

Is Plato's True Rhetoric True Enough? Gorgias, Phaedrus and the Protreptic Rhetoric of Republic

[Platon'un Doğru Retoriği Yeterince Doğru mu? Georgias, Phaedrus ve

Devlet'in 'Protreptik' Retoriği]

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ABSTRACT

Rhetoric has always had a bad reputation among philosophers. As far as we know, the first discussion of rhetoric in the history of philosophy takes place in Plato's works. Plato accuses sophistry as possessing an attitude that contains rhetoric, and thus accuses it for having almost no philosophical value. However, Plato himself uses a kind of rhetoric in some of his works too — this rhetoric can be called a 'true rhetoric.' In this work, the notion of rhetoric is analysed considering *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus* and *Republic*, and it will be queried as to whether the 'true rhetoric' of Plato is true enough.

Keywords: Plato, rhetoric, sophistry.

ÖZET

Retorik, filozoflar arasında her zaman kötü bir üne sahip olmuştur. Bu konuda felsefe tarihindeki ilk tartışma bildiğimiz kadarıyla Platon'un eserlerinde yer almaktadır. Platon, sofistliği, retorik ihtiva eden bir yaklaşıma sahip olmakla ve dolayısıyla felsefi değere sahip olmamakla suçlamaktadır.

Ancak Platon'un kendisi de bazı eserlerinde bir tür retorik kullanmaktadır ve bu retorik "doğru retorik" olarak adlandırılabilir. Bu çalışmada, retorik kavramı *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus* ve *Devlet* eserleri çerçevesinde analiz edilmekte ve Platon'un "doğru retorik"inin yeterince doğru olup olmadığı sorgulanmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Platon, retorik, sofistlik.

Introduction

In this work I will examine the position rhetoric (*rhêtorikê*) occupies in the philosophy of Plato. In doing so, I will first consider the two influential dialogues, *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias*, before turning to *Republic*. It should be stated that there are certain distinctions within this work about the subject and the object of rhetoric. These distinctions and definitions are examined in the first section. The second section is composed of a discussion of rhetoric within *Gorgias*. The third section involves a similar discussion but within *Phaedrus*. These two similar sections will help us to understand the notion of rhetoric at a deeper level. However, the section that then follows deals with issue from another angle, presenting another distinction to be made. This fourth section deals with *Republic* and with the rhetoric it exhibits. In the fifth section, some possible objections to the rhetoric Plato uses are discussed.

1. Definitions & Distinctions

1.1. Definitions

It should be recognized that to define a word solves almost everything, and within a Platonic context giving definitions is a little deceptive since Plato himself tries to find them. However, for the sake of establishing background knowledge and making presumptions, I, nonetheless, have to pose some definitions and also to give a simple distinction which I will mention later in this section.

In the first instance, I will give a general definition of rhetoric:

Plato invented the term ‘rhetoric’ as a contrast term against which philosophy could define itself. Philosophy and rhetoric both proposed new truths and apparently powerful methods that threatened existing moral codes and authorities. As modes of empowerment, self-making, and self-consciousness they could *as easily become enemies as allies*. Thus while philosophy attempted to achieve self-consciousness and power through an awareness of thought and being, rhetoric focused on an

awareness of language and the circumstances of speaking and acting
(Craig ed., 1998, p. 306).

The *Routledge* definition seems a good starting point. Although there may be radical shifts from “being an enemy” to “being an ally,” some interpretations treat rhetoric as an enemy of Plato, yet some would say rhetoric is an ally too, as we will consider later.

A more general view is that “rhetoric ‘is the study of the condition of human existence’” (Johnstone in Petruzzi, 1999, p. 368). This understanding of rhetoric, however, is a wide open one and it may, indeed, include philosophy itself as such. If philosophy’s aim is to persuade someone, then rhetoric may be more general than philosophy (Rudebusch, p. 2009, p. 55). According to Wardy, “rhetoric...was born from a great debate about the opposing possibilities of the power of persuasion...[it is] a manipulative power neither absent at any moment nor innocent in human [conduct]” (Mifsud, p. 1999, p. 75).

It might be regarded as more appropriate to examine what Plato, himself, says. In *Phaedrus*, Socrates says:

The rhetorical art is a certain influencing of the soul by means of words, not in law courts only and in other such public meetings, but also in private gatherings, the same concerning both small and great matters, and no more esteemed when done right concerning serious things than concerning trivial things (Plato in Murray, 1998, p. 280).

It can be said, here, that rhetoric can be used widely and is not limited to only words used in public but, extended, limitlessly to their use in “great matters” too. However, it should be done “truly.” I will discuss this “true way” too, in the following sections.

By taking rhetoric as a wide notion, Benitez notes that all the “themes” in Platonic philosophy, such as “characters, actions, and affections of those present in a dialogue, whether they take part in a conversation or not,” are all parts of the rhetoric (Benitez, 1992, p. 223). This may seem to be as an over-widening of the issue of rhetoric in Plato, yet as can be seen in section five, it has a point in the discussion.

I quite agree with the proposition that rhetoric fluctuates from being an enemy to being an ally in Plato’s texts. If understood properly, it can be said, contra Benitez, that there is *a kind of* rhetoric in Plato’s texts.¹

1.2. Distinctions

Some points should be made clear in order to move forwards with certainty. Some interpreters differentiate the speeches of Socrates from the writings of Plato. Specifically, they argue that what Socrates says in the dialogues is different from what Plato says. Plato writes all of the characters, to be sure, but it may be beneficial to point out that the doctrines of Plato are mediated throughout Socrates (Ingram, 2007, pp. 293, 294).

The similar question is that, if there is rhetoric in the texts, is it the rhetoric of Socrates or of Plato (Kirby, 1997, p. 190)? The answer to this question takes two routes: (i) Socrates’ declarations on rhetoric and (ii) Plato’s writing style. In the case of (i) we can consider Socrates’ thoughts about rhetoric on behalf of Plato, and I think this *can* be right to a certain extent; otherwise in (ii) we can

¹ There are various discussions about the meaning of rhetoric in Plato, one of the most important of which involves regarding it as “a way of life” (Doyle, 2010). Some consider it only a way of “speech” (Foley, 2013).

consider Plato's writing style as rhetorical. Nevertheless, if Plato uses rhetoric, he would call it "true" rhetoric in his own terms.²

In the following section, I will focus on the notion of rhetoric in the dialogue *Gorgias*. As we know, sophists are straightforwardly accused of using rhetoric and this is what Plato would (or could) call "wrong" (or "false") rhetoric.

2. Gorgias

"Sophistry," in its literal sense, had been thought of as a distorter of truth by the use of verbal arts. However, this consideration was not so clear even in the times of the Greeks. Rhetoric, as a technique, was thought of both as a distortion in some senses and as an art of word-saying, whether argumentative or not (Barrus in Plato, 2007, p. 8). In the dialogue *Gorgias*, we see essential points on rhetoric being made. The forthcoming quotation explicitly draws a line between "rhetoric" and "dialectics." But it is more important to notice what Socrates claims when talking about rhetoric, or rhetorical answers. Note Polus' answer emphasized here:

Chaerephon: I'll ask, then. If Gorgias happened to be one who knew the technical skill of his brother Herodicus, what would we justly name him? Wouldn't it be the name that we called Herodicus?

Polus: Yes, of course.

Chaerephon: Then, in saying that he was a physician we would be speaking excellently.

Polus: Yes.

Chaerephon: And, if, of course, he were experienced in the technical skill in which Aristophon, the son of Aglaophon, or his brother is experienced, what would we rightly call him?

Polus: It is clear that we would call him a painter.

Chaerephon: And now, since [Gorgias] is one who has knowledge of some technical skill, what name—calling him rightly—would we call him?

Polus: *Chaerephon, many technical skills have been discovered experientially among men by experience. Experience, you see, makes life proceed by technical skill, inexperience by chance. And of each of these various men have various shares variously, and of the best*

² I adopt Murray's term here but not wholly with the same meaning. Murray defines a kind of "true rhetoric" (see Murray, 1999).

things the best men have a share, and Gorgias is among these best and has a share of the most beautiful of the technical skills.

Socrates: Gorgias, Polus appears excellently prepared, of course, for speeches. But, you see, he is not doing what he promised Chaerephon.

Gorgias: In what way, precisely, Socrates?

Socrates: He doesn't seem to me at all to have answered what was asked.

Gorgias: But *you* ask him, if you'd like.

Socrates: No, [I'd rather not,] if of course you yourself are willing to answer. But it would be more pleasant if you [answered]. You see, it's clear to me from the things Polus said that he has cared more for what's called rhetoric than for engaging in dialectic (Plato, pp. 448b-448d).³

It is more than evident that Polus does not answer the question but makes his way around it. Socrates criticizes this and mentions that what Polus is doing is rhetorical rather than dialectical. We will see, when discussing *Phaedrus*, that Plato's view of rhetoric is more positive than this in *Gorgias*. However, for now, the distinction of rhetoric-dialectic seems to be crucial within context. It seems that any sentence that does not answer the question but seems to be an answer is a rhetorical answer. But it should be a condition that a sentence or answer must be argumentative to be dialectical. The answer Polus should give in this context should be like the earlier answers he gave him, such as “[i]t is clear that we would call him a painter” (Plato, p. 448c). The exact answer would be “rhetor,” but it does not matter whether Polus gives the wrong answer or the right one, since he is not saying anything at all. In the dialogue *Gorgias*, then, it can be said that a “wrong” kind of rhetoric is apparent in most of the sophistry.

Plato, in the meantime, makes another distinction in the dialogue too:

Socrates: Do you wish, then, that we establish that there are two “looks” of persuasion, the one that provides belief without knowing, the other that provides knowledge?

Gorgias: Yes, of course.

³ Emphasis mine, brackets as appear in original.

Socrates: And so does rhetoric produce persuasion in courtrooms and other crowded places about the things that are just and unjust? And from it does there come about believing without knowing, or from it [does there come about] knowing?

Gorgias: It's clear, I do suppose, that from it comes believing.

Socrates: Rhetoric, as it seems, is a craftsman of a *believing* persuasion and not of a *teaching* persuasion about the just and unjust (Plato, pp. 454e-455a).

So, there are two kinds of persuasion, “believing persuasion” and “teaching persuasion.” Implicitly the difference rests upon the fact that the former does not have any argumentative power but has in itself a kind of persuasive power, while the latter has argumentative power so it teaches as well as persuading. Rhetoric, for Plato is described as follows:

...[W]hat make-up is to physical training, this is what cooking is to medicine; nay, rather this, that what make-up is to physical training, this is what sophistry is to lawgiving: and what cooking is to medicine, this is what rhetoric is to justice (Plato, p. 465c).

Rhetoric plays a part in justice then. But is it an important part? It is also “shameful” and “bad” (Plato, p. 463d). One can say that “true” rhetoric can be a part of justice, yet a “wrong” one; therefore, sophistry is not a part of it. It is at least a negligible part. Yet, the text gives the impression that if sophistry begins to take part in lawgiving, its part can be widened in time. Furthermore, when we think of rhetoric in its widest sense as used today, it would appear that lawmakers use rhetoric more than dialectics, or more than argumentative speech, since the masses may not understand such argumentative approaches. They should be told what they are able to understand.

To return to the dialogue, Socrates asks Callicles questions whose answers are almost obvious. In these questions, we can see some other functions of rhetoric that are related to the points raised above in relation to today's lawmakers:

Socrates: Well: and what is the rhetoric for the populace of Athens and the other peoples in the poleis of free men —whatever is this [rhetoric] for us? Do rhetors seem to you always to be speaking for what is best, aiming at this —how because of their words the citizens will become as good as possible; or [do the rhetors] also, stirring themselves to be pleasing to the citizens for the sake of their own private [benefit while] making light of the common [good], talk to the peoples [in the different poleis] as though [they were talking] to children, trying only to please them, but, of course, without caring at all whether they will be better or worse on account of these things [that they say] (Plato, pp. 502d-502e)?

Here it seems that the lawmakers, as rhetors, are only pleasing the public, since as for a democracy, this seems to be a necessity. This pleasing, however, gives nothing to the people of the polis since it is not a “teaching persuasion” but a “believing persuasion.” I would suggest that in the dialogue *Gorgias* we can see an extreme form of “wrong” rhetoric taking place.

Now I turn to the dialogue *Phaedrus* for a rather different angle on rhetoric.

3. Phaedrus

“In *Phaedrus* ... Plato analyzes the workings of rhetoric as the art of influencing the soul” (Murray, 1998, p. 279).⁴ This art is treated a little more positively than Plato’s remarks in *Gorgias* suggest. As an art, though, rhetoric should be performed in a certain way. The dialogue, starting from 259e1 to 278b4, contains an explicit discussion of the rhetoric as an art. I will try to review some of the passages in the aforementioned parts. It seems useful to begin with the following quotation:

[Socrates:] ... [W]hen a rhetorician who is mindless of good and evil encounters a city in [a neutral] condition and attempts to persuade it not by praising a mere shadow of an ass as if it were a horse but by praising evil as good, and by carefully studying public opinion, he persuades the

⁴ Although Catherine Zuckert states that Socrates talks about rhetoric as a “sham art” (Zuckert, 2007, p. 169).

city to do evil things rather than good ones, what sort of fruit do you think this rhetorician would harvest from the seed he has sown (Plato, pp. 260c-260d)?

The analogy is as follows; a good rhetor (rhetorician) can persuade a man that an ass is a horse; likewise, good words may persuade a people of a city to act for evil rather than for good. It is evident that “wrong” rhetoric can be used as a way to deceive people by making them “believe” (“believing persuasion”). This is surely a possibility Plato identifies as able to be turned into an actuality. Continuing with the dialogue, the artfulness of rhetoric is explained away as it progresses:

[Socrates:] Don't you think, my good man [Phaedrus], that we have chastised the art of speaking more harshly than need be? Lady Rhetoric might reply perhaps: “Astonishing fellows, what nonsense you speak. I never required anyone ignorant of the truth when he learns to speak, but—if my counsel means something—to master the truth and then take me up. But do I make a major claim: without me, in no way will a man who knows the truth be able to persuade with art”(Plato, p. 260d).

Lady Rhetoric says she is not in need of one who is ignorant, but also more importantly that one who wants to know the truth is in need of her. There cannot be a way, she proposes, for a knowledgeable man to persuade someone without her. No matter how much you know the truth, it is useless if you do not use rhetoric.

After that, Socrates says that if she “IS an art,” then what she says is true, but he suggests there are some counterarguments to this. He seems to refute these arguments by giving the example of law courts, since when he gives the examples of “Nestor's rhetorical treatises, or Odysseus” Phaedrus seems not to know anything about them (Plato, pp. 260e-261c). But by themselves, these examples do not show that rhetoric is an art. The argumentation continues as follows:

- (i) In the courts and in the literature too, there *seems* to be an art.
- (ii) It can be said that there is art in literary writing, yet it seems arguable that there is art in the speeches in court too.
- (iii) If you want to deceive somebody you approach the subject either on similarities or dissimilarities.
- (iv) It seems that the things that are more similar to each other can be harder to distinguish than the less similar ones.
- (v) So in order to deceive somebody and divert him from the truth, you have to be in a position close to the truth.
- (vi) But how can somebody who does not know what the truth is be close to the truth? It is not possible.
- (vii) “Therefore... someone who does not know the truth but has hunted down public opinion will exhibit an art of speech which is at once laughable in some way, as it seems, and artless.” (Plato, p. 262c)
- (viii) Therefore, the true rhetoric is an art (Plato, pp. 261a-262c).

There are some further points that common sensically or practically, may follow from the Socratic tradition. We should keep in mind that, in Socratic dialogues, it is nearly impossible to act contrarily if you know what the truth is. Therefore, according to Plato, if there is an *art of* rhetoric, it shows itself to be close to the truth. The other type of apparent rhetoric is no more than a “laughable...artless” speech.

To sum up thus far, it seems that some rhetoric is “wrong” in the sense that it may misguide some people, as we infer from *Gorgias*; yet rhetoric as *an art*, when done “truly,” is a tool to guide people of a city to act justly, as we infer from *Phaedrus*.

Now, after all these inferences and speeches about rhetoric and rhetors, I will turn to the question, “Is Plato a rhetor?” The answer *might* be “yes.” Exploring his technique of rhetoric, I will follow Harvey Yunis, who approaches the dialogue *Republic* as *an instance* of Plato’s “true” rhetoric very well.

4.Plato’s ‘Protreptic Rhetoric’

In this section, I will review the influential paper by Harvey Yunis on ‘The Protreptic Rhetoric of Plato’s *Republic*.’ In this paper, Yunis represents the way Plato uses in the dialogue *Republic* and says that his technique of rhetoric is a unique way of changing the reader’s mind. This rhetoric by Plato, I believe, can also be considered within the *art of* rhetoric, namely, a true rhetoric.

Yunis argues that in *Republic*, Glaucon and Adimantus change their minds, while the dialogue progresses, about the nature of justice. This changing of minds is analysed by Yunis and his chief claim is that Plato, likewise, tries to change the reader’s mind accordingly. The word “protreptic,” coming from the Greek word “*protrepein*,” he says, which means “to ‘turn [someone] forward,’ hence ‘propel,’ ‘urge on,’ ‘exhort.’” According to him, Plato’s technique includes not only an argumentative part but also a proposition suggesting a certain “way of life” (Yunis, 2007, p. 1). This way of life proposed by the author is “necessarily rhetoric” according to Yunis since the language is limited. One can do little simply by following the argumentative lines of texts, so something rhetorical must be added. It is not something that is necessarily bad to do. It can simply be a way of

writing. He says that Plato somehow eliminates possible responses of the interlocutors (if they were to be actual life characters) and draws attention to the controllable things within the dialogue. Plato directs the course of the dialogue so as to draw the reader to the position taken by Socrates. According to Yunis, taken this way, “protreptic is a form of rhetoric because it acknowledges a division between the responsibility of the author or speaker and that of the reader or listener”(Yunis, 2007, p. 2). More precisely, it is an interaction-based notion and thus presupposes rhetoric. It is here more evident that there is no hint of deceiving the agent. Persuasion is necessary, certainly, but in terms of Plato’s dialogues there is no apparent attempt to deceive. The rhetoric flows from the structure. It is to some extent an affective function, according to Yunis: “[p]rotreptic rhetoric focuses on making that guidance as forceful as it can be,” but it may not affect the outcome directly if the directed outcome is impossible. That is to say, it cannot “self-defeat” itself, “presuming it can control outcome, that is, how the reader or listener will respond” (Yunis, 2007, p. 2). Yunis means that the protreptic technique of rhetoric does not commit itself wholly to persuasion so that it could use any legitimate and illegitimate strategy. It can be called, in this respect, a true rhetoric. Sophistry, if we call it “wrong,” as it is commonly called, by contrast, acts to persuade the listener by any means necessary.

But why *Republic*? For Yunis, the shorter dialogues, too, contain the element of protreptic rhetoric, but only *Republic* makes the reader decide and takes his position with respect to the dialogue’s main issue (Yunis, 2007, p. 5). We can say that the protreptic rhetoric is most evident in *Republic* but exists in other dialogues to a certain extent as well. According to Yunis,

[*Republic*] allows Plato to demonstrate that his protreptic endeavor is, like the just state itself, not a fantasy but entirely possible, however remote it may seem. Glaucon and Adimantus are not and do not become philosophers in the course of the *Republic*. But they submit themselves to

philosophy's rule, and they do so for the right reasons, thereby becoming exemplary for Plato's readers in the public domain (Yunis, 2007, p. 8).

5. Discussion: Is True Rhetoric True Enough?

So far I have argued that Plato uses a kind of rhetoric, and I followed the train of thought introduced by Yunis in order to say that the protreptic rhetoric Plato uses is the "true rhetoric." But how is it 'true' at all? One can easily refer to the Platonic way of life and say that the knower of truth, since she can do nothing wrong, and since he cannot persuade by argumentation alone, can and must use rhetoric.

However, some problems might arise: (1) assuming that Socrates speaks on behalf of Plato, one can object to what Socrates is doing in some dialogues. For example, Benjamin A. Rider says that what Socrates is doing can be regarded as pedagogically wrong⁵ in some cases since he uses rhetoric instead of argumentation and this might mislead a student of philosophy (Rider, 2012, p. 224). I partly agree, but I also suggest that Plato should not be assigned to such a pedagogical formation in terms of method but can only be thought of the asserter of truth. Once one grasps the truth, one can by no means do anything wrong.

(2) Another alleged problem is termed the 'Imputed Objection' by Rachel Barney: "The teacher of rhetoric is morally blameworthy, since he transmits a power that can be (ab)used unjustly" (Barney, 2010, p. 97). The answer seems simple, since once one has used true rhetoric there seems no way to abuse such rhetoric.

⁵ Although he thinks that it is not essentially wrong.

However, in order to defend Plato's position, in terms of Socrates' speeches, the only possible defence entails opposing it to sophistry, which will defend anything if given a chance. However, as it is, this may not be a good enough answer, since Plato would call any act rhetorical that rhetorically defends the opposite view to his own regardless of the fact that a sophist may also defend the contrary.

Another (3) problem might be that, when considering the works of Plato as a whole rather than attributing to Plato only Socrates' speeches, we can always raise the objection that Plato's so-called true rhetoric is circular. Taking the protreptic rhetoric of Plato, one can always say that the truth lies inside the texts, thus arguing the idea that Plato uses a true rhetoric is a fallacy, since the text itself asserts the truth. This seems to suggest circularity. However, the true rhetoric can only be considered as a type of rhetoric, distinct from what Plato sees as truth.

Conclusion

In this work, I tried to interpret the notion of rhetoric within some of Plato's works. I considered the dialogues *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*, and *Republic*. In sections three and four, I tried to analyse the notion of rhetoric. It seems, from these two sections, that there is an understanding of rhetoric in Plato and that it is twofold, distinguishing between 'true' rhetoric and 'wrong' rhetoric. 'True' rhetoric is put forward as an art, the other as a deceiving technique that is both worthy of being "laughed" at and also "artless." The fourth section considers the issues arising from the distinction made in section one. In this fourth section, I tried to ascertain if Plato himself uses rhetoric when he writes his dialogues. The answer I give is "yes," following Yunis. I suggest that he seems to use a rhetoric, a protreptic one. The protreptic rhetoric is suggested as the true rhetoric, which seems plausible yet may be subject to some criticisms. However, it seems that the only way to make rhetoric an *ally* of

Plato is to interpret it as anti-sophistry and within protreptic rhetoric. Finally, as one can see in section five, one can always have doubts about the applicability of such an opposition and such interpretation. The one thing we cannot say is that Plato does not use rhetoric at all.

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