ‘aesthetic austerity’, but also to motivate responding to the challenges that are raised against it. But the argument is not sufficiently compelling to make us dismiss those challenges: perhaps we should not, after all, (a) hold the general view of persuasive legitimacy canvassed in premise 1, or (b) allow that aesthetic features cannot constitute reasons for holding this or that view of a substantive matter, as premise 2 says. The idea expressed in the conclusion (3) is sufficiently surprising that, even if we cannot fault the argument that supports it, we might still wish to consider whether those challenges give us stronger reasons to reject it.

## 3. The Implausibility Challenge From ‘Florid Examples’

The first challenge is a direct rejection of the austere conclusion, on the basis that there are cases where its normative assessment seems clearly incorrect. That is, we can identify

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11 Although this is most naturally understood within an evidentialist framework (cf. Kelly, 2002; Shah, 2006), it is compatible with more permissive views of what might constitute reasons for believing.

cases of persuasion where it seems clear that the audience's evaluations and verdict-formation are influenced by aesthetic features of the speech, but which seem equally clearly to lack impropriety. Indeed some such cases might exemplify the kinds of persuasion that we find most admirable.

4. [FLORID EXAMPLES] Some cases of persuasion (indeed some of our most admired cases) seem both without any (even pro tanto) impropriety and also to depend for their success on the audience evaluating the merits of views and adopting verdicts in ways that are influenced by aesthetic features of the persuasive medium.

This contradicts the austere conclusion above:

3. [AUSTERITY] People should (other things being equal) avoid persuasive methods that depend for their success on the audience's evaluating the merits of views and adopting verdicts in ways that are influenced by aesthetic features of the persuasive medium.

We will frame the challenge using speeches by renowned orators Barack Obama, Martin Luther King, and Abraham Lincoln. But the austere conclusion will be challenged by any example, actual or possible, in which the key features are present (the aesthetic features of the speech influence the audience's evaluations and verdict-formation). However, it is implausible to think that these make the persuasive methods wrongful. There are surely many such cases.

Example 1: On 21 October, 2020, former US President Barack [Obama \(2020\)](#) delivered a speech in support of the presidential election campaign of Joe Biden.

It is an entertaining speech and stylistically far from plain, as one might expect from one who is widely regarded as one of the great orators of the present era.<sup>12</sup> At one point, Obama lists a number of departments of government that have been put in the hands of those with corporate vested interests likely to be in conflict with the interests of ordinary citizens that department was established to serve. The first three are introduced the same way, giving the name of the department and the public interest purposes it serves:

*The Environmental Protection Agency that's supposed to . . . The Labor Department that's supposed to . . . The Interior Department, that's supposed to . . . .* ([Obama, 2020](#))

The aesthetic presentation—as a tricolon—makes the list obvious, memorable, and emphatic. But then a further two examples are added, using a different form of words:

*You've got the Education Department that's supposed to . . . .* ([Obama, 2020](#))

and

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12 It has been suggested to me that his nickname 'no drama Obama' not only highlights his calm personality but implies also that he did not tend to speak with dramatic displays of emotion. Even if that were so, this is not in conflict with recognizing his skill in using aesthetic devices (such as choice of diction, rhythm, and sentence construction) as part of his panoply of techniques.

*I mean, the person who runs Medicaid right now is . . . . (Obama, 2020)*

which emphasizes the abundance of examples available, and whose informality gives the impression that further examples are spontaneously occurring to Obama as he is speaking. This addition suggests that what is being said about these departments applies systematically across government, but does so in a way that hides the artifice of the first tricolon by breaking up the rhythm. The audience is being invited to draw a general conclusion about the subversion of public service by the Trump administration on the basis of the five examples presented. The aesthetic features of how this list of examples is presented plays a significant part in achieving this persuasive result: the tricolon emphasizes the significance of the examples (Environment, Labour, Interior), and the off-hand informality of the two later additions suggests the abundant availability of examples, perhaps implying that many others are available.<sup>13</sup> Assuming that there is no deception about the factual aspects of what is implied, the use of these stylistic devices seems entirely legitimate, and indeed commendable. Insofar as we want our political choices to be informed by persuasive speeches, it is surely skilful, creative speeches of this kind that we most want to hear.

It seems undeniable that aesthetic features influence the audience's weighing of the issues at hand: a less stylistically accomplished speech conveying otherwise similar informational content would have been less persuasive. If so, this favourable verdict on the propriety of Obama's speech seems to be incompatible with the conclusion (AUSTERITY).

Example 2: Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I've been to the mountaintop' speech.

*Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!*

*And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!! (King, 1968)*

This is an extraordinary end to an extraordinary speech, and I confine myself to a few limited observations. One of the things that Dr King is seeking to convey here is his expectation that the civil rights struggle will be successful in achieving its goals, and to instil such an expectation in others ('I want you to know tonight', etc.). This is no small persuasive task, given how distant equal treatment of black workers will have seemed to the audience at that point. But he does so through the use of stunning imagery—of himself as Moses, enabled by the Lord to look over into the promised land where his people are destined to go, where that promised land represents the success of the civil rights struggle;

13 Another very famous example of the use of this kind of aesthetic device is the ending of Winston Churchill's wartime 'We will fight on the beaches' speech (Churchill, 1940). The succession of phrases introduced by 'we shall fight' emphasizes the importance of what is said—namely, of the determination to defend Britain—and the breaking up of that pattern in the long list of modes of resistance emphasizes that there is line upon line of defence of Britain's shores, implying that eventual victory against Hitler's forces was all but certain.

and of himself as someone who has seen a vision of the future, in which the success of the civil rights struggle is as the coming of the Lord himself. It is hard to deny that these aesthetic devices influence the persuasive effects of the speech on its audience. But it seems equally clear that these do not in any way compromise the propriety of the speech. On the contrary, these are generally regarded as features to be greatly admired.

Example 3: Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

*Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.*

*Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.*

*But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced . . . that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth. (Lincoln, 1863)*

Lincoln seeks to motivate his audience to dedicate themselves to the Union cause in the civil war by framing that conflict in particular ways. The aesthetic features of the speech contribute to the persuasive success of this framing. In particular, the structure is significant. It moves from the past (the founding fathers) through the present to the future. And it moves from birth ('brought forth', 'conceived') through death to rebirth or resurrection ('a new birth of freedom') to implied immortality ('shall not perish'). Both of these structural features create a sense of movement from the past through the present and into the future that emphasizes a sense of the future's being a kind of fulfilment and culmination of the past and present, and a sense of obligation on the living to continue successfully into the future the cause bequeathed to them by the founding fathers and the Gettysburg dead.

As with the previous two examples, clearly these aesthetic features make a difference to the speech's persuasive efficacy, but equally clearly they do not compromise its propriety.

### 3.1. Assessing the Implausibility Challenge from Florid Examples

The challenge strikes directly at the plausibility of the conclusion (AUSTERITY) itself. One option for defending it is to deny that there are such cases—perhaps these cases and others like them are not, after all, as morally unproblematic as supposed, and we are mistaken to admire them. Another option is to insist that, in such cases, the aesthetic features do not, after all, influence the audience's evaluations and verdict-formation themselves. The latter response might involve identifying a different role for the aesthetic features in the persuasive process.

Both of these possibilities will be considered below. But first, I highlight a second challenge to aesthetic austerity.

#### 4. The Challenge From the Impotence of Austere Speech

The second challenge stems from the observation that restricting the methods of persuasive speech in the way that AUSTERITY recommends is to render it persuasively impotent in real-world deliberative contexts, such as law courts and political assemblies. Success in such contexts, this challenge maintains, always or usually requires using aesthetic features of the medium to influence how the audience evaluates its options. This constitutes an objection when combined with the claim that, despite their imperfections, real-world deliberative contexts make a significant and valuable contribution to the functioning of states and other human communities because of how they function in enabling people collectively to listen to reasons and evidence being presented in favour of different conclusions, evaluate the comparative weight of those reasons and evidence, and be persuaded by the best of these to adopt the best-supported of the available conclusions. Where these deliberative arrangements or institutions function successfully, it must be in some significant measure because persuasion has been conducted as it should, and it has succeeded. But if stylistic austerity generally leads to failure, then these successful cases must be using the kinds of aesthetic devices that AUSTERITY would rule out.

This does not immediately show the conclusion AUSTERITY to be false. It shows that insofar as we want persuaders to contribute to the value of real-world deliberations, they should use the methods that AUSTERITY claims they should not. That would set up a conflict between what is valuable or required from persuasive speakers *as far as contributing to deliberation is concerned*, and what is required from persuasive speakers *otherwise*. But such a conflict is highly problematic for the plausibility of AUSTERITY. Contributing to deliberation is the main purpose for which we value persuasive speech, so if AUSTERITY applies only to persuasive speech that is not contributing to deliberation, its scope of application starts to look very small indeed.

We might spell out the challenge as follows.

5. Many real-world, imperfect, deliberative contexts secure the valuable outcomes of (i) improved collective judgements (ii) formed through weighing evidence and reasons. These outcomes to a significant degree result from, and depend upon, the successful use of persuasive speeches.
6. Insofar as those valuable outcomes result from the successful use of persuasive speech, they are the result of speakers' achieving non-accidental persuasive success by using the methods that they should, i.e. those methods that influence audiences in the right way(s).
7. (from 5 and 6): Some kinds of persuasive methods that speakers should use tend to succeed in real-world deliberative contexts.
8. [IMPOTENCE] A range of persuasive methods that does not involve aesthetic features of the persuasive medium influencing audiences' evaluation of their options will not tend to succeed in real-world persuasive contexts (or: 'Austerity is impotent').
9. (from 8): If a range of persuasive methods tends to succeed in real-world persuasive contexts, it will involve aesthetic features of the persuasive medium influencing audiences' evaluation of their options.
10. THEREFORE: (from 7 and 9) Some kinds of persuasive methods that speakers should use involve aesthetic features of the persuasive medium influencing audiences' evaluation of their options.



If 10 is true, AUSTERITY is false. It is difficult to deny that successful public persuasion can be undertaken in the kinds of ways it should, because it seems clear that even imperfect deliberative arrangements often deliver the valuable improvement in collective judgement that they are designed to achieve,<sup>14</sup> and that successful persuasive speech plays an important role in their doing so.

A key role in this challenge is played by the premise here labelled ‘IMPOTENCE’. It is an empirical generalization, and may not seem compelling to all. But it is certainly very plausible and widely believed.

It is worth clarifying what is claimed in ‘IMPOTENCE’. It is not the claim that aesthetically austere persuasion *never* succeeds. Rather it is the claim that austere persuasion is generally liable to fail. This might be because it tends to make insufficient persuasive impact in its own right, or because in situations where there are multiple advocates for rival perspectives, the austere persuader will be outgunned by those who make persuasive use of aesthetic devices. Austere persuaders will succeed sometimes, especially where they have facts of clear, major significance to deploy on their side, or are able to enlist to their cause powerful existing motivations of their audience. But the general effect of austerity is to deprive them of persuasive tools that are so powerful and so widely used that to be without them is to be likely to fail. The effect observed above in the discussion of the Obama case seems to be widespread: the more aesthetically accomplished the speech, the higher the regard the audience is likely to have for the view it commends. And conversely, the merits of views commended by aesthetically dull speeches tend to be evaluated lower (other things being equal). Such is the claim labelled ‘IMPOTENCE’.

Is ‘IMPOTENCE’ true? Since this is an empirical claim, its full evaluation must be left to others. But there are reasons for thinking it is true. Senior politicians regularly employ speech-writers—a major part of whose job is to enhance the aesthetic effectiveness of their speeches. The vast sums spent on advertising expertise,<sup>15</sup> a significant part of which involves optimizing the persuasive deployment of aesthetic aspects of advertisements, suggest that these make a vast difference to persuasive effectiveness in the ways ‘IMPOTENCE’ suggests.<sup>16</sup> In our own leadership ethics research (Dow, n.d.), we have frequently encountered organizational leaders wrestling with what they see as the necessity of deploying the ‘dark arts’ of persuasion in order to secure agreement and cooperation among others within which they would certainly include aesthetic tools of persuasive communication.

## 5. Options for Defending Aesthetic Austerity in the Face of These Challenges

These challenges constitute a substantial case against the requirement for aesthetic austerity in persuasion. But they work by challenging the conclusion directly, the requirement that persuasion be aesthetically austere, and do not undermine the argument that supported it.

14 The argument does not require claiming (implausibly) that improvements in collective judgement are the only thing that these arrangements are designed to achieve. Participation and consent are obvious further goals.

15 Global spend on advertising for 2021 was estimated at over \$780bn. Cf. [Cramer-Flood \(2021\)](#).

16 ([Dow, n.d.](#)).

Thus we have a plausible initial argument in favour of austerity and now two plausible arguments against it. Can these arguments be reconciled, and if so, how? I consider three possible responses, not mutually exclusive. One is to reject the intuitions behind the challenges—that is, contesting the propriety or the persuasive effectiveness of the methods in the ‘florid’ examples at the heart of the first challenge. A second response would be to insist that austere persuasion is not impotent in the way claimed in the second challenge. And a third response is to highlight how some ways of using aesthetic features of persuasive media are not ruled out by the argument in favour of austerity. This opens up the possibility that the aesthetic sophistication of the methods that feature in the first challenge’s ‘florid examples’ functions in such a way as to lie outside the scope of what the argument for persuasive austerity says persuaders should avoid. And it increases the plausibility of insisting that ‘austere’ persuasion (or rather, persuasion involving methods that are permitted by the argument for austerity) is not impotent in the way that generated the problems highlighted in the second challenge.

### 5.1. *Response 1—Retain Austerity and Avoid Public Persuasion*

The first response is to hold fast to the conclusion of the argument requiring aesthetic austerity in persuasion, and maintain that each of the challenges is mistaken in key respects. Although the ‘florid examples’ illustrated above may seem to involve unobjectionable persuasive methods, this is not in fact so. The fact that examples of persuasion are for causes we ourselves support may beguile us into overlooking their manipulative way of working. They seem unproblematic, but they are not. If it is accepted (as the second challenge suggests) that an austere repertoire of aesthetic tools means persuasive impotence in at least certain kinds of (large-scale, public) settings, then we should avoid attempting persuasion in such settings. It will be futile.

But this might, in turn, motivate rejecting the view that the deliberative institutions and arrangements referred to in the second challenge are as valuable and important as claimed. They may appear to improve collective deliberation, but perhaps this only happens accidentally and less systematically than supposed. Indeed, the fact that such deliberative contexts are so vulnerable to being swayed by the use of aesthetic features and other such persuasive methods might be highlighted as evidence that they are open to manipulation, and that, so far from being valuable, they are highly problematic and best avoided. In this way, the force of the second challenge is blunted.

### 5.2. *Response 2—Retain Austerity and Accept Vulnerability to Defeat*

Anyone insisting that speakers should maintain an austere approach to the aesthetics of persuasion is bound to reject as illicit examples, however widely celebrated, in which a wider range of persuasive aesthetic devices is deployed. But it is also possible to take a more sanguine view of the austere persuader’s prospects for success than those articulated in the second challenge laid out above.<sup>17</sup> You can concede that less scrupulous approaches

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17 Cicero highlights this possibility, and suggests that a number of Stoics in practice took this position. Cf. *De Orat.* 3.59–3.60; *Brutus* 117; *Paradoxa Stoicorum* proemium 1–2. For English translations, see e.g. Cicero (1989), Cicero (2020) and Cicero (2001).

to persuasive aesthetics would often make it easier to bring others round to your point of view, without despairing entirely of the persuasive prospects of the orator committed to aesthetic austerity. Unadorned oratory will sometimes succeed, especially where the speaker makes their arguments and evidence supremely clear: evidence and arguments have a persuasive force, and this can sometimes be enough.

These first two responses are perfectly coherent, and there is nothing impossible about the idea that correct norms governing persuasion might be revisionary, requiring us to reject as improper some examples of persuasion that most people would regard as unproblematic. Perhaps also correct normative views about persuasion and deliberation might require us to reconsider our approval for real-world deliberative institutions and practices, and more pessimistically accept that, under current societal arrangements, those who adhere to the correct set of norms governing persuasion will always tend to lose out to the less scrupulous.

But these are costs. Both responses require the rejection of some reasonably robust intuitions about both particular instances of persuasion and persuaders, and also the value of real-world deliberative institutions and arrangements. It is a cost to suppose that speakers, in cases like those of Obama, King, and Lincoln discussed earlier, are using illicit persuasive means to promote their causes. And it is a cost to suppose that apparently well-functioning real-world deliberative institutions tend to be impervious (whether wholly or in part) to legitimate persuasive methods. This is enough to motivate trying to find a response to these challenges that avoids overturning such intuitions.

### 5.3. Response 3—*Reinterpret Austerity to Permit Some Aesthetic Elements*

The third possible response involves distinguishing between those ways of using aesthetic features in persuasion that are ruled out by the argument for austerity and those that are not. If successful, this would open the door to recognizing the propriety of the aesthetically sophisticated methods used by these famous orators and others, and to seeing how there could be unobjectionable ways to deploy aesthetic devices in the kind of persuasively effective communication that underpins the value of real-world deliberative institutions. But it would do so without rejecting the premises of the argument for austerity, nor the way in which its conclusion expresses an important constraint on how persuasive speech should be undertaken.

The key premise in the argument for aesthetic austerity is the first premise:

1. Other things being equal, people should avoid persuasive methods insofar as those methods depend for their success on the audience's evaluating the merits of views and adopting verdicts in ways that are influenced by things other than good grounds for their verdict (i.e. good reasons/evidence).

Aesthetic features of the persuasive medium are not *good grounds* for the verdict, so speakers should not be seeking the kind of persuasive success that is achieved through their influence on the audience's evaluation of their options. But it does not follow from this that they could not legitimately play some *other* important role in the persuasive process. Their role might be to enhance the audience's recognition or comprehension

of the good reasons or evidence that then determines their evaluation of the options. Aesthetic features might do this by securing the wandering attention of audience members on what is being said, or by ensuring that particular aspects of what is said capture their attention, where those things constitute particularly significant reasons or evidence in relation to the issues under consideration. Of course, aesthetic features of a speech do not exert their effects separately from other properties of the speech: the audience experiences them together, and the various properties of the speech (e.g. semantic, epistemic, logical, aesthetic) are interdependent in important ways. The issue here has to do with which of the speech's many properties are causally relevant to producing a given effect. If it is (partly or wholly) in virtue of its aesthetic properties that the speech causes the audience to pay attention in particular ways, that does not fall within the purview of the argument for austerity. But if it is (partly or wholly) in virtue of its aesthetic properties that the speech causes the audience, in their deliberations, to evaluate the merits of this view better or worse than another, or to settle upon this rather than that verdict on the issue at hand, then the speech's methods will fall within the scope of the argument's recommendations. Insofar as persuasive speeches influence the audience's evaluation of the merits of options and their forming of verdicts on the issues before them, they should do so in ways that avoid those processes being influenced by anything other than good reasons and evidence.

Recall that anyone who supports the basic case for aesthetic austerity in persuasion faces two challenges: (1) the challenge that they are committed to condemning (i.e. judging illicit) a range of real-world persuasive practices and real-world examples of persuasion ('florid examples') that intuitively seem perfectly legitimate, and (2) the challenge that the repertoire of austere persuasive methods they deem legitimate dooms its practitioners to likely failure in real-world deliberative contexts. This is problematic because it entails denying what we think is valuable about real-world deliberative contexts (that they benefit, albeit imperfectly, from hearing competing arguments for rival views and being properly persuaded by the better arguments). In the face of these challenges, the supporter of austerity can either bite the bullet and accept these counter-intuitive implications (as do the two responses so far considered), or take the option explored in this section. This last option involves insisting that the argument for austerity does not rule out *all* uses of aesthetic features in persuasive communication, and that it is the permitted uses that feature in the persuasive practices and deliberative institutions that we find intuitively unproblematic and indeed valuable.

It is therefore important for us to assess the plausibility of this third response, since it looks likely to be the most attractive option.<sup>18</sup>

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18 Besides the options listed, one might consider rejecting one of the premises in the argument for austerity (and abandoning its conclusion), or rejecting premises in one or both of the challenges (and retaining the austere conclusion). One might also coherently adopt certain combinations of these options. But all these strategies face the difficulty that rejecting any of these premises is, at least *prima facie*, extremely unattractive.

## 6. Assessing the Third Response—Implications for the Obama Case

We can assess the merits of the third type of response to the two challenges articulated earlier by considering how plausibly it applies to a ‘florid example’ such as the Barack Obama speech considered earlier. Such examples constituted a challenge because they were examples (a) that intuitively seem to be cases of persuasion being conducted as it should be, and (b) in which aesthetic features of the communicative medium seem to exert a significant influence over the deliberating, evaluating, and verdict forming of listeners. To what extent can the persuasive contribution of their aesthetic features be understood as lying elsewhere than influencing the way the audience evaluate the merits of views and the way they adopt verdicts? How plausible is it to suggest that the aesthetic features contribute to the overall persuasive effects of the speech by such things as capturing and directing audience attention? And how closely do our intuitions about the propriety of such examples vary depending on the exact causal contribution made by their aesthetic features?

### 6.1. *Directing and Sustaining Attention*

In the Barack Obama speech considered in Section 3, most of the aesthetic features whose persuasive contribution we noted do indeed function to focus the audience’s attention on things that are reasons or evidence relevant to Obama’s persuasive goal. Additionally, they may *sustain* their attention upon them over time by making those things more memorable or more gripping, drawing the audience to look for longer, reflect harder, and listen more carefully, or to remember subsequently what has been communicated.

In the presentation of Obama’s list of government departments ceded by the Trump administration to corporate interests, the initial repetition calls attention to the number of examples in the list. And the subsequent variation in how the later examples are presented (i.e. the disruption of the pattern set up by the initial list) keeps the listener alert to the abundance of examples available. What influences the audience’s evaluation of their options (supporting continuation of the Trump regime or switching to a government led by Joe Biden) seems to be the abundance of examples and their ready availability. Obama partly tells us (‘destructive actions that his appointees are doing *all across the government*’) and partly shows us. Five examples is an unusually large number of examples to offer in support of a point in spoken communication. The aesthetic aspects of how this series of examples is presented call attention to this abundance. In this case, the aesthetic features are not influencing the audience’s evaluation independently of the things that constitute good reasons<sup>19</sup> for adopting the speaker’s proposed verdict. The good reasons communicated

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19 The good reasons for rejecting Trump in favour of Biden are the examples of betrayal of the public interest by Trump, and their suggested abundance. Of course, this assumes that these are true—if, in Obama’s five examples, things are not as he presents them, or if these are the only examples there are, with such cases being scarce and the list compiled only with difficulty from obscure corners of government, then presenting those five in ways that imply their abundance and ready availability would obviously be misleading.

and the features (including aesthetic) of the speech in which they are conveyed are of course intertwined. But our key question is whether the listeners' evaluation and verdict-forming processes are influenced by the speech in virtue of its aesthetic features or in virtue of those features that constitute good reasons for their evaluations and verdict. To answer this, let us suppose a listener (who is not deceived about their own psychology) is asked why in response to the speech they drew a general conclusion about the subversion of public service by the Trump administration: they would likely reply by saying (on the basis of what Barack Obama reported) something to the effect that 'everywhere you look, there is example upon example of public services being ceded to corporate interests'. This would suggest that in such a case it is not features of the persuasive medium, including aesthetic features, that are influencing the audiences' evaluations themselves directly, but that the good reasons being presented influence the listener's deliberations more efficiently when the way they are presented (e.g. the structuring of the list of examples) makes their significance (e.g. their abundance) clear.

A similar analysis can be applied to the Gettysburg Address considered above. Its structure creating of a sense of movement from past through the present to the future, and from conception and birth through death to rebirth or resurrection, serves to draw the audience's attention to Lincoln's central argument and to his main conclusion. The conclusion is that they have an obligation to dedicate themselves to the Union cause. The argument is that they owe this to the founding fathers, to their ancestors in general, and to the Gettysburg dead in particular. The aesthetic features of the speech call attention to this by emphasizing how the story of these figures from the past and present requires as its culmination the successful defence of the Union's cause by Lincoln's immediate and wider audiences. The structure is incomplete without this denouement in ways that make clear how the efforts of those figures would constitute failure if the Union cause is not successfully defended. The aesthetic features focus the audience's attention on the reasons Lincoln gives for them to dedicate themselves to the Union cause. Insofar as these are good reasons, the aesthetic features serve to help the audience respond to good reasons.<sup>20</sup>

The Martin Luther King example is more complex because it contains—I suggest—a number of overlapping elements. But I wish to suggest that the function of its aesthetic features is still along broadly similar lines to those in the other examples. These call attention to his claims, and render these clear, easily grasped and memorable (i.e. easily grasped in the future as well as the present). What King is communicating includes that the equal treatment of black workers is possible, that he is personally convinced it will happen, and that it is right, mandated by God, and inevitable. His use of imagery makes this clear, instantly graspable, and memorable. It is also emotionally compelling, which is to say that it is intended and likely to lead its audience to a wholehearted response in which

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20 One might question whether the argument is a good one: are there obligations to make successful the projects of those in the past in the way suggested? But this is not germane to my case here. My claim is that the aesthetic features make clear, and focus attention on, what Lincoln is arguing, and they do not exert persuasive influence independently of that argument—rather, they serve to enable that argument to exert persuasive force itself. Whether his argument is sound is a separate matter.

they do not just believe those things, they feel them emotionally too. In this part of the speech, King does not offer arguments. He perhaps alludes to arguments that many in his audience might have heard previously. The principal grounds on which he invites his audience to accept what he communicates are testimonial, taking him as a credible authority on the prospects for their cause. It is to precisely these grounds that the aesthetic features of his speech—particularly the vision imagery—call attention. Insofar as the audience is convinced by this passage of speech, their verdict is being determined not by the aesthetic features themselves, but by the credibility of King as a witness, on which they focus deliberative and emotional attention.

### 6.2. *Is the Third Response Over-Permissive?*

One might now wonder whether the resulting view is too permissive. Granted that one refrain from seeking to persuade others using methods whose working depends on aesthetic features of the communicative medium directly influencing how listeners evaluate their options. Nevertheless, this might still seem to leave open a vast scope for using the manipulative deployment of aesthetic devices in persuasive speech. Applying the austerity argument to persuasive speech would not in fact result in styles of speech that are aesthetically especially austere. And, as a result, there is a concern that it simply leaves unchallenged the ways in which aesthetic devices can be deployed in persuasion to manipulate the deliberations of audiences. Does this third response, faced with an implausibly restrictive conclusion from the austerity argument, reinterpret it so as to yield a position that is implausibly permissive?

The concern is significant because it seems very plausible to suppose that aesthetic devices have often been implicated in manipulation, both politically and in organizational leadership.<sup>21</sup> The hope at the outset of the paper was that we might have here the resources to identify a principled basis on which to distinguish between those uses of aesthetic devices in persuasive speech that are unobjectionable and those that are manipulative or otherwise wrongful. So, it is important to show that this option does not give the green light to *all* uses of aesthetic devices in persuasion.

In addressing this concern, note firstly that the argument for aesthetic austerity in persuasion is but one argument relevant to how aesthetic devices are used in persuasion. It need not carry

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21 Examples in our own day include the use of flags, imposing settings, and state buildings as the backdrop to a speech, or the mimicking the phrasing and intonation of iconic figures perceived as great statesmen (e.g. Winston Churchill in the UK). Right-wing politicians often use sharply-tailored, dark-coloured professional clothing, and business-like settings to create the impression of competence. Within organizations, when the leadership proposes a new vision for its operations or strategic direction, the use of aesthetic devices, such as presenting key elements of the proposal within visually arresting diagrams and graphics, may well serve to secure a greater degree of acceptance among the organization's staff than is really warranted by the merits of the proposals. Across many sectors people worry that slick presentation gets used as a substitute for rigour and substance, and that proposals secure acceptance regardless of their merits or defects, because of aesthetic features of how they are presented, both within and around the communication itself.

the entire burden of identifying impropriety in this area. There will be much else that needs to be said about the normative evaluation of how aesthetic features can be harnessed in persuasion.

Secondly, the argument *does* rule out some important kinds of misuse of aesthetic features in persuasion. It rules out the misuse of image to convey credibility. If a patrician tone of voice or turn of phrase, or national flags, or expensive tailoring function directly to influence how the audience evaluates the speaker's view, perhaps increasing the presumption in favour of accepting it, then they will be among the things this argument concludes speakers should not do. These are devices that are so familiar to us that there is something surprising about the verdict that they are illicit, even if this seems very plausible on reflection.

Furthermore, the argument will similarly rule illicit certain ways of using stylistic features in persuasive verbal communication. This may be illustrated by the following excerpt from a 2019 speech by Boris Johnson.

*[We have] so many reasons to be confident about our country and its direction, and yet we are like a world-class athlete with a pebble in our shoe. There is one part of the British system that seems to be on the blink. If Parliament were a laptop, then the screen would be showing the pizza wheel of doom. If Parliament were a school, Ofsted would be shutting it down. If Parliament were a reality TV show, the whole lot of us would have been voted out of the jungle by now. But at least we could have watched the speaker being forced to eat a kangaroo testicle. And the sad truth is that voters have more say over I'm a celebrity than they do over this House of Commons. Which refuses to deliver Brexit, refuses to do anything constructive and refuses to have an election. Just at the moment when voters are desperate for us to focus on their priorities, we are continuing to chew the supermasticated subject of Brexit, when what people want, what leavers want, what remainers want, what the whole world wants—is to be calmly and sensibly done with the subject, and to move on. (Johnson, 2020)*

The obvious aesthetic device in use here is comedy. The similes are funny. The reference to eating a kangaroo testicle is startling, and funny. And the diction ('supermasticated') is funny. The goal is to persuade the audience, both in the room and in the wider British public, to support him in forcing through a highly contentious policy (so-called 'hard Brexit') against the background of deep divisions in the country, reflected in Parliament, over how best to proceed. How does the humour help with this? It helps by distracting attention away from the serious elements of the situation (such as how MPs' disagreements *accurately* reflected deep divisions between citizens across the country), reducing it to a simple kind of absurd immobility, compared to which any kind of way forward is preferable.<sup>22</sup> The situation

22 A defender of Johnson might suggest that the humour focuses attention on his implied argument, which appeals to the absurdity of MPs unable to agree collectively on any course of action. This has some force to it (the humour certainly focuses attention on the supposed absurdity of the UK Parliament's position). But this defence fails because the absurdity is simply asserted (no reasons or argument are given), and the humorous similes in fact make this assertion seem more credible than it is. They do so in part by how the humour presupposes that absurdity in order to laugh at it, and invites the audience to accommodate the same presupposition in order to get the joke and laugh along with it. Cf. the mechanisms traced in, for example, Langton and West (1999) esp. § II; Stanley (2015); Langton (2018) esp. § 2. Accordingly, even on this view, the aesthetic features (particularly the use of humour) are directly influencing the audience's evaluation of the merits of the speaker's claims in ways the austerity argument rules illicit.



referred to in these humorous ways is one in which there is a deep difficulty associated with taking any one of the possible political options when none of them commanded sufficient popular or parliamentary support. And the humour takes the audience's attention *away* from all of that, and gets them simply to picture Parliament as malfunctioning in various absurd ways and to laugh. Comedy also harnesses the general tendency of amusement to make listeners sympathetic to the speaker. In these ways, it seems to play a direct role in helping shape the audience's verdict on Johnson's proposed course of action. The humour is influencing the deliberations of the audience, despite not being a good reason for concurring with the speaker. As such, it is a kind of method the austerity argument tells us speakers should not use.

There will be many hard-to-judge borderline cases. But the argument would suggest that speakers should not be using aesthetic devices as substitutes for arguments and evidence, and audiences should not (in general) be basing their assessment of a speaker's credibility on their tone of voice, regional accent, or choice of clothes—whether positively or negatively. Hence, although it might well be legitimate for speakers to act *remedially* to prevent conclusions about their credibility being improperly drawn from these aesthetic features, it will not be legitimate to exploit these *positively* to garner unwarranted credibility. Remedial use of aesthetic features is unobjectionable insofar as it removes or avoids a source of illicit influence that would otherwise be present—that is, insofar as it restores a situation in which listeners' evaluations are based solely on good reasons and evidence. Of course, this may make many cases hard to judge and yield rather unclear guidance for action. Would wearing this suit gain me more credibility than I merit, or merely allow what I say to be judged on its merits by remediating an unjustified tendency to disregard what is said by those less well-dressed? Should I disguise my home-counties, educated accent so as to avoid gaining unjustified levels of credibility, or would doing so obscure what I say by making me the target of unjustified prejudice against views expressed in other accents? The austerity argument does not give a clear answer. But that is not a defect. These cases *are* complex and hard to judge: the argument successfully discharges its role of correctly identifying the elements that make them so by highlighting sources of epistemic danger arising on both possible courses of action under consideration.

Finally, this third response to the objections raised against the austerity argument involves pointing out that the argument has nothing to say against the use of aesthetic devices to orient the attention of audiences in particular directions. There will, of course, be a further task to identify comprehensively the kinds of normative considerations that should govern the directing of attention. It is not a defect in the austerity argument, or in this response to the objections, that they do not accomplish this task. Rather they serve to highlight that this task is necessary. In cases such as the Obama, King, and Lincoln speeches discussed here, we have the clear intuition that the aesthetic devices in operation are legitimate, and they are arguably so because they direct attention towards things that in turn have a legitimate role in persuasion. Equally, there are other cases, such as the Johnson case discussed above, where aesthetic devices direct attention in ways that are illicit, distracting the audience from important relevant concerns; and there may be still others where aesthetic devices serve to focus

attention disproportionately on one thing rather than another. Developing a more comprehensive normative view of how communicators may or should direct the attention of their audiences is beyond the scope of this paper. For the purposes of this paper, it is enough to show that there are some unobjectionable ways to do this, some of which are achieved by aesthetic features of the medium of communication: the Obama, King, and Lincoln speeches illustrate what this looks like. The argument for aesthetic austerity in persuasion permits these while also ruling impermissible other uses of aesthetic features to direct audience attention—for example, to distract from relevant considerations, or to play the role that should be played by reasons and evidence.

## 7. Conclusion

I have sought to articulate what I propose is the central argument supporting the view that persuasion should be aesthetically ‘austere’. The argument’s premises are plausible but its conclusion seems both surprising and challenging. Two challenges to it have been considered, which are powerful and significant, and generate a kind of argumentative impasse. Three possible ways of resolving this impasse have been evaluated. The first response involves giving up on public persuasion and retreating to conducting discourse-only contexts in which the aesthetic austerity of one’s persuasive communication does not matter. The second response involves persevering with austere approaches to persuasion in the public sphere, despite recognizing that these will often be impotent. Adopting either of these responses would be highly revisionary of our view of what constitutes acceptable persuasive methods, and would require accepting that, contrary to most people’s intuitions, the paper’s central examples—speeches by Barack Obama, Martin Luther King, and Abraham Lincoln—involve the kind of persuasive use of aesthetic devices that speakers should (generally) avoid. A third response avoids this unwanted implication. It highlights ways in which aesthetic devices contribute to persuasion in other ways, such as securing and directing the attention of audiences, without falling foul of the austerity argument. The resulting position is arguably very attractive. Persuasive communication is governed by overarching epistemic norms, according to which audiences should be persuaded only by things that are good reasons for adopting the communicator’s recommended view. Aesthetic features do not (usually) fall into this category, and so communicators should not seek to get audiences’ deliberations and evaluation of views on the issue under discussion to be influenced by these aesthetic features themselves. However, this leaves open other possible roles in persuasion for aesthetic devices. They will still form an integrated part of the communicator’s armoury of methods for fostering and supporting audiences’ engagement with the things that do constitute good reasons for the view they are recommending. Perhaps the resulting position is not especially austere in what it commends and criticizes in persuasive communication. But it does serve to defend the core insight at the heart of the austerity argument: that deliberators should be evaluating the options before them on the basis of good reasons and evidence alone,

and that the artistry of persuasive speakers should support and foster their success in doing so, not undermine it.<sup>23</sup>

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