

Marina McCoy:

Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists

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It is commonly held that Plato defines philosophy as somehow standing in opposition to sophistry and rhetoric. Whilst the former endeavour is motivated by the search for objective truth, the latter pair is concerned with winning the argument at all costs, irrespective of the truth of the matter. In *Plato on the Rhetoric of the Philosophers and Sophists*, Marina McCoy resists this simplistic polarity, arguing that the Platonic opposition is between philosopher and sophist as particular types of individuals properly characterized by their motivations. Clear-cut verbal definitions of ‘philosopher’ and ‘sophist’ are too difficult, and, this being the case, Plato develops and demonstrates their differences at least in part through the way that each employs rhetoric to further his specific aims. As she explains in her “Introduction” (pp. 1-22), McCoy focuses her attention on six dialogues (the *Apology*, *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Republic*, *Sophist*, and *Phaedrus*), each of which has something to say about “evaluating the relative places of philosophy, sophistry, and rhetoric” (p. 20).

In her second chapter (“Elements of Gorgianic Rhetoric and the Forensic Genre in Plato’s *Apology*”, pp. 23-55), McCoy scrutinizes the rhetoric of the *Apology*, arguing that Socrates’ defence employs elements of sophistic rhetoric. In support of this, she points to what appear to be deliberate parallels between the language and *topoi* of the *Apology* and Gorgias’ *Defence of Palamedes*. One might think that the adoption of sophistic techniques would rather undermine Socrates’ explicit attempts to distance himself from the Sophists. In fact, McCoy avers, the sophistic elements of Socrates’ speech are intended to emphasize his separation from that group. Plato is constructing a defence of Socrates (and, through Socrates, of philosophy) that adapts traditional rhetorical devices in support of philosophical values. Socrates stands apart from the sophists because he uses rhetoric in “subjugation to the demands of virtue” (p. 39). For when Socrates employs standard forensic *topoi*, he aims as much, if not more, at persuading his audience to care for their souls as at defending himself. Thus, for example, McCoy identifies Socrates’ infamous admission of ignorance as part of an argument from probability (*eikos*): if he doesn’t know anything, how could he teach the young anything that might corrupt their souls? Gorgias’ Palamedes also employs argument from probability, but for the sole purpose of arguing for his innocence. Socrates’ rhetoric, in contrast, is motivated by the desire to persuade his audience of their own inadequacies: “more important to Socrates than the fact that his ignorance shows his innocence is the very admission *that* he is ignorant. [...] Socrates wants others to identify with his own condition, to sympathize with him, not *qua* defendant but *qua* human being” (p. 43).

The apparent similarities between Socratic questioning and sophistic eristic are explored in McCoy’s third chapter (“The Rhetoric of Socratic Questioning in the *Protagoras*”, pp. 56-84), which takes the *Protagoras* as its focus. McCoy rejects the notion that the *Protagoras* illustrates a

straightforward conflict between the rationality of philosophy and the rhetorical nature of sophistry. She argues that Socratic “question and answer is a form of philosophical rhetoric. That is, Socratic questioning in the *Protagoras* is a mode of speaking in which the form of the speech is as important as its content” (p. 59). McCoy finds evidence of the rhetorical nature of Socrates’ approach both in the *ad hominem* nature of his questions to Protagoras and in its “significant social and performative dimensions” (p. 60) as a collaborative conversational interaction. As with the *Apology*, Plato is adapting rhetoric for philosophical purposes; Socrates “connects the rational to the rhetorical” (p. 71).

Chapter 4 treats “The Competition between Philosophy and Rhetoric in the *Gorgias*” (pp. 85-110). Again, McCoy rejects the common assumption that the *Gorgias* is intended to establish the divide between philosophy and rhetoric. Rather than assuming the distinction of rhetoric and philosophy (and the superiority of the latter), Plato uses the conversation critically to examine the difference between the sophist and philosopher, and to ask “still deeper questions [...] about the relative value of philosophy and rhetoric” (p. 86). Both philosophical and sophistic rhetoric are scrutinized in the *Gorgias* and the superiority of the former is not always as clear as one might expect. The motivations and commitments of the speaker fundamentally inform the relative value of their rhetoric. Thus, “[t]he *Gorgias* does not reject rhetoric as such but instead connects good rhetoric to the possession of [...] philosophical virtues” (p. 110).

McCoy turns her attention to the *Republic* in her fifth chapter (“The Dialectical Development of the Philosopher and the Sophist in the *Republic*”, pp. 111-137). Here the emphasis is less on the use of rhetoric and more on the way that the distinction between sophist and philosopher is investigated and developed dialectically throughout the dialogue. McCoy argues that the philosopher is distinguished by his love of the Forms, and points out that this distinction will not be available to those, including the sophists, who do not accept the Forms. Rhetorical considerations are more or less limited to the suggestion that Socrates’ use of imagery represents an attempt to appeal to his audience’s current desires in order to reorient them towards a philosophical goal: “While the philosopher’s ability to persuade relies on his audience’s desires as much as the rhetorician’s, he seeks to connect those current desires with the person’s still hidden desires for forms” (p. 136).

McCoy’s claim is, as I understand it, that Socrates’ moral character guides his use of rhetoric and should thus inform our understanding of the nature of the philosopher and of philosophical speech. With the *Sophist*, the subject of her sixth chapter (“Philosophers, Sophists, and Strangers in the *Sophist*”, pp. 138-166), things are necessarily complicated by the fact that Socrates is silent throughout most of the dialogue. McCoy suggests that the *Sophist*’s main speaker, the Stranger from Elea, can usefully be compared to Socrates in the *Theaetetus* and that this pair of “dialogues function to draw us into the philosophical question of what philosophy is” (p. 139). Whilst the Stranger might wish to distance himself from the sophist, he is not, from Socrates’ point of view, fully justified in identifying himself as a philosopher. The difference between Socrates and the Stranger is made clear by the motivations guiding their rhetoric: “Both Socrates and the Stranger are interested in persuasion, but Socrates’ rhetoric is to be found in the role of a midwife who is helping others to give birth to ideas and to grow in self-knowledge, while the Stranger’s rhetoric is oriented toward making his interlocutor more compliant and dispassionate” (p. 140).

With her seventh and final chapter, McCoy considers “Love and Rhetoric in Plato’s *Phaedrus*” (pp. 167-196), which, as she notes, gives an explicit and extended treatment of rhetoric. Some might find it odd that McCoy fails to treat either the speech of Lysias or Socrates’ immediate response, bearing in mind their quite explicit status as rhetorical set-pieces. McCoy prefers to focus on Socrates’ second speech and his account of good rhetoric, both of which she argues are themselves

rhetorical insofar as they “are designed to lead Phaedrus’ soul away from sophistical rhetoric and towards love of the forms” (p. 167). McCoy begins with a discussion of Socrates’ technical speech on rhetoric and argues that, for Socrates, the art of rhetoric can only be practised by those who have knowledge of the truth along with an understanding of the nature of the souls and beliefs of their audience. McCoy goes on to suggest that, while the *Palinode* is undoubtedly intended to exhibit many of the elements of good rhetoric, its imperfections are a result of the impossibility of a human being ever perfectly mastering the rhetorical art. Having pointed out what she takes to be the rhetorical elements of the *Palinode* and Socrates’ technical speech, McCoy argues that philosophical rhetoric is not dependent on any explicit technique. Rather, “any way of speaking that leads the soul to seek the forms and increases its desire to pursue them [...] counts as philosophical rhetoric” (p. 190). The chapter ends with a brief conclusion for the book as a whole, in which McCoy reiterates her claim that “Plato does not reject rhetoric in favor of a rhetoric-free philosophy [...]. Instead, we see that Plato presents philosophy as being intertwined with rhetoric” (p. 194). A speaker motivated by virtue and knowledge can and, perhaps, should employ rhetoric to persuade others towards philosophy.

McCoy’s central claim is that philosophy “as Plato understands it, includes important rhetorical dimensions” (p. 3). Those looking for an extended discussion of Greek technical *rhetorikê* will, I fear, be disappointed. Whilst, for example, elements of Athenian forensic rhetoric are important to her treatment of the *Apology*, in general McCoy, as she admits, uses ‘rhetoric’ in “its broad, contemporary sense of ‘the means used to persuade through words’” (p. 3). My feeling is that adopting this quite vague definition of rhetoric is a somewhat risky tactic. McCoy claims, in passing, that “Plato does not always treat *rhetorikê* as a political practice” (p. 9). I confess that I find this claim a difficult one to swallow. Even in the *Phaedrus*, where rhetoric does seem, in being wrested from Lysias, to have been divorced from the *polis*, the philosophical version of rhetoric offered by Socrates might well be considered, in some sense, to be an alternative kind of *political* rhetoric. For Plato, appropriation of rhetoric is, I suggest, an appropriation of politics. I think McCoy does herself a disservice in underplaying this political aspect, especially when her emphasis is so often on the difference in the ethical stances adopted by philosopher and sophist.

My second minor concern is with the manner in which McCoy verges on elision in her treatment of Plato and Socrates, and the internal and external audiences of their rhetoric. At times she highlights the distinction between Socrates’ interaction with his dramatic audience and Plato’s interaction with the reader in a way that nicely complements her case. At other times, however, the nuances of the different levels of discourse are lost. One example comes in Chapter 3’s discussion of the performative elements of Socratic questioning in the *Protagoras*. McCoy argues that Socrates’ questions are rhetorical in one sense because “philosophy takes place in conversation rather than in the realm of thought, logic, or systematic writing” (p. 82). My question is whether the rhetorical force of such conversations remains as strong when we think about them as the written fictions. Are we, as readers, part of this conversation? Are we intended to be affected by this (use of) rhetoric, or are we simply asked to observe its persuasive (or, quite often, unpersuasive) force?

Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists is a wide-ranging, sensitive, and generally persuasive account of the difficult relationship between sophist and philosopher in the Platonic dialogues. The role of rhetoric in this relationship is more obvious in some chapters than in others (the chapter on the *Republic*, for example, seems to suggest that Socrates’ use of imagery is rhetorical almost as an afterthought). The chapter on the *Apology* will be of greatest appeal to those interested

in the history of rhetoric. The rest of the volume will, I suspect, appeal more to scholars of ancient philosophy. Whilst the suggestion that Platonic dialogues are in some sense protreptic (intended to turn us towards philosophy) is relatively familiar, McCoy's development of this idea is extensive and original.

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