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Understanding Rhetoric and Knowledge in the Light of Plato's Phaedrus

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Abstract

Plato's view of rhetoric is both extensive and influential, and it demands considerable philosophical and interpretive challenges. Even a general reading of his dialogue, the *Phaedrus* demolishes a common assumption that Plato was entirely antagonistic to the practice of rhetoric. In fact, it reveals that Plato's discussion of rhetoric is both critical as well as constructive. Further, rhetoric, when practiced correctly, paves the way for knowledge. This paper seeks to elucidate such views of Plato on rhetoric in the light of his dialogue the *Phaedrus* and show how knowledge has to play an important role in it. Furthermore, important insights are also drawn from his other dialogues, such as the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*, wherever necessary. The paper has been structured in following three parts – first, it investigates into the meaning of the term 'rhetoric'; second, it examines the concept of 'rhetoric' and arguments concerning 'rhetoric' from the dialogues, namely the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*; third and finally, it draws a number of conclusions and observations following the above discussion.

Keywords: Rhetoric, knowledge, Plato, Phaedrus, Gorgias, Sophists

-I-

There are a number of different connotations associated with the term 'rhetoric'. We often use the terms like '*rhetoric*' or '*merely rhetoric*' in our everyday conversation, which leaves the impression that we have a clear and thorough understanding of the term, but a closer investigation reveals that the concept of 'rhetoric' has been used in varied and sometimes conflicting sense and it hints that there is no universally accepted understanding of the meaning of the term. The semantic variations are both horizontal and vertical in the history of philosophy. Horizontally, for instance, Sophists, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, Shakespeare, Renaissance thinkers, Jacques Derrida, etc. had different understandings of rhetoric. Vertically, for instance, Plato, in his different dialogues, seems to propose different understandings of rhetoric. Prior to further investigation, it would perhaps be safer to begin with the etymological understanding of the term within the politico-historical context to Plato. In modern usage, the term 'rhetoric' is attached to someone's speech in a derogatory sense. As per Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, rhetoric is a 'speech or writing that is intended to influence people, but that is not completely honest or sincere (Hornby & Turnbull, 2011). Etymologically, it comes from the Greek *rhētorikē tekhnē*, meaning "art of an orator" (*Rhetoric | Search Online Etymology Dictionary*, n.d.). This clearly shows that the term was not used originally in a negative sense, rather 'rhetoric' has been viewed as an art. Accordingly, if we purge 'rhetoric' out of its negative association, we may propose a working definition of rhetoric as – the art of persuading a specific audience to specific actions and beliefs through the use of eloquent language. Now, Plato lived from 425 BC to 348 BC, and this was the time when rhetoric began as a self-conscious discipline (Richards, 2007). The art of speaking had been admired since the times of Homer, but as a discipline, it emerged in Sicily in the mid of 5th century BC and then rhetoric moved to Athenian democracy, and it seems that there itself it really took its root as in this *polis* where there had been many democratic and court reforms. Hence, there was an urgent need of skill at speaking in political, judicial, and forensic context; and consequently, a major part of civic life revolved around the use of oratory skills. This also gave rise to Sophists, who taught such oratory and persuasive skills, also called *arête* (excellence or virtue). Sophists taught predominantly to young statesmen and nobility who could pay them better. Besides, there were other causes of the rise of Sophists, such as the inconsistencies, divergences, and incompleteness of the philosophies of the cosmo-centric period and the presence of cultural variations due to art and opulence of Athens, etc. (Stace, 2010). Nevertheless, the immediate cause was the practical advantage of mastering rhetoric in the Athenian civil court.

Furthermore, the question arises that what was so disturbing about these Sophists that Plato vehemently criticized them? Straightforwardly speaking, it was the teachings of Sophists like Protagoras and Gorgias, which taught a sort of moral relativism and skepticism. Protagoras declared – Of all things, the measure is man... Gorgias declared – nothing exists, and if anything exists, it cannot be known, and if known, it cannot be communicated (Stace, 2010, Ch. IX). In fact, they destroyed the faith young Athenian once had in deities of Olympus and the moral codes sanctioned by them. To them, there were no objective moral values, and they preferred to do whatever pleased them. The character of Athenian individuals disintegrated, which led Athens susceptible to be raided by other stronger city-states such as Sparta. The ethical crisis also gave birth to a political problem as the Athenian State was now ridiculously governed by quibbling and a passion-ridden mob in no particular order. Hence, Socrates had a challenge of saving the morality and the State. In other words, he had two major questions before him – what is virtue and what is a just State? It was in search of answers to these questions, Socrates turned bitterly against the Sophists and the art of rhetoric practiced and preached by them.

Plato was twenty-eight when Athenian democracy sentenced Socrates to death in 399 BC. It left a long-lasting impression on Plato's mind – a hatred and scorn against democracy, Sophists, and party rhetoricians. He criticized democracy and proposed it to be replaced by a State ruled by the wisest guardians or the philosopher-kings like Socrates.

Now, though Plato often presents most of his dialogues involving debates between the philosophers (mainly Socrates) adhering to dialectic and the Sophists adhering to mere rhetoric, yet his criticism of rhetoric is largely observed in his dialogue the *Gorgias* and then fully developed in the *Phaedrus*. The *Gorgias* condemns sophistic rhetoric as it is detrimental to the political audience. The *Phaedrus* rejects sophists' rhetoric because it is incapable of persuasion, which is the ostensible goal of it. Also, in the *Phaedrus*, it is claimed that the noble rhetoric is based on the speaker's knowledge of the subject matter, of soul, and the receptivity of his/her audience.

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The central question that Socrates asks in the *Gorgias* to his interlocutors is to define 'rhetoric,' and he shapes the dialogue in such a way that it may arrive at a proper understanding of what rhetoric is parallel to 'philosophy'. It intends to prove that rhetoric is just concerned with speeches involving praise and blame, and it is practiced just for pleasure without a proper understanding of knowledge of the term under discussion. On the other hand, philosophy approaches questions through give and take of discussion (*dialegasthai*) (*Gorgias*, 448d) in an effort to arrive at concise definitions; and philosophy, in its approach, is also open to be refuted if that leads to better understanding and wisdom, and its goal is never just to win the argument (*Gorgias*, 457 e and 458 a).

Again while discussing what rhetoric is, the dialogue eventually tells us that it is didactic persuasion about the just and the unjust. (*Gorgias*, 455a); it implies that rhetoric here is concerned with persuading people of what is right and wrong, but it does not teach its nature. This highlights the ambiguous character of rhetoric, which aims to persuade people about the subject matter without truly having the knowledge of its nature. Gorgias is again criticized when there is a discussion on the relationship between rhetoricians and doctors in order to see which person is good at curing. Socrates says that a rhetor, knowing nothing about the nature of health, can "be more persuasive than the one who knows among those who don't know, whenever the rhetor is more persuasive than the doctor" (*Gorgias*, 459 b). In this case, a rhetor has no connection with the knowledge of health. He/she does not pay any importance to truth and strives to hide ignorance through verbal eloquence.

Plato is critical of the above-mentioned character of the Sophists. Plato (or Socrates as his mouthpiece) disliked Sophists with their rhetoric who go around the market place teaching justice although knowing nothing about 'justice'. Socrates firmly believed in the maxim that a man knowing justice cannot do unjust. All sins are omissions of knowledge, and the Sophists like Gorgias go on claiming that they know justice and do the acts of injustice. Such a rhetorician, according to Socrates, "is not didactic with law courts and other mobs about just and unjust things, but persuasive only;" (*Gorgias*, 455a). Hence, to Plato, the practice of rhetoric (without knowing the concepts) is not worth pursuing because it leads to an unjust society.

The *Gorgias* revolves around a plethora of issues such as the nature of rhetoric, true and false pleasure, self, the existence of objective values, etc. which cannot be examined here in details yet the question posited at the end of the *Gorgias*, is worth mentioning here, i.e., 'is rhetoric entirely bad and can we abandon it completely?' In response, a distinction between 'a rhetoric that instills beliefs' and 'a rhetoric which instills knowledge' (the noble one) is made in the *Gorgias*. But there is a lack of in-depth explanation of the problem. Nevertheless, deeper insights can be gained from Plato's other dialogue, namely, the *Phaedrus*.

In the *Gorgias*, Plato claims that rhetoric is just a subdivision of flattery in order to gratify the expectations and desires of the audience; or, it is not interested in knowing the truth. Whereas in the *Phaedrus*, Plato takes a slightly different view. He continues his attack on rhetoric but also suggests that there could be an art of persuasive speaking, i.e., philosophical rhetoric and which knows the truth and is aimed at directing the souls of the audience towards the truth.

The second half of the *Phaedrus* discusses love thematically, but it makes a larger claim that true rhetoric is that which is embodied by the love of wisdom, i.e., philosophy. Accordingly, the three speeches made in the first half of the dialogue are examined as being rhetorically either artless or artful. Socrates says – “It's not speaking or writing well that's shameful; what's really shameful is to engage in either of them shamefully or badly” (*Phaedrus*, 258d). Then it further examines the principles that constitute a good speech.

The first and foremost principle of a good speech is that the speaker knows about the subject of the speech. He knows the right definition of the subject matter. Furthermore, through a series of questions, Socrates makes Phaedrus conclude the following:

- 1- Rhetoric is a way of directing the soul by means of speech (*Phaedrus*, 261a).
- 2- Rhetoric involves the same art of speaking in trivial as well as important matters (*Phaedrus*, 261 a).
- 3- Artful speakers can pick up both sides of an argument (*Phaedrus*, 261c).
- 4- To know the similar and dissimilar one must know the truth about the nature of the subject.
- 5- “the art of a speaker who doesn't know the truth and chases opinions instead is likely to be a ridiculous thing— not an art at all” (*Phaedrus*, 262c).

For further comprehension, we need to examine the speeches of the first part. The first speech is delivered by Lysias which is expressing a form of ambiguity. It pertains to the discussion of love but without defining it. It also intends to persuade the boy to accept the seduction from someone who does not love him. Socrates says that some words are clear like ‘iron’, and some words are ambiguous like ‘just’ and rhetors usually thrive on such ambiguous words (*Phaedrus*, 262c). Socrates also suggests that the artful speaker must know the “class to which whatever he is about to discuss belongs” (*Phaedrus*, 263a). Now, to which class does love belong to? Phaedrus agrees that it is an ambiguous term since Socrates discussed both sides of love. Socrates asks – Did Lysias, too, at the start of his love-speech compel us to assume that love is the single thing that he himself wanted it to be? Did he then complete his speech by arranging everything in relation to that? (*Phaedrus*, 236d-e). Lysis, then, haphazardly constructs his speech. It was not like a “living creature” with the head, body, and legs in the proper places (*Phaedrus*, 246c).

Socrates then insists that Phaedrus should give a better speech on the same topic, and as expected, he first defines love as “irrational desire, pursuing the enjoyment of beauty... (that gains) a mastery over judgement that prompt to right conduct...” (*Phaedrus*, 238 b-c). This definition implies that love is some form of evil. In other words, it shows the darker side of love.

But after giving the speech, Socrates realizes a sort of unrest in his mind, and he gives his second speech and contends that love is not something evil but a kind of divine madness, i.e., *eros*. In Greek thought, *eros* connotes desire, longing, disequilibrium, and is generally sexual in nature. However, in Plato (as we observe especially in the *Phaedrus*), although *eros* may start with a particular person as its object, it soon becomes transferred from the particular person to their beauty and finally, it gravitates towards immaterial objects such as the form of beauty itself (Blackburn, 2005).

But the question arises, “how was the speech able to progress from censure to praise?” (*Phaedrus*, 256c). His answer is that it involved two devices of a systematic art” (*Phaedrus*, 265c-d). In the *Phaedrus*, we come across the following two main responses:

The first is “seeing together things that are scattered . . . and collecting them into one kind” (*Phaedrus*, 265d). The second is “cut[ing] up each kind according to its species along its natural joints” (*Phaedrus*, 265e). Following this analytical method, Socrates explains both sides- darker and divine and names it dialectic. (*Phaedrus*, 266b-c)

Another important element of a good speech is its practice. When Phaedrus is unwilling to relinquish all the techniques written down by earlier rhetoricians, Socrates remark is that theory is not enough; practice is also needed, just as a man who has read plenty of books on medicine cannot be said to be a good physician as “he knows nothing of the art [itself]” (*Phaedrus*,268c).

Another vital element of a good speech is that it should persuade the audience soul each according to its kind and hence justly. The speaker should be able to grasp the “essential nature” of the soul (*Phaedrus*, 270e). Thus, a rhetorician must pursue the Socratic maxim ‘*know thyself*’ and consider philosophy indispensable to the true and noble rhetoric.

-III-

A number of insights can be gained from the above discussion and our analysis of rhetoric based on Plato’s dialogue, the *Phaedrus* (and also the *Gorgias*). Two of them require mention here. First is that the central theme of the dialogue is ‘rhetoric’ and second that rhetoric itself chiefly revolves around our understanding of knowledge.

The readers of the *Phaedrus* may find it puzzling that how the first part of it deals with love, and then there is a sudden transition from ‘love’ to ‘rhetoric’. But perhaps this approach of looking at the *Phaedrus* is not much insightful. A closer investigation reveals that in the dialogue, both the themes run parallel and intertwined with each other. Furthermore, the theme of ‘rhetoric’ is central to the dialogue, as we have seen in the beginning that Socrates draws a clear cut distinction between form and content of the speech. The first half of the dialogue, which includes the three speeches, analyzes the content, whereas the second half is the examination of its form. The first speech that of Lysias is an example of a bad rhetoric or speech whereas both the speeches of Socrates mark the progression to a nobler rhetoric or speech. Hence, it is the development between form and content that takes place in the *Phaedrus* and perhaps the discussion on ‘*eros*’ is just a preparatory exercise for the philosophical analysis of rhetoric. However, we can equally consider that there is a great possibility that ‘*eros*’ is central to philosophical understanding as it ultimately leads to the knowledge and the Beauty; and thus, it provides a philosophical understanding and basis for a good rhetoric.

Secondly, what comes to the forefront, is that in assessing rhetoric, our understanding of knowledge plays a crucial role. This takes us back to the Platonic theory of Forms. Plato held that we can have access to two different realms of existence- the world of sensation, i.e., of our everyday object and the world of Ideas. It is important to note here some peculiar features of this world of Ideas. The Ideas are the prime source of our value – be it courage, love, beauty, justice, friendship, etc. They are the *archetypes* of our imperfect values (Tarnas, 2010, Ch. I). Once we recognize that the values we have in any society, say Athenian, are corrupt, misleading, and imperfect imitations of the perfect values, we tend to devise a way to grasp their perfect Idea. It may be a difficult exercise but it is worth pursuing. It asserts the notion that knowledge of any Idea can transform the individual and the society in any context. For instance, in the *Phaedrus*, we observe that when there is a complete or partial misunderstanding of love, it proved detrimental, while when it is acknowledged with the Idea of Beauty inherent in it, the discussion is fruitful. Metaphorically speaking, the Idea of Beauty makes our wings grow and enables us to fly to the natural heaven. Hence, the knowledge of Love, or any other Idea is transformative. Similar is the case with the Idea of Justice. Socrates firmly believed that unless we know Justice, we can be just. This was the crucial mistake committed by the sophistic rhetors who claimed to teach anything without knowing well about it. Again, since rhetoric is concerned with persuasion and an effective and just communication, it heavily relies on the definition of its subject matter, which could be any idea like Love. Hence, knowledge of the definition of any subject matter under consideration is important and transformative as well.

Finally, one could ask what could be a perfect ‘definition’ that can form the basis of our knowledge and communication. Plato, through his mouthpiece Socrates, had laid the foundation of dialectic to arrive at the definition of any Idea. Later on, Aristotle developed the idea of definition in terms of *genus* and *differentia* (Deslauriers, 2007).

Finally, when applied to rhetoric, it is our knowledge of a concept that primarily defines the nature of rhetoric or speech, for its aim is to direct the soul in a just way that can bring about a world with a better vision of Ideas and a better life.

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