

PLATO ON RHETORIC AND VIRTUE

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Sócrates (Platão) tinha uma frágil visão da Retórica como era praticada em sua época, em Atenas, o que não o inclinava a dignificá-la com o nome de arte. Tinha, ao mesmo tempo, uma noção vigorosa do que consistia uma *genuína* Arte da Retórica. Neste texto, planejo um sobrevôo nas suas opiniões sobre o assunto, baseando-me substancialmente em duas fontes principais, o **Górgias** e o **Fedro**, seguidos pelo que penso ser a principal força e fraqueza no seu argumento. Na sequência, questionarei sobre o peso do que ele tem para dizer (ou algo com respeito a isso, de qualquer modo), se é e poderá ser de interesse e preocupação.

Palavras-chave: Retórica, arte, Atenas

Socrates (Plato) had a very dim view of rhetoric as practiced in the Athens of his day, which he was disinclined to dignify even with the name of an art. He had at the same time a strong notion of what a *genuine* art of rhetoric would consist of. In this paper I plan to give a rapid overview of his opinions in the matter, drawing largely on two major sources, the **Gorgias** and **Phaedrus**, followed by what seem to me to be the principal strengths and weaknesses in his argument. I shall then go on to ask about the degree to which what he has to say (or some of it, at any rate) is and should be of continuing interest and concern.

Key-words: Rethorics, art, Atenas

Notoriously, Socrates (Plato) had a very dim view of rhetoric as practiced in the Athens of his day, which he was disinclined to dignify even with the name of an art. He had at the same time a strong notion of what a *genuine* art of rhetoric would consist of. In this paper I plan to give a rapid overview of his opinions in the matter, drawing largely on two major sources, the **Gorgias** and **Phaedrus**, followed by what seem to me to be the principal strengths and weaknesses in his argument. I shall then go on to ask about the degree to which what he has to say (or some of it, at any rate) is and should be of continuing interest and concern.

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In the **Gorgias**, a dialogue by general if not totally universal consent written earlier than the **Phaedrus**, and very likely towards the end of Plato's so-called 'Socratic' period, Socrates has nothing but negativity for the rhetoric practiced by speakers of the day, and clearly thinks of it as one of the many sophistic enterprises for which he evinces such distaste. He also makes it clear, *en passant* (458ab), that the topic of rhetoric is a particularly

critical one for him, saying that he believes "there is no worse evil for a person than to have a false opinion about [the matter in question, i. e., the use and abuse of rhetoric]". Rhetoric, as currently practiced, he says, is not an art at all, but merely a knack or routine, a persuasion-technique elaborated by someone not interested in truth but rather in appearing amongst the ignorant as possessing more knowledge than does the expert (459d). It impersonates the genuine art of rhetoric the way junk food impersonates sound eating habits, having as its objective "persuasion" (and concomitant pleasure) the way the latter has as its objective "gratification" (and concomitant pleasure). Since only a genuine art can be the object of knowledge and have as its object the good (465a), its practitioners will be forever bound to the realm of opinion, and condemned as a result to spend their lives as blind leading the blind, flatterers leading the flattered.

Genuine rhetoric, by contrast, supported on a firm base of "knowledge", and more particularly knowledge of the human "soul", will have as its sole objective "...how justice may be implanted in the souls of the citizens and injustice banished, and how moderation may be implanted and indiscipline banished, and how goodness in general may be engendered and wickedness depart" (504 d-e). Putting the matter somewhat differently, Socrates states that a genuine rhetorician will make it his objective to improve the citizenry of a *pólis*, "making better citizens", as he puts it, "of those who were worse before" (515d). On these grounds he goes on to fault some of Greece's greatest leaders, such as Themistocles and Pericles, arguing in the case of the latter in particular that he had at the end of his career left Athens's citizens "wilder", and hence "more unjust and worse" (516c).

In terms familiar to readers of the **Republic**, he compares genuine rhetoric to the art of medicine, which sets out to produce health (= balance of parts, or justice) in the soul the way good medicine produces physical health (= balance of parts) in the body. But in the **Gorgias** itself we are left in the dark about who the practitioners of this genuine rhetoric might turn out to be, the only historical candidate who comes

close to the ideal that Socrates can name being Aristides the Just (526b) and the only living example being, by legitimate inference, himself. In his own disarming words, “when I speak on occasion it is not with a view to winning favour, but with the aim of what is best, not what is most pleasant”, and he accordingly has no hesitation in saying that he himself is “one of very few Athenians, not to say the only one, who practices the “genuine” art of *politikē*” (521d).

Turning to the **Phaedrus** (260a ff.), we find much of this reiterated. Contemporary oratory has no understanding of truth or justice, merely of what a body of jurors is likely to “think” just; it has no knowledge of what *is* truly good or noble, but only of what will be “thought” so, “... since it is on this latter that persuasion depends” (260a). It is a knack or routine, not an art (260e). But at the same time Plato seems somewhat more positive about what can be achieved, no doubt because he has in the interval worked carefully on the matter in writing the **Republic**. In the light of this it comes as no great surprise to find Socrates arguing that what passes for rhetoric is at best a set of antecedent conditions for the existence of *genuine* rhetoric (269c), which *can* be practiced, and can *only* be practiced by – of course – the *dialektikós*.

Building on his earlier talk, in the **Gorgias**, about the rhetorician’s need for knowledge of the human soul, he now adds further detail to the picture, arguing that such a person will need to know whether soul is uniform or multiple; what its capacities are, productive and receptive; and the classification of the various types of discourse and their effect on various types of soul (271ab). This knowledge will be acquired by the technique of collection and division (265d ff.), a technique which, by the process of bringing a “...dispersed reality under a single form, [thus] seeing it all together”, will set things on a sound basis by securing at the outset a firm and reliable definition of the topic or concept to be discussed. Once the definition of this (in the present instance Love) is established, it must then be divided by kinds (*eidē*) till a point of indivisibility is reached (277b). In this way, says Socrates, one will have fulfilled an indispensable condition for the practice of genuine rhetoric, and that is, “knowing the truth” about the subject of which one speaks or writes (*ibid.*).

Such, in very brief compass, seems to me to be the essence of Socrates’s (Plato’s) thinking on genuine and bogus rhetoric. Turning to the various arguments that he uses to establish key points, one is struck, in reading the **Gorgias**, by the passion of Socrates’s claims, but also, a

little disconcertingly, by the ease with which his various interlocutors in the dialogue either accept his arguments, like Gorgias, or refuse to accept them but also refuse to put up a counter-case, like Callicles. Only the spirited Polus, true to his name, puts up some opposition, and engages – with some misgivings – in the sort of dialectical discussion with Socrates familiar to us from other, early dialogues.

What emerges is a set of arguments that read like a first draft of what is to appear in greater detail a little later in the **Republic**. In an uncompromisingly essentialist and teleological vision of the real, Socrates makes it clear that, while contemporary rhetoricians (barely distinguishable, if distinguishable at all from sophists), either ignore or do not believe in truth, he himself is deeply committed to the existence of truth, and in particular - in the context of this dialogue's discussion - to truth, not just persuasion, as a primary goal of rhetoric. A critical aspect of this truth is that the *télos* of rhetoric is nothing other than the good of the individuals at whom it is directed, and more generally at the good of the *pólis* of which they are members.

Major presuppositions here are, of course, the notion that there is such a thing as truth at all, and the greater defensibility of a teleological vision of things than some more purely empirical vision. On neither point does Socrates defend his views in the **Gorgias**, though both are defended soon afterwards, and in some detail, in the **Republic**. On the matter of truth and the real, he famously claims that truth is achieved when a stable state of consciousness called knowledge has as its object of intellectual vision (*ópsis*) or intellectual grasp (*haphê*) an object or objects (the transcendental Forms) that are as stable as it itself is. Even if one deconstructs these forms, as some scholars wish to do, to read them as being something like universal, topic-neutral concepts rather than perfect particulars, it still remains the case that, on this theory, no knowledge of this world or of any aspect of it will ever be achieved; the most that will ever be attained is, in his words, a true opinion.

For many, forgetting the **Meno**, this view is basic Platonic (if not Socratic) epistemology and metaphysics. But this dialogue presents us with what is *prima facie* a rather different picture. In the **Meno** it is clearly affirmed that a true opinion about any aspect of our world (in this case how to get to Larissa, 97a) can be converted into knowledge of how to get there by being 'tied down' in a particular way described as *aitías logismós*, 'working out the reason' (98a), a process Socrates immediately goes on to categorize as 'recollection'. While one may legitimately infer from the latter point that he is on the verge of the

full-blown theory of Forms, of which the doctrine of recollection is an integral part, the fact that knowledge of the sensible world is being claimed as a possibility suggests strongly that he is not there yet. And this leaves us in an intriguing position. If the view propounded in the **Meno** is, as some think, more likely to have been that of the historical Socrates, the theory of Transcendental Forms being Plato's invention, we seem to have in the **Gorgias** a view of rhetoric that looks more Socratic than Platonic, in that there too, as in the **Meno**, rhetoric in its popular form (what he calls 'false' or 'bogus' rhetoric) is forever confined to the world of opinion and persuasion.

But there too it is also affirmed that a 'true' or genuine form of rhetoric is possible, as instantiated in the activities of Socrates himself, as we have just seen. There is, however, no suggestion that such genuine rhetoric will be based upon a knowledge of perfect particulars glimpsed in an anterior existence. The physician is "someone who has learned medicine; and on the same general principle", says Socrates, "the man who has learned anything becomes in each case such as his knowledge (*epistēme*) makes him" (46b). In similar fashion the geometrical opinions of the slave-boy that get 'turned into knowledge' (86a) are said to form part of that 'truth about reality' that is 'always in our soul' (86b); it is a later metaphysic and a later epistemology that will locate this truth as a set of perfect paradigmatic particulars in a *hyperouranios topos*, beyond space and apparently beyond time (**Phdr.** 247c). The Socrates of the **Gorgias**, like the Socrates of the **Meno**, is, it seems, is more firmly rooted to earth than his counterpart who walks the pages of the **Republic** and **Phaedrus**, despite his possible adherence to a belief in some sort of afterlife.

As far as the teleological cast of Socrates's argument is concerned, this too is simply assumed in the **Gorgias**, to be defended later in a famous set of pages in the **Republic** (352e ff.) and repeated later by a grateful Aristotle in the **Nicomachean Ethics** (Bk. 1). I merely signal here the fact that the defence did take place, with a promise to return to it later in the final part of my paper. As for the overall assumption throughout the **Gorgias** that soul, so crucial to the argument about what would constitute a viable and defensible form of rhetoric, might turn out to be a complex rather than a simple unity, this too is an idea defended in detail with argument later on the **Republic**. But never, in the **Republic** or anywhere else in the dialogues till **Laws 10**, near the end of Plato's life, and possibly not even then, that deepest as-

sumption of all, i. e., the assumption that the term soul, unlike the term goat-stag, is referential.

For the moment I simply want to signal at this stage the fact that at a number of critical points in the argument Socrates makes moves that more aggressive interlocutors might not have let slip by so easily. At 460b-c, for example, Socrates has Gorgias admit without demur that “the man who has learned anything becomes in each case such as his knowledge (*epistéme*) makes him”, along with a statement that “the rhetorician must necessarily be just” and that “the rhetorician will never wish to do wrong”. (Polus demurs, quite fiercely [461b-c], but without engaging in a rebuttal of any sort). But an intellectualist ethics of this order cannot be allowed to pass by so easily without challenge; the Greek of the day allowed comfortably for the distinction between knowledge “of” x, knowledge “that” x and knowledge “how to” x, and a failure or refusal to advert to this allows Socrates to build a case for his intellectualism on arguments that, wittingly or unwittingly, exploit critical ambiguities. On the face of it, nothing in terms of conduct follows necessarily from knowledge “that”, whereas, on a view of morality as being analogous to a skill (*téchne*) in the arts and crafts, which exemplifies a species of knowledge *how*, such a relationship of necessity could be thought to be obvious. But this view of morality must in turn be defended in detail if Socrates is to convince; not everyone will be prepared to take it as self-evident that the morally good person is evincing a moral *skill* of some sort.

A whole paper could of course be spent on this topic, which I merely signal here as I look at Socrates as he establishes his case. The same is true for an argument about the supposed powerlessness of the tyrant, an argument that will return with some force in the republic in his encounter with Thrasymachus. Starting with his well-known and influential claim that, in purposive acts, what we invariably will, as a *télos*, is “the good”, he has Polus agree that the particular act or acts whereby this is achieved is not something willed; this he calls a ‘general truth’ (*peri panton*). On its basis he then argues that tyrants and (more relevantly to his present purpose, “rhetoricians” of tyrannical impulses, for whom their profession is seen to present splendid opportunities) frequently finish up doing things they do not will, since they are frequently mistaken as to their apparent good or, as he puts it, apparent advantage (468d). So they are not, after all, says Socrates, as powerful as Polus has so rashly made them out to be.

But again Polus seems to have conceded much too much, and too quickly. The dichotomy between a *télos* which is willed and a means to it which is not willed is much too stark. Depending on circumstance, a particular *means* can be either “actively willed” (*boulesthai*) – even perhaps on occasion just as enthusiastically as the end is – or merely grudgingly or willingly *accepted* (*etbélein*). And the concept of ‘power’ is in similar fashion radically ambiguous. A tyrant (or rhetorician) who is in terms of the doctrine of *eudaimonía* defended in the **Gorgias** and **Republic** totally powerless and wretched, because sick in soul (and who would ever choose to be sick?), is in a host of other ways absolutely powerful and brimming over with the joys of life. Just as he does Glaucon and Adeimantus if not Thrasymachus in the **Republic**, Socrates convinces his interlocutor Polus in the **Gorgias** (though, like Thrasymachus, it is a very grudging Polus) that the power-tripping which seems to be built into contemporary rhetorical practice is in fact evidence, not of power but of a failure to achieve that *télos* to which all people, including rhetoricians, aspire, and that is ‘the good’ in the sense of ‘their advantage’. Socrates has convinced him, however, at the risk of inventing a private language here, in which *eudaimonía*, far from being, as any normal Greek-speaker would have thought, a feeling of some sort, is now described as a state of an organism, be it the organism which is the state or the organism that is the human *psyché*.

Which is why, I think, so many people over the years have felt some sympathy with Polus and, later, Thrasymachus. Having let Socrates get away with too much at the outset, they struggle ineffectually to deal with the aftermath, even as the modern reader senses frequently that while, true to his convictions, Socrates has indeed followed the argument (*lógos*) to its end, the argument has not necessarily on that account been a convincing one.

So let me turn now to the third part of my paper, where I plan to ask what, in the eyes of a sympathetic but tough-minded philosophical critic, who, like Socrates, is also committed to going where the argument leads, survives of the arguments on rhetoric to be found in the **Gorgias** and **Phaedrus** after due consideration is spent on a number of problems in their formulation, a few of which have just been touched upon. Or, to put it more bluntly, can an essentialist account of genuine and bogus rhetoric, along the lines set out by Socrates, offer anything likely to be thought valuable to a modern reader who, while greatly sympathetic to the figure of Socrates and the nobility of his ideals, is very likely to be fundamentally out of accord with some of the major

philosophical principles embedded in his argument? My answer, perhaps surprisingly, is going to be Yes, and I plan to spend the rest of this paper outlining why. I shall, in so doing, follow Socrates's own lead in laying down the ground-rules for an optimally Just Society, and discuss simply the society *we* would consider optimal by reference to our own ethical lights. Our persistent failures in their "implementation" of these ground-rules, particularly in the areas of advertising and other types of manipulation and propaganda, is of course another paper, which I shall for the moment – though sorely tempted to – resist pursuing.

We can begin with Socrates's remarks on psychology. Whatever the particular stripe of our investigator here, ranging from monism to dualism to linguistic and/or behavioral reductionism, and any number of variants on these, all would I think readily agree with Socrates that an understanding of the thinking, attitudes and general behaviour of the rhetorician's potential audience is an indispensable condition for the practice of the art. The same can be said of an overall "respect" for this audience, if only on the baldly empirical grounds that, with the greater level of information available today, and the presence of near-universal literacy, attempts to deceive can badly backfire, to the ultimate disadvantage of the speaker. As for Socrates's view that the aim of the rhetorician, as for politicians in general, should be the good of the community not their own advantage, many would see these as being far less obviously incompatible than Socrates sees to think, provided one adds an overtone of rights to Socrates's more overtly *eudaemonistic* ethics. With an appropriately policed system of checks and balances, along with a clear statement of citizens' rights, including in this instance the right not to be deceived by others on non-trivial matters, a system in which both private advantage and the overall good can co-incide is not inconceivable and indeed, many would argue, actively desirable. Our terminology tends to be in terms of rights and duties and accountability, and would as such have been perhaps strange-sounding to Socrates, but what is going on is in fact much closer to Socratic reasoning than is commonly imagined, despite the fact that the phrase 'the common good' tends to have dropped out of general parlance.

In its place has come a sense of the common good approached from a different optic, in which the good of everyone but oneself is seen as an incidental but nonetheless very real result of a principle based on simple self-interest, where the limit of my legitimate claims to various rights and freedoms stops at the point where that of the equally legitimate claims of others begin. The result is, on an optimal scenario,

in which the system is working reasonably well, a situation of what one might call the 'common good by default', but the common good nonetheless. And a common good, I would also argue, that would not have been unrecognizable to Socrates. Again, our terminology might have surprised him, but in terms of results I'm not sure there is much difference between what can be achieved by talk of a common good and talk of respect – along with firm legislation based *upon* such respect – for the rights of all, oneself and others.

But surely, it might be objected, the "content" of what is perceived to be the good by contemporary ethical systems, the great majority of them consequentialist in commitment rather than essentialist, is so radically different from Socrates's perception of the good as to be at base fundamentally incompatible with it, despite some of these surface-similarities? But again I have my doubts on this. While a contemporary monist may feel more comfortable talking about the good of the person rather than the good of the soul, since Socrates himself tells us on several occasions that I and my soul are "one and the same" we are hardly up against a major problem here. And if our version of the common good turns out to be, in empirical terms, more like the sum total of individual goods than a supposed essence *of* the good, the result is still something that Socrates might in large part have favoured. Not least because over the centuries we have, in fair measure, succeeded in putting into place checks and balances to minimize many of the abuses he considered part of the fabric of tyranny and of – next worst to tyranny for him – the Athens-style democracy of his day.

But what, it might be asked, of that so essentially Socratic a claim that a good politician/rhetorician will see it as his primary goal to make the citizens better people than he found them? Surely here, if anywhere, we have a view utterly antithetical to those of a world pre-occupied with maximizing one's bank-balance or the gross national product? This claim might be a little more plausible if the goodness of which Socrates speaks could be read as the supposed goodness of individuals in atomic isolation, but of course goodness in all its forms is for Socrates in its very fibre social/political; whatever the various characteristics of an *idiôtês* in the context of a *pôlis*, Socratic goodness, in any of its manifestations, will not be one of them. And it is precisely this Socratic view of goodness that, it seems to me, serves – optimally – as a criterion to-day too, as we attempt to encourage the growth of civic virtues in a population brought up – again I talk only of optimal circumstances – to see participation as both a right and a duty, even if only on voting day.

As for the dichotomy Socrates sets up between truth and persuasion, other commitments of his suggest that this is the somewhat overdrawn result of his antipathy to the whole class of sophist-rhetoricians of his day and the harm he thought they did. Because even on his *own* principles there is a middle ground here, in which truth, too, not simply persuasion, can be gratifying, and in which, given a number of ends agreed upon to be noble, like say that of fair and just society, appropriate persuasion occupies a high and noble place on the list of possible techniques for implementing it.

Because, in the final analysis, all are agreed with Socrates (including just about the entire community of researchers in the various sciences) that the world is in its essence one of *dóxa*, and in a world of *dóxa* our greatest guide is the matter of living in society is the persuasive power of those who combine a maximal commitment to civic goodness with a maximal commitment to the pursuit of knowledge (whether or not this turns out to be no more than correct opinion) by the technique of rational discussion (*dialektikê*). It is such persuasive power which lies the very heart of a Socratic dialogue, in which, whether a positive conclusion is reached or not, no room is left for doubt that some arguments carry more persuasive force than others. It is also, one might say, what could perhaps be described in Socratic terms as a genuine (*alethês*) form of “persuasiveness” analogous to what he called a genuine rhetoric. To the degree that we, too, are committed to it, and to the elaboration of a society based upon it, the closer we are, I would say, to the spirit of the son of Sophroniscus.

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