

Socrates and Gorgias¹

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Abstract

In this paper I try to solve some problems concerning the interpretation of Socrates' conversation with Gorgias about the nature of rhetoric in Plato's *Gorgias* (448e6-461b2). I begin by clarifying what, ethically, is at stake in the conversation (section 2). In the main body of the paper (sections 3-6) I address the question of what we are to understand Gorgias as believing about the nature of rhetoric: I criticise accounts given by Charles Kahn and John Cooper, and suggest an alternative account of my own. In the final section I spell out some of the implications of my account for the interpretation of the *Gorgias*, and of Plato more generally.

Keywords

Plato, Davidson, Gorgias, rhetoric, ethics, justice

1. Introduction

In what follows I try to solve some problems concerning the interpretation of Socrates' conversation with Gorgias about the nature of rhetoric in Plato's *Gorgias* (448e6-461b2). I begin by clarifying what, ethically, is at stake in the conversation (section 2). In the main body of the paper (sections 3-6) I address the question of what we are to understand Gorgias as believing about the nature of rhetoric: I criticise accounts given by Charles Kahn and John Cooper, and suggest an alternative account of my own. In the

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final section I spell out some of the implications of my account for the interpretation of the *Gorgias*, and of Plato more generally.

2. The Conversation with Gorgias

Socrates' conversation with Gorgias is a pretty sedate affair, the more so by comparison with the upheavals that follow. Once the reader has been through those upheavals, he may look back with some puzzlement. Why are the momentous confrontations with Polus and Callicles prefaced by this peculiarly restrained re-enactment of the conversations typical of the Socratic dialogues? As in those other Socratic pastiches, *Republic* I and the first third of the *Meno*, and in the Socratic dialogues proper, the conversation with Gorgias is ostensibly determined by a question of the form "What is *X*?", where this is understood as appropriately answered by a certain sort of definition; in the *Gorgias*, *X* is rhetoric. It may be thought that the *Gorgias*' question marks the conversation with Gorgias, not as a pastiche of the Socratic dialogue, but as a parody of it: a kind of *mock-elenchos*. Is not the nature of rhetoric a lowly sort of object of inquiry, by comparison with the exalted quests undertaken in the Socratic dialogues (and for that matter in *Republic* I and the opening conversation of the *Meno*), where *X* takes the value of one of the central concepts of ethical thinking and life, such as friendship, or one of the virtues? After all, it is not even as if rhetoric is a reputable *tekhnē* – Socrates later reveals that he does not think it is a *tekhnē* at all, or an admirable activity of any kind. How can Socrates group rhetoric, on his own estimation of it, with 'the beautiful' (*to kalon*), self-control, courage and the other concepts he is depicted in the Socratic dialogues as trying to define, and in the *Apology* as ordered by the god to urge others to investigate in the course of self-examination?² Yet in the course of asking Gorgias whether he wants to

² See *Apology* 23b, 29d-30b, 30e-31b, 33c, 37e-38a. In the *Gorgias*, and possibly in other Socratic dialogues, Socrates is not depicted as carrying out the divine command of the *Apology*'s oracle story: in the *Apology* (31a7-c3) he says that his mission would make no sense if it had not been commanded by the god, because if it were not required by piety it could only have harmed him, and (29e) that he coerces his interlocutors into discussion; but in the *Gorgias* (505d4-506a7) he makes it clear that he has as much to gain as anyone (that is, more than could be gained from any other activity) from the continuation of a well-conducted discussion, but that if the discussion is not likely to bring such a benefit he would rather abandon it.

proceed with the discussion, Socrates explicitly confirms that the inquiry about the nature of rhetoric is indeed part of what he described in the *Apology* as his mission to enjoin:

Soc: For I hold that there is nothing so bad for a man, as to fall into false belief about the subjects of our present discussion. (458 a8-b1)

In the *Apology* and various Socratic dialogues, Socrates is depicted as holding that the most important subject one could discuss – the subject in which mistakes are costliest – is how best to live. Here, he seems to be saying that the most important subject one could discuss is *the nature of rhetoric*: there is *nothing so bad for a man* as to fall into false belief about *that*. What on earth is going on?

I believe that there is a way to make sense of Socrates directing his definitional inquiry in the *Gorgias* towards rhetoric, in spite of his disdain for it, in a spirit consistent with his conception of his divine mission.³ He describes that mission and acts it out in various, seemingly conflicting ways. Sometimes he describes it as a kind of exhortation to self-examination: showing that people have no valuable wisdom (*Apology* 23b4-7),⁴ or urging people to care for the state of their souls (*Apology* 29d2-30b4) or to tackle the question, ‘How should I live?’ (*Apology* 38a5-6, *Gorgias* 500b5-c4). At other times he speaks of it in less personally-engaged terms which suggest an exclusively intellectual inquiry: into the nature of virtue (*Protagoras* 329d1-3, *Meno* 71d3-4) or of a virtue (*Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, *Laches passim*), or into the question of who is and who is not happy (that is, successful, in the sense of living the right sort of life: *Gorgias* 472c6-d1). He certainly characterises in these ways *the same fundamental question*: only if the different formulations are supposed to be ultimately equivalent can Socrates avoid inconsistency in his claims, in each case, to be identifying *the*

³ The issue here is one of content, not form: my claim is that the *Gorgias* discussion can be understood as focused on the same questions about virtue, happiness and the good life as the questioning Socrates describes in the *Apology*: I do not mean to suggest that the *Gorgias* discussion can be interpreted as Socrates carrying out the *Apology* mission, since the two dialogues present different *ways* of questioning; see previous note.

⁴ “That’s why even now I’m going around seeking out and examining anyone – citizen or foreigner – whom I think wise. Then if [or, interestingly, “when”] I do not think that he is [wise], I come to the assistance of the god and show [ἐνδείκνυμαι – not, *pace* Grube, “show him”, which seems inconsistent with Socrates’ procedure with (e.g.) *Euthyphro* and *Ion*] that he is not wise.”

most important duty of any human being (and not, for example, a component of such a duty). This means that there are two equally indispensable elements to the activity Socrates exhorts us to: scrutiny of ourselves – that is, of our life – and scrutiny of the norms and ideals by reference to which a human being and his life are to be judged as worthwhile or not. Only if these elements are necessarily connected can the different formulations of the question be thought of as in any sense *equivalent*. The connection, I conjecture, lies in this fact: that one cannot be genuinely engrossed in evaluative scrutiny of one's way of life if one proves indifferent to the question of which standards are appropriate to the evaluation. Since such standards are always contestable, there can be no excuse for complacently adopting whichever happen to be at hand (in the form of the conventional standards of one's circle, for example). The evaluation of one's way of life is therefore also necessarily at the same time an inquiry about which ethical norms and ideals are correct. Conversely, one could not be said to be concerned in the right way with trying to discern the correct norms and ideals against which the worthwhileness of a life may be measured, if the results of one's researches had no effect on the way one lived one's life.⁵

If we understand the task to which Socrates exhorts us as having this character, when we then look at how the question about rhetoric is first raised in the *Gorgias*, we may see a clue as to how that question may be understood as a natural means of carrying out that task:

SOC: Ask him [sc. Gorgias], Chaerephon.

CHAER: Ask him what?

SOC: *Who he is* (ὅστις ἐστίν). (447c9-d1)

The nature of rhetoric has no particular intrinsic significance for the question, considered in the abstract, of how to live. But if one happens to live the life of an orator, the sort of self-examination Socrates enjoins requires, among other things, an investigation into whether *the life of an orator* is a good or worthwhile one. Of course, there is an entirely trivial sense in which an orator says something about *who he is* in giving an account of rhetoric: we thereby gain a grasp of who he is *qua* orator or, in other words, what we mean when we call him an orator. Any such suspicion that Socrates' words "[Ask him] who he is" are intended merely as a verbal variant on "[Ask him] how he would define his trade" may easily be reinforced during

⁵ Cf. G. Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 10.

Socrates' subsequent conversation with Gorgias, in which he pursues the definition of rhetoric unrelentingly, but without ever explicitly raising the question of whether the orator's life is a worthwhile one.⁶ Yet the conversations with Polus and Callicles (and, in retrospect, certain remarks of Gorgias himself) show repeatedly and unmistakably that in giving an account of rhetoric we are contributing to an account of *who the orator is* in the deep sense relevant to Socratic self-examination. Those conversations make it clear that *being an orator* brings with it as necessary concomitants distinctive attitudes, aspirations, beliefs and other commitments: a whole way of looking at the human world. *Orator* (like *philosopher*) is what we might call an *ethically-charged category*: to characterise someone as an *orator* is to characterise their *way of life*, or (equivalently) to say *who* an orator fundamentally *is*.⁷ Belonging to any such category, unless perhaps one is a philosopher, will not be sufficient to ensure a virtuous nature. But Socrates will argue against Polus and Callicles that membership of *some* of these ethically-charged categories – namely *orator*, *democratic politician*, and *tyrant*⁸ – are strictly incompatible with virtue. This is why the *Gorgias* must in the end get personal: philosopher and orator “inevitably despise each other's views” (as Socrates says of himself and his ethical opponents at *Crito* 49d4-5), but the views are at the core of Socrates' and Callicles' self-conceptions; the result is that they cannot despise each other's views without despising each other.⁹

⁶ Socrates does raise the question of whether the orator as such has knowledge of right and wrong (459d-e), but this is not the same question. Presumably the doctor as such does not have such knowledge, but medicine is still a *tekhnē* and a doctor's life may (presumably) be a worthwhile one.

⁷ Thus if “trainer” (παιδοτρίβης) is an ethically-charged category, when Socrates envisages himself asking of such a person “Who are you, then, sir; and (καί) what is your job (ἔργον)?” (452b4-5), the *καί* is epexegetic.

A referee asked how one can tell whether a category of this type is ethically-charged or not, and whether, for example, *cobbler* is ethically-charged. My answer is that there is probably no test that does not presuppose an understanding of whether the category brings with it a distinctive ethical orientation. According to the *Apology* (22d-e), *cobbler* is not ethically charged if cobbling is a *tekhnē*: Socrates found that while the craftsmen (*kheirotekhnai*) did have the knowledge that underlay their crafts, their bad ethical state consisted in their supposition that they knew other things besides. Their status as craftsmen was a matter of their having mastered a certain body of *non-ethical* practical knowledge.

⁸ Also *tragic poet*, who turns out to be essentially a sort of orator (502b1-d8).

⁹ Cf. J. Doyle, “The Fundamental Opposition in Plato's *Gorgias*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 30 (May 2006), 87-100.

If we think of *orator* in this way as an ethically-charged category, we are in a position to solve a puzzle that arises in the course of the conversation with Polus:

SOC: ... you say that great power is a good thing for the one who has it?

POL: Well, yes; I do say that.

SOC: So you think it's a good thing, do you, for someone to do what seems good to him, even though he has no understanding (νοῦν μὴ ἔχων)?

POL: I do not.

SOC: Then presumably you'll show me that orators do have understanding, by refuting my claim that rhetoric is not a *tekhnē* but mere flattery? If you let me go unrefuted, orators and tyrants who do what seems good to them in their cities don't thereby have access to anything good. But power is, as you say, a good thing; whereas even you would agree that doing what seems good to you without understanding is a bad thing. Wouldn't you?

POL: I would. (466d6-467a6)

Socrates here seems to conflate two distinct questions: (i) whether rhetoric has a rational basis (is a *tekhnē*) and (ii) whether the orator generally acts with understanding and so lives a worthwhile life. Yet if *orator* is an ethically-charged category, rhetoric has a rational basis if and only if the orator lives a worthwhile life; indeed, the holding of just this biconditional is what the ethical charge carried by the category *orator* consists in. (More generally, I take the following to be a plausible conceptual claim: a *fundamental* orientation to the human world results in a worthwhile life if and only if it has a rational basis.)

Once we see the question "What is rhetoric?" in this light, we are better able to understand what Socrates is up to, not only in his conversation with Gorgias, but also in his subsequent fixation upon the subsidiary question "Is rhetoric a *tekhnē*?" If rhetoric is not just one activity among many but a fundamental orientation to the human world, then coming to understand what rhetoric is puts us in a position to evaluate the orientation that constitutes the orator's way of life. The issue of whether or not rhetoric is a *tekhnē* then becomes that of whether the fundamental orientation of the orator is itself founded on systematic understanding – whether the orientation has a *logos* – or, instead, rhetoric only grasps what it does by means of an opaque faculty of intuition or 'knack' (*empeiria*), and its official understanding of itself as a *tekhnē* with a *logos* is thoroughly deceived. The question, "Is rhetoric a *tekhnē*?", then, is really a genteel way of confronting Gorgias, Polus and Callicles with the possibility that the course of life they

have chosen for themselves is actually worthless. The champions of rhetoric have as yet no idea how high the stakes are; but right from the start (“[Ask him] *who he is*”) they are as high as they can be.

Given Socrates’ interlocutors in the *Gorgias*, then, the quest for a definition of rhetoric should be understood as a way of confronting them with the very inquiry with which, according to Plato’s account of what Socrates said at his trial, he confronts “anyone [he] come[s] across, young or old, foreigner or citizen” (*Apology* 30a2-3: Polus is young, as Plato emphasises (461c5-8); Gorgias is old; both are foreigners; Callicles a citizen). Because all three interlocutors have devoted themselves to rhetoric, the question of how they should live turns out to be the question of whether their chosen course – the rhetorical life – conforms to the best general account of how to live. This expresses well an important feature of Socratic philosophising: the great question it seeks to answer could not be conceived in a less academic way; it is an urgent practical question that everyone must try to answer in their own case.

One may see all this, however, and still miss the full significance of the confrontation. It is clear enough that the question “What is rhetoric?”, so understood, assumes *for orators* all the importance of Socrates’ great question: it is *their* way of life that is in the dock. Socrates is addressing orators; but Plato is addressing *us*. Why should the attempt to define and so evaluate rhetoric engage our philosophical attention, or even that of Plato’s non-rhetorical Athenian contemporaries? Part of the answer is that *orator* was not just any old ethically-charged category: unlike, for example, *beautician*, it was fundamental to legal and political power in Athens.¹⁰ The very setting of the *Gorgias* confirms this: the aftermath of a rhetorical display by the visiting A-list celebrity Gorgias, which would have been attended by very many of the Athenian political and cultural elite. Plato is presumably invoking the real visit to Athens of the historical Gorgias in 427, when his displays of rhetorical virtuosity apparently caused a sensation.¹¹ (He is

¹⁰ I use “power” here in its non-Socratic, vulgar sense; in his discussion with Polus, Socrates will deny that orators can attain to *real* power, which is necessarily beneficial to its possessor, because rhetoric is not a *tekhnē*, so orators do not act for sound reasons, so their ability to do what they please cannot benefit them. See J. Doyle, “Desire, Power and the Good in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” in S. Tenenbaum (ed.), *Moral Psychology* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 15-36.

¹¹ Diodorus Siculus, 12.53.1; see D. Nails, *The People of Plato* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 157.

therefore signalling Socrates' contempt for rhetoric by having him not even bother to show up.)¹² Rhetoric fascinated the Athenian elites because success in court or on the political stage depended entirely on the ability to persuade the *dēmos*. Gorgias, Polus and Callicles all assume that the point of rhetoric is the acquisition of power, so that the status of tyrant – that is, command of all – is the natural terminus of successful rhetorical activity; they differ merely in their squeamishness about making the assumption explicit – to themselves, as well as to Socrates. Since *orator* is an ethically-charged category, devotion to rhetoric was not just a shared feature of all legally or politically successful people – this much was guaranteed by rhetorical skill being a necessary condition of success; it determined what sort of people these fundamentally were. The nature of rhetoric therefore determines, through the character and behaviour of its most proficient practitioners, the entire legal and political culture of the *polis*. The *Gorgias*' foreshadowing of many of the political and psychological themes of the *Republic* makes it likely that Plato is beginning to think of the legal and political culture of the *polis* as shaping the character of the citizens in vitally important ways.¹³ If the stakes could not be higher for Gorgias, Polus and Callicles, they could not be higher for the rest of us, either.

Indeed, it is rather misleading to talk in this context of *rhetoric* at all, since the word masks the awful significance of the object of Socratic investigation. Rhetoric, in the sense of persuasive speech, happens to be the form social manipulation and control took in ancient Athens; but it is as playing exactly this role that Socrates examines it and finds it wanting. The effective object of Socrates' critique is any method of persuasion that does not have the truth as its primary concern. Such methods are far more multifarious and intrusive in an age of electronic media: our cave has many more puppet-masters even than Plato's. Socrates' critique applies as much to advertising, film, TV and all the other genres of popular-cultural production beyond the spheres of law and politics as it does to anything we would associate with the term "rhetoric."¹⁴

¹² On this and other features of the setting of the *Gorgias*, see J. Doyle, "On the First Eight Lines of Plato's *Gorgias*," *Classical Quarterly*, vol. 56 no. 2 (December 2006), 599-602.

¹³ Socrates says to Callicles that politicians should be judged entirely on whether they have improved the character of the citizenry (515b8-c4). On the role of public culture in the *Republic*, see J. Lear, "Inside and Outside the *Republic*," in his *Open-Minded* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 219-246.

¹⁴ That is why I said, in "The Fundamental Conflict in Plato's *Gorgias*," that "the *Gorgias*

3. What Does Gorgias Say Rhetoric Is?

Gorgias' repeated attempts to specify what rhetoric is are conspicuously inadequate – indeed, that is why Socrates exhorts him to repeat them. The basic problem is not that his characterisations fail to apply to rhetoric, but that they clearly apply to other *tekhnai* besides, and so cannot amount to the definition Socrates seeks. He says that it is concerned with *logoi* (in this context, words, speech or discourse) (449e1) and exclusively so (450b6-c2); but then so is mathematics, says Socrates (d4-e2), so rhetoric must be more precisely specified, presumably with regard to the *subject-matter* of the speech with which it concerns itself (451a3-d6). Gorgias' second attempt to give an account of his trade is to call this subject-matter “the greatest and best of human concerns” (τὰ μέγιστα τῶν ἀνθρωπέων, ὧ Σώκρατες, καὶ ἄριστα, d7-8).

Connoisseurs of Socratic procedure may here expect a repetition of his earlier retort to Polus' strikingly similar “definition” of rhetoric as the finest of all the arts: that he made great claims for it as if in response to some disparagement, but neglected to say *what it was* (448e2-4; cf. *Meno* 71b3-8). Instead, however, he brings up the claims of other *tekhnai* to concern themselves with what is most valuable to human beings, by invoking a well-known drinking-song which enumerates the greatest blessings as health, beauty and legitimate wealth (451e1-5). On this reckoning, it is the doctor, the trainer and the businessman who provide the greatest human goods: how can the orator compete with that? asks Socrates. Gorgias' third attempt to define his *tekhne* specifies the good it produces thus:

GORG: Just this, Socrates: the *truly* greatest good, and the basis for people's freedom, as well as of their ability to rule over others in their own city.

SOC: What are you referring to?

GORG: I mean the ability to persuade with arguments a jury in court, members of Council in their Chamber, voters in the assembly and any other kind of public congregation, whatever it may be. (452d5-e4)

Socrates complains that Gorgias still has not made clear what the activity is, because he has not said what the conviction it produces is *about* (453b5-7). It is at this point, almost half-way through the conversation, that we get Gorgias' fourth and final attempt at a definition:

may be unique among Plato's dialogues in being even more relevant to us than it was to his contemporaries” (93).

GORG: This is the sort of persuasion I'm talking about, Socrates: the sort that's at issue in the law-courts, and in general before large crowds of people, as I was saying just now – and it concerns what's right and wrong. (454b5-8)

There we have it: rhetoric is all about justice and injustice, right and wrong. This makes it sound rather like Socrates' conception of *philosophy*. Yet should we take this as really representing Gorgias' view? He says quite a few other things that do not seem to fit with it. Just after giving his third definition, for example, in answer to Socrates' question about the doctor, the trainer and the businessman, he said:

GORG: What's more, by means of this power [sc of rhetoric] you will have the doctor as your slave (δούλον), and the trainer will be your slave too. And the businessman you mention will turn out to be making money not for himself, but for someone else: for you, in fact, as the one who has the power of speaking persuasively before the crowd. (452e4-8)

On a natural reading, if rhetoric is concerned with justice, as philosophy is, then the orator, like the philosopher, should be concerned with justice too. Yet Gorgias here does not seem to think that he will be – quite the reverse. Then again (the dialectic continues), when Socrates asks him if he would teach his pupils about right and wrong, he says that he would (459c8-460a4) – which fits well with the idea that right and wrong are (part of) the subject-matter of rhetoric. Yet this in turn (someone may further object, and as Socrates ends the conversation by pointing out) forms an inconsistent triad with (i) 'Socratic intellectualism', in which Gorgias acquiesces by agreeing that someone who has been taught about right and wrong is *ipso facto* a righteous man who will never do wrong (460b1-8), and (ii) his earlier protest that the teacher of rhetoric should not be blamed if his pupils use their skill for bad ends (456c6-457c3). Furthermore, no-one in the dialogue dissents from Polus' subsequent diagnosis that Gorgias' claim to teach his pupils right and wrong was made out of "false shame" (461b4-c3). So does Gorgias really think that right and wrong is part of the subject-matter of rhetoric, or not? The closing words of our conversation, with which Socrates makes a gloomy assessment of the inquiry into the nature of rhetoric, could equally be applied to our own inquiry into what Gorgias takes it to be: "By the dog, we'll need more than a short discussion to investigate properly how these matters stand." (461a7-9).

Before we look more closely at what exactly Gorgias believes the subject-matter of rhetoric to be, let us consider two recent commentators who have taken opposed views on the matter.

4. Kahn: Gorgias Believes That Justice Does Not Belong to the Subject-Matter of Rhetoric

Charles Kahn takes the conversation with Gorgias to illustrate Socrates' strategy of examining and putting to the test not just the *logos* but his interlocutor (cf. *Protagoras* 333c7). Accordingly, he argues that when he says that justice is part of rhetoric, Gorgias is being made by Socrates to dissemble for a special reason that applies to him alone. As a world-famous, widely influential teacher of rhetoric, and a foreigner in Athens, he runs the risk of being run out of town if he gives the impression of empowering people who may then act viciously. While other scholars are puzzled by his acquiescence in intellectualism,¹⁵ Kahn attributes it to the social pressure on Gorgias to exclude the possibility that anyone he teaches might use what they have learnt for bad ends:

How can [the claim to teach virtue, unless coupled with a commitment to intellectualism] help [Gorgias] against the charge that, in modern terms, he puts a loaded revolver in the hands of men who may be foolish, unscrupulous, or criminal? . . . [T]he refutation of Gorgias serves not to reveal a conceptual contradiction in his view of rhetoric but to expose a moral and social incompatibility between this view and Gorgias's public role in training young men for political leadership. That is why the contradiction arises from [the concession that he would teach his students virtue], which is not only false but known to be false by Gorgias even as he makes it.¹⁶

Kahn does not quite present his view in the form of an argument for the claim that Gorgias believes that right and wrong do not belong to the subject-matter of rhetoric, but the idea seems to be something like this: Plato clearly signals that it is Gorgias' awareness of his precarious position as a foreign orator in Athens that leads him to express acceptance of the implausible intellectualist thesis and to claim, no less implausibly, that he would

¹⁵ T. Irwin, for example; see his *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 126-8.

¹⁶ "Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1983), 75-121; 83, 84.

teach his pupils about right and wrong. Plato cannot, therefore, intend us to suppose that Gorgias is here saying what he really thinks. Therefore Gorgias does not really think that right and wrong are part of the subject-matter of rhetoric. On this account, Polus' diagnosis, that Gorgias' claim to teach virtue was made out of "false shame" (461b4-c3), is largely correct, although what Gorgias fears is not so much shame as public hostility.

There are at least three problems with Kahn's reading. First, Gorgias already effectively levelled the very same 'loaded gun' accusation at himself when he spontaneously disavowed responsibility for any misuse of rhetoric by his pupils (456d-457c) – a disavowal that makes no sense unless such misuse is a real possibility. Second, Kahn writes that "Polus, who has no international reputation to lose and is not important enough to be the object of political attack, can afford to make the admission from which Gorgias recoils: that rhetoric is really concerned not with justice but only with success"; but does Polus really have so much less to fear? He too is a foreigner¹⁷ and, although young (461c5-8), does not lack for reputation and importance: he has written a book on rhetoric at least part of which Socrates, for all his disdain for the subject, has read (462b11-c1). The third difficulty is a subtle one brought out by John Cooper. As we have seen, Kahn endorses Polus' diagnosis of Gorgias' predicament: "it clearly represents Plato's own signal to us as to how this first refutation is to be understood."¹⁸ Yet Polus' diagnosis is not Kahn's, because Polus makes no mention of the special inhibiting forces to which Gorgias is (on Kahn's view) subject as a uniquely vulnerable celebrated foreigner. On the contrary, Polus strongly implies that what inhibited Gorgias would inhibit anyone: "Do you think that anyone (*tina*) would deny that they knew about justice and would teach it to others?" (461c2-3). Kahn faces a dilemma:

Kahn cannot have it both ways. Either Polus is correct on this point and Kahn's own analysis is wrong or else, if Kahn's analysis is accepted, Polus must be wrong. And if Polus is wrong about the source of Gorgias's shame, why think he is correct at all that the shame led to the concession? Why would Plato "signal" that he was correct, but

¹⁷ See 487a7, and E.R. Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 11; cf. D. Nails, *The People of Plato*, 252.

¹⁸ Kahn, *op. cit.*, 79.

then introduce something into his account of the shame about which he was crucially wrong:¹⁹

It seems unlikely, then, that Gorgias makes the relevant assertions out of fear deriving from his peculiar status. Kahn has not given us reason to believe that Gorgias does not mean what he says when he tells Socrates that the subject-matter of the conviction produced by rhetoric is “right and wrong,” and that this would be part of what he teaches his own pupils.

5. Cooper: Gorgias Believes That Justice Does Belong to the Subject-Matter of Rhetoric

Cooper himself denies that shame has anything to do with Gorgias’ admission, because he believes that Gorgias is consciously and unwaveringly committed to the view that the virtue of justice – knowledge of right and wrong – is part of the subject-matter of rhetoric. Yet Cooper’s denial, and so his account of Gorgias’ beliefs, which entails it, have serious difficulties of their own. First, there is the consequence that Plato cannot intend us to take at face value the diagnosis of Gorgias’ self-contradiction with which Polus interrupts the conversation, inaugurating the second stage of the dialogue (the indignant Greek is at least as grammatically ill-formed as my translation):

POL: Or do you imagine – just because Gorgias was ashamed not to concede your further point that the orator knows what is right, honourable and good, or, if he didn’t know it to start with, said that he was himself prepared to teach him, and then by this admission some inconsistency perhaps crept into his statements (which is just what delights you, when you have deliberately entrapped people in questions like that) – for who do you imagine would deny that he knew what was right himself and could teach it to others? (461b4-c3)

“One thing is very clear,” writes Cooper, “that *Socrates* cannot think that Gorgias made this admission out of any feeling of shame” (47) – and this is clear, he thinks, because Socrates “knows very well... that [Gorgias] became committed [to the claim that he would teach his pupils about justice] when he said... that the topic of what’s just and what’s unjust is the

¹⁹⁾ J. Cooper, “Socrates and Plato in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” in his *Reason and Emotion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) 29-75; 46-7, n. 23.

special province of the orator, to speak about as an expert – parallel in *this* respect to the physician’s knowing and speaking expertly about health” (*ibid.*). Cooper is here advertent to Gorgias’ fourth and final attempt to answer Socrates’ insistent questions about the subject-matter of rhetoric:

GORG: This is the sort of persuasion I’m talking about, Socrates: the sort that’s at issue in the law-courts, and in general before large crowds of people, as I was saying just now – *and it concerns what’s right and wrong.* (454b5-7; my emphasis)

Cooper’s interpretation places an enormous weight on a reading of these last seven words (eight in the Greek) as indicating Gorgias’ considered opinion about the subject-matter of rhetoric, so that the admission that enables Socrates to convict him of self-contradiction – that he would teach his pupils about right and wrong – being a mere reiteration of this opinion, cannot be a rash claim he was panicked into making, against his better judgement, under pressure to avoid the appearance of a shameful lack of scruple, as Polus’ faulty diagnosis has it. As I mentioned above, however, such a reading is called into question by some of Gorgias’ other characterisations of rhetoric, most notably:

GORG: [B]y means of this power [sc of rhetoric] you will have the doctor as your slave, and the trainer will be your slave too. And the businessman you mention will turn out to be making money not for himself, but for someone else: for you, in fact, as the one who has the power of speaking persuasively before the crowd. (452e1-8)

Talk of rhetoric as enabling the orator to enslave his fellow-citizens fits badly with a conception of rhetoric as the *tekhnē* of justice; but this is hardly a decisive interpretative consideration. Since what Gorgias says is not internally consistent, we naturally think of the task of interpretation as fastening onto certain things he says and giving them a ‘straight’ reading, as indicating what he really thinks, and explaining away the other, inconsistent things he says, as for one reason or another not to be taken at face value. As a matter of fact, Cooper does not offer us any explanation of why Gorgias’ depiction of rhetoric as a means of enslavement is not a proper or serious component of his considered view – but perhaps *someone* could. Maybe Gorgias is getting carried away, so that this darker, more cynical conception of rhetoric should not in the end be seen as impugning the ‘*tekhnē* of justice’ conception, which may therefore retain its title as Gor-

gias' official or real view. Yet one may still wonder why, when asked by Socrates whether, *qua* teacher of rhetoric, he would teach his pupils about right and wrong, Gorgias says only that he *supposes that he would*, in addition to teaching them rhetoric proper – without referring back to what Cooper claims to be his earlier clear statement that right and wrong simply *is* the whole subject-matter of rhetoric.

Be that as it may, there remain two real stumbling-blocks for Cooper's interpretation. The first is a remark Socrates later makes to Callicles in the course of praising his candour as marking him out as a superior interlocutor by comparison with his fellow-advocates of rhetoric:

Soc: [I]t cannot be denied that [Gorgias and Polus] are more inhibited than they should be: they are so far gone in their concern for propriety that it drove each of them to contradict himself on the most serious questions before a large audience. (487b1-b5)

This certainly looks like an endorsement of Polus' diagnosis of Gorgias' downfall. Cooper is of course aware of the passage; he treats of it thus:

... [A]t 487a, in a long speech full of irony, Socrates has praised Callicles for having all three of the essential characteristics of the respondent needed to test properly one's own ideas in discussion – including, in particular, frankness (*parrhēsia*, saying anything one pleases however shocking), which, he says, Gorgias and Polus both lacked: they fell into self-contradiction because they were too ashamed and not bold enough to say openly what Callicles has just been saying himself, that clever people, expert at oratory, have a natural right to dominate everyone else and to use their skills to get a greater share than others of anything they want. In saying this Socrates assumes that both Gorgias and Polus also believe this sort of thing, and he implies that they came to grief because they were too ashamed and inhibited – not frank enough – to say it. But he indicates no particular statement each made out of fear of embarrassment; so he is not agreeing here with Polus' diagnosis of exactly how Gorgias was defeated... Thus *nowhere* does Socrates "confirm" [as Kahn claims he does – JD] Polus' diagnosis of where and why Gorgias made his damaging admission.²⁰

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 49 n. 27. Given what Gorgias says approvingly at 452e1-8 about the orator enslaving the practitioners of other *tekhnai*, it is odd that Cooper says that he was "too ashamed and not bold enough to say openly... that clever people, expert at oratory, have a natural right to dominate everyone else and to use their skills to get a greater share than others of anything they want."

Remember that the ‘straight’ reading of Gorgias’ account of rhetoric as the *tekhnē* of justice assumes a certain burden of proof, given that Gorgias says other things about rhetoric that are inconsistent with that account. Cooper cannot appeal to the ‘straight’ reading in support of his interpretation here of Socrates’ remarks to Callicles. (Indeed, this interpretation is surely at odds with the ‘straight’ reading, as it involves ascribing to Socrates an assumption that *Gorgias* holds “that clever people, expert at oratory, have a natural right to dominate everyone else and to use their skills to get a greater share than others of anything they want” – hard to square with a conception of the orator as preoccupied with what Callicles would call “conventional” justice.) Consider what we are being asked to believe. Polus claimed that Gorgias was induced to contradict himself by a fear of shame that led him to claim that he would teach his pupils about justice. This was the *only* contradiction Socrates explicitly convicted Gorgias of in the course of their conversation. Socrates nowhere in the subsequent sixty-six Stephanus pages takes issue with Polus’ diagnosis, and twenty-six pages later himself spontaneously describes Gorgias as having been driven by a concern for propriety to contradict himself. Nevertheless, according to Cooper, we are not to suppose that Plato intends the reader to understand Socrates as alluding to the only self-contradiction of Gorgias that he (Socrates) exposed, which is also the self-contradiction-of-Gorgias-through-false-shame Polus invoked in *his* diagnosis. Not at all: Socrates has an entirely different self-contradiction-of-Gorgias-through-false-shame in mind, although he did not point it out during their conversation, and unfortunately neglects to specify at any subsequent point what it is. This seems implausible.

The second problem for Cooper’s reading is this: he turns out to be mistaken in supposing that Gorgias even once states that right and wrong is the subject-matter of rhetoric. It is true that Socrates’ question concerns the subject-matter of rhetoric; but let us look for a third time at Gorgias’ fourth and final answer:

This is the sort of persuasion I’m talking about, Socrates: the sort that’s at issue in the law-courts, and in general before large crowds of people, as I was saying just now – and it concerns what’s right and wrong. (454b5-7)

Gorgias does not say that right and wrong is the subject-matter of rhetoric. He says that right and wrong is the subject matter of the *persuasion* that constitutes rhetoric’s *product*. Some of Socrates’ examples may lead us to sup-

pose that the distinction between a *tekhnē* and its product does not really matter in this connection. What is the product of mathematics? Mathematical proofs, perhaps, or treatises; and their subject-matter is numbers and other mathematical objects, which also certainly count as the subject-matter of mathematics itself. But rhetoric is surely not like mathematics in this respect: it is more like tragic poetry or singing. The subject-matter of the products of tragic poetry is heroic people and their downfall; but on the supposition that tragedy is a *tekhnē* (which Socrates of course denies, 502d), its subject-matter – what an experienced poet will try to teach a novice – is its *technique*: diction, metre, pacing, characterisation, and so on: the means by which its product is produced. Presumably, if rhetoric *is* a *tekhnē*, the words by which it is carried on are not the words that are spoken when one is *being an orator* – the words, the *products* of rhetoric, by means of which one persuades one's audience, regardless of subject-matter. They are the words used when one is *being a teacher of rhetoric*: the sort of words that constitute, for example, Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, as opposed to the speeches of a Lysias or a Demosthenes. Again, if we consider singing,²¹ it is clear that the words one utters *while singing* – the products of the *tekhnē* – have no distinctive subject-matter. Even if they did – if, say, the only subject anyone ever happened to sing about were the victors in athletic competitions – this would not be the subject-matter of the *tekhnē* of singing. The words that give expression to that *tekhnē* are not themselves sung, and they concern a distinctive subject-matter of their own: the technique, as we say, of singing. In the same way, we should look for the subject-matter of rhetoric not in its product, the orator's speeches, but in what the teacher of rhetoric tries to impart to his pupil: the technique, as we say, of rhetoric, by means of which its products are produced.

The cornerstone of Cooper's reading – the assumption that Gorgias claims that right and wrong is the subject-matter of rhetoric – turns out to be false. This is not even something Gorgias says in an unguarded moment; *a fortiori*, this cannot be his considered position.

²¹ It is true that Socrates later, in his conversation with Callicles, also denies that singing is a *tekhnē* (501e-502a). But his reason is not that it lacks a distinctive subject-matter; it is instead the 'official' reason he gives, from the beginning of his conversation with Polus, for denying that rhetoric is a *tekhnē*: that it concerns pleasure rather than the good. In any case, Socrates is about to rely on the premise that music is a *tekhnē*; see 460b2-3.

6. What Does Gorgias Really Believe?

Kahn, then, fails to establish that Gorgias does not believe that right and wrong belong to the subject-matter of rhetoric; but nor can Cooper establish that he does believe this. There is a temptation to retreat to the safe haven of the inchoate account given by Polus which, after all, is not contradicted by any of the speakers and seems to be endorsed by Socrates himself: that Gorgias' claim to teach his pupils about right and wrong was prompted simply by "false shame" (that is, it was a falsehood told out of fear of the shame that would accrue if he told the truth), but that, *pace* Kahn, it had nothing to do with Gorgias' peculiarly vulnerable position. This would be a partial vindication of Kahn, since it entails that Gorgias did not believe that right and wrong belong to the subject-matter of rhetoric, and so decides in his favour the main issue between himself and Cooper. Yet even if all the speakers defer to Polus' diagnosis, the fact that Plato is exploring ideas by creating a dialogue-world determines that the diagnosis may yet be false. For Plato may be trying to show us something that none of his characters is in a position to say. So I wish to propose a more radical response.

We have remarked some striking inconsistencies in what Gorgias says; but the fact is that we have barely scratched the surface of his profound confusion. We have seen that he actually says that right and wrong is the subject-matter of the *product* of rhetoric, but we cannot conscientiously ascribe to him the *belief* that is naturally expressed by these words, since he clearly takes himself to be answering Socrates' question, which concerned the subject-matter of rhetoric itself. Cooper's error is interesting because it directs our attention to Gorgias' unthinking neglect of this fundamental distinction between a *tekhnē* and its product. Because he is oblivious to this distinction, there is simply no answer to the question of whether he believes that right and wrong is the subject-matter of rhetoric, or of its product.

The same thing may be said about his avowal, attributed by Polus to "false shame," that he would teach his pupils about right and wrong, if they did not already have this knowledge. Socrates earlier got Gorgias to admit that even in respect of its own subject-matter, which Socrates of course affects to understand to be right and wrong, rhetoric imparts to the crowd only belief, and not knowledge, since it could hardly teach them about right and wrong in so short a time (!) (454c7-455a7). And Socrates has just

induced Gorgias to admit – indeed, to boast – that rhetoric has no inkling of the knowledge that constitutes the other *tekhnai*, such as medicine, training or commerce, whose products it unscrupulously appropriates (458e5-459c2). Socrates is then naturally led to ask whether rhetoric as such stands in regard to its own subject-matter of right and wrong as it does in regard to the subject-matters of those other *tekhnai*; that is, whether it not only fails to produce any knowledge of right and wrong among the crowd, as Gorgias has already conceded, but also, what would explain this, does not *proceed* from any such knowledge. Here Socrates shows himself alive to that distinction between a *tekhnē* and its product that we saw Gorgias elide, for he takes this new question to be answerable in terms of what Gorgias would say, not to the crowd when practising rhetoric, but to his students when teaching it. The question, which turns out to elicit from Gorgias the contradiction that brings this first conversation to an end, takes the form of a comically repeated alternation between the two possibilities:

Soc: Let's consider this question: Does rhetoric turn out to be the same in respect of the just and the unjust, the base and the noble, and good and bad, as it is in respect of health and the subject-matters of the other *tekhnai*? That is, does it have no knowledge of them – of what is good and what bad, what noble and what base, what just and what unjust – but only contrive to produce persuasion about them, so that an ignorant person may look to an ignorant audience as though he knew more than the expert? *Or*: does he really have to know? That is, must a man who's going to learn rhetoric already have acquired an understanding of these things before he comes to you? *Otherwise*, then, considered as a teacher of rhetoric, you won't teach your new arrival any of these things – it's not your job; instead, you'll make him seem to the many as if he did know these things even though he doesn't, and as if he were good, even though he's not. *Or*: will you be unable, in general, to teach him rhetoric unless he already knows the truth about these things? How do these matters stand, Gorgias? And by Zeus, do what you said you would just now: show me what the power of rhetoric consists in! (459c8-460a2)

As if in acknowledgement of the equivocal status of Gorgias' assertion that rhetoric, or perhaps its product, has right and wrong as its whole subject-matter, Socrates here seems to back away from such a claim, treating right and wrong as at most a component of its subject-matter, or a precondition of its operation. Nevertheless, it is clear that he is asking about what is involved in the purported *tekhnē* of rhetoric itself, and so what the teacher of rhetoric teaches *qua* teacher of rhetoric. But look at Gorgias' response:

GORG: Well, Socrates, I suppose he'll learn these things [sc about the just, the noble etc.] from me too, if he happens not to know them. (460a3-4)

He seems to be saying *what he would happen to do under those circumstances*, rather than making clear what the teacher of rhetoric *as such* would do, that is, what rhetoric itself involves. Again, we get the impression that Gorgias is simply not aware of a crucial distinction: here, between two ways of taking the question "What would you do?". So, again, we seem to lack any clear answer to the question of what he takes himself to mean in answering as he does.

In short, where Kahn says that Gorgias believes that right and wrong do not belong to the subject-matter of rhetoric, and Cooper says that Gorgias believes that right and wrong *do* belong to the subject-matter of rhetoric, my suggestion is that *Gorgias has no beliefs whatever about whether right and wrong belong to the subject-matter of rhetoric.*

The greater the confusion that underlies a speaker's utterances, the less warrant we have for straightforwardly ascribing beliefs to him on their basis. This is not merely an epistemic point; it concerns what it is for a person to have a given set of beliefs, regardless of whether anyone is in a position to know it. Kahn, Cooper and Socrates all overlook the respect in which belief with a given content is an *achievement*, presupposing *inter alia* mastery of the relevant concepts, which cannot be taken for granted on the basis of an utterance seeming to assert that content, or even of the explicit self-ascription of the belief by the person in question. Inconsistent assertions *may* indicate that this achievement has not been attained. The interpretation of another person via the ascription of beliefs is an inherently rationalising procedure. It seeks to *make sense* of the other, in that the whole enterprise presupposes an underlying, largely rational structure to those beliefs: the inferences typically involved in such interpretation obviously depend continuously upon such a presupposition. The very identity of an ascribed belief depends in part upon its place in the network of inferential connections that constitutes the hypothesised underlying intelligible structure. There is therefore no ascription of contradictory beliefs that is not at the same time an acknowledgement of partial interpretative failure. If the contradictions lie sufficiently close to the 'surface' of the interpretand's utterances, intelligible structure is compromised, and the straightforward ascription of beliefs is no longer possible, since the determination of their content depends essentially on discerning the relevant structure of

inferential connections, which by hypothesis has now gone missing. This failure does not arise from any deficiency in the interpretative process; it is imposed by a fundamental unintelligibility in the target of interpretation. The ascription of a large degree of inconsistency, as in the case of Gorgias, is not so much a turn our interpretation takes, as a reflection of the fact that interpretation has to a significant extent broken down. If interpretation seeks to lay bare an underlying, intelligible structure of beliefs, to ascribe a good deal of inconsistency is to relinquish the hope that there is much intelligible structure to be found; the ascription of the “beliefs” that manifested so much inconsistency is in turn undermined.²² The current suggestion is that Gorgias does not have a sufficient grasp of the concepts of rhetoric or of its subject matter to count as having full-fledged beliefs about rhetoric or its subject-matter at all.

Before proceeding any further, I would like to disarm some of the most immediately tempting objections to what I have said about belief.

In asserting the presupposition of rational background structure by any interpretation of another’s utterances, I do not intend to go beyond what a philosophically-tutored common sense may – as I claim – be brought to acknowledge as the truth about beliefs and their ascription. (I had better not go any further than this, at any rate, since I ascribe at least an implicit grasp of the point to Plato himself, as informing his depiction of Gorgias.) This is not to call the reality of belief into question, a move which Plato might in any case have found impossible to understand. On the contrary, the conceptual connections I mention, between a decent acquaintance with the geography of the logical space inhabited by the concepts that figure in a set of belief-contents, and the status of these latter *as* belief-contents, are presented precisely as part of a non-revisionary account of what our ordinary psychological talk is about. In particular, I am not to be understood as endorsing any of the various philosophically extravagant, more or less anti-realist theses about belief (and about propositional attitudes more generally) that have recently been maintained partly on the basis of the more or less mundane considerations I here adduce: I mean, for example, the view that *what it is* to have a belief is to be interpretable

²²) This way of thinking about belief as conceptually tied to interpretation derives from Donald Davidson. See his “Radical Interpretation” and “Belief and the Basis of Meaning” in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

in a certain way;²³ or that the ascription of belief is merely a corollary of a certain sort of *stance* we take, for purely pragmatic reasons, toward the targets of ascription;²⁴ or that the notion of inferential licence is prior to that of semantic value, which is to be understood in terms of it.²⁵

Second, I do not deny – how could I? – that various undreamt-of inconsistencies lurk embarrassingly close to the surface of the thought of all of us; but in the normal case they do not lie close enough to undermine the project of interpretation. The sort of case Gorgias exemplifies is necessarily exceptional. In any event, an exact formulation of the point at which there is too much inconsistency for interpretation to proceed is not necessary to my purpose in characterising Gorgias as largely uninterpretable on the matter at issue, provided such a point may plausibly be postulated *somewhere* in the region between the Gorgias case and normal cases of unimpeded belief-ascription.²⁶

Third, someone may wonder how Gorgias' own perspective on his beliefs is supposed to fit into my conception. If his thinking about the nature of rhetoric is sufficiently confused that no straightforward ascription of beliefs is possible, would he not be aware of that? And would such awareness not prompt some cognitive housekeeping on his part, so that intelligibility is restored at least to a degree that warrants the ascription of determinate belief? Why does he not recognise his confusion as confusion? The short answer is: because he is confused. Part of his confusion consists in the fact that *he does not really know what he believes*. He presumably thinks, prior to his conversation with Socrates, that he has certain beliefs about the nature and purpose of rhetoric. The interrogation reveals that some of those beliefs cannot be unproblematically ascribed to him, because they are implicated in an inconsistency that partly undermines the interpretative project. This picture will seem strange only if we think of beliefs as private mental items infallibly accessible to introspection, so that to think that one believes that *p* is sufficient for believing that *p*. That conception of beliefs, however, along with an analogous conception of mental states in general, was a radical Cartesian innovation in our thinking about

²³ E.g. W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964), D. Davidson, *op. cit.*

²⁴ E.g. D. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

²⁵ E.g. R. Brandom, *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

²⁶ The necessity of this sort of disclaimer was made clear to me by Hannes Leitgeb.

the mind, which is utterly alien to the ancients and, arguably, is one we ought ourselves to repudiate.²⁷

Fourth, it may be thought that possession of some *ur*-concept of (e.g.) rhetoric is required if it is going to be possible so much as to fail to grasp the full concept. For what is it to fail to grasp a concept F, if it is not to have false beliefs about Fs? But false beliefs about Fs are beliefs *about* Fs, so the conceptual failure does not after all undermine the ability to have the relevant beliefs. Even if Gorgias does not really know what rhetoric is, he must in some sense grasp the concept if he is to count as having the false beliefs about rhetoric which impugn his full grasp of the concept. Yet, to adapt a saying of Wolfgang Pauli, Gorgias does not even have *false* beliefs *about* rhetoric. The fact that a concept-word “F” shows up in an expression of the content of a belief does not guarantee that the belief is in any more-than-formal sense *about* F or Fs. If I state that Plato’s greatest pupil was a paperclip, I express not so much a false belief about Plato’s greatest pupil as a false belief about what the expression “Plato’s greatest pupil” might mean.

Recall that Socrates said to Gorgias, “I hold that there is nothing so bad for a man, as to fall into false belief about the subjects of our present discussion” (458 a8-b1). Yet if Socrates is right that “the subjects of our present discussion” are the most important subjects one can discuss, there turns out to be something *worse* than falling into false belief about them: namely, failing to attain to any beliefs about them at all. This is Gorgias’ predicament. Because Plato is using the interaction of the characters in the dialogue-world he has created to express ideas, he can present rhetoric’s failure to attain to the status of a *tekhne* in a particularly vivid way: it is not merely alleged by Socrates, and implied by the frustration of his many attempts to elicit a definition of it, but also *enacted*: Gorgias cannot so much as make sense when he tries to give an account of the *logos* of rhetoric.

²⁷ See e.g. L. Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 105e, §§ 605, 606, H. Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’,” in his *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 215-271, T. Burge, “Individualism and the Mental,” in P. French (ed.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy 4: Studies in Metaphysics* (1979), 73-121, J. McDowell and P. Pettit, “Introduction” to their (eds.), *Subject, Thought and Context* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 1-15, T. Williamson, “Anti-Luminosity” in his *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 93-113. On the incoherence of the Cartesian picture in connection with practical thinking, see A. Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (London and Henley: Routledge, 1963), especially chapters 3 and 5.

7. Some Implications of the Foregoing

In his paper “Socrates and Plato in the *Gorgias*,” Cooper asks

What is Plato’s relation to Socrates in the *Gorgias*? Is Socrates there in a straightforward way as Plato’s spokesman? Can we surmise that at the time he was writing the dialogue, Plato identified wholeheartedly with what he has this character say, not only in announcing his views but in arguing for them – and with the philosophical presuppositions of all Socrates’ arguments? Is the whole of what Plato wants to say on the philosophical topics here being pursued to be found in what Socrates says, independently or in reaction to what Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, his fellow-discussants, say?²⁸

Cooper goes on to argue for a negative answer to these questions. For he claims that Plato’s sympathies lie closer to certain things said by Callicles, which foreshadow doctrines defended in the *Republic*, than to anything Socrates says in opposition to them. Thus Cooper rejects the Vlastos-Irwin view that Socrates is always Plato’s spokesman.

If the account given above of what is going on in the conversation with Gorgias is correct, Cooper, and *a fortiori* Vlastos and Irwin, are operating with too restricted a menu of options in respect of *what Plato may mean*. My account requires a conception that can encompass more than anything Socrates, or any other character, says. For neither Socrates nor any other character says that Gorgias is too confused to count as having fully-fledged beliefs about the subject-matter of rhetoric; yet, I have argued, this is part of what Plato the dramatist conveys. He conveys it by making use of the expressive power that accrues to him precisely in his role as a dramatist, a creator of a dialogue-world: the power to show more than any of his characters says. Since it is just this power that gives the dramatist an expressive advantage over his characters, as over the author of a treatise, it would be surprising if Plato made no use of it. If we try to formulate what the conversation with Gorgias *shows*, a new critique of Gorgias’ confusion comes into focus. Cooper’s and Kahn’s accounts are inadequate to the uncanny realism with which Plato dramatises this confusion, because they never suspect that Gorgias cannot be straightforwardly interpreted as having beliefs whose contents match his utterances about rhetoric’s subject-matter.

²⁸) Cooper, *op. cit.*, 31-2.

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