

Socrates'/Plato's Use of Rhetoric A Bahá'í Perspective

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Abstract

Rhetoric in the modern world is often associated with disputation and with less than truthful attempts to persuade. Classical rhetoric, however, in its urge to wed eloquence with the noble goals of philosophy, continues as a study to increase our understanding of human utterance and expression. Although Plato has historically been regarded as an enemy of rhetoric, he is seen here as an important contributor to its classical tradition. The figure of Socrates in Plato's dialogues models a rhetoric of mutuality, a "pedagogical" rhetoric, which—especially when viewed from a Bahá'í perspective—demonstrates the morally nurturing nature of refined speech.

Résumé

Dans le monde moderne on associe souvent la rhétorique à la contestation et aux tentatives de persuasion plus ou moins honnêtes. Cependant, la rhétorique classique, dans son souci d'allier l'éloquence et les nobles buts de la philosophie, continue à guider et à accroître notre compréhension du discours et de l'expression humaine. Bien que l'histoire donne à Platon la réputation d'être un ennemi de la rhétorique, nous le voyons ici en collaborateur important de sa tradition classique. Le personnage de Socrate dans les dialogues de Platon présente une rhétorique de mutualité et de pédagogie qui, du point de vue bahá'í, démontre la nature morale du discours raffiné.

Resumen

La retórica en el mundo moderno frecuentemente se asocia con la disputa acompañada de intentos de persuadir casi siempre carecentes de veracidad. En cambio, la retórica clásica, en su deseo de casar la elocuencia con las nobles metas de la filosofía, sigue en pie como materia que aumenta nuestra comprensión del lenguaje y la expresión humana. Aunque a Platón se le ha reconocido históricamente como enemigo de la retórica, aquí se nos presenta como aportador importante a su tradición clásica. La figura de Socrates en los dialogos de Platón da un patrono de una retórica de reciprocidad, una retórica hasta pedagógica que, al verse desde la perspectiva bahá'í, demuestra que el lenguaje refinado da por resultado una condición de enriquecimiento moral.

Classical rhetoric can be defined broadly, as "man's effort to accomplish his purposes by speech" (Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric* xi). Kennedy distinguishes between "primary" and "secondary" rhetoric. This article is chiefly concerned with a paradigm shift in our understanding of primary rhetoric. Rhetoric for the Greeks and Romans was primarily an oral art of persuasion and only secondarily "the apparatus of rhetorical techniques clustering around discourse or art forms when those techniques are not being used for their primary oral purpose" (Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric* 5). The dialogues of Plato are, of course, literary works; they are not transcripts of Socrates' conversations with his friends. But as an idealized portrait of Socrates the teacher and communicator, the dialogues subtly and profoundly dramatize the educative impact of human utterance when the speaker's purposes are selfless and high minded. Moreover, the dialogues suggest a broader definition of primary rhetoric, one more in line with emergent modern concepts and with Bahá'í teachings.

Rhetoric in Western History

In the Greco-Roman world, from the time of Homer, the ideal orator was the strong-willed hero, noble minded and generally virtuous (Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric* 10). Rhetoric flourished in the law courts and political assemblies of infant democracy; it was central to the curricula of schools throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Dante eulogized rhetoric as "the sweetest of all the other sciences" (Vickers, *Rhetoric Revalued* 13). Cicero, the greatest Roman orator and one of the greatest theoreticians in the field of rhetoric, wrote:

In every free nation, and most of all in communities which have attained the enjoyment of peace and tranquillity, this one art has always flourished over the rest and ever reigned supreme.... What function is so

kingly, so worthy of the free, so generous, as to bring help to the suppliant, to raise up those who are cast down, to bestow security, to set free from peril, to maintain men in their civil rights? The wise control of the complete orator is that which chiefly upholds not only his own dignity, but the safety of countless individuals and of the entire State. (Quoted in Vickers, in *Defence of Rhetoric* 8)

Rhetoric fell into disfavor during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as oratory came to seem a fine art irrelevant to modern circumstances (Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric* 240) and, perhaps, as it came under the fire of the Romantic movement, which valued direct effusions of the artistic soul and was suspicious of speech that seemed to contain a hidden agenda. The twentieth century, however, has experienced a revival of interest in the tradition of classical rhetoric, especially in the “secondary” area of written composition and in terms of rhetoric’s relationships to such fields as semiotics and sociolinguistics. As George Kennedy says, “In the work of such critics as Kenneth Burke and Chaim Perelman the classical tradition in rhetoric seems to have entered a new phase in its long and distinguished career” (*Classical Rhetoric* 241). And current writing in classical rhetoric also indicates an interest in reexamining the civilizing potential of primary rhetoric, proposing that potent speech can be bilateral and spiritual, less a weapon and more a means of achieving unity.

However, “rhetoric” in common parlance remains a pejorative term. After Hitler and Khomeini, after nearly a century of sloganeering and totalitarianism, people are suspicious of eloquence. Can impressive language be used in something other than a combative, a commercial, or an evangelizing mode? Can speech be used to heal, to unite?

“Human utterance,” Bahá’u’lláh writes, “is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation” (*Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 172), and the history of rhetoric could be said to be summed up in the dynamic between power and wisdom implied in these words. Melancthon was probably referring to these poles when he spoke of “the dignity and utility of eloquence” (quoted in Vickers, *Defence* 479). Isocrates (436–338 BC) tried to persuade himself that only a good person could be an effective orator and that the good and the expedient are the same (Rollinson, *A Guide to Classical Rhetorical Theory* 24). Often identified as a Sophist, Isocrates battled with rhetoric’s reputation, stemming from Sophists like Gorgias and Tisias, that it trained a person to be able to make “the worse seem the better cause” (Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric* 31). Isocrates believed that philosophy needed rhetoric in order to exert the kind of influence that could make an individual virtuous (Rollinson, *Guide to Classical Rhetorical Theory* 24), but he must have known as well that without moral philosophy (he was a younger contemporary of Socrates) rhetoric would likely be reduced to the eristic (disputational) model on which it was historically based—the seeking of selfish advantage through persuasive speech. As Cicero put it, “... eloquence without wisdom has been a great obstacle” (quoted in Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric* 91).

For all its dignity and high moral tone as exemplified in the practice and theory of such figures as Demosthenes, Cicero, Quintillian, St. Augustine, rhetoric through the centuries has remained at least in part a science of verbal warfare, an art of imposing one’s will on others through cultivated speech. It has been based on a win-lose paradigm characteristic of a species that was perpetually at war. Current literature on rhetoric, however, often seems to examine the classical tradition for implications that could lead towards another kind of model, a model that would allow the urge to influence to be informed by a vision of unity.

Some Recent Reexaminations of Classical Rhetoric

Frederick J. Antczak in *Thought and Character: The Rhetoric of Democratic Education*, for example, finds nourishment in the perspectives of Kenneth Burke and Wayne Booth, for both of whom, despite their differences, “identification, rather than persuasion” is “the centerpiece of the rhetorical enterprise.” “In Antczak’s finished schema, ultimate rhetorical success requires identification with an audience in thought and character in a way which reconstitutes that audience and liberates it to think, judge, and act creatively, intelligently, and responsibly” (Hammerback, “Review of Thought and Character” 207). Similarly, Kate Ronald in an article entitled, “A Reexamination of Personal and Public Discourse in Classical Rhetoric,” speaks of “unexpressed connections between speaker and hearer” and concludes that dialectical discourse produces “knowledge as something people *do* together” (Ronald, “Reexamination” 47). Plato’s dialogues, in this view, involve a kind of rhetoric that bears reexamination.

In “Studying Rhetoric and Teaching School,” Jim W. Corder delves into the meaning and implications of the rhetorical category of ethos. (Of the three proofs or forms of appeal that Aristotle identified—logos, ethos, and pathos—Aristotle regarded the second as the most influential—that is, the moral presence of the speaker is potentially more persuasive than the rational arguments or the emotional impact on the audience [Rollinson, *Guide to Classical Rhetorical Theory* 3].) This work and another article by Corder with the surprising title “Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love” demonstrate that rhetoric is a discipline still in the process of evolving.

Corder looks at the “radio model of communication” as enunciated in such works as Kinneavy’s *A Theory of Discourse* and concludes that “the model has severe limitations” (33). Especially, ethos as a key to rhetorical conviction is not accounted for: “It does not provide a useful means of understanding ethical appeal” (33).

Implicit in the model is the notion that the message is separate from the speaker, that it leaves the speaker and reaches the hearer. But Walter Ong argues that “all words projected from a speaker remain, as has been seen, somehow interior to him, being an invitation to another person, another interior, to share the speaker’s interior, an invitation to enter in, not to regard from the outside.” (33)

Corder calls this language of rhetoric that of “generative ethos”—the opposite of “the language of confrontation” such as the specialized discourse of slang, cult tongues, professional jargon, and the mass-media communications. He repeatedly describes generative ethos as “commodious.” Corder quotes Georges Gurdorf in *Speaking* as saying, “Living speech acknowledges the requirement of the spiritual life in travail—not at all a closed system achieved once and for all—but an effort of constant regeneration” (quoted in “Studying” 32–36). Corder’s “Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love” is informed by the Rogerian psychology of mutuality. He feels here that “we arguers can learn from the lessons that rhetoric itself wants to teach us,” especially the lessons of “invention,” which open us in our search for thoughts “to the richness of creation,” and ethos, which can be redefined as a means of achieving mutuality. Argument and conflict, characteristic of rhetoric since its beginnings in the eristic disputations of the pre-Socratic courts and assemblies, can be seen to be potentially resolvable through an evolution of rhetorical processes. Corder advises that we learn to speak and write

not argumentative displays and presentations but arguments full of the anecdotal, personal, and cultural reflections that will make us plain to all others, thoughtful histories and narratives that reveal us as we’re reaching for the others. The world, of course, doesn’t want time in its discourses. The world wants the quick memo, the rapid-fire electronic mail service; the world wants speed, efficiency, and economy of motion, all goals that, when reached, have given the world less than it wanted or needed. We must teach the world to want otherwise, to want time for care. (“Argument” 28–31)

These articles seem to represent attempts to broaden the definition of rhetoric in ways relevant to the modern world. The change in all of the articles involves a kind of paradigm shift from a divisive model to a model of unity in diversity. And the spirit that seems to hover over any attempt to understand rhetoric as a means of achieving mutuality is that of Socrates, especially as that beloved figure is depicted in Plato’s dialogues.

Plato’s Pedagogical Rhetoric

Almost from rhetoric’s inception in classical antiquity, Plato has been regarded as its chief and most potent enemy, and rhetoric and philosophy have been waging territorial battles ever since (Viekers, *Rhetoric Revalued* 247). But in the dialogues Plato also described an ideal rhetoric, identified by George Kennedy as “philosophical rhetoric” (*Classical Rhetoric* 41), which has represented a kind of latent, unactualized tradition through the centuries, shadowing the prevailing eristic model and powerfully influencing it.

Even as the “Socrates” of these quite charming (though often tiresome) literary creations assails rhetoric as speech that panders to its hearers for the sake of the speaker’s selfish advantage, hindering human progress for all concerned, Plato was making powerful use of a rhetoric of his own. Known as the Socratic method, this speech-behavior is usually described in terms of the dialectical process that characterizes it, and since that process is claimed by philosophy as central to its search for apodeictic (expressing absolute truth or certainty) truth, its rhetorical nature has not been satisfactorily acknowledged. Clearly, Socrates/Plato is out to persuade, and his attempts are often artful, indeed. As he asks of the power-hungry Callicles in the “Gorgias,” “Do I or do I not persuade you with this image that the disciplined life is better than the intemperate?” (494a). Likewise in the “Symposium” he says to the gathered banqueters at a feast of oratory:

This, Phaedrus—this, gentlemen—was the doctrine of Diotima [his fictitious mentor]. I was convinced, and in that conviction I try to bring others to the same creed, and to convince them that, if we are to make this gift our own, Love will help our mortal nature more than all the world. (212b)

Given whatever allowances are necessary for artful Socratic irony, these quotations indicate that one way to describe Socrates’/Plato’s purpose in the dialogues is that it is to persuade his hearers to examine his vision of reality.

Even when this aspect of Platonic purpose is recognized, however, the dialogues cannot be classified under any of the three generally accepted kinds of classical rhetoric. This in itself has no doubt obscured the fact that Plato's works are, indeed, a form of rhetoric, albeit a form which Aristotle, in focusing on civic discourse, failed to acknowledge. (His three categories are deliberative, judicial, and epideictic [meant for display or show].) Socrates' speech-behavior in the dialogues seems to be a kind of pedagogical rhetoric. Unlike the other three types, Socrates' utterance is directed at, and meant to persuade, one individual at a time, rather than a jury or political assembly. The dialogues are not merely private conversations, however. Socrates saw himself as a kind of civic figure—"gadfly of the state" ("Apology" in Hamilton, *Collected Dialogues* 31) and as having a very real, though God-given, civic responsibility. Indeed, towards the end of the "Gorgias" Socrates identifies himself as Athens's only "statesman" (521d). His purpose is moral and spiritual instruction.

Some of the outstanding features of this pedagogical rhetoric seem to be the following:

- Logical proofs—referred to as the *logos* of a speech—are, of course, extremely important and are arrived at through a question/answer format and through definition;
- *Ethos*—that is, the moral authority of the speaker—is perhaps even more important, however, than *logos*;
- Topics of discussion are always of moral and spiritual import (and, by collective extension, of political import);
- The language is frank but loving and is directed to a particular soul;
- The rhetorical situation is characterized by mutuality, with no assumption of superiority on the part of the teacher;
- The rhetorical occasion is informal but timely;
- The discourse is open to inspiration and, in fact, is meant to prepare for intuitive "reminiscence" on the part of the seeker (Perelman, "Rhetorique" 277);
- Frequent use of analogy (and other inductive methods);
- The dialogues rarely reach closure but end in the *aporia* of "knowing that we don't know" (Ferguson, *Sourcebook* 2);
- Good humor, an element of play, despite a general seriousness.

I will focus on *logos* and *ethos* as being the two most important features of classical rhetoric, attempting to shed light on as many of the other features as possible in the process.

In the tripartite system that Aristotle, the great categorizer, devised and which has informed the mainstream of classical rhetoric ever since, the logical content, or *logos*, of a speech to a jury or a political assembly was, of course, extremely important. Since Aristotle was a student in Plato's Academy for twenty years, the dialogues available during that time no doubt served him as models of dialectical reasoning, and it seems almost superfluous to argue that *logos* characterizes Socratic utterance. Nevertheless, some explanation may be helpful in demonstrating Socrates'/Plato's place in the tradition of classical rhetoric.

Plato's approach has always been classified as philosophy, and he criticized prevailing rhetoric in several of the dialogues (notably in the "Gorgias" and the "Phaedrus" but also in the "Protagoras" and in the "Euthydemus"). Therefore, the rhetorical nature of Plato's use of logic in the dialogues has not been given its due. Aristotle acknowledged the debt that philosophy owed to the Socratic method by saying, "Two things may properly be ascribed to Socrates, inductive reasoning and definition of universals" (quoted in Ferguson, *Socrates* 181). The purpose, however, of the process described in the dialogues is not solely—or even primarily, it seems, in most of them—to demonstrate the truth, which is philosophy's goal, but also, as mentioned above, to persuade, which is rhetoric's traditional goal. In fact, the attempts mutually to define such terms as friendship, courage, virtue, love, and justice, taking up most of the conversations, almost always end in apparent failure. They are unsuccessful as philosophy. Outwardly, they are a case of the blind leading the blind. As Aristotle wrote in *Sophistical Refutations*, "This was why Socrates posed questions without answering them; he admitted his lack of knowledge" (quoted in Ferguson, *Socrates* 181).

It seems that we are dealing with a very rhetorical use of logic, indeed! To the modern reader, the Socrates of the dialogues generally gives the impression that he is merely *pretending* to seek the truth together with his companions, when, in fact, through the nature of his questions, he guides the others down a course he has already taken in his mind towards a conclusion he has already reached. Some readers are profoundly offended by what seems to them Socrates'/Plato's devious use of logic. Terence Irwin, for example, finds dozens of logical tricks in the "Gorgias"—fifty examples of arguments that are invalid or misleading or inconsistent, and fully eighty examples of "unjustified assumptions" (cited in Vickers, *Defence* 116–17).

The “Gorgias,” which contains the most virulent attack on prevailing sophistic rhetoric, is also the dialogue containing the most blatant abuses of dialectic for predetermined ends and cannot be taken as typical. As the editors of *The Collected Dialogues* put it:

In this dialogue Socrates is different.... Except for two passing allusions his usual profession of ignorance has been dropped. He never says that he cannot teach because he does not know. In the ‘Gorgias’ he does know, he is eager to teach—at times he talks with the fervor of an evangelist. (Hamilton, *Dialogues* 229)

In fact, this dialogue reminds one of an anecdote Aristotle recounts: “As Aristippus said to Plato when the latter was speaking somewhat too dogmatically in his view: ‘How unlike our friend!’—meaning Socrates” (quoted in Ferguson, *Socrates* 183). However, for the very reason that the “Gorgias” is more explicit, especially in the second half, it may be instructive for our inquiry into the content of the Platonic dialogues to examine some of the points made in the “Gorgias.”

The dialogue centers on the question, What is the nature of the good life? and concludes that the pursuit and acquisition of worldly power is a tragic mistake, both in terms of the true inward quality of such a life here on earth (253) and in terms of the dire punishment awaiting the errant soul in the next world (525c). Given these assumptions, when the effect of judicial rhetoric is to exonerate the guilty, a crime has been committed against society and against the guilty party, the sickness in whose soul has thus not been treated. In judicial contexts, rhetoric should be used “for the sole purpose of exposing his own misdeeds” (480d). Callicles, a Superman figure in the Nietzschean sense (in fact, Nietzsche was attracted to the portrayal of Callicles [Vickers, *Defence* 103]) intrudes on the conversation at this point with the words, “You run wild in your take like a true mob orator” (482c). (Only a twentieth-century reader can truly appreciate the deliciousness of Plato’s irony in having so Hitlerian a character say this.)

And now, in the person of the intensely worldly Callicles, Socrates/Plato is faced with perhaps the most extreme challenge of all the dialogues. Callicles believes that superior people can profitably indulge their appetites, whereas most people are not able to do so and need the restraints of civic law (491d): “Luxury and intemperance and license, when they have sufficient backing, are virtue and happiness, and all the rest is tinsel, the unnatural catchwords of mankind, mere nonsense and of no account” (492c). Socrates does not break his bond of affection with Callicles at this but calls it “a brave attack” and praises his frankness, “For clearly you are now saying what others may think but are reluctant to express” (492d). He demonstrates to Callicles through this language the mutuality of their endeavor. For clarification, he says, “Then those who are in need of nothing are not rightly called happy,” and Callicles answers, “No, in that case stones and corpses would be supremely happy” (492e). This is a telling analogy; Callicles is not the straw figure that Plato makes of Gorgias earlier in the dialogue. But Socrates’ response is a lovely example of what Corder calls “commodious” language. Directed at Callicles’ argument—at his soul’s ailment, that is—it leaves Callicles himself free to grow in terms of new understanding; Socrates keeps the conversation from becoming a contest of egos, as it was in the eristic model of rhetoric:

Socrates: Well, life as you describe it is a strange affair. I should not be surprised, you know, if Euripides was right when he said, “Who knows, if life be death, and death be life?” And perhaps we are actually dead, for I once heard one of our wise men say that we are now dead, and that our body is a tomb, and that that part of the soul in which dwell the desires is of a nature to be swayed and to shift to and fro. And so some clever fellow, a Sicilian perhaps or Italian, writing in allegory, by a slight perversion of language named this part of the soul a jar, because it can be swayed and easily persuaded.... and the soul of the foolish he compared to a sieve, because it is perforated and through lack of belief and forgetfulness unable to hold anything. These ideas may naturally seem somewhat absurd, but they reveal what I want to put before you, to persuade you, if I can, to retract your view and to choose in place of an insatiable and uncontrolled life the life of order that is satisfied with what at anytime it possesses. But do I persuade, you to change and admit that orderly folk are happier than the undisciplined, or even if I offer many other such allegories, will you not withdraw an inch? Callicles: That is more like the truth. (493a–d)

Socrates begins his cross-examination (497c) in earnest, however, as if, ironically enough, they were in a kind of law court, and when Callicles admits that “some pleasures are good and some bad” (497c), he opens himself to new understanding. They agree on a kind of aphorism: “Then the pleasant as well as everything else should be done for the sake of the good, not the good for the sake of the pleasant” (500a). And now Socrates/Plato returns to an analogy that he had introduced earlier to Gorgias himself, namely, that medicine heals because it scientifically aims at the ailment whereas “cooking” exacerbates sickness because it unscientifically aims simply at what tastes good.

Medicine corresponds to philosophy, which heals the soul by detaching it from the world; cookery corresponds to the prevailing rhetoric, which adds to psychological ills by pandering to humanity's baser, appetitive nature (501b–502e).

But the discussion goes on and on, almost *ad nauseam*. Callicles is an incorrigible student, as we have seen. When Socrates concludes, “Then to be disciplined is better for the soul than indiscipline, which you preferred just now,” Callicles mutters, “I do not know what you are talking about, Socrates; ask someone else.... I have not the slightest interest in what you are saying. I answered you only to gratify Gorgias” (505c). Socrates is reluctant to “leave the discussion incomplete,” however, and one can hear him saying to himself, “My friend Callicles has some dangerous notions!” Callicles then suggests Socrates “carry it through alone, either speaking on your own or answering your own questions,” and the dialogue format breaks down, leaving Socrates a kind of gentle Greek Jeremiah, decrying ignobility, praising justice and the urge to perfection, prophesying his own martyrdom, warning of the torments of Hades—exhorting his listeners “to live and die in the pursuit of righteousness and all other virtues ... to follow and invite others.” Referring to worldly ambition, he says, “it is worthless, dear Callicles” (527b).

And from Callicles, silence. Is it just that he has lost a debate, has been reduced to silence? Only partly so. How different this dialogue has been than the “Euthydemes” where Socrates is “defeated” by two hair-splitting experts of eristics. There, it is clear that the victory is hollow and meaningless, for “the truth is never refuted” (255a). To “refute” Socrates is to close oneself off from the truth. The vain hair-splitters have wasted their time; Callicles has just spent the most important hour or two in his life. Despite his earlier anger, his silence is pregnant. We have been led to the verge of a Platonic moment: Callicles will either turn from the shadows on the wall in the world's cave and see the sun of “beyond being” shining in (Hamilton, *Dialogues* 576)—or he will not. Socrates, who has seen the light (and will be slain for it, the allegory in the “Republic” implies) cannot compel conversion: the soul turns on its own in the Platonic moment of transcendent intuition. He can only educate souls to the loftiness of possibility. “So deplorably uneducated are we!” he laments at the end of the “Gorgias” (527b).

In terms of the rational content, or *logos*, of Socrates'/Plato's utterances, we are, after all, in the dual presence of two of history's greatest thinkers. The Bahá'í writings—replete with insight into so many aspects of human affairs—confirm this estimate of posterity, as they do the truth of much of the content of the dialogues. In “The Tablet of Wisdom” Bahá'u'lláh explains that most of the philosophers of ancient Greece believed in God, having “acquired their knowledge from the [Hebrew] Prophets,” and that Socrates “is the most distinguished of all philosophers and was highly versed in wisdom.” “What a penetrating vision into philosophy this eminent man had! ... Methinks he drank one draught when the Most Great Ocean overflowed with gleaming and life-giving waters” (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 144–46).

After Socrates came the divine Plato who was a pupil of the former and occupied the chair of philosophy as his successor. He acknowledged his belief in God and in His signs which pervade all that hath been and shall be. Then came Aristotle, the well-known man of knowledge. He it is who discovered the power of gaseous matter. These men who stand out as leaders of the people and are pre-eminent among them, one and all acknowledged their belief in the immortal Being Who holdeth in His grasp the reins of all sciences. (*Tablets* 147)

The Bahá'í writings also have much to say about speech and utterance that highlights the “wisdom” with which Socrates/Plato used utterance in attempting to teach selected people about the nature of a moral and spiritual life. Bahá'u'lláh writes, for example:

No man of wisdom can demonstrate his knowledge save by means of words.... words and utterances should be both impressive and penetrating. However, no word will be infused with these two qualities unless it be uttered wholly for the sake of God and with due regard unto the exigencies of the occasion and the people. (*Tablets* 172)

‘Abdu'l-Bahá confirms that “the faculty of speech is very acceptable, but it must be aided by the power of reason...” (*Questions* 302). He explains that “among the Greeks and Romans the criterion of knowledge was reason [as opposed to sense perception, tradition, and inspiration]; that whatever is provable and acceptable by reason must necessarily be admitted as true” (*Bahá'í World Faith* 251–52). But, as Socrates and Plato both seemed to understand, reason has its limitations as a means of truly knowing anything:

This human world is an ocean of varying opinions. If reason is the perfect standard and criterion of knowledge, why are opinions at variance and why do philosophers disagree so completely with each other?

This is a clear proof that human reason is not to be relied upon as an infallible criterion. For instance, great discoveries and announcements of former centuries are continually upset and discarded by the wise men of today. Mathematicians, astronomers, chemical scientists continually disprove and reject the conclusions of the ancients; nothing is fixed, nothing final; everything continually changing because human reason is progressing along new roads of investigation and arriving at new conclusions every day. (“Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í World Faith* 252–53)

The dialogues demonstrate, and to some extent dramatize, the fact that human *logos* can carry seekers only so far towards apodeictic truth and no farther. Then those seekers must inwardly turn in the cave of their mortal lives and, by the aid of a power beyond them, behold the sun of truth. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá puts it, “What then remains? How shall we attain the reality of knowledge? By the breaths and promptings of the Holy Spirit which is light and knowledge Itself. Through it the human mind is quickened and fortified into true conclusions and perfect knowledge” (*Bahá’í World Faith* 253–54).

Ethos in The Dialogues: The Role of Socrates’ Moral Character

Even more important than *logos* as a feature of this pedagogical rhetoric is the *ethos* of the figure of Socrates in the dialogues. By *ethos* as a category, Aristotle meant one of the three kinds of proof or means of conviction that speech–behavior exerts: “Moral character... constitutes the most effective means of proof” (Matsen, *Readings* 120). The term “moral character” as used here has been debased over time so that in current discussions it can refer simply to the sense of authority a speaker conveys, the confidence in the speaker’s knowledge of the subject matter he or she inspires. But in the case of Socrates/Plato, as with the function of *logos* in the dialogues, *ethos* retains something closer to its original meaning. Socrates’ statements about virtue, that is, carry persuasive weight because he himself embodies virtue to an unusual degree. He taught not only by words but also by example.

Bahá’u’lláh pays a remarkable tribute to Socrates’ moral character and to the example of his life: “After him [Hippocrates] came Socrates who was indeed wise, accomplished and righteous. He practised self-denial, repressed his appetites for selfish desires and turned away from material pleasures” (*Tablets* 146). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in a speech at Stanford University in 1912, paid a similar tribute: “As to deistic philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, they are indeed worthy of esteem and of the highest praise, for they have rendered distinguished services to mankind” (*Bahá’í World Faith* 337).

Socrates himself did not write down his philosophy, and, as John Ferguson says, he “would be a footnote in the history of philosophy were it not for his personality and influence.... Those who knew Socrates combine to say, “He was the best man I ever knew” (*Socrates* 16–17). As Seneca wrote in a letter, “Plato, Aristotle and the whole gang of philosophers who were about to go their several ways got more from Socrates’s character than from his words” (quoted in Ferguson, *Socrates* 195).

The Bahá’í writings make it clear that the educational effect of speech depends to a large extent on the character of the speaker. “Righteousness and detachment are like unto two most great lights for the heaven of teaching,” Bahá’u’lláh writes (*The Individual and Teaching* 3). It is a natural human tendency for speech to be used for egotistical ends: “Human utterance is an essence which aspires to exert its influence and needeth moderation.... One word may be likened unto fire, another unto light.... One word is like unto springtime... while another word is even as a deadly poison” (*Tablets* 172–73). This is the connection that Plato seems to be making in the “Gorgias” between rhetoric and the desire for power when Polus says of “good rhetoricians,” “Are they not most powerful in their cities? Do they not like tyrants put to death any men they will and deprive of their fortunes and banish whomsoever it seems best?” (466 a,b). Given this inherent urge to influence that characterizes utterance, Bahá’u’lláh explains that a beneficial influence is “conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets” (*Tablets* 172). And again: “A kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit, it clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding” (*Epistle* 15). And elsewhere in a passage on writing, which is nevertheless extremely pertinent, Bahá’u’lláh writes, “Whatever is written should not transgress the bounds of tact and wisdom, and in the words used there should lie hid the property of milk, so that the children of the world may be nurtured therewith, and attain maturity” (from a tablet recently translated at the Bahá’í World Centre). This is a two-edged simile: milk is both mild and nurturing; it is the stuff of maternal efficacy, gentle, forbearing, utterly concerned. As with “the bread of the spirit,” in its very mildness lies its potency.

Xenophon, the renowned historian and Greek stylist who was the other main source of information about Socrates, wrote eloquently of his righteousness and its educational impact:

But it is still matter of more wonder to me that anyone could be prevailed on to believe that Socrates was a corrupter of youth! Socrates, the most sober and the most chaste of all mankind! supporting with equal cheerfulness the extreme, whether of heat or cold! who shrunk at no hardships, declined no labour and knew so perfectly how to moderate his desires as to make the little he possessed altogether sufficient for him! Could such a one be an encourager of impiety, injustice, luxury, intemperance, effeminacy? But so far from any such thing, that on the contrary he reclaimed many from these vices, by kindling in their minds a love of virtue; encouraging them to think that by a steadfast perseverance they might make themselves esteemed by becoming virtuous men; and although he never undertook to be a teacher of others, yet, as he practised the virtues he sought to recommend, those who conversed with him were animated with the hopes of becoming one day wise from the influence of his example. (Quoted in Ferguson, *Socrates* 147)

As Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Should any one among you be incapable of grasping a certain truth, or be striving to comprehend it, show forth, when conversing with him, a spirit of extreme kindness and good-will. Help him to see and recognize the truth, without esteeming yourself to be, in the least, superior to him, or to be possessed of greater endowments. (*Gleanings* 8)

The key to Socrates' moral character seems to lie in his detachment and self-restraint —what the Greeks called *sophrosyne*—and it is this extreme sense of control and practical wisdom that informs the *ethos* of the dialogues and makes them still seem important and relevant. Two anecdotes from Seneca are instructive in this regard: “With Socrates it was an indication of anger if he lowered his voice and controlled his words. It was clear that he was engaged in an inner struggle. His friends would catch him at it and challenge him, but he was not sorry to be accused of suppressing his anger.” “There is a story about Socrates. Someone slapped his face. He merely said, ‘It’s a nuisance not knowing when to go out wearing a helmet’” (quoted in Ferguson, *Socrates* 196).

The latter part of the “Phaedrus” dramatizes the educational effect of his inner self’s ability to control its passions. The romantic pastoral scene into which Socrates and Phaedrus wander seems at first, as George Kennedy points out, a setting for seduction. (Bi-sexuality was common in the culture.) Phaedrus seems inclined to take advantage of their isolation and to put into practise the implications of their foregoing praise of Eros (236c–d). But through the example of his detachment and the power of his utterance, Socrates transforms their environment into a spiritually nurturing one and prepares Phaedrus to understand that the true “function of oratory is in fact the influence of men’s souls”—for their improvement. Education is a process not unlike farming:

The dialectician selects a soul of the right type and in it he plants and sows his words founded on knowledge... words which instead of remaining barren contain a seed whence new words grow up in new character, whereby the seed is vouchsafed immortality, and its possessor the fullest measure of blessedness that man can attain to. (277a)

Spiritualized Eros indeed! The figure is continued:

...lucidity and completeness and serious importance belong only to those lessons on justice and honor and goodness that are expounded and set forth for the sake of instruction, and are veritably written in the soul of the listener, and that such discourses as these ought to be accounted a man’s own legitimate children—a title to be applied primarily to such as originate within the man himself, and secondarily to such of their sons and brothers as have grown up aright in the souls of other men—the man, I say, who believes this, and disdains all manner of discourse other than this, is, I would venture to affirm, the man whose example you and I would pray we might follow. (278a,b)

One feels that this is the kind of rhetoric that Plato draws from the mouth of his portrayal of Socrates. It is a pedagogical rhetoric, not so much of instruction, which “puts in,” but of education in the truest sense, which “leads out” (*educere*). Justice, honor, and goodness are not captured in an essential sense by definition, but they are perceived in the life of another, and that perception is the planting of a seed that grows into the reality itself. One truly *knows* only what one *is*, Socrates/Plato seems to say.

It is a spiritual and moral concept of education, one upon which the Bahá'í writings, in their radical understanding of the spiritual nature of humanity, shed an interesting light:

Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education bath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess.... Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom. (*Gleanings* 259–60)

And, as Socrates/Plato everywhere implies, this inner wealth remains latent without understanding and effort on the individual's part. "All that which ye potentially possess can, however, be manifested only as a result of your own volition," Bahá'u'lláh writes (*Gleanings* 149).

In that gem of Western literature, the dialogue entitled the "Symposium," the gallant reprobate Alcibiades confesses:

For the moment I hear him speak I am smitten with a kind of sacred rage, worse than any Corbyant, and my heart jumps into my mouth and the tears start into my eyes—oh, and not only me, but lots of other men.

Yes, I've heard Pericles and all the other great orators, and very eloquent I thought they were, but they never affected me like that.... [Socrates] has often left me in such a state of mind that I've felt I couldn't go on living the way I did.... (215d,e; 216a)

Although the "Symposium" is not the best example of dialectic, it helps us, in its encomium of spiritual love and beauty, to appreciate the depth and richness of Socratic *logos*, and in its encomium of Socrates delivered by the drunk but candid Alcibiades to understand the *ethos* of the subtle sage himself.

This great work succeeds the "Phaedrus" and in a sense continues its discussion of the true nature of love. Socrates and several other prominent individuals gathered at a banquet have decided to eulogize the god Eros, each in turn. Socrates' speech is a sublime example of epideictic rhetoric. Love is a "longing for immortality" (206b), physical love aiming at this goal through procreation; spiritual love, however, "conceives and bears the things of the spirit... wisdom and her spiritual virtues." This is the educational relationship, one of love. It is an extreme mutuality, an intense oneness in growth. The "teacher" is really an "initiate" (210b) whose love of beauty will graduate from the particular to the general and from the concrete to the abstract. The teacher–initiate will come to cherish the beauty of laws and institutions and, beyond these, that of the sciences and "every kind of knowledge" (210d). And now we come to a Platonic moment that demonstrates how "supra-rational" is Socrates'/Plato's sense of divine reality and how ultimately mystical is the context of all those quibbling dialogues. Selflessly, and at yet another remove from the writer of these works, he presents the vision as that of Diotima:

And here, she said, you must follow me as closely as you can.

Whoever has been initiated so far in the mysteries of Love and has viewed all these aspects of the beautiful in due succession, is at last drawing near the final revelation. And now, Socrates, there bursts upon him that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshipper as it is to every other. (211a)

And then, as if to confirm the truth of this *logos*, the glamorous, loose-living Alcibiades appears on the scene as a witness to the persuasive ethos of the speaker. Alcibiades seems an ironic symbol of worldly success: "a mass of ribbons and an enormous wreath of ivy and violets" is on his head (2i2d). Socrates is said to be in love with this handsome, accomplished young man, but in Alcibiades' encomium of Socrates we begin to plumb the depths of the latter's detachment and the potent impact of his words. "His words have been too much for all the world—and all his life, too" (213e). Alcibiades confesses to trying to seduce Socrates in an attempt to gain power over one who had so much power over him, but sleeping in the same bed with him was like sleeping "with a father or an older brother" (216e). Socrates, he says, is "so full of temperance and sobriety that you'll hardly believe your eyes" (216d). He is full of virtues like "little images... godlike, golden, beautiful.... There's not one of you that really knows him" (216d).

And Alcibiades' illuminating conclusion is pertinent to any discussion of the educative effect of Socratic rhetoric:

Which reminds me of a point I missed at the beginning; I should have explained how his arguments, too, were exactly like those sileni that open down the middle [full of above images]. Anyone listening to Socrates for the first time would find his arguments simply laughable; he wraps them up in just the kind of expressions you'd expect of such an insufferable satyr [the sileni]. He talks about pack-asses and blacksmiths and shoemakers and tanners, and he always seems to be saying the same old thing in just the same old way,

so that anyone who wasn't used to his style and wasn't very quick on the uptake would naturally take it for the most utter nonsense. But if you open up his arguments, and really get into the skin of them, you'll find that they're the only arguments in the world that have any sense at all, and that nobody else's are so godlike, so rich in images of virtue, or so peculiarly, so entirely pertinent to those inquiries that help the seeker on his way to the goal of true nobility. (221e, 222a)

Conclusion

Socrates'/Plato's criticism of prevailing rhetoric in the "Gorgias," the "Phaedrus," and elsewhere seems to have obscured the rhetorical nature of Socrates' utterance. Even to refer to Plato's "philosophical rhetoric," as George Kennedy does, is somewhat misleading. This phrase may be apt as a historical designation in that the overt influence of Plato on rhetoric has stemmed from those passages in the above dialogues which discussed rhetoric as a subject matter, but it does not do justice to the actual practise of rhetoric throughout the dialogues. This is a rhetoric of subtlety and profundity, a use of utterance for a noble cause that deserves closer examination.

The wisdom of Socrates'/Plato's use of utterance is largely confirmed in the Bahá'í Writings. From a Bahá'í point of view, rhetoric might be defined as frank, eloquent speech characterized by love and wisdom whose purpose is dual: to express the truth and to achieve unity. Bahá'ís will recognize this as also a working definition of what Bahá'u'lláh refers to as "consultation." Bahá'u'lláh writes, "The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two luminaries of consultation and compassion" (*Tablets* 168). Speech is profoundly effective when it is multilateral and loving. Bahá'ís consulting on individual or collective problems have a "sacred obligation," as expressed in a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, "to express freely and openly [their] views" and should have "the courage of their convictions" (*Consultation* 16), but their speech should be "dispassionate" (*Consultation* 21). As 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes, "... consultation must have for its object the investigation of truth. He who expresses an opinion should not voice it as correct and right but set it forth as a contribution to the consensus of opinion" (*Promulgation* 72). Potent utterance, in this view, is an extension of morally refined character:

The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold. (*Selections* 87)

Although the paradoxical phrase "mutual persuasion" is somewhat descriptive of rhetoric from a Bahá'í perspective, that rhetoric would not, it seems, have persuasion as its ultimate goal but something akin to what Antczak calls "identification" and Corder calls "love" and "mutuality." Both consultation and teaching the Faith, as adumbrated in the Bahá'í writings, are acts of mutually realizing and beholding the truth—practical truth in the former case, apodeictic truth in the latter. This is a radical paradigm of unity in diversity. What is envisioned is not a shallow coziness or contrived togetherness but a oneness achieved *because* diverse voices find full expression. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes, "The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions" (*Selections* 87). The opinions clash but not the personalities—this is the difficult secret and the sign of the role of spirituality. No art of compromise is posited here, though the willingness to sacrifice is one of the requisite spiritual qualities; conviction and consensus are not poles apart in this view. Speech in consultation and in teaching is not confrontational or competitive but is cooperative, reciprocal, embracing. It is an act by which two or more souls in the Platonic cave of ignorance and illusion turn together towards the sun of reality.

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