



## Notes on Plato's *Gorgias* [449c-466a]

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### I. Background

#### A. The Sophists

- The Sophists were a group of philosophers who trained young Athenian men for political life. Naturally, the most important skill that they taught was rhetoric, since the ability to persuade the masses was of vital importance in democratic 5th century Athens.
  - The Sophists were known for teaching their students to argue both sides of an issue. The derogatory term “sophist” to this day is used for those who “play both sides of the field.”
- The Sophists also appear to have taught a kind of moral relativism, which denied the existence of the truth. Their position can be summed up in the following way: “Things are as they appear to me, and...they are as they appear to you.” (Plato, *Cratylus*).
  - Thus for the Sophists, there may my truth and your truth, but no TRUTH--- just different and often conflicting positions.
  - This led them to adopt an approach to rhetoric as *antilogia* (speaking against). In the absence of any kind of truth all the rhetor can do is to be able to do is to make his own position as strong as possible against the opposing positions of others.
- One of the aims of rhetoric is to be able to convince others of the merit of your position, and for that one needs a mastery of words.

#### B. Gorgias of Leontini (483-378)

- Gorgias was Greek sophist and rhetorician, born in Sicily in 483. He came to Athens in 427, and soon attracted a number of disciples because of his considerable speaking skills.
- He who was known as “the Nihilist”, because of the paradoxal views that he espoused about the nature of reality and human knowledge. His most famous theses can be summed up as follows:
  1. nothing exists
  2. if anything did exist, it could not be known
  3. if anything did exist and could not be known, it could not be communicated.

- Like most Sophists Gorgias is not at all concerned about the truth of these propositions. His aim was to show that through the use of rhetoric, one could make even almost any position seem plausible.
- Gorgias placed a great emphasis on the persuasive power of speech.
- the rhetor must appeal at all times to the emotions of his listeners to lead them where he will. Through his command of language, the rhetor has complete control over the convictions of his audience.

### C. Plato's Apology: Philosophy vs. Rhetoric

- Plato was born to noble family in Athens in 427 BC. It seems likely that in his early life he was groomed for a life of public service, but at the age of 20 he met Socrates and his life was completely turned around. Instead of entering political life, he followed Socrates' path and became a philosopher, eventually founding his own school, the Academy.
- Plato's hostility towards rhetoric may in part be due to the abuses that he witnessed in Athenian public life during the decline of Athens' great experiment with democracy in the 5th century. This hostility can already be observed in the *Apology*, his version of Socrates' defense speech to the Athenian jury that tried him in 399 BC for impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. The text begins with a comparison between Socrates' own approach to speech and that of his accusers:

How you have felt, O men of Athens, at hearing the speeches of my accusers, I cannot tell; but I know that their persuasive words almost made me forget who I was - such was the effect of them; and yet they have hardly spoken a word of truth. But many as their falsehoods were, there was one of them which quite amazed me; - I mean when they told you to be upon your guard, and not to let yourselves be deceived by the force of my eloquence. They ought to have been ashamed of saying this, because they were sure to be detected as soon as I opened my lips and displayed my deficiency; they certainly did appear to be most shameless in saying this, unless by the force of eloquence they mean the force of truth; for then I do indeed admit that I am eloquent. But in how different a way from theirs! Well, as I was saying, they have hardly uttered a word, or not more than a word, of truth; but you shall hear from me the whole truth: not, however, delivered after their manner, in a set oration duly ornamented with words and phrases. No indeed! but I shall use the words and arguments which occur to me at the moment; for I am certain that this is right, and that at my time of life I ought not to be appearing before you, O men of Athens, in the character of a juvenile orator - let no one expect this of me. And I must beg of you to grant me one favor, which is this - If you hear me using the same words in my defense which I have been in the habit of using, and which most of you may have heard in the agora, and at the tables of the money-changers, or anywhere else, I would ask you not to be surprised at this, and not to interrupt me. For I am more than seventy years of age, and this is the first time that I have ever appeared in a court of law, and I am quite a stranger to the ways of the place; and therefore I would have you regard me as if I were really a stranger, whom you would excuse if he spoke in his native tongue, and after the fashion of his country; - that I think is not an unfair request. Never mind the manner, which may or may not be good; but think only of the justice of my cause, and give heed to that: let the judge decide justly and the speaker speak truly.

- A contrast is made in this text between the truthfulness and simplicity of Socrates' speech compared with the duplicity and eloquence of his accusers. Rhetoric here is seen as a tool for falsehood and injustice.
- Plato would consistently argue for the superiority of philosophy to rhetoric, since the rhetor's seductive language can often be used to lead men astray.

## II. Rhetoric in Plato's *Gorgias* (449c-466a)

### A. What is the Subject of Rhetoric? (449c-456b)

- The main participants in the first part of the dialogue are Socrates (representing Plato's own views) and Gorgias (representing the views of the Sophists). Gorgias is supported by Polus and Callicles. The text begins with an attempt to arrive at a definition of rhetoric.
  - rhetoric, we find out is an art (*technē*)
  - that deals with speeches (*logoi*)
- Socrates presses Gorgias about the subject matter of rhetoric
  - all arts deal with speeches, but each art has a different subject matter
  - e.g., medicine is an art that deals with speeches about diseases and sickness; arithmetic is an art that deals with words about numbers; astronomy is an art that deals with speeches about the motions of heavenly bodies.
  - Glaucon we see has difficulty determining the precise subject matter of rhetoric.
- Eventually Gorgias states that rhetoric concerns the "greatest of human affairs" (451d): this, of course, is the ability "to rule over others in their city" (452d)
  - remember: the Sophists were primarily in using rhetoric for the sake of attaining political power. Power in a democracy such as Athens comes primarily from ones "ability to speak and to persuade the multitude." (452e).

### B. Gorgias' Defense of Rhetoric (456b-e)

- Gorgias proceeds to give a powerful defense of rhetoric:

...if you only knew how rhetoric comprehends and holds under her sway all the inferior arts. Let me offer you a striking example of this. On several occasions I have been with my brother Herodicus or some other physician to see one of his patients, who would not allow the physician to give him medicine, or apply a knife or hot iron to him; and I have persuaded him to do for me what he would not do for the physician just by the use of rhetoric. And I say that if a rhetorician and a physician were to go to any city, and had there to argue in the Ecclesia or any other assembly as to which of them should be elected state-physician, the physician would have no chance; but he who could speak would be chosen if he wished; and in a contest with a man of any other profession the rhetorician more than any one would have the power of

getting himself chosen, for he can speak more persuasively to the multitude than any of them, and on any subject. Such is the nature and power of the art of rhetoric

And yet, Socrates, rhetoric should be used like any other competitive art, not against everybody-the rhetorician ought not to abuse his strength any more than a pugilist or pancratiast or other master of fence; because he has powers which are more than a match either for friend or enemy, he ought not therefore to strike, stab, or slay his friends. Suppose a man to have been trained in the palestra and to be a skilful boxer-he in the fullness of his strength goes and strikes his father or mother or one of his familiars or friends; but that is no reason why the trainers or fencing-masters should be held in detestation or banished from the city-surely not. For they taught their art for a good purpose, to be used against enemies and evil-doers, in self-defense not in aggression, and others have perverted their instructions, and turned to a bad use their own strength and skill. But not on this account are the teachers bad, neither is the art in fault, or bad in itself; I should rather say that those who make a bad use of the art are to blame.

And the same argument holds good of rhetoric; for the rhetorician can speak against all men and upon any subject-in short, he can persuade the multitude better than any other man of anything which he pleases, but he should not therefore seek to defraud the physician or any other artist of his reputation merely because he has the power; he ought to use rhetoric fairly, as he would also use his athletic powers. And if after having become a rhetorician he makes a bad use of his strength and skill, his instructor surely ought not on that account to be held in detestation or banished. For he was intended by his teacher to make a good use of his instructions, but he abuses them. And therefore he is the person who ought to be held in detestation, banished, and put to death, and not his instructor.”

- Gorgias is convinced that:
  - rhetoric commands the power of all the other arts. The rhetorician, because of the skills he possesses) is ultimately more persuasive than the actual practitioner of an art (than the physician would be about his own field of medicine). Rhetoric enables one to speak persuasively on any topic.
  - rhetoric is morally neutral: it is not at all concerned about right and wrong. The teacher of rhetoric can not be blamed if his pupil uses the art he has been taught for unjust purposes (456a-457c)

### **C. Plato's Objections to Rhetoric (457c-466a)**

- If rhetoric has no subject matter, then how can it be considered an art?
  - if it is not an art, it is worthless.
- Rhetoric imparts no real knowledge (*episteme*) but only opinions (*doxa*) (455a)
  - The rhetor may be more persuasive than one who knows (e.g., the doctor), but he does not possess true knowledge about that which he is speaking (459c-e)

- Rhetoric is frivolous and empty (462b-466a)
  - it is like a “knack” for pastry-cooking in that it provides pleasure, but offers no real value to the body.
  - it produces beautiful words that can please an audience, but doesn’t help them to arrive at the truth

True Arts	Mere Knacks
gymnastics; medicine	cosmetics; (pastry) cooking
philosophy	rhetoric

### Suggestions for Further Reading

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