

The Consistency of Plato's Treatment of Rhetoric

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Abstract: Commentators of Plato tend to assume that the philosopher changed his perception of rhetoric over time. Generally, such commentators focus on the critiques against rhetoric in the *Gorgias* and the claim of a philosophical rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* to display a fundamental discontinuity in Plato's treatment of rhetoric. In contrast, I aim to demonstrate a fundamental continuity of Plato's considerations on rhetoric, supplanting the textual evidence commonly analyzed in this debate with some passages from the *Apology*, *Symposium*, and *Laws*. Both in an early dialogue, such as the *Apology*, and in a much later one, such as the *Laws*, the same procedure is at work: a careful distinction between genuine rhetoric and its counterfeits. If rhetoric allies itself with philosophy, turns into a τέχνη, and is guided by the truth and the good, Plato embraces it. On the other hand, if rhetoric rejects this alignment, foundation, and orientation, it is condemned.

Keywords: Plato, Rhetoric, Philosophy, Truth, Persuasion, Dialectic.

A consistência do tratamento de Platão à retórica

Resumo: Comentaristas de Platão tendem a assumir que o filósofo alterou sua percepção sobre a retórica no decurso do tempo. Geralmente, tais comentaristas se concentram nas críticas à retórica no *Górgias* e na reivindicação de uma retórica filosófica no *Fedro* para constatar uma descontinuidade fundamental no tratamento platônico à retórica. De maneira oposta, o meu objetivo é demonstrar uma continuidade fundamental nas considerações platônicas sobre a retórica, suplantando as evidências textuais comumente analisadas neste debate com algumas passagens da *Apologia*, *Banquete* e *Leis*. Tanto num diálogo inicial, como a *Apologia*, quanto num muito posterior, como as *Leis*, está em operação o mesmo procedimento: uma distinção cuidadosa entre retórica genuína e suas contrafacções. Se a retórica se aliar à filosofia, constituir-se enquanto *technē* e orientar-se pela verdade e pelo bem, então é acolhida por Platão. Em contrapartida, se a retórica rejeitar tal alinhamento, fundamentação e orientação, então é condenada.

Palavras-chave: Platão, Retórica, Filosofia, Verdade, Persuasão, Dialética.

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Introduction

There is an extensive bibliography in Plato scholarship dedicated to Plato's considerations on rhetoric. Many commentators tend to assume that the philosopher altered his perception of rhetoric over time, taking for granted some form of development of Platonic philosophy.¹ Generally, such commentators focus on Socrates' criticisms against rhetoric in the *Gorgias* and the claim of a rhetoric aligned to philosophy in the *Phaedrus* to establish a fundamental *discontinuity* in Plato's treatment of rhetoric.² Indeed, this is a recurrent opinion and forms part of a theoretical common sense about Plato's philosophy.

To motivate my approach and make my position explicit, below is the assessment of a renowned scholar and translator of the *Phaedrus*, Christopher Rowe, on the Platonic treatment of rhetoric.

That there is a difference between Plato's earlier and later treatments of rhetoric is, I think, uncontroversial. I have so far simply been picking out some of the finer detail in a picture which so far as I know all Platonic scholars would accept at least in outline, of a movement away from an uncompromising rejection of 'the art of (persuasive) speaking' to a recognition of its place—if properly reformed—in the hierarchy of the τέχνη. (ROWE, 1994, p. 129)

Contrary to this apparent “uncontroversial” academic consensus, I seek to demonstrate in this paper that there has never been a supposed discrepancy in Plato's considerations on rhetoric. On the contrary, there is a marked consistency in Plato's treatment of rhetoric, from the *Apology* to the *Laws*. Thus, I argue for a fundamental *continuity* in Plato's considerations about rhetoric in the set of dialogues being examined. At the very least, I hope my argument contributes to questioning this theoretical common sense that Rowe expresses about the relationship between Plato and rhetoric in the course of the dialogues.

In supporting the consistency thesis, this paper intends to broaden the scope of analysis usually explored by commentators. In other words, I will “raise the stakes,” by incorporating dialogues that are ignored among the textual evidence customarily examined within the specialized debate on the theme of Plato's attitude towards rhetoric. Along these lines, I submit for examination some excerpts from the *Apology*, *Symposium*, and *Laws*, which reveal a convergent pattern in the Platonic approach to rhetoric.

Before proceeding, however, the term “rhetoric” needs to be conceptually clarified.³ According to the more conventional interpretation, rhetoric arose as a relatively autonomous discipline and a more or less methodical, specialized theory of speech in Sicily, Magna Graecia, by virtue of two legendary figures,

¹The abbreviation system adopted for authors is that of the Liddell-Scott-Jones Ancient Greek-English Lexicon (LSJ). I have resorted to the translation of Plato's works from Cooper (1997).

²For authors who identify a fundamental *discontinuity* between the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* regarding the Platonic treatment of rhetoric, see Ryle (1966, p. 259-260), Romilly (1975, p. 49-50), Koritansky (1987, p. 30-31), Hackforth (1952, p. 11), Rowe (1989, p. 180-181), North (1976, p. 14), Cooper (1997, p. 792), Nicholson (1999, p. 45-53), Nussbaum (2001, p. 227). For those who recognize a fundamental *continuity* between the dialogues, see Black (1958, p. 368-369; 371), Kucharski (1961), Hamilton (1973, p. 10), Quimby (1974), Heath (1989, p. 156; 169-17), Werner (2010, p. 46, n. 55), Yunis (2005, p. 102-103), Irani (2017, p. 107), and Lopes (2018). I refer to a “*fundamental continuity/discontinuity*” between the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* because practically all commentators would agree that there is continuity in some aspects and discontinuity in others. For example, rhetoric is defined as the craftsmanship of persuasion in *Grg.* 453a2, while in *Phdr.* 261a7-262b2, it is defined as an art of leading the soul; in the *Gorgias* (454b5-7), rhetoric seems to be reduced to courts of justice and public assemblies, whereas in the *Phaedrus* (261a7-b3) it also encompasses private meetings; the *Gorgias* does not have an exposition of the Forms, while the *Phaedrus* does; the *Gorgias* works with a simple model of the soul (or, at most, bipartite), while the *Phaedrus* outlines a tripartite structure of souls, and so on. That said, when I refer to a “*fundamental continuity/discontinuity*” between the dialogues, what I establish as a criterion is a more general position about rhetoric: whether an academic considers that the *Gorgias* expresses simply or exclusively the negative side of rhetoric, while the *Phaedrus* reveals a more positive perspective on rhetoric, or whether they understand that, to a certain extent, both dialogues provide criticisms as well as constructive considerations about rhetoric.

³I thank the anonymous reviewer of the journal for drawing my attention to this point and for recommending a more rigorous conceptual demarcation of the term “rhetoric,” given that most contributions on the subject fail to clearly and precisely define what is meant by “rhetoric.”

Corax and Tisias. Its genesis is directly linked to the fall of tyranny around 467 BCE and the subsequent establishment of democracy. By way of Gorgias of Leontini, a disciple of the reputed inventors of rhetoric, the art of speech would have reached Athens on the occasion of his famous embassy to the city in 427 BCE, and then spread through the sophistic movement, with a large volume of handbooks on the new art, the so-called *λόγων τέχνη*, circulating in Greece by the end of the 5th century BCE.⁴ On the other hand, the “revisionist” interpretation proposes that the invention of rhetoric is a phenomenon of the 4th century BCE, which can be attributed to the more systematic, developed, and innovative theorizations, first and foremost, of Plato and, secondly, Aristotle.⁵ A third approach offers an intermediate solution, emphasizing the gradual evolution of rhetoric from the experiences, training, and practices of men involved in the political life of cities, pointing to Gorgias as the primary person responsible for the constitution of rhetoric, both its name and profession.⁶ In the absence of more significant textual evidence from the 5th century BCE, considering the lacunar character of the surviving corpus, it is incredibly complicated to settle the question about the invention of rhetoric. However, for the purposes of this paper, stepping into this academic controversy is unnecessary; it is only necessary to take note of the technical and specialized concept of the term “rhetoric.”

Beyond this debate about the invention of rhetoric as a reasonably autonomous, specialized, well-defined, technical discipline, it is crucial not to lose sight of the more generic, everyday meaning of the term “rhetoric,” which refers to the persuasive competence in the elaboration and/or delivery of speeches. Given this, rhetoric, according to the stated meaning, has a more remote history, and it is not difficult to detect, from the epic poetry of Homer and Hesiod onwards, manifestations, formulations, and reflections on the persuasive power of speech (*λόγος*).⁷ It is possible to elaborate a more complex and complete discrimination of the polysemic term “rhetoric.”⁸ Still, the differentiation between a rigorous, technical sense and a generic, versatile one is sufficient for this paper.

Thus, after these brief clarifications on the meaning and usage of the term “rhetoric” (in the strict and general senses), let us return to the argument about Plato and rhetoric. There is no doubt that in the *Gorgias* and, mainly, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato centers on rhetoric in its more technical and specialized sense, developing a robust and methodical theory of rhetorical art. In the other dialogues under analysis (*Apology*, *Symposium*, *Laws*), there is no theorization about rhetoric, and the specialized term for rhetorical art (*ῥητορικὴ*) is even absent.⁹ The excerpts chosen from these dialogues reflect on the power, danger, and effects of *λόγος*, as well as on the norms that should govern the production and performance of speeches in specific and concrete contexts. Hence, these dialogues do not thoroughly examine rhetoric with a high degree of abstraction, generalization, and systematization, as it occurs in the *Gorgias* and, most of all, in the *Phaedrus*. In these cases, rhetoric seems to adhere more to the sense of persuasive competence in the elaboration and/or delivery of speeches, grounded in concrete situations and before a particular audience.

⁴The conventional interpretation of the birth of rhetoric is emblematically represented in Kennedy (1963). For a recapitulation of the main points of the conventional interpretation, see Schiappa (1999, p. 3-13), who calls it “The Standard Account of Rhetoric’s Beginnings.”

⁵See, above all, Cole (1991) and Schiappa (1999).

⁶See Luzzatto (2020).

⁷See, for example, Karp (1997) on the centrality of the theme of persuasion in Homeric poems, Clay (2006) for an implicit theory of rhetoric in Hesiod, and Buxton’s classic study (1982) on persuasion in ancient tragedy. For a historical background of rhetoric before the sophists, see Gagarin (2006).

⁸Schiappa and Hamm (2006, p. 6), for illustration, establish five different ways of using the term “rhetoric.”

⁹Although the discussion in the *Laws* revolves around rhetoric as an art and the same technical vocabulary of the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* is mobilized, as I show in section 5.



However, it is essential to note that the broad (*lato sensu*) and technical (*strictu sensu*) senses have several points in common, which justifies approaching rhetoric and inquiring into Plato's attitude towards it in the selected group of dialogues, paying attention to the zone of convergence between the two uses of the term. At the same time, it is necessary to guard against ambiguity. I shall demonstrate that there is a line of continuity between rhetoric as "persuasive competence in the elaboration and/or delivery of speeches" and rhetoric as a "systematic, formal, methodical, and rigorous theory of the art of speech," between practical aptitude and abstract theory, in a nutshell, because Plato uses the same criteria to evaluate rhetoric in the two underscored senses. In both cases, truth must be normatively assumed as a value regulating speech composition, knowledge about the subject matter of the speech is an essential requirement, and consideration for the good of the interlocutor, as the recipient of speeches, must also be observed.¹⁰

It is true that only in the *Phaedrus* does Plato substantially and thoroughly elaborate on what it means to apply these criteria to the construction of a systematic rhetorical theory, incorporating the dialectical method for the foundation of rhetoric and detailing the content of the knowledge that is necessary for rhetoric to become an art (τέχνη).¹¹ In the *Gorgias*, no more than the outlines of this authentic rhetorical art are glimpsed in specific passages, as I discuss in section 3. In the *Laws*, the excerpt examined focuses specifically on rhetoric as τέχνη, bringing its approach closer to the more technical investigations of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* and the *Gorgias*. On the other hand, in the Athenian's proposal concerning the persuasive effectiveness of the preambles of the laws, the rhetoric in question would have a broader meaning.

Concerning the *Apology* and the *Symposium*, the term "rhetoric" is adopted in its more generic usage to encompass the connection between speech and persuasion in particular contexts so that I shall examine the principles that are presented by Socrates when evaluating speeches, whether in the scope of forensic-judicial speeches or those of encomiastic-laudatory ones. The principles submitted by Socrates to evaluate speeches in such instances are, in general terms, congruent with the criteria that find their most polished formulation in the rhetorical theory of the *Phaedrus*. Thus, rhetoric as "persuasive competence in the elaboration and/or delivery of speeches" must be subordinate to truth and be based on knowledge in order to be accepted by Plato in both the *Apology* and *Symposium*. These more tenuous principles are refined, expanded, and deepened with the development of rhetoric as a "systematic, formal, methodical, and rigorous theory of the art of speech" in the dialogues that inspect it from a more technical and rigorous standpoint. For this reason, I insist on the fundamental convergence and partial overlapping in the meaning of the two proposed usages for the term "rhetoric" in analyzing and evaluating Plato's treatment of rhetoric in the selected dialogues.

In summary, to conclude this already lengthy introduction and resume the argumentative line, both in an early dialogue, such as the *Apology*, and a mature dialogue, such as the *Laws*, the same Platonic procedure is in operation: a refined and careful distinction between good and bad rhetoric; or a good and a harmful use (or even abuse) of rhetoric. Properly speaking, however, it is not a matter of good and bad rhetoric. Instead, there is a unique, authentic, and true rhetoric, alongside fraudulent imitations that lay claim to its name. In this framework, if rhetoric reaches the status of art (τέχνη), that is, if it is supported by knowledge of the subject matter addressed by the speech, grounded in an appropriate methodology, normatively guided by truth and the good of the interlocutor's soul, then it proves itself to be a partner of philosophy and is validated by Plato in the dialogues. On the other hand, it is harshly rebuked whenever rhetoric departs from the parameters of an authentic τέχνη. On the whole, this is the argument I pursue in this paper. Let us then move on to the proofs, i.e., the textual evidence supporting my argument.

¹⁰ On truth as a normative value that inspires and guides the philosophical life, rather than as the finished and unsurpassable product of philosophical investigations, see, above all, Casertano (2010). See also Trabattori (2010) and Vegetti (2023) on the topic.

¹¹ In this paper, I use "art" and "technique," with a clear preference for "art," to capture the semantics of the Greek "τέχνη."

1. Rhetoric in the *Apology*

Many scholars consider the *Apology* one of Plato's earlier dialogues, if not the earliest. It is regarded by a unitarian such as Charles Kahn (1996, p. 46; 52-53) as a Socratic dialogue in a historical sense. Even so, in this paper, I do not concern myself with controversies regarding unitarianism or developmentalism as hermeneutical paradigms for understanding Platonic philosophy since my argument is independent of heavy-loaded assumptions about the chronology of Platonic dialogues.¹² In general, I accept more consolidated and uncontested positions of the order of the dialogues, such as that the *Apology* is a dialogue from the initial period of Plato's philosophical activity and that the *Laws* belong to his last phase. From these premises, I highlight the consistency of Plato's treatment of rhetoric throughout these dialogues.

The passage from the *Apology* that supports my argument comes from the first lines of Socrates' defense speech:

I do not know, men of Athens, how my accusers affected you; as for me, I was almost carried away in spite of myself, so persuasively did they speak. And yet, hardly anything of what they said is true. Of the many lies they told, one in particular surprised me, namely that you should be careful not to be deceived by an accomplished speaker like me. That they were not ashamed to be immediately proved wrong by the facts, when I show myself not to be an accomplished speaker at all, that I thought was most shameless on their part—unless indeed they call an accomplished speaker the man who speaks the truth. If they mean that, I would agree that I am an orator, but not after their manner, for indeed, as I say, practically nothing they said was true¹³. (*Ap.* 17a1-b6; translation by G. M. A. Grube in COOPER 1997)

At first, Socrates denies being skilled in speech, as his accusers described him. However, in a second moment, he admits the label of “skilled in speech” (δεινός λέγειν¹⁴), provided that the expression is understood in a new sense, proposed by the Athenian philosopher, as the one who speaks the truth (τὸν τάληθῆ λέγοντα).¹⁵ In doing so, Socrates advocates for an equivalence between discursive competence and commitment to truth. If this is the case, Socrates confesses to be an orator (ρήτωρ), under the proposed meaning. However, if the expression “δεινός λέγειν” is understood in its current sense as discursive and persuasive competence detached from truth, or cunning manipulation of all available means to affect the audience's opinion at will, without any consideration for the ends λόγος should serve, then Socrates denies the title of ῥήτωρ.

Next, Socrates presents himself as a stranger to the court and its legal language, asking to be treated as a foreigner speaking in dialect. Instead of artificiality and sophistication in the craft of language, Socrates states that he will use simple, spontaneous, and sincere words, the same ones he used in the marketplace, the gymnasium, the palaestra, and other collective spaces in the city of Athens (*Ap.*, 17c6-18a3). Socrates

¹² The question of how to interpret Plato, intimately linked to the problem of the chronology of the corpus, as well as which hermeneutical paradigms to use for this purpose, is highly and intensely debated, having led to a considerable bibliographic production on the subject. I limit myself to referring the reader to some introductory texts that go through the origins of the debate and examine the *status quaestionis*: Tigerstedt (1977), Gonzalez (1995), Press (1996; 2018), and Taylor (2002).

¹³ Ὅτι μὲν ὑμεῖς, ὦ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, πεπόνθατε ὑπὸ τῶν ἐμῶν κατηγορῶν, οὐκ οἶδα· ἐγὼ δ' οὖν καὶ αὐτὸς ὑπ' αὐτῶν ὀλίγου ἔμαντοῦ ἐπελαθόμεν, οὕτω πιθανῶς ἔλεγον. καί τοι ἀληθές γε ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν οὐδὲν εἰρήκασιν. μάλιστα δὲ αὐτῶν ἐν ἐθαύμασα τῶν πολλῶν ὧν ἐψεύσαντο, τοῦτο ἐν' ᾧ ἔλεγον ὡς χρῆν ὑμᾶς εὐλαβεῖσθαι μὴ ὑπ' ἐμοῦ ἐξῆρατηθῆτε ὡς δεινοῦ ὄντος λέγειν. τὸ γὰρ μὴ αἰσχυρῆσθαι ὅτι αὐτίκα ὑπ' ἐμοῦ ἐξελεγχθήσονται ἔργῳ, ἐπειδὴ μὴ δ' ὀπωσιτοῦν φαίνωμαι δεινός λέγειν, τοῦτό μοι ἔδοξε ἐν' αὐτῶν ἀναισχυρτότατον εἶναι, εἰ μὴ ἄρα δεινὸν καλοῦσιν οὗτοι λέγειν τὸν τάληθῆ λέγοντα· εἰ μὲν γὰρ τοῦτο λέγουσιν, ὁμολογοῖν ἂν ἔγωγε οὐ κατὰ τούτους εἶναι ῥήτωρ.

¹⁴ The expression is, for the most part, pejorative and defamatory, having been frequently associated with the sophists, as can be seen in a precise passage of the *Protagoras* (312d3-7). On the expression “δεινός λέγειν”, see also Guthrie (1971, p. 32-34), Wardy (1998, p. 38), Lopes (2017, p. 384, n. 18), and Bonazzi (2023).

¹⁵ Commenting on this passage from the *Apology*, Casertano (2010, p. 20-21) offers valuable notes on the complex relationship between truth and persuasion.



concludes the proem to his defense speech by declaring that the virtue (ἀρετή) of a judge is to judge, and the virtue of an orator is to speak the truth, so he asks the jurors to pay attention only to whether his speech is just (*Ap.*, 18a3-6).

In this way, Socrates uses parallelisms and antitheses, figures of speech widely used in forensic speeches, in addition to a series of commonplaces of this discursive genre, to defend his point and gain the empathy of his audience in what will later be called the rhetorical technique of *captatio benevolentiae*. The highly rhetorical and artistically elaborated style of Socrates' *Apology* emerges more strongly when one verifies the multiple affinities between it and Gorgias' *Apology of Palamedes*.¹⁶ In the quoted passage from Socrates' *Apology*, one finds the use of rhetoric and rhetorical procedures to deny rhetoric, in what Livio Rossetti (1989, p. 234) has already called a "rhetoric of anti-rhetoric."¹⁷

From the outset, one can witness two contrasting meanings for the term "orator" (ρήτωρ) in the *Apology*. On the one hand, Socrates refuses the denomination of "skilled in speech" (δεινὸς λέγειν) as the most despicable lie uttered by his accusers. On the other hand, Socrates redefines the expression "δεινὸς λέγειν" and identifies discursive and persuasive competence with commitment to truth, even characterizing the orator's virtue (ἀρετή) as the act of speaking the truth (τάληθῆ λέγειν). Thus, already in the *Apology*, one can glimpse, albeit rudimentarily, the ambivalence of rhetoric for Plato. In short, a rhetoric committed to truth is adopted by Socrates, while Plato's protagonist rejects a performance of speech detached from the demands of truth.

As anticipated and clarified in the introduction, the nature of Socratic argumentation about λόγος before the jurors in the *Apology* is more concrete and context-dependent, less abstract and systematic, than what is exhibited in the *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*. Nonetheless, the Socratic principles for evaluating λόγος in this specific setting are proven to be congruent with the better-determined, well-founded criteria for constructing rhetoric as a proper τέχνη.

2. Rhetoric in the *Symposium*

The bulk of the *Symposium*, apart from its narrative framework (Apollodorus and his anonymous companion), is composed of six eulogies in honor of the god Eros, following the suggestion of Phaedrus taken up by Eryximachus (*Smp.*, 176a1-178a5). These eulogies are succeeded by a somewhat unusual last encomiastic speech by Alcibiades to Socrates. In a slightly schematic and synthetic way, this is the dramatic framework of the dialogue. The passage I focus on is found in the interlude between the erotic speech of Agathon (*Smp.*, 194e4-197e8) and that of Socrates (*Smp.*, 201d1-212c3).

Right after the performance of Agathon, the host of the symposium, fraught with "Gorgianisms" in its conclusion (alliterations, assonances, parallelisms)¹⁸, it is Socrates' turn to praise Eros. Socrates claims to be shy and unable to rise to the challenge, considering the enormity of the task to which everyone had committed themselves that night. Just as in the *Apology* Socrates confesses to be unfamiliar with the rules of composition of judicial speeches, in the *Symposium* he declares to be unfamiliar with the rules of composition of encomiastic speeches. Just as in the *Apology* his simplicity and sincerity are contrasted

¹⁶The *Apology of Palamedes* recently received an excellent translation into Portuguese by Engler (2023). For the affinities between the *Apology of Socrates* and the *Apology of Palamedes* in the broader context of the opposition between Plato and Gorgias, see, for example, Coulter (1964). Considering the profound similarities between the two texts, Denyer (2019, p. 6-7) asks whether we would have the right to assume that the *Apology of Socrates* has a greater aspiration to historical truth than the *Apology of Palamedes*.

¹⁷ Cf. Konstan (2022).

¹⁸ See Bury (1909, p. xxxv-xxxvi) for a commentary on the style and diction of Alcibiades' speech, pointing out evidence of its Gorgianic inspiration.

with the rhetorical artifices and discursive maneuvers of his accusers, in the *Symposium* Socrates opposes Agathon and sets apart this style of praise (τὸν τρόπον τοῦ ἐπαίνου, *Smp.*, 199a3-4) with his supposedly unpretentious, spontaneous, and truthful speech. Further, Socrates likens Alcibiades to Gorgias, to whom he attributes the qualifier of “skilled in speech” (δεινοῦ λέγειν) and compares the sophist from Leontini to the fearsome head of the Gorgon (*Smp.*, 198c1-5).¹⁹ Here is an excerpt of his words, of his initial caveats, before the elenctic interrogation of Agathon and his subsequent speech in homage to the god Eros:

Then I realized how ridiculous I'd been to agree to join with you in praising Love and to say that I was a master of the art of love, when I knew nothing whatever of this business, of how anything whatever ought to be praised. In my foolishness, I thought you should tell the truth about whatever you praise, that this should be your basis, and that from this a speaker should select the most beautiful truths and arrange them most suitably. I was quite vain, thinking that I would talk well and that I knew the truth about praising anything whatever. But now it appears that this is not what it is to praise anything whatever; rather, it is to apply to the object the grandest and the most beautiful qualities, whether he actually has them or not [...] But I didn't even know the method for giving praise; and it was in ignorance that I agreed to take part in this [...] I'm not giving another eulogy using that method, not at all—I wouldn't be able to do it!—but, if you wish, I'd like to tell the truth my way. I want to avoid any comparison with your speeches, so as not to give you a reason to laugh at me²⁰. (*Smp.* 198c5-199b2; translation by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff in COOPER 1997)

Previously, Socrates had claimed expertise in erotic matters (τὰ ἐρωτικά, *Smp.*, 177d7-8), but now he seems to want to distance himself from this claim. But the tone of the quoted passage is manifestly ironic: Socrates proceeds without delay to criticize Agathon and all the other speakers for ignoring the nature of love (ἔρωτος) and, as a result, failing to speak the truth in their praises. Considering the cross-examination (ἐλεγχος) to which Socrates subjects Agathon (*Smp.*, 199c3-201c9) on the nature of love and his great speech that follows, there is no doubt that Socrates still lives up to the title of master in erotic matters.²¹

Socrates then attributes the title of “skilled in speech” (δεινὸς λέγειν) to Gorgias and claims for himself the skill or expertise in erotic matters (δεινὸς τὰ ἐρωτικά). As has already been suggested, Plato may be making use of a phonetic similarity between the verb “to ask questions” (ἐρωτάω) and the noun “love” (ἔρωτος) so that Socrates' mastery of the erotic art could also be understood as his mastery in the art of asking questions²²—exemplified, later on, in the examination to which he subjects Agathon on the nature of ἔρωτος as lack and longing for the beautiful, but not as beautiful in itself (*Smp.*, 199c3-201c9). Socrates rejects Agathon's hyperbolic, artificial, and irreflective way of praising, for it does not take into account the very object of his praise, that is, ἔρωτος. As Socrates claims, a tribute of this kind, so alien and removed from the object praised, cannot be the correct way to proceed in an encomiastic speech.²³

¹⁹ The reference is possibly to a pair of verses from the *Odyssey* (XI.633-5). Even so, there were other references in the Greek cultural environment about the terrible head of the Gorgon (*vide* Dover, 1980, p. 131, ad loc.).

²⁰ καὶ ἐνενόησα τότε ἄρα καταγέλαστος ὢν, ἠνίκα ὑμῖν ὠμολόγουν ἐν τῷ μέρει μεθ' ὑμῶν ἐγκωμιάσασθαι τὸν Ἔρωτα καὶ ἔφην εἶναι δεινὸς τὰ ἐρωτικά, οὐδὲν εἰδὼς ἄρα τοῦ πράγματος, ὡς εἶδεν ἐγκωμιάζειν ὅτιοῦν. ἐγὼ μὲν γὰρ ὑπὸ ἀβελτερίας ᾤμην δεῖν ἀληθῆ λέγειν περὶ ἐκάστου τοῦ ἐγκωμιαζομένου, καὶ τοῦτο μὲν ὑπάρχειν, ἐξ αὐτῶν δὲ τούτων τὰ κάλλιστα ἐκλεγομένους ὡς εὐπρεπέστατα τιθέναι· καὶ πάνυ δὴ μέγα ἐφρόνουν ὡς εἰ ἔρωτον, ὡς εἰδὼς τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ ἐπαινεῖν ὅτιοῦν. τὸ δὲ ἄρα, ὡς ἔοικεν, οὐ τοῦτο ἦν τὸ καλῶς ἐπαινεῖν ὅτιοῦν, ἀλλὰ τὸ ὡς μέγιστα ἀνατιθέναι τῷ πράγματι καὶ ὡς κάλλιστα, ἐάν τε ἢ οὕτως ἔχοντα ἐάν τε μή· εἰ δὲ ψευδῆ, οὐδὲν ἄρ' ἦν πρᾶγμα... ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἐγὼ οὐκ ἤδη ἄρα τὸν τρόπον τοῦ ἐπαίνου, οὐ δ' εἰδὼς ὑμῖν ὠμολόγησα καὶ αὐτὸς ἐν τῷ μέρει ἐπαινέσασθαι... οὐ γὰρ ἐτι ἐγκωμιάζω τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον – οὐ γὰρ ἂν δυναίμην – οὐ μέντοι ἀλλὰ τὰ γε ἀληθῆ, εἰ βούλεσθε, ἐθέλω εἰπεῖν κατ' ἐμαυτόν, οὐ πρὸς τοὺς ὑμετέρους λόγους, ἵνα μὴ γέλωτα ὀφλω.

²¹ Moreover, in the *Phaedrus*, the other great Platonic dialogue dedicated to ἔρωτος, Socrates declares that he was graced with the erotic art (τὴν ἐρωτικὴν... τέχνην) by the work of the god himself (*Phdr.* 257a7-8).

²² See, in this regard, Reeve (1992, p. 92–93); cf. Roochnik (1987, p. 127–128).

²³ Bravo (2016) suggests that the erotic speeches prior to Socrates' committed a “mereological fallacy” by attributing to the whole (τὸ ὅλον) of ἔρωτος properties belonging to only one of its parts (μέρος τι).



Still, it must be acknowledged that Socrates praises the methodological point with which Agathon had begun his praise of Eros. Agathon had declared that the only correct way (εἷς... τρόπος ὀρθός) to deliver an encomiastic speech on any and every topic is to make explicit the nature of the object praised, then extolling and exalting its effects (*Smp.*, 195a1-5). Socrates agrees with Agathon that this is the correct way to proceed (*Smp.*, 199c3-5) but disagrees that the nature of love has been well defined in his speech. Nevertheless, this methodological inflection in Agathon's speech is relevant for Socrates laying the foundations for his praise of Eros, as well as his considerations of the proper way to conduct encomiastic speeches.²⁴

Once again, we observe Socrates handling an apparent opposition between two practices of speech, albeit now in the domain of encomiastic-laudatory discourse and not in that of forensic-judicial ones. Once again, a mode of speech, more specifically, a τρόπος of encomium, is espoused by Socrates, once it is based on knowledge about the nature of the object being praised and guided by truth. In contrast, a mode of speech not guided by truth, which ignores the object of praise, is dismissed. These principles are provided by Socrates for the proper composition of λόγος in the encomiastic-laudatory genre, evoking the fleshed-out criteria for the constitution of rhetoric as τέχνη, that is, "rhetoric" in its strictest sense.

3. Rhetoric in the *Gorgias*

The dialogue *Gorgias* is widely recognized as a war machine against rhetoric.²⁵ The clash with the orator Gorgias of Leontini and, especially, the discussion between Socrates and Polus can be seen as the *locus classicus* of the ancient quarrel between philosophy and rhetoric—to adapt the famous expression from the *Republic* about the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry (*R.* X.607b5-6). Schematically, it can be said that Socrates' accusation against rhetoric as it was taught and practiced by his contemporaries is twofold: rhetoric is not an authentic art, but a simple know-how (ἐμπειρία) or a knack (τριβή) since it does not fulfill the epistemic requirements necessary to reach the level of τέχνη. Moreover, rhetoric is censurable according to ethical criteria, as it aims at gratifying the interlocutor, and pleasure is, more often than not, an apparent good that obscures the judgment about true good. In brief, on the epistemic level, rhetoric stands out as defective, and on the ethical level, as harmful, irresponsible, and inconsequential.²⁶

In Socrates' "geometric" scheme between forms of art and pseudo-art or flattery, rhetoric appears as the falsification of justice in the domain of souls, just as cookery is the falsification of medicine in the domain of bodies (*Grg.* 46b2-466a3). In Socrates' "geometric" relation, the formulation appears as follows: medicine : cookery :: justice : rhetoric (*Grg.*, 464b-466a). This contraposition between art and pseudo-art is the organizing axis of Socrates' attacks against rhetoric, denouncing it as a practical expedient (ἐμπειρία, τριβή), as it aims at pleasure (an apparent, immediate good) and not the genuine good condition of the soul. As is made clear by the example of medicine, every art must be guided by the good of the object to which it is applied instead of the advantage it affords its practitioners,²⁷ which runs counter to the Gorgianic defense of rhetoric's "technical neutrality" or "amorality" (*Grg.*, 456c6-457c3; 460c7-d6). Moreover, according to Socrates, the

²⁴ On the constructive and cumulative role of the initial speeches in the *Symposium*, including the methodological turn made by Agathon, which paves the way for Socrates' great erotic speech, see Sheffield (2006). For a thorough and illuminating analysis of the specific contribution of Agathon's speech, see Gonzalez (2017).

²⁵ For the hypothesis that Plato invented the technical term "ῥητορικὴ" in the *Gorgias*, see Cole (1991, p. 2) and Schiappa (1990; 2016). On the other hand, Luzzatto (2020) contests this interpretation and credits Gorgias as the inventor.

²⁶ On the content and implications of the Socratic critique of rhetoric in the *Gorgias*, see, *inter alia*, Moss (2007), Carone (2005), Arruzza (2019), and Irani (2017).

²⁷ This is stated in no uncertain terms by Socrates in *R.* I. 341c4 ff., based on the example of medicine. According to the Platonic conception of τέχνη, if a physician were to use his knowledge and experience of medicine to torture, this supposed physician would not be practicing the medical art. In principle, for rhetoric to attain the status of τέχνη in the Platonic dialogues, it would be necessary for it to adopt as an internal norm of its practice the promotion of the (true, not apparent) good of the object to which it is directed, that is, the addressee.

rhetoric of Gorgias and his pupils ignores the proper object of its activity, i.e., the soul, and cannot give a rational explanation of its procedures—it is, therefore, an unreflective activity (ἄλογον πρᾶγμα, *Grg.*, 465a6).

On the other hand, as a growing number of commentators have noted,²⁸ in the confrontation with Callicles, Socrates suggests the conceptual possibility of a noble (503a7) and true rhetoric (517a5) and even speaks of an expert and good orator (504d5-6). The three passages in which Socrates makes this conjecture are *Grg.* 503a5-b3, 504d1-e4, and 516e9-517a6. I quote only one of them, in which the duality of rhetoric appears prominently:

So it looks as though our earlier statements [sc. 503b-c] were true, that we don't know any man who has proved to be good at politics in this city. You were agreeing that none of our present-day ones has, though you said that some of those of times past had, and you gave preference to these men. But these have been shown to be on equal footing with the men of today. The result is that if these men were orators, they practiced neither the true oratory—for in that case they wouldn't have been thrown out—nor the flattering kind²⁹. (*Grg.* 516e9-517a6; translation by Donald J. Zeyl in COOPER 1997)

In this sense, two forms of rhetoric, suitably qualified, are distinguished by Socrates in the *Gorgias*. Just as Socrates distinguished two forms of persuasion in the debate with Gorgias, one that persuades with knowledge and the other without (*Grg.*, 454e3-455a6), Socrates asserts against Callicles that rhetoric is twofold (διπλοῦν, *Grg.*, 503a5): the flattering and the noble kind. But the noble, true, and technical rhetoric of the *Gorgias* is no more than an ideal such as the Kallipolis of the *Republic*, still lacking realization (*Grg.*, 503a ff.; 516e9 ff.) and without precise stipulations of the necessary conditions for someone to become an expert (τεχνικός) in the domain of rhetoric. For this, one must inspect the *Phaedrus*. However, I hope it has been sufficiently demonstrated, as is my objective in this paper, that the *Gorgias* corroborates the same general scheme of Platonic attitude towards rhetoric, even if endowed with a more technical vocabulary and more precise criteria to single out what counts as rhetorical art, strictly speaking, and what doesn't.

4. Rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*

In confirmation of the pattern of rhetoric in the Platonic dialogues observed so far, in the *Phaedrus* one also finds reprehension of a certain type of rhetoric—the conventional rhetoric, as commonly understood at that time—and the ratification of a different kind, that is to say, a genuinely technical rhetoric, aligned with philosophy, grounded in the dialectical method, guided by truth and the good of the interlocutor's soul. The rhetoric claimed and articulated by Socrates in the dialogue deserves the title of τέχνη in its strictest sense, since it is methodologically well-founded, anchored in knowledge, guided by truth, and committed to the good of the interlocutor qua the recipient of the speech. Considering the extremely high demands that Socrates postulates (e.g., *Phdr.* 270c9-271c4; 271c10-272b4; 273d2-274a5), the question of whether such a true rhetorical art is achievable may remain open.³⁰ However, it

²⁸ For example: Yunis (2007), Werner (2010), Irani (2017), and Lopes (2018). The presence, albeit in an incipient and elusive form, of a genuine rhetorical art in the *Gorgias* is the decisive reason for defending a consistency between the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*, given that (i) it is indisputable that the *Gorgias* presents criticisms of rhetoric; (ii) it is equally indisputable that the *Phaedrus* reconciles rhetoric with philosophy, while still containing criticisms against the rhetoric of Lysias, Tisias, Gorgias, among other reputed masters of the rhetorical art. In the following section, I address both sides of the Platonic consideration of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*.

²⁹ Ἀληθεῖς ἄρα, ὡς ἔοικεν, οἱ ἔμπροσθεν λόγοι ἦσαν, ὅτι οὐδένα ἡμεῖς ἴσμεν ἄνδρα ἀγαθὸν γεγονότα τὰ πολιτικὰ ἐν τῆδε τῇ πόλει. σὺ δὲ ὠμολόγεις τῶν γε νῦν οὐδένα, τῶν μέντοι ἔμπροσθεν, καὶ προεῖλου τούτους τοὺς ἄνδρας· οὗτοι δὲ ἀνεφάνησαν ἐξ ἴσου τοῖς νῦν ὄντες, ὥστε, εἰ οὗτοι ῥήτορες ἦσαν, οὔτε τῇ ἀληθινῇ ῥητορικῇ ἐχρῶντο – οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἐξέπεσον – οὔτε τῇ κολακικῇ.

³⁰ Indeed, Socrates casts doubt on the existence of such a rhetorical art, introducing it under a conditional clause in *Phdr.* 261e1-2, and *Phaedrus* has legitimate concerns about the possibility of achieving it (272b5-6; 274a6-7). On the viability (or not) of the rhetorical art of the *Phaedrus*, see the different approaches of Waterfield (2002, p. xxxv), Werner (2010), Hunt (2013), and Reames (2012).



seems undeniable that in the *Phaedrus*, Plato is wholly committed to the project of laying the groundwork for an authentic, true, and technical rhetoric in the service of philosophy.

The analogy between medicine and rhetoric proves essential, both in the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*, to, on the one hand, criticize the current teachers and practitioners of rhetoric, showing to what extent they fall short of the standards of a true art like medicine, and, on the other hand, to recommend the model of medicine as the methodological foundation of rhetoric as a true art. In this paper, however, as my objective is different, I do not dwell on this point; instead, I dedicate myself to the pattern of the Platonic considerations of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*.³¹

After the interlude about the cicadas, right after the Palinode, Socrates, and Phaedrus begin the investigation into λόγος; more precisely, about the extent to which it is possible to speak beautifully (καλῶς, *Phdr.* 259e1 ff.). Socrates begins the inquiry by asking whether it is not necessary for those who wish to speak beautifully about a particular subject to know the truth about the topic they speak on. Phaedrus responds to the interrogation with what seems to belong to a commonplace in the democratic Athens of the 5th century BCE, namely, that what makes a speech convincing is not what is truly just, good, or noble, but how it appears to the multitude (*Phdr.* 259e7-260a4). Persuasion, then, would be anchored, in Phaedrus' opinion, in the beliefs of the multitude and not the nature of things.

The ensuing discussion seeks to demonstrate that truth is an essential requirement for technical persuasion. Socrates even subordinates the category of “probability” or “verisimilitude” (τὸ εἰκός), explored in sophistic speeches and judicial debates, to the attainment of knowledge of a given subject matter. If verisimilitude is an effect of how things appear to the multitude (*Phdr.*, 273b1), as Socrates suggests, then this appearance is forged through its similarity to the actual truth. As a result, to employ speeches based on τὸ εἰκός, it is better for one first to come to know the truth about things (*Phdr.*, 273d2-e4; see also *Phdr.*, 265c9-266c5). Socrates' justification is that the dialectic method of acquiring knowledge about being and, consequently, about the similarities and dissimilarities between beings, is necessary for rhetoric to achieve its proper end, i.e., persuasion, more effectively³² (*Phdr.*, 271c10-272b6; *Phdr.*, 277b5-277c6). Put another way, dialectic provides a methodological foundation for rhetoric to equip itself with adequate knowledge so as to persuade with art (πειθεῖν τέχνη, *Phdr.*, 260d9).

According to my interpretation, the authentic rhetorical art is grounded on the dialectical method and the knowledge gained through it. Yet, rhetoric is not reducible to dialectic.³³ The dialectical method offers knowledge about the subject matter addressed by the speech, the various types of souls, and the genres of speech, which is essential for genuine rhetoric, rhetoric as a proper τέχνη. However, dialectic alone cannot adapt speeches to the sensibilities of each interlocutor, adjusting the form of the speech to the shape of the soul it has before it. Therefore, this is the eminent function of rhetoric, namely, stylizing and customizing speech artistically based on dialectical knowledge (about the subject addressed, the varieties of souls, and the genres of speech, etc.), making them more persuasive for a specific recipient.

Just as Socrates in *Phdr.* 265e1-266b1 speaks of a “left-handed love” vilified as a disease to be avoided, a merely human madness, and a “right-handed love,” which is the manifestation of divine-sent madness,

³¹ In a future paper, I intend to analyze and elaborate on the analogy between medicine and rhetoric in the *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*.

³² For a similar appreciation, see Yunis (2009; 2011, p. 12–14).

³³ Against the interpretation of several commentators who identified the authentic rhetorical art of the *Phaedrus* with philosophical dialectics, such as Brownstein (1965), Guthrie (1976), Trabattori (1994, p. 48-59), and Werner (2010). My position aligns more with that of Yunis (2009; 2011, 10–14). However, I do have a significant point of departure from Yunis. I take it that the genuine rhetoric of the *Phaedrus* is, by definition, value-governed instead of technically neutral. In my assessment, Yunis did not sufficiently consider the Platonic conception of τέχνη, as previously exposed. For a comprehensive and thorough study of the theme of τέχνη in Plato, see Cambiano (1971).

a gift from the gods to mortals, one could view the *Phaedrus* as revealing a “left-handed rhetoric” and a “right-handed rhetoric.” The “left-handed rhetoric” of Lysias’ speech in favor of the non-lover, as well as that of Hippias, Tisias, Gorgias, Polus, Protagoras, Thrasyarchus, and other writers of handbooks on the art of speech (*Phdr.*, 268a8-c4; *Phdr.*, 269a1-3), is subjected to harsh criticism, with similar arguments to those in the *Gorgias*, for not being a true τέχνη, not turning to the good of its object, the soul, for adopting “probability” (τὸ εἰκός) as an epistemic criterion, and for assuming as its ultimate end victory in popular courts and success in public assemblies.³⁴ Conversely, Socrates adumbrates a “right-handed rhetoric” grounded in the dialectical method, which has truth as an epistemic criterion, and demands, as its ultimate end, to please the gods. Socrates’ argument against an imaginary Tisias in *Phdr.* 273d2-274a5 is, in a way, a good display of this distinction between the two forms of rhetoric in the dialogue. Plato, again, rejects a certain rhetoric, that of Lysias, Tisias, Hippias, and reputed masters of the art of speech, while endorsing another rhetoric, allied with philosophy, grounded on dialectic, and guided by truth.

Upon closer examination, however, the distinction between “left-handed” and “right-handed” rhetoric is misguided. Even if such a distinction might hold some didactic interest, it is incorrect from the interpretive and explanatory stances. In reality, Plato conceives of rhetoric as a singular art, defined by specific methodological, epistemic, and ethical criteria that are first sketched in the *Gorgias* and then fully elaborated on in the *Phaedrus*. Any putative “rhetoric” that ignores or discounts these criteria, operating away from their boundaries, is, in Plato’s conception, rhetoric only nominally, i.e., a counterfeit of the true art of speech. Thus, the salient upshot is not a bifurcation of rhetoric into two types, but rather the specification of a true rhetorical art, which meets Plato’s stipulated requirements, and, conversely, that which falls short of qualifying as a true art.

5. Rhetoric in *the Laws*

Direct and indirect testimonies attest that the *Laws* is Plato’s last work.³⁵ Following a tradition reported by Diogenes Laertius, a Platonic disciple named Philip of Opus could have been responsible for the editorial work to finalize the dialogue (D.L. III.37); perhaps due to Plato’s advanced age or even his death. Let us turn to the text of the *Laws* to clarify whether, in this undoubtedly late dialogue, the same pattern of treatment of rhetoric can be identified.

During the discussion about the justice system in the idealized city of Magnesia, the Athenian stranger differentiates between two ways the courts of justice function, both presented as harmful. In the first case, the courts of justice are senseless and decide their disputes privately, subtracting their decisions from public appreciation. In the second, considered even more fearsome (δεινότερον), decisions are not made silently in secret, but amid tumultuous shouting and, as in a theater (καθάπερ θέατρα), orators (ῥήτωρ is the word used) praise and vilify matters by shouting, one at a time (*Lg.*, IX.876a9-b6). It is, in fact, a portrait very similar to what one finds in the *Republic* (e.g., R.VI.492a-493c), affiliated with the perception of democracy as a theatrocracy (θεατροκρατία) discussed in Book III of the *Laws* (*Lg.*, 701a3).

³⁴ Gagarin (1994) questions Plato’s negative portrait of the conventional teachers of the art of speech (Gorgias, Antiphon, Lysias, Tisias), showing that in their writings probability (τὸ εἰκός) is never esteemed more than truth but rather as a reasonable expedient to approach truth when direct evidence is not available or is inconclusive. However, as this paper focuses on analyzing Plato’s relationship with rhetoric, I am more interested in the Platonic view of rhetoric than its historical veracity.

³⁵ For a long time, the *Laws* were rejected as a spurious dialogue, despite Aristotle’s explicit mention of the *Laws* as a dialogue by Plato (*Pol.* II.1264b26-7; 1271b1). Indeed, Aristotle’s reference to a supposed Socrates in the drama of the *Laws* did not favor his testimony in favor of the authenticity of the dialogue (*Pol.* II.1265a1-18). Currently, however, the dialogue is considered, by a reasonable unanimity, as Platonic (*vide* Tigerstedt, 1977, p. 19-24, 27, 31-32, 84-85), and there is a growing number of studies on it. Finally, the *Laws* are commonly situated as the *terminus ad quem* for the chronological ordering of the dialogues (*vide* Taylor, 2002, p. 79).



The passage that is the subject of my analysis is *Lg.*, XI. 937d6-938a4 is an astonishing passage that is little discussed in secondary literature. The term “rhetoric” is not explicitly mentioned. Still, there is no doubt it is rhetoric that stands at the center stage in this exposition containing some technical nuances, although lacking elaboration and scrutiny:

Although human life is graced by many fine institutions, most of them have their own evil genius, so to speak, which pollutes and corrupts them. Take justice, for instance, which has civilized so much of our behavior: how could it fail to be a blessing to human society? And granted justice is a blessing, can advocacy fail to be a blessing too? But valuable though they are, both these institutions have a bad name. There is a certain kind of immoral practice, grandly masquerading as a ‘skill,’ which proceeds on the assumption that a technique exists—itsself, in fact—of conducting one’s own suits and pleading those of others, which can win the day regardless of the rights and wrongs of the individual case; and that this skill itself and the speeches composed with its help are available free—free, that is, to anyone offering a consideration in return. Now it is absolutely vital that this skill—if it really is a skill, and not just a knack born of casual trial and error—should not be allowed to grow up in our state if we can prevent it³⁶. (*Lg.*, XI. 937d6-938a4; translation by Trevor J. Saunders in COOPER 1997)

Just as the expulsion of the poets from Kallipolis suggested in *R.*, X, here, one is faced with the banishment of orators and the art of rhetoric from the city architected in the *Laws*. However, just as the *Republic* still admits a specific type of poetry—notably, hymns in honor of the gods and virtuous citizens (see *R.*, X., 606e1-a8)—the idealized city of the *Laws* appropriates the power of rhetoric in the composition of its legal mandates.

It is remarkable, moreover, that this nameless art that subverts the demands of justice and unduly benefits those who can afford it is tackled by Plato with the same terminology used in the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* when it comes to disqualifying the status of rhetoric as an art. The Athenian suspects, indeed, that it is not an art but rather “an artless (ἄτεχνός) know-how (ἐμπειρία) or knack” (τριβή, *Lg.*, XI. 938a3-4). In the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*, these are precisely the terms used in Socrates’ attacks against the pretensions of rhetoric to constitute itself as an art, agglutinating the epistemic, ethical, and methodological aspects of his critique (*Grg.*, 463b3-4, 465a3; *Phdr.*, 370b5-6). There is no doubt, therefore, that the nameless art in the quoted passage is rhetoric, nor that the Athenian advocates for extreme measures against it, namely, that rhetoric should never come to light in the Cretan city conceived in the *Laws*. By the critical tenor and technical vocabulary employed, it is evident that this rhetoric is very far from the authentic rhetorical art announced in the *Gorgias* and brought to completion in the *Phaedrus*, in such a way that it is the second branch of the conditional sentence (εἴτε... εἴτε..., *Lg.*, 938a3-4) that seems to prevail.

Previously, however, in Book IV of the *Laws* (*Lg.*, 719c-724a), the Athenian stranger requested a specific introduction to laws in the form of preambles to ensure the voluntary submission of citizens to the city’s norms. According to the Athenian, the preamble must be persuasive and make use of exhortation to counterbalance its normative commands. In the same way that physicians use a mixture of sweet persuasion and bitter prescription in their treatments, the law must also proceed: a persuasive, exhortative, edifying preamble must be mixed with a coercive and imposing mandate.³⁷ As Luc Brisson and Jean-François

³⁶ Πολλῶν δὲ ὄντων καὶ καλῶν ἐν τῷ τῶν ἀνθρώπων βίῳ, τοῖς πλείστοις αὐτῶν οἷον κῆρες ἐπιπεφύκασιν, αἱ καταμαίνουσιν τε καὶ καταρρυπαίνουσιν αὐτά· καὶ δὴ καὶ δίκη ἐν ἀνθρώποις πῶς οὐ καλόν, ὃ πάντα ἡμέρωκεν τὰ ἀνθρώπινα; καλοῦ δὲ ὄντος τούτου, πῶς οὐ καὶ τὸ συνδικεῖν ἡμῖν γίγνεται ἂν καλόν; ταῦτα οὖν τοιαῦτα ὄντα διαβάλλει τις κάκη, καλὸν ὄνομα προστησαμένη τέχνην, ἢ πρῶτον μὲν δὴ φησιν εἶναι τινα δικῶν μηχανήν – εἶναι δ’ αὐτῆ τοῦ τε δικάσασθαι καὶ συνδικεῖν ἄλλω – νικᾶν δυναμένην, ἄντι οὖν δίκαια ἄντε μὴ τὰ περὶ τὴν δίκην ἐκάστην ἢ πεπραγμένα· δωρεὰν δ’ αὐτῆς εἶναι τῆς τέχνης καὶ τῶν λόγων τῶν ἐκ τῆς τέχνης, ἂν ἀντιδωρῆται τις χρήματα. ταύτην οὖν ἐν τῇ παρ’ ἡμῖν πόλει, εἴτε οὖν τέχνη εἴτε ἄτεχνός ἐστιν τις ἐμπειρία καὶ τριβή, μάλιστα μὲν δὴ χρεῶν ἐστὶν μὴ φῦναι.

³⁷ The persuasive power of the preambles to the laws could, in my view, be approximated to the rhetorical art of the *Statesman*, since in both cases we would be facing a rhetoric subordinate to the political art. However, the purpose of the preambles to the laws is evidently didactic and explanatory, as can be observed in the well-detailed case of the preamble to the laws on impiety (τὸ προοίμιον ἀσεβείας περὶ νόμων, *Lg.* X. 907d1–2) which forms the bulk of Book X of the *Laws*, whereas the rhetorical art of



Pradeau (2012, p. 87) write in their study of the *Laws*, “to govern is to persuade,” and Plato entrusts this “rhetorical mission” precisely to the preambles of the laws.

As a result, the evidence from the *Laws* seems to confirm the Platonic approach to rhetoric detected in the preceding sections. Contrary to Rowe and the still predominant theoretical common sense about the relationship between Plato and rhetoric in the course of the dialogues, the analysis conducted in this paper reveals a consistency in Plato’s treatment of rhetoric, at least in five representative texts on the subject.

In summary, rhetoric is disqualified in the Platonic dialogues as an art when it is not normatively oriented by truth, ignores the object of its speech, and harms the interlocutor. Contrariwise, when rhetoric is grounded on dialectical knowledge (of the species of speech, the object of speech, the types of soul qua recipients of speech, the causal relationship between species of speech and types of soul, as indicated in the previous section) and is guided by the good of the interlocutor’s soul, then its status as τέχνη is recognized, and its technical expedients and persuasive effect are employed in favor of Plato’s philosophical project.

Conclusion

In this paper, I sought to demonstrate how, in disagreement with a certain interpretive tendency still predominant in Platonic studies, there is a consistency in Plato’s approach to rhetoric, at least in the group of dialogues analyzed, rather than abrupt and well-demarcated ruptures. Moreover, I sought to broaden the scope to which the analysis of the relationship between Plato and rhetoric is usually dedicated—as a rule, limited to the *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*—in order to evaluate, using a more comprehensive sample of dialogues, whether there is continuity or discontinuity in Plato’s considerations on rhetoric.

Going through excerpts from the *Apology*, *Symposium*, *Laws*, and the indispensable participants in this debate, *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*, the research results indicate a patent consistency in Plato’s treatment of rhetoric. His way of proceeding is rooted in very similar and concordant standards, emphasizing the normative value of truth in the elaboration and delivery of rhetorically fabricated speeches, in addition to concern with the (genuine, not apparent) good of the speech’s recipient. Plato also employs related technical terms to disqualify the teaching and practice of rhetoric by his contemporaries (τριβή; ἐμπειρία) and to outline a rhetoric that would be an ally of philosophy, constituted as τέχνη with the aid of dialectic.

After all, Plato’s problem is not with the art of rhetoric *per se*, or its range of persuasive mechanisms, but with the principles that should guide it and its methodological foundation as a τέχνη. If conventional rhetoric is governed by particular interests, has a merely financial motivation, and has the love of competition and victory (φιλονεικία) as its ideal, the philosophical rhetoric that Plato outlines is a lover of truth (φιλαλήθης), aimed at the good of its interlocutor, like a medicine for the soul, and based on the dialectical method of collections and divisions. In more current and consciously anachronistic language, Plato is interested in rhetoric that values truth and strives for justice instead of a counterfeit rhetoric that propagates disinformation, pursues profit, and does not take responsibility for the pernicious consequences it produces.

the *Statesman* engenders persuasion in the masses more through mythical narratives than through instruction (τὸ πειστικὸν οὖν ἀποδώσομεν ἐπιστήμη πλήθους τε καὶ ὄχλου διὰ μυθολογίας ἀλλὰ μὴ διὰ διδαχῆς, *Plt.*, 304c10-304d2).



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