The task before us is to reflect upon theory, its relevance, and its capacity to energize rhetoric’s possibilities. Further, we are to consider rhetoric in relation to ethics. The task is daunting because these terms are not stable and indeed colour each other. This is particularly so when we consider how rhetoric can stand both as a specific practice and as an ontological operator.

Rhetoric can be the art of persuasion, but also the constitutive power of discourse, or as Robert Scott once observed, “rhetoric is epistemic.” Furthermore, each of our key terms, “theory,” “ethics,” and “rhetoric” can be either subject or predicate of the others. And so, proceeding by antithesis, “rhetorical theory” can mean “theory about rhetoric” or “theory that acts rhetorically.” In this latter case, theory would both constitute a field of objects and relations and “sneak in” practical commitments and commands.

Using this principle of antithesis, we can also consider the relationship of rhetoric and ethics. Rhetorical ethics can mean a set of norms and prescriptions to guide rhetorical practice to ensure that it is compatible with rightness, justice or the good. One could think of this as a deontological code for rhetoricians. Conversely, it could also mean a set of prescriptions or normative claims that are secured through persuasive appeals. In the former case, “the ethical” would be a stable quality secured by tradition or philosophy that would police or discipline rhetoric. In the latter case, to the philosophers’ dismay, rhetoric would be in charge and ethics would be infected by interests. Finally, the same operation can be performed on “theory” and “ethics.” Either term can discipline the other. One can theorize ethics, which is to say consider
ethical prescriptions in terms of formal and abstract relations. One can also “ethicize” theory, which is to say subject the task of theorizing to ethical norms.

These grammatical pairings can be understood in terms of predication, when one term operates upon the other. Also, each term claims a particular discursive function. Theory’s premise it that it represents or modesl the real. Theory would proceed through subordination to the real, in order to condense it, to render it understandable and perhaps even manipulable. Theory would proceed through distanciation, through disinterested interest, and claim to be fundamentally descriptive, consisting of constantives. Ethics, in contrast, is a function of normativity, of obligation. The ethical function consists in directedness toward a regulative Ideal, such as the just, good, or right. The ethical function does not consist in justification, seduction, rationalization, or even compulsion. Ethics issues commands. The ethical function does not have a principle of moment. The function of movement is provided by rhetoric. The rhetorical function, mediating theory and ethics, is neither theoretical nor ethical, but mimics these two. Rhetoric, like theory, claims to represent, but rhetoric’s function is to figure, to selectively bring to presence, to highlight and colour a partiality. Similarly, it does not function as obligation, it does not issue commands, but invokes them as it offers appeals. It fashions duties and, most importantly, seeks to move. Indeed, rhetoric’s function is movement: the movement of figures, the movement of adherence, the movement between desire and reason, and finally the impious movement against the call of being, of eros against thanatos.

My aim here is not to develop ideal types for their own sake, or to explain what “theory,” “ethics,” and “rhetoric” really are. This is not a dialectical exercise. I am not calling for the purity of each term. However, an understanding of these functions is necessary to a consideration of how theory might still engage or provoke. Indeed, debates over the ethics of
rhetoric are subtended by conflicts and disagreements regarding these functions and their ordering. Thus, and famously, Plato figures philosophy as the union of the representation and obligation to which figuration and movement should be subordinate. Aristotle, in contrast defends rhetoric by dissociating representation from obligation. He observes that all good things except virtue can cause harm. For Aristotle, practical and theoretical knowledge are independent of norms. This line of thought also is developed by Jean-François Lyotard in *Just Gaming* and other writings. He cites the Gulag as an instance of terror that results from treating theory as a ground for prescriptives. His maxim, an anti-maxim of sorts, is that one must act in accordance with the Idea of the autonomy of language games.

Lyotard cautions against the hubris of theory, but nevertheless trades in abstractions. He is a theorist of sorts, but not in the pure sense distilled above. He does not aim at developing a complete model of some objects. Thus, he says of even his most “academic” work, *Discours/Figure*, that it is not *savant* (learned), even as it offers a persuasive argument that art and language are not well rendered through referential models. It figures a model of art and language. He “theorises” the limits of theory. In more general terms, his practice does not model a real, but identifies tensions, *aporia*, trajectories, limits, and opportunities. As such, his work, which might still be *called* theory or philosophy, is subtended by the rhetorical function. As he puts it, most of his writings pertain to the political, for which he says, citing Aristotle, that “there is no science.” There is no adequate ground for representation or for prescription. All that he can offer is the impossible “be pagan,” which is not a prescription but a rhetorical appeal, to “be prudent,” although not quite as Aristotelian hand in mind.

Aristotle favours prudence, because he recognizes the impossibility of deriving practical norms from theory. Indeed, his conception of prudence also is predicated on an appreciation of
contingency. Thus, while the *Nichomachean Ethics* catalogues the virtue, these are not transcendental, but arise from the trajectory of a constituted *polis*. And so, for Aristotle as for Lyotard, the ethical is an appearance, the normative function is produced by and through figures. This is clearest in his *Rhetoric*, where *ethos* is a proof. This does not render ethics cynical, however, for a paradox of substance is at play. To be persuasive, one must appear ethical. *Ethos*, ethical appearance, is in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* produced by arguing appropriately, by choosing the proper topics, and by through one’s reasoning displaying *philia*. *Philia*, friendship, is ethical in the *polis*. And so, the rhetorical function, as movement directed toward some other, constitutes an ethical relation. But this ethics is not a command or prescription, not a “pure” ethics, but part of the trajectory of a form of life. Aristotle’s rhetorical ethics is not based in obligation, but arises in the rhetorical movement between its contingent elements.

In considering how theory might still be engaging, there is value taking up both Aristotle’s and Lyotard’s provocations. They highlight the inevitable rhetoricity of both theory and ethics in a way that restrains theoretical *hubris* and normative dogmatism. They suggest to us that theory still has something to contribute when it takes the task of mapping limits and of charting trajectories that are animated with the idea of a more harmonious life.