

## Commentary on Yunis

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I find myself in complete agreement with this very helpful exposition of the *Phaedrus*. It will not be my aim here to make any substantial criticism of the exegesis of the dialogue. Instead I will raise some questions that arise out of what Plato is saying, according to Yunis' exposition. (If I have any criticism of the paper at all — and it is only a very minor one — it is that these questions might be best treated alongside the Platonic claims that give rise to them.) I shall consider, first, the comparison between the attack on rhetoric that we find in the *Gorgias* and the praise of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*, then the proposal that rhetoric must be supported by dialectic, and finally Plato's view of the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy.

The *Gorgias* is an attack on rhetoric. It is also an attack on democratic methods and practices, and the dialogue gives the impression that Plato regards these as much the same thing. Rhetoric, in the *Gorgias*, is the principle tool of the democratic system. It comes into play when political and ethical questions are settled by public debate in front of large audiences. Plato is against this method of settling ethical questions. He says that it can only lead to *persuasion*, rather than *instruction* (455a) and that it lets ignorant public speakers persuade ignorant listeners (459b). Allowing such people to direct our lives is like letting cooks give you dietary advice rather than the trained doctors (464d-e). But in the *Phaedrus*, Plato is in favor of the use of rhetoric. Why isn't this a contradiction of the attack on rhetoric of the *Gorgias*? Evidently because Plato thinks there is good rhetoric and bad rhetoric. Rhetoric employed by democratic politicians like Pericles is

bad, rhetoric as employed by philosophers like Socrates is good. But does this explanation make any sense? The *Gorgias* seemed to be an attack on rhetoric *as a method of ethics and politics*. The contrast was between persuading and teaching, between relying on faulty opinion and possessing genuine expertise. But in the *Phaedrus* Plato is in favor of persuasion as long as it is done by the right people and for the right ends. Thus, he no longer attacks rhetoric as a method. The idea that we should at all times aim for genuine teaching rather than mere persuasion seems to have been abandoned.

Evidently we at least need some clear way of distinguishing good from bad rhetoric, and Yunis nicely sketches what Plato has in mind. Plato sees philosophical rhetoric as having a much bolder purpose. Democratic politicians are interested in persuading audiences to vote in a particular way, but 'Plato is interested in persuading individual human beings, or in his parlance, "souls," to make certain choices and to pursue certain ends ....' Related to this is the idea that democratic speakers base their arguments on the existing attitudes of their audience, whereas philosophers are aiming to bring about entirely new attitudes in their listeners, especially new ethical beliefs. This seems right as an account of one way that Plato distinguishes good from bad rhetoric, but is also clear that it simply won't do. Political leaders (ancient and modern) frequently aim to lead fellow-citizens in some particular direction, ethically speaking, and to persuade them to make certain choices and pursue certain ends. They often aim to get people to adopt radically new ways of seeing political problems. Conversely, even Socrates has to make use of the *existing* beliefs of his interlocutors if he is to make any progress; indeed, he is

famous for doing so. So there is no very clear distinction here between what democratic politicians and philosophers are doing with their rhetorical ability.

Of course, Plato also claims that democratic politicians (and their audience) are *ignorant* on ethical matters, whereas philosophers have knowledge of what is right and wrong, good and bad, or at the very least aspire to such knowledge and come much closer to it than everyone else. That is the idea behind the philosopher-as-doctor analogy, and the cute fable of the orator and the donkeys. A politician might be able to persuade people to acquire wealth or power or pleasure in pursuit of happiness (pandering to their foolish desires and mistaken conceptions) but he's no more genuinely helpful than a man persuading them to buy donkeys when what they need is cavalry. He has no idea what really makes human beings prosper, so he does harm, by getting people to adopt disastrous policies. The existence of this gap between philosophers and politicians explains how rhetoric can be an instrument for good in the hands of Plato, who knows his donkeys from his horses, but a dangerous weapon in the hands of Pericles, who is an ass.

Even if we accept that philosophers are a class apart from ordinary mortals, it still turns out (if we apply the claims of the *Phaedrus* to those of the *Gorgias*) that Plato was not attacking rhetoric after all — not even the bad kind. The *Phaedrus* implies that all he was really saying is that it's regrettable when ignorant people like Pericles and Themistocles persuade us to adopt their bad ideas. This is not an attack on their powers or methods of persuasion; it is just an attack on their ideas. It is as if someone wrote a treatise nominally 'against the use of firearms' but then admitted that what he really meant was that he was against the use of firearms *by the enemy* — he's very much in

favor of them when they are used by his own side.

Second, it seems extremely implausible that there is any such distinction between philosophers and the rest of us. In which case the distinction between good and bad rhetoric collapses, and with it the principal arguments of the *Gorgias*. If we reject Plato's stark division of humanity, then we hold that there are no experts, there are no ethical 'doctors' among the laymen, but rather that — as Protagoras says (*Protagoras* 327a) — we are *all* experts in ethical matters. And in that case we should probably also dismiss the idea that there is such a thing as exact knowledge in ethical questions and instead opt for the Aristotelian view that there is only what seems plausible to us, and all anyone can ever aim at is persuasion — exactly as the democratic politicians were doing all along. Finally, we can argue that public debate and public criticism of ideas constitute the best way of reaching political decisions, because those methods expose our proposals to maximum scrutiny, revision, and accountability. Below we shall consider how this kind of response to the attack on rhetoric in the *Gorgias* ought to shape the way we read Plato's claims about rhetoric and philosophy in the *Phaedrus* as well. But first let's look at Plato's claims about rhetoric and dialectic, as expounded by Yunis.

In Plato's understanding dialectic is the method used by philosophers to pursue genuine ethical knowledge, and it is the medium of true ethical instruction. Rhetoric is a tool of mere persuasion. But Plato claims in the *Phaedrus* that dialectic can at any rate improve and embellish rhetoric by giving the speaker the ability to construct arguments more persuasively. This implies that without philosophy public speakers cannot succeed even at their own already inferior goals. The philosopher is not only the unchallenged

expert on ethical matters but turns out to be the superior rhetorician as well, better able to persuade because of his mastery of argument. The comparison with Lysias is presented as an illustration of this. Plato can effortlessly out-Lysias Lysias, because dialectic makes him better able to construct persuasive arguments on whatever subject.

Again the argument here in the *Phaedrus* seems to undermine the *Gorgias*. The claim is that dialectical (i.e., philosophical) expertise is central to our ability to persuade. Socrates doesn't find Lysias' speech at all persuasive, and says that its failure is directly connected to the poverty of its arguments (235a). Plato evidently thinks that his own expertise makes his version of the same proposition far more effective. But in that case, doesn't it follow that when politicians *are* spectacularly successful at persuading people to adopt their proposals (as they often are) their arguments must be informed by dialectical expertise? Contrary to the claims of both the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* it seems they must have the appropriate knowledge after all — it follows from their conspicuous success as persuaders. In his eagerness to claim even persuasion for philosophy, Plato has accidentally attributed at least a little philosophy to other persuaders. Plato certainly doesn't want anyone to make that inference, but how can he avoid it? He says that politicians, when they do succeed, only persuade people on a modest scale, by pandering to what people already believe. Philosophical rhetoric is far grander. As Yunis says, 'the psychagogic art that [Plato] is interested in entails the potentially transformative power of ridding an audience of beliefs which they currently hold and replacing them with entirely new ones.' But as we have seen, this doesn't work as a distinction between political rhetoric and philosophical rhetoric. Politicians often get people to do things they *didn't* want to do, and to believe things that they *didn't* believe

before. Pericles persuaded the Athenians to stay on the defensive when they were strongly inclined to go out and fight the Spartan army; Churchill persuaded the British to keep fighting when they were strongly inclined to sue for peace. If those examples seem modest (in just the way that Plato has in mind) what of those cases where public orators have brought about, or ushered in, substantial changes in the ethical and political climates of their societies? Lincoln, King, and Mandela spring to mind, to think only of very recent history. It follows from Plato's argument here that those political orators and activists — the ones who transformed the ethical attitudes of their societies — must have been in possession of the kind of expertise that he thinks is only available to philosophers. But a more sensible view would be that there is no real or useful distinction to be made between the two kinds of rhetoric, political and philosophical.

Another question worth asking is whether Plato is right to pick on the ability to construct arguments as the key factor in what makes a discourse persuasive when we are debating ethical, political and religious matters. There are good reasons for thinking that this is not the case, and that mastery of argument is one of the *least* important elements of specifically ethical persuasion. If that seems an odd claim, just consider how hard it is to persuade someone by argument alone to give up a lifelong belief in God, or to persuade a Muslim to become a Buddhist, or a Democrat to become a neo-con. A view now favored by some evolutionary psychologists — and well supported by experience — is that our fundamental ethical and political beliefs arise from a sub-rational cocktail of instinct and upbringing, and as such tend to be virtually immune to reasoned argument, however presented<sup>1</sup> (unless by 'presented' we mean 'combined with something different from, and

much more effective than, rational argument'). That is why arguments over foundational ethical beliefs (the kind of argument that Plato regards as the special province of philosophical rhetoric) are in reality almost always futile. Of course, this does not mean there is no place for life-changing persuasion in ethics or politics, just that when such persuasion succeeds it is almost never by way of rational argument, or rhetoric informed by dialectic. Plato's idea of a powerful and transformative rhetoric *grounded in philosophical wisdom and rational argument* is a misconstruction of how rhetoric works. Transformative rhetoric is typically based on *non-rational* methods of persuasion and its practitioners typically have little or no philosophical training. For that matter, the most common form of ethical transformation is effected by whole groups of people, persuading by social pressure, exploiting our desire to belong and to conform — and this has no connection at all with rational argument. (Even among philosophers peer pressure has probably always been an important form of persuasion.) When individuals 'transform' us, what they have is powerful and charismatic personalities, and they persuade as much by gesture, character and example as by argument. Their ethical wisdom, if they have any, is a mere background condition. That fact explains why, as Plato notes here in the *Phaedrus* (275-6), live discourse is so much more effective than the written word. It is people's live presence and personality that is the persuasive force, not their arguments treated abstractly on the page or in the memory. Even in the world of purely written ideas transformative rhetoric is more the specialty of literary artists like Plato than of pure philosophers like Aristotle. If the *Apology*, the simile of the cave, or the speech of Diotima succeed at persuading us it is not because of the philosophical ideas behind them

but in spite of them. Plato's brilliance as a writer and rhetorician is revealed in his ability to make even muddled and implausible philosophical positions seem attractive and coherent.

Philosophy can certainly provide *subject matter* for rhetoric, but so can any number of other things, and there seems to be no reason at all to treat philosophical thinking as a special component of persuasion just on that account. Is Socrates' version of the speech really any more persuasive than that of Lysias? Yunis claims that it is, endorsing Plato's own assessment. But surely neither speech is remotely persuasive. Neither stands any chance of persuading you to abandon someone who is in love with you and transfer your affections to someone who is *not* in love with you. That would be a bizarre thing to do, and our sense of its bizarreness is immune to all effects of argument. Lysias understands this perfectly well. His speech is a piece of comedy. It works by creating a ticklish clash between the plausibility of his arguments and our deep, immovable conviction that his conclusion is completely crazy. So of course Lysias is not seriously trying to persuade any young man to abandon a lover. He is showing us that romantic love is something to which rational argument obviously doesn't apply. In which case, Socrates' criticism — that his arguments are not terribly sophisticated — seems to miss the joke. You might as well complain of Swift's *A Modest Proposal* that it couldn't really persuade the Irish to eat their children, and needs a more effective deliberative argument. Considered as humor, which is what the topsy-turvy thesis demands, Lysias' speech is in fact superior to Socrates', because it has a much lighter touch.

The most important part of Yunis' exposition is what he says about Plato's

conception of the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric. He stresses that Plato separates philosophical knowledge-gathering, achieved uniquely by philosophers through dialectic, from *persuasion*, which is the task of rhetoric: '[The] philosophical reasoning that determines which choices and ends are appropriate for human beings is essentially a separate matter from the factors that influence, and that can be made to influence, human beings in the choices they make.' I agree with this analysis. Plato treats rhetoric as a tool to be used by those people who *already* have far superior ideas about how human beings should live their lives. 'Philosophy's worldly burden, symbolized by the philosopher's return to the cave, is to persuade the mass of non-philosophical citizens to accept philosophical rule and to instill in them philosophical understanding to the extent possible. This burden falls to rhetoric.' Philosophers are the doctors, we the patients. Our ethical confusion is an illness, and it is the philosophers' task to turn us towards health through rhetoric. Rhetoric is the spoonful of honey that makes the medicine go down.

Because Plato divides humanity in this way, into the healthy and the sick, and separates knowledge-gathering from persuasion, he thinks that it makes perfect sense for philosophers to achieve persuasion even by 'deception', i.e., without always fully revealing their own reasoning, and without the audience grasping how it is that they have been brought to the conclusion. The philosopher knows that his views are superior, and that his ideas will benefit his audience, so why should it matter how exactly they come to accept them? The arguments used don't even have to be logically valid; they just have to convince.

This is the most problematic aspect of Plato's treatment of rhetoric, and it brings us

back to his criticisms of democratic practices in the *Gorgias*. It seems a major mistake to separate knowledge-gathering from persuasion in the ethical domain. In ethics persuasion does not come *after* the discovery of the truth. Our attempt to persuade other people is itself an excellent way of *arriving at* better ethical views. It is this fact that Plato fails to consider in his attacks on democratic politicians. He assumes that ‘mere’ persuasion and the search for ethical knowledge are two different operations, and when he sees that democratic politicians are only engaged in the business of persuasion, he infers that they have no interest in searching for the truth. But the process of persuasion — persuasion of a strong opposition, and of the public — just *is* a method of searching for political solutions and for ethical truth. Indeed, it is by far the best method, perhaps the only sound method, of conducting that search. Plato’s approach, which separates the search for political knowledge from the business of political persuasion is not just a bad way of doing politics but also weakens philosophy itself. As philosophers we should want to expose our ideas to as much scrutiny as possible. When Plato assumes that nobody outside of philosophy — no member of the general public, no democratic politician — could ever be in a position to judge or improve on the ethical ideas that derive from philosophy, he declares ‘philosophical’ ideas (i.e., more precisely, *his own*) exempt from criticism. This is a terrible blunder. By defining his opponents as ‘non-philosophers’ and non-philosophers as all those people who disagree with his conception of human happiness, he generates an excuse for setting himself above, and ignoring, anyone who proposes a substantially different ethical view. In line with this, Plato actually prides himself on his rejection of common ethical attitudes, and on the fact that philosophical

rhetoric ‘aims to rid an audience of beliefs which they currently hold and replace them with *entirely new ones*.’ But as democratic politicians rightly assume, and as Aristotle also argues at length (*Politics* 3.11-12), common opinion is very much worth listening to in ethical and political matters. For one thing, if political proposals are shaped by the need to persuade the people that they will effect, that alone is bound to improve them enormously. The best people by far to consult about the rightness and wrongness of slavery, for example, are *the slaves*. (But for Plato consultation of the people who will suffer under your policies is ‘pandering.’) Also, common sense is a vital source of criticism. The reason that so many ordinary people reject Socrates’ views on death, wealth and power, is not that ordinary people are too stupid or too greedy to grasp the truth, but — plausibly — because Socrates is wrong. Likewise most people reject Plato’s idea that we should ‘accept philosophical rule’ because it is a muddled idea that thoroughly deserves to be rejected. To benefit from these valuable and informative criticisms Plato would first have to give up the idea that the task of rhetoric is purely to persuade, and accept that it is also a tool for *testing* and *shaping* our ideas. That is the insight of democracy, and it has important applications within moral and political philosophy as well.

Plato’s willingness to conceal his real reasons for his conclusions and to get people to those conclusions by some other route exacerbates the problem, because it buries his real arguments even more deeply. To give just one example, the *Protagoras* (as it seems) leaves us none the wiser as to Plato’s own reasons for thinking that goodness (ἀρετή) is knowledge. His real reasons almost certainly have nothing to do with hedonism. He

apparently assumes either that we ordinary people would not be able to understand those reasons, or that we would not be persuaded by them because we are philosophically naive. But there is another possibility: that we would understand them perfectly well and reject them because they do not seem especially cogent. Philosophers should be keen to present their own ideas in full, and to subject them to that kind of test.

There is also the fact that honesty and sincerity in philosophical discourse are valuable for their own sake. All rhetorical productions aim at persuasion; many use non-rational methods that shade into what Plato calls ‘deception’ (where the audience don’t quite grasp what it is that has persuaded them). But that is only acceptable when the speakers themselves don’t quite know how they have persuaded anyone either. When there is a very large and *deliberate* disparity between what the doctor thinks and what he says to the patient, between the philosopher’s own reasons for believing what he believes, and the arguments he chooses to use on us, then he crosses the line from persuasion into propaganda, like the political propaganda of the *Republic*: the ‘noble lie’ and the extensive censorship of literature. Yunis says of the noble lie that ‘with respect to its content (the relative capabilities of the city’s inhabitants) it is true’ and that its mythological form, though literally false, makes that truth persuasive to its audience. That is certainly Plato’s view. But surely it is worth noting, here, as part of any analysis of this conception of rhetoric, that in reality the noble lie is *false*, not just literally but also (more importantly) with respect to its content, and that its mythological presentation has the effect of burying Plato’s reasons away from scrutiny and making it far harder for its audience to see that it is false.

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<sup>1</sup> See Haidt 2001. The idea is that the reasons we give for our ethical beliefs are often after-the-fact rationalizations. They *express* our beliefs, and are a way of communicating them to others, but do not create them. For that reason, even if we show that someone else's reasons for their beliefs do not make sense, we should not expect their beliefs to change. We should just expect them to find a new rationalization.

## WORK CITED

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