Disputation, Deception, and Dialectic: 
Plato on the True Rhetoric (Phaedrus 261–266)

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In Phaedrus 261a–266b Plato analyzes the workings of rhetoric as the art of influencing the soul.¹ The bulk of traditional scholarship does not find in Plato’s treatment of rhetoric in general anything important for his larger philosophical project. And thus it has considered Plato’s true, or “reformed,” or “scientific” rhetoric to be at best a useful means of crowd control catering to human deficiencies² and at worst a clear demonstration of its own impossibility due to the excessively rigorous demands made upon its practitioners.³ The communis opinio concerning Plato’s discussion of rhetoric at Phaedrus 261a–266b in particular has interpreted it as little more than a way of underlining the importance of the dialectical methods of collection and division.⁴ For Plato’s purpose in the passage, so the interpretation posits, is to demonstrate nothing beyond the fact that the claim to an art of rhetoric which ignores the need for knowledge is an empty one.⁵

Recently, however, some students of Plato’s rhetorical theory have been moving more or less steadily in another direction. There has been an increasing tendency to treat seriously the Platonic theory of a true rhetoric having status as a bona fide and philosophically significant art.⁶

In the main, I believe this tendency has brought us closer to the intended meaning of the Platonic text, and I wish to make the case for true rhetoric even stronger by looking again at Phaedrus 261a–266b in the light of recent work done on the sophistic movement. For, though we have achieved a more interesting insight into the teachings of the Sophists, the results of such studies have not been clearly applied to our understanding of Plato’s rhetorical theory. And since it has been, in no small measure, the supposed un-Platonic and unphilosophical nature of the specific, practical steps in the description of that theory which has prompted commentators to view it as nothing more than a disposable preamble to a discussion of diairesis, the rehabilitation of such terms as antilogiké

and apaté strengthens immeasurably the case to be made for a rhetoric with philosophical and paedogogical importance of the first rank. Thus, I wish to argue that Plato could, and actually did in the *Phaedrus*, envisage a true philosophical rhetoric which worked by means of "disputation" and "deception" and yet was useful in leading men to knowledge of the Forms.

Socrates introduces the consideration of rhetoric with the following definition:

> The rhetorical art is a certain influencing of the soul by means of words, not in law courts only and in other such public meetings, but also in private gatherings, the same concerning both small and great matters, and no more esteemed when done right concerning serious things than concerning trivial things. (261a–b2)⁷

By this description Socrates reconstitutes the terms of the discussion. Up to this point in the *Phaedrus*, rhetoric had been seen as an art defined in terms of external issues and contexts—for example, rhetoric is an art which deals with legal matters in law courts. Now, however, Socrates discounts externals (public and private, matters small and great, serious and trivial) and turns our attention to internal dispositions and how to effect them—for example, rhetoric is an influencing of souls. Moreover, it is an influencing which is achieved through some sort of disputation (ἀντιλογική, 261d10). Here we meet the first hurdle in the way of my suggestion concerning the true rhetoric.

Traditionally, ἀντιλογική has been viewed as a "rhetorical art of deception, ignorant of truth and going in chase of mere beliefs."⁸ This opinion of ἀντιλογική is reflected in what G. B. Kerferd calls "a long tradition in Platonic studies" of treating ἀντιλογική and ἔρυθρική as "simply interchangeable."⁹ Within this tradition, the workings of rhetoric, as they are described by Socrates in *Phaedrus* 261c–161c, have been seen as a competition for the dialectical processes of collection and division (265d–266b). Thus, for Plato to use either the "disputation" of rhetoric or the "collection and division" of dialectic was tantamount, on the traditional view, to his rejection of the other member of the pair.

Recent work by Kerferd challenges the validity of the traditional account of ἀντιλογική.¹⁰ He sums up what he takes to be Plato's attitude to eristic, ἀντιλογική, and dialectic as follows:

Plato is wholly opposed to eristic, and is completely committed to dialectic. Antilogic for him comes between eristic and dialectic. It
can be used simply for eristic purposes. On the other hand, if it is claimed as a sufficient path to truth it also meets Plato's condemnation. But in itself it is for Plato simply a technique neither good nor bad.11

This suggested understanding of Plato's view of ἀντιλογικὴ opens a way for an interpretation positing a union of dialectic and rhetoric.12 My contention concerning Phaedrus 261c–262c is that Plato is portraying in this passage a sort of ἀντιλογικὴ which can be artfully employed, but, as it will turn out, only by the rhetor who can dialectically collect and divide.13 The essential feature of this ἀντιλογικὴ, according to Kerferd, is "the opposition of one logos to another either by contrariety or contradiction."14 He writes:

It follows that, unlike eristic, when used in argument it constitutes a specific and fairly definite technique, namely that of proceeding from a given logos, say the position adopted by an opponent, to the establishment of a contrary or contradictory logos in such a way that the opponent must either accept both logoi, or at least abandon his first position.15

Described in this way, ἀντιλογικὴ would be the last thing that Plato would reject.16 Formulated as Kerferd has it, "disputation" seems reasonably equivalent to the Socratic elenchus, and I agree with Kerferd when he writes that "the process of elenchus is for Plato a necessary part of the process of dialectic (cf. Phaedo 85c–d, Republic 434b–c)."17

Claimed as a sufficient path to right living and to right thinking, ἀντιλογικὴ surely is in error. This is precisely one of Plato's greatest difficulties with the sophistical rhetoricians whom he will list a bit later in the dialogue. But applied in a context like Socratic elenchus, and seen for what it is—a technique, not a complete philosophy—ἀντιλογικὴ can, I admit, have a role to play in Plato's thought. Thus Phaedrus 261c–262c does not need to be taken as the portrayal of a rhetorical method which is being displayed only for the purpose of being rejected with the advent of the twin processes of collection and division, but rather as the erection of a structure (albeit rhetorical) which requires as its foundation the dialectical processes.18

The appearance of ἀπάτη (cf. 261e6, 262a5, 6, b2) in Socrates' illustration explaining how the ἀντιλογικὴ works provides a second stumbling-block for my thesis that the structure of rhetoric depicted by Socrates in 261c–262c is in fact a skeletal explanation
of the true rhetoric. How could the true rhetoric involve deception? Would not Plato appear guilty of something morally reprehensible if he were interpreted as making ἀπάτη an integral part of a way of truth and knowledge?19

One solution to the dilemma over deception in true rhetoric is suggested by recent studies in the fragments of Gorgias. As expressed in his Encomium on Helen, the logos deceives the soul (τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπατήρας, DK 82b 11, 8).20 For Gorgias, it is suggested, the true nature of things is beyond our grasp (DK 82b, 3, 77; Bllα, 35), and the logos, denied a role as a reflection of things,21 is essentially fiction and falsehood.22 Kerferd brings his interpretation of Gorgias' On Nature (DK 82b 11a) to bear on the description of the deceptive logos and summarizes as follows:

It follows that Gorgias is introducing a radical gulf between logos and the things to which it refers. Once such a gulf is appreciated we can understand quite easily the sense in which every logos involves falsification of the thing to which it has reference—it can never, according to Gorgias, succeed in reproducing as it were in itself that reality which is irretreievably outside itself. To the extent that it claims faithfully to reproduce reality it is no more than deception or ἀπατέ. Yet this is the claim which all logos appears to make. So all logos is to that extent Deception, . . .23

Here we have then a special notion of deception introduced (via Gorgias) into the fabric of fifth-century rhetorical theory. It is not simply a description in the nontechnical, everyday, moral sense of a deliberate and evil falsification of an otherwise communicable truth.24 Such rhetorical deception is not to be interpreted in moral terms; it is a matter of epistemological limitations.25 Thus W. J. Verdenius can write (of Gorgias) that

. . . persuasion is a form of deception . . . , but this does not imply that the original thoughts of the audience were more right and true than the feelings induced by the orator. The term ἀπάτη originally means "leading away" and refers to the fact that a person is deflected from his own way of thought without realizing it.26

As a feature of rhetoric theory, deception is a technique without ethical implication. It is, so to speak, a leading away from one's opinion, not necessarily a leading away from the truth (though it may well be).

What application of the "rhetorical" notion of ἀπάτη can be
made in *Phaedrus* 261c–262c? In general, note that the passage is formally a discussion of rhetoric. Granted the definition includes under the rubric of rhetoric much more than Phaedrus has heard in the reports of the existing tradition. Nevertheless the explication of ψυχαγωγία as ἀντιλογία, far from unsettling Phaedrus’ traditional understanding, is a basis for comprehending other types of discourse under the same classification. What we are given in the passage is an analysis of persuasive speech in general, in terms arising out of the traditional theory. Inasmuch as there is a striking resemblance between Phaedrus’ “reports” and the Gorgian theory of rhetoric, it would not be unexpected to discover ἀπάτη carrying the sort of technical “rhetorical” notion outlined above.

Pushing a bit further, how might this sense of ἀπάτη find a place within Plato’s philosophy? The account of “reality,” and man’s ability to know it, out of which this notion of deception arises, differs only in part from that of Plato. For Gorgias, man is confined to the realm of δόξα; knowledge of reality is impossible. For Plato, man is not necessarily limited to δόξα, but the vast majority of individuals do live their lives with nothing better. Indeed, all men are born without knowledge (in a state of forgetfulness); even the man who eventually becomes a knowledgeable philosopher must be “converted” from the realm of δόξα to the realm of ἐπιστήμη. If it is the man of opinions (δόξαι) who can be “deceived,” then Plato would have no problem in finding a place for “rhetorical” ἀπάτη. This very sort of thing is prominently displayed in the “Myth of the Metals” (*Republic* 414). Men are “helped” by means of a falsehood; their lives are improved morally (they do not grasp for more than is their due) and benefitted by the resulting harmonious relations of the parts of the city. The philosopher, who has knowledge of the truth, must act discriminantly among the untaught, and so does not always state “the truth.” Consider also the men chained in the Cave of the *Republic* 514–521; they could not receive the direct presentation of the truth about things. They would think the man who told them such things to be a maniac. It is a slow process out of the darkness; at the outset they would be “blinded” by direct exposure to reality.

*Plato’s philosopher-orator therefore often practices an “art of deception” in which, by presenting resemblances to truth, proceeding by degrees from one resemblance to another, he “deceives” inferiors into believing something which approximates it.*
Books three and four of the *Republic* indicate the necessity and propriety of teaching children myths which are put aside later in life.\(^{31}\) This training reflects the same lesson as the Allegory of the Cave. The deception of the true rhetoric (to use a phrase applied to Gorgias by Versenyi) "reveals something more fundamental than what is open to everyday human insight; . . . in this sense, . . . all such deception really undeceives."\(^{32}\) The technical, or "rhetorical," notion of ἀπαίτησι, as leading one away from current opinions, may well find a place as part of Plato's true rhetoric.

The principle eventually agreed upon by Socrates and Phaedrus is that we can be "deceived" when two things are so similar that we are unable to perceive the difference between them.\(^{33}\) In terms of everyday experience this is true: for example, a man may mistakenly wear navy blue socks though he wanted to wear black ones. Of course, some colors are quite different; no one can be led to believe that white socks are black, unless he is trying to tell the difference in the dark. Socrates, however, does not deal with colors, which are for the most part readily discernible one from the other. He recommends subjects to the rhetor about which there is no widespread agreement (Socrates' examples are δικαίου ἡ ἀγάθοι, 263a6–b5) due to men's ignorance about them. The man who has no knowledge of the forms of the just and the good can be mistaken about their likenesses in the world of opinion.

It is at 262c5 that Socrates suggests an examination of the speeches of Lysias and himself, in order to illustrate the notion of deception by means of similarities within the disputational context. He discovers two glaring faults in Lysias' effort and puts a question to Phaedrus in which he pinpoints both of them.

Did Lysias, in beginning his discourse on love, compel us to accept it as a certain "something" with his own meaning? And did he organize the whole of the speech which followed along this line? (263d4–e2)

Lysias' speech does not begin correctly, nor does it carry on in the right way. The use of multivocal terms emphasizes the need for an initial definition in a speech such as that attributed to Lysias. He is, of course, not so stupid as to try to convince the Athenians that iron is not iron (iron is a Socratic example of a univocal term at 263a6); he has spoken on a topic about which there is no little disagreement (like 'justice' and 'good,' 'love' is a difficult thing to
define in a way that is acceptable to all, 236a9–10). It is just such things, says Socrates, about which men are more readily deceived (ἐναρτατότεποι ἐσομεν, 263b3, picking up the earlier analysis of rhetoric as ἀπάτη, 261e6–7) and by which the rhetorical art can most powerfully flex its muscles (363b3–4). The fact is, however, that while Lysias is to be congratulated for choosing the right sort of term (a good rhetor must be able to, 263b6–c5), his delinquency in properly defining it effectively nullifies any advantage gained. Love (ἐρως) is a word which means “all things to all men,” so to speak, and so the fact that Lysias has not stopped to define it is an obvious flaw in his approach. By neglecting to offer a definition, Lysias allows each member of his audience to use his or her own understanding of the word. Accordingly, each listener hears the speech in terms of his own estimation of ἐρως. In this case the rhetor does not have the ability to guide his audience down the path he wants them to take. He may “move” them, but he has allowed them to move along their own road, as it were. And even his ability to “move” them is hampered since, not knowing from what point they are starting (each one with his own definition), he is less capable of deceiving them by using likenesses. He does not know to what he should make his portrayal similar, for each listener has his own understanding of love.

Socrates then turns to the second of the deficiencies in Lysias’ speech: a lack of proper arrangement. I cannot agree with Hackforth that Plato is here (Phaedrus 264 a–d) making a rather insignificant statement about ταξις. Actually he is elaborating upon one result of Lysias’ ignorance, which is evident from his speech. After failing to begin with a proper definition, the remainder of Lysias’ speech flounders. The speaker seems to be “swimming on his back upstream” (264a4–7). In Socrates’ eyes, the end comes at the beginning and vice versa. See how this would qualify as bad rhetoric as outlined at 261c–262c. The object there stated for the rhetor was to make α to appear to the audience as not-α by moving a little at a time, and thus deceiving his hearers. Here Lysias is accused of speaking at random χῦνθην (264b3); he has no notion of where his speech is going. Its untidy nature will (perhaps) reveal his intent to “deceive.” The ability to deceive, depending as it does on the right use of similarities, demands a rigid structure for the speech in order to make the whole give support to the original definition. But Lysias’ speech has no order at all. In such a case, he is bound to be tripped up by the dullest wits in the assembly, who
will not be deceived. Lysias' speech then displays his ignorance both in its beginning and in its order.

It is no accident that when we come to the discussion of Socrates' speeches we find demonstrated the two procedures which, when applied to speaking, cure the ills of sophistic rhetoric. It may surprise us, however, when we see how readily the dual processes of "collection and division" fit into the rhetorical framework of the ἀντιλογία as explained in 261c–262c. Rhetoric is not portrayed as the natural antagonist of these dialectical processes, nor is it shown to be excluded by them. On the contrary, rhetoric demonstrates its status as art, as psychagogy, only when the rhetor speaks from a knowledge gained by collection and division.

"One thing mistaken for another" is, for Plato, the key to the psychagogic art. The rhetor attempts to displace one view (held by his listeners) with a second relying on the audience's inability to distinguish one from the other. He looks for a notion which, on the one hand, supports his case, and on the other, is similar to (but of course not exactly like) the thoughts of his listeners. Lacking the discernment which would expose the dissimilarities between the rhetor's proposed notion and their opinion, the audience is led to accept the rhetor's conclusions. He is best equipped to convince, argues Socrates, who is best able to discern similarities.

The usefulness of diairesis in the task of determining similarities seems obvious. The gathering of kinds (or instances) under one generic form and the division into species according to natural kinds can reveal to the rhetor those forms which are most similar and can be used in deceiving his listeners. Forms taken under the same genus will have similarities by virtue of the fact, but each form need not be like enough to each other to accomplish the deception of one's audience. In general, a clear view of divisions gives the rhetor clarity in his own speaking, as well as a tool to unravel the rhetoric of his opponent by catching him using a notion which wrongly conflates two separate and distinct things. By having worked through the dialectical processes, the rhetor is ready both to begin his speech with a definition of the topic, and then to bring the whole of the discourse into agreement behind this distinction. Only on the basis of right understanding of forms can one be sure that he is using words correctly, and thereby speaking well (cf. Cratylus 387b–d, 438a–b).

Dialectic supplies the basis for the rhetorical art. The best "deceiver" will be the man equipped, by experience with collection
and division, with an adequate knowledge of similarities and dissimilarities. The rhetor who can "map out" the realm of true being, relating things by collection and division, will then be familiar with the relationship between these things. On this basis the pair of procedures which Plato attributes to dialecticians becomes the means by which one may attain to the true art of rhetoric. Just such an art Thrasymachus et al. missed by not having the knowledge which comes from dialectic (266c1−7).

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Notes

1. It is not my intention to deal with the second part of his analysis, which concerns the rhetor's awareness of types of souls and the arguments suited to each (Phaedrus 266c–274b).


4. A typical way of removing rhetoric from the discussion is seen in Guthrie. He suggests that "true rhetoric is coextensive with philosophy" (A History of Greek Philosophy, Vol. III [Cambridge: University Press, 1969], 177). By this he means that the proper art of logos is the practice of dialectic which Plato describes metaphorically in Phaedrus 276−277, and that this proper art is to be distinguished from the antilogiké described in 261a−266b. Plato, he says, is just "pretending to take it [i.e., rhetoric] seriously" (IV, 413). See also G. Bouchard, "L'antimodèle platonicien de la nouvelle rhétorique," Canadian Journal of Philosophy 11 (1981): 701−702.

5. The traditional approach to the passage can be seen in Hackforth's comments on section 261a−264c (Plato's Phaedrus [Cambridge: University Press, 1952], 129−30). Notwithstanding prolixity of style and strangeness of major thesis, Burger (Plato's Phaedrus [University Ala.: The University of Alabama Press, 1980], 72) arrives at a position on Phaedrus 261a−266b not unlike the traditional commentator. Both argue that Plato's objective is to deny the possibility of a rhetorical art without knowledge, one to emphasize the place of dialectic, the other to allow for the "philosophic art of writing." Nothing is said positively about the true rhetorical art.

7. Translations throughout are my own unless otherwise noted.


11. Ibid.

12. So long as ἀντιλογική was considered equivalent to eristic, and was thus subject to Platonic censure, scholars worked to make Zeno fit into the pattern which their idea of ἀντιλογική determined for the passage. Thus Cornford, Plato and Parmenides, 67, could write: “Modern writers regard Zeno’s argument as subtle and profound and valid against the position he was attacking. But Plato seems to have thought of him as a mere sophist.” (Cf. A. Dies, Parmenide, Budé series (Paris: 1923), 14-19). Cornford goes on to cite as proof Phaedrus 261d and to point out that Zeno is “Classed as a controversialist ἀντιλογικός with the demagogue and the forensic orator . . .,” and then to give the traditional view of ἀντιλογική which Kerferd has questioned. Corrective for Cornford’s view of Zeno may be found in G. Vlastos, “Plato’s Testimony concerning Zeno of Elea,” Journal of Hellenic Studies 95 (1975): 136-62 and in R. E. Allen, Plato’s “Parmenides,” (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 67-69.

13. Of ἀντιλογική in Phaedrus 261d, Allen, Plato’s “Parmenides”, 68, writes: “Cornford roundly declares that, ‘the whole is condemned as an art of deception’ (PTK 177). But that is not so. The art of deception is said to require ability to represent, or misrepresent, one thing as like another (261e), which requires in turn, if the art is to be properly practiced, knowledge of the truth about how things resemble and differ from each other (262a-b).”


15. Ibid.


18. J. McCumber comes close to this view when he writes of Phaedrus 361 that the reader must not “. . . be led to think that Plato is contrasting, rather than assimilating, the narrow and broad meanings of the term, and thence to the view that the narrower (and more clearly “Platonic”) meaning is for Plato “good,” and the broader correspondingly bad. In fact, we shall argue the Phaedrus is trying to appropriate the lower levels of discourse and soul to philosophy, not read them out of it.” “Discourse and Psyche in Plato’s Phaedrus,” Apeiron 16 (1982): 19. The term of which McCumber is speaking is ἤπτομα; and he is arguing against the elimination of persuasive discourse of traditional rhetoric from consideration in the Phaedrus.

Such an interpretation goes in exactly the wrong direction because it assumes a nontechnical sense for διάκρισις.


24. Deception may even be considered a positive good in Gorgias’ view, if we may accept DK 82b 23 (II, 305, 26–306, 2) as genuinely Gorgian. As Guthrie writes: “Even when deceptive, deceit may be a just one and the deceived go away wiser than before, as happens with the fictions of tragedy, which to Gorgias was only rhetoric in verse.” *A History of Greek Philosophy*, III, 180–81. Classen regards διάκρισις as “technical term in the theory of rhetoric . . . as well as of poetry.” “The Study of Language Amongst Socrates’ Contemporaries,” 229, n. 48.


33. Often the argument is connected with the problem of the “knowledgeable deceiver” of the *Hippias Minor* (e.g., P. Friedänder, *Plato*, III, trans. H. Meyerhoff [New York: Pantheon Book, 1964], 235 n. 27), and to the doctor who causes illness in *Republic* I (333c–334a). The comparison is not necessarily an apt one, since the goals of the “true rhetor” differ greatly from the objectives of those two men.
