

In Defense of Plato: A Short Polemic

Author(s): David Roochnik

Source: *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1991), pp. 153-158

Published by: [Penn State University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40237668>

Accessed: 20-08-2014 17:02 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Penn State University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Philosophy & Rhetoric*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

IN DEFENSE OF PLATO: A SHORT POLEMIC

David Roochnik

What follows is a brief, and frankly polemical, discussion of Brian Vickers' *In Defence of Rhetoric*.¹ This book has been well received by critics, including Arthur Quinn.² Although he has serious reservations about the latter portions of the book, Quinn concludes that "Vickers has produced a synthesis to which whole generations of students and scholars will be indebted."³ It is my hope that Quinn's prophesy turns out to be false.

Vickers states that the goal of his imposing book is "to remove the misapprehensions and prejudices that still affect our appreciation of rhetoric" (vii). In fact, this explicit announcement of purpose understates the actual intentions of *In Defence of Rhetoric (IDR)*. Its title is more informative: Vickers is a partisan who enters into the millennia old battle rhetoric has fought against its enemies. In Quinn's words, *IDR* "is a splendid historical polemic."⁴

IDR is hardly modest in its scope. It attempts to chronicle comprehensively the battles rhetoric has fought since antiquity. Vickers thus begins with a discussion of classical rhetoric which is followed by chapters with titles such as "Medieval Fragmentation," "Renaissance Reintegration," and "Rhetoric in the Modern Novel." Not content with an exhaustive account of the past, he closes with "Epilogue: the Future of Rhetoric."

As a strictly historical text *IDR* is valuable. There is a good deal of factual and bibliographical information compiled here to which many scholars will find it useful to refer. As a *defense* of rhetoric, however, *IDR* fails almost totally.

Despite the fact that *IDR* covers thousands of years, the battle Vickers is most concerned to fight is ultimately waged against a single opponent: Plato. "Plato's travesty of rhetoric influenced Kant, Croce, and continues to influence a majority of classicists and philosophers today" (viii). A long chapter is therefore devoted to "Plato's Attack on Rhetoric" (83–148) and a sizable portion of

another is titled “Responses to Plato” (149–178). This section of *IDR*, the only to which I shall respond, is central to Vickers’ argument because, as Quinn rightly puts it, “For Vickers all the most important attacks on rhetoric through the centuries are but a series of footnotes to Plato. Refute Plato and you have the basis for dealing with the others.”⁵

Clearly, then, if Vickers’ counter-attack on Plato fails, then his entire defense of rhetoric crumbles. I shall argue that not only does Vickers fail to discredit Plato’s treatment of rhetoric, but that he does not even seriously address it.

The following are the sorts of objections Vickers makes against the Platonic account of rhetoric:

(1) It is “biased to an extreme” (88). Plato makes defenders of rhetoric, such as Gorgias and Polus, into foolish incompetents (93) or straw men like Callicles (118). He distorts historical facts, such as the accomplishments of Themistocles (89) and falsifies the role rhetoric played in democratic Athens. In the *Gorgias*, for example, Socrates characterizes rhetoric as the ability to flatter the ignorant masses and as the tool of a tyrant. With this Plato has “of course . . . crudified the argument, for the power traditionally ascribed to rhetoric was not the unscrupulous power of the tyrant . . . but the power to influence decisions in open meetings” (99).

(2) Plato operates with a strict “binary” form of argumentation that ultimately becomes “constrictive” (127). Too-rigid dichotomies, such as knowledge/opinion, soul/body, health/sickness and finally philosophy/rhetoric, are examples of Plato’s “use of binary categories to privilege one pole and exclude the other” and represent his “favourite weapon throughout the *Gorgias*” (110). Even though he expresses some contempt for the work of Paul de Man and deconstruction in general (see 434–469), Vickers’ procedure here is actually similar.

(3) Plato’s arguments against rhetoric are bad. Socrates’ terms are ambiguous (116), his reasoning inconsistent (116), he does not justify his assumptions (117), “he makes up the rules as he goes along” (118), and he uses “verbal tricks” which “seem to reduce the contest to a farce” (100).

(4) Plato is an enemy of free speech and tolerance. His “utterly jaundiced view of rhetoric [and] politics” (107) is ethically reprehensible and in the late dialogues his “whole system has become rigidly authoritarian” (138). (Not surprisingly, Vickers begins his treatment of Plato with a quote from Popper’s *The Open Society*

and its Enemies [83].) By contrast, Sophists such as Protagoras, Gorgias, and Isocrates, i.e. the ancient defenders of rhetoric, advocated “a process of interaction in which the norms of justice and social order were worked out by those taking part” (123). They were flexible pragmatists and realists (124), true democrats, who “were ethically superior to [Plato]” (147).

I propose that these four objections are not substantiated by a close reading of Plato’s dialogues and are internally inconsistent.

How does Vickers reach his conclusions about Plato? First, he moves without hesitation from speaking about “Socrates,” the character who appears in the dialogues, to “Plato” the author. In other words, he utterly ignores the obvious fact that Plato wrote dialogues and therefore cast each of Socrates’ assertions into a specific dramatic context. Vickers thus uncritically adheres to the long, and unfortunate, interpretive tradition of simply isolating various arguments and statements from the dialogues without taking into account the situation in which they are made or the characters to whom they are addressed. That such a reductive procedure is performed by contemporary “analytical” philosophers is at least understandable; that it is followed by a noted scholar of rhetoric is shameful. I, with many other commentators, would argue that Plato, more than any other philosophical author, shows his character Socrates to be sensitive to the *kairos* and to fashion his responses with intense regard for the character of his interlocutors.

Socrates’ assertions, therefore, are far more complex than Vickers would have them. Indeed, it is possible that they themselves are thoroughly and self-consciously rhetorical, that at times even his apparently hostile remarks about rhetoric ironically undercut themselves.

Such a claim of course requires extensive substantiation which I cannot here provide. It is fair, however, to ask that Vickers consider such a possibility or at least list one of its many advocates (e.g., Strauss, Klein, Gadamer, Rosen, Griswold; to a lesser extent, Nussbaum, Kahn) in his bibliography. This he does not do. Instead, in his discussion of the *Gorgias* he relies almost exclusively on the work of Terence Irwin, one of the leading practitioners of the analytical school of Plato interpretation. Irwin, according to Vickers, “has given the text perhaps the most rigorous and sustained scrutiny it has ever received” (113). It is my view, which I cannot here defend, that since Irwin’s *Plato’s Moral Theory* (Oxford: 1977), as well as his commentary on the *Gorgias* (Oxford:

1979), utterly ignore the philosophical implications of the dialogue form and simply analyze arguments with no regard for the context in which they appear, they are anything but rigorous. They are, instead, one-sided distortions of the dialogues.

Even if I am wrong, however, it is astounding that Vickers offers almost no evidence to justify his encomium of Irwin. He certainly does not review the enormous amount of literature on the *Gorgias*, much of which would argue against Irwin, to validate his claim that Irwin's is the most sustained scrutiny the dialogue has ever received.

Vickers is solicitous of the reader new to Plato. For example, he begins his discussion of the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* by saying, "To the reader who does not know them it must be said at once that these are not . . . dispassionate evaluations of rhetoric's validity . . . but frank polemics against it" (84). But surely the reader new to Plato is ignorant of the secondary literature. One would expect, therefore, some indication that Irwin's commentary is just one among many. Instead, Vickers attempts to persuade his reader that Irwin is authoritative. For example, according to Vickers' count, Irwin discovers "some fifty places" (116) and "some eighty occasions" (117) where Socrates either is inconsistent or makes unjustified assumptions. In his footnotes to these claims, Vickers cites *only* the pages in Irwin's text and not the corresponding pages of the *Gorgias*. It is as if he is trying to give the impression that an Irwin page is a Stephanus page. In any case, he does not even pretend to analyze independently the many passages that Irwin dissects. (Quinn seems to fall victim to Vickers here when he says, "Vickers can list, for instance, eighty instances in the *Gorgias* alone where Plato makes unwarranted assumptions."⁶ The only way Vickers "can" do this is by citing Irwin.)

This procedure should be enough to deflate Vickers' criticism of Plato. His supercilious degradation of the complexities of the *Gorgias*, manifested by his attempt to canonize Terence Irwin, robs this, the crucial section of *IDR*, of any real force. This is not to imply that Plato's understanding of rhetoric is inviolate. It is only to say that the reader new to Plato knows no more about Plato than he or she did before opening *IDR*.

My second criticism of *IDR* is that it fails on internal grounds. Vickers accuses Plato of employing a strictly "bipolar" or "binary" form of logic in order "to paint rhetoric as black as possible" (118).

He aligns rhetoric with pleasure, disease, and ignorance, philosophy with the good, health and knowledge. Vickers objects: people cannot, for example, “be divided into such absolute categories as ‘those who know’ and ‘the ignorant’ ” (95). Perhaps this is true and Socrates’ dichotomies are exaggerated. The problem is that Vickers himself is an extremely dichotomous thinker. Plato is bad, i.e., intolerant, anti-democratic, unfair, unrealistic: the Sophists are good, i.e., tolerant, democratic, fair, realistic. Unlike the deconstructionists he criticizes, Vickers rather blithely reproduces the very logic he professes to disdain.

This same problem is found in Vickers’ accusation that Plato commits the “crime” of allowing “Socrates to make unjustified assumptions” (117). Does this imply that some assumptions can be justified? If so, then arguments can be hierarchically evaluated according to the degree that their assumptions are well justified. This begins to sound like old fashioned, bipolar, philosophizing. Vickers can’t have it both ways. He can’t object to bipolar thinking and then use it himself or turn it into a standard with which to criticize his enemy.

At one point in the Preface Vickers seems to distance himself from dichotomous thinking: “I regard such controversies between rhetoric and philosophy as pointless” (viii). This is quite unconvincing coming from a man who writes long and impassioned chapters that explicitly enter into such controversies.

Vickers ends his chapter “Philosophy versus Rhetoric” with this:

Truth is relative, as all important concepts and values are relative, their exact nature being the individual’s task to discover or ratify for himself . . . any one in search of objective truths in a world after Nietzsche, Husserl, and Popper, say, is doomed to a dusty answer . . . we have now reached a stage in which relativism can be defended . . . an honest admission that . . . the acts of perceiving the world, interpreting its signs, evaluating its actions, are all irremediably personal. (211)

This tirade is maddening. Aside from the fact that one of his examples, Husserl, surely was a firm believer in some sort of “objective truth,” and another, Popper, had a far more complex doctrine on this issue than Vickers suggests, the same problem of internal coherence arises. Let’s say that truth and values are relative. If so, then proponents of relativism have two choices. First, they can attempt to provide an extensive defense for their views. If

they succeed, then they win the right to criticize those, like Plato, who disagree. Such a strategy may be possible, but it will always run the obvious risk of refuting itself. Second, they can behave like real relativists and refrain from making “absolute” judgments. If values are relative, then Plato is surely no worse or better than Isocrates. Vickers takes neither tack. He merely, but confidently, asserts that relativism is true *and* he offers “a sustained argument on behalf of rhetoric itself”.⁷

IDR fails. It is entirely possible that Plato’s attack on the sophists can be rebutted and that rhetoric can be defended from those philosophers who would wish it away. But because of its failure to read the dialogues seriously, because of its excessive dependence on the one-sided views of Terence Irwin, and because of its internal incoherence, *IDR* simply does not do justice to this time-honored and entirely noble battle. As Quinn has observed, Vickers’ critique of Plato is the basis of his polemic on behalf of rhetoric. Unfortunately, this means that, like so many failed strategies of defense, the fortress that *IDR* constructs around rhetoric is porous to an extreme, and is just waiting to be overwhelmed.

Notes

1. Brian Vickers. *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). All references to this work will be in parentheses.
2. Quinn’s review of Vickers appeared in *Rhetorica* 8(1989), pp. 291–294.
3. Quinn, p. 294.
4. Quinn, p. 291.
5. Quinn, p. 291. See *IDR*, pg. 179 for a comparable statement.
6. Quinn, p. 292.
7. Quinn, p. 291.