

Socrates' Rhetorical Attack on Rhetoric

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The standard story is this: Plato the philosopher is the mortal enemy of rhetoric, which he condemns on both epistemic and ethical grounds. The philosopher denies that rhetoric is real knowledge: since it is not a legitimate *technē*, its teachers are frauds. Furthermore, he accuses it of being ethically bankrupt: it aims only to gratify the ignorant many and enhance the power of its expert practitioners. By contrast, Plato champions a purified rationalism and aims for Knowledge of The Changeless Good. His Philosopher is impervious to and contemptuous of the ephemeral contingencies of ordinary life. The line between Platonism and rhetoric, according to this story, could not be more sharply drawn.¹

A pivotal text invoked by proponents of the standard story is *Gorgias* 462a-466a, where, in his argument against Polus, Socrates seems to level both these charges against rhetoric. It is, he says, not a *technē*, but only an *empeiria* and *tribē* (462c, 463b), a knack based on experience. Furthermore, as a species of flattery that aims for the production of gratification and pleasure (462b),

1. Brian Vickers, in his *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) is both a good representative of the standard story, as well as a useful guide to the literature. There have, of course, been numerous rebuttals of the standard view. See, for example, Livio Rossetti, "The Rhetoric of Socrates," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 22 (1989): 225-238, for a representative view as well as a brief survey of some nonstandard literature.

rhetoric is ethically degenerate as well (463b, 501b).

This passage has galvanized the supporters of rhetoric for centuries and so the two prongs of the attack have each met with numerous responses. In antiquity, Cicero, Quintilian, Philodemus, and Aristides all explicitly offered vigorous rebuttals to the Socratic charges, and as recently as 1988 Brian Vickers did the same in his forceful defense of rhetoric.²

I will argue that the standard story is flawed because *Gorgias* 462a-466a has been read out of context. More specifically, it is flawed because the standard reading fails to take into account the fact that the *Gorgias*, like virtually all of Plato's work, is a *dialogue*. If this passage is considered within the larger framework of the dialogue as a whole, it can be shown that Plato's hostility to rhetoric is ambiguous, and the line drawn between rhetoric and philosophy is not nearly as sharp as most commentators think.

1.

First, to the *locus classicus* of the "old quarrel" between rhetoric and philosophy, the debate between Socrates and Polus. Polus begins by complaining that Socrates has unfairly refuted his teacher, Gorgias. Gorgias, Polus says, was shamed into admitting that "the rhetorical man" both knows and teaches what is just and fine and good (461b), and this is what led him to contradict himself. After all, who could possibly deny that he both knows what is right and fine and good, and is willing to share such knowledge with those who do not? Polus's point is that if Gorgias had refrained from making such a claim about teaching "virtue," he could have saved himself from refutation.³ In a formal sense, Polus's diagnosis of the argument is accurate, for it was Gorgias's admission that he could and would teach what is right and fine and good (at 460a) that eventually led him to contradict himself. The contradiction arises because Gorgias had earlier stated (456d-457c) that rhetoric is like boxing; it is indifferent to, and not responsible for, the uses to which it is put by its students. Since "use" represents the domain of human value, rhetoric is "value-neutral," a statement that directly contradicts what Gorgias says at 460a.

As we will see in Part II below, while Polus may be right in a strictly formal sense in locating the contradiction, he is far from diagnosing the real

2. See Cicero, *De Oratore*, Book I, Quintilian, *Institutio*, II.xviii., Aristides, *In Defense of Rhetoric*, each of which has been published in the Loeb series. For Philodemus, see *The Rhetorica of Philodemus*, trans. Harry Hubbell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920). See also Brian Vickers, *In Defense of Rhetoric*.

3. The historical Gorgias apparently did not claim to teach virtue. See *Meno*, 95c. (Throughout I have used Burnet's Oxford edition of Plato. Translations are my own.)

cause of his teacher's demise.

After persuading him to refrain from long speeches and to engage instead in question and answer, Socrates invites Polus to ask the first question. Polus complies: "What do you say that [rhetoric] is?" he asks (462b). Rather than answering, however, Socrates reformulates the question: "Are you asking what *techne* I say that it is?" (462b). Polus agrees to the reformulation.

It is important to note that, precisely as he did at the very beginning of the dialogue (447c-448b), it is Socrates who here seems to assume that rhetoric is a *techne* (a critical point I will discuss at length shortly). Here with Polus, however, Socrates seems to retract the assumption immediately upon asserting it: rhetoric is not a *techne* at all, he says, but merely an *empeiria* that produces gratification and pleasure (462c). In order to clarify, Socrates compares rhetoric to cooking. It too is not a *techne* but an *empeiria* for producing gratification and pleasure (462d). Both rhetoric and cooking, neither of which "has any share in what is fine," (463a), belong (together with sophistry and cosmetics) to the category of "flattery."

[Rhetoric] seems to me, Gorgias, not to be a technical practice (*epitēdeuma technikon*), but instead a quality of an intuitive and manly psyche, one that is clever by nature in dealing with human beings. In general I call it flattery (463a).

What exactly is "flattery?" To explain, Socrates offers the following scheme:

	BODY	
Apparently Good Condition		Good Condition
Flattery		Therapeutic <i>Techne</i>
Cooking Cosmetics		Medicine Gymnastics
	PSYCHE	
Apparently Good Condition		Good Condition
Flattery		Political <i>Techne</i>
Rhetoric Sophistry		Justice Legislation

Socrates asserts, but does not prove, that both body and psyche have an inherently good condition (*euexia*: 464a2) that can be securely known and towards which body and psyche each can be moved. Four *technai*—medicine and gymnastic for the body, justice and legislation for the psyche—know the good condition of their objects and can move them toward it. The pairs medicine/justice and gymnastic/legislation differ in that the former correct deficiencies and return their objects to their *euexia*, while the latter create abidingly good and stable conditions. In contrast to these genuine *technai*, flattery:

perceives, I do not say that it knows but that it intuits (*stochasmenē*), that there are four branches [of *technē*] that always exercise their objects, namely the body and the psyche, toward what is best, and then it [flattery] divides the parts, pretending that it is that which it has insinuated itself into. It does not care at all for what is best, but it always hunts out foolishness by saying what is most pleasant and it deceives those who are foolish by making it seem as if it is the most valuable thing of all (464d).

A cook, for example, may pretend that he is a doctor and say that a cookie is good for the stomach.⁴ The cookie is delicious and hard to resist. Since the cook merely gratifies his audience without contributing to the actual excellence of their bodies, he is like the rhetorician.

The entire scheme can be expressed "geometrically": as cosmetics is to gymnastic, so sophistry is to legislation, and as cooking is to medicine, so rhetoric is to justice (465c). With such a scheme in place, Socrates can condemn the forms of flattery as shameful.

Flattery, I call it, and I state that such a thing is shameful, Polus—for I'm saying this to you—because it intuits what is pleasant without the best. And I say that it is not a *technē*, but an *empeiria* because it has no account (*logos*) of the things it applies, what sort of nature they are, and so it cannot state the cause (*aitia*) of each thing. I refuse to call anything that is irrational (*alogon*) a *technē* (465a).

The intent of the passage seems obvious: to condemn rhetoric. The particulars of the charge, however, are surprisingly ambiguous. First, exactly why, according to Socrates, is rhetoric shameful? Because it is not a *technē*. But why is it not a *technē*? Because it intuits what is pleasant and does not know the appropriate *euexia* of the psyche. But where does the emphasis in the charge lie? On the fact that rhetoric aims for the pleasant without the good, or on the fact that it is only "stochastic," i.e., epistemically deficient? Even the first sentence of the passage cited above is ambiguous: rhetoric is shameful because it "intuits" (*stochazetai*) the pleasant without the good. But is it shameful because it merely intuits, or because its end is pleasure and not the good?

The key point is this: the *locus classicus* of Plato's attack on rhetoric is two-pronged and comprises both an epistemic and ethical dimension.⁵ There is,

4. It is hard to imagine a cook actually doing this. Terence Irwin, in his commentary on the *Gorgias* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), says, "But surely Socrates is wrong to say that cookery pretends to offer healthy food" (134).

5. The two prongs of Socrates's objection to rhetoric became enshrined, I believe, in the standard Stoic definition of a *technē* (as reported by Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors*, II.10): "every *technē* is a body (*sustēma*) consisting of items of knowledge which are mutually cohesive and having reference to one of the ends which are useful

however, no obvious connection between the two prongs. The latter part of the passage cited above (465a6-8) seems strictly epistemic (and quite Aristotelian):⁶ the various branches of flattery are not *technai* because they cannot give a *logos* of the *aitia*. Does this inability make rhetoric shameful? Not in itself, for that would imply that anything that is not a *technē* is shameful. A child's ability to walk is surely not a *technē*, but it is hardly to be blamed for that. Why, then, does rhetoric's "irrational" (*alogon*: 465a6) and therefore "nontechnical" character make it shameful? Presumably because the rhetorician, unlike the child, lies: he pretends to possess a *technē* while in fact he only has an "image" (*eidolon*: 463d) of it.

Second, rhetoric is condemned on ethical grounds for aiming at the pleasant rather than the good. But is this aim in itself a matter for blame? Only given certain assumptions. If, for example, the rhetor aims *only* for pleasure, and if pleasure is totally divorced from the good, then he could be fairly blamed. But if "what is pleasantest over all is also best over all," then "if the rhetor aims at what is pleasantest, will he not aim at what is best over all?"⁷ In other words, Socrates does not make it clear why aiming for pleasure is in itself shameful.

Third, Socrates seems to assume here that *because* rhetoric aims for the pleasant rather than the good, it cannot be a *technē*. He seems to assume that there can be no *technē* of or aiming for pleasure.⁸ But why? Why can't there be a *technē* of cooking or cosmetics whose goal is pleasure? Such a goal would be quite different from that of medicine or gymnastic, but why can't the cook or "cosmetologist" apply real knowledge?

Finally, Socrates's scheme asserts that all *technai* aim for the *euexia* of their objects. But the *euexia* of the body, the goal and epistemic content of medicine and gymnastic, seems quite different from that of the psyche, the goal of legislation and justice. Medicine is concerned with the proper *functioning* of the body and unconcerned with whether the well-functioning body is used to perform just or unjust actions (see 456d). As such, it is strictly a value-neutral affair. By contrast, the good condition of the psyche, and therefore the *technai* of justice and legislation, are by definition value-laden. What, then, are we to make of the single word *euexia* being used to label two apparently different conceptions? Does Socrates simply assume that values are a matter of fact that can be straightforwardly known? Does he think that the psychic *euexia* is, like that of the body, something fixed and stable and thus easily apprehended by

in life." The translation is that of Jonathan Barnes, in his "Is Rhetoric an Art?" *DARG NEWSLETTER* 2 (1986): 5.

6. See Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, I.1.

7. Irwin, *Plato's Gorgias*, 135.

8. See Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1152b18 for this point.

a *techne*? Or, conversely, does he think that every *techne*, even that aiming only for the proper, but value-neutral, functioning of the body, is, or at least aims for the, good?

To summarize: *Gorgias* 462a-466a, the *locus classicus* of Plato's putative assault on rhetoric, raises several questions: what is the relationship between being epistemically deficient and aiming for pleasure? Why can't there be a *techne* of or aiming for pleasure? Is the *euexia* of the psyche as fixed and stable, and therefore as straightforwardly aimed at, as that of the body? In general, there is a tension between the two prongs of Socrates's attack against rhetoric, the ethical and the epistemic, that the passage itself does not explicitly resolve or even address.

Perhaps there is an implicit resolution. Assume (as Socrates does in the *Philebus* at 27e ff.) that pleasure is inherently indeterminate. This might be true in two senses. First, people experience pleasure in an indefinite and unpredictable variety of ways and second, pleasure and pain form a continuum that can (in the language of the *Philebus*) always admit of "the more and the less" (24a). Pleasure offers no fixed, stable, and epistemically reliable standard at which to aim. Assume further that a *techne* is a rigorous form of knowledge with a determinate subject matter.⁹ If so, it follows that there can be no *techne* of or aiming for pleasure, and if rhetoric indeed aims to produce pleasure, it cannot be a *techne*.¹⁰

Such an implicit resolution, even if accurate, would only address one of the ambiguities provoked by the passage: it would explain why there can't be a *techne* of pleasure. But it would not explain why aiming for pleasure is shameful. Again, presumably the reason that flattery in general and rhetoric in particular are shameful is not simply that they aim for pleasure, but because they lie: they pretend to be *technai* when in fact, because of the indeterminate nature of their subject matter (i.e., pleasure), they are not.

It must be remembered, however, that (in the *Gorgias* at least) it is neither rhetoric nor its representatives that do the lying: it is none other than Socrates, the truth-loving philosopher himself who, in the course of debating both Polus and Gorgias, invites them, indeed pressures them, into making the claim that rhetoric is a *techne*. This is a vital point to which I will return shortly.

9. This would have been a rather traditional sense of *techne* in Plato's time. See F. Heinemann, "Eine vorplatonische Theorie der *Techné*," *Museum Helveticum* 18 (1961): 105-130.

10. E.R. Dodds makes this point in his commentary to the *Gorgias* (Oxford University Press, 1959). The pleasant, he says, is not "in each case rationally determinable" (229). J. C. B. Gosling, in his commentary on the *Philebus* (Oxford University Press, 1975) puts the same point this way: "They [*emperiai* like rhetoric] fail to be *technai* because no general account can be (or at least is) given of what pleases people, and so there are no general canons for ensuring success" (153).

The implicit resolution offered above, namely that pleasure is indeterminate and therefore cannot be a legitimate object of a *techne*, does not address another implicit but significant question: is the *euexia* of the psyche itself determinate? Since, according to Socrates's scheme, it is an object of a *techne*, presumably it is. But, as mentioned above, this would imply that the value-laden *euexia* of the psyche is as stable and as epistemically reliable as that of the body. At the very least, this assumption requires defense.¹¹

There is a related problem. As Dodds points out, there is no place for the individual psyche in Socrates's scheme.¹² This is all the more puzzling since the individual psyche would seem to be the natural correlate to individual body. A question must thus be asked: even if the *euexia* of the psyche "writ large," i.e., the *polis*, is determinate, is that true of the individual psyche as well? In Aristotelian terms, can both ethics and politics be rendered technical? *Gorgias* 464a would seem to assert yes to the latter. But can there be a *techne* whose subject matter is the *euexia* of the individual psyche? Would such a *techne* be philosophy?

It should be clear that there is considerable ambiguity in Socrates's charges against rhetoric. Is this a consequence of Plato's carelessness?¹³ Or can the ambiguities of the passage be shown to fit coherently into the larger pattern of the dialogue as a whole? I think the latter.

2.

Consider one of the most striking but least commented upon facts about the *Gorgias*: while it is true that Socrates denies that rhetoric is a *techne* in his argument against Polus; he asserts that it is a *techne* in his argument against Gorgias. In fact, this assertion proves to be *essential* to his argument.

At the outset of the dialogue, when Callicles invites him to listen to one of Gorgias's famous displays, Socrates responds, "I want to find out from him what the power of the man's *techne* is and what it is he professes and teaches" (447c). Callicles says that Gorgias will answer this question; after all, the great rhetorician boasts that he can answer "every" (*hapanta*) question. With this boast, the principal issue discussed above is broached: Gorgias can answer every question; his subject matter is somehow "everything" and as such is

11. It is in the discussion between Socrates and Callicles that, I believe, the answer to the question of the determinateness of the psyche emerges. In a future paper, I will develop this theme.

12. Dodds, *Plato's Gorgias*, 227.

13. Vickers relies heavily on Irwin, and he relishes every opportunity to criticize Plato. See *In Defence of Rhetoric*, 83-147.

indeterminate.¹⁴ Socrates, however, refuses to allow Gorgias to rest content with such a claim; he demands that he identify a specific subject matter for his profession of rhetoric. This demand, which shapes the entire argument with Gorgias, is a consequence of Socrates's initial characterization of rhetoric as a *techne*, a move that he makes early in the dialogue. Consider this: when instructing Chaerephon as to what he should ask Polus, Socrates tells him to find out "who he [Gorgias] is?" Chaerephon does not understand this question. Socrates illustrates by example: if you were to ask a shoemaker who he is, he would answer a "shoemaker." Now Chaerephon understands and he dutifully asks, "if Gorgias happened to be knowledgeable about the *techne* in which his brother Herodicus is knowledgeable, what would we rightly call him?" (448b). The answer is a doctor.

With these remarks, Socrates foists the "techne analogy" upon the rhetorician. In other words, he implies that as the doctor is to medicine, so Gorgias is to X. But what is the X? Rhetoric. But what is rhetoric? Medicine has a specific subject matter, the health of the body, which determines what medicine is and renders it unique among the *technai*. According to the dictates of the analogy, then, rhetoric must also be able to identify such a subject matter. Socrates's strategy is now clear. He wants Gorgias to identify a particular, that is, determinate, subject matter for rhetoric. Towards that end he repeatedly asks variations on the question, "About what (*peri ti*: 449d1) is rhetoric?"

Gorgias's first answer is, it is "about speeches" (*logoi*: 449d8.) Socrates, however, immediately negates this response. After all, other *technai* also make speeches. The question is, speeches about what? Gorgias's next three answers are (I paraphrase), rhetoric has a subject matter that, unlike others, is purely a matter of *logos* (450b); it is about the greatest of all affairs (451d); it is the ability to persuade (452e). In each case, Socrates shows that Gorgias's answers fail to describe rhetoric in terms that are sufficiently unique to identify and distinguish it. Other *technai*, notably mathematics, also have subjects that are a matter of pure *logos* (450d); all *technai* seem to evaluate themselves as positively as Gorgias evaluates rhetoric (452a-c); all *technai*, insofar as they teach, also persuade (453d-454b).

The rhetorician resists delimiting his subject matter. This was foreshadowed in Gorgias's boast that he can answer *every* question: the ability of the rhetor is unrestricted. His is a power that embraces within it all powers; he is able, for example, to persuade those untouched by the arguments of normal technicians (456a-c). As such, rhetoric seems to be, says Socrates, "something daimonic" (456a6). But if the rhetor has this daimonic power to talk about

14. Quintilian comments favorably upon Gorgias's boast: see II.xxi.21. Book I of Cicero's *De Oratore* makes much the same claim.

everything to everyone, how can rhetoric be a *techne*? He who possesses a *techne* is a *technitēs*, an expert, and no one can be an expert in everything. It is because of this need to identify himself as an expert, i.e., it is because of the *techne* analogy foisted on the argument by Socrates, that Gorgias is eventually pressured into claiming that the object of his expertise is "the just and the unjust" (454b; see also 460a).

As discussed in Part I, this claim dooms him because Gorgias has already stated that rhetoric is like boxing. If a teacher teaches a student how to box, and the student then uses his knowledge unjustly, neither the teacher nor the *techne* ought to be blamed, for they are indifferent to and not responsible for the good or bad applications of the *techne*. In this sense, rhetoric, as a *techne*, is application- or value-neutral, and Gorgias has contradicted himself.

As also mentioned in Part I, when Polus claims that Gorgias was shamed into asserting that he teaches virtue, he was only partially correct in diagnosing the cause of his teacher's demise. The real impetus behind the refutation, as we can now see, is Socrates's use of the analogy, as medicine is to the health of the human body, so rhetoric is to an X that is as determinate as health. In other words, the presupposition that *rhetoric is a techne* is essential to the refutation of Gorgias. The opposite assumption, however, namely that *rhetoric is not a techne*, governs the refutation of Polus. Which is it? If, in fact, rhetoric is not a *techne*, what sense can we make of the refutation of Gorgias, which presupposes that it is?

One answer is that the Socrates/Gorgias debate constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum*. From his initial assumption that rhetoric is a *techne*, Socrates generates a contradiction. This leads to the negation of the assumption, i.e., the proposition that rhetoric is not a *techne*, which then becomes the first premise Socrates uses in his argument against Polus (as well as his sincere belief).¹⁵

This is a very plausible interpretation, but does not fully explain why Socrates insists that Gorgias claim to possess a *techne*. Why does he foist what he takes to be a false statement—rhetoric is a *techne*—on his opponent? The obvious answer, i.e., the one that straightforwardly accounts for the "action" of the dialogue, is *in order to refute him*. Socrates demands of Gorgias, who claims that he can answer "every" question, that rhetoric be formulated as a *techne* with a specific subject matter. Doing this forces Gorgias to identify

15. This was suggested to me by Professor Francisco Gonzalez. Another resolution to this problem is to describe Socrates's arguments against Gorgias and Polus as a destructive dilemma. The first assumes that rhetoric is a *techne*, and ends in a contradiction. The second assumes that rhetoric is not a *techne*, and ends in a criticism of rhetoric. Rhetoric is either a *techne* or it is not a *techne*; in either case, it is in trouble.

precisely what it is he professes to know. Once this identification is made, Socrates can examine and evaluate his opponent's claim. At the very least, then, it is immensely helpful for the philosopher *if* the rhetorician asserts that he has a *techne*. To reiterate, once Gorgias does this, Socrates can refer to the specific subject matter that belongs to the *techne* ("the just and fine and good" [461b]), and then use it as a standard by which to measure and finally refute his opponent's knowledge claim.

There is more behind Socrates's perplexing use of the *techne* analogy than his desire to refute his opponent. The above, however, should suffice to show that his refutation of rhetoric is problematic. By using the *techne* analogy against Gorgias, he seems to invite the rhetorician to make a statement that he knows is false, and to do so because it is to his advantage. When arguing against Polus, Socrates follows an entirely different strategy. Simply put, then, Socrates speaks differently to different people. It might even be said that he wields the *techne* analogy as something like a rhetorical device. If this is correct, then the confidence with which the standard story draws a sharp line between Platonic philosophy and rhetoric, and declares them to be diametrical opposites, is misplaced.

There is another quite tempting way in which proponents of the standard story often draw the distinction between rhetoric and philosophy: the philosopher aspires to transform knowledge of the human good into a *techne* and thereby to render human affairs determinate and rationally controllable. By contrast, the rhetorician affirms, even celebrates, the indeterminate, the contingent, and the unpredictable. Like an open hand, he welcomes all comers and applauds all the many goods embraced by all the many human beings; he is willing to talk about everything. The philosopher is like the closed fist, grasping firmly—that is, technically—his conceptual content, namely *the* determinate good.¹⁶

But does Plato actually recommend that moral knowledge be transformed into a *techne*? Does he advocate the firm fist? This is hardly obvious in the *Gorgias*. First, as evidenced by his conversation with Gorgias, Socrates is not quite firm even on the question, Is rhetoric a *techne*? If philosophy is (or should become) a *techne*, then it should be able to identify that form of flattery that imitates it. The carpenter knows and will confidently assert that the child playing with a hammer does not share his *techne*. But against Gorgias, Socrates does not make an analogous denunciation of rhetoric.

Second, there is the glaring absence of the individual psyche in Socrates's

16. This famous image is Zeno's and is cited by Quintilian at II.xx.7. The view presented here is well articulated by Martha Nussbaum in "The Protagoras: A Science of Practical Reasoning," in *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

geometrical scheme depicting the forms of flattery. If philosophy is or should become a *techne*, presumably this is what its subject matter would be. Its absence, therefore, is perhaps designed to cause the reader to wonder whether the individual psyche can in fact be stabilized or rendered determinate enough to become the subject matter of a *techne*.¹⁷ Perhaps this is true as well for the psyche "writ large," i.e., the *polis*. Even if it is present on the scheme as the subject matter of legislation and justice, there is the tacit, but problematic, assumption that the *euxia* of (the political) psyche is as stable and as straightforwardly apprehended as that of the body.

Third, in an important sense Socrates is similar to Gorgias. While Gorgias offers to field, and presumably answer, all questions, Socrates spends his days wandering the agora, asking all sorts of questions. It is, quite simply, very difficult to identify Socrates's determinate field of expertise. It is, as his interlocutors well know, difficult to force Socrates to provide straightforward answers even to the questions he himself raises (such as, Is rhetoric a *techne*?). And what else is a *techne* if not a series of straightforward answers?

Considerations such as these should militate against the standard view that Plato conceived of knowledge (specifically, moral knowledge) as strictly analogous to a *techne*, and that this conception is *the* critical difference between him and the rhetoricians.¹⁸ At the same time, however, these considerations might seem to fly in the face of Socrates's startling assertion at 521d: "I think I am one of the few Athenians, if not the only one, who really attempts (*epicheirein*) the political *techne*." Two responses: Socrates does not say that he actually possesses a *techne*, but that he "attempts" one. *Techne* may well be a kind of ideal at which the philosopher aims, but to aim for is not the same as to possess. Second, I suggest that Socrates' assertion may well be a kind of *reductio*. In other words, if, of all people, Socrates is the only Athenian to attempt the political *techne*, that might be good evidence that no one actually possesses such a *techne*. Socrates, after all, spends his days "whispering in a corner with three or four lads" (485d), rather than fighting in the Assembly for the views he advocates. In sum, it simply is not clear that the stark and standard opposition (embraced by philosophers and rhetoricians alike)—rhetoric (bad [or good], indeterminate, nontechnical, open) versus philosophy (good [or bad], determinate, technical, closed) is viable. As a

17. Dodds fails to explain the absence of the individual psyche. He only refers to Plato's "deeply held conviction that the basic task of the statesman is educational" (*Plato's Gorgias*, 227).

18. The standard reading typically assigns this conception of moral knowledge only to the early Plato. Again, it is well articulated by Martha Nussbaum in *The Fragility of Goodness*. For a competing position see David Roochnik, "Socrates's Use of the *Techne*-Analogy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 24 (1986): 295-310.

result, then, far from being two manifestly different activities, rhetoric and philosophy actually become quite difficult to distinguish. I propose that simply understanding that this task is difficult is a significant advance beyond the standard story. To conclude this paper, I suggest in somewhat general and speculative terms how, in the absence of the straightforward diametrical opposition, the distinction between rhetoric and philosophy can be conceived.

A single concept has lurked behind Socrates's refutations of Polus and Gorgias: that of determinacy. Implied by the scheme used against Polus, the point seems to be that since pleasure is the goal of rhetoric, and pleasure is indeterminate, rhetoric cannot be a *techne*. It is precisely this feature of a *techne*, namely that it has a determinate subject matter, that Socrates exploits when he uses the *techne* analogy against Gorgias. There he attempts to identify and thus make refutable Gorgias's otherwise vague and hence irrefutable claim to teach the "daimonic" power of all powers. In both cases, Socrates puts the notion of *techne*, and therefore its foundational concept, *determinacy*, to good use. Specifically, he uses it to refute his opponents.

There is another sense in which the philosopher finds the *techne* analogy useful. Against Polus, Socrates draws a geometrical scheme—as cooking is to medicine, so rhetoric is to justice—not only to locate rhetoric, but also to denigrate it by showing its place in a hierarchy. But in much the same way as he does with the "divided line" of the *Republic*, by drawing such a hierarchical scheme, he exhorts his listeners to seek its pinnacle. In short, Socrates uses the analogy both to negate and affirm: to negate the claim of the rhetorician to have a *techne*, and to exhort the uncommitted listener to seek knowledge of the good. Neither use implies that the philosopher himself possesses a *techne* with a determinate subject matter. Instead, they imply that he thinks determinacy, the notion that undergirds his use of the *techne* analogy, is useful and good.

By contrast, the rhetorician's view of determinacy is almost reversed. On the one hand, he praises indeterminacy. He boasts of his ability to talk about "everything," he praises *doxa* and democracy, he affirms contingency and change, and insists that his speeches are situated within the specific circumstances from which they emerge.¹⁹ On the other hand, he claims to have so sufficiently gained specific expertise that he can teach students and, very significantly, charge a large tuition. This claim implies that rhetoric is in some sense a *techne*, which, after all, is the paradigmatic form of teachable

19. Neither Gorgias nor Polus actually makes many of these claims, but their defenders regularly have. An excellent exposition of this view of rhetoric can be found in Stanley Fish, "Rhetoric," in *Doing What Comes Naturally* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989).

knowledge.²⁰ But how can the indeterminate "everything" be sufficiently delimited to function as the subject matter of a legitimate and teachable *techne*? This is, I would argue, the fundamental epistemic problem that has never ceased to haunt the rhetorical tradition.²¹

Socrates claims no *techne*. He lives in the midst of indeterminacy, wandering the agora, picking up conversations as he happens along. But he praises determinacy and evaluates it positively; he is animated by the goal of rigorous knowledge when he describes himself as the only Athenian to "attempt" the political *techne*. There is thus a tension within Socrates's attitude towards *techne*. This tension is, I suggest, extremely illuminating, so much so that it can help to account for the fact that Plato chose the dialogue form to express his thinking.

As an imitation of characters both speaking and acting, a dialogue is infused with indeterminacy and the irremediable particularities of the human speeches and deeds that it imitates. Socrates does not, for example, offer a theoretical refutation of rhetoric. Instead, he argues against Gorgias at a very particular time and place. Because the dialogue is written thus, the reader can never extract any single argument Socrates might happen to make and then declare it "Platonic." The argument may well be tailored to meet the dialogical needs generated by the particular context in which it is spoken. A good example is Socrates's vacillation on the question, *Is rhetoric a techne? Against Gorgias*, the answer, at least initially, seems to be yes. Against Polus, the answer is unambiguously no.

Socrates's positive evaluation of determinacy, clarity, intelligibility, and *techne* is thus inextricably situated within the contingencies of the life that is the dialogical context from which they are spoken. From within that turmoil, the philosopher makes determinacy and *techne* look good and seems to offer them as the final goal of inquiry.²² But Plato never allows that desire to be completed. Simply put, he never writes a treatise or a *techne*. He only writes dialogues.

Like the good rhetor, Socrates speaks differently to different people and thereby himself manifests "an intuitive and manly psyche, one that is clever

20. See F. Heinemann, "Eine vorplatonische Theorie der *Techne*," for this point.

21. Two examples of ancient rhetoricians treating this problem are Cicero in Book I of *De Oratore* and Quintilian in Book II.xvii-xxi of *Institutio*. For a contemporary update, see Renato Barilli, *Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), viii-xi.

22. A crucial line for my interpretation is found at 508a, where Socrates claims that the difference between him and Calicles is that the latter has failed to absorb the great lesson of "geometrical equality," namely that the world is informed by intelligible/determinate structure, the articulation of which can become a meaningful goal.

by nature in dealing with human beings." Unlike the rhetorician, however, Socrates remains steadfast, first, in his positive evaluation of determinacy and, second, in his denial that he himself possesses any determinate form of knowledge. In this paper, I have only begun to discuss how this tension shapes the Platonic conception of philosophical knowledge. What I hope I have shown is how this conception emerges from the confrontation between the philosopher and the rhetorician, a confrontation that has been badly oversimplified by the standard account given of it.