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Gorgias Reloaded: A New-Found Dialogue between Gorgias and Socrates

In the Elysian Fields, Socrates to his surprise meets his old rhetorical adversary Gorgias—who has, in the meantime, come to think twice about some of the alleged errors that Socrates made him admit to in the Platonic dialogue about their original encounter. Among other things, Gorgias has had the advantage of gathering a few points from a certain young thinker hailing “from up North” (he presumably means Stagira). Thus equipped, he takes Socrates to task about several of his anti-rhetorical pronouncements from back then that Gorgias now feels he is in a position to challenge.

SOCRATES Well, if *that* isn't—you can call me a sophist if that isn't—*Gorgias! Old boy!* Fancy meeting you here—in the Elysian Fields! The Island of the Blessed! The very man who brought that awful nuisance, rhetoric, to Athens! I'd never have thought I'd live to see that. In fact, I didn't.

GORGAS No, you didn't see that one coming, did you, Socrates? And you know, it was only recently that they let us in, me and my gang—you know, the other sophists, Protagoras and Prodicus and Antisthenes and those guys.

And why do think *that* is? *You* did that to us. *You* did such a great job dragging our names through the mud, smearing me and the other sophists or rhetoricians, as you call us, and thanks to *you* most philosophers until this day have detested us.

Take a philosopher like John Locke, one of the bright lights who started the so-called Enlightenment—he said this in *An Essay on Human Understanding* (1690): “It is evident how much men love to deceive and be deceived, since rhetoric, that powerful instrument of error and deceit, has its established professors, is publicly taught, and has always been had in great reputation.” He also said that rhetoric does nothing but “insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment”

(Book III, 34; 1841, 360). The great Immanuel Kant, a hundred years later, said that rhetoric “deserves no respect at all” —it is “gar keiner Achtung würdig” (Buch II, § 53; 1839, 192). And *you*, Socrates, taught them to say these things.

SOCRATES Okay, much of the stuff they said about you wasn’t quite fair of you guys, I suppose.

GORGIAS But they got it from *you*, Socrates. *You* said, in the *Gorgias*, 463a, that rhetoric is “a practice that’s not craftlike, but one that a mind given to making hunches takes to, a mind that’s bold and naturally clever at dealing with people. I call it flattery, basically.”

SOCRATES But then again, Gorgias, what you’re quoting there does have *some* truth in it. You are the one who believes that words can act like a drug, and you wrote a speech in defence of Helen of Troy—who left her husband, damn it, to marry an enemy of Greece, because she couldn’t help it: his sweet words had acted on her and seduced her with their flattery and their rhythm and their musical repetitions—acted like hypnotism. And you are fascinated by that! Admit it! Honestly, do you really think that speech is nothing but seduction?

GORGIAS Okay, Socrates, you are right, speech is not *just* seduction, but it *is* seduction among other things. I did say it’s like a drug, and we all know that some drugs do good things and others do bad things, and sometimes they do a good thing and the next day they do a bad thing. You know what drugs are like: some put an end to disease and others to life, and that goes for discourses as well: “some give pain, others delight, others terrify, others rouse the hearers to courage, and yet others by a certain vile persuasion drug and trick the soul.” *I* wrote that, in that speech you mention. Pretty persuasive, isn’t it?

SOCRATES But it’s terrible to use speech to do all those things, Gorgias.

GORGIAS Yes, I agree, sometimes it *is* terrible, but at least it’s good to *know* that speech can do all these things—and to know how it’s done. And *I* pointed that out, Socrates. A lot of it has to do with repetition and rhythm and variation and ambiguity and puns and parallelisms and with raising expectations and fulfilling them and circumventing them and surprising them, and things like that. With all this, words can work like music. You know, I can imagine how one day a huge crowd of people will be put into a state of rapture or frenzy by one person who speaks or sings. Imagine a thousand young girls screaming with joy—or a thousand young boys, for that matter, Socrates?

SOCRATES Now let's not get carried away, Gorgias. Better let's discuss what rhetoric really is. I asked you that when we last conversed, but I don't think you were able to answer.

GORGAS Well, all this is *part* of what rhetoric is, Socrates. Words and sounds can do things to us, and carry us away, and it's better to know about it beforehand, so that we don't get carried away unless we really want to. It's a part of life, but you never seemed to really understand that. And the guy who wrote down everything you said, what's his name, he never understood it either. And that's strange because he wrote pretty beautifully himself—in fact, when I think about it, he wrote even better than I do, but did he want to be called a rhetorician? God forbid!

SOCRATES But you and your gang, Gorgias, you rhetoricians and sophists, you not only *told* people about these things, you also taught them to *do* these things.

GORGAS You know, Socrates, nowadays there a quite a few wise people who think differently. We were not spin-doctors and manipulators, we were forerunners of democracy and the Open Society. Open discussion of everything! Nothing should be taken for granted! “The Open Society!”—do you know that the guy who wrote about that, he said that we were on the same side, you and I, fighting for human reason, on guard against dogmatism! *Now* what do say, Socrates?

SOCRATES *I* will ask the questions here, Gorgias. That's what makes it real, responsible dialectics. So now I ask again. What *is* rhetoric? And what is it *about*?

GORGAS Well you know, Socrates, it's been nearly 2,500 years since I last tried to explain to all you Athenians what rhetoric is, and I've actually learned a great deal since then. Soon after I came to the Elysian Fields here I ran into another clever fellow, although he was not a real Athenian—he came from up North, he wrote books about rhetoric and all sorts of other things, and he put things in perspective for me. Did you not meet him when we were still down there, on earth?

SOCRATES There was a lot I didn't get around to, Gorgias. I was cut short.

GORGAS Yeah, isn't that's too bad, Socrates, but come to think of it, you pretty much dug your own grave with that “apology” you came up with. You should have let *me* write that for you. But the way you handled that situation, you might as well have taken poison—I mean, taken it from the start.

SOCRATES You're trying to dodge my question again, Gorgias. So let me repeat the question I asked you 2,400 years ago: "What kind of persuasion, and of persuasion dealing with what, is rhetoric the art?" (*Gorgias*, 454a).

GORGAS Well, that is something I have given a lot of thought since our last talk all those years ago, and I've found out that in that talk you really tricked me. You sometimes do that to people, you're no better than the rest of us. Take for example what you said about my colleague Protagoras. You compared a player of the harp or lyre [*kitharistēs*] to a sophist, such as me or Protagoras, and you said that the harp-player can teach us to talk about harp-playing; but what can the sophist teach us to talk about? Nothing in particular, you said—since his speeches can be about anything, or, in other words, nothing (*Protagoras*, 312d-e).

SOCRATES That's right, Gorgias.

GORGAS But that's where you tricked us. You should have asked what *skill* each of them can teach. The harp-player can teach us the skill of harp-playing, and the sophist can teach the skill of public speaking. Instead you asked what the sophist's *speeches* are about. But then you should also have asked what the harp-player's *music* is about. If you want to compare two things, you should ask the same questions about them both. But you tricked us. You stacked the cards.

SOCRATES Very clever, Gorgias, it only took you 2,400 years to figure that out.

GORGAS Well Socrates, this is just one example of how you pretend to be so honest and truth-seeking, but just like me you're simply out to persuade people. There are honest ways of doing that as well as less honest ways, and you know both kinds. Welcome in the club. I remember what you said about us sophists, it also applies to you: "there is no need to know the truth of the actual matters, but one merely needs to have discovered some device of persuasion which will make one appear to those who do not know to know better than those who know" (*Gorgias*, 459b-c).

SOCRATES Yes, and what did you answer, Gorgias? You walked right into my trap and said "is it not a great convenience, Socrates, to make oneself a match for the professionals by learning just this single art and omitting all the others?"

GORGAS Honestly, Socrates, that's what I said according to that young man who wrote all those dialogues about you, just as Dr. Watson did about Sherlock Holmes! Would *I* actually have made such a stupid answer? What

your young friend did there was to set up a “straw man” version of my opinion. Just like all the politicians are constantly doing to each other.

SOCRATES And it was you and your friends who taught the politicians and their spin-doctors all those underhanded tricks, Gorgias.

GORGAS So did you, Socrates. But I think you philosophers and us rhetoricians, we should join forces to expose all the underhanded tricks we hear in political debate so that we can all deliberate about our common affairs in a reasonable manner.

SOCRATES So you are still dreaming about that silly idea, “democracy,” Gorgias? I think it’s not a dream, it’s a nightmare.

GORGAS Yes I do, Socrates, and let me tell what I learned after speaking to that guy from up North. He thinks rhetoric is a part of political science, and that political science is about securing the good life for everyone as far as possible, and he says that the most highly esteemed of the faculties in political science are strategy, domestic economy—and rhetoric! That’s what he said in his *Politics*, 1094 b.

And what is rhetoric about? I agree with you, Socrates: it is very important to define what rhetoric is. I think it is about how we human beings can try to get each other to cooperate by using speech. If I were to come back to Athens today and set up as a teacher of rhetoric again, I would follow that guy’s definition of what rhetoric is, and what its uses are. He says in his book about rhetoric, 1357a: “The duty of rhetoric is to deal with such matters as we deliberate upon without arts or systems to guide us.” And he makes it very clear that what we can deliberate about is only that which we can decide to *do*. So rhetoric is the means we have in a democratic society to deliberate and make *decisions* together about our shared issues and problems. We can do that well or we can do it badly. Or we can let a dictator or the philosophers do it for us—that’s what *you* want, right?

SOCRATES But what about the truth, Gorgias, should our first concern not be to find the truth? And that is where rhetoric fails us.

GORGAS No, Socrates, I said that rhetoric should be our means for discussing what *to do*. Things like, should we wage war against the Spartans? Should we all use the same kind of money? Should we all form a large union, or should we stand alone? In these matters we do not discuss what the *truth* is, we discuss what we want to *do*. It’s like when you discuss at home whether to buy a home, or when you discuss whether to see an

exhibition of sculptures or a wrestling match, you and your wife Xanthippe—

SOCRATES You keep her out of it!

GORGIAS What I mean is that both you and your wife have a right to want what you want, and to win the discussion about it. You want to see the wrestlers, she wants to see the sculptures. Neither of your opinions is the “truth.” My young Northern friend has said, in one of his books on ethics: “choice is not either true or false” (*Eudemian Ethics* 1226a). It’s a matter of what you want, not of finding the truth.

SOCRATES If *I* want to see the wrestlers, and *she* wants to see the sculptures, then we discuss it in a civilized dialectical manner, and then we go to see the sculptures. That’s dialectic. No rhetoric can help me there.

GORGIAS But without rhetoric, there’s really no democracy, is there, Socrates?

SOCRATES There you go again with your “democracy.” At the end of the day, what did *I* get out of it? They took a democratic vote and made me take poison.

GORGIAS But democracy is not just taking a vote, Socrates, it’s having a reasonable public discussion where we deliberate on the choice we face, and *then* we take a vote. You know, our Greek word for “deliberate” is based on our word for “will.” But the reasonable public discussion should be there first. As citizens we should all know rhetoric, not just so we can take part in public debates, but also so we can attend public debates with a critical ear and use what we hear, or the good parts of it, in our own deliberations. And *that’s* where we can learn from you, Socrates, *you* know how to ask really penetrating questions, and insist on an answer to them. You really have a critical ear.

SOCRATES I have *two* critical ears, Gorgias.

GORGIAS Yes, but you also need to have an *appreciative* ear that can recognize a reasonable argument when you hear one. The citizens of Athens, for example, should be able to recognize both bad arguments and good ones when they hear them—even when the good arguments come from someone they disagree with. We should all learn to speak—but what good is that if no one listens to anyone else? Rhetoric can teach us that. It’s not enough to have a big mouth that blabbers away. But it is not enough either to tear apart everything that other people say, the way you sometimes do. Look, *this* is my critical ear—and *this* is my *listening* ear.

SOCRATES I think what matters is what's between the ears, Gorgias. True wisdom, you know.

GORGIAS What use is it that we all have true wisdom between the ears if we don't also use it? I'd like to quote another Athenian, who happened to be my student. His name was Isocrates.

SOCRATES I knew him, Gorgias.

GORGIAS Well, then you also know that he wrote this: "because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish" (*Antidosis*, 254). What he's saying is that a city like Athens could never have existed without rhetoric.

SOCRATES But what use is rhetoric without wisdom, Gorgias?

GORGIAS Then again, what use is wisdom without rhetoric, Socrates? Here is something else that Isocrates said: "it behoves all men to want to have many of their youth engaged in training to become speakers, and you Athenians most of all. For you, yourselves, are pre-eminent and superior to the rest of the world, not in your application to the business of war, nor because you govern yourselves more excellently or preserve the laws handed down to you by your ancestors more faithfully than others, but in those qualities by which the nature of man rises above the other animals" (*Antidosis*, 293). He means speech, Socrates. He means rhetoric.

SOCRATES Honestly, Gorgias, I think I need to go home.

GORGIAS No, Socrates, we need you. And you know, the people of Athens still remember you. It's me that they've forgotten. But they need us both. I can teach them what words can do. You can teach them to be critical. We can both teach them to listen to each other.—Hey, are you listening?!

SOCRATES Sorry, what? Oh, right. I was just thinking that I don't know. In fact I have often thought that I know nothing, except one thing, which is that I don't know anything.

GORGIAS Well, isn't that's something, Socrates?

SOCRATES I don't know. Look, isn't it getting pretty hot here? Come on, let's go.

GORGIAS Sure, Socrates. You know, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

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