

PLATO'S AMBIVALENCE ABOUT RHETORIC IN THE *GORGIAS*

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ABSTRACT: The main thesis of the present paper is that Plato's attitude towards rhetoric appears to have been complex to the point of ambivalent, for as one reads the *Gorgias*, one cannot avoid getting the impression that in spite of his *overt* castigation of rhetoric, the philosopher did *covertly* resort to it in the very dialogue. Thus, the article will seek to demonstrate that even though Platonic Socrates repudiated rhetoric understood as political demagoguery and cynical adulation, he did employ some sort of art of persuasion designed to inveigle his interlocutors into accepting a worldview that must have appeared extremely paradoxical for the then mentality.

In the course of his discussion with Callicles, Socrates differentiates (503a) between rhetoric understood as “flattery” (κολακεία) or “shameful oratory” (αἰσχρὰ δημηγορία) on the one hand and “some other” (ἕτερον) which is characterized as “noble” or “fine” (καλόν) and whose task consists, according to the philosopher (503b), in:

trying to perfect the souls of the citizens and struggling to ensure that the best things are said, whether they be more pleasant or more unpleasant for the hearers (τὸ παρασκευάζειν ὅπως ὡς βέλτισται ἔσονται τῶν πολιτῶν αἰ ψυχαί, καὶ διαμάχεσθαι λέγοντα τὰ βέλτιστα, εἴτε ἡδίω εἴτε ἀηδέστερα ἔσται τοῖς ἀκούουσιν)¹.

While Socrates points out (ibid.) to Callicles that “he has never seen such rhetoric”, the paper will argue that in the *Gorgias* Platonic Socrates applies this mysterious and noble rhetoric with the view to making his interlocutors accept a given axiology. It has to be emphasized that the rhetoric that Socrates employs is a philosophical one, as it is ancillary to his dialectic. Yet, even though the

¹ In the present article, the Greek text of the *Gorgias* was consulted with the editions of E.R. Dodds (London 1959) and M. Wohlrab (Lipsiae 1887), while the English with the translations made by J.A. Arieti and R.M. Barrus (Newburyport 2007), R. Waterfield (Oxford 1994), D.J. Zeyl (Indianapolis 1987) and T. Irwin (Oxford 1979). Occasionally, F. Schleiermacher's (Frankfurt/M. 1991) translation has also been consulted.

objective of this dialectical rhetoric is far more lofty than the objective of the rhetoric applied at public assemblies, the method of the former – as we will show – does not differ that much from the method of the latter.

The *Leitmotiv* of Plato's *Gorgias* is a conflict (ἄγών) of two, mutually exclusive, axiologies. According to the first one, there does exist objective good and morality which can be reached through rational cognition and, therefore, serve as the very foundations of ethics. According to the other, the existence of such imponderables is – to say the least – disputable. Whereas the former view is represented by Platonic Socrates and the latter by the sophists, it is worth accentuating that the conflict which is to be found in the dialogue could, arguably, be seen as a reflection of Plato's own internal struggle. Hence, one might purport that Plato's suggestive portrayals of rhetoricians – presumably – testify to the philosopher's wavering between making use of rhetoric *in commune bonum*, on the one hand, and discarding it, on the other. Consequently, the purpose of our paper is to investigate the aforementioned eventuality and to ascertain whether and, if so, to what extent, it would be justifiable to maintain that contrary to his declarations one does in fact encounter clandestine rhetoric in Platonic Socrates².

We believe that the entire dialogue can be characterized as a reflection of Platonic Socrates' vacillation with regard to two positions. On the one hand, the philosopher aptly asks (453d) whether it is not so that “whoever teaches anything, persuades about what he teaches” (ὅστις διδάσκει ὅτιοῦν πρᾶγμα, πότερον ὁ διδάσκει πείθει ἢ οὐ) and, on the other, he boldly asserts (473 b) that “the truth can never be refuted” (τὸ γὰρ ἀληθὲς οὐδέποτε ἐλέγχεται). Arguably, the *Gorgias* pivots, then, on this acute tension between a “realistic” plea for rhetorical effectiveness and sober pragmatism, on the one hand, and an “idealistic” plea for objectivity and axiological neutrality, on the other. Naturally, one is immediately prompted to ask the question whether rhetoric can be true in the first place, but apart from that, it has to be observed that insofar as Platonic Socrates seems to be identifying διδάσκει with πείθει, one might profess the identification to be a token of his awareness of the indispensability of rhetoric.

Consequently, Socrates' profound insight could be interpreted as revealing the fact that in order to make somebody acknowledge that the only proper mode of acting is that which follows the λόγος, one has to apply a non-rational strategy, for choosing rationality, like choosing any worldview, revolves around appeals to emotions and, therefore, remains a matter of believing in the validity of given values rather than of providing some rational justification. Accordingly, when

² Our investigation will make no sharp distinction between Platonic Socrates and the “authentic” one due to our fundamental assumption that one of Plato's rhetorical strategies consists in fabricating *all* of his *dramatis personae*. The issue of the extent to which Plato's dialogue represents Socratic philosophy accurately has received a great deal of scholarly attention, but it is neither possible nor necessary to enumerate all diverse approaches. The reader is referred to the following works: Field 1969; Guthrie 1975; Hare 1982; Irwin 1989; Santas 1979 and Vlastos 1991.

Platonic Socrates endeavours to inveigle his interlocutors into abiding by his “rational” worldview, he stoops to the noble rhetoric, which – as earlier observed – “perfects the souls of the citizens”. In other words, the philosopher applies various tools of rhetorical persuasion, for in the long run one becomes *persuaded* and, thus, *resolves* to *believe* in the intellect and the value of rational argumentation. This interpretation might help to explain why Platonic Socrates purports to be persuaded solely by reason, whereas the preponderance of his arguments – as we will demonstrate – must be seen as rhetorical appeals to his interlocutors’ passions rather than to their reason.

Platonic Socrates is determined to rationally prove two paradoxical theses: (1) that it is worse to perpetrate evil than suffer it and (2) that it is better for a man who has perpetrated evil to be punished. Needless to say, the view that doing injustice is worse than suffering it was entirely incomprehensible for the then mentality and for this reason Polus describes (473a) Platonic Socrates’ views as ἄτοπα, which means “extraordinary to the point of being absurd”. What is important for our considerations is that inasmuch as the position of Platonic Socrates sounded absurd not only to Polus, but to almost every Greek who came to listen to the Greek thinker, it was precisely this “absurdity” of his stance that compelled Platonic Socrates to resort to rhetoric³.

In the light of the above, it becomes understandable why the attempts to establish what rhetoric is result in discussing issues as lofty as the nature of good and evil or the question of universal morality. If, in the final analysis, the Greek thinker acquiesces in the impossibility of *proving* that a moral life is *better* in the sense that it guarantees *happiness*, then it is – as we believe – due to Plato’s not being oblivious to the fact that there is just no irrefutable logical explanation why a moral life should be preferred to an immoral one. In other words, Plato was perfectly aware of the fact that when it comes to such axiological issues as morality, no rational demonstration can substantiate the validity of a moral choice. That is why although Platonic Socrates does seek to highlight the contrast between the art of persuasion, on the one hand, and the rational dialectic, on the other, he ultimately ends up obfuscating it and finally turns himself a rhetorician.

We wish to underscore that the rhetorical stratagems of Platonic Socrates do remain subordinate to his dialectical method, inasmuch as the philosopher observes (458a) that he ‘gladly’ (ἡδέως) not only refutes those who say something not true but also himself becomes refuted when he says something not true.

³ It goes without saying that from the perspective of a person raised in Christian culture, the paradoxicalness of Socrates’ position is less obvious, for the thesis that it is a greater evil to do wrong than to suffer it anticipates the very core of Christ’s message. Suffice it to quote the teaching (1 Pet. 3, 17) that it is better to suffer for well doing than for evil doing (κρεῖττον γὰρ ἀγαθοποιούντας [...] πάσχειν ἢ κακοποιούντας).

Whenever Socrates insists (506a) that he solely “seeks in common with his interlocutors” (ζητῶ κοινῇ μεθ’ ὑμῶν), whenever he actually encourages (506b) Callicles to ‘attack’ (ἐπιλαμβάνου) him, then the “rhetoric” of Platonic Socrates does remain dialectical and can by no means be identified with the elocutionary displays of the sophists. A rhetorical discourse is *monologic*, while a philosophical one – at least in the way that Socrates conceived of it (448d) – is *dialogic*, inasmuch as his διαλέγεσθαι connotes a *rational discussion*. Hence, when we say that Platonic Socrates supports his dialectic with some sort of art of persuasion, we hardly equate the Socratic discourse strategy with the sophistic one. We solely wish to demonstrate that Platonic Socrates is perfectly aware of the fact that it is simply unfeasible to settle an axiological dispute by means of rational argumentation alone. It is only in this sense that we purport that Platonic Socrates turns himself a rhetorician. Let us see how this happens⁴.

During his discussion with Polus, Socrates identifies (463b) rhetoric with some sort of “flattery” or “adulation” (κολακεία) and seems to suggest that rhetoric is somewhat base and despicable. Nonetheless, throughout the dialogue, Platonic Socrates himself “flatters” his interlocutors. He appeals, for instance, to Polus’ aesthetic taste when he asks (474d) the sophist whether doing injustice is not “worse” (κάκιον) and “uglier” (αἴσχιον) than suffering it⁵. As a matter of fact, it is already the antonymous pair κακός – καλός that stresses the obvious axiological dimension, since the former means not only “bad”, but also “ugly” and “unsightly”, whereas the latter – not only “good”, but also “pretty” and “beautiful”. Still, αἰσχροός makes things even more obvious, as it implies disgraceful ugliness⁶. If Platonic Socrates equates (ibid.) “beautiful” with “good” and “bad” with “ugly” (καλόν τε καὶ ἀγαθόν καὶ κακὸν καὶ αἰσχροόν), then he subsequently identifies (476b, e) “all that is just with the beautiful” (τὰ δίκαια πάντα καλά), so as to conclude (477a) that “if beautiful, then good” (εἴπερ καλά, ἀγαθά). It needs to be accentuated here that Platonic Socrates exceeds thereby the rigid frames of a rational discourse, for by suggesting that *morality* is something *beautiful*, he appeals not so much to his interlocutors’ reason, but rather to their *emotions*. It seems that the philosopher does realize that identifying morality

⁴ As our exposition is organized in accordance with the heart of the matter, we deliberately reverse the chronological order and address Socrates’ dispute with Gorgias at the end of our considerations.

⁵ Conceivably, the term “aesthetic” can sound slightly unfortunate due to its modern connotations. Undoubtedly, it is only from our present perspective that beauty can be seen as an aesthetic value, since for a Greek it had first of all a moral and practical sense. Throughout the article, we use the term “axiological” to capture the broad understanding of beauty that was characteristic of the antiquity.

⁶ Indisputably, a language as rich as Greek offers numerous translation possibilities for both κάκιον and αἴσχιον. Schleiermacher’s decision to render them as “schlimmer” and “hässlicher”, respectively, seems to corroborate our interpretation.

with beauty is tantamount to appealing to Polus' aesthetic taste, for he openly states (473a) that he seeks to "make" (ποιῆσαι) Polus "say the same things that he says" (ταὐτὰ ἐμοὶ λέγειν). But then again, in order to make Polus say what Platonic Socrates says, i.e., to make the sophist agree with him, the philosopher must have recourse to the noble rhetoric (ancillary to dialectic), whose high goal is to talk the adversary into Platonic Socrates' rational ethic.

The same strategy is employed by Platonic Socrates during his "clash" with Callicles. When the philosopher resorts (523b) to his famous myth of "the prison of retribution and justice" (τὸ τῆς τίσεώς τε καὶ δίκης δεσμωτήριον), one can hardly maintain that he remains within the rules of a purely rational discourse. One should rather say that he appeals to fear of severe punishment, when he talks (525b) of being an "example for the others" (παραδείγματι τοῖς ἄλλοις) and of suffering which makes people "fear and improve" (φοβούμενοι βελτίους γίγνωνται). No matter how noble the ends and how lofty the ideals that guide Platonic Socrates were, arguments such as fear of punishment have little to do with morality.

Furthermore, inasmuch as Platonic Socrates resorts to myths, he employs scarcely a dialectical strategy, but rather a rhetorical one, since he appeals to the listener's emotions and beliefs and not to his reason. Although rhetoric is here subordinate to dialectic its indispensability is due to the fact that hardly anybody can rationally be made to accept Socrates' paradoxical ethic and, therefore, they have to be inveigled into doing it. Where reasoning bears no fruit, other arguments must be put forward and that is why in the *Gorgias*, Socrates' entire polemic with Callicles pivots on a quasi-Orphic myth. Nevertheless, the recourse to such a myth is clearly a rhetorical measure.

Plato's proclivity for supporting his philosophical ideas with myths can be observed not only in the *Gorgias*, but also in dialogues as various as *Meno*, *Republic*, *Phaedo* or *Timaeus*. In view of this, we should note that Plato's attitude towards myths is just as complicated and ambivalent as his attitude towards rhetoric. On the one hand, he severely criticizes the traditional mythology, repudiating for example the Greek anthropomorphism, and on the other – he exploits miscellaneous myths so as to "reinforce" his epistemology (*Meno*), ethic (*Gorgias*) or cosmology (*Timaeus*). It is crucial to understand Plato's dialectic of myth, for there is a certain significant parallel between myth and rhetoric in Plato, who at the same time condemns and uses them both. On the one hand, the philosopher seeks to rationalize myths, as in the *Republic*, and, on the other, he illustrates some of his theses by means of myth, as in the *Gorgias*. The apparent ambivalence can be explained as Plato's reluctance to disregard the irrational component of the human soul. This helps to explain why Platonic Socrates resorts not only to rhetoric, but to myths as well, taking both with sober criticism: even though he remains suspicious of them, Plato employs in his works rhetoric and myths, as these appeal mainly to the extra- or trans-rational in man. The *Phaedo* provides us with a prime

testimony to this strategy, when Platonic Socrates, having presented a mythological justification of his eschatology, entreats (114d) every “man endowed with some intellect” (νοῦν ἔχοντι ἀνδρὶ) not to “insist stubbornly” (δυσχυρίσασθαι) on literal interpretation of myths told the by philosopher. A similar approach is to be found in the *Gorgias*, where Platonic Socrates appears to perceive myths and rhetoric as *mala necessaria*, the former being useful heuristic and rhetorical fictions, whose purpose is to illustrate and, in the long run, persuade the reader into accepting the worldview of Platonic Socrates.

With regard to the myth that concludes Socrates’ discussion with Callicles, two things need to be stressed. Firstly, Socrates explicitly says that he expects (523a) Callicles to regard his tale as nothing more than μῦθος, even though he treats it as λόγος, i.e. a parable not utterly devoid of an intellectual element. And secondly, having suggested that myths can and should be rationalized so that they could serve useful purposes, Platonic Socrates states (ibid.) that “he will present as truth what he intends to say” (ὡς ἀληθῆ γὰρ ὄντα σοι λέξω ἃ μέλλω λέγειν). We may ask why the philosopher asserts that he will present his tale “as truth” (ὡς ἀληθῆ)? Socrates makes it clear (527a) that although Callicles is bound to “despise” (καταφρονεῖν) the myth, there is nothing “better and truer” (βελτίω καὶ ἀληθέστερα) that could “demonstrate” (ἀποδείξει) what kind of life one ought to live. This astonishing statement makes the philosopher’s parable somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, the verb ἀποδείξει suggests the idea of *proof* in the sense of the Latin *demonstratio*, since Platonic Socrates aims to *prove* the value of a moral life. On the other hand, this candid admission can be taken as Socrates’ consciousness of the impossibility to rationally prove the superiority of a moral life over an immoral one. Inasmuch as Socrates acquiesces in the fact that there is simply no irrefutable logical proof that morality guarantees earthly *happiness*, the philosopher has no other option but in order to make his interlocutor live a moral life he is forced to deceive them into morality by dint of a rhetorical reference to the fable of the afterlife. The fact that Platonic Socrates appeals to such incentives as fear of punishment, shows not only his determination to induce his interlocutors to live morally, but, at the same time, his helplessness with regard to the task. In the end, it does not matter how hard Platonic Socrates endeavours to refute Callicles position, since he succeeds only seemingly and at the end of the day offers no proof or reason, but rather silences the opponent by spinning his yarn about the afterlife. It is hardly possible to speak of any rebuttal here, and the reader is left with the impression that Platonic Socrates manages to talk his adversary down only due to the fact that it was Plato who authored the dialogue.

It is crucial to note that Plato does not attempt to reinterpret traditional myths so as to find some hidden and deeper meaning in them. If there is no allegorical interpretation of myths in Plato, it is because the philosopher uses them exclusively for a very special purpose: to persuade the interlocutor to succumb to

a given view. Hence, myths can be seen in Plato as heuristic instruments of rhetorical persuasion. The fact that Platonic Socrates eventually has recourse to rhetoric reflects not only the inner conflict between reason and passion that Plato must have experienced, but also his awareness of the impossibility of rationally proving the necessity to live morally. Thus, the *Gorgias* can be perceived as a result of Plato's dilemma whether to attribute the highest value to rational cognition or accept the vital role of non-rational factors in the process of adopting a given set of values. Yet, even if Plato saw clearly that it is not viable to rationally demonstrate the superiority of a moral life, the obvious question that we must pose now is whether the fact that Platonic Socrates does apply some sort of rhetoric is not – at least to some extent – a sort of its justification? To this Platonic Socrates could naturally reply that he does not employ rhetoric with a view to dominating and subjugating his interlocutor politically, i.e. that he applies it justly, but then again, “justly” is a matter of one's perspective and Callicles would point out that Socrates begs the question, as the task of the dispute was only to establish what justice is at all.

All things considered, the Platonic conviction about the indispensability of rhetoric stems from his anthropology: the philosopher divides (*Resp.* 441a sqq.) human soul into the rational (λογιστικόν) and the irrational (ἐπιθυμητικόν and θυμοειδές in his terminology) and it is precisely for this reason that adequate, i.e. rational and irrational strategies must be applied, these being dialectic and rhetoric (together with the appropriate myths). Plato was, thus, perfectly aware of the fact that human beings cannot be reduced to reason alone, since we have also been endowed with passions and that is why λόγος is accompanied in the *Gorgias* by πάθος and dialectic is assisted by rhetoric⁷. Now, if the philosopher does not appeal to the intellect alone, then we must not overestimate the so-called rationalism or intellectualism of Platonic Socrates, who himself at times enchants his listener rhetorically. As it is plainly impossible to persuade somebody intellectually to do good, and as the emotional and passionate in human require a different approach, myth becomes a matter of the utmost importance in the *Gorgias*, for Platonic metaphysics serves there the very rhetorical purpose to persuade to the worldview that Socrates advocates. In the light of the fact that Platonic Socrates has recourse to myths, it seems advisable to revise the trite cliché of Socrates' intellectualism. Now, we must turn to Socrates debate with Gorgias, where the philosopher also seems to employ the noble and refined rhetoric.

⁷ Plato awareness of it is testified by his remark (*Resp.* 607b) about “an ancient controversy between philosophy and poetry” (παλαιὰ μὲν τις διαφορὰ φιλοσοφία τε καὶ ποιητικῆ). Inasmuch as philosophy (being oriented towards Intellect) is in Plato identical with dialectic and inasmuch as poetry (being oriented towards emotions) is for him – at least to some extent – affined with rhetoric, then the *Gorgias* is a classical presentation of the perennial conflict between the rational, i.e. philosophy and dialectic, on the one hand and the “irrational”, i.e. poetry and rhetoric, on the other.

When Gorgias praises highly (452e) the ability – or power – (δύναμις) “to speak and persuade the masses” (λέγειν καὶ πείθειν τὰ πλήθη), Socrates, accordingly, defines (453a) rhetoric as the “craftsman” or “agent of persuasion” (πειθοῦς δημιουργός). Socrates and Gorgias agree (454e) that rhetoric produces persuasion from which “conviction without knowing” (πιστεύειν ἄνευ τοῦ εἰδέναι) comes. However, Socrates’ conclusion (455a) that the rhetorician cannot teach about the just and unjust seems to be rather hasty, if not downright erroneous, and his contempt for rhetoricians who “solely produce conviction” appears to be unwarranted. When Socrates maintains (ibid.) that rhetoric is “designed to produce conviction, but not to educate about the just and unjust” (πιστευτικῆς ἄλλ’ οὐ διδασκαλικῆς περὶ τὸ δίκαιόν τε καὶ ἄδικον), he disregards the fact that every axiology is founded on conviction and faith (πίστις) – rather than on knowing and that, consequently, it is hardly possible to *know* what is just or unjust, since it is only possible to *believe* that. The view that one can actually possess objective knowledge with regard to values is naturally Platonic to the core. Nevertheless, the question remains open whether it is possible at all to avoid any persuasion in a discussion that concerns values.

It follows from what has been said so far that it is only on the surface that Platonic Socrates rejects all art of persuasion, as beneath the veneer of an avowed enemy of rhetoric (understood as “flattery”, “adulation” and political demagoguery), the philosopher does resort in the course of his discussion with the sophists to some sort of rhetoric (understood as an art of persuasion indispensable in every axiological debate). Just as Plato’s dialogues are literary works of an astounding persuasiveness, so contrary to the philosopher’s intransigent insistence that philosophy and dialectic be distinguished from rhetoric, significant *rhetorical* ruses do appear throughout the dialogue on both sides of the dispute. Inasmuch as Plato in his *Gorgias* seeks through Socrates to inveigle the listener into accepting an ethic whose rationalism leads to theses that sound paradoxical, the philosopher very often appeals to faith and emotions rather than to reason and in the long run talks of (506a) “agreeing” (ὁμολογεῖν) rather than “proving” (ἀποδείξει).

In order to persuade the interlocutors into accepting his paradoxical ethical intellectualism, Platonic Socrates also employs a rhetorical strategy which consists in fabricating all *dramatis personae* of the dialogue in such a manner that they are supposed to propagate consensus with regard to Socrates’ paradoxical life-view. This may seem *prima facie* rather farfetched, but if one considers this carefully, one is bound to reach the following conclusion: just as there reigns general consent with regard to the fact that the Socrates which is to be found in Plato’s dialogues is – at least to some extent – a creation of Plato, so all other characters of the *Gorgias* should also be perceived as concocted by Plato. Let us begin with Gorgias.

It is common knowledge that in his treaty *On What is Not, or About Nature*, Gorgias repudiated any concept of truth whatsoever. Now, when the sophist in

Plato's dialogue eagerly accepts Socrates' distinction between "persuasion from which conviction comes without knowing" and "persuasion from which knowing comes", one is tempted to say that this Gorgias is simply a Platonic mystification, for the "genuine" Gorgias, for whom there was no knowing at all, would never have accepted such a dubious distinction. The "authentic" Gorgias repudiated any cognition in Plato's sense of the word, as for him no legitimate rational knowledge could ever be obtained in the first place. The sophist questioned the possibility of any rational, disinterested and objective knowing, as for him no knowledge could be anything more than just an opinion (δόξα). Philosophy and rhetoric did not differ that much from his perspective (let alone be opposite), as they both presuppose conviction and faith with regard to the values that underlie every worldview and every discourse. While the Gorgias in his treaty rejected any attempts to define Truth or Being, the Gorgias in the dialogue is a construct of Plato and for this reason he becomes easily "defeated" by Platonic Socrates. It has to be emphasized here that by creating – or fabricating – such Gorgias, Plato seems to be resorting through his Socrates to some sort of rhetorical subterfuge. If the Gorgias concocted in the dialogue is a product of Plato's rhetorical strategy, then just as we speak of Platonic Socrates we should also speak of Platonic Gorgias, since both are Plato's rhetorical mystifications, produced with a view to persuading the reader into accepting a given axiology.

If by constructing his protagonists (Socrates) and antagonists (Gorgias et al.), Plato proves to be not only a dramaturge but a rhetorician as well, then he actually applies the very sophist strategy against the sophists, for by concocting his Gorgias Plato combats rhetoric by means of rhetoric. Let us remind it here that rhetoric that is "flattery" and "shameful oratory" is to be superseded by another, "noble" one, which is "to perfect the souls of the citizens". This lofty objective helps to explain why the fabricated Gorgias falls into some glaring contradictions during his debate with Socrates. Whenever this happens it has to be borne in mind that it is always *Platonic* Gorgias that falls into contradictions that are deliberately created by Plato. Let us consider the following charge that the Platonic Socrates levels (459d) against the rhetorician who:

doesn't know the things themselves, what is good or bad, what is fine or shameful or just or unjust, but he has devised persuasion about them so that though he doesn't know among those who don't know he appears to know, rather than the man who knows⁸.

αὐτὰ μὲν οὐκ εἰδώς, τί ἀγαθὸν ἢ τί κακὸν ἔστιν ἢ τί καλὸν ἢ τί αἰσχρὸν ἢ δίκαιον ἢ ἄδικον, πειθῶ δὲ περὶ αὐτῶν μεμηχανημένος ὥστε δοκεῖν εἰδέναι οὐκ εἰδώς ἐν οὐκ εἰδόσιν μᾶλλον τοῦ εἰδότος.

⁸ Quoted after T. Irwin's translation.

Platonic Socrates assumes here that unlike the rational dialectic (and the aforementioned “refined” variety of rhetoric), the rhetoric that is tantamount to “pandering” appeals (like poetry) exclusively to the emotions of the listeners and, therefore, exempts from the obligation to possess any genuine learning whatsoever. It is for this reason that Platonic Socrates states (502b) that “composing tragedies” (ἡ τῆς τραγωδίας ποίησις), being also oriented “solely toward pleasing the audience” (χαρίζεσθαι τοῖς θεαταῖς μόνον) can be identified (502c) with “flattery” or “pandering” (κολακεία), while both poetry and rhetoric deserve (502d) to be named as a sort of “popular oratory” – or in modern term: “demagoguery” (δημηγορία). Naturally, it is only the adulatory and demagogical rhetoric that becomes equated with poetry, while its noble and ancillary to dialectic variety remains the constant element of Socrates’ discourse.

Still, it is evident that from the “authentic” Gorgias’ perspective such a differentiation together with Socrates’ censure could be dismissed as preposterous. When Socrates distinguishes between a “noble” and a “vile” rhetoric or when he castigates the rhetorician who has “devised” (μεμηχανημένος) persuasion, the philosopher suggests that there is another way to make somebody accept a set of values, yet, in fact, there is not⁹. There is no knowing when it comes to axiology and morality is not an epistemological issue, for no value can be classified as “true” or “false”. The hackneyed *de gustibus non est disputandum* is valid with regard to every axiology: not only aesthetics but ethics, too. Surely, Gorgias accepts all of Platonic Socrates’ dubious presuppositions, but – as already noted – it is a rhetorical mystification on Plato’s side, for if we agree that it is actually *Platonic* Gorgias that heartily accepts the premises of Socrates’ intellectualism and is easily defeated by it, then we must also agree that we do not encounter here an “authentic” Gorgias, but rather a fabricated one. Consequently, as it is *Platonic* Gorgias that is “vanquished” by equally Platonic Socrates, one might argue that ultimately it is Plato that defeats Plato¹⁰.

Similar rhetorical manoeuvres are employed by Platonic Socrates during his discussion with the remaining sophists: just as in the case of Gorgias, Socrates’ ethical intellectualism serves very often as an instrument of rhetorical persuasion, so in the case of Polus and Callicles appropriate means of rhetorical persuasion

⁹ Let us note again that Platonic Socrates does realize this when he enquires: whether it is not so that “whoever teaches anything, persuades about what he teaches” and when he frankly confesses that he endeavours to “make” Polus “say the same things that he says”. Both quotations confirm his consciousness that it is not feasible to persuade to a given axiological option, unless a certain art of persuasion and appropriate rhetorical stratagems are employed.

¹⁰ Incidentally, there is even a testimony that corroborates the assumption that we are dealing here with Platonic fabrication of Gorgias and not the “genuine” sophist. According to Athenaeus (XI 505d–e [A 15a DK]), Gorgias, having read Plato’s dialogue, was supposed to have said that Plato could “deride” (ἰαμβίζειν) magnificently and added that he neither said nor heard any of those things that are to be found in Plato’s dialogue.

are also applied. For our considerations, it is of minor importance whether Polus and Callicles existed or whether they are fictitious characters, created for the purpose of Plato's drama and with a view to advancing Socrates' stance. What is of major importance is the manner in which they were presented by Plato: even though we know for a fact that Polus existed, whereas Callicles' existence remains only probable, it seems advisable to focus on the reasonable premise that neither Polus nor Callicles can be described as entirely "genuine" and "authentic", for they, too, must have been – at least to some extent – concocted by Plato. Unfortunately, a thorough presentation of the whole of the discussion is impossible due to the necessary limitations of the present article. Hence, we cannot enumerate all the ambiguities and equivocations which Platonic Socrates produces in order to ensnare his interlocutors. Suffice it to say that what has been said about Plato's fabricating Gorgias seems also valid with regard to the remaining sophists: they, too, are Plato's rhetorical mystifications, designed to persuade the reader into accepting Socrates' ethical intellectualism. We have concentrated on Gorgias, but – needless to say – Polus and Callicles are equally significant. Altogether, the thinkers, as they appear, reflect not only an escalation of the conflict between philosophy and rhetoric, but also a subtle coalescence of the two.

Finally, we wish to draw attention to a striking inconsistency in Platonic Socrates, which, in our opinion, illustrates perfectly the thesis about the rhetorical mystification on Plato's part. The Greek philosopher claims (515d–517c) that great men such as Pericles, Cimon, Miltiades, Themistocles did deserve the treatment they received from the people they had ruled over "for not a single leader of a city can ever be destroyed unjustly by the very city he leads" (προστάτης γὰρ πόλεως οὐδ' ἄν εἷς ποτε ἀδίκως ἀπόλοιτο ὑπ' αὐτῆς τῆς πόλεως ἧς προστατεῖ) (519c). Likewise, Socrates maintains (ibid.) that the sophists make themselves ridiculous when "they claim to be teachers of virtue" (ἀρετῆς διδάσκαλοι) and at the same time often accuse their pupils of "doing injustice" (ἀδικοῦσι) to them. The charge is obvious: both politicians and rhetoricians aspire to certain authority and, consequently, must bear responsibility for the actions of people they want to guide. Immoral actions of the guided testify to the worthlessness of the guidance. Nevertheless, Socrates is supposed to be some curious exception to the rule, as he boldly asserts (521d) that if he is ever brought to court, his prosecutor will be a "base man" (πονηρός). The assertion that anyone who tries to indict Socrates will be ignoble raises the obvious question why Socrates should be exempt from the very responsibility that politicians and rhetoricians must shoulder. Callicles could have answered that Socrates' death would only testify to the poverty of his teaching. We discover here a glaring discrepancy between the sweeping condemnation of the politicians or rhetoricians, on the one hand, and the touching eulogy of Socrates, on the other. As it is scarcely possible that Plato would have failed to see this inconsistency, we must ask what its purpose is.

One of the possible answers could be that such inconsistencies, contradictions and paradoxes, as the one delivered above, serve a very specific purpose in Plato: they are certain rhetorical devices whose function is to stimulate to reflection and very often to persuade the reader into accepting the view that Platonic Socrates advocates. Plato makes use of various contradictions and paradoxes for purposes that could be labeled as “therapeutic”: in the spirit of his moral teacher, Plato expects philosophy to bring about a certain ethical revival and the “therapy” of his literal production aims to cure both the individual and the entire community of the ancient πόλις. That is why Plato portrays in his dialogues characters that represent so diverse life-views. By depicting various axiologies, frequently mutually exclusive, Plato seeks to convince the reader that he should follow the path of Socrates rather than of the sophists.

All in all, the clash between rhetoric and dialectic philosophy in the *Gorgias* is a clash of not only two different discourse strategies, but also of two different worldviews. Inasmuch as Plato realized that the normative postulate that one ought to lead a moral life cannot be proved in a rational and logical manner, he deliberately filled the dialogue with paradoxes, myths and appeals to emotions so as to encourage his readers to abide the universal morality that Socrates gave his life for. With the situation being as it is, one should not be surprised that Platonic Socrates repudiates rhetoric only on the surface, while beneath the philosophical veneer, he proves to be a rhetorician – so to say – κατ’ ἐξοχήν, who combats the sophists by means of their own strategies. By using the “refined” and “noble” rhetoric against the teachers of a “shameful” and “demagogical” one, Platonic Socrates appears to transcend the limited view that rationality is the sole legitimate discourse strategy. If we agree that some of those strategies employed by Platonic Socrates can reasonably be characterized as substantially rhetorical, then the *Gorgias* transpires to be of paramount importance, since when read between the lines, the dialogue can be perceived as Plato’s challenge to the view that dialectic is the only justifiable philosophical strategy.

In conclusion, this has to be accentuated: whenever Plato resorts to myths, whenever he “fabricates” his protagonists and antagonists, whenever he presents us with various inconsistencies and contradictions, he does, in the final analysis, have recourse to rhetoric (albeit ancillary to dialectic), because he is perfectly aware of the fact that it is simply impossible to teach and communicate with man only in a rational way, let alone prove rationally the value of moral life. That is why Plato does use some “irrational” – or even better: “para-rational” – strategies, proving thereby to be not only one of the greatest philosophers of all times, but also one of the greatest rhetoricians.

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