

Seeking Justice in Plato's *Gorgias*

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that Socrates' description of a rhetorician capable of using rhetoric in the service of justice in Plato's *Gorgias* should be read as a reference to Socrates himself. A critical examination of the passage in which Socrates argues that rhetoric should be applied to legally protecting one's enemies (480e–481a) reveals Socrates' willingness to use rhetorical tactics, even the ones he criticizes, such as making misleading statements and manipulating his audience's emotions, in order to persuade his audience of the benefit of correction and that it is better to be done wrong than to wrong another.

Keywords

Rhetoric, Justice, Socrates, *Gorgias*

Seeking Justice

In Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates and Gorgias propose polar opposite interpretations of the relationship between rhetoric and justice. Gorgias' definition of rhetoric revolves around the knowledge of justice, claiming that his pupils either possess this knowledge prior to their education or they will obtain it through his instruction, whereas Socrates criticizes rhetoric as a valueless form of flattery often misunderstood as justice. Socrates harshly critiques rhetoric and its practitioners throughout the dialogue, yet the text ends with Socrates claiming the role of politician and insisting that rhetoric be used to point to what is just. I argue that a re-examination of Socrates' application of the rhetorical tactics he criticizes in others, particularly the use of unclear communication and manipulation of the audience's emotions, reveals that it is Socrates' own speech which emerges as a form of rhetoric oriented toward justice. In this paper, I will examine an often neglected passage

of the dialogue in which Socrates leaves an element of his argument unstated, and through the identification of Socrates' style here as rhetorical, examine how rhetoric and justice can be reconciled.

This approach contradicts the traditional reading of the dialogue as one which, as Nussbaum describes, consists of a "general condemnation of rhetoric."¹ There are some scholars who reconcile the double standard of Socrates' criticism and utilization of rhetoric by incorporating this tension into an interpretation of Plato's ends. For example, Kauffman argues that Socrates must fail, and fail visibly, in order to show Socrates as a failed rhetorician and dialectician, and Stauffer reads the *Gorgias* as a plea for a better, more noble rhetoric, ultimately embodied not by Socrates, but by Plato, viewing the dialogue itself as an example of justified rhetoric.² Recognition that Socrates is a literary character is crucial, but I intend to keep the discussion within the dramatic setting in order to get a better sense of Socrates' application of rhetoric. Interpretations of Socrates' behavior that rely upon their reading of the Platonic mission to account for the actions of Plato's characters miss out on the opportunity to grapple with what it means for a character to argue vehemently against something Socrates skillfully applies.³

¹ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 227. See also Teloh's summary of scholarship that interprets Socrates as condemning rhetoric: Henry Teloh, "Colloquium 3: Rhetoric, Refutation, and What Socrates Believes in Plato's *Gorgias*," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium of Ancient Philosophy* 23, no. 1 (2008): 57. See also Roochnik's description: "The standard story is this. Plato the philosopher is the mortal enemy of rhetoric, which he condemns on both epistemic and ethical grounds." David Roochnik, "Socrates' Rhetorical Attack on Rhetoric," in *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies*, ed. Francisco J. Gonzalez (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995), 81.

² Charles Kauffman, "Enactment as Argument in the *Gorgias*," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1979): 114–29; Devin Stauffer, *The Unity of Plato's Gorgias: Rhetoric, Justice, and the Philosophic Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³ There are many fascinating studies of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* that, unfortunately, cannot be explored in greater detail in this paper as their lens is too different from the one applied here. For example, Wardy's "In Defence of Reason: Plato's *Gorgias*" identifies the competitive spirit of Socrates' performance but still contrasts his practice to the practice of rhetoric, and Gentzler's "The Sophistic Cross-Examination of Callicles in the *Gorgias*" rereads Socrates as a sophist in his dealings with Callicles, using different terms and different passages to identify a similar trend of Socrates as manipulative speaker. Klosko's "Insufficiency of Reason in Plato's *Gorgias*" applies a political lens to the dialogue, arguing that the failings of philosophy and dialectic, as he identifies Socrates' practice, call for political intervention.

There are other readings that argue that Socrates models a just form of rhetoric, yet it is important to recognize that the foundations for these readings vary significantly. Some scholars make this case by drawing a sharp contrast between Socrates' speech and the speech of his interlocutors. For example, Spitzer's reading of Socrates as a rhetorician is based upon an assumption that Socrates rejects the forms of rhetoric utilized by others, and McCoy argues that Socrates' practice of rhetoric is justified as he embodies the honest traits of "wisdom, goodwill, and frank speech" in contrast to Callicles.⁴ However, by viewing Socrates through the same critical lens as his interlocutors, we recognize significant overlap between the speech of Socrates and that of his interlocutors, which is unexamined in these readings yet must be reconciled. Carone examines three elements of rhetoric criticized yet utilized by Socrates: a focus on the opinion of many over the truth, use of *makrologia* or long speeches, and the utilization of emotional impact.⁵ I would like to add to Carone's list another tactic—a lack of clarity and directness in speech. My approach draws from the readings of Carone and Teloh, who proposes that Socrates' form of justified rhetoric fits the category of art rather than flattery, yet I argue that a close analysis of Socrates' tactics reveals a more significant resemblance to the unjust rhetoric of others than has previously been recognized.

In order to highlight Socrates' rhetorical practice, I will analyze a passage in which Socrates proposes a new use for rhetoric in court. In this passage, after establishing that correction is beneficial to the one being corrected, and therefore that it is in one's best interest to receive punishment for their actions, Socrates proposes that everyone should seek to be punished

⁴ Adele Spitzer, "The Self-Reference of the *Gorgias*," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 8, no. 1 (Winter 1975): 1–22; Marina McCoy, "The Competition between Philosophy and Rhetoric in the *Gorgias*," in *Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 85–110.

⁵ Gabriela Roxana Carone, "Socratic Rhetoric in the *Gorgias*," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 35, no. 2 (2005): 221–41.

themselves and do their best to keep their enemies from punishment. In making this argument, Socrates adds a curious caveat, that this proposal applies only in cases in which the damage has been done to another:

Supposing it is our duty to injure somebody, whether an enemy or anyone else—*provided only that it is not against oneself that wrong has been done by such enemy, for this we must take care to avoid*—but supposing our enemy has wronged some one else, we must make every exertion of act and word to prevent him from being punished or coming to trial.⁶

The distinction Socrates has made between justice sought for oneself and another, referred to as a “surprising remark” by Stauffer,⁷ is often brushed over or disregarded. Focus is placed upon the content of the entire speech, both by academics who analyze the proposal rather than the aside, and the internal audience of the dialogue, who scoff at his overall argument.⁸ However, I argue that a closer look at Socrates’ wording here, and particularly its lack of clarity as well as its function in manipulating the emotions of his audience, reveals that Socrates is utilizing questionable rhetorical tactics in order to persuade his audience to behave justly.

So, let us look closely at Socrates’ comment that one should prevent the punishment of the enemies of their friends only if they themselves are not injured. Rather than articulate what the injured individual should do, Socrates redirects attention to the necessity of self-protection. His silence leaves all possibilities open, which I boil down to three options:

1. The victim can either act as he would for a friend in preventing their enemy from receiving punishment.
2. The victim can take no action.
3. The victim can, contrary to the general direction of Socrates’ argument, take legal action to defend themselves against their enemy.

⁶ Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 377 (480e–481a). All translations are taken from this edition; emphasis is my own.

⁷ Stauffer, *The Unity of Plato’s Gorgias*, 81.

⁸ “Callicles: Tell me, Chaerephon, is Socrates in earnest over this, or only joking?” (481b).

I argue that the third option, although it undermines his overall argument, is the most likely option, and that this purposeful lack of clarification presents a threat to Socrates' self-presentation as a speaker intent upon open and clear communication, and instead shows how he employs the rhetorical tactics of emotional manipulation and unclear communication.

As the argument is made throughout the dialogue that avoiding conflict is the best way to avoid harm, Socrates' remark requires no further explanation if innocence is thorough insurance against involvement in legal matters. Avoiding conflict is a strategy recommended on multiple occasions, as Socrates answers that he would prefer to encounter neither when asked whether he would prefer to wrong or be wronged,⁹ and at the end of the dialogue Socrates states that the best form of self-protection is to not do wrong to other people.¹⁰ By avoiding prescribing action for the injured party, Socrates may be attempting to avoid endorsing behavior which should not be necessary in the first place. Although it may provide one layer of defense, staying out of conflict is not a guaranteed shield against prosecution, as Socrates refers to the possibility of himself being brought to trial, convinced that he would be condemned to death by a jury that would not understand his value.¹¹ Dramatic irony aside, this scenario is evidence that Socrates cannot guarantee safety for a virtuous citizen, as he is unable to guarantee himself freedom from accusation. As a case may be brought against the most strictly adherent of Socrates' followers, regardless of their moral and civic perfection, we must return to the question of what exactly Socrates considers the appropriate course of action for an injured individual.

⁹ "Polus: Then would you wish rather to suffer wrong than to do it? / Socrates: I should wish neither, for my own part" (469c).

¹⁰ "...if he [a man who, like himself, had attempted to improve his audience] had stood up for himself by avoiding any unjust word or deed in regard either to men or to gods. For this has been repeatedly admitted by us to be the most valuable kind of self-protection" (522e).

¹¹ "Such, however, I am sure would be my own fate if I were brought before the court" (522b).

One possibility is that Socrates is advocating for the avoidance of crimes against oneself whenever possible, but that if this should fail, one ought to provide the same kind of escape to one's own enemies as to the enemies of their friends. This option seems most in line with the larger argument, but I question the necessity of separating out the two kind of victims (self and other) if there is not some assumed difference in victim behavior. It is worth noting that Socrates does not differentiate between self and other when describing the ideal actions of the perpetrator and their friends. He asserts that one should carefully guard one's self and loved ones against committing crimes, but that one should seek justice immediately if one fails, which he repeats, saying that all have a responsibility to accuse themselves and their loved ones.¹² If avoiding crimes against oneself is recommended to be attempted first, followed by protecting the criminal from legal retribution, wouldn't this two-step protection be recommended equally, and explicitly, for the friend as well as for the self? Ultimately, Socrates' language in this passage seems to exclude the possibility that the same approach, regardless of victim identity, is being endorsed. His recommended course of action includes the crucial exception that this *only applies if* the case does *not* relate directly to the individual he is addressing: *ἐὰν μόνον μὴ αὐτὸς ἀδικῆται ὑπὸ τοῦ ἐχθροῦ*. Therefore, I do not believe that Socrates' argument allows for the possibility that he is recommending the same behavior for self and friend.

Inaction is a different option available to the wronged individual. Silence on the part of the victim would leave the fate of the criminal entirely in the criminal's hands, and they could then choose to submit themselves to punishment or to evade a court case entirely. Although this possibility is not voiced by Socrates, a scenario in which criminals are essentially allowed to decide their own fate would separate the morally redeemable ones from those incapable of change, which

¹² "But if he is guilty of wrongdoing, either himself or anyone else he may care for, he must go of his own freewill where he may soonest pay the penalty" (480a-c).

coincides nicely with the afterlife myth Socrates narrates at the end of the dialogue, which divides criminals capable of correction from those who are irredeemable.¹³ However, the recommendation for an injured party to take no action seems scarcely more appealing than the recommendation that they help their enemies, as the Athenian court system relied upon individuals pursuing legal action for both public and private cases, especially as a certain type of case, a δίκη, could *only* be brought by the victimized or their representatives. It does not seem likely that lack of action is preferable to action in this case, as the justice described by Socrates relies upon the result, the non-punishment of the criminal, rather than the process. If there is a preferable outcome, it seems that the most moral action would be one in enthusiastic pursuit of that outcome, regardless of actor or motivation. Additionally, this solution does not explain why Socrates would recommend friends be active on behalf of friends while asking individuals to remain passive. For an individual to remain inactive undermines Socrates' philosophical argument without increasing its persuasive effect, and for these reasons, it seems unlikely to be the unspoken recommendation.

The only possibility remaining is that Socrates' silence on this issue provides allowance for the injured individual to take legal action against the perpetrator. I am not alone in reading the passage this way, as Lamb characterizes Socrates' clarification as "humorously" anticipating potential opposition from those who would wish to take up a case for financial restitution.¹⁴ With this exception made, a victim of theft, for example, would be more likely to agree with Socrates' speech as it does not deny them their legal right to seek compensation. However, if Socrates stated openly that an individual could take action against their enemy, he would undermine the argument

¹³ "Socrates: Those who are benefited by the punishment they get from gods and men are they who have committed remediable offences; but still it is through bitter throes of pain that they receive their benefit both here and in the nether world; for in no other way can there be riddance of iniquity. But of those who have done extreme wrong and, as a result of such crimes, have become incurable, of those are the examples made" (525b-c).

¹⁴ W. R. M. Lamb, trans. and ed. *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, by Plato, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 377.

that one should prevent the punishment of one's enemies, and so Socrates must omit this clarification in his argument.

Let us examine how Socrates' aside, understood as tacit permission for his audience to behave in direct opposition to his proposal that one seek freedom for one's enemies, reveals his application of two rhetorical tactics: manipulation of his audience's emotions and a lack of clarity. Socrates rejected Polus as an interlocutor at the beginning of the dialogue, taking Polus' indirect answers to Socrates' questions as proof that Polus' speech style is indicative of the study of rhetoric rather than dialectic:

Socrates: For I see plainly, from what he has said, that Polus has had more practice in what is called rhetoric than in discussion.

Polus: How so, Socrates?

Socrates: Because, Polus, when Chaerephon has asked in what art Gorgias is skilled, you merely eulogize his art as though it were under some censure, instead of replying what it is.¹⁵

Although Polus was asked a direct question, he answers in an indirect and unclear way, and for this reason, Socrates rejects Polus as overly rhetorical and redirects his attention to Gorgias. This focus on clarity suits Socrates' self-presentation throughout the dialogue as someone who aggressively seeks the truth through refutation. Socrates represents himself as a dialectician in pursuit of the truth, insisting that he finds more value in being criticized than criticizing, and equates having a false opinion with the greatest evil possible.¹⁶ Socrates promises that his arguments are open to dispute, and insists that as the purpose of argument is to reveal the truth, refutation of each and every point is necessary.¹⁷ Therein, he claims, lies the power of dialectic.

¹⁵ 448d.

¹⁶ "Socrates: Of what sort am I? One of those who would be glad to be refuted if I say anything untrue, and glad to refute anyone else who might speak untruly; but just as glad, mind you, to be refuted as to refute, since I regard the former as the greater benefit, in proportion as it is a greater benefit for oneself to be delivered from the greatest evil than to deliver some one else. For I consider that a man cannot suffer any evil so great as a false opinion on the subjects of our actual argument" (458a).

¹⁷ "Socrates: Now I am going to pursue the argument as my view of it may suggest; but if any of you think the admissions I am making to myself are not the truth, you must seize upon them and refute me. For I assure you I myself do not say

However, Socrates' caveat concerning the appropriate action of a wronged individual reveals Socrates' awareness that in order to persuade his audience, he must reassure them while redirecting their attention away from a weak spot in his argument. If Socrates were to earnestly seek refutation in order to access the truth, it stands to reason that he would present this scenario as transparently as possible. Instead, he leaves an aspect of his argument purposefully vague in order to preserve its persuasive power. This behavior resembles the tactic Socrates criticized as rhetorical when used by Polus. Socrates professes an eagerness to receive negative feedback, and yet his seemingly throwaway line, which excludes the listening individual from obedience to his proposed system, has the effect of avoiding critique. Socrates' tacit permission for an individual to bring a case seeking retribution, which contradicts his larger argument, reveals a prioritization of building consensus in his audience, as well as of avoiding possible contradiction, over accessing the truth through open communication and refutation.

Although not explicitly labeled as rhetorical by Socrates, manipulating the emotions of one's audience is another tactic Socrates criticizes in the speech of the rhetorically trained Polus.¹⁸ Socrates critiques Polus' description of the torture of a prisoner as relying upon effect rather than argument: "You are trying to make my flesh creep this time, my spirited Polus, instead of refuting me;"¹⁹ Socrates takes issue with the way in which Polus relies upon triggering an emotional reaction instead of refuting the logical argument. However, Socrates' reason for including any reference to the behavior of the addressed victim is best understood as a manipulation of his audience's emotions. As the underlying recommendation for an individual to pursue another

what I say as knowing it, but as joining in the search with you; so that if anyone who disputes my statements is found to be on the right track, I shall be the first to agree with him" (506a).

¹⁸ This tactic, as well as the use of long speeches and appeal to opinion rather than truth are developed in greater detail in Carone's article.

¹⁹ 473d.

course of action weakens the larger argument Socrates is making, it at first appears to be contradictory to Socrates' persuasive effect to mention it at all. Dodds proposes that Socrates makes the comment in order to reassure his audience that they shouldn't imagine themselves as an active participant in this topsy-turvy system. "The proviso is necessary since, as Cope put it, if the injustice we encourage were exercised at our own expense it would rather spoil the fun; to be wronged is undesirable even to Socrates."²⁰ In other words, allowing injustice to continue uninhibited is compelling only until the audience imagines themselves as victims encouraged to provide legal aid to their enemies. Socrates anticipates a negative emotional reaction on the part of his audience, and so in order to reassure his audience that the rules do not apply to them, yet without sabotaging the larger point, Socrates briefly alludes to the possibility that these rules have exceptions, and so relies upon tempering the emotional response of his audience, rather than on logical refutation, to persuade them.

Socrates' rhetorical behavior is not confined to this passage, and in order to gain a fuller picture of Socrates the rhetorician, let us briefly consider other instances in which Socrates applies these tactics. For example, Socrates also employs emotionally manipulative tactics when, after baiting Callicles through praise for his manliness that resists bashfulness, Socrates uses the example of the κίναϊδος to shame Callicles for his hedonistic arguments.²¹ Socrates takes Callicles' premise of following pleasure to the extreme and uses the shame Callicles feels to discredit his argument. Whether attempting to outrage, embarrass, or calm one's audience, the direction of the

²⁰ E. R. Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 259.

²¹ "Socrates: ...See, Callicles, what your answer will be, if you are asked everything in succession that links on to that statement; and the culmination of the case, as stated—the life of catamites—is not that awful, shameful, and wretched? Or will you dare to assert that these are happy if they can freely indulge their wants? / Callicles: Are you not ashamed, Socrates, to lead the discussion into such topics?" (494e).

audience's emotional response to serve the speaker's ends is a persuasive tactic both criticized and employed by Socrates.

The use of long speeches and citation of public opinion are also rhetorical tactics criticized and applied by Socrates. During Socrates' critique of Polus' reliance on his training in rhetoric, Socrates urges Polus to answer succinctly (*διὰ βραχέων*),²² and later Socrates mocks Polus for his lengthy speeches (*μακρολογία*).²³ However, Socrates himself uses long speeches, and the speech he makes about the prerogative to provide escape to one's enemy is longer than any speech made by Polus in the dialogue. Socrates defends his own lengthy speeches as necessary to provide clarity, but his openness in employing a tactic he deems unpleasantly rhetorical serves as the most obvious sign that this dialogue explores the blurring of the boundary between appropriate and inappropriate uses of rhetoric.²⁴

Socrates disparages Polus' study of rhetoric a second time, describing Polus' arguments as easy to dispute due to the limitations of his performance, which echo a rhetorical display in a law court:

Socrates: At the beginning of our discussion, Polus, I complimented you on having had, as I consider, a good training in rhetoric, while you seem to have neglected disputation; and now, accordingly, this is the argument, is it, with which any child could refute me? By this statement, you think, I now stand refuted at your hands, when I assert that the wrongdoer is not happy? How so, my good friend? Why, I tell you I do not admit a single point in what you say.

Polus: No, because you do not want to; for you really agree with my statement.

Socrates: My gifted friend, that is because you attempt to refute me in rhetorical fashion, as they understand refuting in the law courts. For there, one party is supposed to refute the other when they bring forward a number of reputable witnesses to any statements they may make,

²² 449a.

²³ "Socrates: ...for my part I am willing to revoke at your pleasure anything that you think has been wrongly admitted, if you will kindly observe one condition. / Polus: What do you mean by that? / Socrates: That you keep a check on that lengthy way of speaking, Polus, which you tried to employ at first" (461d).

²⁴ "Socrates: It may, indeed, be absurd of me, when I do not allow you to make long speeches, to have extended mine to so considerable a length. However, I can fairly claim indulgence: for when I spoke briefly you did not understand me; you were unable to make any use of the answer I gave you, but required a full exposition" (465e).

whilst their opponent produces only one, or none. But this sort of refutation is quite worthless for getting at the truth.²⁵

Socrates' complaint is that Polus' style of argumentation relies upon the citation of compiled testimonies rather than the truth of those testimonies, and is therefore unpersuasive and useless for discovering the truth. However, before long, Socrates makes a similar claim, saying that Polus, along with everyone in the world, agrees with his argument, saying: "For I think, indeed, that *you and I and the rest of the world* believe that doing wrong is worse than suffering it, and escaping punishment worse than incurring it."²⁶ There is a distinction between how much weight Polus and Socrates place upon this tactic, as Polus uses a quantity of agreeable sources as the primary proof, whereas Socrates places greater emphasis on the value of a tested hypothesis and relies upon the accumulation of agreeable sources as only one source of evidence. Despite this distinction, both Socrates and Polus, among other persuasive tactics, cite the agreement of a larger population to persuade their audience of the legitimacy of their position.

Now that this image of Socrates as rhetorician has emerged, we turn to the question of how and why he is applying rhetoric.²⁷ Socrates claims that he is the only true statesman in Athens, defining a statesman as one who looks out for the improvement of his audience:

Socrates: I think I am one of few, not to say the only one, in Athens who attempts the true art of statesmanship, and the only man of the present time who manages affairs of state: hence, as the speeches that I make from time to time are not aimed at gratification, but at what is best instead of what is most pleasant.²⁸

²⁵ 471d–e.

²⁶ 474b.

²⁷ I am limiting my view of Socrates as a rhetorician to the terms established by Socrates himself, although his performance in this passage can be seen as rhetorical on other fronts as well. Socrates' speech is reminiscent of the rhetorical tactic of "distorting the law" found in forensic oratory, as discussed in Ilias Arnaoutoglou's "Twisting the Law in Ancient Athens," as well as fitting the specifications of rhetoric as: "cunningly crafted, carefully and skilfully composed." Robert Wardy, "In Defence of Reason: Plato's *Gorgias*," in *The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato, and Their Successors* (London: Routledge, 2005), 56.

²⁸ 521d.

As Carone writes, Socrates claims to be “one of the few Athenians, if not the only one, who undertakes to exercise the true political art (politics and rhetoric, we must note, going very much hand in hand in this context).”²⁹ Socrates has identified a good politician as one who seeks to improve the public, and as a politician is necessarily linked to the practice of rhetoric, Socrates as politician must then admit to employing rhetoric for the good of his audience.

As previously stated, I argue that Socrates’ use of rhetoric can be best understood in the context of rhetoric used for justice. We must tread carefully in developing an association between rhetoric and justice, as it was Gorgias’ flippant equation of the two which first opened rhetoric to criticism. Although Gorgias claims that he does not teach virtue, he admits that he will teach justice to any ignorant pupil.³⁰ This leads to a conversation in which Gorgias is confronted with the responsibility of guaranteeing the perfection of his students, which he has already rejected on the grounds that it is an unfair expectation to place on any teacher.³¹ Socrates breaks up the false equivalency between justice and rhetoric, describing rhetoric as a form of flattery which mimics the art of justice.³² Flattery, according to Socrates, convinces many through its focus on the pleasant over the good, as it appeals to the body rather than the soul.³³ For example, according to Socrates, medicine is an art, as it constitutes a study of its own nature and the consideration of the causes of its undertaking. Cookery, on the other hand, is a knack, as it is the result of repeated practiced behavior and relies upon the memory of past results rather than rational consideration of

²⁹ Carone, “Socratic Rhetoric in the *Gorgias*,” 235.

³⁰ “Socrates: If you make a man a rhetorician he must needs know what is just and unjust either previously or by learning afterwards from you. / Gorgias: Quite so” (460a–b).

³¹ “Gorgias: And, in my opinion, if a man becomes a rhetorician and then uses this power and this art unfairly, we ought not to hate his teacher and cast him out of our cities. For he imparted that skill to be used in all fairness, whilst this man puts it to an opposite use” (457b–c).

³² 462–63.

³³ 464.

cause and effect. According to Socrates, just as an ignorant person may mistake cookery for medicine, rhetoric is mistaken for justice:

Socrates: Flattery, however, is what I call it, and I say that this sort of thing is a disgrace, Polus—for here I address you—because it aims at the pleasant and ignores the best. [...] Cookery is flattery disguised as medicine; and in just the same manner self-adornment personates gymnastic... as self-adornment is to gymnastic, so is sophistry to legislation, and as cookery is to medicine, *so is rhetoric to justice*.³⁴

Although Socrates criticizes rhetoric as flattery, at no point does he propose that rhetoric is the opposite of justice, just that the two are distinct and should not be considered interchangeable. As Carone writes: “Thus we should not be misled by the sharply critical tone that accompanies Socrates’ description of rhetoric as ignoble flattery (464c ff., 465a–b). For Socrates’ tone, it should by now be clear, concerns not so much his opponents’ methods as such, as the use of such methods when they do not follow the goals of reason.”³⁵ Socrates has laid out the risks of mistaking rhetoric for justice, but he does not condemn rhetoric on its own merits, even arguing that a good rhetorician must be well informed of justice.³⁶

Indeed, an association between rhetoric and justice is emphasized by Socrates throughout the text. At the end of the dialogue, the need for a speaker capable of using rhetoric in just ways is laid out by Socrates, who states that “rhetoric is to be used for this one purpose always, of pointing to what is just.”³⁷ Socrates divides rhetoric into a noble kind and a form of flattery, albeit with the caveat that no one who uses rhetoric appropriately has been found:

Socrates: That is enough for me. For if this thing also is twofold, *one part of it*, I presume, *will be flattery and a base mob-oratory, while the other is noble*—the endeavour, that is, to make the citizens’ souls as good as possible, and the persistent effort to say what is best, whether it prove more or less pleasant to one’s hearers. But *this is a rhetoric you never yet*

³⁴ 464e–465c.

³⁵ Carone, “Socratic Rhetoric in the *Gorgias*,” 238.

³⁶ 508c.

³⁷ 527c.

saw; or if you have any orator of this kind that you can mention, without more ado let me know who he is!³⁸

Teloh and Carone read Socrates as this just practitioner of rhetoric, whose use of rhetoric has more in common with an art form than a knack. These readings are persuasive, especially in light of Socrates' description of the idealized rhetorician as τεχνικός: "Then it is this that our orator, the man of art and virtue [ὁ ῥήτωρ ἐκεῖνος, ὁ τεχνικός τε καὶ ἀγαθός]...with this thought always before his mind—how justice may be engendered in the souls of his fellow-citizens."³⁹ I am persuaded by the reading that Socrates emerges as the just rhetorician, yet I want to stress that the similarity between the different kinds of rhetoric is so complete as to make them indistinguishable in practice. To borrow the comparison between medicine and cookery, it is not just that cooking a healthy meal has more in common with an art than a knack, as Teloh points out.⁴⁰ It is also that a cook making an unhealthy meal appears identical to one preparing an unhealthy one. Only by recognizing how small the divide is between a flattering rhetoric and a noble one aimed at justice can we begin to understand how Socrates positions himself as the just rhetorician.

In order to make that argument, we must first consider the alternative—that the just rhetoric Socrates refers to is the use of one's rhetorical skill to ensure the punishment of oneself or one's friends and the acquittal of one's enemies, as presented in the passage discussed earlier in this paper. However, a justice system which functions this way is incompatible with the value system Socrates expresses throughout the dialogue. The foundational premise of a system in which help takes the form of punishment is based on the idea, expressed again at the end of the dialogue, that

³⁸ 503a–b.

³⁹ 504d–e.

⁴⁰ "Notice, first, that whether something counts as an art or, instead, a knack, depends on whether it aims at the good of its end. Arts do, and knacks do not. But even cooking, for example, can be an art by being aimed at the correct end; e.g., masking restorative medicine, or providing healthy food. So can rhetoric: it admits of good and bad manifestations." Teloh, "Colloquium 3," 65.

“if one becomes bad in any respect one must be corrected.”⁴¹ Near the dialogue’s end, Socrates describes the afterlife as a place in which the evil acts one commits are visible upon the soul, where the dead endure punishments that either improve them or allow them to serve as an example to others.⁴² Neither Socrates’ desire for universal improvement, nor his picture of an afterlife structured to correct wrongdoing, can be reconciled with a system in which those who commit crimes are left alone to get worse. This argument is also based on the condition that the injured party is required to harm the enemy, which Socrates only accepts conditionally, stating that these terms apply only if it’s one’s duty to harm another: “εἰ ἄρα δεῖ τινὰ κακῶς ποιεῖν.” Socrates draws attention to the fact that he is not endorsing this system but is merely framing a hypothetical. For this reason, I do not believe that the use of rhetoric to prevent one’s enemies from receiving punishment can be the kind of rhetoric Socrates describes as pointing to what is just.

Although the use of rhetoric to prevent punishment appears to be incompatible with the pursuit of justice, later in the dialogue Socrates reaffirms the value of using rhetoric to seek correction for oneself and one’s friends, leaving out any mention of behavior toward one’s enemies:

Those former results [that the just are happy and the unjust wretched], Calicles, must all follow, on which *you asked me if I was speaking in earnest when I said that a man must accuse himself or his son or his comrade if he do any wrong, and that this is what rhetoric must be used for*; and what you supposed Polus to be conceding from shame is after all true—that to do wrong is worse, in the same degree as it is fouler, than to suffer it, and that whoever means to be the right sort of rhetorician must really be just and well-informed of the ways of justice, which again Polus said that Gorgias was only shamed into admitting.⁴³

Just as in the passage he is referring back to, Socrates frames this just use for rhetoric as conditional, basing it upon the proof of his earlier arguments. Unlike that earlier passage, however,

⁴¹ 527b–c.

⁴² See footnote 13.

⁴³ 508b–c.

as the use of punishment for correction is consistent with the ideals Socrates expresses throughout the dialogue, this appears to be a justified use for rhetoric. This may be one use for rhetoric, but I argue that Socrates' self-presentation as a politician, as well as his use of rhetorical tactics, presents his actions as another form of rhetoric oriented toward justice.

Let us return to the passage in which Socrates leaves the action of the injured party unprescribed in order to consider how his use of rhetoric in this passage may be understood as operating in pursuit of justice. First, we must acknowledge that a major obstacle to understanding justice's role in the *Gorgias* is the absence of clarified terms. As Benardete writes, "In the *Gorgias*, however, no definition of justice is offered, even though Socrates denies that it is possible to speak of anything as good or bad before it is determined what it is. Socrates thus admits that the *Gorgias* as a whole is rhetorical."⁴⁴ Although we cannot articulate a specific definition of justice based on the text, we may still consider how rhetoric can be used to persuade an audience to contemplate justice or to incorporate behaviors aligned with justice. That Socrates believes this passage to contain something of value, despite the flawed framework in which evildoers are left unpunished, is evident. Socrates' sincerity is revealed in his claim that philosophy should be considered the voice of this argument, granting this passage an authority beyond his own.⁴⁵ Additionally, Socrates, while allowing for the refutation of many of his claims, reaffirms that there is one argument incapable of contradiction, which is that it is better to be wronged than to wrong, an assumption integral to the system he proposes here: "Socrates: But among the many statements we have made, while all the rest are refuted this one alone is unshaken—that doing wrong is to be more

⁴⁴ Seth Benardete, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy: Plato's Gorgias and Phaedrus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 32.

⁴⁵ "Socrates: Make my darling, philosophy, stop talking thus. For she, my dear friend, speaks what you hear me saying now" (482a).

carefully shunned than suffering it.”⁴⁶ It is an extension of this line of thinking that leads Socrates to propose the benefit of punishment as correction.

As previously mentioned, the argument Socrates is making at this stage of the dialogue, that one should harm their enemies through preventing them from receiving punishment, is shocking to its audience. Dodds refers to this passage as a bit of “comic fantasy,”⁴⁷ as Socrates calls upon the conventional Greek interpretation of justice, that of doing good to one’s friends and harm to one’s enemies, but by inverting the traditional practice of harm from punishment to acquittal, he shocks his interlocutors.⁴⁸ A similar discussion is found in the first book of the *Republic*, in which justice is defined as helping friends and harming enemies,⁴⁹ but there Socrates corrects justice to mean the prevention of harm being done to friend or enemy.⁵⁰ In the *Gorgias*, however, instead of refuting the reciprocal component of justice, Socrates emphasizes it, but through the innovation of punishment as benefit, has applied a traditional understanding of justice (helping a friend) to unconventional ends (seeking their punishment).⁵¹

In fact, this proposal is so extreme it seems incapable of persuading his audience. As Thompson writes, “Socr. is assuming the premisses of his opponents in order to lead them to a conclusion from which their common sense will revolt.”⁵² Despite the controversy of his statement, Socrates’ presentation of this scenario is successful. Polus is refuted and no longer argues with Socrates, and Callicles, unable to find a flaw in this argument, insists that they return to the

⁴⁶ 527b.

⁴⁷ Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias*, 259.

⁴⁸ Further evidence for the Greek moral imperative to help friends and harm enemies is examined in the following: Kenneth Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 180–84.

⁴⁹ Plato, *Republic*, 332d.

⁵⁰ Plato, *Republic*, 335-6.

⁵¹ My reading that this formulation is unconventional is reliant upon Trevor Saunders’ *Plato’s Penal Code*, which indicates the disconnect between corrective punishment and the Athenian court system. For more on how Plato’s formulation of justice differed from the traditional, especially in terms of interiority and reciprocity, see Eric A. Havelock’s “The Justice of Plato.”

⁵² W. H. Thompson, *The Gorgias of Plato* (London: Whittaker & Co., 1871), 70.

fundamental question of whether it is better to be wronged than to wrong. If Socrates' aim is to convince his audience that correction is beneficial to the individual and that it is better to be done wrong than to do wrong, then he has succeeded. It is worthwhile to keep in mind that in his discussion of the behavior of tyrants, Socrates, much to Dodds' discomfort, argued that men act with a mind to an action's effect rather than the action itself, using the taking of medicine as an example.⁵³ If Socrates' persuasion has the intent of moving his audience toward just action, the ends justify the means.

This reading of Socrates as a just rhetorician does not signify that there is no difference between Socrates and his interlocutors, but instead that a lack of focus on the tactics employed by Socrates does his rhetorical prowess a disservice and allows a false dichotomy between rhetoric and justice to linger. Teloh and Carone's readings, which distinguish between rhetoric as flattery and rhetoric as art, replace one dichotomy (rhetoric and philosophy) with another (bad and good rhetoric). I propose that only a close examination of Socrates' speeches and actions through the lens of flattering rhetoric can reveal how a just form of rhetoric may function. By reading Socrates' speech in terms of rhetoric instead of dialectic, we can see that, at least here, Socrates is not seeking truth, but seeking to improve his audience and lead them to justice. He is not endorsing a system that allows evil to continue in the world; rather, he is trying to make a point, using hyperbole, that the greatest evil is not to be punished, but on the contrary, to escape unpunished as an evil or immoral person. By obscuring the philosophical weaknesses in his argument through his application of rhetoric, and, in particular, through his unclear language and manipulation of his

⁵³ "Socrates: Then is it your view that people wish merely that which they do each time, or that which is the object of their doing what they do? For instance, do those who take medicine by doctor's orders wish, in your opinion, merely what they do—to take the medicine and suffer the pain of it—or rather to be healthy, which is the object of their taking it? / Polus: To be healthy, without a doubt. . . . Socrates: And is it not just the same in every case? If a man does something for an object, he does not wish the thing that he does, but the thing for which he does it." (467c–d).

audience's emotions, Socrates has successfully persuaded his audience to reconsider their approach to punishment, and even to drastically reconsider what they deem to be just.

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