

IS THE *APOLOGY* COUNTER-RHETORIC?

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Various commentators¹ of Plato's *Apology of Socrates* have noted that in spite of Socrates' claim therein to be speaking "at random, using words that I happen upon,"² the *Apology*, when viewed in light of the rhetorical norms of the fourth century B.C., is a very well constructed work. For example, Riddell noted that

The *Apology* is artistic to the core, whether in respect of the recurrence of received *tópoi* [commonplaces] of Attic pleaders, or of the arrangement and outward dress of the arguments..., or of the tripartite dramatic arrangement of the whole.³

And Dyer noted that "all the laws of oratorical art are here carefully observed..."⁴ However, aside from its occasional use to bolster the argument that the *Apology* cannot be the exact reproduction of the speeches given by the historical Socrates at his trial, there has been almost no attempt to derive any philosophical significance from the rhetorical form of the *Apology*.

In his article "Irony and Rhetoric in Plato's *Apology*,"⁵ R.E. Allen

¹ For example, Riddell, Dyer, Burnet and Friedländer. Plato, *The Apology of Plato*, ed. James Riddell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1877), pp. xx-xxv (reprinted by Arno Press, New York, 1973). Plato, *Apology of Socrates and Crito*, ed. Louis Dyer (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1886), pp. 43-46. Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates and Crito*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), pp. 146-148. Paul Friedländer, *Plato*, tr. Hans Meyerhoff (3 vols.; New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1958-1969), Vol. II, p. 157.

² *Apology*, 17c1-c2. All translations of Plato are my own.

³ Riddell, p. xx.

⁴ Dyer, p. 43.

⁵ R.E. Allen, "Irony and Rhetoric in Plato's *Apology*," *Paideia: Special Plato Issue* (Fifth Annual Issue, 1976), pp. 32-42.

Diálogos, 42 (1983) pp. 83-90.

discusses the philosophical significance of the rhetoric used in the *Apology*. His conclusion is that the rhetoric of the *Apology* is a form of counter-rhetoric which is employed to exhibit the difference between base and philosophical rhetoric.

I propose to show that, far from being an example of counter-rhetoric, the *Apology*, when considered as a whole and in relation to its potential readers, is a very good example of rhetoric (although, to be sure, Allen's contention may hold true of certain parts of the dialogue considered in isolation). I also propose to demonstrate that an appreciation of the rhetorical form of the *Apology* is essential for an understanding of the dialogue.

After discussing briefly how the form of Socrates' speech in the *Apology* corresponds to the rhetorical norms of the fourth century B.C., Allen claims that the speech does not aim at acquittal. To substantiate this point, he notes that Socrates violates some of the practices of forensic rhetoric: he does not attempt to make his character look right and he does not attempt to put his audience in the right frame of mind.⁶ By "right frame of mind," Allen, following Aristotle, means that the audience should be made to feel "friendly and placable."⁷ Thus, according to Allen, the speech is a form of "counter-rhetoric", "rhetoric which seems very like the opposite of rhetoric."⁸ It is rhetoric "which aims at telling the truth in accordance with justice even if the truth leads to conviction."⁹

In order to explain the significance of this, Allen turns to the *Gorgias*, where he finds a distinction between two concepts of rhetoric: "base rhetoric, aiming at gratification and pleasure, and indifferent to truth or the good of the soul; and philosophical rhetoric, aiming at the truth or the good of the soul and indifferent to gratification and pleasure."¹⁰ He concludes that, in the *Apology*, Socrates provides an example of philosophical rhetoric, the purpose of which is not to state but to show the difference between base rhetoric and philosophical rhetoric, and to show also that the difference is not merely one of form.¹¹

Although Allen's article sheds much light on the use of rhetoric in the *Apology*, it leaves some basic questions unanswered. For example, the article fails to make clear just who was the addressee of Socrates' rhetoric.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

Was it in fact addressed to the judges? If so, it was a dismal failure, because the judges were not able to discern the difference between sophistic rhetoric and the supposedly philosophical or noble rhetoric used by Socrates. If they had been able to discern the difference, they would not have found him guilty and condemned him to death. Or to put the matter somewhat differently: there may well be various forms of rhetoric, but rhetoric cannot be separated from the effort to persuade. To *show* something effectively requires that it be seen. Thus, if Socrates wanted to *show* something to the judges, it makes no sense that he would purposely use only the form of rhetoric while at the same time undermining what he said by antagonizing, nay, challenging his audience. Allen's explanation, therefore, is incomplete.

The *Apology*, however, is not a failure. It has been persuading readers since it was written, and it continues to persuade them. In fact, many historians of thought consider it one of the most influential works in the development of philosophy and of Western culture in general. But then, how can this observation be harmonized with Socrates' supposedly incomplete or eccentric use of rhetoric in the *Apology* and his failure to persuade the judges at his trial?

The key lies in recollecting that the *Apology* is a dialogue written by Plato, and that Socrates is a character in this dialogue. The audience, therefore, to which the *Apology* and its rhetoric is addressed is the readers of the dialogue and not the judges in the dialogue. This observation permits us to understand how it is possible that the rhetoric used by Socrates may be considered both a failure and a success: a failure when considered from the standpoint of his inability to persuade the judges, and a success when considered from the wider standpoint of the audience to which it is addressed.

The use of rhetoric in the *Apology* both pleases and instructs the reader of the dialogue. The rhetorical form—and we may add here, the playful irony—enhances the literary quality of the *Apology* and makes it more pleasing. But more important, the use of rhetoric (and irony) enhances the figure of Socrates in the eyes of the reader. A Socrates is portrayed (and whether he corresponds exactly or at all to the historical Socrates is a moot point) who is capable of using rhetorical form and of making rhetorical speeches, if he so pleases, and this is accomplished by having him use rhetoric, albeit somewhat ironically. Therefore, the *Apology* is able to show, not just with words but also with deeds, that the failure of Socrates to use all of the tricks of rhetoric in order to obtain an acquittal was a matter of choice. For otherwise, Plato could not have him

say:

It is because of a lack that I have been convicted, not however of words, but of over-boldness and shamelessness and willingness to say to you the sorts of things which would have been most pleasing for you to hear.¹²

These words are convincing to the reader because Socrates can and does use rhetoric. Therefore, the rhetoric of the *Apology* is an essential part of the development of that dialogue.

But then it is not appropriate to call such rhetoric "counter-rhetoric." Such a characterization made sense only when the rhetoric of the *Apology* was viewed exclusively in relationship to Socrates' failure—intentional, to be sure—to obtain an acquittal from the judges. It was called "counter-rhetoric" because it supposedly was not used for the purpose of persuasion. However, if the rhetoric of the *Apology* is viewed in relationship to the readers of the dialogue, the intent to persuade is not absent.

To be more precise: Allen claims that Socrates' speeches in the *Apology* are missing some of the crucial elements of forensic rhetoric. According to Allen, no attempt is made to make the character of Socrates look right or to put the audience in the right frame of mind. But it has been shown above that both of these elements are present in the *Apology*. By showing a Socrates who is capable of using rhetoric and who chooses not to use all of the tricks of rhetoric in order to obtain acquittal, the figure of Socrates is made to "look right". And inasmuch as the well-wrought structure of the dialogue and the playful irony are pleasing to the readers, it is possible to claim that the audience, who in this case is the readers, is being put into the "right frame of mind." Moreover, even Socrates' haughty attitude, which is precisely what places the judges in a bad frame of mind, is pleasing. This haughty attitude actually enhances the figure of Socrates: since it is not directed against the readers, it does not intimidate them, and it plays a significant role in making manifest the ignorance of the judges. And as the *Apology* points out, it is not unpleasant to watch the demonstration of the ignorance of others. Thus, far from being an example of counter-rhetoric, the *Apology* may be said to be a very good example of rhetoric.

Furthermore, instead of there being, as Allen claims, a sharp dichotomy between sophistic rhetoric and the rhetoric used in the *Apology*, there seems to be a resemblance. To be sure, Socrates' speech does not

make extensive overt use of emotion: it neither stages "piteous dramas,"¹³ nor does it involve "wailing and lamenting."¹⁴ But it does attempt to persuade, and, in the course of this attempt, it appeals to the emotions as well as to the intellect. The appeal to the emotions is evident in the attempt to please the audience with its fine style and playful use of irony. It is even more evident in the attempt to associate the figure of Socrates with various heroes of the mythical tradition and, in effect, portray him as a hero. And the pleasure derived from seeing the unmasking of the ignorance of others cannot be characterized as purely intellectual. Thus, although there may well be differences between sophistic rhetoric and the rhetoric employed in the *Apology*, they are closely related.

As was noted earlier, Allen makes use of certain things said in the *Gorgias* in order to explain what he means by counter-rhetoric. Similarly, a consideration of some aspects of the *Gorgias* will help to show that the comments which have been made above about the rhetoric of the *Apology* are not unwarranted.

The *Gorgias*, as Allen correctly points out, presents more than one concept of rhetoric. The account of what may be called "sophistic rhetoric" is presented quite literally.¹⁵ According to this account, rhetoric is a type of flattery, the counterpart of cooking, an image or semblance of the art of justice. To be precise: Socrates claims that there are two types of endeavors which care for the body and the soul. One type consists of the true arts of caring for the body or the soul. The other type consists of certain practices which are only habitudes, not arts, and whose task he calls flattery because they merely aim at gratification and pleasure without considering the possible good or bad that they may cause. Politics is the art of caring for the soul, and it has two branches: legislation and justice. The art of caring for the body is divided into gymnastics and medicine. In opposition to these true arts, Socrates places the flattering habitudes, which he claims are images or semblances of the former. The habitudes which care for the body are self-adornment and cooking, the former being the image of gymnastics and the latter being the image of medicine. As regards care for the soul, sophistry is the image of legislation and rhetoric is the image of justice. All of this is summed up by Socrates in the following geometrical proportion: self-adornment is to gymnastics as cooking is to medicine, as sophistry is to legislation, and as

¹³ *Ibid.*, 35b7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38d9.

¹⁵ *Gorgias*, 462b3-466a3.

¹² *Apology*, 38d6-d8.

rhetoric is to justice. He thus concludes that rhetoric is to the soul what cooking is to the body.

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates also refers to another type of rhetoric, which is the rhetoric that Allen calls "philosophical rhetoric."¹⁶ However, the nature of this type of rhetoric is not explained fully and the explanation provided is not without its ambiguities. In the course of his conversation with Kallikles, his third interlocutor in the *Gorgias*, Socrates accepts the possibility that rhetoric may be twofold: one type being base demagoguery, dedicated to flattery, and the other being a noble form of rhetoric, dedicated to making the citizens as good as possible.¹⁷ But, to be sure, Socrates also tells Kallikles that he, Kallikles, has never seen this form of rhetoric. At various other places in the dialogue,¹⁸ Socrates mentions the possibility of using rhetoric to accuse oneself, relatives or friends of wrongdoing, in order that injustice may be brought to light and the wrongdoer forced to pay the penalty and become healthy. It is interesting to note that Socrates compares this use of rhetoric with the art of the physician, who cuts and burns patients in order that they may regain their health. At still another point of the dialogue, Socrates speaks of a "true rhetoric,"¹⁹ and, when at the end of the dialogue he lists the statements that he considers unshaken, he includes among them that rhetoric is always to be used for the just.²⁰

The above might lead someone to conclude—as Allen does—that Socrates (and thus Plato) believed in and used a type of rhetoric which does not aim at persuasion and which is completely different from sophistic or base rhetoric. Such a conclusion, however, ignores other things which are said or shown in the *Gorgias*. For example, it fails to take into account that in this dialogue, one of whose themes is rhetoric, the only person explicitly criticized for improper argumentation and demagoguery is Socrates. Polus, Socrates' second interlocutor, chides him for coarseness or boorishness (*pollē agroikía*)²¹ in his manner of arguing. As for Kallikles, his criticisms of Socrates' manner of speaking occur at various points of the conversation between them. Kallikles calls Socrates a demagogue (*dēmēgōros*),²² accuses him of using demagoguery (*dēmē-*

goreîs),²³ claims that Socrates leads the discussion into the vulgar and the demagogic (*phortikà kai dēmēgoriká*),²⁴ accuses him of doing harm with speech by means of a clever trick (*sophón*),²⁵ and even asks Socrates if he is not ashamed of his way of arguing.²⁶ Finally, Socrates himself admits that it has been necessary for him to use demagoguery.²⁷

If Socrates had been called a demagogue only once in the dialogue, one might be tempted to call it an accident, a mere convention of speech or perhaps even a slip of the Platonic pen. But such recurring references to Socrates' use of demagoguery, and above all, Socrates' own admission to the use of demagoguery, are clear indications that Socrates does, in fact, at least at times, employ some of the rhetorical devices used by the sophists. This means that there is some similarity between sophistic rhetoric and the rhetoric used by Socrates; that is, the relationship between these two types of rhetoric is closer than seems to be implied by the passage in which they are distinguished.

This conclusion is corroborated by certain dramatic aspects of the dialogue, specifically the role that Plato has Gorgias play. Even though Socrates makes use of demagoguery in the *Gorgias*, his power to persuade his interlocutors is not enhanced. Socrates is unable to convince any of his interlocutors, especially Kallikles, his so called "touch-stone."²⁸ Nevertheless, although Kallikles is unconvinced, he is contained. He is forced to keep quiet and allow Socrates to have his way. In a sense, Socrates wins. But, in the *Gorgias*, Socrates requires help in order to contain Kallikles. Gorgias must intervene at certain key moments in order to keep the discussion alive. For example, when Kallikles realizes that the argument is going badly and refuses to answer, Gorgias steps in so that Kallikles might continue. Kallikles agrees to continue, but makes it clear that he does so only because Gorgias so chooses.²⁹ Further along, he repeats twice that he has agreed to continue only because of Gorgias.³⁰ And finally, when Kallikles again refuses to continue the argument and suggests that Socrates might wish to continue by himself, Gorgias speaks for the group and asks Socrates to continue.³¹ Without Gorgias, the

¹⁶ Allen, pp. 36-38.

¹⁷ *Gorgias*, 503a5-b1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 480b9-d6 and 508b3-c3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 517a5-a6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 527c3-c4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 461c3-c4.

²² *Ibid.*, 482c5 and 494d1.

²³ *Ibid.*, 482c5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 482e3-e4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 483a2-a3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 494e7-e8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 519d5-d6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 486d2-488b6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 497a6-c2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 501c7-c8 and 505c5-c6.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 505c1 - 506b3.

conversation would not have reached its conclusion.

This is significant because Gorgias is, as Friedlander has noted,³² the representative of sophistic rhetoric. Plato has chosen to represent a situation in which Socrates is only able to contain his interlocutor Kallikles with the aid of sophistic rhetoric. Thus, far from being diametrically opposed, the rhetoric of Socrates and sophistic rhetoric complement each other in the *Gorgias*.

And yet, although Socrates requires the aid of Gorgias, it is Socrates—and not Gorgias—who contains Kallikles. Thus, we should not move to the other extreme of identifying completely the rhetoric of Plato with sophistic rhetoric. As the *Gorgia* suggests, there still remains a difference in purpose between rhetoric pursued fundamentally for self-aggrandizement and rhetoric pursued for the sake of bettering oneself and others. Both the *Gorgias* and the *Apology* provide us with examples of the latter type of rhetoric.

But we may go even one step further. Up to this point, no explicit distinction has been made between the rhetoric *in* the two dialogues and the rhetoric *of* the two dialogues, although such a distinction has been implicit all along. The rhetoric *in* the *Apology* may be taken to refer to the rhetoric used by Socrates in his speeches. Inasmuch as it does not persuade the judges, it may be judged a failure. And yet, as has been noted, the *Apology*, taken as a dialogue addressed to the readers, is not a failure. It has been persuading readers since it was written. The rhetorical aspects of the dialogue as a whole (that is, the style, irony, action, drama, and all the other aspects that are pleasing to both the intellect and the emotions) may be called the rhetoric *of* the *Apology*. It is this rhetoric, the rhetoric *of* the *Apology*, which must be judged a success.

Likewise for the *Gorgias*. The rhetoric *in* the *Gorgias* refers to the rhetoric used by Socrates in his arguments against his different interlocutors: Gorgias, Polus and Kallikles. Inasmuch as Socrates does not convince his interlocutors, this rhetoric cannot be judged a success. But, as has been noted, the *Gorgias* does succeed. Socrates wins, so to speak, and this is made possible by the presentation of the dialogue. This presentation, taken as a whole, may be called the rhetoric *of* the *Gorgias*.

Therefore, when a distinction is made between the rhetoric *in* and the rhetoric *of* the *Apology* and the *Gorgias*, it becomes evident that, in these dialogues, the true rhetoric of Plato is the dialogue form itself.

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³² Friedländer, Vol. II, p. 244.