The Review of Politics 69 (2007), 286–326.
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Book Reviews

A NOBLE RHETORIC

Devin Stauffer: *The Unity of Plato's "Gorgias": Rhetoric, Justice, and the Philosophic Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. vii, 191. $75.00.)

DOI: 10.1017/S0034670507000563

Devin Stauffer joins a now rather large cadre of Plato scholars who have turned to the *Gorgias.* His, however, is one of the few full-length and intended-to-be-comprehensive studies of this, the third longest Platonic dialogue. The widespread turn to the *Gorgias* is perhaps due in part to the fact that many of the other texts on political and moral subjects (e.g., the *Republic*) have already been so worked over that the ever demanding maw of academia must find new sustenance. But the *Gorgias* has other attractions as well. It contains one of Socrates' two confrontations with the famous rhetoricians of the day, Gorgias (with Thrasymachus in the *Republic* being the other); it contains the ever striking Socratic claim, "[I]t is better to suffer injustice than to do it"; and, finally, it contains Socrates' confrontation with Callicles, who, according to one classical scholar of an earlier generation, made "the most eloquent statement of the immoralist's case in European literature."

The last two of these concerns have attracted the most attention from scholars. Nonetheless, the treatment that *Gorgias* has received in the recent spate of literature has been quite various—from Roslyn Weiss's direct focus on and endorsement of the Socratic "moral paradoxes" in this and other places, through Seth Benardete's brilliant but perverse attempt to show that the dialogue is not an endorsement but a critique of the moralist position Socrates voices. Some, like Waller Newell, explore the pre-Socratic philosophic (ontological) roots of the doctrines expressed by Socrates's interlocutors, while most others stick much closer to what is in this particular text.

Stauffer makes a point of sticking to the text, straying outside only to look a bit at some other Platonic texts. He does not, like so many, begin from some one striking feature, but instead notices that the dialogue on its surface is nearly a chaos, with a surfeit of topics raised, reraised, and raised again in no obvious order and with no obvious connection. He thus puts the question of the unity, order, and coherence of the text itself at the forefront of his attention, as his title attests. He wants to know what the dialogue as a whole is attempting to accomplish. This involves him in attempting to answer a whole set of sub-questions. For example, why is the dialogue

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670507000563 Published online by Cambridge University Press

named for Gorgias, who has the least presence of all the major characters, and, by Socrates's own testimony, is the least forthcoming of all the interlocutors? Why does Socrates initially condemn rhetoric but then rehabilitate it by speaking of a "noble rhetoric," different from that practiced by Gorgias and his students?

Stauffer's book, both in its approach and in its conclusions, is an essential addition to the large literature and to the understanding of this difficult but important Platonic text. To simplify a bit, two approaches to the Platonic texts tend to dominate. On the one side are those who see in the dialogues a somewhat pseudoartistic setting for good old philosophic argumentation. These scholars take the view that an argument by any other name is an argument and see their business to be "argument analysis." At the other extreme is the increasingly large set of scholars who see the dialogues as peculiar kinds of works, part drama, part philosophic argumentation. These scholars take seriously the fact that Plato did not merely issue a series of impersonal arguments, but embedded them in a dramatic situation, always attributed them to distinctive human characters acting in a recognizable kind of human interaction. This group of scholars then tends to emphasize the literary, dramatic, and psychological aspects of the dialogues, often at the expense of close analysis of the arguments.

One does not have to be a Hegel to realize that there is something one-sided about both approaches. Stauffer's is an extremely successful effort to give proper weight, in an integrated and coherent way, to both of these obvious aspects of Platonic texts. And he manages to do so without the kind of tediousness and awkwardness that often accompanies such efforts when they occur.

His substantive conclusions are also important. The core of the dialogue, he concludes, lies in its call for a new and "noble rhetoric"; Socrates seeks out Gorgias for this conversation because he is attempting to enlist Gorgias, with his undeniable rhetorical skills, in the enterprise of developing this new rhetoric. Socrates's remarkably gentle treatment of Gorgias throughout the dialogue reflects this subtle effort at seduction; Gorgias's surprising interjections to keep his more rambunctious students engaged with Socrates reflect, at least, his intrigue with the project Socrates is proposing between the lines.

Nonetheless, Stauffer concludes, the seduction fails, as we may gather from the way *Gorgias* ends and from the more explicit testimony of Plato's *Meno.* The *Gorgias* thus presents a failed seduction, but one which points to the Socratic awareness of the need for a new rhetoric, which is not independent of, or, worse yet, hostile to, the greatest human good. The new or noble rhetoric would be in service to the "true art of politics," the Socratic art, which lays claim to knowledge of the true good for human beings and cities, knowing, among other things, that "to do injustice is worse than to suffer it." This new rhetoric is needed both for the city, which is misled and distracted by the old rhetoric, and by the practitioner of the new, or "true art" of politics, the "philosophical politician" Socrates.

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The Socratic art of politics sets Socrates in opposition to his city, for it requires him to challenge received opinions, especially among the young, an activity that is taken by the city fathers to amount to "corrupting the young." Socrates is thus in danger, a theme which runs like a scarlet thread through *Gorgias* and connects it to the *Apology of Socrates.* The true art of politics is not wholly contrary to the city, however, for while it is "critical of ordinary politics and of the city as it naturally operates yet ultimately [it is] supportive of the highest aspirations and deepest yearnings of ordinary citizens . . . . Philosophy comes to sight as something like the moral conscience of the city and as a pursuit that seeks wisdom about an orderly cosmos that is in harmony with human virtue" (178–79).

Socrates failed with Gorgias, but he arguably succeeded with another and greater philosopher-rhetorician, Plato himself. The ultimate point of Stauffer's study is to claim that the Platonic dialogue itself, perhaps the *Gorgias* most emphatically, is the fulfillment of the project sketched in the *Gorgias*. Thus *Gorgias*, according to Stauffer, supplies a particularly perspicuous insight into the overall character of the Platonic corpus and its aim to make Socrates "younger and more beautiful," that is, more attractive to the citizens among whom he (or his successors) carries on the philosophic life. This conclusion drives Stauffer to a certain inconclusiveness with regard to the central substantive concerns of the dialogue: Does Socrates really believe it is worse to do injustice than to suffer it? Quite possibly this is merely a rhetorical part of the noble rhetoric, yet Stauffer hesitates to so conclude. So he concludes in a state of uncertainty, an aporia about the big themes. In my opinion, this is a flaw, even an important flaw, but one for which the very intelligent and carefully executed drive to coherence and philosophical adequacy that marks this study more than compensates.

–Michael P. Zuckert

WITHOUT INHIBITION

Arlene W. Saxonhouse: *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. x, 235. $70.00. $56.00, Adobe e-book.)

DOI: 10.1017/S0034670507000575

This superb new book by Arlene Saxonhouse deserves a wide audience, but one fears that its title and the first sentence on the front flap of its dustcover—which distorts a sentence from a reviewer's comment on the back flap—may draw a group of readers who will undervalue it. What this book emphatically is not is a comparative analysis of free-speech jurisprudence, comparing free-speech law of ancient Athens to free-speech law of the modern United States. Rather, this volume contains an exceptionally

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