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Gorgias, Polus, and Socrates on Rhetoric in Plato's *Gorgias*

by

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Introduction

Rhetoric was an important part of Greco-Roman education, for it enabled politicians and others who spoke in public to persuade their audiences in an efficient and effective manner. However, there was (and still is) a danger associated with this art because, like any powerful tool, it can be misused. Just as a virtuous person can employ it to accomplish good, so can an evil one use it to do the opposite. The nature of rhetoric was of interest to Plato, and he wrote about it in the *Gorgias*. The focus of this paper is on what Gorgias, Polus, and Socrates say about the subject in this dialogue and the insights concerning its essence and proper use that can be gained therefrom.

The *Gorgias*

Dodds states that the *Gorgias* is presented as a drama with five actors (6), but due to the constraints of space, only the three mentioned above will be considered in this article. The main topic of conversation between Gorgias and Socrates is the definition of rhetoric. In the dialog between Polus (a follower of Gorgias) and Socrates, the emphasis is on how it should be used. Socrates masterfully leads the discussions through a series of questions and answers, termed “dialectic,” to help all of the interlocutors understand the subject better. Nothing seems to fluster him, and even when the impatient Polus becomes agitated, he maintains his composure and keeps the discussion on track.

Gorgias, Polus, and Socrates: Background

Each of these men is an actual historical character. Gorgias was born in Sicily, where rhetoric has its roots. In the *Gorgias*, he is clearly considered a rhetorician, not a sophist (Dodds 7), though he shared some of their characteristics, such as teaching for pay and traveling from city to city. However, he differed from them in one important respect: whereas sophists believed that they could teach *arete* ‘excellence,’ Gorgias did not. Of those whom Socrates examines in the *Gorgias*, he receives the gentlest treatment.

Polus has a much harder time with Socrates, and one reason why is his impulsive nature. As Kennedy observes, his name means “colt,” which is suggestive of his personality (45). His coltish impatience stands in stark contrast to the professional manner of Gorgias (Dodds 11). Not much is known about the historical Polus; all that is known for certain is that he was born at Acragas in Sicily, taught rhetoric, and wrote a no longer extant treatise or two on the subject (Dodds 11).

We know more about Socrates. According to Ehrenberg, it is difficult to discover the real Socrates though many wrote about him (362), but there are some facts upon which there is agreement. Regarding his family, he followed in his father's footsteps and became a stonemason, his mother was a midwife, and he married Xanthippe, who bore him three sons. Most of his life was spent in Athens, and he left only to fulfill military obligations (Ehrenberg 366). Although he participated in governmental affairs on occasion, he usually stayed clear of them. However, he did not keep aloof from people and enjoyed conversing with and questioning anyone who would speak with him, particularly the aristocratic youth. Eventually this angered some powerful individuals, and he was accused of corrupting the youth and introducing new gods into the state. That he was convicted and executed is well known.

Besides his death, Socrates is also remembered for his “teaching,” though he claimed not to teach anything. He questioned men to help them know more both about themselves and about good and evil, and it was through this type of knowledge that he believed excellence could be found. As we shall see, the Socratic method is not easy and can be quite frustrating.

Gorgias and Socrates (449A-461B)

The scene for most of the *Gorgias* is the house of Callicles, Gorgias' host. The first to be questioned by Socrates is Gorgias, who confidently promises to answer any question that may be posed. When asked the name of his art and what he calls himself, he replies that he is a rhetorician and practices rhetoric. It seems that Socrates has asked a simple question requiring a simple answer, but this is not so since he then continues the questioning to discover *exactly* what he does.

Socrates goes on to ask Gorgias whether can train others to be rhetoricians, and he asserts that he can. At this point, the conversation becomes deeper, and Socrates sets the stage for a more serious discussion by asking him to continue to reply to his questions as briefly as possible. Gorgias consents, claiming that he is a master of the brief style of speaking and that nobody can speak more briefly than he.

Socrates then asks, “With what particular thing is its [rhetoric’s] skill concerned?” (449D).¹ Keeping true to his promise of brevity, Gorgias responds, “With speech” (449D). Inquiring further, Socrates asks whether rhetoric deals with every kind of speech. Gorgias answers that it does not, but that it enables men to speak and to understand what they say. Socrates is still not satisfied and observes that other arts, such as gymnastics and medicine, use speech and that their practitioners understand what they say about their disciplines. He then asks, “Why then, pray, do you not give the name ‘rhetorical’ to those other arts, when they are concerned with speech, if you call that ‘rhetoric’ which has to do with speech?” (450B). Gorgias replies, “Because, Socrates, the skill in those other arts is almost wholly concerned with manual work and similar activities, whereas in rhetoric there is no such manual working, but its whole activity and efficacy is by means of speech” (450B-C).

This seems like a good answer, but Socrates believes that Gorgias still has not captured rhetoric’s essence. He maintains that other arts, like geometry and arithmetic, use speech and very little or no manual labor. When asked what subject is dealt with by rhetorical speech, he replies, “The greatest of human affairs, Socrates, and the best” (451D). Socrates, however, points out that this does not answer the question since other professionals would say that their arts are concerned with the greatest good for mankind. In the words of Scott, “Praise doesn’t define it” (1).

Still patient and not giving up, Socrates poses another question to Gorgias. He asks him what rhetoric produces, and Gorgias replies that it is persuasion. He claims that rhetoric enables a man to persuade judges, members of the assembly, and others that deal with governmental issues. He also boasts that a rhetorician can have anyone he wants as his slave by using his powers of persuasion. Socrates, beginning to feel confident that Gorgias is close to revealing his concept of rhetoric, synthesizes what he has said

about it thus far. As he understands it, Gorgias believes that rhetoric produces persuasion and nothing else. When asked if this is correct, he agrees.

Socrates next wants to know the domain of persuasion in general and the true nature of rhetorical persuasion. He points out to Gorgias that arts besides rhetoric persuade, such as teaching. Gorgias does not deny this and when asked what type of persuasion rhetoric brings about, he replies that it is the kind that is used in public meetings and courts and that it is concerned with justice and injustice.

Socrates reassures Gorgias that he is not harassing him and then continues his probing to clarify the issues at hand, for he wants to avoid any misunderstanding. He asks him whether there is a difference between knowledge and belief, and Gorgias states that the two are different. He also agrees with Socrates that persuasion is used both in causing someone to learn something and in swaying one to a particular belief. When Socrates suggests that there must be two kinds of persuasion, one that produces knowledge and another that causes belief, Gorgias agrees. Socrates then asks him to state the type of persuasion produced by a rhetorician at a public meeting or in a court, to which Gorgias replies that it is the one that brings about belief. Therefore, Socrates asserts, "Thus rhetoric, it seems, is a producer of persuasion for belief, not for instruction in the matter of right and wrong" (455A). Gorgias grants that this is true.

Socrates now states that he wants to sort out exactly what has been said so far about rhetoric and asks Gorgias to imagine that he is being questioned by prospective pupils concerning what they will learn from him. Gorgias enthusiastically relates what he considers the great power of rhetoric. Of particular note, he states that he has gone with his brother, a physician, many times on his rounds and has been able to convince his patients to submit to treatment when his brother could not. He declares that a rhetorician can speak before a crowd more persuasively than anyone else but should not use his art improperly. Furthermore, when a rhetorician abuses the power of rhetoric, his teacher should not be blamed because he imparts his knowledge to be used correctly.

When Gorgias is finished, Socrates asks him whether he wants to continue. He does so because he feels that Gorgias has made some claims that are not in accord with what he had said earlier and he does not want the situation to turn ugly. Gorgias agrees to proceed. Socrates' position at the end of their discussion can be summarized thus: a rhetorician has no knowledge, produces only empty beliefs, and uses his skill with words as "a tool of power and pleasure" (Scott 1).

Commentary

Gorgias appears to be a fine professional with ethical standards. He definitely is a master at speaking and cognizant of his responsibility not to use his craft unethically. Perhaps he boasts too much about what he sees as the powers of rhetoric; but this might be forgiven in part since others were listening, and we can not blame him for wanting to attract some business. However, he has not questioned some aspects of his profession deeply enough, such as its relation to justice and injustice, and this is his major flaw in the *Gorgias*.

Just as Gorgias shows himself to be an expert rhetorician, Socrates displays his mastery of dialectic, which somewhat resembles rhetoric. For example, like Gorgias, he maintains the attention of his audience, displays poise and confidence, and carefully presents his case in a vigorous manner. Socrates, however, delves into meanings of ideas and concepts much more deeply than does Gorgias, whose art is rather superficial. All of this is not to say that he does not use some "tricks." According to Lanham, "He must create a context which does not notice words as words" (38). This he does very well by keeping Gorgias and the others busy thinking about what he says, which gives prominence to his ideas rather than to his words. The opposite is true of Gorgias because the way in which he says something is more important than what he says.

Socrates and Polus (461B-481B)

Socrates next speaks with Polus, who is upset because he believes that Socrates has been unfair to Gorgias. Socrates takes control of the situation and does not allow himself to become upset. He knows how to handle Polus, who, as noted earlier, is similar to a spirited colt in his impulsiveness. When Polus asks him what kind of art rhetoric is, he replies that he considers it a certain kind of knack (*empeiria*) and not a real art at all. Polus then inquires what kind of knack this is, and Socrates responds that it is the kind that produces pleasure and gratification. He elaborates on this by explaining that rhetoric is a type of flattery. Polus, in turn, asks him to name the branch of flattery to which it belongs, and Socrates replies that it is a reflection (*eidolon*) of a branch of politics. Therefore, it is not one of the true arts, which are founded on knowledge, but only a counterfeit.

The discussion now shifts to the question of the power of rhetoric. Polus believes that orators have supreme power in the cities where they live, but Socrates disagrees. Thereupon, he tries to clarify what they mean by “power,” and Polus agrees with him that it is good for one who has it. Socrates then proceeds to give proof that orators do not have great power. To begin with, both orators and tyrants do not really do what they wish, but only what seems best to them because of the good results that they *believe* will be produced. Secondly, a man is powerful only if what he obtains *is* good. However, it not infrequently happens that a seemingly excellent course of action has bad results, which is a sign of weakness rather than power. Socrates concludes by saying, “Then I spoke the truth when I said that it is possible for a man to do what he thinks fit in a city and yet not to have great power nor do what he wishes” (468E).

Next, Polus remarks that a man who does whatever he wants, such as killing or sending to prison whomever he wishes, is enviable and that it makes no difference whether he is just or unjust in his actions. Socrates could not disagree more and adds, “We ought not to envy either the unenviable or the wretched, but pity them” (469A). As regards Socrates’ opinion of the unjust man, “[He] is completely wretched, even more so if unpunished, not because his injustice is more painful, but because it is more evil” (Scott 2).

Polus goes on to state that a man who does as he wishes must try to avoid punishment, believing that punishment is an evil and that an unjust man can gain an advantage from his actions only if he does not incur any disadvantage or punishment therefrom. Polus also thinks that such a man can be happy, but not Socrates. One claim made by Polus to refute him is that surely the omnipotent King of Persia must be happy, but Socrates can not tell whether he is because he does not know his stance on education and justice. Polus then inquires whether he believes that happiness is totally based on one’s attitude towards these concepts. Socrates replies, “Yes, by my account, Polus; for a good and honourable man or woman, I say, is happy, and an unjust and wicked one is wretched” (470E). Socrates also disagrees with Polus regarding punishment, for he considers it good because it acts as a medicine and improves an unjust soul, which is the worst evil that a person can have; a just soul is best because it is supremely beneficial to the individual (Scott 2).

Commentary

Polus obviously is a man with little knowledge of the complexities of life. In his naiveté, he believes that a powerful orator or tyrant is practically invulnerable and can commit any act of injustice that pleases him. He does not understand the consequences of the unjust use of power and how hard it is to avoid punishment for evil acts. Being selfish and sadistic in mentality, he is completely ignorant of what it means to live in a community and does not realize that the total disregard for justice that he describes is doomed to failure, for people do not tolerate it for long and soon dispose of the offender.

Socrates, on the other hand, is no stranger to the real world. He knows both from experience and from contemplation that we need justice to live happily and that a person can be truly happy only if she or he is honorable and good. During his life, he saw the consequences of injustice and understands that it is destructive not only to the community but also to the individual. Through dialectic, Socrates attempts to help Polus to know himself better and grasp the difference between good and evil. Polus, however, is a difficult case, and Socrates has such a hard time getting through to him because he is inexperienced in life, headstrong, and convinced that he is right. Nevertheless, this does not discourage Socrates because he knows how important it is to assist Polus and others like him to come to know themselves, realize their illogical thinking, and make a firm decision to pursue excellence and justice.

Conclusion

Plato's *Gorgias* allows us to examine various attitudes towards rhetoric and to form our own opinions about it. Gorgias is representative of those who unequivocally sing its praises, while Socrates is a fine example of one who, through careful analysis, arrives at a low opinion of it. From Polus, we are reminded that the unjust can use rhetoric to accomplish egotistical and evil objectives. While we can reject Polus' abhorrent beliefs outright, the diametrically opposed views of Gorgias and Socrates merit attention. Most would agree that formal rhetoric is not the phenomenal art that Gorgias portrays it to be, but from him we see its effectiveness as a tool of persuasion. Socrates underestimates the value of rhetoric by considering it a counterfeit art, but correctly advises us that we need to know the difference between justice and injustice so that our actions may be ethically sound and our lives happy. A point missed by both is that rhetoric is a part of human behavior (Lanham 46). It is neither just the formal art of persuasion used by trained professionals nor a mere knack for producing pleasure and gratification. We all learn to use rhetoric to some degree of competence to cause others to listen to us and persuade them to our point of view.

Note

¹All quotations from the *Gorgias* are from W. R. M. Lamb, trans., *Plato with an English Translation*, vol. 5 (New York: Putnam, 1925).

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