

Devin Stauffer:

The Unity of Plato's Gorgias. Rhetoric, Justice, and the Philosophic Life

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006

191 pages (bibliography; index)

ISBN: 0-521-85847-X

Price: £40; \$75

Devin Stauffer, who is Assistant Professor of Government at the University of Texas, takes the reader on a guided tour through the *Gorgias*, Plato's great dialogue on rhetoric, politics, and the good life. Stauffer has tried "to avoid imposing an order on the dialogue that is not its own" (p. 7) and "to follow the movement of the *Gorgias* on its own terms or as it comes to sight by following the movement of the text" (p. 8). The presentation is thus scaled roughly in proportion to the length of the three parts of Plato's dialogue: while the introductory low-key conversation with Gorgias is allotted 25 pages in Stauffer's book, the more intense interchange with Polus gets 40 pages and the spirited debate with Callicles some 80 pages. By showing and telling Stauffer makes both the characters and the topics of Plato's dialogue come to life, especially to readers who are not already familiar with it. The book to a large extent reads as a running interpretative commentary on the text of the *Gorgias* – the translated text, that is, for no knowledge of Greek is needed to follow Stauffer's discussion. What quotations we get are given in the author's own translation. The quotations, mostly of single sentences or phrases, are pinned down by means of references to the page and section numbers in the 1578 edition of Henri Étienne (the "Stephanus pagination" still in general use) and are thus easy to find, as are the numerous passages from which Stauffer seeks support of his claims.¹ The reader should definitely have a text or a translation with Stephanus pagination at hand. Given the character of Stauffer's project, I am sure he must have considered offering a translation with commentary. By choosing not to do so, however, he obviously gains more freedom to concentrate on the features in the text that he finds particularly striking and important.

Stauffer's book is well worth reading, for scholars and students alike, and his interpretation of the *Gorgias* is sustained by a genuine enthusiasm for what Plato has to offer. Stauffer's basic tenets are laid out in the Introduction (pp. 1-14). Although, as he argues, Plato has endured much criticism and abuse in modern times, he still has the power to attract and enchant the reader. People today are drawn back to Plato because they sense that his works contain "a richer and truer account of human life, of the soul and its deepest concerns, than one can find even in the greatest works of modern philosophy" (p. 1). Stauffer counts himself among those "who are drawn to Plato by an enchantment with his vision of the philosophic life as it was lived by Socrates" (p. 2). But he knows that, as initial attraction transforms itself, as it must transform itself, into a more serious encounter – how, for instance, is the 'philosophic life' related to Socrates' understanding of virtue, his estimation of political life, and his analysis of human nature and human concerns? – one is likely to become perplexed or frustrated. The reason is that Plato's dialogues are not only attractive, but also "extremely complex and difficult" (p. 2). This is particularly true of the *Gorgias*, which, when considered as a whole, "quickly becomes a bewildering maze without any clear unifying theme" (p. 3). Stauffer claims that previous inter-

¹ For example, "compare 472d1-9 with 470a1-8"; "see 437a2-3, 474b2-c3" (two of six references on p. 68); "consider especially 475a2-4"; "consider 475a2-c9 together with 474c7-d2" (both on p. 73).

preters of the *Gorgias* have focused almost entirely on the second half of the dialogue in their endeavour to prove that Plato primarily aimed to present “a moral position capable of overcoming the arguments and attractions of even the most radical immoralism” (p. 4). Stauffer wants to break with what he calls the common but questionable tendency to start from the second half of the *Gorgias* in order to establish the unity of the dialogue or its single unifying theme. He claims that the dialogue has rarely been treated in full and that no previous study “has successfully explained how its different parts fit together” (p. 5). Thus, as the dust-jacket tells us, Stauffer offers the first book-length interpretation of Plato’s *Gorgias* to bring out the complex unity of the dialogue. If the primary aim of the study is to show how the seemingly disparate themes of rhetoric, justice, and the philosophic life are woven together into a coherent whole, then its secondary aim is to demonstrate that Plato and Socrates had a more favourable view of rhetoric than is generally believed.

I would not say that Stauffer is knocking on open doors. However, some readers might object that he tends to overstate the difficulties of the dialogue (“apparent chaos”, p. 6), even though his observation that it contains “strange passages, questionable arguments, and confusing transitions” may be correct (*ibid.*). At the same time, Stauffer somewhat understates what others have already found in terms of the unity of the dialogue. To my mind, even E. R. Dodds’ famous commentary to his edition of the Greek text (Oxford, 1959) has more to offer in this respect than Stauffer allows. Dodds in fact deals with the unity and coherence of the dialogue, not only in the course of his commentary but also in his introduction. There he states that “the two themes of *rhêtorikê* and *eudaimonia* (happiness) are interlaced throughout the dialogue” even more logically and more skilfully than *rhêtorikê* and *erôs* are linked in the *Phaedrus*, and that “[t]he interweaving is dynamic, not external and mechanical [...] The movement is not that of a pendulum but that of an ascending spiral, where at each fresh turn of the road we can see farther than before” (Dodds 1959, p. 3).

Nevertheless, Stauffer manages to carve out a place of his own in relation to other studies of the *Gorgias* (see especially the quotations and citations on p. 4f.). His familiarity with the relevant literature is evident throughout. Thus, he quite often refers to Dodds’ commentary and seeks support in or takes issue with a series of modern scholars. While a reviewer can always point to missing items – I would have thought that, for example, the forty pages on the *Gorgias* in R. B. Rutherford’s *The Art of Plato* (London: Duckworth, 1995) deserve to be considered, as does R. D. Parry’s *Plato’s Craft of Justice* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996) – my only complaint about Stauffer’s bibliography is that it is rather parochial in including only English titles.² As for German contributions, to take only one foreign language, Theo Kobusch’s “Wie man leben soll: *Gorgias*” (in: T. Kobusch and B. Mojsisch, *Platon. Seine Dialoge in der Sicht neuer Forschungen*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996, pp. 47-63) has much to offer, and Joachim Dalfen’s translation and 400-page commentary on the dialogue (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004) will have to be consulted by everyone from now on.

Stauffer’s Introduction ends by raising a series of questions about Socrates and rhetoric, and about the existence of a Socratic rhetoric. Stauffer rightly sees a close connection between the *Apology* and the *Gorgias*: despite Socrates’ disavowal of rhetoric, is there not something rhetorical about his speech at his trial? Could it be that Socrates was more open to rhetoric than he explicitly suggests? Was his self-presentation “a part, not to say the heart, of a kind of rhetoric”? Socrates’ critique of rhetoric, Stauffer suggests, should be understood “as a critique only of a

² Stauffer also informs us that his view of the *Gorgias* has been shaped by the transcripts of two courses on the *Gorgias* taught by Leo Strauss in 1957 and 1963 as much as by any published work he has read (p. 13).

certain kind of rhetoric, not as a critique of rhetoric as such". Stauffer anticipates that this "surprising conclusion" along with the unsettling questions that will be raised about the true character and purpose of Socrates' claims about justice, will lead to a new view of the lessons of the *Gorgias*, helping us see Socrates himself in a new light and to understand better the philosophic life he lived (p. 12f.).

Chapter 1, "Examining the Master of Rhetoric" (pp. 15-39), starts with a fine observation on the significance of Socrates' appearing at the beginning of the *Gorgias* together with the Chaerephon of the *Apology*. Thanks to Chaerephon the two men linger on in the Athenian agora, and the everyday activities that Chaerephon usually performs there form the backdrop against which the *Gorgias* unfolds. Stauffer gives a fair representation of "the ensnaring of Gorgias" in two 'acts' (449c9-455a7 and 455a8-461b2) with a fine ear for what is and what is not being said. The first act is dominated by the question of the rhetorician's area of competence and of specialization. Stauffer is perhaps making Socrates too understanding when reading his remark that the rhetor "would not be able in a short time to teach such a large mob such great matters" (455a5-7) as an indication that Socrates and Gorgias agree on this point. According to Stauffer, "[i]f their conversation ended here, it would be very hard to see what might divide them" (p. 28). But he is right in observing that from 455a8 onwards the situation hardens, as moral issues come to the fore. Stauffer is preoccupied with a contrast between what Gorgias accepts, in spite of what he "really believes" (p. 35), and in contrast to his "true view" (p. 36), and with the "powerful impression" that Socrates must make on Gorgias, even leading to Gorgias experiencing "something akin to awe, an emotion with which he has little familiarity" (p. 37). The textual clues for getting under Gorgias' skin seem to me to be sometimes less than obvious; e.g. the use of *phainetai*, "it appears" (460c2, c6, and e2) does not necessarily imply that a character is going along only reluctantly.

Chapter 2, "Polus and the Dispute about Justice" (pp. 40-81), provides a discussion of Socrates' description of rhetoric (462b3-466a3), which, according to Stauffer, "is colored by his desire to provoke Polus and thereby to draw him into a quarrel" (p. 44). This part of the *Gorgias* contains the famous 'analogies' between genuine and phantom arts in intellectual and corporeal matters. Stauffer stresses that Socrates' claim – that none of the phantom arts (sophistry, rhetoric, cosmetics, cookery) has an account (*logos*), and thus that rhetoric is not an art – is also implied by Gorgias when he says earlier in the dialogue that knowledge of justice is not a prerequisite of rhetoric. The ensuing discussion of whether rhetoricians are powerful or not (466a4-468e9) leads to the question of justice and to what Stauffer calls "the Socratic thesis", namely "that unjust actions are never enviable because injustice is the greatest of all evils" (esp. 469b8-9) (p. 56; cf. also p. 12). Polus attempts to refute Socrates by pointing to the unjust but fortunate king Archelaus of Macedonia (470c4-471e1). While I do not think that Socrates' refusal to accept anything of what Polus says (471d8-9) includes even Polus' claim that Archelaus is obviously an unjust man, Stauffer is right in pointing to "a crucial limit of the discussion between Socrates and Polus, in so far that they nowhere examine what would seem to be the prior question of what justice is" (p. 63). During the following intermezzo on philosophical versus rhetorical refutation and on political decisions versus philosophical refutation (471e-474c) Socrates expands his thesis to include the claim that those who do injustice are better off if they pay the penalty than if they escape punishment (472d6-473e3). Thereafter Socrates introduces the concept of the noble (*to kalon*) and the shameful (*to aischron*), a central topic of the *Gorgias* in terms of the development of the dialogue (both Gorgias and Polus fell victim to shame, Callicles would say; once you free yourself of that, you are free to act according to true values). The discussion of the shameful and the bad, on the one hand, and the noble and good, on the other, represents a dazzling display of Socratic dialectics, and Stauffer's presentation of it is very helpful (especially pp. 68-80). He has a keen eye for what is missing, both in the way of positive arguments and in the way of unexploited possibilities for objection.

However, while I find Stauffer's analysis helpful, I find it hard to accept the suggestion that Polus, despite his emphasis on the wickedness of Archelaus, should reveal being "disturbed by the spectacle of such blatant and successful injustice" and that Polus should display "a sense of indignation at Archelaus and his 'successful' injustice" (p. 74). Polus might indeed have made certain objections to Socrates' argument, but does his failure to deny the shamefulness of doing injustice reflect "an *unwillingness* to deny it, an unwillingness that stems from the fact that he *truly believes* that doing injustice is shameful, so that Socrates' argument *does succeed* in revealing in Polus a buried concern for justice" (ibid., Stauffer's italics)? Nevertheless, Stauffer may have a point when he argues that Socrates does not make a complete and convincing case when arguing that punishment cures the soul of injustice. Nor does Socrates answer the question of exactly why injustice is such "a great harm and an amazing evil" in the first place. Stauffer's idea that Socrates' refutation of Polus may be regarded as an act of punishment for the benefit of Polus's soul (although "it would be overly optimistic to expect the transformation in his views to endure for long") is definitely appealing (see p. 79; similarly for Callicles, p. 133).

In Stauffer's reading, Gorgias appears impressed by Socrates' success in taming Polus and by what he has shown about Polus' deeper concerns, while at the same time Gorgias might wonder "whether the attachment to justice that Socrates has revealed in Polus is really a sign of a deep concern in the human soul rather than a reflection of Polus' susceptibility to bouts of shame. If these are Gorgias' thoughts at this stage of the dialogue, he will welcome the entry of Callicles" (p. 82). Chapters 3 ("The Confrontation between Socrates and Callicles", pp. 82-122) and 4 ("Socrates' Situation and the Rehabilitation of Rhetoric", pp. 123-176) are devoted to the last and longest part of the *Gorgias* – its culmination, by all criteria. Again, Stauffer follows the text closely and helpfully, dealing first with Callicles' famously provocative opening speech on *physis* (nature) and *nomos* ('convention'/custom) and on the philosophic and the political life (482c4-486d1), and then with Socrates' demolition of Callicles's view of justice (486d2-491d4), which leads on to the topic of moderation versus immoderation, and to the question of hedonism (491d4-499d8). Stauffer highlights many minor points while never letting the overall development of the argument out of sight. Sometimes I think he puts too much into what is said (or rather why it is said) in the dialogue, as, for example, when he states that Callicles "is not really a hedonist" (p. 116), thereby creating the problem as to why Callicles argues as one in the first place, or when he claims that although "Callicles' hedonism is not entirely sincere, neither is it simply insincere, and it would be a mistake to dismiss it as merely a false and completely misleading façade" (ibid.). Questions like "Why would Callicles try to conceal his deepest convictions even from himself?" and "What is the source of Callicles' reluctance to acknowledge what are in fact his own deeper views?" (p. 116f.) deserve further discussion after Stauffer's treatment.

Chapter 4, which focuses on a part of the *Gorgias* in which many of the main topics of the dialogue are handled for a second and third time, contains some fine observations on Socrates' way of conducting a discussion and on how even Socrates gets his way by assertion rather than by way of argumentation (e.g., p. 131f., 153). Stauffer takes into account both the form and the substance of the conversation, showing the reader that there is "a movement away from the question of how best to preserve the purity of one's own soul and back to the question of the proper task of politics" (p. 150) and that "[t]he crucial issue is no longer posed as a contest between the private philosophic life and the political life, but rather as one between two versions of the political life" (p. 161). There is, in other words, harmony between philosophy and 'the city'. Any reader may be tempted to wonder, with Stauffer, whether "[t]he very extremism of Socrates' attack may be intended, in part, to make us question whether that attack is really sound and thus to consider whether political leadership can reasonably be expected to accomplish what Socrates demands of it here" (p. 159), and to ask: "Could any rhetoric – even the

true rhetoric to which Socrates points – dispense entirely with all forms of flattery and with all service to desires [...]?” (p. 160). To Stauffer’s credit, he does pay due attention to Socrates’ image of a new rhetoric as a somehow realistic project, not a philosopher’s unrealistic dream.

No monograph on the *Gorgias* can make up for the reading of the *Gorgias*. It is to be hoped that Stauffer’s book, interesting and engaging as it is, will propel readers to Plato’s text. The reader may then also discover whether he or she shares my reservations with respect to some underlying assumptions of Stauffer’s. First, there is Stauffer’s tendency almost to treat the characters as real persons and to worry a great deal about what they “really” mean and why they do not say what they must really mean. Second, and more specifically, there is the dramatization of Socrates’ actual situation and the postulation of Socrates’ (hidden) intention of transforming Gorgias into a practitioner of a “new kind of rhetoric” (p. 178). According to Stauffer, Socrates is asking for Gorgias’ help in the creation of this new and noble rhetoric. He is “interested in Gorgias as a potential ally” (p. 40) and is “suggesting a nobler use to which Gorgias might put his powers” (p. 41). What Socrates has to say to Polus about rhetoric is furthermore meant “for the ears of Gorgias as much as for those of Polus” (p. 80) – there is even mention of “the education of Gorgias in a nobler form of rhetoric” (p. 122). Stauffer suggests that, in his conversation with Callicles, Socrates “is trying to indicate at least the outlines of a predicament he is in and thus to call attention to his need for assistance (p. 165f), and argues that Socrates “may have emphasized the danger he faces in order to call it to the attention of Gorgias” (p. 168). There are many question marks in Stauffer’s text (“How exactly could Gorgias help Socrates? How seriously are we to take the possibility of a Gorgias-Socrates alliance?”, p. 167; “How realistic was Socrates’ hope to find in Gorgias an ally who could successfully carry out the rhetorical project to which he points in the *Gorgias*?”, p. 180). I have put many more in the margins of Stauffer’s book.

Stauffer pulls all his points together in the brief Conclusion, “A Final Reflection on Noble Rhetoric” (pp. 177-182). There he also brings Plato into the picture. For did not Plato himself accomplish what Socrates had in mind? By not protecting Socrates while he was alive, Plato did not, according to Stauffer, accomplish the most basic task that Gorgias might have been able to accomplish. But Plato succeeded tremendously in securing Socrates and Socratic philosophy a place in the hearts and minds of future generations. Thus, as Stauffer contends, the *Gorgias* can open a window to the aims of Plato’s “project” as a whole: “In a word, *Gorgias* gives us reason to believe that Plato in fact had a literary-rhetorical project in his presentation of Socratic philosophy, a project that was guided by his appreciation of the problem that the *Gorgias* brings to light. After all, it is Plato, the author of the *Gorgias*, who helps us to understand the need for rhetoric [...]. In this sense, the very ‘failure’ presented in the *Gorgias* may be seen as Plato’s way of revealing the problem to which his writings respond and of indicating the role he plays in defending Socratic philosophy” (p. 181).³ That is an interesting perspective on Plato’s *Gorgias*, which every reader of Stauffer’s book is sent up or back to Plato’s text(s) to ponder.

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³ On p. 181 I found two misprints, maybe the only misprints in what is generally a nicely produced book.

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