

Reading 'Gorgias' 454c–461a

1. Overview and Analysis

- (1) Since conviction or belief is not the same as knowledge, there are two kinds of persuasion: belief-inducing and knowledge-inducing. [454d–e]
Learning and education leads to knowledge.
Rhetoric is an agent of persuasion designed to produce conviction or belief, but not to educate people (i.e. make them learn) about morality: rhetoric bestows conviction, but not knowledge, about moral matters. [455a]
- (2) Gorgias teaches rhetoric, and hence moral matters. [458e]
- (3) A rhetor is more persuasive than a knower (expert) but only if he speaks before a mob. A rhetor is not more persuasive than a knower in front of knowers (experts).
'Mobsters' do not know. Anyone who does not know about x is ignorant (anepistēmōn) about x .
But a rhetor is not a knower (e.g. medicine), and thus ignorant; yet more persuasive than those who know in front of a mob. [459b]
So, a rhetor must have a ploy (mēchanē) for making non-knowers believe he is a knower.
- (4) Moral matters concern right (dikaion) and wrong (adikon), fine (kalon) and shameful (aischron), and good (agathon) and bad (kakon). [459d]
This is an area of expertise just like health.
Rhetors make people believe they know about morality when they do not.
- (5) It is not possible to teach what one does not know. So, if rhetors are ignorant about morality, then their students must not be. [459d–e]
Gorgias' Assertion: students of rhetoric also learn morality from the rhetor. [460a]
- (6) Anyone who understands morality is moral.
Anyone who is moral acts morally.
Anyone who is moral never wishes intentionally to act immorally.
Since rhetors understand morality, they are moral, and hence they never willingly intend to act immorally.
Gorgias' Concession: Rhetoric can be used deliberately for something immoral. [457b]

2. Two Claims that Do not Sing Together (ou sunadein; 461a)

1. *The Assertion*. Students of rhetoric learn about morality (justice)—not just about rhetoric itself. In this sense, rhetors are experts in something after all,

i.e. experts in morality. Tacit assumption: in order to teach x one must know x . [460a]

2. Someone who understands morality (justice) is moral (just). [460b]
3. Someone who has learned rhetoric is a rhetor. [460b]
4. Rhetors are moral (just) (from 1, 2 and 3). [460c]
5. Someone who is moral (just) never does anything immoral (unjust) intentionally or willingly. This anticipates the later discussion of the idea that it is worse to do wrong than to suffer wrong; that the worst thing for anyone is (intentionally) to do wrong.
6. Rhetors cannot do wrong intentionally (from 4 and 5). [460c]
7. Rhetoric cannot be put to immoral (unjust) use (from 6). [460e]
8. *The Concession*. Rhetoric can be used for immoral (unjust) purposes, in which case the teacher of rhetoric is blameless. [457b–c]
9. Rhetors can be immoral (unjust) (from 8).
10. Rhetors can be, and cannot be, immoral (unjust) (from 6 and 9). [460e–461a]
11. Rhetoric can, and cannot be, used immorally (unjustly) (from 7 and 8).

2. Socratic Method: Elenchus and Aporia

1. “What kind of person am I? I am happy to be refuted if I say something wrong, pleased to refute those who say something wrong, yet not less pleased to be refuted than to refute someone else.” (458a). Refutation is the ‘elenchus’ (ἐλεγχος), which also means proof or cross-examination.¹

2. The technique: invite someone to claim p , explore what p entails, e.g., q , and then show that q and p are incompatible. Hence p needs correction or replacement. It is a refutation insofar as the one who claims to know something does in fact not know, or perhaps reveals inconsistent (incoherent) beliefs.

3. The elenchus is *destructive*: to prove ignorance, expose false beliefs, mere opinions, incoherent contradictions, or just bullshit (cf. *Apology* 21d ff.); the price seems to be indecision and scepticism.

4. Yet, elenchus is also *constructive*, leading to further inquiry and conceptual clarification or refinement. (This is Socrates’ point in the citation.) There is a metaphilosophical point too: the result is less important than the enquiry itself. Philosophy is an open-ended search with an uncertain outcome.

5. Aporia is the hallmark of the elenchus. The verb ἀπορέω (*aporēō*) means to be perplexed, at a loss, without further resources, or in (embarrassing) doubt. Hence, ἀπορία (*aporía*) is probably best translated as puzzlement or impasse. Since many of Plato’s early works end in *aporía*, they are called ‘aporetic’.

elenchus, a cross-examination or refutation. Typically in Plato’s early dialogues, Socrates has a conversation with someone who claims to have some sort of knowledge, and Socrates refutes this claim by showing the interlocutor that what he thinks he knows is inconsistent with his other opinions. This refutation is called an elenchus. It is not entirely negative, for awareness of his own ignorance is supposed to spur the interlocutor to further inquiry, and the concepts and assumptions employed in the refutations serve as the basis for positive Platonic treatments of the same topic. In contrast, sophistic elenchi are merely eristic: they aim simply at the refutation of an opponent by any means. Thus, Aristotle calls fallacies that only appear to be refutations “sophistical elenchi.” **See also SOCRATES.**

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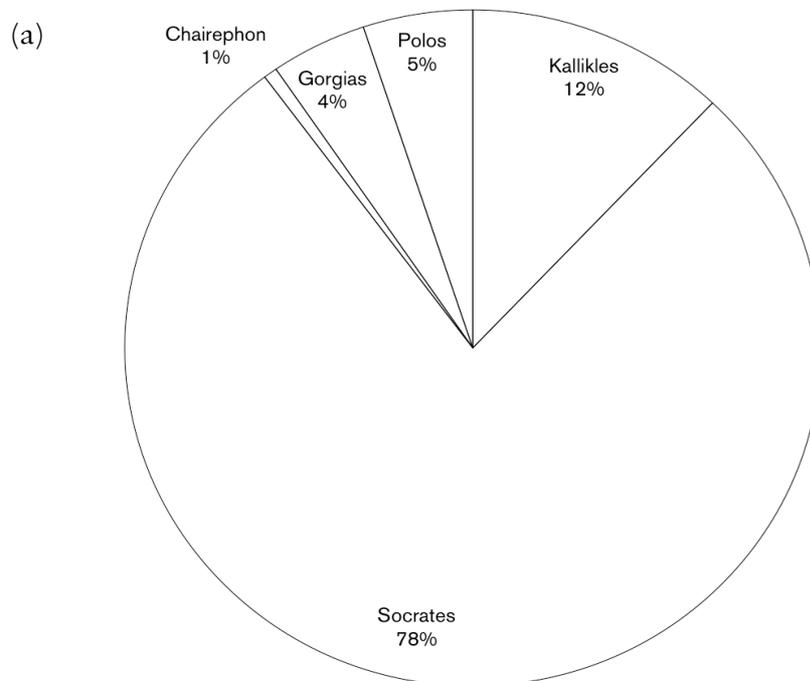
¹ Snippet: Halper, E. C. (1995). Elenchus. In R. Audi, (ed.) *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (p. 220). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

6. Wittgenstein captures the idea nicely: “A philosophical problem has the form: ‘I do not know my way about’”—also in the sense of (apparently) not finding a way out.² This connects to *poros*, which is a way, usually across a river; and thus ‘aporos’ means there is no way to go: impassable or pathless. Does this suggest that with *aporia*, it becomes possible to break new ground?

7. In a passage in *Meno* passage (80a), Socrates is compared to a torpedo, who numbs anyone who comes in contact with him.

3. Visualizing the Gorgias

- (1) What strikes you about the distribution shown in figure (a)? (The total word count of the *Gorgias* is 26,385.)
- (2) How does this compare to other dialogues that you may know?
- (3) Does the order in which the persons enter the dialogue seem relevant? (It all begins with Callicles.)
- (4) The dialogue falls into three parts—see figure (b). Compare who says how much, overall, and in each part.
- (5) Figure (c) shows the proportion of dialogue about the dialogue in the first part of *Gorgias*, i.e. ‘Gorgias’: does this illustrate potentially interesting facts about the dialogue?
- (6) Finally, figure (d) shows the possible dramatic dates for the *Gorgias* and the (textual) evidence. How should we interpret this range?



2 *Philosophical Investigations* I §123.



