

PLATO'S AMBIVALENCE ABOUT RHETORIC IN THE *GORGIAS*

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ABSTRACT: The main thesis of the present paper is that Plato's attitude towards rhetoric appears to have been complex to the point of ambivalent, for as one reads the *Gorgias*, one cannot avoid getting the impression that in spite of his *overt* castigation of rhetoric, the philosopher did *covertly* resort to it in the very dialogue. Thus, the article will seek to demonstrate that even though Platonic Socrates repudiated rhetoric understood as political demagoguery and cynical adulation, he did employ some sort of art of persuasion designed to inveigle his interlocutors into accepting a worldview that must have appeared extremely paradoxical for the then mentality.

In the course of his discussion with Callicles, Socrates differentiates (503a) between rhetoric understood as “flattery” (κολακεία) or “shameful oratory” (αἰσχρὰ δημηγορία) on the one hand and “some other” (ἕτερον) which is characterized as “noble” or “fine” (καλόν) and whose task consists, according to the philosopher (503b), in:

trying to perfect the souls of the citizens and struggling to ensure that the best things are said, whether they be more pleasant or more unpleasant for the hearers (τὸ παρασκευάζειν ὅπως ὡς βέλτισται ἔσονται τῶν πολιτῶν αἰ ψυχαί, καὶ διαμάχεσθαι λέγοντα τὰ βέλτιστα, εἴτε ἡδίω εἴτε ἀηδέστερα ἔσται τοῖς ἀκούουσιν)¹.

While Socrates points out (*ibid.*) to Callicles that “he has never seen such rhetoric”, the paper will argue that in the *Gorgias* Platonic Socrates applies this mysterious and noble rhetoric with the view to making his interlocutors accept a given axiology. It has to be emphasized that the rhetoric that Socrates employs is a philosophical one, as it is ancillary to his dialectic. Yet, even though the

¹ In the present article, the Greek text of the *Gorgias* was consulted with the editions of E.R. Dodds (London 1959) and M. Wohlrab (Lipsiae 1887), while the English with the translations made by J.A. Arieti and R.M. Barrus (Newburyport 2007), R. Waterfield (Oxford 1994), D.J. Zeyl (Indianapolis 1987) and T. Irwin (Oxford 1979). Occasionally, F. Schleiermacher's (Frankfurt/M. 1991) translation has also been consulted.