Socrates Questions Gorgias:
The Rhetorical Vector of Plato's "Gorgias"

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ABSTRACT: This essay argues that Plato's "Gorgias," a dialogue lauding dialectic over rhetoric, uses a question-and-answer format as a heuristic of argument. Specific observations are advanced to explain the implications of Plato's techniques and to provide a more sensitive understanding of the process by which Plato sought to gain the adherence of his readers.

KEY WORDS: Argument, dialectic, dialogue, Gorgias, Plato, question, Socrates, sophist.

"But I neither was in agreement with these (philosophers) nor he who created and began the dispute with infinitely more seriousness and eloquence, Plato, whose 'Gorgias' I read most carefully when I was in Athens with Charmadas; and what most surprised me about Plato in that work was that it seemed to me that as he was in the process of ridiculing rhetors he himself appeared to be the foremost rhetor" (Cicero, *De Oratore* 1.11.47).

INTRODUCTION

Cicero's brief remark about Plato's "Gorgias" — uttered through *De Oratore's* principal dialogue-character Crassus — is ironic in two respects. First, Cicero's assertion that Plato was never a better rhetor than when ridiculing rhetoric reveals that Plato was "trapped" into the use of rhetoric as a way of arguing against it. Second, one of the great ironies of technology encumbered Plato. Despite his adamant opinion that direct oral dialogue was superior to writing, Plato was nonetheless required to use writing as a means of preserving the "orality" of both his ideas and the representations of his mentor, Socrates. Plato was committed to dialectic in the form of oral dialogue as a means of revealing Truth. For him answerhood as the route to the elimination of problems (Meyer, 1988, p. 4) and the dialectic method of question-and-answer provided the apparatus for such inquiry. That Plato is widely acknowledged as one of the great stylists of Antiquity (Levi, p. 2) only makes the irony more acute if no more surprising. In both his *techne* and his technology, Plato was

endemically bound to use those systems of articulating thought and expression — rhetoric and composition — that he found inferior. Beyond the whimsy we may sense over Plato's dilemma, his use of rhetorical discourse and the technology of writing provide, the opportunity to offer a more sensitive accounting of how he expressed his views and the nature of his argument and in the process the interrelationship of rhetoric and dialectic; specifically, how he modified the question-and-answer method of dialectic in his literary compositions. Sensitivity to both Plato's task and methods, in turn, will provide the opportunity for a more accurate understanding of his dialogue. The "Gorgias," a dialogue of unquestioned importance in understanding Plato's view of sophistic rhetoric and the validity of his charges against it, is a particularly valuable subject of inquiry since both in topic and technique Plato deals with the nature of rhetoric and the role of expression while he himself is engaged in those activities.

PLATO WRITES THE "GORGIAS"

Plato's dialogues are not the transcriptions of dialectic in action but rather artistically composed discourse written to elicit a certain effect. The first issue of *Philosophy and Rhetoric* contains Drew A. Hyland's "Why Plato Wrote Dialogues," a sympathetic defense of the reasons why Plato would stoop to script. Hyland's interpretation calls forth reasons that emphasize how writing dialogues maintains the philosophical importance of the form of dialogue itself by not permitting readers to "forget to philosophize" (p. 40), that writing dialogues presents opposing viewpoints and, subsequently, the dialogue format preserves Plato's principle of not writing his "Platonic doctrine" (p. 41) since contrary views are represented. The importance of Hyland's position is founded on the view that such reasons will help explain Plato's dialogues as acts of philosophy; that is, Hyland's presumption is that what Plato is doing is philosophizing. The point made in this essay is that the question-and-answer format of Platonic dialogues reveals the rhetorical vector of Platonic dialogues and that in the "Gorgias" such an activity is better understood as rhetorical argument.

   The "Gorgias," based upon stylometric evidence is, according to Dodds, "now universally accepted" (p. 18) as belonging to the first of the three major groupings of Plato's dialogues, called the "early," "Socratic" or "aporetic" dialogues. The classification of the "Gorgias" in this first group is important, since one of the salient features of these early dialogues is that "Socrates asks questions" (Meyer, 1980, p. 282), a feature not characteristic in later dialogues. For Socrates, the "Gorgias" is an effort to arrive at an answer to the seriousness of sophistic rhetoric as a contributor to knowledge. To engage in this activity Socrates questions the movement's most prestigious representative, Gorgias of Leontini. For Gorgias, how-

ever, the ends and process of argument are in marked contrast to Plato, and here, Socrates' position. For Gorgias, rhetoric is the process of justifying answers or propositions to and by a public audience. From the sophistic perspective, as Meyer emphasizes, "questioning serves only as a pretext for giving his own opinion as an answer" (1980, p. 281) and thus has a far different purpose (p. 282) in the Socratic debate than the (early) Platonic process for arriving at Truth. By appearance and intent, then, the Platonic and sophistic methods of dealing with questions would seem to be at odds. In this essay, however, an effort will be made to illustrate how Plato's "Gorgias" not only uses the dialectical method of question-and-answer as a heuristic for advancing propositions by Socrates but that the "Gorgias" itself — composed as one extended argument — is an eristic effort more akin to sophistic argumentation than its dialectic method and the dialogic form might lead one to think.

Remembering that the "Gorgias" is a fictive, literary composition helps to re-establish the nature and parameters of Plato's treatise. As the first great thinker to solidify a philosophy based on abstraction (Havelock, p. 286; Sesonske, p. 78) it is not surprising that Plato would have control of his language. Nor is it particularly surprising that he would (reluctantly) resort to a technology that would artificially simulate the dynamics of the dialectical process. What is extraordinary, but not immediately apparent, is that the shift from oral deliberation to writing would do much more than record verbal interactions; it would transform the locus of intellectual control in a manner far different than the spirit driving dialectical deliberations to the extent that they would continue to be dialogues in form only and dialectic only in appearance. In effect, as noted by Skousgaard, "The Platonic Dialogues instantiate in literary form the dialogical-ritual of Socrates much the same as the genre of tragic poetry instantiates the ritual of value-reconstruction" (p. 376).

The importance of recognizing Platonic dialogues as literary creations is central to assessing his criticism of sophistic rhetoric. "It is a constantly recurring characteristic of Platonic dialogues," notes Friedlander (1958, p. 155), "that Socrates contrasts the kind of conversation he conducts with the lectures of the Sophists." Plato's "writing" of dialectic events — as opposed to the spontaneous deliberations of several participants — introduces a dimension of mediation not only in the level of writing but in the interpretive function of the author. In the "Meno," for example, Socrates discusses explicitly Gorgias' habit of answering questions in an elaborate and detailed manner (70B), a trait characteristic of sophists. In the "Gorgias," however, Plato has his Socrates chide Gorgias for long-winded answers (449C) and directs the dialogue-character Gorgias to limit his responses to short, direct replies. Socrates' insistence on dialogic conversation rather than rhetorical elaboration is not unique in the "Gorgias." In the "Protagoras" (329A), for example, Socrates rebukes sophists and

politicians who respond to questions as if they were written books, which can neither answer nor ask but give only the same long response. Socrates even rebukes Gorgias, as Quimby illustrates, for having "taught" Polus to make speeches but not to answer questions" (p. 76). In the "Gorgias" (453C), Socrates asserts that it is by asking Gorgias questions — rather than merely stating his own view — that progress in argument can be made. Surprisingly, Gorgias, the master of rhetorical embellishment and the elaboration of a thesis (449B, 458B, C), agrees. Plato has modified the characteristic dialogue pattern of the real Gorgias and composed the dialogue character in a manner that permits him only to respond to questions in a dialectical rather than rhetorical manner. In effect, as Friedlander comments, "Chairephon, whom Socrates is using as a kind of advance guard against the enemy, knows as much about the Socratic art of asking questions as Polos [sic], the pupil of Gorgias, knows about the art of his master" (p. 93).

What takes place in the dialogue is apparent argument against two competing views of knowing but agreement on the method of deliberation; i.e., Gorgias' concession to debate in the dialectical mode. It is difficult to imagine that the real Gorgias, noted for his elegant prose, would have agreed to such a format. It is also ironic to note that as the dialogue develops it is Socrates who elaborates his statements in detail and Gorgias is reduced to virtually passive silence. Plato abandons the crisp, direct question-and-answer format promised at the introduction of the dialogue (462A) when detailed passages occur which benefit Socrates' elaboration, an inconsistency which Kauffman calls "an unpardonable blunder" (p. 121). Regardless of how the actual Gorgias may have reacted to Socrates' command for short answers, it is obvious that Plato's literary control has done more than "controlled the opposition of character" (Levi, p. 17); Plato's writing has re-written characters, the mode and form of the dialectic. In so doing he has transformed dialectic from a philosophical to a rhetorical activity. Writing a dialectic, as opposed to participating in or the recording of one, provides a rhetorical vector that explains better the nature and implications of Platonic dialogues as rhetorical compositions. In sum, Plato's criticism of sophistic deliberation centers on his distaste for long-winded propositional arguments rather than dialectical interaction. Yet, Plato's "Gorgias," composed entirely by him as the author, is itself one detailed argument of proposition under the appearance of a dialogue.

THE CONSTITUENTS OF THE DIALECTICAL SITUATION AND
ITS ARGUMENTATIVE FUNCTION

To say that Plato engaged in rhetorical discourse when he wrote such dialogues as the "Gorgias" is to echo a commonplace uttered as long ago

as the Ciceronian quotation initiating this essay. Yet, asserting that Plato's dialogues are rhetorical arguments does not help us to understand the nature of his literary enterprise unless the nature of these "rhetorical arguments" is specified. Plato's compositions are cast as dialectical arguments: immediate, live, correlative, rigorous and interactive (Kaufer, p. 64, n. 4). Dialectic is an inventional situation, with cooperative interlocutors seeking to approach a *telos*, an immutable end, one whose validity is not measured by the judgments of participants or even the audience present but by a universal standard. "One of the basic accusations against writing," argues Lentz, "was that the written word could not reply to questions, and therefore could not explain the intended meaning of its words" (p. 15). Plato's simulated dialogues attempt to capture the oral features of a spontaneous dialectic. The positioning of questions, the framing of responses are all cast in a manner that re-creates the best features of the Socratic method of probing for Truth. Yet, that same ephemeral, immediate, spontaneous interaction is cripplingly momentary and thus lost to all but those within hearing range. Plato's desire to extend his audience beyond immediate ears left him no choice but to freeze the moment through writing; in a sense, to abstract a pragmatic event by stabilizing it through simulation. In doing so, however, Plato then introduced a new dimension to his simulated dialectic — he fictionalized responses of interlocutors. In dramatizing philosophy Plato engaged in the choice and selection of responses. These two dimensions — writing and re-creation — shifted the nature and function of dialectic from a non-fictive to a mimetic event and introduced a rhetorical vector to the characterization of the dialogues. In short, the "Gorgias" is dialogue only in appearance and dialectic only in form. These two dimensions are best understood through a discussion of Plato's use of question-and-answer, for it is in that set of inquiries and responses that a microcosm of what constitutes a shift of epistemic knowledge becomes apparent.

One of the most important constituents of Plato's "Gorgias" is the characterization of the participants. While Rendall accurately calls Plato's "Gorgias" an act of fictive utterances (p. 176), there is precious little historical evidence (Enos, 1976) to conclude that, as Rendall asserts, that such statements as those seen in the "Gorgias" do "*represent* the natural utterances of characters who speak in them" (p. 176). Interlocutors participating in the dialogue on the nature of rhetoric and the requirements for a legitimate *techne* in effect stand in both for representative ways of thinking and for the prevailing social standards of evaluating thought. Gorgias and his apprentice Polus, for example, respectively constitute both the foundation of sophistic thought (Friedlander, p. 92) and its future form. Characterized as the founder of sophistic rhetoric, the elderly Gorgias represents the most mature and refined personification of their movement; Polus, the promising student of the tradition, who must be told

(466B, C) to restrict himself to a question-and-answer format. Gorgias and Polus, by contrast, represent a popular counter-view to Socrates and his apprentice, Chairephon. Together these two pairs represent the maturation of both clearly distinct views and the consequences of their enactment through disciples. Callicles, the final character in the dialogue, represents little that deals with the nature of rhetoric but rather the society that will either benefit or suffer from its practice. Grounded in expediency and valuing matters only in terms of their social consequences, Callicles stands in for a segment of the Athenian community whose democratic tendencies centered the seat of validity in public approbation to a degree that — in Plato's mind — put at risk the fundamental ideals of *arete* and *paideia*. Yet, it is Callicles and his colleagues, it should be noted, who will ultimately be persuaded by, and enact the consequences of, such rival views and constitute the audience of the deliberation. Callicles' participation and questions constitute the popular sentiment (481C, D) of Athenian society that he represents. Callicles is composed by Plato into the dialogue as the audience — but not a passive one. Callicles' participation gives the Athenian community its voice in the dynamics of the dialectical deliberation.

Plato's composition of dialogue characters does more than center the locus of conversational control with the author, it reveals an argumentative technique that is both established in oral discourse but modified in literary composition. Inherent in the dialectical method since its inception with Zeno, is the process of question-and-answer. This process, a commonplace practice in oral deliberations, served many functions: it helped interlocutors position the *stasis* of deliberation; it helped to reach agreement of key terms; it served both to reaffirm norms and to regulate untenuous assertions. All such functions were based on the presumption that independent minds were at work contributing to a common goal, the most sensitive understanding of the topic under examination, and that a reality of that understanding existed independent of the individuals present. The task of participants, then, was to pool intellectual resources together in a united effort to try to approach such an understanding. The audience, in turn, represents not an *ad hoc* collection of listeners, but rather a group of listeners who constitute a "normal" group of reasonable individuals who offer the possibility of being swayed by reasonable arguments.

Based on such presumptions, the method of question-and-answer became an inventive and corrective device to check progress toward that goal. As Welch astutely notes, "Plato praised philosophical rhetoric because it depends on the active use of dialectic . . . . Without dialectic, there is no real rhetoric for Plato" (p. 10). Plato's *writing* of a dialogue, however, altered the nature of dialectical deliberations to the extent that it (ironically) gave only the outward appearance of the deliberative process. The interaction of independently thinking minds was replaced by the

isolated thoughts of one writer: Plato. Presumptions of deliberations were regulated in question-and-answer form only within the mind of Plato and not the separate thinking of the participants. In short, rather than having the recording of an actual dialogue that captures a dialectic, the "Gorgias" is a monologic composition in dialogic form. That is, the composed interactions are mimetic and directive rather than non-fictive and spontaneous. The importance of realizing distinctions between its apparent form and its actual composition reveal processes in the composing of the "Gorgias" that better explain its nature and (eventually) its implications.

PLATO COMPOSES REALITY

While the entire "Gorgias" is composed in dialogue format, the opening passages are particularly important for understanding the argumentative vector of Plato's question-and-answer scheme. Socrates' early questions are an effort to gain consensus on crucial notions. Concepts such as *techne* and *dunamis* are treated early in the discussion (e.g., 451A, 452E) and are used as the basis for adjudicating the meaning of the more essential notions of *dike, arete, paideia* and ultimately rhetoric itself. In short, the early questions of Socrates are directed toward establishing a consensus on the nature of such terms as "art," "system," and "capacity" as a way of revealing sophistic rhetoric's nature and eventually evaluating its credibility in terms of its goal of justice, excellence, and educational ideals.

Socrates' early questions offer a form that reveals an agreement of concepts crucial to the understanding of rhetoric. Plato's early effort is to illustrate that consensus of the meaning of such terms as *techne* and *dunamis* will not only form a starting point of agreement of meaning but that such an agreement constitutes the "reality" of such terms; that is, that a real meaning of notions — ones that eventually lead to a discovery of rhetoric's nature — is laid bare for readers. Plato's technique of question-and-answer presupposes the existence of such concepts and the interlocutors' desire to discover their meaning. The starting point of the argument — that such concepts have independent existence — is the foundation for Plato's effort to make subsequent arguments in the form of a double hierarchy. That is, the "recognition" of the reality of such notions forms the basis for evaluating items under discussion. "Ontology," as Perelman indicates, "would thus serve as the basis for a hierarchy of forms of conduct" (p. 103). Thus agreement in the form of favorable answers to Socrates' questions constitute tacit recognition of the ontological existence of such terms. Once agreed upon by Gorgias and Polus, Socrates has the ontological foundation, the starting point of argument, to then evaluate sophistic rhetoric. In actuality, however, the starting point of the "Gorgias" is a *petitio principii*, since ontological existence of critical notions is

presumed but not verified. Moreover, such presumptions are ones which
sophists — other than the dialogue-characters created by Plato — would
have contested. The fragments of Gorgias' own works (Enos, 1976), for
example, clearly reveal that he would have contested the ontological
assumption of Plato's reality to the extent that he not only would not have
answered Socrates' questions in the way Plato had the dialogue-character
respond, but that the actual Gorgias would have redirected the argument
to determining if meaning is independent of human interaction and social
consensus.

Plato has not revealed Reality, but rather composed one for his readers.
Plato's arguments are not double hierarchies in the way discussed by
Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), since actual sophists such as
Gorgias would not have agreed to the reality of ontological meaning as a
starting point of the dialogue. Through both direct and indirect interroga-
tive sentences Plato has so composed the interaction of the participants
that starting points have tacitly been agreed upon; i.e., that the reality of
rhetoric's nature exists and is subject to examination. The casting of such
deliberative questions presupposes both the existence of rhetoric's "truth-
ful" reality (517A) and the methodology for seeking its understanding.
Rather, Plato's question-and-answer scheme is a heuristic for establishing
a shared view of reality. Plato's opening passages of the "Gorgias" apply a
question-and-answer format as an instrument to choose and select those
features that Plato believes constitute the legitimacy of a discipline. That
is, Plato's opposition to the view that public consensus constitutes a
standard of judgment (502E) is based on the presumption that such
decisions are based not on the validity of a point but rather on communal
opinion. Plato's own view, however, is predicated on his opinion that
justice exists independent of agreement and further that his notion of
abstraction toward an ideal (508C) is the standard for determining
validity. Lost within Plato's presumptions is the fact that sophists who
practiced rhetoric did use abstraction but did not presuppose that it lead
to essences independent of human cognition, articulation and social
validation (Enos, 1987). The process used in the "Gorgias" is similar to its
function in the "Phaedrus," which Murray argues "as the erection of a
structure (albeit rhetorical) which *requires as its foundation* the dialectical
process" (p. 281). In short, Plato's use of questioning is a heuristic
employed not to discover Truth but rather to create his meaning of reality
in the minds of readers.

CONCLUSION

Excluding the current practices of legal argument and the Socratic method
of teaching, the procedures of arriving at knowledge no longer employ

questioning but propositions. That is, the trend, as Meyer (1988, p. 4) reveals, is that "answers have become propositions, questions have disappeared as sophistic or eristic, at any rate as the opposite of knowledge." In what is perhaps the ultimate irony for the Platonic method, the long-sustained, thesis-driven propositions characteristic of sophistic rhetoric have become more representative of the mode of articulating understanding and opinion than the constitutively different form of question-and-answer. Yet, Plato's method for understanding, and his impact on philosophy and rhetoric, is of immense importance for both the history of rhetoric and argumentation in general. "Actually," observed Stewart, "Plato's purpose, his method, and rhetoric's adaptability are difficult to separate. General scholarly opinion seems to be that Plato was never in doubt about what the function of rhetoric should be, but the method had to be developed" (p. 120). Stewart's point bears directly on the topic of this essay, which has sought to identify the method Plato actually employed in the "Gorgias." More specifically, "Plato cannot," as Welch accurately argues, "divide the activity of dialectic from rhetoric" (p. 17). This essay argues in agreement not only for Stewart's pervasive observation and specifically for Welch's view of the "interaction of dialectic and rhetoric" (p. 18) but its correlative complement: we cannot divide the activity of rhetoric *from* Plato's dialectic. The point of this essay was to reveal how and why Plato's "Gorgias" employed question-and-answer as a rhetorical heuristic. Socrates' opening questions are based on the supposition that the real natures driving critical concepts are waiting to be discovered — as opposed to the sophistic view that meaning is the act of abstraction through social consensus — permits both a choice and selection of notions and the presuppositions that such notions have a real (and idealized) meaning. The fact that the dialogue-characters Gorgias and Polus accept the invitation to respond to such questions implicitly signals their agreement to these presuppositions and places them on a path which will lead them to a tenuous position of claiming that they teach an art of deception which neither realizes nor leads to knowledge and hence an enterprise devoid of merit. Yet, the circumspect argument Plato has Gorgias and Polus mouth is weak in part because they initially agreed to a standard of evaluation based on Plato's criteria.

Henry W. Johnstone, Jr. has devoted much of his scholarly career demonstrating "that the distinction between finding the truth in philosophy and finding the proper rhetorical devices for propagating it cannot be maintained" (p. 74). There is little doubt that Plato considered dialectic the "proper" device for philosophy but did not realize or acknowledge that when he had his characters answer and respond he was propagating "truth" through a rhetorical device: the heuristic of question-and-answer. In this sense, Plato's question-and-answer form is itself a heuristic of argument; i.e., the choice and selection of data and method based on

preference in the form of an independently logical ideal. Plato's "Gorgias" is based on the starting point that a reality independent of human perception and knowledge exists; his question-and-answer format is predicated on the existence of such an ontology. That position, as richly and thoroughly realized by current scholarship, is precisely the point of contention between Plato and Gorgias and, as such, would not have been agreed upon early in any actual dialogue and thus would not have been the basis for any subsequent arguments of double hierarchy. When Plato composed his dialogue, he ought to have structured his question-and-answer scheme to argue for a shared view of reality rather than to pre-suppose it; that is, Plato could have had the dialogue-character Socrates engage Gorgias and Polus in questions that would have sought to establish a shared basis of agreement that ontology was indeed the reality and the standard for the evaluation of sophistic rhetoric. Plato, however, would not have composed a dialogue from such a perspective since the validation of an ontological reality would rest with the interlocutors' agreement and not its independent existence. Plato's belief in the independent existence of ideas would restrict him from having Socrates "argue" for a shared view of reality, since human argument and human agreement was not the test of its validity. Plato's heuristic was to initiate the dialogue with a starting point of independent reality and have the dialogue characters composed in such a manner that they would agree to such a starting point.

From this perspective it is clear that Plato's composition of question-and-answer is far more and far different from the transcription of a dialectical conversation. It is a heuristic for composing an argument. More importantly, it is a heuristic that purports to be the method for philosophy but is actually an inventional tool to advance a position and secure the auditor's agreement; that is, a method of argumentation that is rhetorical. Plato's technique of question-and-answer, particularly in the earlier parts of the "Gorgias," predicates the "long-winded" statements by Socrates that occur toward the close of the dialogue, that constitute propositional statements about the nature of rhetoric as practiced by the sophists. Socrates' extended propositional declarations, however, are based on the argeement of critical terms arrived at by the dialectical method. In this sense, Plato's use of question-and-answer in the "Gorgias" is a heuristic for starting an argument that would eventually be composed in a proposi-tional mode. Because this heuristic presupposes a view of reality, and is initiated from Plato's desire to think of things in such a manner, it is best understood as rhetorical in nature and dialectical in appearance. The argument of the "Gorgias," initiated on a starting point that only the sophists Plato composed as characters would likely have agreed with not only further illustrates the rhetorical vector of Plato's dialectical method but offers an explanation of why, as cited in the opening passages of this essay, Cicero saw Plato as a rhetor at his best when he was arguing against rhetoric in the "Gorgias."

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