

# What Is True Rhetoric in Plato's *Gorgias*?

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## Abstract

In Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates clearly rejects the conventional rhetoric of his contemporaries. He rejects their skills, and refuses to practise anything like them himself. But he also discusses something else, variously called “technical rhetoric”, “good rhetoric”, “true rhetoric”, and “true politics”, that he commends as having some value. What is this practice and skill? Some scholars take this commendation to be Socrates' vindication of a particular kind of public speechmaking. This, I suggest, is wrong. What Socrates vindicates in the *Gorgias* under those headings is not public speechmaking, or anything that Gorgias or his contemporaries would have meant by terms like “rhetoric”. What Socrates commends is his own practice of conversation-based philosophy, and by appropriating for it terms like “true politics” and “good rhetoric” he means to indicate that it successfully serves the purposes that people might have imagined were served by skills in speechmaking and public advocacy.

## Keywords

rhetoric – dialectic – philosophy – Socrates – Plato – Gorgias – politics – flattery

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that in Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates rejects as objectionable the conventional rhetoric of his contemporaries. He rejects their use of this occupation and set of skills, and rejects the suggestion that he practise any such kind of rhetoric himself.<sup>2</sup> It is also clear that there is something else, variously called

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1 I am grateful for several very helpful exchanges with Sarah Broadie, Tushar Irani, Marta Jimenez, Filip Karfik, Ondřej Krása, MM McCabe, Vladimír Mikeš, Frisbee Sheffield, and particularly during the *Symposium Platonicum Pragense* of November 2020.

2 I take up in another (unpublished) paper the thorny question of exactly what Socrates' grounds were for this. Draft versions are available at <https://dow.org.uk/research>.

“technical rhetoric”, “good rhetoric”, “true rhetoric”, and “true politics”,<sup>3</sup> that he commends as having some value. Some much later Platonist writers such as Olympiodorus seize on this commendation (and a similar commendation in the *Phaedrus*) as vindicating a kind of rhetoric recognisable as such – i.e. as vindicating a certain kind of practice of public advocacy that is viable in the real world. In this paper, I argue that this is wrong. What Socrates vindicates in the *Gorgias* under those headings is not any public speechmaking practice. What he commends is his own practice of conversation-based philosophy, and by calling it “true politics” and “good rhetoric” he is commandeering those terms to indicate that it successfully serves the purposes that people might have imagined were served by a skill in speechmaking, i.e. it delivers benefits for its possessor, the citizens and the city as a whole (or some combination of these). In doing so, he adopts the position staked out in the *Apology*,<sup>4</sup> that his own conversational practices are the greatest blessing to the city, the greatest benefit for its citizens, and render him worthy of free meals in the Prytaneum!<sup>5</sup>

It might be thought that this position does not advance beyond a statement of the obvious about the *Gorgias*. But in fact much of the secondary literature presumes that Socrates’ contemplation of a “good rhetoric” (i.e. something that is a good version of the type of thing ordinary Greek speakers could be taken to be referring to with terms like “rhetoric”) is to be taken at face value.<sup>6</sup> I will highlight below that the ancient tradition was divided over whether Socrates genuinely allowed for a good kind of oratory, with Cicero and Aristotle seeing Socrates as having rejected public speechmaking, and others such as Olympiodorus convinced that Socrates vindicated a purified practice of oratory.

3 *Grg.* 504d5–6, 517a5, 521d7–8.

4 I follow James Doyle in taking the *Gorgias* to be closely connected to (“haunted by”: 39) the *Apology*. “Socratic Methods,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 42 (2012).

5 *Ap.* 30a5–7, 38a1–6, 36e1–3.

6 See e.g. Terence Irwin, *Plato: Gorgias, Translated with Notes*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 215–6, who, despite his recognition that Socrates’ “true oratory” involves forgoing oratorical techniques, nevertheless sees 504d–e as outlining a political arrangement set out more fully in *Republic*; or Jessica Moss, “The Doctor and the Pastry Chef: Pleasure and Persuasion in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” *Ancient Philosophy* 27, 2 (2007): 229–49, 34. The view I am commending is reflected in some passing remarks in Robert Wardy, *The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato and Their Successors* (London: Routledge, 1998), 81, 85, as well as in the overall interpretation of the dialogue’s central themes canvassed in James Doyle, “The Fundamental Conflict in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 30 (2006): 87–100; Rachel Barney, “Gorgias’ Defense: Plato and His Opponents on Rhetoric and the Good,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48,1 (2010): 95–121, esp. 106, 118–119; A. G. Long, *Conversation and Self-Sufficiency in Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 46; Tushar Irani, *Plato on the Value of Philosophy: The Art of Argument in the Gorgias and Phaedrus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), esp. 29–32. But it is rarely defended in detail as an understanding of what Socrates’ “true politics” involves.

## 2 Key Claims

This paper defends the following claims.

1. Socrates rejects all (or nearly all) public speechmaking to the kinds of gatherings of citizens of which political assemblies and lawcourts are paradigm cases, and consequently sees little value in cultivating an ability (“rhetoric”) to undertake such public speechmaking (well).
2. Socrates’ recommendation of “true politics” is a recommendation of the kind of philosophical conversation for which he was himself known.

Explaining and defending claim (2) will be the focus of the second part of the paper. It amounts to the claim that Socrates’ commandeers and redeploys terminology such as “true politics” and “good rhetoric” in a novel and surprising way to apply to his own practice of small-scale philosophical conversation.<sup>7</sup>

The claim captured in (1) summarises Socrates’ rejection of Gorgias’ rhetoric as shameful (463d4–5), in his description of rhetoric as having little use (481d1–5), and in his rejection, in the choice of lives discussion with Callicles, of the kind of life that involves “mak[ing] speeches among the people, practis[ing] oratory, and be[ing] active in the sort of politics you people engage in these days” (500c4–7). But it will be helpful to set out more carefully what does and does not fall within the scope of this rejection of public speechmaking and rhetoric. I am suggesting that his rejection covers both a type of activity (public speechmaking), and an ability to undertake that activity (rhetoric). Socrates’ rejection of public speechmaking will be our main focus, because claiming that Socrates rejects this activity involves not just the modest view that Socrates rejects Gorgias’ specific conception of what an ability in public speechmaking consists in, or his particular motivations for speechmaking, but the more ambitious view that there can be *no* valuable ability or expertise in that kind of activity. There can be no valuable expertise in rhetoric because public speechmaking itself is not of value. This is why a life that includes public speechmaking is not an option for Socrates himself, despite the fact that his motivations would be very different from those of Gorgias and his followers and from those of the orators of the present and past.

The position ascribed to the Socrates of the *Gorgias* in these two claims is in one way wholly unsurprising. It repeats his explicit rejection of public speechmaking in the *Apology* (which covers at least the assembly and the lawcourts), and preserves the “choice of lives” presented in various ways throughout the *Gorgias*, most explicitly at 500c1–8, between the kind of life urged by Gorgias, Polus and Callicles, of rhetoric and public advocacy, and the kind of life

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<sup>7</sup> See Irani, *Plato on the Value of Philosophy*, 31.

exemplified by Socrates himself, the life of small-scale philosophical conversation. But it amounts to a rejection of a view espoused by some interpreters that Socrates, later in the *Gorgias*, finds a substantial valuable role for public advocacy in the assembly and lawcourts, or discerns a valuable kind of ability to undertake those activities.

It is not part of the purpose of this paper to determine the precise rationale for Socrates' policy, although it will be necessary to say something about this. Our focus will be on the scope of what he rejects when he rejects "rhetoric", and what he is commending under headings such as "good rhetoric" and "true politics".

### 3 Public Speechmaking, Rhetoric, and the Scope of Socrates' Criticism

What Socrates rejects is what Gorgias proclaims, early on in the dialogue, to be "the greatest good for mankind" (452d3–4). Gorgias characterises it in this way:

... the ability to persuade by speeches judges in a law court, councillors in a council meeting, and assemblymen in an assembly or in any other political gathering (πολιτικὸς σύλλογος) that might take place. (452e1–4)<sup>8</sup>

Rhetoric is here characterised as an ability. The value of the ability consists in the value of the thing it enables its possessor to do. In this case, this is discharging a certain role in civic institutions, i.e. of persuading gatherings of citizens in courts, councils, and political assemblies. The ensuing discussion confirms that rhetoric is indeed an ability to instil persuasion in the souls of the audience (453a4–5), but clarifies that the type of persuasion is "the kind that takes place in law courts and in those other large gatherings (ἄλλοις), as I was saying a moment ago." (454b5–7) In the souls of listeners, the type of persuasion (πειθῶ) that it produces is conviction (πίστις) rather than knowledge (454e5–9) in "law courts and other gatherings (ἄλλων)" (455a3–4). Although there is some suggestion in this opening exchange that rhetoric may have some distinctive subject (the just and the unjust) with which it is concerned, it looks as though this is either abandoned or interpreted in such a way as to include within the orator's province a very wide variety of matters such as the building

<sup>8</sup> Translations of the *Gorgias* are those of Donald J. Zeyl in John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works – Edited with Introduction and Notes* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1997), unless otherwise stated.

of harbours, dockyards and fortifications. The idea perhaps is that the just and the unjust are the values in terms of which any proposed verdict in the assembly or lawcourts on such matters is to be commended. At any rate, rhetoric is taken to be an ability whose paradigmatic exercise is in the assembly and lawcourts. In other words, rhetoric is characterised in terms of the *social role* that it enables its possessor to discharge, and within which its abilities are typically exercised, as the persuasive adviser of crowds (ὄχλοι) in public gatherings such as assemblies and lawcourts. This is confirmed by its reiteration in Callicles' friendly advice to Socrates, urging him to devote himself to cultivating an ability to "put a speech together correctly before councils of justice" or to "utter any plausible or persuasive sound" or to "make any bold proposal on behalf of anyone else" (486a1–3). The life of oratory, championed in the dialogue by Gorgias, Polus and Callicles is one of public persuasion in the courts and the assembly, and it is this that is summarised by Socrates in the "choice of lives" passage as follows:

[How should we live?] Is it the way you urge me toward, to engage in these manly activities, to make speeches among the people, to practice oratory, and to be active in the sort of politics you people engage in these days? (500c4–7)

Gorgias and Callicles see rhetoric as valuable because they see this kind of social role as valuable in certain ways. Socrates' responses to Gorgias and Callicles, taken together, constitute a rejection both of rhetoric – the ability to discharge this socially-specified role – and also of the social role itself that rhetoric is the ability to discharge. And the natural understanding of his position is that these are not two separate rejections, but one. Socrates rejects (as something of no great value) the ability to persuade crowds in the assembly and lawcourts, *precisely because* he rejects (as something of no great value) that social role itself – the persuading of crowds of citizens in those public contexts.

Socrates' position, I suggest, is that he rejects neither just *some particular approach* to discharging the social role of public persuader of crowds in the assembly and lawcourts, nor *some particular specification* of the ability to discharge it, but the social role itself, and as a consequence of that rejection, he rejects even the possibility of a different specification of the ability to persuade by speeches in the assembly and lawcourts, such that it might be something of value for him to cultivate himself. It is the "manly activities", the "making speeches among the people" and the "being active in politics" (in anything like the way his contemporaries would recognise) that he is rejecting.

In doing so, Socrates of the *Gorgias* is simply taking the same position as the Socrates of the *Apology*. There, he calls attention to the fact that he had never spoken in a lawcourt before (17d2–3). And he highlights how strange it is that he is prepared to give advice to his fellow citizens privately, but not in ways that involved “going up” to advise among the “multitude” (πλήθος), before the city as a whole (31c4–7). His divine sign prevented him from undertaking this kind of public persuasion before crowds in the lawcourts or assembly, that is to say that it prevented him from “doing politics” (31d5) or “engaging with the *demos* as a whole” (δημοσιεύειν, 32a3). These latter expressions do not refer to some further activity beyond persuasive speechmaking in the assembly and lawcourts. They are simply ways of referring to that activity, and as such form part of the explanation of why Socrates had not given speeches in these contexts before, despite his commitment to serving the city by advising his fellow citizens. Indeed, we should notice that in the *Apology* too, Socrates’ rejection of this kind of public role is not a rejection of the broader project of serving the interests of the city and of his fellow citizens. Quite the contrary: he sees his rejection of public speechmaking and his preference for small-scale conversation as precisely *allowing* him to be the gift of the god to the city (30d5–31a1), conferring on it the “greatest benefit” (36c3–4, 38a2). The claims made here about Socrates’ position in the *Gorgias* simply match his stance in the *Apology*: his rejection of persuasive speechmaking in the lawcourts and assembly (claim 1) is understood as allowing him to practise a different and more valuable kind of civic service (claim 2), undertaken through philosophical conversation.

This evidence highlights that for Socrates, the problems that attach to public speechmaking (and rule it out as an option for himself) are such that they are not eliminated by the practitioner’s having a different goal or a different approach. Socrates’ goals and hence his priorities and approach, were he to engage in public speechmaking, would be different from those of most other practitioners but he still rejects public speechmaking. The problems with that kind of activity must arise from something other than the particular approach of the practitioner. Likewise, they do not seem to arise from specific distinctive features of Athens, or to be confined to one or two particular polities. They seem to be common at least to all or most actual polities: Socrates is explicit about this in the *Apology*, when he says that his reasons for not engaging in public speechmaking apply not just in Athens, but to “any other multitude” (31e2–3) where justice and lawful propriety are at stake. In both of these ways, then, the problems attached to public speechmaking (the exact nature of which is not our focus here) cannot be easily remedied. In the arguments below, I will say that Socrates took them to be “unavoidable” in the sense that they could not be avoided by anything the prospective practitioner might do. The idea is perhaps that although these problems may not attach to public

speechmaking by logical or metaphysical necessity (perhaps in an idealised state entirely populated by the perfectly virtuous, these problems would not arise, and Socrates might happily engage in public speechmaking), they will always arise in the kinds of states we actually have in the real world, populated by people as they actually are.

Having canvassed the initial plausibility of the position being attributed to Socrates, and particularly his rejection of persuasive speechmaking in civic gatherings, let us immediately deal with some concerns about this view. One concern is regarding its lack of clarity: does this view really succeed in specifying with any precision the object of Socrates' rejection? Another concern will have to do with whether this view can accommodate all of the relevant textual evidence. Let us start with the worry about the lack of clarity.

#### 4 Clarifying Socrates' Rejection of Rhetoric

The Greek for a speech is λόγος, but it is obvious that Socrates is not rejecting all use of λόγοι, since the Greek word also refers to other uses of human speech. Claim 1 says that the use of speech he rejects is to be characterised in social terms – the use of speech to persuade crowds of assembled citizens in contexts typified by the assembly and the lawcourts. Although we are not directly concerned here with identifying the *grounds* on which Socrates rejects this kind of activity, it is clear that on this way of understanding his position, it does not constitute a rejection of long speeches by one person in other sorts of social settings. Equally it does not *in principle* commit Socrates to rejecting the possibility of *teaching* a large crowd of citizens *en masse*, where teaching is understood as the imparting of knowledge by one who has it. But in practice such teaching will be impossible (e.g. due to time limitations, *Grg.* 455a5–6). Gorgias and Socrates agree that the kind of speechmaking in which rhetoric is the expertise (and which Socrates will reject) is to be distinguished from teaching by its social context: it is the kind of persuasion “that takes place in lawcourts and in those other large gatherings (ᾠχλοῖς)” (454b5–6), and the limitations of time imposed by that kind of context render teaching impossible (454c7–455a7). They further agree that “in a large gathering” (ἐν ᾠχλῳ, lit. “in a crowd”) implies “among those who don't have knowledge” (ἐν τοῖς μὴ εἰδόσιν) (459a4). In principle, Socrates' position might permit persuasive speechmaking to a large crowd of experts, or to convey knowledge where time limitations did not rule this out. But his concern in the *Gorgias* is not with such possibilities – he rejects persuasive speechmaking to crowds who lack knowledge, in contexts such as the lawcourts and assembly where it is not possible to convey knowledge by teaching.



Socrates thus rejects as of no great value a social role that was familiar to his contemporaries and commended to him in the dialogue by Gorgias, Polus and Callicles – the role of orator, i.e. of persuasive adviser in public deliberative contexts such as lawcourts and assemblies. As a consequence, he likewise rejects the expertise or ability of rhetoric that enables its possessor to persuade in such contexts.<sup>9</sup> It is not just that he is critical of the particular way in which Gorgias and his followers exercise rhetoric, or the purposes with which they do so: Socrates rejects *as options for himself* both the exercise of rhetoric and the role of public persuader in the lawcourts and assembly. Socrates' motivations are clearly less self-interested, and more public-spirited, than those of Gorgias, Polus and Callicles. So the fact that Socrates rejects *for himself* public speechmaking and the ability to undertake it, shows that his criticism of these activities and this ability is not confined to the practising of them with faulty motivation. Whatever we take to be the grounds of Socrates' rejection of rhetoric, for example that it is servile and involves flattering (521a2–b2), he takes to be *both* grounds for the criticism of current and past practitioners of public speechmaking *and also* grounds for his own rejection of such a life for himself. His repeated and consistent deployment of the doctor and pastry-chef imagery highlights this: the life of public speechmaking represented by the pastry-chef is not only the path chosen by others, it is also the option that Callicles urges upon Socrates himself and that Socrates refuses to adopt. The option in the choice of lives that Socrates rejects is the life of public speechmaking *for himself*, and when he describes it as a servile and flattering life, he means that it would be servile and flattering *even if he were the person living it*. That is to say that, for Socrates, this life is servile and flattering for reasons that are not derived from, but rather are independent of, the goals of the person living it.

## 5 Gorgianic Rhetoric outside the Assembly and Lawcourts

It might be objected at this point that although it is clear that Socrates had a policy of avoiding public speechmaking,<sup>10</sup> it is not so clear that Gorgias'

9 We will consider below Socrates' apparent cautious recommendation of certain highly unusual uses of rhetoric, so as to use the roles afforded to speakers in lawcourts in an idiosyncratic way, such as taking the role of prosecutor as well as defendant in one's own trial in order to accuse oneself and ensure one's own conviction, and likewise for family and friends (480b9–d7, 508b5–7), or contriving (μηχανητέον, 481a2) – perhaps by using the role of prosecutor – to secure the acquittal of unjust defendants (480e5–481b5).

10 Socrates calls attention to this in the *Apology* (40a2–c3, see also 31c4–32a3), and explains very clearly that his appearance as a speaker at his own trial is precisely an *exception* to a general policy he has observed throughout his life up to that point. It is this policy with which we are concerned here. Nicholas Denyer, "Authority and the Dialectic of Socrates,"



rhetoric (which is certainly among the targets of Socrates' criticism) was an ability intended solely for exercise in large-scale civic deliberations. The dialogue starts just after what seems to have been a private exhibition of Gorgias' rhetorical abilities (447a1–b8). And Gorgias himself indicates that it is by the expertise of rhetoric that he is able to persuade the previously unwilling patients of his brother and other doctors to comply with treatment (456b1–5). So, if this falls within the scope of the activities and expertise to which Socrates objects,<sup>11</sup> one might suppose that his objections should not be interpreted so as to confine their scope to the exercise of those activities and that expertise in the public contexts of assembly and courts.

The observation is correct but not damaging to the claims being advanced here about Socrates' position. Socrates, I am suggesting, objects to the activity of persuading ignorant crowds in public settings, and does not value an ability (rhetoric) designed to achieve this. It is no objection to ascribing this view to Socrates to point out that this same ability could be deployed also in other settings.

## 6 Evidence for this Construal of Socrates' Position

Let us turn then to the evidence supporting this proposed construal of Socrates' position. I start with consideration of his overall position, before looking at evidence that relates specifically to one or other of its two components – (1) the rejection of all public speechmaking, and (2) the commendation of a life of philosophical conversation as what is intended in his commendation of “true politics” and “good rhetoric”.

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in *Authors and Authorities in Ancient Philosophy*, ed. J. Bryan, R. Wardy and J. Warren, *Cambridge Classical Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), helpfully clarifies, in a response to an unpublished paper of mine (see above n. 2) on this topic, that Socrates did not reject private speechmaking.

- 11 Socrates does not in fact explicitly object to this particular use of rhetoric by Gorgias. And one might note that it is different from the uses of rhetoric that are the main focus of discussion in the *Gorgias*: for insofar as Gorgias operates under his brother's directions, both the things he persuades patients to do (i.e. to submit to treatment of various kinds) and the overall goal of their doing so (i.e. health) are guided by the expertise of medicine. And this represents an important difference between this kind of case and the paradigm exercises of rhetoric that Gorgias and his followers are commending, i.e. in public life, where both the immediate persuasive goals and the longer-term objectives are whatever the orator thinks best (see e.g. 467b3–5). As such, this ancillary role for rhetoric has similarities with the role assigned to rhetoric in the *Statesman* (304a6–e2) where rhetoric is subordinated to statesmanship. This private use of rhetoric is also directed towards one patient at a time, rather than to large numbers simultaneously in a crowd. As such we should be cautious about drawing conclusions regarding whether these private activities fall within the scope of Socrates' rejection of rhetoric.

The first body of evidence that we should understand Socrates' position in the way proposed is the various ways in which the dialogue from start to finish presents a choice of lives, with the two options being a life of public advocacy and a life of philosophical conversation. This represents important support for both claims (1) and (2), because this choice only makes sense if Socrates is rejecting *all* public speechmaking (1) and not – as those who deny (1) tend to suppose – commending some suitably adjusted way of undertaking public speechmaking under the heading of “good rhetoric” or “true politics”. If Socrates' commendation of “good rhetoric” and “true politics” *were* a commendation of a particular way of undertaking public advocacy, then the choice of lives as the dialogue presents it would be undermined. There would either be some third option on the table (a life of public advocacy, suitably modified from the one commended by Gorgias, Polus and Callicles), or the choice of lives would collapse entirely, since Socrates' would no longer be opposing the kinds of *activities* that his interlocutors were urging upon him, but rather commending them (albeit to be pursued with different motives). Whereas if Socrates' commendation of “good rhetoric” / “true politics” is an appropriation of those terms so as to apply them to his own practices of philosophical conversation, the choice of lives remains intact exactly as it is presented. The next section explores this evidence in more detail.

## 7 The Choice of Lives in the *Gorgias*

The choice of lives is set up right at the start of the dialogue. The life Gorgias represents is characterised by public speechmaking, principally in public deliberative forums like the assembly and the courts, but also the kind of public “display” (ἐπίδειξις) that the dialogue represents him as having finished just before it begins (447a1–b8). Socrates' life is correspondingly characterised by dialogue (διαλεχθῆναι 447c1). And these rival kinds of lives and characteristic activities show us, for each of the protagonists, “who he is” (447d1).

The same choice of lives is clearly emphasised right at the end of the dialogue.

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. This is because the speeches I make on each occasion do not aim at gratification but at what's best. They don't aim at what's most pleasant. And because I'm not willing 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. Think about what a man like that, taken captive among these people, could say in his defense, if somebody were to accuse him and say, "Children, this man has worked many great evils on you, yes, on you. He destroys the youngest among you by cutting and burning them, and by slimming them down and choking them he confuses [or paralyzes] them." (521d6–522a1)

In the final stage of his exchange with Callicles, Socrates contrasts the life urged upon him by Callicles with the one that he actually leads. In doing so, he picks up the imagery of the doctor and the pastry-chef from the exchange with Polus earlier in the dialogue. It is clear that Socrates views himself as taking the role of the doctor (521e3). As in that earlier exchange, the pastry-chef represents the rhetorician, i.e. the person who has an expertise in public speechmaking. And in this imagery, the use of the pastry-chef to characterise the rhetorician highlights what Socrates thinks speechmaking will inevitably involve, i.e. flattery, pandering to the audience. It is a characterisation of rhetoric in general, not of Gorgianic rhetoric specifically: in fact – as we have seen – Socrates leaves open to Gorgias the option of protesting that his particular approach to public speechmaking is such as to fall *outside* the scope of Socrates' characterisation of rhetoric. This option is never taken up, so Socrates' characterisation can be presumed to apply to experts in public speechmaking quite generally (including Gorgias and those who follow his approach). As such, in this final exchange with Callicles, this way of presenting the contrast between "true politics" and the life of rhetoric urged by Callicles is explicitly emphasising its continuity with the choice of lives presented earlier on: between the life of public speechmaking and the life of philosophy. It counts in favour of an interpretation that preserves this continuity.

Notice that in this reprise of the choice of lives, the practice of Socrates' favoured option is called "true political expertise" (521d7), but it is characterised in a number of ways that make clear that it is a life of philosophy, of the kind actually lived by Socrates, that he is talking about. Socrates is one of only a few Athenians, if not the only one, to live this way (521d6–8). This kind of political expertise leaves you unable to come up with anything to say in court (521d8–e2, see also "dizzy" at 527a2). It is represented in the analogy by the doctor who "confuses" or "paralyzes" his patients (ἀπορεῖν ποιεῖ, 522a1) – i.e. has precisely the aporetic effect that Socrates' philosophical practices have on his interlocutors. Socrates' true politics explicitly excludes the kind of skill that would be usable in court, and any kind of ability to "protect oneself" (522c5–6)

in public.<sup>12</sup> The only kind of “protection” that this true politics provides is against speaking or acting unjustly, in ways that are supposed to be established and tested by “refutation” (ἐξελέγχοι, ἐξελεγχομένοις, 522c7–d7). It is surely the life of philosophical conversation, the life that Socrates actually lived (or is portrayed by Plato as having lived), that he is talking about.

The continuity in the choice of lives from the start to the end of the dialogue is also reflected in the dialogue’s closing myth. At the end of the myth, he contrasts the good life he champions with the life honoured by most people and by Calicles. The latter is the traditional life of the powerful in public life, including public speechmaking, “those active in the affairs of cities” (525d4–5); and Socrates rejects it as he says Rhadamanthus does in the next world (in line with claim 1 above). His preferred life is exemplified by the philosopher minding his own business (526c1–5), and “practising truth” (526d6), in such a way as to enable you to “protect yourself” in the way referred to above (suggesting claim 2), and this is contrasted with the life or lives Calicles and Polus and Gorgias commend (527a8–b2). In this choice, he urges Calicles (and everyone else) to “listen to me and follow me where I am” (527c4–5) i.e. live like Socrates (claim 2). This *may* eventually lead to some consideration of politics, but only once they have got better at deliberation and generally got into a better condition, and even then it may not do so (527d2–5) (see claim 1).

The presentation of the choice of lives as one between a life of public advocacy and one of philosophy is thus clear from the start and end of the dialogue. We have no reason not to take at face value its characterisation along exactly such lines, by Socrates to Calicles, in the most famous passage in which this choice is presented.

SOCRATES: For you see, don’t you, that our discussion’s about this (and what would even a man of little intelligence take more seriously than this?), about the way we’re supposed to live. Is it the way you urge me toward, to engage in these manly activities, to make speeches among the people, to practice oratory, and to be active in the sort of politics you people engage in these days? Or is it the life spent in philosophy? (500c1–8)

Notice here that the life Socrates is rejecting is characterised in terms of the social role it involves taking, not in terms of any particular aim or attitude with

12 That is to say that it excludes all public speechmaking. Hence Socrates’ reference to “flattering oratory” (522d7) is a clarification of what is involved in “oratory” and not a subdivision of it.

which that role is occupied. Insofar as flattery enters the discussion, it does so because Socrates thinks it is unavoidably involved in occupying the role of public advocate, not merely as one way among many of doing so. What is rejected is the life of public speechmaking itself (claim 1). And what is vindicated in its place is a life of philosophy, the life exemplified by Socrates (claim 2).

Notice also that within the list of things that characterise the life Callicles is commending and Socrates is rejecting, the phrases “make speeches among the people” and “practise oratory” are entirely unqualified. Socrates seems to be referring to recognisable social practices of public advocacy, not to some specific way of undertaking them. This stands in contrast to his reference to “politics”, where he *does* add qualifications to make clear what he is referring to: in this case he is not rejecting every form of engagement with fellow citizens, but only “the sort of politics you people engage in these days”. We have no reason not to take Socrates’ unqualified rejection of the social practice of public speechmaking at face value (claim 1).

The structure of the argument that follows (and how it is connected to the preceding discussion of pleasure and the good) is also instructive. Socrates suggests that he and Callicles should decide which life they should live on the basis of what those two lives are like (500c8–d4). Socrates reminds Callicles of their previous agreement that the good and the pleasant are distinct, and that there are human practices for securing each of these (500d6–e1). Since he further claims that pleasure-directed practices are inexpert and irrational, whereas those directed towards the real good are expertises (τέχναι), it is clear that if he can show that the life of the orator is pleasure-directed, and the life of philosophy is good-directed, that it is the latter that should be chosen in preference to the former (500e3–501c6, see also 513d7–514a3). Accordingly, Socrates embarks upon a classification of practices: medicine is classified as good-directed, and there is a long list of pleasure-directed practices. This starts with pastry-baking, but extends to flute-playing, chorus training, dithyrambs, tragedy, and popular harangue (δημηγορία). The crucial question is where the practices of public advocacy, rhetoric and speechmaking fit in. When Socrates asks him to classify them, Callicles resists classifying speechmaking as a whole, and insists that although some is pleasure-directed, some is good-directed (503a2–4). Although the full development of Socrates’ rejection of this takes several pages, his rejection is clear. It is reasonably clear already at 503d2–3, where Socrates says, “I don’t see how I could say any of these men has proved to be such a man.” (i.e. the kind of man that systematically secured the good of the citizens, rather than one who was concerned only with their pleasure, by filling up whatever appetites they had). But it is put beyond doubt when the argument is brought to its conclusion.

SOCRATES: 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. You were agreeing that none of our present-day ones has, though you said that some of those of times past had, and you gave preference to these men [Themistocles, Cimon, Miltiades, and Pericles]. But these have been shown to be on equal footing with the men of today. ... I'm not criticizing these men either, insofar as they were servants of the city. 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. But the truth is that in redirecting its appetites and not giving in to them, using persuasion or constraint to get the citizens to become better, they were really not much different from our contemporaries. That alone is the task of a good citizen. Yes, I too agree with you that they were more clever than our present leaders at supplying ships and walls and dockyards and many other things of the sort. (516e9–517a4, 517b2–c4)

Socrates' appeal here is to historical facts. There have been many and varied people who have, over the years, lived the kind of life of public advocacy that Callicles commends. They have been different in all kinds of ways. But none of them, not even those thought of as "better", has provided an example of successful good-directed activity in public advocacy. Despite their differences, they are all ultimately (with varying levels of success) engaged in pleasure-directed activity. Socrates' claim seems to be that taking the role of politician or public advocate unavoidably involves serving the pleasures and appetites of the people, regardless of what is really good for them, and that these historical facts offer evidential support for that claim.

We might wish to fault Socrates' reasoning here. He has not *proved* that it is impossible for there to be a way of discharging the role of public advocate in a way that systematically aims at and (to some worthwhile extent) achieves the genuine good of citizens. But he has highlighted that this logical possibility remains uninstantiated. And he seems happy, on this (presumably inductive) basis, to draw the more generalised conclusion – i.e. that such an option is not instantiated because it is not in fact possible. His conclusion is that this shows that the life of public advocacy is to be rejected in the choice of lives – rejected, that is, as an option for Socrates himself – in favour of the life of philosophy.

Now, it might be true that, for all Socrates has said, the possibility of someone's occupying the role of public advocate, in a way that is good-directed and successful to a worthwhile degree, remains open to Socrates himself and anyone else who chose to pursue it. That something has not in fact been done does not entail that it is not possible. But this would be to *disagree* with the Socrates of the *Gorgias*, not to champion his position. Socrates takes the fact

that all orators, past and present alike, have served the appetites of the citizens and not what is best for them, to show something quite general about undertaking “the business of the city” (515a2, b8–c1) – the kind of public advocacy that Callicles urges Socrates to take up, and blames him for not doing so (515a2–3). Public advocacy does not count as exercising “the true political craft and practis[ing] the true politics” (521d6–8), in the way that Socrates’ life of philosophical conversation does. We can see that this is Socrates’ conclusion from the fact that Socrates does not consider public advocacy to be a viable option *for himself*, despite the fact that his objective as a citizen is to make his fellow citizens as good as possible. He does not regard public advocacy as a way in which he could secure that objective. And this equally explains why his appeal to Callicles, Polus and Gorgias is not to revise the objective with which they practise public advocacy, but to change their way of life to match Socrates’ (527c4–6).

## 8 Supposed Evidence of Socrates Commending Public Advocacy

Those who suppose that Socrates does not reject public advocacy wholesale tend to point to passages in which he appears to take seriously the idea of “good rhetoric”, and those in which he appears to commend certain kinds of public advocacy. In the section that follows, I will show how these passages function within the dialogue. I concede that Socrates does recognise the value of some very bizarre uses of public advocacy (taking up the role of prosecutor in order to secure one’s own conviction and punishment or that of family or friends; and somehow contriving – perhaps through unorthodox uses of the role of prosecutor or defendant – to ensure a wrongdoer’s acquittal). But apart from these, his general position is that “good rhetoric” (in the ordinary sense of those words) is non-existent and impossible; there is no available way of practising “true politics” through public advocacy. But this does not mean that “true politics” is non-existent: it does exist, but it consists of philosophical conversation of the kind practised by Socrates (and there are some hints in how Socrates expresses his view that philosophical conversation could be seen also as an instantiation of “good rhetoric”, though that is not made explicit). We can describe Socrates’ position on “good rhetoric” as having three stages.

Stage One (462b3–503a1): Socrates’ arguments to Polus, and to Callicles up to 503a1 treat the whole of rhetoric as part of flattery, and reject it. “Politics” in this sense (i.e. active participation in public deliberation as a speaker or advocate) is treated as unavoidably involving flattery, and on this basis, the practice so central to the life and professional concerns of Gorgias, Polus and Callicles is wholly rejected as a way of life for Socrates or anyone else. There



is no recognition of a good type of oratory at this stage. Socrates' argument here is that because oratory is directed at pleasure not at what is best, it is an inferior kind of activity, and good citizens should reject it in favour of activities that do aim at what is best. He sets out to show that oratory is among the activities directed towards pleasure rather than towards what is best.

Stage Two (503a2–517c4): Callicles seeks to block Socrates' argument by introducing a distinction between two types of rhetorical practice: "good oratory" that aims at the best for the citizens and the standard flattering type that aims only to gratify them (503a2–4). Callicles wants to say that the present generation of orators are of the bad, flattering kind, but there were some orators of the good kind in previous generations (Themistocles, Cimon, Miltiades, Pericles). If Callicles can show that there is a good type of oratory that aims at what is best, then Socrates will be forced to recognise this as a valuable kind of activity around which to organise one's life. This is where, and why, the idea of a good type of oratory is first introduced, and not by Socrates. But Socrates runs with the idea in order to refute Callicles' claim. He fleshes out more precisely what it would take for something to count as "good rhetoric" (504d5–e3). In doing so, his primary objective, which he ultimately achieves, is to show that there are no examples of "good rhetoric" of this kind. Once the concept is clearly delineated, it is clear that it is uninstantiated (516e9–517c4) and the implication seems to be that it is in practice impossible to instantiate, such that this is not a realistic life option for Socrates or anyone else.

Stage Three (517c4 onwards): Socrates drops the "good oratory" terminology in favour of speaking about "good politics" – in doing so, he is not really changing the subject ("practising oratory" and "being active in politics" were happily used as synonyms back at 500c5–7, as are various other expressions subsequently such as "engaging in the city's business" (515a2), being a "fine and good citizen in the city" (518b1)). But doing so enables him to focus on what the proper objective of an active citizen is. Rhetoric purports to be a way, perhaps the best way, of achieving the proper (valuable) objective of a citizen, and thereby of engaging in "good politics" (519b2–d4, 520a3–6). This objective is agreed to be: to promote what is best for the citizens, which is to make them as good as possible (515c1–3). As a result, although Socrates thinks that there is no kind of *public advocacy*, i.e. no kind of *rhetoric*, that can achieve this objective, he does think that there is *some activity* that can achieve it. And that activity is philosophical conversation of the kind that is central to his own life. Once it is clearly understood what it takes for a practice to count as "good politics", it opens the door for Socrates to claim<sup>13</sup> that philosophical conversation

13 He does not really argue for this claim in the *Gorgias*. He testifies that his activities *aim* at what is best for citizens, and he implies (by casting himself as the doctor, 521e2–522a7;

alone is such a practice (at least among options that are realistically available) (521d6–8). By focusing on the aims of political participation, i.e. “caring for the citizens” (513e5–7), or what those “active in politics should be doing” (515c2–3), Socrates is able to claim that it is his own way of life that best instantiates, and alone instantiated at that time, the features of “true politics” (521d7) such as challenging their appetites and undermining their misplaced confidence (producing “confusion” (*aporia*), like the doctor’s treatments do (521e8–522a1)), so as to make them as good as possible, as I have shown above.

This outline of how talk of “good oratory” and “true politics” features in the *Gorgias* indicates how the key passage should be understood.

SOCRATES: So this is what that skilled and good orator 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 to how justice may come to exist in the souls of his fellow citizens and injustice be gotten rid of, 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. Do you agree or not?

CALLICLES: I do.

(*Grg.* 504d5–e4)

In context, this is Socrates spelling out a distinction made by Callicles, between flattering oratory and good oratory, with a view to testing Callicles’ claim that there is a genuinely beneficial kind of oratorical practice. Callicles attempts to support this view by suggesting that some of the great statesmen of the past were of this kind. Socrates, on the other hand, will reject this view and claim that once we are clear on what it would take to count as “good oratory”, it is clear that such a practice does not exist – no orator past or present instantiates it. The conclusion is announced by Socrates at 516e9–517a6.

Given that this is how this passage functions in the argument of the dialogue, it seems simply a mistake to take it as a straightforward practical commendation by Socrates of a particular kind of public advocacy. To do so would be to ignore the context in which this passage comes. At best, we might say that, in setting out a set of features that would make a practice count as “good oratory”, it not only forms part of an explicit argument to the effect that there neither is nor has been in the past any such practice of public advocacy, but

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and see 522b7–c1) that they constitute unappreciated genuine benefits. His claim to be the city’s greatest benefactor is developed more extensively in the *Apology* esp. 29d2–30b4, 30d5–31c3, 36b3–37a1.

also implicitly invites reflection as to whether anything else might meet these criteria and so constitute a beneficial kind of “good oratory”. Perhaps there is some practice (whether as yet instantiated or not) that produces justice, self-control and excellence in the souls of citizens and gets rid of injustice, discipline and evil, and which does so by applying *logoi* (speeches, arguments) to people’s souls, by giving gifts, and by taking things away.<sup>14</sup> This passage does not assert *that* there is such a practice. But it perhaps can be seen as implicitly inviting reflection on *whether* there is, or could be. If so, we might notice that such an implication is entirely compatible with the second key claim of this paper, that for Socrates “good rhetoric”, as well as “true politics”, consists in the kind of philosophical conversation that he himself practises. He applies *logoi* to people’s souls, he gives the gift of stirring people up to seek virtue,<sup>15</sup> and he takes away injustice and the false conceit of knowledge. Nothing in this passage commits Socrates to recognising any beneficial activity beyond philosophy – the activity at the centre of his preferred option in the choice of lives.

When we attend to the organisation of the dialogue around the choice of lives between the life represented by Gorgias and that represented by Socrates, and to the precise ways in which phrases like “good rhetoric” and “true politics” are used, we find solid grounds for supposing that Socrates’ position on rhetoric and public advocacy in the *Gorgias* is continuous with the position of Socrates in the *Apology*, summarised in the twin claims that are the focus of this paper.

In the next section, I consider briefly the extent to which these claims need to be revised or qualified in the light of passages where Socrates appears to countenance certain valuable kinds of public speechmaking.

## 9 Possible Exceptions and Modifications

The first point to note is that, insofar as Socrates of the *Gorgias* is being seen as adopting the same stance towards public speechmaking as Socrates of the *Apology*, we should see this stance, summarised in the two claims above, as admitting of some exceptions. Most obviously, Socrates’ delivery of his defence speech at his own trial, the *Apology* itself, is precisely such an exception. Within

14 Socrates’ wording, “any gift he gives, *if he gives one*, or any confiscation he carries out, *if he takes anything away*”, (504d7–8) perhaps suggests that these are somehow more optional elements of good rhetoric. Whereas applying *logoi* to people’s souls and performing “actions” are not hedged around with caution in the same way.

15 Socrates explicitly describes himself as the god’s gift to his fellow citizens at *Apology* 30d7–e1.

the *Apology*, Socrates highlights that making a public speech like the one he is making is not his normal pattern of behaviour, and is in fact the kind of practice he had rejected, as a matter of policy.<sup>16</sup> Socrates' countenancing of some rather surprising uses of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* should, I suggest, be seen in precisely this light.

SOCRATES: So, if oratory is used to defend injustice, Polus, ... it is of no use to us at all, unless one takes it to be useful for the opposite purpose: that he should accuse himself first and foremost, and then too his family and anyone else dear to him who happens to behave unjustly at any time; and that he should not keep his wrongdoing hidden but bring it out into the open, so that he may pay his due and get well... He should be his own chief accuser, and the accuser of other members of his family, and use his oratory for the purpose of getting rid of the worst thing there is, injustice, as the unjust acts are being exposed.

• • •

And, on the other hand, to reverse the case, suppose a man had to harm someone, an enemy or anybody at all, provided that he didn't suffer anything unjust from this enemy himself—for this is something to be on guard against—if the enemy did something unjust against another person, then our man should see to it in every way, both in what he does and what he says, that his enemy does not go to the judge and pay his due. And if he does go, he should scheme to get his enemy off without paying what's due. If he's stolen a lot of gold, he should scheme to get him not to return it but to keep it and spend it in an unjust and godless way both on himself and his people. And if his crimes merit the death penalty, he should scheme to keep him from being executed, preferably never to die at all but to live forever in corruption, but failing that, to have him live as long as possible in that condition. Yes, this is the sort of thing I think oratory is useful for, Polus, since for the person who has no intention of behaving unjustly it doesn't seem to me to have much use—if in fact it has any use at all—since its usefulness hasn't in any way become apparent so far. (480b7–481b5)

The first question to consider is: what kind of “recommendation” is made in these passages of the practices they describe? It seems ambiguous. “If oratory

<sup>16</sup> See references in n. 5 above.

is used to defend injustice [in the way you might expect], it is useless, unless one takes it to be useful [in a different way]" (480b7–c1). And the final conclusion is equally ambiguous: "this is the sort of thing oratory is useful for ... if in fact it has any use at all—since its usefulness hasn't in any way become apparent so far" (481b1–5). The point seems to be that none of the normal uses of public advocacy are of value, and that *if public advocacy has any value at all*, it is in these strange, idiosyncratic kinds of ways. It is not that Socrates is insincere. His seriousness is strongly implied both immediately after this passage (481b6–9) and in the reference back to it at 508b3–7. It is just that these are marginal cases. Rhetoric is not generally beneficial to anyone, but Socrates concedes that he is able to conceive of some circumstances where it is beneficial. But these are rare: accusing yourself or your family and friends is an extremely unusual legal move<sup>17</sup> to start with, but Socrates highlights that even this is only a fallback strategy: a person's aim should be to avoid injustice in the first place; self-accusation becomes relevant only in those cases where one has failed to do so. So, the use of rhetoric to benefit someone is rare. Its valuable use as a way to harm someone is equally unusual: it is valuable only when it is necessary to harm someone, someone who has committed some injustice, and in circumstances where one can harm them without incurring greater injustice from them. In such circumstances, the use of rhetoric to prevent them from coming to justice would be valuable. These are convoluted possibilities. The second of them is not repeated when Socrates later refers back to this passage at 508b3–7. They may be sincerely meant, but they do not undercut, rather they serve to emphasise, Socrates' general position on the value of rhetoric. That is that rhetoric is useless, except when used in these bizarre and unusual ways.<sup>18</sup>

Does Socrates make a more general recommendation of an expertise in public advocacy, i.e. of rhetoric, at 508c1–3?

SOCRATES: We must either refute this argument ... or else, if this is true, we must consider what the consequences are. [*Various Socratic conclusions are then mentioned from earlier in the dialogue*], ... and that a person who is to be an orator the right way should be just and be knowledgeable in what is just, the point Polus in his turn claimed Gorgias to have agreed to out of shame. (508a8–b3, c1–3)

17 Its strangeness is famously part of the setup of the *Euthyphro*.

18 I am grateful to Ondřej Krása for discussion of these issues.

The answer is: no. This passage comes as part of Socrates' clarification of what would be involved in a beneficial activity in general, and in a beneficial kind of "good rhetoric" in particular. These are with a view to evaluating whether "good rhetoric" exists (now or in the past), and ultimately to determining which option to take in the choice of lives. The claim being made here is that what it would take to practice oratory "in the right way" ( $\delta\rho\theta\omega\varsigma$ , 508c1) includes being just and possessing knowledge of what is just. As Socrates points out, this is what Gorgias had been forced to agree earlier in the dialogue. But this simply serves to remind us of the problems this brings. Their being just and knowing what is just guarantees that the orator's exercise of their expertise will be beneficial. But it rules out the possibility of there being any such oratory in the real world. When Gorgias agrees that anyone who learns rhetoric must be just and know what is just, he runs into contradiction because this claim commits him to denying the obvious fact that orators sometimes do use rhetoric unjustly – a fact that he has already recognised.<sup>19</sup> Although in a sense this passage is a specification of "good oratory" and a commendation of it. It is not really in any sense a practicable commendation, because the conditions it specifies cannot realistically be met. As such, this passage is entirely compatible with the position ascribed to Socrates here.

These insights enable us to make sense of a remark very near the end of the dialogue. Socrates claims that his position "survives refutation and remains steady" (527b2–4), a position which includes his saying that "oratory and every other activity is always to be used in support of what's just." (527c3–4). This implies that oratory is "to be used" ( $\chi\rho\eta\sigma\tau\acute{\epsilon}\omicron\nu$ ). But the passages just discussed highlight the kinds of things that would fall within the scope of this commendation. Just as at 508c1–3, the idea might be that it specifies a condition for the valuable use of oratory, even if that condition is in practice impossible to meet. Or alternatively, it might be recapitulating the recognition from 480b7–481b5,

19 See Barney, "Gorgias' Defense", 104–6. The claim that a trained orator is just and knows what is just can of course be understood in a looser or a tighter sense. Gorgias plays on the ambiguity. He is responding to the charge that rhetoric is a dangerous activity, practised by those ignorant of justice, so as to make them falsely seem knowledgeable, on audiences that are equally ignorant (459c8–e8). It is no response to that charge to insist (as he breezily attempts to) that his pupils are people who, *in a loose, everyday sense* are just and know what is just (460a3–4). The refutation requires Socrates' tighter sense. Only this will yield a defence against the charge that his teaching of rhetoric is dangerous and irresponsible. And likewise here, "good rhetoric" requires that its practitioner be just and have knowledge of what is just in the tighter sense that guarantees that exercising such rhetoric will be beneficial and actually produce justice and virtue.

and 508b3–7 that there are some cases, albeit bizarre and unusual ones, where real-world public speechmaking can be undertaken justly.

## 10 The *Gorgias* as Viewed in Antiquity

The overall picture of Socrates' attitude towards public speechmaking in the *Gorgias* receives support from how the *Phaedrus* looks back on the arguments of the *Gorgias*. Plato's *Phaedrus* shows clear awareness of the (presumably earlier) *Gorgias*. Most obvious is the consideration given to the suggestion that rhetoric is an "artless practice" (ἄτεχνος τριβή).

SOCRATES: But could it be, my friend, that we have mocked the art of speaking more rudely than it deserves? For it might perhaps reply, "What bizarre nonsense! Look, I am not forcing anyone to learn how to make speeches without knowing the truth; on the contrary, my advice, for what it is worth, is to take me up only after mastering the truth. But I do make this boast: even someone who knows the truth couldn't produce conviction on the basis of a systematic art without me."

PHAEDRUS: Well, is that a fair reply?

SOCRATES: Yes, it is—if, that is, the arguments now advancing upon rhetoric testify that it is an art. For it seems to me as if I hear certain arguments approaching and protesting that that is a lie and that rhetoric is not an art but an artless practice. As the Spartan said, there is no genuine art of speaking without a grasp of truth, and there never will be. (*Phdr.* 260d3–e7)

The section preceding this passage follows Socrates of the *Gorgias* in rejecting the idea that there could be a valuable expertise practised by the ignorant on the ignorant. And here too the criticism considered, and seemingly rejected by Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, is that advanced in the *Gorgias* by Socrates against Polus and Gorgias, to support the rejection of rhetoric as disgraceful and untechnical. The *Phaedrus* shows Socrates developing a position in which he recognises a genuinely technical and valuable art of rhetoric, and some might imagine that this builds on Socrates' remarks about a true politics and good rhetoric in the *Gorgias*. But in fact the crucial move highlighted here – the recognition of a genuine art (τέχνη) of rhetoric – is nowhere defended in the *Gorgias*. In fact, the *Phaedrus* develops this supposed<sup>20</sup> rehabilitation of

20 It seems to me an open question whether the *Phaedrus* genuinely recommends anything that would be recognisable to us as "rhetoric". We should recognise the possibility that in



rhetoric without any reference to the earlier discussion of true politics in the *Gorgias*. Insofar as precedents are invoked, they are Pericles and Anaxagoras (269a6, 270a3–8), and the “dialecticians” (266b3–c1), where the latter’s dialectical expertise is explicitly distinguished from rhetoric.<sup>21</sup> Insofar as the *Phaedrus* refers back to the *Gorgias*, it is Socrates’ rejection of rhetoric that is in view. If our interpretation is correct, this is exactly what one would expect, since on this view, the rejection of rhetoric is not qualified or retracted – what is endorsed in its place is not rhetoric at all, but Socratic philosophical conversation.

The interpretation proposed here thus matches the way the *Gorgias* is viewed from the *Phaedrus*. But it also matches the way it is viewed from some other key perspectives in antiquity. A detailed exploration of the reception in antiquity of Socrates’ stance towards rhetoric within the *Gorgias* is beyond our scope here. But it is worth noting that in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, the principal Platonic text explicitly engaged with is the *Gorgias*,<sup>22</sup> and the references are to its rejection of rhetoric, not to any supposed rehabilitation of rhetoric or canvassing of “good rhetoric”. The principal Socratic views from the *Gorgias* to which Aristotle calls attention are the claim that rhetoric is the counterpart to pastry-baking, and the claim that it fails to be an expertise (τέχνη).<sup>23</sup> Likewise, when at the end of the *Sophistical Refutations* Aristotle catalogues his predecessors in developing an account of rhetorical expertise, Plato doesn’t even get a mention. That would be surprising if it were true that in both *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*, a foundation for a technical, valuable kind of rhetoric had been laid. But it is entirely what you would expect if the Platonic contribution was being viewed as consisting in the provision of arguments for the rejection of rhetoric. The case of the *Phaedrus* is more complicated.<sup>24</sup> But as far as the *Gorgias* is

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this dialogue too, Socrates’ recommendation for a good, technical kind of “rhetoric” turns out really to be a recommendation of his own conversational philosophical method, i.e. dialectic. Exploring the merits of this suggestion is beyond the scope of the present paper.

- 21 It is a reference to the use of dialectic in understanding the nature of things through the use of collection and division, rather than to any process of influencing the souls of others (*Phdr.* 265d3–266c1).
- 22 My suggestions of some passages that subtly engage with positions from the *Phaedrus* are offered in J. Dow, *Passions and Persuasion in Aristotle’s Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 79–82.
- 23 *Rh.* I 1, 1354a1, 7–11.
- 24 Aristotle’s explicit engagement with the *Phaedrus* is considerably less than his engagement with the *Gorgias*, for reasons we can only speculate about. But equally there are questions about whether the knowledge conditions set in the *Phaedrus* for the exercise of an expertise of rhetoric are ones that readers would have thought anybody could actually meet. And certainly, it is philosophical conversation that is recommended over speech-making (written or oral) in the concluding sections of the dialogue (see esp. 276e4–277a4).

concerned, Aristotle's omission of Plato from this list (despite his clear awareness of the content of the *Gorgias*) matches the interpretation proposed here. What is offered in the *Gorgias* is not a positive account of a valuable kind of rhetoric, but rather a series of challenges to which any positive account of rhetoric must answer, and if, as the evidence of the *Rhetoric* suggests, this is what Aristotle also sees, it provides no grounds for Plato's inclusion in his catalogue.

Socrates (presumably primarily Plato's Socrates) had a reputation later in antiquity as an opponent of rhetoric. In both his *Brutus* and the *De Oratore*, Cicero lists Socrates as an opponent of oratory: he opposed and refuted the teachers of oratory with "a certain subtlety of argumentation";<sup>25</sup> and he is listed as the "source and head" of the band of philosophers that reject the idea that rhetoric could convey knowledge or bring benefits to states or to humankind more generally.<sup>26</sup> This can only be a reference back to the *Gorgias*. And if in Cicero's day, the passages about good rhetoric and true politics were being read as offering support for anything recognisable as rhetoric, those passages were clearly being forgotten or ignored in the passages just mentioned. Much more likely is that the *Gorgias* was being understood along the lines proposed here – it does not recommend any kind of rhetoric or public speechmaking, but commends Socratic philosophical conversation instead.

Of course, the reception of the *Gorgias* is not unanimous about its rejection of rhetoric. Neoplatonists in particular came to adopt a much more positive view of rhetoric,<sup>27</sup> and interpreted the *Gorgias* as rejecting only a very specific approach to public speechmaking, and even as commending an alternative, valuable approach instead.<sup>28</sup> Whatever the overall merits of their view of rhetoric, the understanding of the *Gorgias* proposed here commits us to siding

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The *Phaedrus* certainly represents Socrates as making an explicit change in position on rhetoric from the position of Socrates in the *Gorgias*, but Socrates' overall stance in the *Phaedrus* towards public speechmaking is, at the very least, complex.

25 Cicero, *Brutus* 8,31.

26 Cicero, *De Oratore* I 42.

27 Yosef Z. Liebersohn, *The Dispute Concerning Rhetoric in Hellenistic Thought* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010) argues that from Arcesilaus or Carneades onwards, there was a philosophically-motivated rehabilitation of rhetoric within the Academy (36f. and references there).

28 Olympiodorus *In Plat. Gorg.* 1,13; 33,2–3; 41,11. See also *Olympiodorus: Commentary on Plato's Gorgias, translated with full notes*, ed. Robin Jackson, Harold Tarrant, and Kimon Lycos (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 17–20. Obviously, Olympiodorus's scheme owes much to Plato's *Statesman*, esp. 303e–304e, but it is noteworthy that whereas in Plato there is considerable hesitation over whether in fact rule by an ideal statesman is a real practical possibility, this seems in Olympiodorus to have become a genuinely viable option.

with Aristotle and Cicero against them on the interpretation of the *Gorgias* regarding Socrates' policy on public speechmaking.

## 11 Conclusion

This paper has defended a view that has gone surprisingly unarticulated in the scholarship on Plato's *Gorgias* – the view that Socrates in the *Gorgias* maintains the same stance towards rhetoric as the Socrates of Plato's *Apology*, i.e. wholesale rejection of rhetoric, and the championing in its place of philosophical conversation. Although in the *Gorgias*, the life and activity championed by Socrates is called “true politics” and, by implication, “good rhetoric”, what is being recommended is nothing like what would (then or now) be ordinarily recognised as rhetoric or political activity. As in the *Apology*, the claim is that this kind of philosophical conversation is in fact the best civic contribution a person can make, and the best deployment of speeches (λόγοι). This interpretation is unsurprising, since it simply mirrors what is clearly Socrates' position in the *Apology*, and what is clearly his way of life set out throughout the *Gorgias* itself. Perhaps it is little more than a statement of the obvious. But insofar as the question of what Socrates' “true politics” involves has even been considered in the scholarship, it has often been assumed instead to be some purified but recognisable form of political, public advocacy. This, I contend, is a mistake, and I urge a return to the simpler, more common-sense view.

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