

### **Rhetorical Theory as a Product of Epistemology in Plato's "Gorgias"**

Plato's rhetorical theory differs strikingly from Gorgias's because Plato's epistemology differs from Gorgias's. Gorgias, because he is a Sophist, opposes the idea of absolutes and therefore argues that persuasion ought to be towards belief. Gorgias has no compunction against using rhetoric to persuade someone regardless of whether that persuasion is towards truth; indeed, he argues that persuasion is necessarily false. Plato, on the other hand, believes in the existence of absolute knowledge. Plato therefore argues that persuasion ought to be towards knowledge. To Plato, it matters very much that one use rhetoric only to persuade someone to believe or act in accordance with absolute truth. To Plato, the rhetor is not merely a persuader; he is an educator responsible to improve his audience and to lead them from the darkness of ignorance in the cave to the light of knowledge. Plato and Gorgias therefore differ in both their rhetorical theories and in their epistemologies. It is not, however, their rhetorical theories that drive their epistemologies; their epistemologies drive their rhetorical theories.

Since the real difference between Plato and Gorgias lies in their epistemologies, the key to the difference between these rhetors is an evaluation of their epistemologies.<sup>1</sup> A Christian must reject (at least in theory) a view of rhetoric like Gorgias's in which truth is irrelevant or nonexistent and favor instead a view of rhetoric that, like Plato's, requires that the rhetorician's means and goal be truth alone. Rejecting Gorgias, however, does not require an unreserved acceptance of Plato. Christian persuasion, unlike Platonic rhetoric, is not towards knowledge as distinct from and antecedent to faith (believing). Rather than being the product of an epistemology in which knowledge leads to belief, a Christian rhetoric ought to be the product of an epistemology in which faith leads to knowledge (1 Cor. 1-2).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> An evaluation of the difference between the Plato and Gorgias should be helpful, though not definitive, for comparing any philosophical system in which truth is absolute with any system in which truth is relative.

<sup>2</sup> It must be admitted that there is some crossing of philosophical traditions in this paragraph. Plato's terminology of a rhetoric that leads to knowledge seems to be connected with Aquinas's epistemology in

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which knowledge can and usually does precede faith. Aquinas, however, was more influenced by Aristotle than by Plato. Gorgias's terminology (though certainly not the meaning behind his words) seems to be more closely connected with Augustine's epistemology in which faith precedes knowledge. Augustine, however, was influenced by Plato. I'm not sure why there seems to be this seeming crossing of philosophical traditions. Perhaps it is the result of equivocation on or misunderstanding of the terms *belief* and *knowledge* as used by these five philosophers; perhaps it is the result of an oversimplification of Augustinian thought as Platonic and Thomistic thought as Aristotelian. In any case, my argument is that though Plato's rhetorical theory is preferable to Gorgias's, it must at least be modified by adopting some of Gorgias's terminology. The goal is the traditional Protestant epistemology (via Augustine) over the traditional Roman Catholic epistemology (via Aquinas), since that epistemology will drive one's rhetorical theory.