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Dialectic as True Rhetoric in Plato's *Gorgias*

The apparent contradictions in the *Gorgias* are many. Two key examples should suffice. First, Socrates claims that rhetoric is not an art (τέχνη) but a form of flattery, indifferent to the good and devoid of any usefulness (464b–466a), and then later he refers to a true rhetoric whose purpose is the improvement of citizens (cf. 503a–b, 504d, etc.). Oddly enough, this true rhetoric resembles disciplining dialectic as he practices it, primarily as refutation, ἔλεγχος. ("Dialectic" refers here to the term διαλέγεσθαι; διαλεκτική is not used in the *Gorgias*).[1] In the second example, Socrates says that he is not a politician (473e) but then later claims that he is the only person in Athens practicing true political art (521d). These contradictions compel the reader to reflect on how the discussion and the dramatic action proceed. Yet, according to a still very common reading of the dialogue, the *Gorgias* is a complete and final condemnation of rhetoric and politics. Socrates' good rhetoric may be, in his eyes, a theoretical possibility. He challenges Callicles to name a single orator who satisfied the requirements of this rhetoric (503b). At the end of the dialogue, however, Socrates refers to Aristides the Just as an example of a model politician (526a–b).[2] What, then, is the status of these superior forms of rhetoric and politics, which he explicitly claims to practice? Laurent Pernot proposes an answer, which he unfortunately does not develop further: "It seems that there has never been an example of such an orator, unless one cares to mention Aristides the Just (526a–b) and Socrates himself (521d), who are cited from a political rather than strictly rhetorical point of view".[3]

The notion of a Socratic rhetoric raises in turn other questions. Is Socrates' use of myth and other extra-logical means part of the good rhetoric to which he refers? Are these rhetorical devices compatible with the paradox, which he defends in the dialogue, that virtue is knowledge? According to some commentators,[4] the use of

Note: This paper is composed of translated and revised sections of my recent book, Renaud (2022). I follow the Greek text of Dodds (1959) for the *Gorgias* and that of Burnet (1900–1907) for the rest of the Platonic corpus.

1 This does not preclude, however, the presence of division (διαίρεσις) in the dialogue, such as in the division of the arts in 462b–465e.
2 Admittedly, true rhetoric is not discussed in any detail, which leads Goldschmidt (1963, p. 310) to this mistaken conclusion: "le *Gorgias* n'a cure de savoir ce que serait une rhétorique 'droite'".
3 Pernot (2005), p. 48.
4 See, for instance, Fussi (2001), Carone (2005), and Moss (2007).

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rhetorical means, such as the appeal to the emotions, implies a Platonic criticism of Socratic "intellectualism". According to others, the Socratic paradox, correctly understood, is compatible with the use of rhetorical tricks.[5] Let us take as an example the notion, crucial for the dialogue as a whole, of disciplining or punishment (κολάζειν). According to the main moral thesis Socrates defends in the *Gorgias*, the greatest evil is committing injustice, not suffering it, especially if the injustice is not punished (468e–469c, 479b–e, 508c–509c). Discipline frees from ignorance and injustice, as a bitter medicine cures an illness.[6] Socrates refers to conventional procedures such as confiscation, imprisonment, exile, and death (480c–d and, in the final myth, 524e–525a, 526e–527a). He also refers to dialectic refutation as a kind of discipline, however. In both cases, he employs the term κολάζειν, which can be translated by "chastising", "punishing" or "disciplining" (I shall translate it in most cases by "disciplining" or "disciple").[7] While in some passages, Socrates evidently means conventional punishment (such as at 480d2 in the case of an execution and likewise in the final myth), in others, he has dialectic in mind as instrument of discipline.[8] How are these two divergent uses of the term κολάζειν to be explained?

The most plausible explanation,[9] which I defend in this paper, is that of the deliberate twofold use of the conventional and philosophic meanings. This usage allows Socrates to adapt to his non-philosophic interlocutors, who at first only understand the conventional notion, in order to bring them gradually, if possible, to the dialectic conception, within the dramatic action, as he makes clear on a few occasions (475d5–e1, *cf.* 480c5–7, 505c3–4 and 521e6–8). The intention of Socrates

5 Cf., for example, Erler (2006), Rowe (2007), and McPherran (2012).

6 While little is said of the "greatest good" (μέγιστον ἀγαθόν, of which only four occurrences, all in 452a–d), the "greatest evil" looms large (μέγιστον κακόν, μέγιστον τῶν κακῶν, ἔσχατον κακῶν: seven occurrences), especially the two greatest evils: committing injustice and committing injustice with impunity (479d4–6, 480d5–6, 492c4–8, 511a1–3, 525b8–c1). Socrates refers frequently to medicine and justice, which are restorative arts, and seldom to gymnastic and legislation, which are preventive arts that serve to maintain the good condition of the physical and political body.

7 There are sixteen occurrences of κολάζειν in the *Gorgias*, as well as twenty-six of διδόναι δίκην (literally "giving justice", "suffering punishment"), the latter being limited, however, to two sections of the dialogue (the exchange with Polos and the final myth), where the meaning of judiciary punishment predominates.

8 The term "punishment" can be employed in both cases to translate κολάζειν in the extent to which the Platonic conception of "punishment", as distinct from the modern connotations of that term, includes a therapeutic as well as a punitive function, comparable to painful but beneficial medicine. *Cf.* Mackenzie (1981), pp. 183–184, and Shaw (2015), p. 80. As is often the case in the dialogues, terminology is not strict or systematic. I shall in most cases use the term "discipline", sometimes also "punishment" when the context requires it.

9 See Rowe (2007), pp. 143–163.

in the *Gorgias* would then be twofold: to convince his interlocutors to accept the requirements of justice understood as the justice of dialogue, in default of which he can count on the recourse of constraint (517b), that is self-control, as is the case with Callicles. Socrates characterizes discipline in the same terms as true rhetoric and true politics (504e1–3, 525b8–c1). His dialectic thus seems to be identical with true rhetoric, by which the real value of conventional rhetoric can be judged.[10] The dramatic action would thus be strictly inseparable from the argumentation: Socrates defends justice as discipline against his interlocutors primarily by disciplining them. More generally, in the *Gorgias* the interlocutors discuss while illustrating the impediments to dialogue. The primary aim of the paper is to show that *this twofold use of the notion of disciplining, at both theoretical (or thematic) and dramatic (or pragmatic) levels, applies equally to the notions of rhetoric and of politics.*[11] The two meanings or dimensions, gradually unveiled during the dialogue, are part of an overall argumentative-literary strategy which can be called one of transfer or transposition.[12]

1 True Politics

Towards the end of the dialogue, just before the final myth, Socrates makes an astonishing claim, referred to above:

> I believe that I'm one of a few Athenians—so as not to say I'm the only one, but the only one among our contemporaries—to take up the true political craft and practice the true politics (ἐπιχειρεῖν τῇ ὡς ἀληθῶς πολιτικῇ τέχνῃ καὶ πράττειν τὰ πολιτικὰ μόνος τῶν νῦν) (521d6–8; trans. Zeyl in Cooper 1997).

What does he mean by the true art of politics (ἡ ὡς ἀληθῶς πολιτικὴ τέχνη)? He already referred to the art of politics (πολιτική [τέχνη]) in his classification of the true and false arts. There he defined it as the art which cares for the soul (τὴν ἐπὶ τῇ ψυχῇ, 464b3–4).[13] He explains in 521d–e the meaning of his claim as follows:

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10 See Szlezák (1985), pp. 195.

11 See Erler (2009), p. 18.

12 This is the expression used by Diès (1972) to express an interpretation that Rowe (2012, p. 192, n. 22; *cf.* viii) also defends: "a general feature of Platonic writing", in this case "a general tendency to redefine, or transform, common-or-garden notions of things".

13 The paradoxical definition of politics as the art of caring for the soul (464b3–4), which Socrates alone practices, is more easily understood if one bears in mind that the ancient concept of politics rests on that of the city (πόλις): contrary to the modern concept of the State, it does not include a

> This is because the speeches I make on each occasion do not aim at gratification but at what's best (πρὸς τὸ βέλτιστον). They don't aim at what's most pleasant (οὐ πρὸς τὸ ἥδιστον). And because I'm not willing (οὐκ ἐθέλων) to do those clever things you recommend, I won't know what to say in court. And the same account I applied to Polus comes back to me. For I'll be judged the way a doctor would be judged by a jury of children if a pastry chef were to bring accusations against him (κρινοῦμαι γὰρ ὡς ἐν παιδίοις ἰατρὸς ἂν κρίνοιτο κατηγοροῦντος ὀψοποιοῦ) (521d8–e4; trans. Zeyl).

In this explanation he takes up the same terms he used to describe true rhetoric, namely aiming for the best, rather than for pleasure as does conventional rhetoric. Is dialectic then identical to true politics and true rhetoric? To answer this question, it is first necessary to confront some of the difficulties posed by Socrates' surprising statement. First, he said earlier that he is a stranger to politics (*cf.* οὐκ εἰμὶ τῶν πολιτικῶν, 473e6). Second, possessing the true art of politics seems incompatible with his avowal of ignorance, stated more than once in the *Gorgias* (*cf.* οὐκ οἶδα, 509a5). Socrates hardly explains the nature of true political art nor how to apply it (500e, 505a–b). Third, can he claim to possess this art if he is unable to convince Callicles and improve him (*cf.* 515a–b, 517a)?

First, it is necessary to distinguish conventional from true politics. According to Socrates, in Athenian democracy the orators-politicians fight against each other for the people's favors. He sarcastically castigates the great representatives of that type of politics, Pericles, Cimon, Miltiades, Themistocles, as mere servants of the people:

> (Soc.) No, my strange friend, I'm not criticizing (οὐδ' ἐγὼ ψέγω) these men either, insofar as they were servants of the city (διακόνους εἶναι πόλεως). I think rather that they proved to be better servants than the men of today, and more capable than they of satisfying the city's appetites (ἐπεθύμει). But the truth is that in redirecting its appetites and not giving in to them (μεταβιβάζειν τὰς ἐπιθυμίας καὶ μὴ ἐπιτρέπειν), using persuasion or constraint (πείθοντες καὶ βιαζόμενοι) to get the citizens to become better (ἀμείνους ἔσεσθαι), they were really not much different from our contemporaries. That alone is the task of a good citizen (μόνον ἔργον ἐστὶν ἀγαθοῦ πολίτου) (517b2–c2; trans. Zeyl).

Far from trying to make citizens better, these politicians exploited their prejudices, one of which is "freedom" understood as the "power" to do anything that one

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territorial or institutional dimension; the city is the whole of human beings composing it (πόλιν δὲ τὸ τῶν τοιούτων πλῆθος) according to Aristotle's definition (*Politics* III, 1275b20–21). If the soul constitutes the true human being, as Socrates claims, then it follows that it is the souls that the political art ought to care for. *Cf.* Erler (2012), pp. 279–280. The specificity of the Socratic conception, however, lies in its private character: dialectic, even practiced in the public space of the agora, addresses to interlocutors individually; on this see Renaud 2022, Chapter II, § 7.

"wishes".[14] The principal cause of corruption is the mimetic character of flattery, which is the means of avoiding being a victim of injustice or any other harm and of obtaining power and goods, both material and symbolic (511c–513c). The conflict between Athenian democracy and true politics appears unresolvable, like that between democracy and true rhetoric. These two conflicts really are one and the same, opposing divergent types of discourse and ways of life.

Yet is the idea that the political art is identical with dialectic not incompatible with Socrates' avowal of ignorance?[15] This difficulty is resolved if the knowledge in question is that of the dialectic art and its rules. Socrates compares dialectic refutation to medical treatment that frees from illness (477e7–8) as well as to discipline that frees from ignorance (505c3–4). The medical and juridical analogies are interdependent; as we have seen, both aim at illustrating dialectic as discipline. By means of dialectic Socrates fulfils the function which institutional politics should but do not fulfil, namely that of improving citizens. If Socrates fails in convincing Callicles, this is because the latter violates the dialectical rules and is one of the incurable souls referred to in the final myth.

2 True Rhetoric

2.1 Gradual Unveiling

According to the classification of the arts established by Socrates (463e–466a), rhetoric is a counterfeit image of a part of politics (πολιτικῆς εἴδωλον, 463d2). He refers also, however, to a true rhetoric that cares for the soul (ἡ ἀληθινὴ ῥητορική, 517a5, *cf.* 503a2–9, 504d5–6). The status of rhetoric is revealed only gradually, in seven steps:

(1) 454e–455d. Socrates distinguishes at first, with Gorgias' agreement, two kinds of persuasion (δύο εἴδη πειθοῦς), one that conveys knowledge (εἰδέναι, μάθησις, ἐπιστήμη), the other mere belief (πίστις, 454e3–4). Rhetoric is the kind of persuasion used in tribunals or public assemblies (452e1–4); it "produces the

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14 *Cf.* Aristotle, *Politics* V, 1310a32: τὸ ὅ τι ἂν βούληταί τις ποιεῖν.

15 Irwin (1979, pp. 240–241) translates ἐπιχειρεῖν by "undertake" or "attempt"; Socrates' declaration would then imply an important qualification: he undertakes or attempts to practice the true political art but does not yet possess the knowledge of its principles nor of its proper application. Shaw (2011, pp. 188–190) shows that the passage (521d6–8) allows for both interpretations ("I practice" and "I attempt") and that the larger context must be considered, after which he defends (pp. 193–195) the interpretation that Socrates attempts to practice but does not possess the political art by referring especially to 509a4–7 and 515a3–4.

persuasion that comes from being convinced, and not the persuasion that comes from teaching (πιστευτικῆς ἀλλ' οὐ διδασκαλικῆς), concerning what's just and unjust" (454e9–455a2; trans. Zeyl).

(2) 480c–d. Socrates then admits that rhetoric can be useful after all, if it fulfills a function contrary (τοὐναντίον) to that of flattery that is normally attributed to it. The useful function is that of accusing (κατηγορεῖν) and disciplining (κολάζειν): accusing oneself and one's relatives when injustice is committed (480c1–3). This function restores the health of the soul and gets rid of "the worst thing there is", injustice, together with ignorance on which it is based.

(3) 503a–b. Socrates recognizes the distinction, proposed by Callicles, between two types of rhetoric (διπλοῦν): flattery or demagogy (κολακεία, δημηγορία) and noble rhetoric, the function of which consists in "striving valiantly (διαμάχεσθαι) to say what is best, whether the audience will find it more pleasant or more unpleasant (εἴτε ἡδίω εἴτε ἀηδέστερα ἔσται τοῖς ἀκούουσι)" (503a8–9; trans. Zeyl).

It is remarkable that Callicles proposes this distinction between the two types of orators, and that Socrates passively accepts the distinction. He had asked the (binary, structuring) question of whether the orators speak with a view to the good or to pleasure. "This issue you're asking about, Callicles responds, isn't just a simple one (οὐχ ἁπλοῦν ἔτι τοῦτο ἐρωτᾷς)". Socrates' question actually requires a distinction.[16] Socrates answers: "That's good enough (ἐξαρκεῖ)". This response is surprising. It is as though Socrates had been waiting to be challenged by Callicles before taking up again the distinction he himself proposed earlier, between a good and a bad πειθώ (454e–455d). As we will see, the two distinctions are basically the same, despite the fact that the earlier one is formulated more simply in terms of knowledge and belief. The passive role played by Socrates, in this reformulated distinction, can be explained as follows. He agrees with Callicles that this other type of rhetoric is still unknown (οὐ πώποτε, 503b1), but he does not categorically deny that such a rhetoric exists (indeed he will explain its nature shortly after, at 504d5–6); he places the burden of proof on Callicles. Callicles is unable to give any examples of its existence among contemporary orators(-politicians), but mentions great politicians of the past, Themistocles, Cimon, Miltiades, and Pericles. Then follows Socrates' scathing attack, quoted above, against the four famous politicians, whom he describes as providers of "goods" rather than reformers. From that moment on, Socrates refers, in his own name, to that true, noble rhetoric.

(4) 504d–e. Immediately thereafter, Socrates himself refers to the figure of the good orator:

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16 *Cf.* 468c2–5, where Socrates requires that two questions be distinguished where Polos sees only one; *Lach.* 188c5: (Lach.) οὐχ ἁπλοῦν ἀλλὰ διπλοῦν.

> (Soc.) So this is what that skilled and good orator (ὁ ῥήτωρ ἐκεῖνος, ὁ τεχνικός τε καὶ ἀγαθός) will look to when he applies to people's souls whatever speeches he makes as well as all of his actions, and any gift he makes or any confiscation he carries out. He will always give his attention (πρὸς τοῦτο ἀεὶ τὸν νοῦν ἔχων) to how justice may come to exist in the souls of his fellow citizens and injustice be gotten rid of (ἀδικία δὲ ἀπαλλάττηται), how self-control may come to exist there and lack of discipline be gotten rid of, and how the rest of excellence may come into being there and badness may depart (504d5–e3; trans. Zeyl).

We note that the function of good rhetoric, which "gets rid of injustice" (ἀδικία ἀπαλλάττηται), corresponds exactly to the good use of rhetoric at 480c–d, namely, that of accusing and disciplining, which also eliminates injustice (ἀπαλλάττωνται ἀδικίας), "the worst thing there is", and ignorance.

(5) 508b–c. Socrates then refers explicitly to his discussion at 480c–d as follows:

> (Soc.) These consequences are all those previous things, Callicles, the ones about which you asked me whether I was speaking in earnest when I said [480c–d] that a man should be his own accuser, or his son's or his friend's, if he's done anything unjust, and should use rhetoric for that purpose (τῇ ῥητορικῇ ἐπὶ τοῦτο χρηστέον). Also, what you thought Polus was ashamed to concede is true after all, that doing what's unjust is as much worse than suffering it as it is more shameful, and that a person who is to be an orator the right way should be just and be knowledgeable in what is just (ἐπιστήμονα τῶν δικαίων), the point Polus in his turn claimed Gorgias to have agreed to out of shame (508b3–c3; trans. Zeyl, slightly modified).

Like true politics, true rhetoric rests on knowledge. "Knowledge" here is to be understood primarily as the knowledge of the dialectical rules, as expounded throughout the *Gorgias*, the most fundamental of which is the requirement of consistency in speech (logical consistency) and between speech and deeds (or moral consistency).

(6) 516e–517a. Next, Socrates establishes, in a not fully explicit manner, the link between true rhetoric and true politics, both of which he claims are unknown in Athens:

> (Soc.) So it looks as though our earlier statements were true, that we don't know any man who has proved to be good at politics in this city (ἄνδρα ἀγαθὸν γεγονότα τὰ πολιτικὰ). You were agreeing that none of our present-day ones [*scil.* Themistocles, Cimon, Miltiades, Pericles] has, though you said that some of those of times past had, and you gave preference to these men. But these have been shown to be on equal footing with the men of today. The result is that if these men were orators, they practiced neither the true rhetoric (οὔτε τῇ ἀληθινῇ ῥητορικῇ ἐχρῶντο)—for in that case they wouldn't have been thrown out—nor the flattering kind (οὔτε τῇ κολακικῇ) (516e9–517a6; trans. Zeyl, slightly modified).

(7) 527b–c. At the very end of the dialogue, after the final myth, Socrates comes back to the good function of rhetoric, namely accusation and disciplining (or punishing, κολάζειν):

> and that if a person proves to be bad in some respect, he's to be disciplined (κολαστέος), and that the second best thing after being just is to become just by paying one's due, by being disciplined (κολαζόμενον διδόναι δίκην); [...] and that rhetoric and every other activity (τῇ ῥητορικῇ οὕτω χρηστέον... καὶ τῇ ἄλλῃ πάσῃ πράξει) is always to be used in support of what's just (527b7–c4; trans. Zeyl, slightly modified).

On the whole, the repeated references to the good rhetoric as well as to the close links between it and the true political art, raise the following questions: is true rhetoric in the *Gorgias* the same as the philosophic rhetoric in the *Phaedrus?* Is it the instrument of true politics? And if so, does Socrates himself practice true rhetoric in the *Gorgias?*

2.2 Ancient Readings

It is instructive to look at the ancient responses to these questions. In Antiquity, the ways of understanding the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric are generally characterized by two contrary hegemonic tendencies: the dominance of rhetoric by philosophy and the dominance of philosophy by rhetoric. This antagonistic relationship does not exclude annexation nor partial appropriation of one by the other. Philosophy, notably in the case of Plato, tends to appropriate rhetoric and some of its techniques while assigning a new aim to them.

Cicero (106–43 BCE) holds the criticism of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* to be self-contradictory. In the *De oratore* (I 47) he expresses, through the mouth of Crassus, his impressions when reading the dialogue: "what impressed me most deeply about Plato in that book was, that it was when making fun of orators that he himself seemed to me to be the consummate orator (*mihi [in] oratoribus inridendis ipse esse orator summus videbatur*)" (trans. Sutton, Rachham). The *Gorgias* displays, according to him, a tension between theory and practice as Plato, and with him Socrates, reluctantly recognize the necessity of rhetoric in displaying his own rhetorical talents.[17] Aelius Aristides (c. 117–181 CE) comments on this question in a far more detailed and critical manner than does Cicero. He exploits especially what he considers a contradiction between his wholesale condemnation of rhetoric

17 Ciceron, *De oratore* III, 129: *si est victor, eloquentior videlicet fuit et disertior Socrates.* On Cicero's take on the *Gorgias* and its relation to the *Phaedrus*, see Renaud (2018).

and his occasional defense of it. He opposes Plato to Plato. He cites the references to the good rhetoric in the *Gorgias* as well as the defense of rhetoric as an art (τέχνη) in the *Phaedrus.*

According to Quintilian (c. 35–95 CE), however, the *Gorgias* does not contradict the *Phaedrus*, the latter is merely more explicit and detailed on true rhetoric.[18] The *Gorgias* as refutative dialogue deals with the rhetoric of its time (*tum*) while recognizing a true rhetoric (*veram autem et honestum*). Quintilian refers to Socrates' evocation of the good orator (508c1). The Roman rhetor even conceives of his own rhetorical ideal in Platonic terms: the orator does not seek the apparent, but the true; the prize is not victory of a cause, but good conscience.[19] Socrates' argumentation itself is rhetorical to the extent to which he addresses an adversary.[20] There would not be for that reason any incompatibility between the Socratic paradox (460c) and this rhetorical practice.[21] Apuleius (c. 124–170 CE), in his *De dogmate Platonis* (Book II), takes up the distinction between two kinds or two parts (*partes*) of rhetoric: one is a science (*disciplina*) that teaches how to know the good and how to live according to justice, with a view to the science of politics; the other is the science (*sic*) of flattery (*adulandi scientia*) which finds probable arguments without employing reasoning. He links the notion of mere use (τριβή, 463b4) with persuasion (πείθειν) without knowledge or teaching (διδάσκειν, 454e–455a), which is only a shadow or image (*umbram, imaginem*) of science. According to Olympiodorus, finally, Socrates is the only politician, although he identifies rational rhetoric more with Plato than Socrates (*cf.* 9.4).[22] Olympiodorus responds to criticisms of Plato, including those of Aelius Aristides, by showing how the *Gorgias* can be read not in opposition to but in continuity with the *Phaedrus.* Socrates uses various types of discourse according to the type of soul he is dealing with, as he recommends in the *Phaedrus* (269c–272b). Olympiodorus insists on the medical analogy in the *Phaedrus* (270b–c) equally central in the *Gorgias*, including in connection with true politics (517a–b and above all 521d). In short, according to Quintilian and the Platonic tradition as attested by Apuleius and Olympiodorus, the Socrates of the *Gorgias* recognizes two rhetorics or two uses of rhetoric, one juridical or conventional and the other philosophical.

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18 Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* II, 15, 24–29.

19 Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* II, 15, 27, 28 and 32 respectively.

20 Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria.* II, 15 and 28: for instance, when he speaks to Polos: *contra quem illa de simulacro et adulatione.*

21 Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* II, 15 and 29.

22 According to *The Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy,* closely related to the School of Olympiodorus, Plato intends "to explain what true rhetoric is (τὴν ἀληθῆ ῥητορικὴν)" (22.40).

2.3 True Rhetoric and Dialectic

In the *Apology* (17b), Socrates defends himself against his accusers' claim he would be clever at speaking (δεινὸν λέγειν): he will speak as he is accustomed to, by telling the truth (τὸν τἀληθῆ λέγοντα). He admits that he too is an orator (ῥήτωρ) but not in their manner.[23] Yet this does not prevent him, in this exordium, from resorting to various devices of conventional rhetoric. Socrates knows these tricks, although he claims not to use them. His speech thus pretends to be non-rhetorical: he will simply be using the words that come to him haphazardly (ἐπιτυχοῦσιν). So-called improvisation is one of the *topoi* of sophistic rhetoric, as is the reversal of common opinion to create the effect of surprise and striking revelation. In short, the beginning of the *Apology* defends the new rhetoric of frankness while revealing Socrates' ability to employ conventional rhetoric at the very moment he says he is not using it.[24]

Contrary to the ancient readers, modern scholars commonly oppose the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* on the ground that the *Gorgias* presents itself primarily as an attack on rhetoric, while the *Phaedrus* defends and expounds in some detail the notion of philosophic rhetoric. Scholars usually explain this contrast in terms of Plato's development. They usually suppose, moreover, that the philosophic rhetoric of the *Phaedrus* is for Plato no more than a program to be realized. This rhetoric, then, could hardly be the one practiced in the *Gorgias.* Some modern commentators, however, including Eric Robertson Dodds, consider the good rhetoric referred to in the *Gorgias* to be the same as that described in the *Phaedrus.*[25] In both dialogues, the good orator is an expert (τεχνικός, *Gorg.* 504d5, *Phdr.* 262b5), although compared to the *Phaedrus*, the *Gorgias* deals less with the rhetorical techniques than with the psychological conditions of persuasion.

What then distinguishes the two dialogues, beyond the fact that one is more explicit in regard to true rhetoric? According to Harvey Yunis (2007), the innovations in the *Phaedrus*, in comparison with Plato's previous dialogues (in the standard chronology) and his predecessors, are threefold. First, the *Phaedrus* would expand the scope of rhetoric: in addition to the political dimension proper (i.e., rhetoric as oratory), underscored in the *Gorgias*, the *Phaedrus* would include the private sphere, that is (philosophic) dialogue (261a7–9). Second, rhetoric understood as the art of "directing the soul" (ψυχαγωγία) would include psychology:

23 This truth-telling will be taken up by the Stoics as the only rhetoric, or "the science of speaking well" (ἐπιστήμη τοῦ εὖ λέγειν; SVF II, 293).

24 On the compatibility between the requirement of frankness and irony, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* IV, 1124b28–1125a2, as well as *Posterior Analytics* 13, 97b14–26.

25 Dodds (1959), p. 330.

its object is the soul[26] and rests on the methodical and systematic knowledge of the different types of soul and on the different types of discourse corresponding to them (271b–272b). Third, the aim of the orator's knowledge of the subject matter is not so much the public's best interest (as in the *Gorgias*) as persuasion itself (259e–262c). As rhetoric, dialectic includes knowledge of the right moment (καιρός), that is, with whom, when, and how to speak.

The first innovation pointed out by Yunis, namely, the extension to the private sphere, requires, however, a significant qualification. It is true that the rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* encompasses the whole range of the sayable, that is, that its scope is universal (261d10–e4):

> (Socrates) Well, then, isn't the rhetorical art, taken as a whole, a way of directing the soul by means of speech (τέχνη ψυχαγωγία τις διὰ λόγων), not only in the lawcourts and on other public occasions but also in private (καὶ ἐν ἰδίοις)? (261a7–9; trans. Nehamas and Woodruff in Cooper 1997).

In the *Phaedrus*, therefore, the main subject is not conventional or forensic rhetoric, the prime object of criticism in the *Gorgias*, but philosophic rhetoric. The novelty of this rhetoric is indicated by Phaedrus' astonishment (261b2). The universal dimension of rhetoric makes it inseparable from dialectic. It is, however, incorrect to claim, as Yunis does, that this extension is absent in the *Gorgias.* At the very end of the dialogue, Socrates sums up his argument, from both the methodological and moral point of view:

> and that every form of flattery (πᾶσαν κολακείαν), both the form concerned *with oneself* (περὶ ἑαυτὸν) and that concerned with others, *whether they're few or many* (καὶ περὶ ὀλίγους καὶ περὶ πολλούς), is to be avoided, and that rhetoric and every other activity is always to be used in support of what's just (527c1–4, trans. Zeyl, emphasis added).

Regarding the question of the practice of this rhetoric, Socrates in the *Phaedrus* speaks with caution, if not with skepticism, concerning the very existence of that art ("if indeed this art exists": εἴπερ ἔστιν, 261e2). The two contradictory speeches improvised by Socrates in the first part of the *Phaedrus* demonstrate, however, his talents as orator as well as the possibility of a one-to-one encounter, in this case between the young Phaedrus and him.[27] Here, as in the *Gorgias*, the dramatic action completes the argument.

26 Cf. Yunis (2007), p. 84.
27 Cf. Narcy (2007), p. 955.

3 Socratic Rhetoric, Platonic Rhetoric

The noble rhetoric referred to in the *Gorgias* thus overlaps that of the *Phaedrus*. But does Socrates practice it? Most commentators believe Socrates does not practice the rhetoric of the *Phaedrus*, neither in the *Gorgias* nor elsewhere in the Platonic corpus, on the ground this would be incompatible with his avowal of ignorance. Moreover, he would not give any account of (*logos*), condition for the possession of any art (465a), limiting himself to some allusions. He would not possess that art since he fails in persuading his main interlocutor, Callicles.[28] According to other commentators, Socrates does not practice the rhetoric of belief (πιστευτική, 454a–455a), defended by Gorgias, either; that would be incompatible with the opposition, on which he insists so much, between dialectic and rhetoric. Finally, according to many, the rhetorical dimension of the Platonic dialogues would be limited to the function of mere literary reinforcement, adding nothing substantial to the argumentation nor to the nature of dialectic.[29]

Consistent with my earlier remarks about true politics, I hold that dialectic in the *Gorgias* is none other than true rhetoric. But does Socrates practice the rhetoric he teaches? Consider first the question of whether he denies teaching anything (*Apol.* 23d). That depends on what should be understood by teaching (διδάσκειν). If that term is understood as the straightforward transmission of knowledge, then dialectic is not teaching due to its questioning and maieutic function. In the *Sophist* (229b7–230d5), however, the art of refutation (ἔλεγχος), which is in its purgative function very much akin to Socratic dialectic, is presented as a form of teaching (διδασκαλική). Socrates "teaches" in making the interlocutor conscious of his own ignorance and in leading him through the art of maieutic to draw knowledge from within.[30] The appeal to the emotions is also compatible with this rhetoric. Socrates' employment of devices specific to conventional rhetoric does not imply a criticism or rejection of intellectualism (or the Socratic paradox) nor the approval of Gorgias' rhetoric.[31] As we have seen in the preceding section

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28 Roochnik (2007), p. 79.

29 It is common to recognize, for example, the rhetorical character of the *Apology*'s exordium, referred to earlier, without however always drawing the consequences for the interpretation of Socrates' speech nor of the *Apology* as Platonic writing. Luc Brisson (1997, p. 129, n. 2), for instance, shows the extent to which Socrates (and so Plato making him speak) masters the *topoi* of judiciary rhetoric: contrary to what he says, he "*semble connaître les ficelles du métier*". Brisson does not further explore the rhetorical dimension of the *Apology*, nor the Socratic (or Platonic) irony it implies.

30 On the unity of *elenchos* and maieutic, see Renaud (2001), pp. 729–730.

31 Cf. McPherran (2012), p. 14–24, in reply to Fussi (2001).

concerning true politics, dialectic understood as rhetoric has two functions, one rigorously intellectual, such as refutation, the other extra-logical.[32] In the case of Polos and Callicles, Socrates appeals to the emotions: he tries to change their false opinions by frustrating and not by satisfying their desires, as the rhetoric of flattery does.

3.1 Rhetorical Devices

Socrates' rhetoric resides first of all in the fact that his argumentation is adapted to his interlocutor. This adaptation implies a strategic dimension, including the often progressive or gradual character of his argumentation. Socrates first seeks to focus his interlocutor's attention, then to maintain the continuity of the exchange, to shake his self-confidence, and to discipline through refutation. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates attempts to have his interlocutors admit that true power must be subjected to the constraints of justice. To this end, he deploys an argumentation that makes use of rhetorical and polemical elements, in a more striking way than in other dialogues, given his antagonistic interlocutors. His use of irony, especially in his avowal of ignorance, also fulfils strategic functions.[33] Socrates often proposes premises which he does not himself accepts, but which eventually allow him to refute his interlocutors' opinion.[34] His argumentation is sometimes elliptic, based on premises which have not been defended and which are merely accepted by the interlocutor (for instance concerning the existence of the arts, τέχναι, and the soul, ψυχή), as opposed to other occasions when the premises are defended at length. He employs fictive questions which help clarify an issue, and work to lead the exchange in a specific direction.[35] He sometimes resorts to speeches, notably in the case of myths or more generally of emotionally charged diction. These speeches belong to

32 Cf. Collobert 2013, p. 115–131.

33 Socrates appears to acquiesce to the accusation that he himself does not respect the principle of frankness (495b2). In the *Apology*, he practices judiciary *elenchos* (with the exception of the dialectical exchange with Meletus, in 24d–28a), condemned in the *Gorgias:* in the third part of his defense especially, he appeals to testimonies (πολλοὶ μάρτυρες, 32e1). Dorion (2007, pp. 88 and 89) concludes from this that "Platon confie à l'*elenchos* rhétorique, plutôt que dialectique, le soin d'assumer la partie la plus déterminante de la défense de Socrate contre les accusations de 399. […] [S]a défense invite à penser qu'il [*scil.* Socrates] était conscient des limites de l'*elenchos* dialectique". The aim of the *Gorgias* consists precisely to reveal the strengths and limits of dialectics and therewith the insurmountable conflict between two types of discourse and two kinds of life. On this larger question see Renaud (2022), especially Chapter II, § 6.4.

34 Compare, for example, *Gorg.* 474c and 475b–c.

35 Cf., for instance, 451a–b, 452a–c, 455c–d, as well as Renaud (2022), Chapter I, § 2.

the same category of devices as the exposition of the division of the arts, a speech whose structure is antithetical, the language full of imagery and the harmonious assonances.[36] Refutation appeals to feelings of shame (αἰσχύνη), in its philosophical meaning, that is self-regarding, as opposed to conventional, other-regarding shame.[37] Socrates provokes Callicles' anger[38] which leads him to defend a radical form of hedonism.[39] The exchange with Callicles alternates, according to the latter's moods, between demonstration and persuasion. Socrates uses logical tactics, especially homonymy (for instance the equivocal phrase εὖ πράττειν which can mean "acting well" and "being happy": 497a3, 507c3–5). Thus, some of the argumentative strategies referred to by Aristotle in Book VIII of the *Topics* are at work in the *Gorgias*, such as hiding from the interlocutor the conclusion at which the questioner is aiming (155b23) and disguising the argument's premises (156a7–13).[40] Socrates recognizes to having behaved as a popular haranguer,[41] compelled that he was by Callicles' refusal to respond. While Socrates does need his interlocutor's assent as a condition of truth (500e3–4), he nevertheless can do without if need be.[42] He also parodies some Gorgianian figures of speech.[43]

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36 For example, the assonances characteristic of the beginning of his speech (464b3): δυοῖν ὄντοιν τοῖν πραγμάτοιν. Cf. Dalfen (2004), p. 241. The personification of the Laws in the *Crito* resorts to sarcasm, antithesis, rhetorical questions, and impassioned commands and appeals. The *Hippias Major* is one of the most evident cases of a massive use of irony.

37 On this transposition of the notion of shame, as well of rhetoric and politics, see Renaud (2022), *passim.*

38 For example, 490c8–d1, d6, d10, e4, 490e9–491a3.

39 Cf. Gentzler (1995), pp. 36–38.

40 Cf. Aristotle, *Sophistic Refutations* 12, 172b35–173a30. On the question of the relationship between Platonic dialectic and Aristotelian dialectic, see especially Narcy (1984), pp. 159–178.

41 519d5–6: (Soc.) ὡς ἀληθῶς δημηγορεῖν με ἠνάγκασας, ὦ Καλλίκλεις, οὐκ ἐθέλων ἀποκρίνεσθαι. According to Polos and Callicles, Socrates is ironic (εἰρωνεύῃ, 489e1), sophistic, and eristic (σοφίζῃ, 497a6; φιλόνικος, 515b5), in short, a popular haranguer (δημηγόρος, 482c5), appealing to "crowd-pleasing vulgarities (φορτικὰ καὶ δημηγορικά)" (482e3–4). The δημηγόρος at the time is the one who makes speeches (*cf. Prot.* 329a, 336b), uses doubtful devices such as the appeal to popular opinions and sentiments, in order to win the approval of the crowd (482c, 494d).

42 Cf. 505d8–e3: (Soc.) εἷς ὢν ἱκανὸς γένωμαι.

43 Such as in 467b11: ὦ λῷστε Πῶλε. *Cf.* Philodemus (*De vitiis* 22, 30–32) criticizes Socrates for his use of ironic epithets in 473d3: ὦ γενναῖε Πῶλε ("noble Polos") and in 494d4: ἀνδρεῖος γὰρ εἶ ("for you're a brave man"). For a general discussion of the stylistic aspect of Platonic writing, see Norden (1915), pp. 104–113, as well as Demetrius (*De elocutione* 5, 205–298), especially on allusion (ἐσχηματισμένον, 287) and the employment of terms with equivocal meanings (πολλαχῇ ἐπαμφοτερίζουσιν, 291), deliberate ambiguous uses of words, irony (εἰρωνεία) which causes perplexity (ἀπορίαν).

3.2 New Purpose

Does the use of such stratagems undermine the logical value of the argumentation?[44] Let us phrase the question differently: according to what Platonic criteria can the employment of deliberate sophisms be justified? First, as Socrates himself says, he is sometimes forced to resort to long speeches: for example, if the interlocutor does not understand, Socrates must explain his thought in the form of a speech, such as in the case of the classification of the arts. He considers the use of this method to be justified (δίκαιον, 466a2). Speeches are also necessary[45] when Callicles refuses to respond. Moreover, Socrates' argumentation is sometimes agonistic and provocative, but the victory aimed at is that of truth or at least the moral improvement of interlocutor. For dialectic is not a purely logical activity. One must distinguish between the form and the purpose of argumentation (*cf.* τοῦ ἕνεκα, 457e1). As the *Euthydemus* shows, sometime the philosopher's ethical intention alone distinguishes him from the sophist. The overall criticism of the *Gorgias* therefore does not imply a complete rejection of judiciary or conventional rhetoric, but the redefinition of its purpose.[46] The conventional purpose (the power or success of the orator, according to Plato) becomes the liberation from ignorance and sometimes the attainment of truth (472b6) or at least the inculcation of self-control (492a–c, 508a, etc.).

4 Rhetorical Practice and Dialectic: The Final Myth

I will limit myself to myth, a key example of Socrates' rhetorical practice. The final myth offers another specimen of Socrates' rhetoric which does not flatter but disciplines. This rhetoric, as we have seen, overlaps in many important ways with dialectic. It includes private conversation but, just like dialectic, it is used in two ways: one is strictly rational or argumentative, the other appeals to the emotions and aims not at demonstration but persuasion.

The final myth can seem at first sight to defend a form of moral optimism.[47] It does evoke a world in which justice rules, but one should not consider only what the myth says, but also to whom it is addressed and to what aim. In what sense

44 Schofield (2000), pp. 194–195.

45 505e3: ἀναγκαιότατον; 519d6: με ἠνάγκασας.

46 Cf. Erler (2006), p. 84, and McCoy (2008), p. 136.

47 Cf. Annas (1982), p. 123.

exactly and to what extent does the myth have on the one hand dialectical value and on the other rhetorical value (in its conventional meaning)?

During the narration and explanation of the myth, Socrates addresses Callicles directly, in the vocative (ὦ Καλλίκλεις), no less than seven times, the last of which ends the dialogue (524a8, d4, 525e5, 526a4, c3, d3, 527e7). One notes, moreover, that Socrates resorts to the final myth *after* the dialectic impasse with Callicles. Since dialectic failed, Socrates hopes by means of a myth to instill mere belief in Callicles. Socrates thus implicitly recognizes the inability of dialectic to convince non-philosophers, such as Callicles, who refuse the rules of dialectic. Earlier (in 492d–494a), Socrates uses the vocabulary of belief (πίστις and πειθώ, and cognates),[48] and he tells Callicles the brief myth of the water carrier and the leaking jar. Socrates first compares desire (ἐπιθυμία) to a leaky jar which the water carriers in Hades have to refill continually (493b–c). He then makes the following remark:

> This account is on the whole a bit strange (τι ἄτοπα); but now that I've shown it to you, it does make clear what I want to persuade you (πεῖσαι) to change your mind about if I can: to choose the orderly life, the life that is adequate to and satisfied with its circumstances at any given time instead of the insatiable, undisciplined life. Do I persuade you at all (πείθω τί σε), and are you changing your mind to believe that those who are orderly are happier than those who are undisciplined, or, even if I tell you many other such stories (ἄλλα πολλὰ τοιαῦτα μυθολογῶ), will you change it none the more for that? (493c3–d3; trans. Zeyl).

Callicles once more expresses his incredulity: "You do not convince me (οὐ πείθεις), Socrates" (494a6). This rhetoric of belief (πίστις) appears to be the one Socrates identified in 454a–455a as one of the two forms of persuasion (πειθώ), opposed to that by teaching (διδάσκειν).

This use of rhetoric aims at imparting true opinions and inculcating the virtues, above all self-control. In the case of the final myth, rhetoric aims to replace Homeric poetry through stories that are both true and edifying: they are shown to be true once the λόγος in the μῦθος has been brought out and explicated. Socrates considers opinion (δόξα and πίστις in the *Gorgias*) to be a starting point towards knowledge (ἐπιστήμη). The transformation of opinion into knowledge is the ultimate goal of dialectic. That is why other dialogues, the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* for instance, seek to justify rationally what, in the *Gorgias* myth, is merely presupposed, the survival of the soul after death and the nature of justice. The judiciary reform of Zeus requires the nakedness and solitude of the soul facing judgement,

48 493c5, d1 and 494a3, 6; *cf.* 526d4, 527c5; cf. Tarrant (1990), p. 22.

in this case through the unveiling of injustice and the required punishment, an image for the disciplining of dialectic through refutation (ἔλεγχος).

The philosophical quest is itself a fight, a heroic combat: "And I call on all other people as well, as far as I can—and you especially I call on in response to your call—to this way of life, this contest (ἀγῶνα), that I hold to be worth all the other contests in this life" (526e1–4; trans. Zeyl) (526e1–4).[49] It is no longer a matter of fighting for a personal victory[50] and the glory resulting from it but rather of fighting for justice and truth, that is, dialogue and self-criticism. Socrates thus takes up the rhetorical model as contest (*cf.* 456c7–8) and turns it against itself, transforming it in philosophical terms into the notion of discipline as he does in the case of politics.

In short, I have defended three theses. First, in the *Gorgias*, Socrates' dialectic, conceived and practiced as discipline has two distinct functions, according to the context and the interlocutor: to refute and demonstrate on the one hand, and persuade by extra-logical means on the other. Second, the notions of discipline rhetoric and politics as conceived and employed by Socrates have a double meaning, philosophically and conventionally. And third, Socratic dialectic in the *Gorgias* coincides, in a largely implicit manner, with true rhetoric and true politics.

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49 *Cf. Rép.* X, 608b4–8: "Yes, for the struggle (ὁ ἀγών) to be good rather than bad is important (μέγας), Glaucon, much more important than people think. Therefore, we mustn't be tempted by honor, money, rule, or even poetry into neglecting justice and the rest of virtue (ἀμελῆσαι δικαιοσύνης τε καὶ τῆς ἄλλης ἀρετῆς)" (trans. Grube, revised by Reeve in Cooper 1997).

50 As Socrates already declares in 505e4–5, the "victory" is no longer that of having the last word but of discovering the truth: "all of us ought to be contentiously (φιλονίκως) eager to know what's true and what's false about the things we're talking about (πρὸς τὸ εἰδέναι τὸ ἀληθὲς τί ἐστιν περὶ ὧν λέγομεν καὶ τί ψεῦδος)". He thus subverts ironically the usual meaning of the term φιλονικία (*cf.* 457d4, e4–5, 515b6).

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