More than Just Cookery: Using Performative Paradox to Disrupt the Narrative of Rhetoric in Plato's *Gorgias*

Lisa Rumsey Harris

Department of Writing and Rhetoric, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, United States of America

Lisa.R.Harris@utah.edu ORCID 0009-0006-2692-3833

Lisa Rumsey Harris is a doctoral student in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Utah. She holds a bachelor's degree in English from Brigham Young University, and a master's degree in American Literature from Brigham Young University. Her interests include feminist rhetoric, narrative, and WPA administration.

*The author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.

More Than Just Cookery: Using Performative Paradox to Disrupt the Narrative of Rhetoric in Plato's *Gorgias*

The narrative of Socrates besting three rhetoricians in Plato's *Gorgias* has cast a long shadow over the study of rhetoric. It has been argued that in the *Gorgias,* Plato creates a dichotomy that is unfairly dismissive of rhetoric, which results in the antagonism and deletion of Plato from the historicizing of rhetorical theory. Rather than thinking about this dialogue as a dichotomy, I reframe it as a study in performative paradox. I assert that Socrates contradicts himself at least three times, creating paradoxes. He disparages rhetoric (and then employs it); he claims to be eager to be refuted (and then resists refutation); and he criticizes flattery (and then uses it). There are four types of paradox operating in this dialogue: paradox as forced proximity of contradictory terms, as a speech performative, as the development of persona, and as the pursuit of meaning-making. Ultimately, examining these paradoxes through a lens of performance, I identify both nuance and a proliferation of meaning that is valuable to rhetoric. Plato's *Gorgias* is more than just a narrative; it is a complex ecosystem of reasoning, contradictions, questions, and answers that emphasizes the pursuit of knowledge as the goal. Plato's work is relevant in a modern world replete with human inconsistency that calls on us to investigate, unsettle, and challenge previously held ideas, even to change our minds to accept new ideas that contradict our earlier notions.

Keywords: Gorgias; paradox; Plato; performative, Socrates

Introduction

Plato's narrative of Socrates besting three different rhetoricians (according to Socrates himself) has cast a long shadow over the study of rhetoric. His *Gorgias* is a dialectic, with Socrates sparring first with Gorgias, then Polus, and finally, Callicles, all sophists who practice and teach rhetoric as their trade. While Socrates asks questions, Gorgias holds steadfastly to the idea that the goal of rhetoric is persuasion. Socrates, as recorded by Plato, dismantles, and deconstructs Gorgias's argument by questioning the true value of rhetoric: if it is merely a tool to persuade, regardless of merit, justice or

truth, what is its value? While Socrates contends that rhetoric is merely "the habit of a bold and ready wit," which is more akin to flattery and cookery than art and skill, he does not offer his own succinct definition of what rhetoric is, beyond these trivializing descriptions.

The conclusion that Socrates (and thus Plato) disparages rhetoric is settled ground among most philosophers and rhetoricians (Ede, Glenn, & Lunsford; Jacob; Carone). Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford describe the argument in Gorgias as Plato's "sound drubbing" of rhetoric (422). Jacob likewise notes that many scholars take *Gorgias* as Plato's comprehensive condemnation of all rhetoric (77). Carone declares Socrates's stance against rhetoric "uncontroversial" (221). However, in pitting Gorgias's simple definition against Socrates's dismissive, albeit nuanced and broader view of rhetoric, Plato has created a dichotomy, a forced pairing of rhetoric and dialectic, in which dialectic is superior and rhetoric is inferior. This forced pairing creates not only a contradiction, because Socrates uses rhetoric even as he disparages it, but also a paradox. *Gorgias* is replete with contradictions that I frame as paradoxes. Traditionally, paradoxes are understood as puzzles that must be solved. However, I assert that the type of performative (lightly following Austin), interactional paradox that is found in *Gorgias* is a useful heuristic that proliferates and expands meaning, not a flaw in the text that must be reconciled. Building upon the concept of contradiction from traditional paradox, and the pursuit of knowledge from epistemic paradox, my theory of performative paradox includes those concepts but also adds the aspect of performance in four different ways: through the forced proximity of paired opposing terms to create emphasis, as a speech performative wherein the speaker's act of speaking or pronouncing performs rhetorical action, as a deliberate development of a persona, and

finally as a creative pursuit that invites readers into the text to participate in meaning creation.

Within *Gorgias,* there are three conspicuous textual paradoxes to which I apply the heuristic of performative paradox. Socrates contradicts himself at least three times, creating paradoxes: He disparages rhetoric (and employs it); he claims to be eager to be refuted (and resists refutation); and he criticizes flattery (and uses it). Plato's account of Socrates performing rhetorical moves that he is simultaneously depreciating in the same breath creates performative paradoxes that are dependent upon his interaction with his opponents. The Gorgias, if read rhetorically, is not a paradoxical disparagement of rhetoric. Instead, it's an interactional, rhetorical performance of paradox.

Gorgias in Rhetoric

The antagonistic forced dichotomy between rhetoric and dialectic in the Gorgias text not only creates tension, but is also narrow, limiting, and unfairly dismissive of rhetoric, which results in what Welch has described as both the antagonism and deletion of Plato from the historizing of rhetorical theory. This deletion and relegation has serious implications for rhetorical theorists, several of whom go to great lengths to defend Socrates and justify his contradictions (Cooper; White; Welch). Cooper, for instance, claims that some incongruities are the fault not of Socrates or Plato, but of the translator (579). Other authors, however, readily acknowledge the illogicality in the text (Kastley; Levett). Kastely notes that "any reader of *Gorgias* must be struck by the weakness of some of its arguments" (97). In the analysis that follows, I argue that examining Plato's *Gorgias* through the lens of performative paradox demonstrates that rhetoric and dialectic are not adversarial, but instead interactional and relational: that is, they work in tandem, thus forcing readers to contemplate the two ideas together,

rhetoric, dialectic, and paradox, in order to lead to greater understanding in the Gorgias text.

*Gorgia*s is both an implicitly and explicitly paradoxical text, even while Socrates himself uses the rhetorical figure. By implicit and explicit, I mean that paradox is embedded into the text in subtle ways as well as overt ones. Explicitly, Plato is offering us a way to grapple with rhetoric even in the very construction of this dialogue. This, I contend, was not an accident. This paradox about paradox is a grand puzzle that Plato laid out for readers to wrestle through in pursuit of greater knowledge and understanding of rhetoric. Socrates himself says to Gorgias, "Come, then, and let us see what we really mean about rhetoric; for I do not know what my own meaning is at yet." The invitation that Socrates extends to Gorgias to participate in this performance of paradox is also an invitation that Plato, as the author, extends to us as the readers. This statement is an affirmation that this dialectic is both an epistemic process and a rhetorical performance. For Plato, the ultimate goal of speaking, listening, and responding, is a purposeful heuristic through which the participants (including the readers) gain new understanding. In this pursuit of knowledge, paradox, both implicit and explicit, is a useful tool because it forces participants to go beyond simple explanations and to challenge settled logic. Paradox does not negate meaning; instead, paradox proliferates meaning. Examining these paradoxes through a performative lens yields nuance and a multiplication of meaning that is highly valuable to the field of rhetoric. Plato's *Gorgias* is more than just cookery or just a story; it is a complex ecosystem of reasoning, contradictions, performance, questions, and answers that emphasizes the quest for knowledge as the ultimate goal. I claim that the paradoxes are not mistakes in logic, but a vital aspect of the text that leads us to engage in critical thinking, urging us to unpack and investigate the text and its claims about rhetoric,

coaxing us to co-exist with inconsistencies and to resist easy answers. The theory of performative paradox that we see in the Gorgias is relevant now, in a modern world replete with human inconsistency, that calls on us to investigate and challenge previously held ideas, even to change our minds to accept new ideas that contradict our earlier notions, unsettling what has been settled, and troubling easy answers.

Types of Paradox

In examining the body of scholarship regarding paradox, there is a clear division of scholars who look at paradox as an intellectual challenge (traditional paradox), and those who look at paradox as a way of knowing (epistemic paradox). This split is likely influenced by Aristotle, who was the first to study paradox explicitly (Moore 16). Aristotle viewed paradox as a logical fallacy instead of a rhetorical figure, and he saw little advantage in its use, except as a way to expose flaws in an opponent's logic (Moore 18). Aristotle's view has had long lasting effects on how scholars view the term even now. For instance, Olin refers to traditional paradox, of which the central feature is conflict, as the use of reason to demonstrate that a statement is true and yet, by the same logic, that the statement is false (5). Here Olin points toward the first and most common definition of paradox: the concept of contradiction. Sainsbury's definition also centers the idea of contradiction as Olin does but adds the idea of inherent deception, that appearance must be deceptive, and the premise must be acceptable and unacceptable at the same time. It is this type of definition that presents paradox as a puzzle to be solved or a lie to be unmasked, more like a riddle than a methodology. Quine, while agreeing with Olin regarding contradiction as a central feature, introduces a new facet to the definition of paradox: that of argument: "a paradox is just any conclusion that first seems absurd, but that has an argument to sustain it" (3). Quine introduces paradox as a way of underpinning and supporting an argument that leads the reader back to logical

reasoning, while also emphasizing the word “absurd” which is the antithesis of logic, therefore maintaining the conflict of reason at its core. Solving a paradox is equivalent to unmasking its deception.

This connotation of paradox as deception, as noted in Olin, Quine, and Sainsbury’s definitions of paradox seem to overlook the historical definitions of the word, and in the process, omit some of the nuances and broader applications of the use of paradox. Moore begins his definition of paradox by looking back at the historical meaning of the word: "Paradox (from the Greek root *paradoxon*, implying something unexpected) has been used historically to describe the unusual or enigmatic” (15). While this first half of the definition does address the centrality of the idea of contradiction, Moore widens the scope by locating paradox within the field of rhetoric. He examines the tension inherent in Aristotle's definitions of both rhetoric and paradox by noting that paradox forces readers to look beyond settled beliefs and common knowledge and instead to consider new knowledge and contemplate a different reality. It is here that the idea of paradox as epistemic emerges within the context of rhetoric. This definition of paradox as a methodology for creating “new knowledge and a different reality” widens the scope and applicability of paradox, freeing it from the constraints of contradiction. Burge agrees with Moore that the possibilities of creating of new knowledge and nuance through paradox as a process has more potential as a central feature of the term than contradiction alone: “Paradoxes are best approached as resources for understanding deep and subtle features of our language and concepts, rather than as symptoms of contradiction or incoherence in them” (7). This concept of paradox as a methodology opens up vistas for the creation of new knowledge beyond the realm of solving.

Far from being an afterthought, the use of paradox as a heuristic in the creation of greater knowledge is the primary focus for scholars like Burge, Moore, Welch, Rendall, and Ingram, and especially for the latter three, in the field of rhetoric. Burge asserts “Paradoxes are a source of theoretical illumination” (7), but Moore moves beyond theory to discuss paradox as a heuristic, a thought process for creating, describing, and resolving arguments, controversies, and contradictions. In addition, paradox expresses ways of knowing by offering "new " insights that reach beyond common sense and existing belief “(Moore 17). Later, Moore expands his ideas by arguing that while paradox is often thought of as a figure or device, the true value of paradox is its potential as an analytical process. The difference between looking at paradox as a philosophical puzzle to be solved and as a method to create new knowledge opens up all sorts of possibilities, especially in the field of rhetoric. Emphasizing process, Moore builds on the work of Kenneth Burke who noted “rhetorical figures such as paradox represent the basis of human understanding since they are implicit in the process by which we think” (qtd. in Moore 22). In this way, paradox is located as both an epistemic and rhetorical concept. In *Gorgias*, there is textual evidence of paradox as a figure and as an epistemic pursuit, both of which inform my theory of performative paradox.

Performative Paradox

My theory of performative paradox includes both the traditional notion of paradox as contradiction, as outlined by Olin, Quine, and Sainsbury, and Moore’s conception of paradox as an epistemological endeavor, but I expand it to encompass the new concept of performative paradox, borrowing the concept from Austin who notes that “The uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action” (5). I identify four ways that performative paradox operates within the *Gorgias* text: first, paradox as

forced proximity to rivet our attention, second, paradox as a speech performative (a verbal pronouncement that performs action that *does* as well as *says*), third, performative paradox as intentional development of persona, and finally performative paradox as a creative pursuit that invites readers into the text to participate in meaning making. These four ways of analyzing paradox in *Gorgias* create a heuristic, a practical application of reason guided by these four definitions that yields new vistas with an old rhetorical figure. Analyzing *Gorgias* through this heuristic of the four different facets of paradox will yield new insight and understanding into an ancient text that is applicable and relevant for today.

This heuristic is informed by definitions of paradox that form the foundation of the theory. The first definition centers on juxtaposition: the forced pairing of antithetical terms. However, the application of this type of paradox becomes more transparent when we add in the rhetorical purpose of the use of the figure from Santos. While Santos agrees with Olin, Quine, and Sainsbury that the first and basic meaning of paradox is contradiction, he also notes that the function of a paradox is to "rivet attention on what is usually disregarded" (15). The way attention is riveted is by means of the constrained proximity of two contradictory terms, forcing the audience to contemplate the two ideas together. Burge expands this idea by noting that paradox creates more space to understand the subtleties of language. By adding this expanded purpose of paradox to the disjuncture of the two terms, there are more possibilities for paradox not only as a rhetorical feature but as an epistemological process ladened with nuance beyond the binary opposition.

Another facet of performative paradox centers on performance, which has two relevant connotations. In speech, a performative is the act of doing something by speaking (Austin 6). For instance, In *Gorgias*, Socrates combines the act of utterance

contradictorily paired with tacit action: he does what he explicitly says not to do. In other words, one form of performative paradox is the pairing of antithetical explicit narration and implicit action. This addition again enriches our understanding of the rhetorical function of paradox beyond contradiction, in a way that teaches us how to interpret the increased emphasis created by juxtaposition, thus drawing our attention to the performance of paradox: where saying is a way of doing rather than merely describing.

Performative paradox also includes the colloquial definition of performative: acts that are intended to construct a persona. In other words, performative paradox is a rhetorical performance of persona constructed through text. For Plato, dialectics are performative in that the identity of the players is constructed to develop each individual persona. Socrates and Gorgias, in particular, become performances of paradox through their presentations of their individual personas. These personas highlight the paradox that is embodied in the performance of Socrates as a paradox himself, as he both conceals and reveals his own persona in the *Gorgias* text.

Finally, readers are invited into the text to collaborate and participate in meaning making through performative paradox through the juxtaposition of two paradoxical terms For instance, in the first paradox that I analyze in *Gorgias*, Socrates represents dialectic and Gorgias represents rhetoric. The meaning is made in the interaction of the readers and the text, like a play that includes the audience as a player. Paradox not only shines a bright light on what may have been overlooked, it also invites the reader to participate in puzzling out the significance of the play (both in the sense of language play and in the sense of a literal play as a dialectic) between the two terms.

Analyzing *Gorgias* through the Process of Performative Paradox

Analyzing Plato's *Gorgias* through the process of performative paradox has specific implications and applicability for the field of rhetoric and beyond. Moore, Welch, and Ingram each highlight the importance of dialectic work and of using paradox not just as a figure but as an analytical process. Likewise, my concept of performative paradox is also a heuristic: an investigation that yields new insights by drawing attention specifically to the use of paradox in four different ways: as juxtaposition, as speech performative, as persona development, and as a creative, participatory interaction that encourages the reader to participate in meaning making.

In my conception of performative paradox, Moore's work is foundational. He agrees with Aristotle's assertion that paradox is a concept best suited for study within rhetoric (Moore 15). Paradox and other rhetorical figures, he affirms, are more than merely features or flourishes within the text. Instead, they function as an epistemic process, a way of knowing, that illuminates the relationship between knowledge and rhetoric, a distinct perspective that highlights knowledge creation and expression (Moore 15). Welch also emphasizes the importance this type of analysis has for rhetoric. In fact, of the all the authors surveyed in this paper, she perhaps recognizes the most how high the stakes are for analyzing and including Plato's work as a basis for rhetoric, and she has the highest goal: not only to investigate paradox but also to recover Plato for the field of rhetoric, where he has been summarily dismissed specifically because of his critique of sophistic rhetoric in *Gorgias.* She states, "In much of the work on rhetoric in the last generation--especially in the historicizing of rhetorical theory--Plato has been made to disappear or, more seriously, has been made to stand against rhetoric" (Welch 4). It is this central paradox at the heart of *Gorgias* between rhetoric and dialectic that Welch wrestles with, in order to reclaim Plato's work for the field of rhetoric.

In my own analysis of *Gorgias* that follows, I endeavor to take up Welch's challenge, by carving out a space for a multivalenced approach to paradox as a heuristic by applying the process of performative paradox theory to three paradoxes within *Gorgias.* These paradoxes each seem to follow a similar pattern. In each, Socrates verbally criticizes something, and later tacitly uses the very thing he disparaged, thus drawing our attention to the contradiction. In these paradoxes, he also makes performative utterances, speech acts in which *saying* is also *doing.* These speech acts also inform the characterization of his persona: a textual embodiment of paradox itself. Finally, through the text, Socrates, through Plato, beckons to us as readers to engage with paradox in the creative pursuit of meaning construction.

The first and most obvious paradox is the same one that Welch and other scholars in rhetoric have grappled with: Socrates's definition and use of rhetoric. The second paradox highlights some of the same passages in the text but introduces a new paradox regarding refutation wherein Socrates claims to be eager to be refuted, but then not only resists refutation, but also blames Gorgias for his reaction. Finally, the third paradox highlights Socrates's disparagement and simultaneous use of flattery in the text. The features of these paradoxes are set up in a way that resists easy resolution, and instead guide the reader toward aporia in order to see the dismantling, the unsettling, the troubling of ideas that resists easy resolution. In this way, analyzing the text by using performative paradox theory yields greater nuance and proliferation of meaning.

Paradox 1: Rhetoric vs. Dialectic

In order to understand how rhetoric vs dialectic is positioned as a performative paradox, I will primarily analyze the interactions between Gorgias and Socrates, although Polus does make a brief appearance in this part of the dialogue. The argument about rhetoric is a performance, the doing of a thing, a demonstration of rhetoric itself,

and so the argument must be demonstrated using paradox. In the first paradox, Plato sets up a binary opposition between rhetoric and dialectic. The forced proximity of the two terms rivets our attention to this juxtaposition. Socrates champions dialect, while Gorgias represents rhetoric. Socrates begins by refining the definition of rhetoric through dialectic with Gorgias. The rhetorical performance of the definition of rhetoric is itself a performative in which they are enacting rhetoric as they negotiate a definition: Gorgias agrees with Socrates's starting point: that rhetoric is an art "which works mainly through the use of words," which implies the performative nature of paradox where in saying is also doing. Later, Socrates in dialogue with Gorgias, adds to the definition:

> Now I think, Gorgias, that you have very accurately explained what you conceive to be the art of rhetoric; and you mean to say, if I am not mistaken, that rhetoric is the artificer of persuasion, having this and no other business, and that this is her crown and end. Do you know any other effect of rhetoric over and above that of producing persuasion?

In these lines, Socrates explicitly begins with performative rhetoric when he says to Gorgias, "You have very accurately explained what you conceive." By speaking affirmatively of what Gorgias said, Socrates gives credence to Gorgias's definition. It's an endorsement that Socrates's understanding of Gorgias's definition is indeed what Gorgias meant. The statement is performative because it becomes a pronouncement, an evidentiary claim, that they are in agreement, and that both players accept this definition as common ground. Here the language is more than just words: it becomes the act of doing, of creating, of enacting, as it is being said.

Gorgias answers and agrees to Socrates's definition: "No: the definition seems to me very fair, Socrates; for persuasion is the chief end of rhetoric." In this

performance of paradox that revolves around definition, Socrates asserts that he and Gorgias have common ground even as he works to dismantle that common ground in the next breath, which is, of course, paradoxical.

Here in these lines, we also see another facet of performative paradox that Socrates is enacting, wherein performative acts are intended to construct a persona even as it puts the thing that is spoken into play. Through his speech to Gorgias particularly, Socrates aims to be seen as reasonable, logical, and even courteous, finding agreeable common ground between himself and Gorgias. However, there is evidence that Socrates is laying the groundwork to disparage rhetoric even as he and Gorgias seem to work together to define the term. Note that Socrates adds the word *artificer* into the definition, but Gorgias does not repeat it in his response back to Socrates. In fact, it seems as if Socrates slips the word into the middle sentence, and then completely omits it in his question back to Gorgias regarding their consensus on the definition. However, Socrates's almost off-handed use of this word is anything but. Instead, it seems to be a deliberate inclusion on Socrates's part that reveals his own bias against rhetoric. An artificer, by definition, is a skilled craftsman. However, the word *artificer* is originally from Middle English via the Latin word *artificiarius* and thus carries connotations of its root word *artifice*: which implies craftiness, chicanery, dishonesty, slyness, and guile (all words that point us back to the definition of philosophical paradox established by Aristotle, Olin, and Quine). Therefore, even when Socrates seems to be collaborating with Gorgias as they build a definition, Socrates has slipped in a word that reveals the direction of his own forthcoming argument, that rhetoric is, at its core, deceptive. Socrates repeats the word *artificer* several times throughout the dialogue, but Gorgias never uses it. Thus, Socrates uses a dash of deception even in working to establish a definition of rhetoric that Gorgias agrees with. This kind of artifice or deception is

exactly what Socrates is decrying in rhetoric, which he describes as "part of a not very creditable whole." In this way, even the persona that Socrates constructs for himself is paradoxical.

Later in the dialogue, Socrates explicitly states his negative view of rhetoric when he provides his own definition of rhetoric to Gorgias: "Rhetoric, according to my view, is the ghost or counterfeit of a part of politics." This definition abandons subtlety and directly states the inherent idea that rhetoric is a form of trickery. And in case Gorgias had any question about Socrates's opinion, Socrates adds that it is an ignoble art. After this, there is no subterfuge regarding Socrates's view of rhetoric. However, Socrates creates a paradox by using rhetoric (and deception) while simultaneously disparaging both rhetoric and deception. He becomes a rhetorician, using the very techniques of rhetoric, namely trickery, that he decries. Likewise, Gorgias, a rhetorician who values discourse, is not very forthcoming in this text. He is a speaker who does not speak much. Many of his answers are short one-word answers: "Certainly," "Clearly," "Yes," and "True." Part of this is because Socrates asks him to be brief: "Will you keep your promise, and answer shortly the questions which are asked of you?" Gorgias responds, "Well, I will, and you will certainly say, that you never heard a man use fewer words." And Gorgias keeps his promise. While he is active in the dialectic as he answers questions, he does not discourse as much as Socrates does. Socrates initially praises him for this, saying, "I admire the surpassing brevity of your answers." But later, Socrates seems to become frustrated by Gorgias's reticence.

After Socrates's lengthy discourse on flattery as cookery, in which he paradoxically uses rhetoric rather than discourse, he ends by saying: "I may have been inconsistent in making a long speech, when I would not allow you to discourse at length. But I think I may be excused, because you did not understand me and could

make no use of my answer when I spoke shortly and therefore I had to enter into an explanation." Here Socrates shows his frustration because he knows that he has switched from dialectic to discourse. Despite his effort to shift the blame to Gorgias for forcing him to discourse, he demonstrates self-awareness of the paradox itself, that in defending dialectic he resorted to discourse, thus using rhetoric. In this, the personas of both Socrates and Gorgias are paradoxical, in that while they each profess to identify with either rhetoric or dialectic, their performance illustrates that instead they *do* the opposite of what they *profess*, creating a performative paradox.

As readers, we are also part of the performance–party and witness to Socrates' and Gorgias' back and forth conversation. It is up to us, as the audience, to puzzle through the layers of paradox: the forced proximity of antithetical terms, the performative speech acts in which the players create paradoxical personas as they say what they don't mean and do what they say not to do. The deeper the audience looks, the less clear the meaning becomes. It is up to the reader, not the author or the players, to wrestle with the presentation of the logical and illogical alike to determine what the significance of this dialogue is.

Paradox 2: Refutation

The same passage from Socrates in which he blames Gorgias for forcing him to discourse also illustrates another paradox: the paradox regarding refutation. Earlier Socrates refutes Gorgias, proclaiming as a speech act that "what you are saying now about rhetoric is not quite consistent or accordant with what you were saying at first about rhetoric." This same pronouncement could easily have been said by Gorgias referring to Socrates. But Gorgias does not answer in kind. However, by drawing attention to Socrates's pronouncement of Gorgias's inconsistencies, Plato directs our attention not only to Gorgias's inconsistency, but to Socrates's contradiction as well,

forming a paradox first through proximity, and secondly as a speech performative. Socrates continues, saying "I am afraid to point this out to you, lest you should think I have some animosity against you." Again, this pronouncement, a speech act that *does* as well as *says*, could have easily been stated against Socrates, who does indeed exhibit some hostility toward Gorgias later in the text. At the moment that Socrates becomes antagonistic, Gorgias, however, does not take offense or respond with animosity.

Following his refutation of Gorgias, Socrates claims "I am one of those who are very willing to be refuted if I say anything which is not true, and very willing to refute anyone else who says what is not true, and quite as ready to be refuted as to refute." This statement functions as another speech performative, in that as Socrates speaks, he performs an action, the doing of the thing that he has stated. While Socrates is indeed very willing to refute anyone who says what is not true (as he does with Gorgias earlier,) it is not true that he is as ready to be refuted as he is to refute thus creating a performative paradox. He demonstrates this unwillingness following his lengthy discourse on rhetoric as cookery. He also shows his awareness not only of his contradiction in discoursing, but also his awareness that he may be in danger of being refuted. So instead of waiting for Gorgias to notice or point out his error, Socrates proactively blames Gorgias. In his use of blame tactics, he contradicts his earlier proclamation that he is eager to be refuted. Instead, he shows that he is so reluctant to be refuted that he resorts to blaming his opponent in a "look what you made me do" moment that only serves to foreground his less-than-willing response.

Socrates's pronouncements and responses also create a performative paradox of claiming to be eager to be refuted only to then blame his inconsistency on his opponent, thus shaping the development of Socrates's persona, as someone who not only knowingly contradicts himself, but also demonstrating animosity toward his opponent

because of it. As mentioned before, Gorgias does not answer back with ill feelings, as he could. Instead, his persona illustrates that he does what he says he will do: first in speaking succinctly, as Socrates bids him too, and in not responding churlishly. Instead of contradicting Socrates or responding in kind to Socrates's blame tactic, Gorgias redirects the argument, stating that they should consider the audience who have already heard a long exhibition.

Indeed, Gorgias seems to be the only one of the two who is aware of the audience seated before them and those who will read it later. However, by drawing our attention to the audience, Plato beckons toward us as modern readers, inviting us to consider what the players before them have said and done. We cannot be blind to the paradoxes throughout the text. The proliferation of paradoxes forces us as an audience to grapple with them as a feature of the text. They cannot be mere happenstance, but are instead intentional, begging for readers to engage with them, applying reason and logic to the entire process. It is us, not Socrates or Gorgias, who must draw conclusions as to what this dialectic ultimately means; it is the reader, and we are directed to do so via the rhetorical figure, paradox.

Paradox 3: Flattery

The final paradox I will analyze is the paradox regarding flattery. Socrates defines flattery as "a habit of bold and ready wit, which knows how to manage mankind." This flattery, he argues, is more like cookery, than art. It is "only an experience" not a truth. Thus, flattery uses persuasion to make the hearer agreeable, but does not get at truth. He also describes flattery as a "sham or simulations" which "has no regards for men's highest interests" and is ever "making pleasure the bait of the unwary and deceiving them into belief that she is of the highest value to them." Flattery, according to Socrates, is fundamentally a lie. And yet, in the process of defining and

disparaging flattery, he simultaneously uses flattery to gain his opponent's good will. He flatters Polus when he says,

> Illustrious Polus, the reason why we provide ourselves with friends and children is, that when we get old and stumble, a younger generation may be at hand to set us on our legs again in our words and in or actions: and now if I and Gorgias are stumbling, here you should raise us up.

The forced proximity of Socrates's pronouncement and disparagement of flattery followed by his use of it draws attention to the discrepancy that Socrates creates. Here again, Socrates's pronouncement performs paradox. Even the first word that Socrates uses to address Polus is evidence of flattery. The word *illustrious* functions like an honorific. Here flattery is a lie that Socrates uses to sway Polus and establish his good will. Thus, Socrates does the very thing that he is in the midst of disparaging, creating a performative paradox. Polus is no match for Socrates, and Socrates knows this. There is evidence of this when he talks about how Polus "our friend by name and colt by nature, is apt to run away." Polus, a younger and less-learned man than either Gorgias or Socrates, does not have the intellectual ability needed to be able to help Socrates if he should stumble, and could no more set him or Gorgias "on [their] legs again in [Gorgia's] words" than he could fly.

Socrates also flatters Gorgias throughout the text. After Gorgias provides his definition of rhetoric, Socrates praises him, saying, "Now I think, Gorgias, that you have very accurately explained what you conceive to be the art of rhetoric." He continues with more flattery, used specifically for the sake of persuasion, "Then hear me, Gorgias, for I am quite sure that if there ever was a man who entered on the discussion of a matter from a pure love of knowing the truth, I am such one, and I should say the same of you." Here Socrates not only flatters Gorgias, he also seeks to

develop his persona as a reasonable and wise collaborator, rather than an opponent through these pronouncements. He equates Gorgias with himself, someone genial and cooperative who is united with Gorgias in their common search for truth. Socrates's use of flattery in the text, while also disparaging flattery, constitutes a performative paradox. In addition, Socrates's definition of flattery as "the habit of a bold and ready wit, which knows how to manage mankind" seems to serve as a fair description of Socrates's persona in *Gorgias.* Thus, the paradox is revealed as Socrates constructs a cooperative persona while simultaneously undermining that persona through his exhibit of his bold and ready wit in verbally sparring with three different opponents, Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, successfully managing all three of them through his use of rhetoric.

Throughout the text, Socrates employs rhetoric as he discourses, even though he both decries it and seeks to justify his use of it. Similarly, he both disparages flattery and uses flattery: As readers, we are keenly aware of this paradox. While there is limited textual evidence, beyond his tongue-in-cheek flattery of Polus, that Socrates is self-aware of his use of flattery, we do see textual evidence of his awareness of (and excuses for) using rhetorical discourse instead of dialectic. He even makes a defense for himself, seeking to blame Gorgias for his use of discourse, therefore revealing his awareness of not only the paradox of using rhetoric after criticizing it, but also the paradox of his willingness to be refuted. The reader understands that though Socrates is arguing that he is on higher ground, he is demonstrably not. In this way, the reader is invited into the dialectic to ponder and consider the meaning of Socrates's contradictions and paradoxes. In *Gorgias*, Socrates employs even more paradoxical and rhetorical techniques (such as flattery and discourse) than Gorgias the rhetorician does. Socrates makes his argument against rhetoric through rhetoric, which is perhaps the

greatest paradox of all. As readers, we are left to puzzle out the meaning of this dialogue, and perhaps that is the point.

Conclusion: The Value of Paradox

Bringing these paradoxes to light yields more meaning than a simple resolution would. Clearly, *Gorgias* is more than a puzzle to be solved. Instead, it is a complex ecosystem of reasoning, contradictions, questions, and answers that emphasizes the key pursuit of knowledge as the ultimate goal. At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates says to Gorgias, "Come, then, and let us see what we really mean about rhetoric; for I do not know what my own meaning is as yet." This declaration may be the most true statement that Socrates makes in the entire dialogue. This shows that Socrates is indeed engaged, along with Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, with seeking truth through examining the use of words, definitions, and contradictions. Discovering truth, Socrates teaches us (and perhaps himself and his opponents) is a process, and a messy process at that, littered with illogical contradictions, refutations, and paradoxes.

And perhaps that's the whole point of *Gorgias.* James L. Kastley in his article "In Defense of Plato's Gorgias" agrees that in this case, the whole goal of using paradox might be to trouble and problematize rather than to have the paradox resolved neatly. He concludes that "part of *Gorgias's* rhetorical strategy might be to provoke dissatisfaction and further, that this provocation might be essential to Plato's understanding of the philosophical importance of rhetoric" (97). In this way, the inherent paradoxes are not mistakes in logic but a vital aspect of the text and of rhetoric itself. And the process of performative paradox, as shaped by Austin, Moore, Welch, and others, is a useful heuristic, not a flaw in the text that must be reconciled. Going through this process proliferates meaning beyond simple resolution because it engages

our critical thinking power, urging us to unpack and investigate the text, to co-exist with inconsistencies, to resist easy answers.

This type of ancient active investigation via rhetoric into paradox and ambiguity has applications with the potential to impact our modern world. For instance, Ingram points out not only the larger stakes in the context of contemporary rhetoric but broadens the potential impact this type of scholarly work has to additional fields. Ingram urges us not to shy away from dissonance, claiming that it is vital for rhetoric, education, and public discourse to include Plato's work and embrace ambiguity. This uncertainty, developed by the reader in response to the contradictions in the text, creates exigency, urging us to investigate the text through the process of performative paradox. The concept that the most fruitful pursuit of knowledge leads us through unsurety and ambiguity could be a game-changer for multiple high-impact fields. Standardized tests like the ACT/SAT reduce the process of education to a number that may not be an accurate representation of students' abilities to think critically. A number alone cannot account for an individual's preparation, abilities, challenges, and privileges, not to mention how these tests have become susceptible to bribery from those with money to pay for scores. Revisiting college admission requirements with an eye toward Socrates and the process of performative paradox could yield new ways of measuring college readiness. The realm of public political discourse also could be enriched by problematizing instead of searching for easy solutions, on both a micro and macro level. In a world where people decide who to vote for based on a campaign slogan rather than an examination of voting records or platforms, learning to lean into and investigate ambiguity and even paradox could have profound implications. It should at least give us a second thought before we dismiss ideas or even people because they are sometimes contradictory. While sometimes we prefer easy and glib answers, *Gorgias* shows us that

the security they provide is false. It is better to grapple with unsettling and troubling paradoxes and ideas than to seek a neat but reductive resolution. We must learn not only to tolerate paradoxes and contradictions, but to actively investigate them. By examining ancient rhetoric with a nuanced contemporary eye, we can see not only the relevance of Plato's work, but also the importance of including controversial, unsettling texts in the classroom and public forums. In the introduction to *Gorgias,* translated by Benjamin Jowett, the author notes that Socrates is both earnest and ironical at the same time, creating a paradoxical argument that is really an invitation for hearers and readers alike to join him in the pursuit of higher reasoning.

I would argue that our current world needs precisely this type of truth, even if the world is still unprepared for it. Plato's work is relevant now, in a modern world replete with human inconsistency, that calls on us to investigate, unsettle, and challenge previously held ideas, even to change our minds to accept new ideas that contradict our earlier notions. Welch notes, "If the new rhetorics are going to work, they will have to follow such writers as Kennedy, Ong, and Lundsford, and Ede in fully reinscribing Plato's rhetoric" (18). How paradoxical (and fitting) it seems that the new frontier of rhetoric is literally a reclamation of the ancient foundational texts that problematize, trouble, and force us to engage through their inconsistencies.

Works Cited

Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words.* 1962. Eastford, Martino Fine Books, 2018.

Burge, Tyler. "Epistemic Paradox." *The Journal of Philosophy 81.1* (1984) 5-29.

Carone, Gabriela Roxana. "Socratic Rhetoric in the 'Gorgias.'" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy,* vol. 35, no.2, 2005, pp.221-41. *JSTOR,* http://www.jstor.org/stable/40232246. Accessed 24 May 2023.

Cooper, John. "The 'Gorgias' and Irwin's Socrates." *The Review of Metaphysics,* vol. 35, no.3 Mar. 1892, pp.577-587.

Ede, Lisa, et al. "Border Crossings: Intersections of Rhetoric and Feminism." *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 13.4 (Autumn 1995): 401-441.

Ingram, Jason. "Plato's Rhetoric of Indirection: Paradox as Site and Agency of Transformation." *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2007, pp. 293–310. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25655278. Accessed 25 Oct. 2022.

Jacob, Bernard E. "What Socrates Said: And Why Gorgias and Polus Did Not Respond: A Reading of Socrates' Definition of Rhetoric in 'Gorgias' 461-466." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1999, pp. 77–98. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3886392

Jowett, Benjamin. Introduction to Plato. *The Dialogues of Plato.* New York, Random House, 1937.

Kastley, James L. "In Defense of Plato's Gorgias." *PMLA,* vol.106, no 1, 1991, pp.96-109. JSTOR. https://doi.org/10.2307/462826. Accessed 25 Oct. 2022.

Levett, Brad. "Platonic Parody in the 'Gorgias.'" *Phoenix*, vol. 59, no. 3/4, 2005, pp. 210–27. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25067774. Accessed 24 May 2023.

Moore, Mark Paul. "Rhetoric and Paradox: Seeking Knowledge from the 'Container and Thing Contained'." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 18.1 (1988): 15-30.

Olin, Doris. *Paradox*. Vol. 12. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2003.

Plato. Gorgias. Leipzig: Teubner, 1909.

Plato. Protagoras; and Meno. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004.

Quine, W. V. The Ways of Paradox, and Other Essays. 1966.

Rendall, Steven. “Dialogue, Philosophy, and Rhetoric: The Example of Plato’s ‘Gorgias.’” *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1977, pp. 165–79. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40237029. Accessed 25 Oct. 2022.

Sainsbury, Richard Mark. *Paradoxes*. Cambridge UP, 2009.

Santos, Narry. *Slave of All: The Paradox of Authority and Servanthood in the Gospel of Mark*. Vol. 237. A&C Black, 2003.

Welch, Kathleen E. "The Platonic Paradox: Plato's Rhetoric in Contemporary Rhetoric and Composition Studies." *Written Communication* 5.1 (1988): 3-21.

White, F.C.. “The Good in Plato’s “Gorgias.” *Phronesis,* vol. 35, no.2, 1990, pp.117-127. *JSTOR,* http://wwwjstor.org/stable/4182353. Accessed 5 July 2023.