COMMENTARY ON YUNIS

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ABSTRACT
I agree with this analysis of the Phaedrus and will raise three points that arise from it. First, it is hard to square the Gorgias with the Phaedrus. The former attacks rhetoric per se; the latter claims that rhetoric is a good thing if used by philosophers, but fails to provide criteria for distinguishing philosophical from political rhetoric. Second, the idea that dialectic embellishes rhetoric both undermines the Gorgias further and seems problematic in itself: it is implausible that dialectic is the key to ‘transformative’ persuasion. Third, Plato’s conception of the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy shows us that he separates the task of searching for ethical truths from the task of persuading others, when it seems more reasonable to treat persuasion as an important part of the search, and leads him to the troubling conclusion that philosophers are entitled to be dishonest.

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 principal 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 us 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 . . .” (236). 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.