PLATO ON RHETORIC: *THE GORGIAS* AND *THE PHAEDRUS*

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> "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. I do not mean the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from his writings. I allude to the wealth of general ideas scattered through them. His personal endowments, his wide opportunities for experience at a great period of civilization, his inheritance of an intellectual tradition not yet stiffened by excessive systematization, have made his writing an inexhaustible mine of suggestion."

So said twentieth century philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead about Plato's influence upon Western philosophy. The same general characterization of the European rhetorical tradition could be made, with one slight alteration. Instead of a series of footnotes to Plato, the rhetorical tradition has expended much of its effort answering (or incorporating) Plato and his criticisms of the art and practice of rhetoric.[1] Every student of rhetoric ought to digest Plato's thoughts on rhetoric if only to grapple with the problems Plato puts forward for the practitioner and/or teacher of rhetoric.

In the *Gorgias*, Plato's major concern is with the definition of rhetoric as it was popularly practiced among the sophists of his day. Is rhetoric an art in and of itself, or is it the habits of speech that are generally persuasive amongst the non-specialist crowds? The theme of justice arises early in the dialogue as Socrates guides Gorgias to narrow the scope of rhetoric to law courts and matters of justice. From here the dialogue shifts away from rhetoric as the ability to persuade, to rhetoric as the ability to accomplish justice for those who would benefit from its use. Polus is quickly outmatched, but Callicles maintains his *realpolitik* approach to speech and justice. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato is less concerned with the legal and political realms, and seems more interested in the existential use and methodological basis of rhetoric. What kind of rhetoric is useful to the individual soul in relation to other individuals and on what basis can such rhetoric be mastered? Plato provides an object lesson using Socrates and Phaedrus in the dialogue. Phaedrus' adoration of Lysias' praise for the non-lover is critiqued, outdone, and then redirected by Socrates. First, Socrates shows the disorderliness of Lysias' speech, demonstrating that even rhetoric that is unconcerned with the virtue of the argument itself requires some methodological consideration in order to be beautiful or, perhaps, successful. Socrates first speech shows the superiority of properly defining,

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dividing, and elaborating on the theme of the non-lover. However, Socrates second speech repents of the false theme (praise for the non-lover) and advances a "true" encomium of the lover, whose benefit to the beloved is marked by inspiring philosophical ascent to knowledge. Socrates then elaborates on the dialectical method and the philosophical requirements foundational to the proper use of rhetoric, which might best be understood as myth-making. The use of rhetoric, whether spoken or written, is heuristic—it provides impetus for the philosophical life of dialectical ascent to knowledge through definition, division, and elaboration.

Plato's basic position on rhetoric is, therefore, mixed. He excoriates the sophistic pragmatism embodied in figures like Polus and Callicles (though not necessarily Gorgias) and recommends a philosophically grounded approach to rhetoric that, he hopes, is insured against the dangers of demagoguery inherent in democratic government. Rhetoricians are rewarded for paying attention to Plato's criticisms of rhetoric, for they represent the primary ethical challenges to the fundamental tenets of rhetorical engagement, which are rhetoric's audience-centeredness and rhetoric's primary attention upon the immediate and momentary exigencies of assembly, court, and culture.

In what follows I offer a prolegomena for teaching Plato's thoughts on rhetoric as expressed in two of his dialogues, *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*. The first task involves choosing a translation. The second task involves placing Plato in his historical and theoretical context. The third task involves indicating the major themes for Plato's contribution to rhetoric.

TRANSLATION IS INTERPRETATION

Translations of Plato's works are numerous, and because Plato's philosophy is of interest to so many different kinds of scholars, choosing a translation that is well suited to the teacher of rhetoric is no simple task. In addition, the necessities of a budget influence which translation is best if one desires a class set of texts for students to use. For the teacher's copy of a text, finding a good translation may be overshadowed by concern for an adequate scholarly introduction to the text. If the teacher has some facility with Greek, the Loeb Classical Library editions[2] provide the Greek text side-by-side with an English translation. Generally speaking, the Loeb introductions are comprehensive, though they do not always focus upon the topics of interest to the rhetoric instructor. I have also found helpful introductions in Joe Sachs' introduction to the Focus Philosophical Library edition, *Plato's Gorgias and Aristotle's Rhetoric,*[3] and James H. Nichols' introduction to the Agora editions of *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*.[4] Focus also has a translation of *Phaedrus* by Stephen Scully,[5] which has an interesting interpretive essay as well as an adequate introduction. Some schools may already use the standard anthology of rhetoric, *The Rhetorical Tradition*, by Bizzell and Herzberg,[6] which contains a short but helpful introduction to *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus* from a rhetorical standpoint.[7] On a tight budget, recourse to public domain editions is ideal for class use. For example, Benjamin Jowett's translations of *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus* are available online.[8] At Trinitas, we've elected to use public domain texts for students, which I've found to be adequate, though I do recommend a teacher text for each dialogue (preferably the Focus Philosophical Library editions) that contains helpful footnotes, which the teacher can provide to the students where necessary.

CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT

The further removed from a time, place, and people we are, the more necessary the task of delineating the historical context of a text becomes. Plato's thoughts, Socrates' thoughts, are not experiments in the same way that proving Boyle's Law is an experiment—thought experiments aren't evaluated in a vacuum under ideal

conditions. Rather, Plato is at once responding to his contemporaries' thought and practice as well as carving out his own vision for the future, philosophically (as a proponent of a particular *epistemic* and *moral* viewpoint), pedagogically (for those students he would receive into his Academy), and politically (as part of his larger aims for the *polis,* more fully expressed in *Republic* and *Laws*). In order to grasp what Plato pitches in terms of rhetoric, one must prepare by understanding the sophists of Plato's time (who are his primary targets) as well as other alternative schools of thought (who also attacked sophistry, yet from a different presupposition from Plato).

There are a number of ways to improve one's understanding of Plato's context. First, one can consult one of the several excellent histories of classical rhetoric. Included in the endotes are several major histories of classical rhetoric, including Kennedy, Herrick, Conley, Murphy, and Pernot.[9] Kennedy is the leading American classics scholar on the subject, while Herrick (communication), Conley (English), and Murphy (English) are well-recognized scholars from within their disciplines. Pernot is the leading European classics scholar, and of the group I find his work to be the most balanced, helpful, and interesting.

Second, one may read the original sources themselves in edited editions, which provide helpful introductions to the individuals in their times. The edition of *The Older Sophists,* edited by Rosamond Kent Sprague,[10] has translations and brief introductions to the fragments we still possess of the Sophists, and serves as a handy handbook on the Sophists. The Sophists' efforts can be summarized in terms of two basic tenets: 1) man's measurements shape reality, 2) language possesses ultimate power. The first tenet implies the second, since whatever may be known by human measurement will be promulgated through language. The limitations upon human perception entail an ongoing contest for persuasion, or the power to shape reality toward some advantage. The Sophists were masters of linguistic strategy for the momentary victory over human perception, as Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* demonstrates in its captivating exculpation of Helen and her blame for the Trojan War.[11] Xenophon, Aristophanes, and Plato all give accounts of Socrates,[12] which agree and differ in certain important respects.[13]

PLATONIC RHETORIC

In the classroom, I regularly use Plato between readings of the Sophists (Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* and the anonymous *Dissoi Logoi*, sometimes attributed to Protagoras) and of Aristotle (*On Rhetoric*). In the historical development of the theories of rhetoric, Plato serves as a bridge between the skeptical pragmatism of sophistry and the natural law approach of Aristotle. Plato's idealist rhetoric posed difficult problems of knowledge (*epistemology*) and morality (*ethics*) for the popular sophistic rhetoric, and in doing so influenced Aristotle to combine the pragmatic approach of the sophists with the philosophical grounding he gained as a student of Plato. The students, therefore, need to have some idea of what sophistic rhetoric attempts (independently of Plato's depictions) in order to contrast it to the version Plato presents as well as understand Aristotle's (and later, Cicero's) synthesis.

Once the sophists are in hand, one can proceed through the *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*, attending to several key themes. First, there is the theme of knowledge, or epistemology, and morality, or ethics. Can one truly teach or be rationally trained in an "art" when the "art" cannot provide a rational justification for accomplishing what it proposes to accomplish? When Plato has Gorgias claim that rhetoric concerns matters of justice in law courts and assemblies, and that the one who is ignorant of justice can learn it from the teacher of oratory, the upshot is either that rhetoric attempts far more than what is achieves, or it is something other than what it claims to be. For Plato, unless a rational method

leading to determinate conclusions can be given, the teacher of oratory cannot ensure that justice is what the student will know or speak on behalf of. The key question to pose for the students here is, "To what extent is philosophical knowledge necessary for speaking well?" This question will be revisited in Aristotle and Cicero. A corollary of justice is virtue, or what might be considered the individual's and corporate body's relation to justice. In the *Gorgias*, virtue is primarily about the negative cultivation of justice in the soul—to suffer punishment unjustly is less devastating to the soul's virtue than to avoid just punishment. In the *Phaedrus*, virtue is positively construed as speech that leads away from sensual indulgence and toward intellectual advancement—the philosopher's paradoxical erotic-ascetic ideal, which combines rigorous self-control with the ineffable ecstasy of divine illumination. The relationship between individual and corporate virtue, self-control, and knowledge is a central question students should continually consider and revisit during their readings of Plato: "How does one cultivate virtue, to what extent does language play a part, and what sort of language will lead to the proper cultivation of virtue?"

Second, there is the theme of pedagogy, or proper method. Since, for Plato, sophistic rhetoric is disorderly, Plato offers his own alternative in *dialectic*, which is both on display in Gorgias and Phaedrus, as well as giving some methodological description. In class I spend some time allowing the students to familiarize themselves with the philosophical method of dialectic in contrast to the sophistic method of double-arguments (*dissoi logoi*).[14] The *Phaedrus* presents both a fabulous (in the literal sense of the word) account of dialectical assent, as well as a description of how the method operates. The complicated nature of both recommending dialectical speech while also employing rhetorical speech is on display, and students should attempt to reconcile the apparent contradiction of at once abusing rhetoric while employing rhetoric.[15]

Third, there is the theme of politics,[16] which requires the students to acknowledge and examine the possibilities of rhetoric in different forms of government. For democratic Athens, the ever-shifting desires and opinions make sophistic pragmatism especially tempting, where Plato's aristocratic oligarchy (or philosophical meritocracy) is more restrictive. In conjunction with the political theme, one can also bring in the personal theme, which is Plato's connection to Socrates and the impact of Socrates' death upon Plato's criticisms of rhetoric.[17] Students should be asked to consider the extent to which a political ideal constrains (or ought to constrain) an oratorical ideal: Should one shape one's speech to fit a political model, or should one shape one's political model to fit an oratorical ideal, or something of both?

Fourth, there is the theme of teleology, or the ends of rhetoric. This theme is really intertwined with the others, but serves as a good opportunity to summarize Plato's contributions in preparation for those who follow him, and will be interacting directly or indirectly with the problems Plato raises. Is the purpose of rhetoric to serve justice in the sense of making one just, or is the purpose of rhetoric more procedural, that is, does it only enable one to possess the skills of speech that could be used to accomplish justice, but also injustice? Is rhetoric integrally tied to the philosophical ideal, or is it a tool available to any who would seek it out?

CONCLUSION

Despite the complex nature of Plato's writings, and the students' unfamiliarity with reading dialogues, the teacher and student of rhetoric will find much to stimulate conversation and contemplation of the nature and task of speech-making and writing. The *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* are two of Plato's dialogues that provide a sound introduction to Plato's thoughts on rhetoric, and, if taught well, will aim the classical student toward more thoughtful and careful rhetorical engagement.

NOTES

1. Edward Schiappa, *Protagoras* and *Logos* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 40ff. Schiappa provides considerable evidence for the claim that Plato was the first to coin the term "rhetoric" for the art and practice of oratory.

2. No. 36, which is available in the public domain, contains *Phaedrus*; no. 166 contains *Gorgias*.

3. Joe Sachs, *Plato's Gorgias and Aristotle's Rhetoric* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2009).

4. Plato, *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*, trans. James H. Nichols Jr., Agora Series (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). Though the Nichols' translations are published separately, the introductions are identical in each book.

5. Stephen Scully, *Plato's Phaedrus* (Newburyport, MA: Focus, 2003).

6. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2001).

7. The translations of *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus* in *The Rhetorical Tradition* are by W.R.M. Lamb and H.N. Fowler, respectively. Lamb and Fowler were also the translators of the Loeb editions.

8. Plato, *Lysis*; *Symposium; Gorgias*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983). Gorgias alone is available in the public domain from Project Gutenberg, translated by Benjamin Jowett: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1672/1672-h/1672-h.htm. Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito*, *Phaedo, Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990). Available in the public domain: http://books.google.com/books?id=qFIMAAAAIAAJ&source=gbs_navlinks_s. *Phaedrus* is also available alone in Benjamin Jowett's translation in the public domain from Project Gutenberg: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1636/1636-h/1636-h.htm. Stanford provides helpful information for copyright and fair use laws for the reproduction of public domain texts: http://fairuse.stanford.edu/.

9. Major histories of classical rhetoric:

- Thomas M. Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
- James Herrick, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2012).
- George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980). There is also an updated edition, published in 1999.
- George A. Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).
- James J. Murphy, Richard A. Katula, and Michael Hoppmann, *A Synoptic History of Classical Rhetoric*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013)
- Laurent Pernot, *Rhetoric in Antiquity*, trans. W. E. Higgins (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

10. *The Older Sophists: A Complete Translation*, ed. Rosamond Kent Sprague (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2001).

11. Isocrates represents an alternative to the Sophists on one end of the spectrum, as well as Aristotle and Plato toward the other end. Isocrates disdains the ethics of the sophists, but does not require the philosophical rigor of Plato and Aristotle. Rather, Isocrates represents the virtuous statesman—one who seeks to stand apart from the demagogic impulses of democracy, yet is willing to rely upon *doxa*, or common opinion, as suited to the immediate needs of the *polis*. In several ways Isocrates prefigures the later Roman oratorical ideals of Cicero and Quintilian.

12. Accounts of Socrates:

- Xenophon, *Memorabilia, Recollections of Socrates*. Available in the public domain, translated by H. G. Dakyns: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1177/1177-h/1177-h.htm
- Aristophanes, *Clouds*. Available in the public domain from Project Gutenberg, translated by William James Hickie: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2562/2562-h/2562-h.htm
- Plato's "account" of Socrates is, of course, dispersed throughout his dialogues, but several dialogues in particular consider his last days and can be found in the public domain from Project Gutenberg, all translated by Benjamin Jowett:

  1. *Euthyphro*: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1642/1642-h/1642-h.htm.

  2. *Apology*: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1656/1656-h/1656-h.htm.

  3. *Crito*: http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext99/crito10h.htm.

  4. *Phaedo*: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1658/1658-h/1658-h.htm.

13. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates and Notes of Schelling's Berlin Lectures*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989). Kierkegaard's early work, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, provides an interesting interpretation of Socrates on the basis of Kierkegaard's analysis of the historical sources.

14. I've found it very helpful to use Aristotle's square of opposition to discuss the sophistic method of double-arguments and Socrates' method of undermining his opponents' claims. Double-arguments play upon the differences between universal and particular claims.

15. Richard Weaver's article, "Phaedrus and the Nature of Rhetoric," on Plato's view of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* has become a classic favorable interpretation of Plato's viewpoint. The article opens Weaver's *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1985).

16. Extremely helpful on the topic of Plato's political theory is the transcript of Leo Strauss' 1963 seminar on Plato's *Gorgias*, which is available in the public domain: https://archive.org/details/LeoStraussSeminarOnPlatosGorgiaschicago1963.

17. Pernot gives an excellent summary of the progression of Plato's thoughts on rhetoric beginning with *Gorgias* and Plato's challenge to sophistry, through *Menexenus, Symposium, Apology of Socrates*, and *Phaedrus*.