

# A tainted dialogue



The *Gorgias* by Plato has long been considered a disparaging dialogue that denounces both rhetoric and its practitioners for the unethical wielding of eloquence. However, numerous scholars have agreed that Plato's account of rhetoric is both incomplete and deceptive. George Kennedy, a Platonic scholar, asserts that Plato was incapable of perceiving the value of rhetoric; "rather embittered by Socrates' death, he is so prejudiced he appears to weight the scales in turn against rhetoric" (qtd. in Kastely 29). This allegation implies that Plato may have allowed his antagonistic stance on rhetoric to influence both the content and philosophical accuracy of the *Gorgias*. The philosophy of Socrates, Plato's beloved teacher, and the philosophy of Gorgias, an esteemed Leontinian Sophist, come into conflict and thus are showcased in the dialogue. Unfortunately, Plato misrepresents both Gorgias the Sophist and Gorgianic rhetoric in his stigmatizing dialogue, the *Gorgias*. Plato's deliberate prevarication of Gorgias and his techn is a consequence of his disdain for Sophists; furthermore, this prejudice is manifest in the dialogue. Plato accused Sophists of promulgating deception, evasiveness, and exploiting language for monetary means in many of his dialogues. The biased author also despised the notion that granted Sophists immunity from contradiction (Rankin 161). Perhaps this is a reason for the prominent false contradiction constructed in the exchange between Socrates and Gorgias. In this instance, Gorgias attempts to justify the utilization of rhetoric but tragically admits to its societal abuse. Socrates immediately manipulates this honorable confession into a somewhat questionable contradiction, stating that instructors of rhetoric are liable for their students' actions (Kastely 31). Plato's intent to pervert Gorgianic rhetoric is also evident in his decision to force Gorgias into the background of the dialogue, leaving two pathetically

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incompetent students to defend themselves (and their mentor's philosophy) against the wiser Socrates (Kastely 33). Then, Socrates will of course hold Gorgias liable for his students' blunders. Plato's first misrepresentation of Gorgianic rhetoric occurs when he denies it *techné* status. He warrants this negation of eminence by deeming rhetoric irrational. Plato argues only that which is founded on absolute, dialectically-discovered truth can be considered rational. Arguments that are not based on incontrovertible absolutes are mere beliefs and are thus irrational (McComiskey 21). Gorgias regrettably accedes to this claim in the following transaction: Socrates questions, " Now, do you think that to have learned and to have believed, or knowledge and belief, are one and the same or different?" Gorgias replies, " I consider them different, Socrates." However, rational and irrational arguments can exist concurrently. When questioned as to the effect rhetoric has on an audience, Gorgias further distorts the philosophy of Gorgias the Sophist by declaring his *techné* is capable only of generating belief (McComiskey 22). Therefore, by relating the art to belief, Socrates has condemned Gorgianic rhetoric as being irrational. In actuality, Gorgias the Sophist would have never afforded credence to a case based on rationality, for Gorgias did not believe in the existence of rational or irrational arguments. Instead, he argued that all human convictions were " kairotic" or situationally dependent and it would be impossible to attain the *kairos* of a given circumstance by means of absolute [pure] knowledge (Platonic concept). Hence, a " relativistic epistemology," like that held by Gorgias, is required for one to interpret accurately a rhetorical *techné* ruled by *kairos*. According to Bruce McComiskey, " Gorgias's relativistic epistemology legitimates his claim that pure knowledge does not exist and that no *logos*

[language] can be wholly rational” (23). Additionally, Gorgias also considered human perception as a variable with which to contend. The faculty of human discernment is intrinsically biased and consequently produces an imprecise version of truth. As the originator of this philosophical approach, Gorgias maintained that no human thought could be deemed “rational” (24). Plato further misrepresents Gorgianic rhetoric by asserting that rhetoric functions solely as flattery and hence is not concerned with the “greatest good.” Plato has Gorgias legitimate this falsification by stating that the rhetorician has the ability to persuade a “crowd” more successfully than an expert (McComiskey 25). Socrates retorts that a rhetorician can only persuade the ignorant (crowd) due to their lack of knowledge. Gorgias consents, stating that in many cases the rhetorician does not possess absolute knowledge on the subject of which he speaks. By forcing Gorgias to agree that both the rational and irrational exist, Plato also coerces the Sophist into accepting that instruction results in knowledge (rational belief) and persuasion results in conviction (irrational belief). Socrates concludes, “Then rhetoric apparently is a creator of conviction that is persuasive but not instructive about right and wrong” (McComiskey 26). Despite Socrates’ attempt to condemn Gorgias and his rhetoric as being irrational and corrupt, Gorgianic rhetoric advocates the greatest good. McComiskey proclaims, “I argue that Gorgianic rhetoric is concerned with the greatest good, contrary to what Plato would have us believe – but it is the good of the community.” Gorgias aids the community in achieving its goals by employing affective, aesthetic discourse. The emotional appeals interspersed throughout Gorgianic rhetoric are intended to evoke particular emotional responses from the community, which in turn incite it to action (28). According to James Kastely, “The public

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office of rhetoric is to serve the community by persuading it to undertake advantageous actions when through ignorance or fear it is unwilling to do so." Thus, Gorgianic rhetoric exposes Gorgias's dedication to society and assists the public in deciding upon a self-serving strategy (35). In addition to rejecting the idea of pure knowledge in the defense of his relativistic, communal epistemology, Gorgias the Sophist argued that absolute knowledge (a prerequisite for instruction) was unattainable because of the inherent faults of logos or language (McComiskey 26). Language is the product of an imperfect creator. Hence, it is logically deduced that language by nature is flawed and ultimately inadequate. Messages conveyed by logos are consequently distorted versions of perceived realities. H. D. Rankin comments, " In formulating and uttering a logos we do not express the existent or reality about which the logos intends to communicate. All we express is logos. Any meaning the logos may have for us has infiltrated into us by means of our perception... It is these perceptions which illuminate the logos rather than the logos illuminating reality or existents" (43). Gorgias contends that even if perfect perceptions of reality were humanly possible, communicating these truths via logos would serve to taint their final conveyed form. Therefore, despite Plato's attempt to misrepresent the Sophist, Gorgias argues that instruction in absolute truth via logos is unfeasible. In order to comprehend why Plato chose to misrepresent the epistemology of Gorgias, one must analyze the historical context in which the Gorgias was written. Plato composed his tainted dialogue during an unstable time for the Athenian democracy. It has been proposed that the Gorgias was written around 387 BCE. If this account is accurate, then Plato's composition came into being less than twenty years after the tyranny of the

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Thirty (21). McComiskey suggests, “ Had Plato presented Gorgias’s epistemology accurately, most fourth-century BCE Athenian citizens would have preferred Gorgias’s arguments, since democracy depends on the ability to change the opinions of others and the willingness to allow one’s own opinions to be changed.” Athenians would have been forced to denounce the legitimacy of their democratic power structure in order to acknowledge the possibility of absolute knowledge (Platonic concept). So in an attempt to garner the support of an anti-oligarchy Athenian society, Plato misrepresented the epistemology of Gorgias the Sophist (25). Plato’s dialogue the Gorgias calls into question the ethicality of Gorgianic rhetoric and erroneously concludes that rhetoric engenders unfounded conviction and is thus irrational and unethical. However, Plato misrepresents Gorgias the Sophist by having the Leontinian acquiesce to claims that he would have adamantly denied in actuality. Ironically, Plato’s beloved Socrates assumes the role of rhetorician at the close of the dialogue in a final attempt to convince his companions to accept dialectics as being superior to Gorgianic rhetoric. Thus, the dialogue concludes with a clearly rhetorical oration delivered by rhetoric’s condemner, Socrates.

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