The Southern Journal of Philosophy
Volume 48, Issue 1
March 2010

GORGIAS' DEFENSE: PLATO AND HIS OPPONENTS ON RHETORIC AND THE GOOD

Rachel Barney

abstract: This paper explores in detail Gorgias' defense of rhetoric in Plato's *Gorgias* (456c–7c), noting its connections to earlier and later texts such as Aristophanes' *Clouds*, Gorgias' *Helen*, Isocrates' *Nicocles* and *Antidosis*, and Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. The defense as Plato presents it is transparently inadequate; it reveals a deep inconsistency in Gorgias' conception of rhetoric and functions as a satirical precursor to his refutation by Socrates. Yet Gorgias' defense is appropriated, in a streamlined form, by later defenders of rhetoric such as Isocrates and Aristotle. They present it as an effective *reductio* against a critique of rhetoric that depends on the "harm criterion." This is puzzling, since Plato's own critique of rhetoric does *not* depend on the harm criterion. On the other hand, Plato *does* seem to embrace the harm criterion as a more general principle—as if pre-emptively embracing the *reductio*—in his arguments about the good in the *Meno* and *Euthydemus*. Nonetheless, Isocrates and Aristotle seem to be deliberately misreading Plato on rhetoric: where he intends to criticize its intrinsic nature, they respond as if he were merely complaining about its contingent effects.

It is not unknown for readers of Plato to see a *modus tollens* where he apparently intended a *modus ponens*, or vice versa, and to side with his characters against their author.[1] Callicles in the *Gorgias* has had his defenders, most notoriously

Rachel Barney is Canada Research Chair in Classical Philosophy at the University of Toronto. She has previously taught at the University of Chicago, Harvard University, the University of Ottawa, and McGill University. In addition to *Names and Nature in Plato's* Cratylus (Routledge, 2001), she is author of numerous articles on ancient philosophy, including "Eros and Necessity in the Ascent from the Cave," *Ancient Philosophy* (2008); "Aristotle's Argument for a Human Function," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (2008); "The Carpenter and the Good," in *Pursuing the Good: Ethics and Metaphysics in Plato's Republic*, ed. Cairns, Herrmann, Penner (University of Edinburgh Press, 2008); and "The Sophistic Movement," in *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Gill and Pellegrin (Blackwell, 2006).

[1] For an extended attempt to champion Plato's characters against their author, see J. Beversluis, *Cross-Examining Socrates: A Defence of the Interlocutors in Plato's Early Dialogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Of course, how we can *tell* what Plato intended is an enormously difficult question, and we need to be alive to the possibility that Socrates may not

The Southern Journal of Philosophy, Volume 48, Issue 1 (2010), 95–121.
ISSN 0038-4283, online ISSN 2041-6962. DOI: 10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x

Nietzsche.[2] It is less well known that some important ancient readers took the side of Socrates' first opponent in the same dialogue, Gorgias himself, in a debate about the nature and value of rhetoric.[3] My purpose in this paper is to offer a reading of Gorgias' defense of rhetoric and its relation to Plato's own critique. I will then trace some of the dialectical story to which the defense belongs, and show how it may have contributed to a broader ancient debate about the good itself.

1. GORGIAS' DEFENSE

The passage that I will call "Gorgias' Defense" runs as follows (bracketed letters are my own, for ease of reference):[4]

> [A] One should, however, use rhetoric like any other competitive skill, Socrates. In other cases, too, one ought not to use a competitive skill against any and everybody, just because he has learned boxing, or pancration, or fighting in armor, so as to make himself be superior to his friends as well as to his enemies. That's no reason to strike, stab, or kill one's own friends! Imagine someone who after attending wrestling school, getting his body into good shape and becoming a boxer, went on to strike his father and mother or any other family member or friend. By Zeus, that's no reason to hate physical trainers and people who teach fighting in armor, and to exile them from their cities! [B] For these people imparted their skills to be used justly against enemies and wrongdoers, and in defence, not aggression, but their pupils pervert their strength and skill and use them incorrectly. So it's not their teachers who are wicked, nor does that make the craft guilty and wicked; those who use it incorrectly are, I think, the wicked ones. [C] And the same is true for rhetoric as well. [D]The rhetorician has the ability to speak against everyone on every subject, so as in gatherings to be more persuasive about, in a word, anything he likes, but the fact that he has the ability to

be presented as having a monopoly on the truth. Cf. J. M. Cooper, "Socrates and Plato in Plato's *Gorgias*," in *Reason and Emotion*, 29–75 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[2] See E. R. Dodds, "Appendix: Socrates, Callicles, and Nietzsche," in *Plato: Gorgias*, ed., intro., and commentary by E. R. Dodds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 387–91.

[3] This is despite the fact that the connections among the texts I discuss have long been recognized. Cope cites the *Antidosis* and the *Gorgias* in reference to the *Rhetoric* (E. M. Cope, ed., *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, rev. J. E. Sandys, 3 vols. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1877], 1: 24n13). S. Sudhaus ("Zur Zeitbestimmung des Euthydem, des Gorgias und der Republik," *Rheinisches Museum* 44 [1889]: 52–64) notes the connections among the *Gorgias*, *Nicocles*, and *Antidosis* passages (63–64).

[4] Here and throughout, except where specified, I use 'Gorgias' to refer to the character in Plato's dialogue. The substantive views of the historical Gorgias are difficult to pin down, though the *Helen* certainly articulates something like the manipulative conception of rhetoric: whether Gorgias' Defense represents anything the historical Gorgias said (or could have said) is an unanswerable question. For a sophisticated account of the *Gorgias* (and later Isocratean and Aristotelian thinking about rhetoric) as responses to authentically Gorgianic problems and ideas, see Robert Wardy, *The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato, and Their Successors* (London: Routledge, 1996).

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

> rob doctors or other craftsmen of their reputations doesn't give him any more of a reason to do it. He should use rhetoric justly, as he would any competitive skill. And I suppose that if a person who has become a rhetorician goes on with this power and this skill to commit injustice, we shouldn't hate his teacher and exile him from our cities. For while the teacher imparted it to be used justly, the pupil is making the opposite use of it. So it's the one who uses it incorrectly whom it's just to hate and exile or put to death, not the teacher.[5]

The tone of protestation here signals that we are dealing with a counter-argument—a *Defense* against an *Imputed Objection*. But no such objection precedes it in our text. On the contrary, Gorgias himself has been speaking for a while, and speaking in *praise* of rhetoric. In the earlier part of his speech (456a7–c7), which I will discuss later as the *Advertisement*, he has been enlarging on the enormous powers given by rhetoric to its possessors, including the power to supplant and "enslave" the practitioners of all the other crafts. So Gorgias' protestations here must be responding to some objection that this Advertisement is expected to prompt. Reading backwards, the Objection is apparently that rhetoric is harmful and dangerous inasmuch as it facilitates injustice and aggression, and that teaching rhetoric is therefore morally blameworthy.

> *The Imputed Objection* (IO): The teacher of rhetoric is morally blameworthy, since he transmits a power that can be (ab)used unjustly.

There is a frustrating haziness surrounding the Imputed Objection. Surely it must matter to the critic how *often* rhetoric is used to do injustice, and how its harmful effects compare to its beneficial ones. What general principle about the connection between the facilitation of injustice and blameworthiness is being relied on here? And how are injustice and the abuse (or "incorrect" use) of rhetoric related to each other? But of course it is not in Gorgias' interest to supply a clear and cogent position to his critics; here, as in the later defenses of rhetoric I will consider, the Imputed Objection is only ever glimpsed through the palisades of the Defense. The Defense itself has a complex structure, roughly as follows:

> *The Defense*:
>
> A1. Physical agonistic skills such as boxing and pancration can all be abused.
>
> A2. But it would be ridiculous to blame abuses of physical agonistic skills on the teachers of those skills.

[5] Plato, *Gorgias*, 456c7–57c3. Translations from the *Gorgias* are by D. Zeyl (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), somewhat revised. Translations of other Platonic dialogues are from the various hands in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x, by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

[Argument for A2:

B1. Teachers of physical agonistic skills such as boxing and pancration transmit their skills to be used justly.

B2. If a teacher transmits a skill to be used in a certain way, he is not to be blamed if some students use that skill in the opposite way.]

C1. Rhetoric is an agonistic skill just like boxing and pancration.

D1. Teachers of rhetoric transmit rhetoric to be used justly [*the Just Use claim*].

D2. Therefore, teachers of rhetoric are not to be blamed if some students of rhetoric use it unjustly [*the Disclaimer*] [from B2 + D1 (the direct argument); and also from A2 + C1 (the argument from analogy)].

So Gorgias' Defense consists of two intertwined arguments. One is an argument from analogy with the physical agonistic skills (A2 + C1); the other is a direct argument based on the Just Use claim (B2 + D1). Given the well-known limitations of argument by analogy, we might suppose that the former is just meant to warm us up for the latter. And we might expect later discussions to drop the analogies, in favor of elaborating the all-important Just Use claim and the intriguing general principle B2. Exactly what conditions have to be met for a teacher to count as transmitting a skill "to be used justly"? And why precisely is it morally exculpating to do so? To answer these questions would be to address some persistently controversial questions about the relevance of intentions, expectations, and the actions of others to an agent's moral responsibility: one could even try to extract from Gorgias' Defense something like the doctrine of double effect. But in fact the ancient debate, as we will see, takes a very different direction. The Just Use claim drops from view, and even the question of the teacher's responsibility fades into the background, as the debate comes to focus on the value and legitimacy of rhetoric itself.

As presented, neither of Gorgias' arguments is at all convincing.[6] The argument from analogy has the deficiency inherent to its kind: we cannot assume, without begging the question, that the analogues really *are* relevantly analogous. The very fact that Gorgias takes the Defense to be called for indicates that teachers of rhetoric *are* sometimes blamed for abuses of it. If we agree with Gorgias that teaching the physical agonistic skills is blameless, this

[6] Gorgias' Defense has not been the focus of much sustained analysis or assessment. An exception is J. S. Murray, "Plato on Power, Moral Responsibility and the Alleged Neutrality of Gorgias' Art of Rhetoric (*Gorgias* 456c–57b)," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 34 (2001): 355–63. Murray agrees that the Defense fails, in large part because Gorgias' analogues do not hold, though he spells out the disanalogy rather differently (360).

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

may show not that our moral intuitions are incoherent, but rather that they are responsive to a morally salient difference between the two activities.[7] Moreover, much of the rhetorical power of the Defense comes from its *outré* imagery: the vision of boxing students deciding to practice by beating up Mom and Dad is bizarre enough to be funny. But that is because such abuses of boxing are *extremely rare*, which is plausibly the *reason* why boxing teachers are not blamed. Clearly, it would be unreasonable to blame the teacher for an abuse too rare to be predicted or (*a fortiori*) prevented; and it seems reasonable to describe the teacher as transmitting his skill for just use if that is the normal and expected outcome.[8] But this line of reasoning backfires by making [C1], the claim that rhetoric is relevantly analogous to the physical agonistic skills, look indefensible. For unjust abuses of rhetoric are *not* so rare as to be unpredictable—the very necessity for the Defense shows as much. Moreover, in the course of [B] and [C] Gorgias implies that the appropriate use of rhetoric is for *self-defense*; and there is no need for defense unless offense is to be expected. Thus reflection on the argument from analogy quickly suggests that the analogy fails in just the morally salient respect.

Gorgias' direct argument fares no better. For this hinges directly on the claim that the rhetorician provides his teaching 'to be used justly' (457b7–c1; cf. 456e3) (D1). And Gorgias never explains what this Just Use claim amounts to. There is no mention here of any concrete steps taken by the rhetorician to ensure his students' good behavior, and we have no historical evidence of any that he might be assuming.[9] Instead, we are left to wonder how the Just Use

[7] And of course, even if we did grant that there is a *prima facie* incoherence here, it wouldn't immediately follow that this should be resolved favorably to the rhetoricians: perhaps we should take a more severe view of those pancration teachers.

[8] Greek ethics has comparatively little to say about moral responsibility for the indirect effects of one's actions: we would want to say that Gorgias is here denying that the teacher is guilty of *negligence* in relation to the actions of his students, but it is not clear how he himself would spell that idea out. The most interesting text for these questions is alas, by design, entirely inconclusive: Antiphon's second *Tetralogy*, which presents conflicting speeches on the question of blameworthiness in the case of a youth accidentally struck and killed by a javelin. Cf. *Euthyphro*, 4b–e and Aristotle, *NE*, V.8. For what it is worth, Socrates' insistence in the *Apology* that he is *not* a teacher and therefore cannot be held responsible for the good or bad behavior of his followers (33a–b) suggests that he and his audience assume teachers to have a special degree of responsibility in relation to the relevant actions of their students. Cf. R. Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause and Blame* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 291–95 (on Aristotle), and R. J. Hankinson, *Cause and Explanation in Ancient Greek Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 71–79 (on sophistic texts).

[9] Beversluis claims that "having exhorted his pupils to use them [rhetorical skills] properly, the responsible rhetorician has done all that can reasonably be expected of him" (*Cross-Examining Socrates*, 300), but Plato mentions no such exhortation. Olympiodorus gets it right: "But we say that those who teach it are also responsible. For if they said 'Do not use it badly,' they would be blameless, but as it is they do not give this warning." He adds an interesting point in support: "That they do not warn them to use [rhetoric] for the good is clear from their composing speeches for incoherent and unreal cases too, thinking them worthy of equal

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

claim, understood as morally exculpating, might be warranted in the *absence* of such steps. Something like Protagoras' Great Speech in the *Protagoras* might seem to do the trick (*Protagoras*, 320c–28d): if justice is a prerequisite for participating in society at all, and is acquired by a universal process of indoctrination in early education (324d–28a), then the teacher of rhetoric would be entitled to *assume* that his students already possess it. And at 460a3–4 Gorgias hints at something like this view, when he suggests that it is an unlikely contingency that a student of his would need to be taught about justice: "Well, Socrates, I suppose that if he really doesn't have this knowledge, he'll learn these things from me as well."[10] But this strategy would run up against his admission that some *do* use rhetoric unjustly: whatever level of justice may be guaranteed by early socialization is insufficient.

The closest Gorgias comes to supporting the Just Use claim is with his insistence that the student's acquisition of an agonistic skill 'does not give him any reason' to abuse it (456d1, d4, 457b2). (He uses the same formulation immediately afterwards to claim that we have no reason to blame the teacher (456d8)—as if he hopes that the plausibility of the one claim will rub off on the other.) So perhaps Gorgias thinks that a teacher counts as providing his skill "to be used justly" whenever he does not provide his students with a new *motivation* to abuse it. But this is surely too weak a condition to be exculpating. For instance, in Book I of the *Republic*, Socrates and Cephalus both find it obvious that if you have borrowed weapons from a friend who has gone mad in the interim, it is *not* a just act to return them to him (331c–d; cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, IV.2.17–8). Returning the weapons would not give the madman a new *motivation* to harm himself or others, but it would *empower* him to do so much more effectively, and that suffices for the action to be unjust. The same reasoning should apply to the provision of other sorts of offensive capacity, such as boxing skill or rhetoric, in cases where we can anticipate harmful abuse—and the Defense itself shows that such abuse *can* be anticipated in the case of rhetoric.

The Just Use claim is further, and massively, undermined by its juxtaposition with the preceding part of Gorgias' speech, the *Advertisement* (456a7–c7). This Advertisement is the culmination of a whole series of boasts by Gorgias as to the *value* of rhetoric, in keeping with his student Polus' opening affirma-

honours" (R. Jackson, K. Lycos, and H. Tarrant, trans., *Olympiodorus*: *Commentary on Plato's Gorgias* [Leiden: Brill, 1998], 105). That is, Gorgias could hardly insist to his students that rhetoric should be used only in a good cause, given his own practice in the *Helen* and in *On Not Being*.

[10] The *form* of the condition here (future more vivid) does not suggest remote contingency, but the details of Gorgias' phrasing ("I suppose . . . if he really doesn't have the knowledge [*mê tuchê eidôs*] . . .") seem to me to do so. Cf. B. Levett, "Platonic Parody in the *Gorgias*," *Phoenix* 59 (2005): 210–27, at 213.

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

tion that it is the finest of the crafts (448c8–9). Rhetoric, Gorgias claims, concerns the greatest of human matters and the best (451d7–8), namely, *persuasion*: "in truth the greatest good and the cause of freedom for human beings themselves and at the same time it is for each person the source of rule over others in one's own city" (452d5–8). Rhetoric reigns supreme over the other crafts inasmuch as it can appropriate the goods they provide: "with this ability you'll have the doctor for your slave, and the physical trainer, too. As for this financial expert of yours, he'll turn out to be making more money for somebody else instead of himself; for you, in fact . . ." (452e4–8). When Socrates comments that rhetoric seems to be "something supernatural in scope," Gorgias bursts forth in a little aria: "Oh yes, Socrates, if only you knew all of it, that it encompasses and subordinates to itself just about everything that can be accomplished." He offers as a proof his own ability to be more persuasive with the patients of doctors, such as his brother, than the doctors are themselves, and he insists more generally that a rhetorician could persuade any gathering in preference to a craftsman in matters of the latter's own expertise (456a7–c7).

This praise of rhetoric as enabling its possessor to "enslave" others—that is, get them to work against their own interests, for the rhetorician's private good—expresses what we may call the *manipulative conception* of rhetoric. This manipulative conception is central to Gorgianic rhetoric as Socrates portrays it. It even turns up again in a much later Platonic dialogue, the *Philebus*, when a character says: "On many occasions, Socrates, I have heard Gorgias insist that the art of persuasion is superior to all others because it enslaves all the rest, with their own consent, not by force" (*Philebus*, 58a). And this idea seems likely to be taken from the historical Gorgias. At any rate it is hard not to be reminded of Gorgias' own hymn to the power of speech, *logos*, in his *Encomium of Helen*: *logos* is a mighty ruler [*megas dunastês*], which exerts a compelling power over listeners' souls, as drugs do over their bodies, so that the actions of those persuaded by it should count as involuntary (*Helen*, 8). Together with the view that the power of rhetoric is somehow dependent on our lack of knowledge, and our consequent reliance on mere opinion (*Helen*, 11; cf. *Gorgias*, 458e–9c, 464b–5e), this strongly suggests that much of Plato's critique of rhetoric is adapted from Gorgias' own account of its powers, with his positive evaluation upended[11] (a strange dialectical pattern that we will see repeated in the history of the Defense). On the other hand, as I will soon argue, the manipulative conception does not seem to be the whole story about how Gorgias in the *Gorgias* conceives of his art.

[11] Cf. A. Fussi, "Socrates' Refutation of *Gorgias*," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 17 (2001): 123–45, at 129.

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

It is from the Advertisement that Gorgias abruptly launches into the Defense. And so it is hard for the reader not to notice, at least subliminally, that the two are in a kind of pragmatic contradiction. The Advertisement praises rhetoric for its powers of enslavement, thereby *commending* it to an audience of impressionable prospective students (cf. *Gorgias*, 458b–c); the Defense condemns and disavows any unjust use of those same powers. Both the Defense and the Advertisement could be *true*: that is, it might be the case both that rhetoric provides powers of enslavement and that its teachers nonetheless provide it to be used justly (whatever exactly that might mean). But the two cannot both be *sincerely proclaimed*: insofar as a teacher of rhetoric proffers the Advertisement to prospective students, he loses any entitlement to the Just Use claim.[12] The countervailing rhetorical force of the Advertisement reduces the Defense to an obviously bad-faith, *pro forma* consumer warning. It is like the fine print on an overpromoted drug, or the rushed note at the end of a car commercial that piously warns against driving as depicted. These are a familiar target of satire, and Gorgias' Defense too is—a crucial fact often noticed by students, in my experience, but never discussed by scholars—really quite funny. Gorgias is being exposed and satirized here: the humor comes both from the anxious, nakedly self-serving character of the Defense itself and from the bathos of its hurried descent from the grandiose Advertisement.

Still, it is worth considering one final strategy by which Gorgias *might* try to uphold the Just Use claim and, with it, his Defense as a whole. This is suggested by Gorgias' repeated claim that to use an agonistic power unjustly is to use it "incorrectly" or "wrongly" (457a1–2, a3–4, c1–2). Arguably the teachers of any skill transmit it to be used "correctly," since a certain normativity is built into the very idea of skill: to teach students how to play the piano or fly an airplane, for instance, just *is* to teach them how to do those things correctly. However, there are obviously two kinds of incorrectness to be distinguished here. We might say that driving the getaway car for a bank robbery is using a car incorrectly: it's an incorrect action, after all, and that action consists in the use of a car. But this is a somewhat artificial sense, since the features of the action that make it incorrect have nothing to do with cars as such. It seems more natural to say that someone uses a car incorrectly when he plunges it into a river, plants vegetables inside it, or sets it alight for a bonfire. Such incompetent and perverse uses are not what a car is *for*: they are

[12] I here take it as obvious that to enslave one's fellow citizens is the height of injustice (see, e.g., Thrasymachus on tyranny at *Republic* I, 344a–c). Only Callicles, with his deliberately shocking reversal of conventional values, would claim that such enslavement can actually be just.

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

incorrect in an "internal" sense, one governed by our understanding of what a car is.

Might Gorgias try to claim that justice is part of what rhetoric is and is for, so that unjust uses of it are incorrect by this stronger, internal standard? The question is an intriguingly tricky one to answer. For in the course of his discussion with Socrates, Gorgias vacillates between two very different conceptions of rhetoric. Both place in the foreground the capacity of rhetoric to *persuade*: as I have already noted, Gorgias conceives of rhetoric as essentially the producer of persuasion (452e–53a). But under pressure from Socrates, who notes that this is not yet a distinguishing feature (for the other crafts persuade about their specialized topics), Gorgias finds himself pulled in two different directions.[13] At some points, he emphasizes rhetoric's *universality* or subject-neutrality: rhetoric differs from the specialized crafts precisely in that the rhetorician can be more persuasive about *anything* than anybody else (455d–56c, 459a–c). And this subject-neutrality is consistently associated with what I have termed the manipulative conception of rhetoric, on which it is essentially a tool of enslavement. But at other times, Gorgias proposes that rhetoric too is a specialized craft with a distinctive subject-matter, namely, the questions of *justice* debated in the law courts and political gatherings (452e, 454b). And this specialized conception fits better with a *cooperative conception* of rhetoric, on which it involves a genuine expertise in questions of justice—an expertise deployed on behalf of the community, as the doctor deploys his expertise in medicine. This latter conception is less well articulated than the manipulative one in Gorgias' comments, but it is clearly present both in the Just Use claim itself and in his boast that rhetoric is "the greatest good and the cause of freedom for human beings themselves," as well as being "for each person the source of rule over others in one's own city" (452d5–8). Whatever exactly he has in mind by "freedom" here,[14] it is certainly being distinguished from rule over others; and it is hard not to be reminded of the claim of Isocrates (Gorgias' alleged student, and his most important successor in the defense of rhetoric) that without rhetoric no moral reasoning or communal deliberation would be possible at all (*Antidosis*, 253–57). It is, I think, meant to be disquieting that Gorgias in this single line blandly slips from the cooperative conception (rhetoric as the instrument of freedom) to what sounds a lot

[13] I discuss these two conceptions of rhetoric, and argue for the attribution of both to Gorgias, more fully in "Plato on the Two Faces of Rhetoric," manuscript in preparation. Cf. S. Halliwell, "Philosophy and Rhetoric," in *Persuasion: Greek Rhetoric in Action*, ed. I. Worthington, 228–31 (London: Routledge, 1994).

[14] On which see Cooper ("Socrates and Plato in Plato's *Gorgias*," 33n5), though he goes too far in treating the cooperative, Isocratean conception as the *whole* of Gorgias' conception of rhetoric (40–42).

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

more like the manipulative one (rhetoric as the tool of rule over others—rule over others may not entail enslavement, but it has a distinctly zero-sum sound). We see here that he refuses to see any conflict between the two conceptions, a complacency that Socrates will soon challenge.

Now on the cooperative conception of rhetoric, though not on the manipulative one, Gorgias might well argue that to use rhetoric unjustly would be to use it incorrectly, in the strong "internal" sense. In fact, if we take justice as providing the content of the rhetorician's expertise, in the strong sense that mathematics does that of the mathematician, it may seem to follow that the person who acts unjustly is not really acting as a skilled rhetorician at all—as a rhetorician qua rhetorician, as Socrates might say, or a rhetorician in the strict sense (cf. *Republic* I, 340d–47a). And it can hardly be a coincidence that this is just the prospect explored, soon after the Defense, in Socrates' refutation of Gorgias. I will discuss the *elenchus* in just a moment: for now, suffice it to say that this line of defense is a long way from what Gorgias actually offers in the Defense—and incompatible with what he *does* say, since it entails that rhetoricians never act unjustly.[15] As initially presented, Gorgias' Defense excludes this strategy; and we have found no other that can salvage it.

To sum up: as initially presented, Gorgias' Defense is a total failure. Neither of his arguments can stand: his analogies are not analogous, and the Just Use claim, depending on how it is taken, must be either too weak to exculpate or too strong to be empirically true. Rather than drive the point home as I have done, by considering and rejecting the possible avenues by which Gorgias might hope to shore his position up, Plato hammers home this failure by dramatic means, through the satirical juxtaposition of the Defense with the Advertisement. In doing so he calls attention to the deep incoherence in Gorgias' understanding of his craft—to his complacent yet incompetent attempt to combine the essentially incompatible manipulative and cooperative conceptions of rhetoric. This is the kind of philosophical critique through dramatic ostension that only the dialogue form can provide.

This same incoherence is then brought out explicitly in the *elenchus* of Gorgias. For here Socrates and Gorgias agree that anyone who has learned rhetoric has learned justice, where that entails internalizing it as a norm. In outline, the *elenchus* runs as follows:

[15] Cooper ("Socrates and Plato in Plato's *Gorgias*") notes that the Defense explicitly grants that abuses of rhetoric take place, and that Gorgias' admissions in the *elenchus* thus amount to a significant change in his position: "You don't defend your innocence for unjust misuse of your teaching by denying that such misuse is even possible: that is a different defence of your instruction, making much stronger claims for it" (38n11). On my reading Gorgias is forced to shift ground by the obvious feebleness of his self-exculpation as initially presented.

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

(1) Rhetoricians have learned justice. (459d–60a)

(2) Anyone who has learned justice acts justly. (460b–c)

(3) Rhetoricians sometimes act unjustly. (460d–e)

As Socrates notes, admission (3) comes straight from the Defense (460c7). By contrast, (1) is elicited by a direct question from Socrates at 460a1–2, and Gorgias' assent is, as I have noted, rather shrug-like: "Well, Socrates, I suppose that if he [a prospective student] really doesn't have this knowledge [of the just and unjust, etc.], he'll learn these things from me as well" (460a3–4). Some interpreters follow Polus' later suggestion (461b–c; cf. 482c–d, 508c) in taking this to be an insincere concession, provoked by shame or necessitated by Gorgias' public position.[16] And commentators are often puzzled and disappointed by Gorgias' assent to (2), which is introduced by an induction [*epagôgê*] over the crafts.[17] For this seems to express Socrates' own "intellectualist" theory, on which knowledge is sufficient for and even constitutive of virtue; given that Gorgias has no obvious reason to agree to *that*, his assent here looks like sheer dialectical incompetence.[18] However, this reading is unnecessarily uncharitable to Socrates and Gorgias both, by missing the ways in which the *elenchus* as a whole is shaped by the Defense.[19] As we saw, the crucial weak link in the Defense was Gorgias' reliance on the underarticulated, undefended Just Use claim: for Gorgias to make good on this claim, and with it his Defense as a whole, he *needs* to affirm that the teacher of rhetoric has good reason to expect that students will use his teaching justly. And it is hard to see what could ground that rational expectation, unless

[16] See e.g., Dodds (*Plato: Gorgias*, 216–17), who notes that in the *Meno*, according to his student Meno, Gorgias made no such claim (*Meno*, 95c), and C. Kahn, "Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 1:75–121.

[17] Levett ("Platonic Parody in the *Gorgias*") argues persuasively that Socrates' *epagôgê* parodies Gorgias' own use of polyptoton; but this is unlikely to be the whole story about Gorgias' reasons for accepting it.

[18] See, e.g., Cooper, "Socrates and Plato in Plato's *Gorgias*", 44n20: "Socrates' argument here appeals to considerations he has given Gorgias no reason at all to accept." See however the important comments of Dodds (*Plato:* Gorgias, 218–19), to the effect that "Socratic intellectualism" is not so remote from traditional Greek ways of thinking about moral action as commentators tend to assume. Note too that Socrates (fairly or not) already describes Gorgias' position as inconsistent at 457e1–3.

[19] Kahn sees the relevance of the Defense ("Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*," 80–81, 83), and notes that there would be no point in Gorgias' rejecting (2): "the pressure on Gorgias to claim to teach justice is precisely the pressure to claim that he trains only good men, who will not abuse their power" (82). However, Kahn sees this as merely a matter of external social pressures, rather than a demand having a foothold in Gorgias' own thought (83, 84). Fussi also sees a deep incoherence here, presaged in the earlier discussion ("Socrates' Refutation of *Gorgias*," 123). However she construes the contradiction here rather differently, emphasizing the question whether the rhetorician can be as *omnipotent* as Gorgias claims (133, 138–39).

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

students of rhetoric as such regularly acquire an internalized commitment to justice as part of their specialist expertise (452e, 454b, 459d–e). So Gorgias' assent to the all-important (2) need not be read as an unmotivated acceptance of Socratic doctrine. Rather, (1) is already part of the cooperative side of Gorgias' own conception of rhetoric; with (2), he is opting for a stronger version of that conception in order to shore up the weak point in his Defense.[20]

On this reading, *both* sides of the *elenchus* are latent in the Defense: and it is Gorgias' own refusal to choose between the manipulative and the cooperative conceptions that dooms him to refutation. The refutation is thus *ad hominem*, and another rhetorician might escape it by adhering to only one conception or the other, as Polus will do. On the other hand, Gorgias is not presented here as just an individual rhetorician. Rather, he serves in the *Gorgias* as the personification of his craft and is speaking on its behalf. To open the dialogue, Socrates asked Chaerophon to inquire into Gorgias' identity: "Ask him who he is" [*hostis estin*], he says (447c9–d1). This "who he is" takes the role of Socrates' habitual *ti esti* question, "what is it?" usually asked about some virtue, which governs dialogues like the *Charmides* (159a), *Laches* (190e) and *Euthyphro* (5d). Like these, the *Gorgias* announces itself as a dialogue of definition: it is an attempt to identify Gorgias by defining the profession he practices. So when Gorgias praises and defends rhetoric, we are watching the discipline attempting to make the best case for itself that it can. And when he is refuted, we see the inconsistency of *rhetoric itself* as a civic institution. If one wonders *how* a civic institution itself could be incoherent, the *Gorgias* will soon provide an answer: when Socrates presents to Polus his own analysis of rhetoric, as a "knack" rather than a craft, he argues that it has the structure of a kind of deception or imposture (463a–5e). Rhetoric is a tool of aggression and manipulation *that masquerades as* a socially constructive skill with expertise in justice (I return to this briefly in section 3 below).

I cannot here give a full account of Socrates' analysis of rhetoric as flattery,[21] or chart the ways in which his critique of rhetoric develops and

[20] Irwin likewise sees the Just Use claim as motivating Gorgias' assents here (*Plato's Ethics* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995], 97–99): "if he knew that his pupils would probably use rhetoric unjustly, but he did nothing about it, then he could reasonably be blamed even if he hoped they would not use it unjustly; in the same way (to pursue Gorgias' comparison) we would rightly blame a gun dealer who sold guns knowing that the buyers were going to use them to commit murder" (98). And to reject step (2) would do no good: "if Gorgias admits that although he informs people about what is commonly considered just and unjust, he is well aware that they will not act justly, then his informing them does not count as even trying to ensure the just use of the craft" (98). Contrast this with T. Irwin, trans., *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 125–26 (cf. 116–18).

[21] On rhetoric as flattery and gratification, see J. Moss, "Pleasure and Illusion in Plato," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72 (2006): 503–35, and "The Doctor and the Pastry Chef:

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

deepens over the course of the *Gorgias* as a whole.[22] My point is just that the Defense itself, in conjunction with the Advertisement, dramatically foreshadows the line of critique brought out in the *elenchus*, namely, that it is incoherent as a civic practice. I will call this line of criticism the *Initial Critique*, to distinguish it from Socrates' upcoming critique of rhetoric as "flattery"—though, as I have just suggested, the latter can be read as a development and clarification of the same theme. For present purposes the important point is that we have to do with multiple layers of critique already in Gorgias' Defense alone: for this Initial Critique is interestingly different from the Imputed Objection to which the Defense ostensibly responds. If the reading I have so far offered is on the right track, Plato's objection to rhetoric is all along that it is *inherently* an incoherent, deceptive, and thus essentially vicious practice—*not* merely that it can be unjustly abused.

If this is right, we might well wonder what the standing of the Imputed Objection is in Plato's text. Perhaps Gorgias is merely responding to a straw man of his own devising. But this seems unlikely, for the Defense must have reminded contemporary readers of a real and memorable critique—not of rhetoric by that name, admittedly, but of sophistic teaching of public speaking. In the *Clouds*, Aristophanes depicts the sophists (represented by Socrates!) as purveyors of a corrupt pedagogy that—its great selling point—can make the weaker argument defeat the stronger (882ff.). Its turning point comes when young Pheidippides, having studied the Unjust Speech in Socrates' house, emerges to rejoin his father. He and Strepsiades quarrel over poetry, and Pheidippides *beats his father up* (1353–96). He then employs his new-found

Pleasure and Persuasion in Plato's *Gorgias*," *Ancient Philosophy* 27 (2007): 229–49. See also Terry Penner, "Socrates on the Impossibility of Belief-Relative Sciences," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 3 (1988): 263–325: whether or not one accepts his explanation, Penner is clearly right that there is an important general principle here for Socrates, one that also excludes (e.g.) rhapsody from the status of *technê*.

[22] A full account of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* would also have to take into consideration Socrates' later mooting of a "true rhetoric" (517a6–8) and his claim to undertake the true art of politics (521d), not to mention the rhetorical strategies (broadly speaking) that he himself practices in the dialogue. On these see G. R. Carone, "Socratic Rhetoric in the *Gorgias*," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 35 (2005): 221–41, and R. Weiss "Oh, Brother! The Fraternity of Rhetoric and Philosophy in Plato's *Gorgias*," *Interpretation* 30 (2003): 195–206. In this paper I use 'rhetoric' to refer to the practice first attacked in the discussion with Gorgias and then defined by Socrates at 463a–5e; this needs to be distinguished from the good kind of rhetoric (and how far *this* can be identified with the scientific rhetoric of the *Phaedrus* is another question again), and both are quite different from 'rhetoric' in the ill-defined contemporary sense(s). Though Carone ("Socratic Rhetoric in the *Gorgias*") is probably right that the true rhetoric can subsume and legitimate many of the techniques of the bad kind, it does not follow that Plato must have had a conception of rhetoric "as such" as a neutral practice, dependent for its value on how it is used. This distinction between the practice as such and the good or bad uses to which it is put seems to be exactly what he is arguing *against* (see section 3 below; cf. Murray, "Plato on Power, Moral Responsibility and the Alleged Neutrality of Gorgias' Art of Rhetoric [Gorgias 456c–57b]").

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

skill at speaking to prove to his father that the beating is *just* (1399–1436). Only when he proposes to beat his mother, an even more stomach-turning offense, does the appalled Strepsiades repent (1441–53). And his response is to blame the teacher: with the approval of the gods (and perhaps even their assistance), he burns down Socrates' house (1465ff.).[23]

Thus the most striking image in Gorgias' Defense evokes the climactic moment of the *Clouds*, Pheidippides' violence toward his parents: "Imagine someone who after attending wrestling school . . . went on to strike his father and mother or any other family member or friend" (456d5–8).[24] Moreover, Aristophanes' critique of rhetoric seems in an odd way to lie behind the strategy of the Defense itself. For the *Clouds* depicts teachers of rhetoric as vendors of an agonistic skill both analogous and causally connected to physical violence. Rhetoric may not provide students like Pheidippides with a new *motivation* to beat their parents up; but it empowers them to do so more effectively, by providing them with impunity. Moreover, Aristophanes depicts rhetoric as itself a form of violent agonistic combat, both in the *agôn* between the Just and the Unjust Speeches and in Pheidippides' brutal schooling of his father. The *point* of rhetorical skill, as depicted in the *Clouds*, is to inflict injury and establish dominance, as the Unjust Speech does over the Just. Socrates, despite his ostensibly neutral relation to the Just and Unjust Speeches, is aware of all this and complicit in it: his irresponsibility calls not only for blame but violent punishment. In the Defense, Gorgias turns this critique against Aristophanes, countering: if rhetoric is exactly like the physical agonistic skills, why should its teachers be uniquely to blame? He thus adopts at least some of the content of Aristophanes' depiction of rhetoric while upending his evaluative verdict—just as Plato himself does, I suggested, in borrowing from Gorgias' own account of rhetoric in the *Helen*. At the same time, it is not clear that the Imputed Objection is really a fair presentation of the Aristophanic critique. For Aristophanes' claim (like Plato's own) is that sophistic rhetoric *is by nature* a vicious force for aggression and injustice, not merely that it is sometimes "abused" to that effect. If Gorgias is here responding to Aristophanes, he is also misrepresenting him.

Where Plato himself stands in all this is even harder to say. Neither the Imputed Objection nor the real Aristophanic critique can be identified with

[23] Hermes (presumably represented by the household herm) is asked for advice at 1478ff., and the advice is apparently followed when Strepsiades decides on violence; some texts give the god a speaking role at 1508–09, egging Strepsiades on.

[24] The allusion here has received remarkably little discussion, but is noted by S. Benardete (*The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991], 24) and J. Dalfen, ed. and trans., *Platon Werke: Gorgias*, Band VI.3 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004], 209).

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

his own: whether he would endorse either is uncertain. We would certainly expect him to reject the Aristophanic critique as a critique of *Socrates*: in the *Apology*, Plato singles out Aristophanes as one of Socrates' dangerous "old accusers" and attempts to rebut his accusations (18bff.).[25] (Moreover, in the *Euthyphro*, Euthyphro is depicted as prosecuting his father for manslaughter: when Socrates refutes him, showing that he knows nothing about piety, Plato seems to be insisting that Socratic argument is a bulwark *against* the violent ambitions of parricidal sons.) But Plato might still seek to evoke the Aristophanic critique here as having some force against people like Gorgias, who actually do teach a corrupt profession of persuasion. After all, the Defense (so I have argued) is an embarrassing failure, and its inadequacy naturally imparts a certain credibility to *whatever* critique it is attempting to block. Whether later installments of the Defense do any better is the question I turn to next.

2. THE EXPANDED DEFENSE AND THE NATURE OF THE GOOD

When later authors adapt Gorgias' Defense, what catches their eye is just this (originally Aristophanic) analogy with the physical agonistic skills. For this suggests to them a broader point: rhetoric is quite generally analogous to other competitive advantages that, though dangerous and abusable, are uncontroversially good things. Isocrates (twice), Aristotle, and Quintilian all offer their own variations on this theme, in what I'll call the *Expanded Defense*.[26] In doing so, they neither cite Gorgias nor name the critics of rhetoric to whom they respond: but the agonistic analogies strongly suggest that they have our text in view, and that they see themselves as addressing a Platonic critique. (If

[25] Socrates in the *Apology* emphasizes that he is not a teacher, and on that basis disclaims responsibility for the behavior of his followers (33a–b). It is hard not to hear an echo of this insistence in Gorgias' Defense; whether the association should cast retroactive doubt on this particular strategy of self-exculpation in the *Apology* (which is rather unconvincing in the first place) is an intriguing question. By the time of the *Republic* Plato evidently views Socrates' public practice of dialectic as morally corrupting (VII, 537d–9d). And he there compares the damage it does to—yet again—an upset in family authority: the young man who hears traditional moral ideas refuted, without having anything better to put in their place, is like one who discovers he is adopted, and loses respect for the father and mother he had previously loved (537e–8c).

[26] Nothing here hangs on the question of whether Isocrates was a student of Gorgias (on which see Y. L. Too, "Appendix 1: Isocrates and Gorgias," in *The Rhetoric of Identity in Isocrates*, 235–39 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995]): but this would certainly add some urgency to the story. I make no attempt here to survey the whole of the complicated polemical engagement between Isocrates and Plato, and the even less clear relations between Isocrates and Aristotle. Key texts include, on Plato's side, *Euthydemus*, 304c–06c and *Phaedrus*, 278e–79b; for Gorgias, *Helen*, 1–5; for Isocrates, *Against the Sophists*, 1–8, *Nicocles*, 1–5, and

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Plato is *not* the critic in view, there is no other obvious candidate.) Just what they take the critique to be, and whether their implicit representation of it is accurate, are questions I will come to later.

The first of these texts is Isocrates' early *Nicocles*, which probably dates from 372–65.[27] Here Isocrates seems to be replying to critics (plausibly including Plato) of his own educational program as a teacher of rhetoric, for which he claims the name *philosophia*.

> I am surprised that those who hold this view do not also decry wealth, strength and courage. If they object to public speaking because some men do wrong and lie, they should reasonably blame other good things too, for some people who possess these will clearly do wrong and will use them to harm many. But it is not right to condemn physical strength just because some people hit those they meet, or to criticize bravery because some people kill those they should not, or generally to transfer the evil of men to their actions. Instead one should blame individuals who use good things badly and try to harm their fellow citizens using means that could benefit them instead.[28]

The argument is then reprised in his late credo, the *Antidosis*, again in the context of an extended response to certain unnamed critics (again likely including Plato).

> Someone younger than I, and without the anxieties of this occasion, might bring together many more of their contradictions.[29] For instance,

---

Antidosis, 8, 261ff., 270–85; and for Aristotle, the *Protrepticus*, as well as lost early works on rhetoric such as the *Gryllus*. Whether and in what ways Isocrates might be a target of the *Gorgias* itself is an open and controversial question. Guthrie notes Isocrates' use of Gorgias' Defense in the *Antidosis* and claims that it "suggests that Plato is writing later and criticizing Isocrates" in the *Gorgias*: this would be a tidier dialectic, but involves ignoring the pertinence of both the *Clouds* and the *Nicocles* (W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy (Volume 4): Plato: The Man and His Dialogues: Earlier Period* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975], 310; cf. 308–11 on the more general question). In addition to Gorgias' Defense, a connection is often seen between *Gorgias*, 463a6–8, and *Against the Sophists* 17; but see Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias ad loc*. On Isocrates and Plato more generally see J. M. Cooper, "Plato, Isocrates, and Cicero on the Independence of Oratory from Philosophy," in *Knowledge, Nature and the Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 65–80, esp. 71–78; Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias*, 27–28; W. Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, trans. G. Highet, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939–44), 3:45–155; C. Eucken, *Isokrates: Seine Positionen in der Auseinandersetzung mit den zeitgenössischen Philosophen* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1983); and Wardy, *The Birth of Rhetoric*.

[27] Following D. C. Mirhady and Y. L. Too, *Isocrates I* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 10.

[28] Isocrates, *Nicocles*, 1–4; translation by Mirhady and Too, *Isocrates I*, with revisions.

[29] Who are "they"? Plato might well be included among those who see Isocratean rhetoric as corrupting, and there are suggestive allusions nearby to hostile practitioners of "eristic," who seek to improve their own status by attacking Isocrates (258ff.; cf. *Against the Sophists*, 20), and who wrongly appropriate the name of "philosophy" for empty, barren theoretical speculations (261–69).

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

> on the same subject one could say that if some people inherited a vast sum of money from their ancestors and did not serve the city's interests but instead abused their fellow citizens and dishonoured their wives and children, would anyone dare to blame those who were responsible for the wealth, rather than demanding that the offenders themselves be punished? Or if others who have learned fighting in armour do not use their knowledge against the enemy but rise up and kill many fellow-citizens, or if they receive the best possible training in boxing or the pancration, but then instead of entering athletic competitions they hit everyone they meet, who would not praise their teachers and then put to death those who made bad use of what they learned? Thus we should have the same understanding of speaking [*hoi logoi*] as we do of other matters, and not judge similar cases in the opposite way, or show hostility to this power, which of all human capabilities is responsible for the greatest goods.[30]

As in the original Defense, Isocrates is concerned in the *Antidosis* to vindicate the teacher, that is, himself; but the focus has shifted to a more general defense of "the art itself," and he segues from here into a lengthy positive argument for its value (*Antidosis*, 253–57; cf. *Nicocles*, 5–9). In the *Nicocles*, the question throughout is the merits of rhetoric as such. (This seems a reasonable strategy even if Isocrates' ultimate goal is self-exculpation: it is hard to imagine a convincing argument for or against the teaching of subject *x* in the absence of an argument as to the value of *x* itself.) In both texts, the Just Use claim has disappeared: all the work is now to be done by the argument from analogy, with the analogues being drawn from a much broader class of advantages. In fact, in the *Nicocles*, the physical agonistic skills are dropped altogether in favor of the more generic advantages of wealth, strength, and courage. (The Aristophanic–Gorgianic origins of the argument still peek out, though, in the vision of men who abuse their advantages to go about assaulting innocent bystanders.)

The result of these streamlining moves is arguably a more powerful version of the Defense. Its power rests in the wide range and uncontroversial goodness of the analogues cited: if you infer from the harmful abuses of rhetoric that it is not a good thing, you must hold the same for some canonical, uncontroversial goods as well.

We find a third version of the Expanded Defense in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, almost certainly a later text than the Isocratean pair.[31]

---

[30] Isocrates, *Antidosis*, 251–53; translation is from Mirhady and Too, *Isocrates I*, with revisions.

[31] The *Rhetoric* is notoriously difficult to date, however. The text as we have it clearly includes tranches from different eras of Aristotle's work (cf. J. M. Rist, *The Mind of Aristotle* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989], 85–86, 136–44; C. Rapp, *Aristoteles: Rhetorik* 2 vols. [Berlin: Akademic Verlag, 2002], 1:178–93): given the general scrappiness of *Rhetoric* I.1, it seems to me impossible to date *this* occurrence of Gorgias' Defense. We know that several of Aristotle's early works focused on rhetoric and engaged with Isocrates: his very early *Gryllus* was apparently on rhetoric, and it or some other early anti-Isocratean work is said to have provoked a lengthy

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

> Moreover, it is absurd if <one were to suppose that> it is shameful not to be able to defend oneself using the body, but not shameful <to be unable to do so> with speech, which is more proper to a human being than the use of the body. And if <someone objects> that one who uses such a power of speech unjustly may do a great deal of harm, it has this in common with all good things except virtue, and above all with the most valuable ones, such as strength, health, wealth, and generalship. For using these things justly one may confer the greatest benefits, and using them unjustly, do the greatest harm.[32]

Here the question at hand has been tweaked once again: not whether rhetoric is a good thing, but whether or not it is shameful to learn it. Still, the origins of the argument remain on view in the opening analogy with bodily self-defense; and from there, Aristotle follows the generalizing moves we have already seen in Isocrates, with his broad range of analogues—though as a Platonist, Aristotle must hold, as Isocrates apparently does not (cf. *Nicocles*, 4; *Panathenaicus*, 223) that moral virtue is excluded from the class of abusable goods.[33] Aristotle also makes more explicit an even stronger conclusion already suggested by Isocrates' praises of rhetoric (cf. *Nicocles*, 4), namely, that the capacity of rhetoric to do harm is *a necessary concomitant* of its capacity to do good. The harms that the critic takes as evidence against the value of rhetoric are in fact evidence in its favor.

For the sake of completeness, we may as well note the apotheosis of the Expanded Defense, offered by the Roman orator Quintilian several centuries later.

> On the showing of these critics not only orators but generals, magistrates, medicine and philosophy itself will all be useless. For Flaminius was a general, while men such as the Gracchi, Saturninus and Glaucia were magistrates. Doctors have been caught using poisons, and those who falsely assume the name of philosopher have occa-

---

rebuttal from a student of Isocrates, Cephisodorus (Quintilian, II.17.14; Numenius *ap*. Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.*, XIV.6.9–10). According to Cicero, Aristotle lectured on rhetoric while a member of the Academy, saying that it was shameful to be silent and let Isocrates speak (Cicero, *De Orat.*, III.35.141). Guthrie gives an entertainingly bemused summary of scholarly views on the relation of the *Antidosis* and *Protrepticus* (W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy (Volume 6): Aristotle* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981], 74n2). It seems likely that Aristotle's appropriation of Gorgias' Defense dates back to these very early writings on rhetoric: if so, it would signal that from the outset he undertook not simply to reaffirm the Platonic party line, but to develop his own triangulating position, with appropriations from both sides. On Isocrates and Aristotle more generally, see Rapp, *Aristoteles: Rhetorik*, 1:224–35; Werner Jaeger, *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development*, trans. R. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 37–38, 55–60; Rist, *The Mind of Aristotle*, 5–7, 85–86, 141. For a more general exploration of sophistic themes in Aristotelian ethics, see H. Segvic, *From Protagoras to Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[32] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, I.1.12–13, 1355a38–b7; my translation. For discussion see Rapp, *Aristoteles: Rhetorik*, and "Nachbemerkung zu Kap. I-1: Das Problem der Rechtfertigung" (2: 199–233).

[33] He is sometimes prepared to speak with the vulgar, though, e.g., at *NE*, I.3, 1094b18.

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

> sionally been detected in the gravest crimes. Let us give up eating, it often makes us ill; let us never go inside houses, for sometimes they collapse on their occupants; let never a sword be forged for a soldier, since it might be used by a robber. And who does not realise that fire and water, both necessities of life, and, to leave mere earthly things, even the sun and moon, the greatest of the heavenly bodies, are occasionally capable of doing harm.[34]

By this time the goalposts have been moved so far that the original Imputed Objection has been lost altogether: the question can no longer be one of *unjust* uses of rhetoric, if the harmful effects of water and the sun are to be relevant analogues. The Objection to be answered is now apparently just that since rhetoric "is occasionally capable of doing harm," it is not a good thing. More important, this also seems to be the Objection at which the Isocratean and Aristotelian versions of the argument (to which I now return) are really aimed. Neither says anything to distinguish harmful, unjust, and incorrect uses of rhetoric, apparently taking the three to be coextensive. And each attacks what we may call the *harm criterion*: the principle that any practice or advantage that can be used to cause harm (or used unjustly, or incorrectly) is a bad thing. Yet at this point a chasm opens up with our original texts, for it is hard to see how either Plato's Initial Critique or the real Aristophanic critique actually relied on the harm criterion. On the contrary, both Aristophanes and Plato clearly mean to claim much more than that rhetoric *could sometimes* be abused to do harm. Though they differ on the details, both argue that the intrinsic features of rhetoric make harmful, unjust uses the easily predictable *norm*—the default setting, so to speak. (And it is surely *this* stronger charge that renders the teacher culpable.) On the other hand, the view attacked in the Expanded Defense does recall the original hazy Imputed Objection at which Gorgias himself took aim. Isocrates and Aristotle seem to be teasing out that Objection, with harmful effects now twinned with injustice as the criteria for abuse.

> IO1. Any practice or advantage that can be used harmfully (or unjustly, or incorrectly) is a bad thing [the *Harm Criterion*].
>
> IO2. Rhetoric can be used harmfully.
>
> IO3. Therefore, rhetoric is a bad thing.
>
> Corollary: IO4. If some skill or practice is a bad thing, to acquire it is shameful and to teach it is blameworthy.

The Expanded Defense offers a reasonably effective counterargument against this objection, by showing that the all-important harm criterion is subject to

[34] *Institutio Oratoria*, II.16.5–6, trans. H. E. Butler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library, 1920), vol. 1.

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

a *reductio ad absurdum*. But just as Gorgias' original Defense seemed to misrepresent Aristophanes' critique, so too the Expanded Defense seems to misrepresent Plato's. (Not by name, admittedly, as I noted earlier: but if he is not the critic in view here it is unlikely that any real person is.) For whatever his view might be about contingently abusable powers and advantages, Plato consistently argues that rhetoric is something much worse. The Expanded Defense seems to be an effective rebuttal of a straw man.

And yet matters are not quite so simple. To see why not, we need to locate this debate about rhetoric within the broader debate about the good to which it belongs. For both Isocrates and Aristotle, there is an important *general* principle at stake here: the harm criterion is dangerously misguided, and in rejecting it we should opt instead for what we might call a conception of *presumptive goodness*.[35] By a presumptive good I mean something that (1) is good *as such*, in virtue of its own nature or intrinsic features; and that (2) for this reason is characteristically a *cause* of beneficial effects, under normal circumstances. What is presumptively good is good in a default way, all else being equal, barring abuses or exceptional circumstances. (One could perhaps gloss this as a kind of conditional goodness, with the proviso that the conditions in question are ones that *do* normally obtain.) A presumptive good may be abused; but then the very concept of abuse implies a contrast with some more normal and beneficial *use*. Isocrates and Aristotle, I take it, mean to insist that presumptive goodness is what we have in mind when we speak of health or wealth as being good *tout court*, and that this usage is legitimate. We may describe something as good, and reasonably commend its acquisition and use, without any commitment to its *invariably* having beneficial effects.

Both Isocrates and Aristotle have strong positive arguments to offer for the presumptive goodness of rhetoric. Isocrates emphasizes that the art of speech is the natural expression of human rationality, making possible moral suasion and effective deliberation both publicly and privately (*Antidosis*, 253–57). Without it, civilization would be impossible. Aristotle emphasizes that rhetoric tends overall to favor what is true, just, and better (*Rhetoric*, I.1.12).[36] The role of the Expanded Defense is to support these positive arguments by pointing out that presumptive goodness is, so to speak, good enough: *all* the things we normally consider good (other than moral virtue, for Aristotle) are at most presumptively so. And both Isocrates and Aristotle present themselves

[35] The Expanded Defense is thus one of a family of contexts in which Aristotle, on questions relating to virtue and the good, allies himself more with sophistic and Isocratean ideas than with the absolutism of his teacher (cf. *Politics*, I.5, 1260a28ff.; *NE*, 1.3, 1094b14ff.). Cf. Segvic, *From Protagoras to Aristotle*.

[36] On Aristotle's epistemological optimism as the key to his defense of rhetoric, see Rapp, *Aristoteles: Rhetorik*, 2:129–33, and Wardy, *The Birth of Rhetoric*, ch. 5.

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

as arguing against an opponent who unfairly seeks to set the evaluative bar higher in the case of rhetoric alone.

This conception of presumptive goodness is an attractive part of the Expanded Defense. We do, I think, customarily operate with concepts of something like presumptive goodness and badness: when I say that bicycles are good and jet skis are bad, I do not mean to deny that each can be used to the opposite effect, but only to claim that good and bad effects are the norm in the respective cases, for reasons that have to do with the intrinsic features and causal properties of the objects in question. Aristotle is right that all agonistic advantages can be abused, and it does seem ridiculous to deny the goodness of strength and health on those grounds. On the other hand, once again, nothing in the *Gorgias* critique commits Plato to holding otherwise: rather, his views involve a complex account of what rhetoric *is*, one that would shows that it is (if anything) by nature presumptively *bad*. So the Expanded Defense still seems to leave the real critique unaddressed.

And yet the dialectic does not end on that rather depressing note: it goes somewhere much stranger. For though the *Gorgias* itself does nothing to commit Plato to the harm criterion, he *does* gratuitously commit himself to it in two other early dialogues, the *Meno* and the *Euthydemus*. These are likely to be earlier than the *Nicocles*, the first of our texts for the Expanded Defense, and we have no good way to date them *vis-à-vis* the *Gorgias* itself. But it is hard not to suspect that Plato's thinking about the good in these works is shaped by reflection on something very like the Expanded Defense, whether already circulated by his opponents or drawn from his own dialectical imagination. For in both the *Euthydemus* and the *Meno*, Plato seems to bite just the relevant bullet: he *agrees* that the powers and advantages invoked as analogues in the Expanded Defense—things like wealth and strength—since they can be abused, are indeed not good things. And by the same token he argues that only wisdom, which makes possible their beneficial *use*, is good in itself (*Euthydemus*, 281e; *Meno*, 88c–d).

> Let us then examine what kinds of things benefit us, taking them up one by one: health, we say, and strength, and beauty, and also wealth. We say that these things, and others of the same kind, benefit us, do we not?
>
> Yet we say that these same things also sometimes harm one. . . . Look then, what directing factor determines in each case whether these things benefit or harm us? Is it not the right use of them that benefits us, and the wrong use that harms us?—Certainly.
>
> Let us now look at the qualities of the soul. There is something you call moderation, and justice, courage, intelligence, memory, munificence, and all such things?—There is.

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

> Consider whichever of these you believe not to be knowledge but different from it; do they not at times harm us, at other times benefit us? Courage, for example, when it is not wisdom but like a kind of recklessness: when a man is reckless without understanding, he is harmed, when with understanding, he is benefited.[37]

In sum, "all qualities of the soul are in themselves neither beneficial nor harmful, but accompanied by wisdom or folly they become harmful or beneficial" (*Meno*, 88c6–d1). The *Euthydemus* gives a similar list of "advantages" that may prove not to be so: wealth, health, and other bodily advantages; noble birth, power, honor; and even being self-controlled, just, and courageous, if these are understood as distinct from wisdom. And the conclusion is much the same: "if ignorance controls them, they are greater evils than their opposites . . . but if good sense and wisdom are in control, they are greater goods. In themselves, however, neither sort is of any value . . . no one of them is either good or bad, but of these two, wisdom is good and ignorance bad" (*Euthydemus*, 281d6–e1).[38]

These arguments are of central importance for Plato's early ethics, and are the basis for the crucial "intellectualist" thesis that virtue must consist in knowledge (*Meno*, 88d). Exactly how we should take their conclusion is a bit murky, since the *Euthydemus* says both that the nonmoral advantages are, if rightly used, "greater goods" than their opposites *and*, in the same breath, that they are in themselves *neither* good or bad. We should perhaps say that on Plato's view health and the like are conditional goods, but that this conditional goodness (unlike Isocrates' and Aristotle's presumptive goodness) is not taken to license an attribution of goodness *tout court*.[39] Later on, this position is clarified (by being made more extreme) by the Stoics, who claim that such

[37] Plato, *Meno*, 87e–88b, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1997).

[38] Isocrates is the target of the framing discussion between Socrates and Crito at the end of the *Euthydemus*, in which a "speechwriter" is reported as having expressed contempt for the eristic discussions depicted there, and as criticizing Socrates for taking part in it (304c–07c). The writer's contempt for what he sees as impractical chatter (304e–05a) is authentically Isocratean, as is the positioning Socrates attributes to him in between politics and philosophy (305c–e) and the competitive stance *vis-à-vis* Socratic philosophy (305d–e). Socrates' reply is that such people are confused about the good, and wrong to think that they can do best by sharing in the goods of philosophy and statesmanship both. This does not touch directly on the issue of presumptive vs. (un)conditional goodness: but it does argue the more general point that Isocrates is confused and incompetent in his thinking about the good (306a–c).

[39] It might be objected that they are also conditional *bads*, since when directed by ignorance they are more harmful than their opposites. In practice, however, Plato seems to prefer to speak with the vulgar in calling "good" the states or advantages that are beneficial when correctly used; and it is important for his conception of "craft," for instance, that there is something genuinely if defeasibly good about ends such as health.

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

conventional "goods" are merely "preferred indifferents."[40] The Stoics are unequivocal in accepting the harm criterion: what is good must be absolutely reliable in its good effects, just as heat invariably makes things hot and coldness chills them (Diogenes Laertius VII.101–03). Preferred indifferents possess "value," in the elaborate Stoic terminology, and the wise person will opt for them whenever possible. But they differ in kind from the genuine good of virtue, which alone is reliable in its effects.

Plato's conclusions in the *Meno* and the *Euthydemus* are extreme and counterintuitive; but in both cases Socrates proceeds by pressing on a plausible pair of intuitions. First, goodness is a *causal* concept: we call things good because they have beneficial effects. And second, real causes must be *reliable* in their effects. Something that seems sometimes to cause p, at other times $\sim p$, cannot really be perspicuously described as the cause of *either* p or $\sim p$.[41] If this is right, there can be no such thing as presumptive goodness.

It is admittedly speculative on my part to suggest that rhetoric and its defense are on Plato's mind in the *Meno* and the *Euthydemus*. Rhetoric is not actually mentioned in either argument, and there is a significant departure here from our other texts: whereas the debate about the value of rhetoric concerns the harm it can do to *others*, the version of the harm criterion we find in the *Meno* seems to concern harm to the *possessor* of the putative advantage. (Thus the "abuse" envisaged is apparently the kind caused by lack of intelligence or practical wisdom, rather than by injustice as such.) Still, the two debates are linked by the familiar roll call of abusable goods, and the explicit application of the harm criterion; and it seems plausible that Plato's thinking about the good would have been intertwined with his thinking about the status of contested goods like rhetoric. At any rate he *can* be read as here adopting the *reductio* of a critic (be it the young Isocrates or a questioning dialectical voice of his own), and—in yet another of the reversals in which this debate seems to specialize—finding in it a *modus ponens* instead.

3. INCONCLUSIVE CONCLUSIONS

I have tried to locate Gorgias' Defense within two kinds of dialectical context. One is the context provided by the *Gorgias* itself, in which it points back to the Imputed Objection and, in conjunction with the Advertisement, forward to the *elenchus* of Gorgias. As for the broader, intertextual dialectic I have

[40] For this Stoic appropriation of Plato's argument, and some of its ramifications, see S. Menn, "Physics as a Virtue," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 11 (1995): 1–34.

[41] On the general principle here, see D. N. Sedley, "Platonic Causes," *Phronesis* 43 (1998): 14–32.

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x, by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

sketched, a major question still remains. It is the one I posed earlier: do Isocrates and Aristotle simply misread the *Gorgias* in taking its critique of rhetoric to somehow rely on the harm criterion? For even if Plato is willing to embrace that criterion elsewhere, his attack on rhetoric in the *Gorgias* does not seem to depend on it (and with it the weak objection that rhetoric *can* be unjustly used). But if Plato is not here in view, then Isocrates and Aristotle seem to be addressing a straw man of their own devising.

Though it may look straightforward, this question actually raises some permanently controversial problems about philosophical method. What I have in mind is that throughout the *Gorgias*, as his analysis of rhetoric progressively unfolds, Plato is working toward the invention of what we might call *philosophical social critique*. His aim is to offer something different in kind from the complaint that rhetoricians are bad people with bad intentions, who use rhetoric to do bad things. Instead, he undertakes to analyze and critique rhetoric *as such*—as a social institution, a well-defined kind (like a natural kind) with intrinsic features of its own, evaluable independently of the intentions and qualities of its practitioners. And this is so from the outset: his satire of Gorgias in the Defense and the refutation of him in the *elenchus* may be formally *ad hominem*, but given Gorgias' function in the *Gorgias* as the personification of his craft, their application is general.

It might be objected that, by defining rhetoric as a species of "flattery" and ignorant imposture, Socrates necessarily relies on claims about the character of its practitioners. But in fact he has only a few passing comments to make about rhetoricians as people—for example, that their souls tend to be "good at guessing, and bold, and by nature clever at dealing with people" (*Gorgias*, 463a7–8); and that, like the sophists they get mixed up with, they are confusing to deal with and confused in themselves (465c). For the most part, Socrates couches his critique of rhetoric in strikingly depersonalized terms. To put it more precisely, he detaches his critique from individual personalities precisely by *personifying rhetoric itself* as the object of analysis, as he does throughout the discussion at 463d–66a. To see what I mean by calling this depersonalized, it may help to compare its positive counterpart: the equally abstract account of craft which Socrates develops in the early dialogues (most notably the *Gorgias* itself, especially at 465a, 500e–01a, 503d–04a) and explicitly defends in *Republic* I (340d–50c). A craft is a systematic body of knowledge in which rationally explicable skilled procedures are harnessed to a constitutive end, one consisting in a kind of ordered and normative state (*Gorgias* 503e–04a). Medicine is the craft that produces health in the body of the patient, using techniques derived from a scientific grasp of what health consists in and how different procedures affect the body's condition. A doctor ("the doctor *qua* doctor") is a person who practices medicine so understood,

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

and a good doctor is one who does so effectively. How far medicine as actually practiced conforms to this conception—who if anyone *is* a real doctor—is another question altogether. Socrates' analysis is prior to that question: presumably part of its point is to provide us with the criteria we would need to judge individual cases. Rhetoric, and flattery in general, is a kind of socially constructed parasitism on craft so understood: indeed being mistakenly accepted as craft is *its* constitutive aim, and its strategy is to produce "gratification" so as to cloud judgment in its favor.

Such normative analyses of social kinds walk a tightrope between irrelevant abstraction and endlessly contestable empirical generalizations. The anti-Platonist opponent will argue that there is nothing in between: either these claims about the doctor qua doctor are generalizations about actual doctors (in which case they are not true) or they are mere metaphysical stipulations (in which case they have no normative standing). Or, more insidiously, the opponent may just insist on reading the Platonist analysis *as reducible to* a combination of dubious empirical generalizations and sweeping normative conclusions—as reducible, for instance, to the argument that since rhetoricians sometimes do bad things, rhetoric itself is bad.

It seems to me that in the Expanded Defense, Isocrates and Aristotle are offering just this kind of misconstrual—probably a highly deliberate one—of Plato's critical project. And this move is neatly prefigured by Plato in the original Defense, where Gorgias misconstrues the Aristophanic critique in just the same way. Both versions of the Defense, then, insinuate that the critique to be answered must somehow boil down to inconclusive empirical complaints about effects. Yes, rhetoric is sometimes used by bad people to do bad things—but then so is everything else, and so what? It seems to me an interesting and even urgent general question how far social critique of the Platonic kind can block this deflationary response and support its claim to identify real social kinds susceptible of depersonalized normative analysis. The defender of the critiqued practice will always make the Gorgianic or Isocratean move: reduce the critique to a complaint about contingent effects, shrug off those effects as the result of abuse by blameworthy individuals, and conclude that the practice itself is left unscathed. The kind of back and forth seen in the dialectic here is still with us in every inconclusive public debate about arguably pernicious media technologies, genres of entertainment, and modes of political discourse. It would be nice to know how the argument ends.[42]

[42] Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at the Princeton Classical Philosophy Colloquium and at the Department of Philosophy, University of Western Ontario. I would like to thank the audiences on both occasions for very helpful comments, and especially Jessica Moss, my commentator at Princeton.

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

REFERENCES

Barney, R. "Plato on the Two Faces of Rhetoric." Manuscript in progress.

Benardete, S. 1991. *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Beversluis, J. 2000. *Cross-Examining Socrates: A Defence of the Interlocutors in Plato's Early Dialogues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Carone, G. R. 2005. "Socratic Rhetoric in the *Gorgias*." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 35: 221–41.

Cooper, J. M. 2004. "Plato, Isocrates, and Cicero on the Independence of Oratory from Philosophy." In *Knowledge, Nature and the Good*, 65–80. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

———. 1999. "Socrates and Plato in Plato's *Gorgias*." In *Reason and Emotion*, 29–75. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Cooper, J. M., and D. S. Hutchinson, eds. and trans. 1997. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Cope, E. M., ed. 1877. *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*. Revised by J. E. Sandys. 3 Vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dalfen, J., ed. and trans. 2004. *Platon: Gorgias* [=*Platon: Werke* Band VI.3]. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Dodds, E. R., ed. 1959. *Plato: Gorgias*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eucken, C. 1983. *Isokrates: Seine Positionen in der Auseinandersetzung mit den zeitgenössischen Philosophen*. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter.

Fussi, A. 2001. "Socrates' Refutation of *Gorgias*." *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 17: 123–45.

Guthrie, W. K. C. 1975. *A History of Greek Philosophy (Volume 4): Plato: The Man and his Dialogues: Earlier Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 1981. *A History of Greek Philosophy (Volume 6): Aristotle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Halliwell, S. 1994. "Philosophy and Rhetoric." In *Persuasion: Greek Rhetoric in Action*, ed. I. Worthington, 228–31. London: Routledge.

Hankinson, R. J. 1998. *Cause and Explanation in Ancient Greek Thought*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Irwin, T., trans. 1979. *Plato: Gorgias*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

———. 1995. *Plato's Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jackson, R., K. Lycos, and H. Tarrant, trans. 1998. *Olympiodorus: Commentary on Plato's Gorgias*. Leiden: Brill.

Jaeger, W. 1939–44. *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, trans. G. Highet. 3 Vols. New York: Oxford University Press.

———. 1948. *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of His Development*, trans. R. Robinson. 2nd Ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kahn, C. 1983. "Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1: 75–121.

Levett, B. 2005. "Platonic Parody in the *Gorgias*." *Phoenix* 59: 210–27.

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Menn, S. 1995. "Physics as a Virtue." *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 11: 1–34.

Mirhady, D. C., and Y. L. Too. 2000. *Isocrates I*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Moss, J. 2006. "Pleasure and Illusion in Plato." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72: 503–35.

———. 2007. "The Doctor and the Pastry Chef: Pleasure and Persuasion in Plato's *Gorgias*." *Ancient Philosophy* 27: 229–49.

Murray, J. S. 2001. "Plato on Power, Moral Responsibility and the Alleged Neutrality of Gorgias' Art of Rhetoric (*Gorgias* 456c-457b)." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 34: 355–63.

Penner, T. 1988. "Socrates on the Impossibility of Belief-Relative Sciences." *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 3: 263–325.

Plato. 1987. *Gorgias*, trans. D. Zeyl. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Rapp, C. 2002. *Aristoteles: Rhetorik*. 2 vols. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.

Rist, J. M. 1989. *The Mind of Aristotle*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Sedley, D. N. 1998. "Platonic Causes." *Phronesis* 43: 14–32.

Segvic, H. 2008. *From Protagoras to Aristotle*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sorabji, R. 1980. *Necessity, Cause and Blame*. London: Duckworth.

Sudhaus, S. 1889. "Zur Zeitbestimmung des Euthydem, des Gorgias und der Republik." *Rheinisches Museum* 44: 52–64.

Too, Y. L. 1995. *The Rhetoric of Identity in Isocrates*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wardy, R. 1996. *The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato, and Their Successors*. London: Routledge.

Weiss, R. 2003. "Oh, Brother! The Fraternity of Rhetoric and Philosophy in Plato's *Gorgias*." *Interpretation* 30: 195–206.

20416962, 2010, 1, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2010.01007.x by University Of Toronto, Wiley Online Library on [21/10/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License