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Rhetoric and Philosophy

True rhetoric requires not only talent and practice, but also the training and method of the philosopher. Pericles, the most finished speaker in the world, owed this to his association with the philosopher Anaxagoras. In particular the true rhetorician must have a clear view of the nature of soul in general and of the various types of individual soul, and be able to adapt his arguments accordingly so as to produce conviction. Only then will be be a practitioner of the genuine art of rhetoric. There is no short cut to this achievement; the true method is certainly laborious, but its object is not merely to gratify one's fellow human beings but to carry into effect the will of the gods.

The association of Pericles with Anaxagoras is well known. It is not, however, obvious how Anaxagoras, a physical philosopher, for whom Mind is simply a cosmological principle, can have helped Pericles to a knowledge of human nature. Probably all that is meant is that Pericles acquired a philosophical outlook. Anaxagoras, like other pre-Socratics, looked for a fundamental substance underlying the manifold phenomena of the sensible world, and Plato's idea may be that Pericles was encouraged by this to base his rhetoric on a view of the essential nature of soul (as Hippocrates, Phaedrus suggests, based the art of medicine on a view of the essential nature of body).

The high praise given to Pericles as a speaker is in strong contrast with the bitterness with which he is condemned as a statesman in the Gorgias (515f). It is true that he is here being considered as a speaker, not as a statesman, but it seems likely that Plato has modified the violence of his earlier view, formed when the condemnation of Socrates was still a recent memory.

SOCRATES: If you mean the power to become a finished performer, Phaedrus, it seems likely – indeed, inevitable – that what is true of everything else holds good here also. If you have a natural gift for speaking you will become a famous speaker, provided that you improve your gift by knowledge and practice, but if any of these conditions is unfulfilled you will to that extent fall short of your goal. In so far as it is a matter of art the method which appeals to me is not the method which is pursued by Lysias and Thrasymachus.

PHAEDRUS: What is it then?
SOCRATES: I fancy, my friend, that it was not surprising that Pericles became the most finished speaker who has ever lived.

PHAEDRUS: Why do you say that?
SOCRATES: All the great arts need to be supplemented by philosophical chattering and daring speculation about the nature of things: from this source appear to come the sublimity of thought and all-round completeness which characterize them. Now Pericles added these qualities to his own natural gifts; he fell in with Anaxagoras, who was a thinker of this type, and by steeping himself in speculation arrived at a knowledge of the nature of reason and unreason, the favourite subject, no doubt, of Anaxagoras' discourse, from which Pericles drew and applied to the art of speaking whatever was relevant to it.

PHAEDRUS: How do you mean?
SOCRATES: The same is presumably true of the art of rhetoric as of the art of medicine.

PHAEDRUS: In what way?
SOCRATES: In both cases a nature needs to be analysed, in one the nature of the human body and in the other the nature of the soul. Without this any attempt to implant health and strength in the body by the use of drugs or diet, or the kind of conviction and excellence you desire in the soul by means of speeches and rules of behaviour, will be a matter of mere empirical knack and not of science.

PHAEDRUS: You may well be right, Socrates.
SOCRATES: Now do you think it possible to form an adequate conception of the nature of an individual soul without considering the nature of soul in general?

PHAEDRUS: If we are to believe the Asclepiad doctor Hippo-
crates this method is equally essential in dealing with an individual body.

Socrates: Hippocrates is quite right, my friend. But Hippocrates' authority is not enough; we must see whether sound reason is on his side.

Phaedrus: Of course.

Socrates: What then have Hippocrates and Truth to say on this subject? Surely that if we are to form a clear notion of the nature of anything at all, we must first determine whether the subject on which we wish to acquire scientific knowledge ourselves and the ability to impart that knowledge to others is simple or complex. Next, if it is simple we must examine its natural function, both active and passive; what does it act upon and what acts upon it? If it is complex we must determine the number of its parts, and in the case of each of these go through the same process as applies to the simple whole; how and on what does it produce an effect, and how and by what is an effect produced upon it?

Phaedrus: It may as you say, Socrates.

Socrates: Any other procedure would be like the groping of a blind man. We must not expose the scientific investigator of any subject to a comparison with the blind— or with the deaf, for that matter. Now, plainly, if one is to teach the art of speaking on scientific lines, one must demonstrate precisely the essential nature of the object to which the art is to be applied, and that object, I presume, is soul.

Phaedrus: Of course.

Socrates: Then it is towards soul that all the rhetorician's energy will be directed. Is it there he aims to produce conviction, is it not?

Phaedrus: Yes.

Socrates: So it is clear that Thrasymachus and any other

1. All physicians are Asclepiads, because the god Asclepius was the founder of the art of medicine. It is not possible to identify the source of Phaedrus' statement in the numerous extant works attributed to Hippocrates.
certain course of action by a certain type of speech, whereas for an equally valid reason a different type cannot. When the student has an adequate theoretical knowledge of these types, the next requisite is that his powers of observation should be keen enough to follow them up when he comes across them in actual life; otherwise he will be no better off for all the instruction received in the lecture room. When he is not only qualified to say what type of man is influenced by what type of speech, but is able also to single out a particular individual and make clear to himself that there he has actually before him a specific example of a type of character which he has heard described, and that this is what he must say and this is how he must say it if he wants to influence his hearer in this particular way — when, I say, he has grasped all this, and knows besides when to speak and when to refrain, and can distinguish when to employ and when to eschew the various rhetorical devices of conciseness and pathos and exaggeration and so on that he has learnt, then and not till then can he be said to have perfectly mastered his art. If his teaching or writing falls short in any of these respects we are entitled to reject his claim to be a properly qualified speaker. ‘So’, our writer on this subject may say to us, ‘here is my account of the art of speaking. Phaedrus and Socrates; are you satisfied with it, or do you want something different?’

PHAEDRUS: One cannot ask for anything different, Socrates. Nevertheless what is set before us is no small task.

SOCRATES: You are quite right. Before we undertake it we should make a thorough review of all we have said on the subject, in case there should be a quicker and easier way to our goal. A long, rough, roundabout route would be a waste of time if there is a short and smooth one. So if what you have heard from Lysias or anyone else can help us at all here, do your best to recollect it.

PHAEDRUS: It’s not for want of trying, but I have nothing to offer at the moment.

SOCRATES: Would you like me then to give you an account of the matter which I heard from some who concern themselves with it?

PHAEDRUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: We are told, you know, Phaedrus, that it is legitimate to play the devil’s advocate.

PHAEDRUS: Then please do so.

SOCRATES: Well, to their way of thinking there is no need to be so portentous or long-winded, or to make such uphill work of the matter. The fact is, as we said at the beginning of our discussion, that the aspiring speaker needs no knowledge of the truth about what is right or good, or about men whose nature or breeding has made them so. In courts of justice no attention whatever is paid to the truth about such topics; all that matters is plausibility. Plausibility is simply another name for probability, and probability is the thing to concentrate on if you would be a scientific speaker. There are even some occasions when both prosecution and defence should positively suppress the facts in favour of probability, if the facts are improbable. Never mind the truth — pursue probability through thick and thin in every kind of speech; the whole secret of the art of speaking lies in consistent adherence to this principle.

PHAEDRUS: This is what those who claim to be professional teachers of rhetoric actually say, Socrates. We touched briefly on this point at an earlier stage, I remember, and those who make this their concern attach crucial importance to it.

SOCRATES: Well, take Tisias; you’ve no doubt studied his book carefully. Let us ask Tisias then whether he means by probable anything more than what the public finds acceptable.

PHAEDRUS: What more could he mean?

SOCRATES: So it was as a result of this profound discovery about his art that Tisias wrote that if a brave pygmy is prosecuted for assaulting a cowardly giant and robbing him of his clothes neither of them should reveal the truth. The coward must declare that he was attacked by more than one
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man, whereas his opponent must maintain that no one else was present and fall back on the well-known line: 'How could a little chap like me have set upon a colossus like him?' The other of course will not admit his own poor spirit, but will produce some further lie which may provide his adversary with a chance of tripping him. And in other cases too these are the sort of 'scientific' rules that are enunciated. Isn't it so, Phaedrus?

PHAEDRUS: Unquestionably.

SOCRATES: Dear me, what a strangely recondite art we owe to the invention of Tisias or whoever it was and whatever he was pleased to take his name from. But, my dear Phaedrus, shall we or shall we not say to him—

PHAEDRUS: What?

SOCRATES: 'Tisias, for some time before you ever came on the scene we were saying that what you call probability establishes itself in the minds of the populace because of its likeness to truth; and we concluded that in every case such likenesses are best discovered by the man who knows the truth. So if you have anything further to say about the art of speaking we shall be glad to hear it; otherwise we shall accept the conclusion we have already reached that a man who does not distinguish the various natures among his audience, and who cannot analyse things into their species and classify individuals under a single form will never attain such mastery of the art of speaking as is open to man. This, however, is a goal that cannot be reached without great pains, which the wise man will undergo not with the object of addressing and dealing with human beings but in order to be able to the best of his power to say and do what is acceptable in the sight of heaven. Those who are wiser than we, Tisias, tell us that the object of a man of sense will not be the gratification of fellow-slaves, except incidentally, but of masters who are supremely good. It is no wonder then that the road is long and winding; the end to which it

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leads is a great end, different from the end which you propose to yourself; yet that, too, as our discussion shows, will best be reached, if a man has a mind to it, as a result of the other.

PHAEDRUS: A magnificent theory, Socrates, I agree, if one could put it into practice.

SOCRATES: It is noble to aim at a noble goal, whatever the outcome.

PHAEDRUS: It is indeed.

SOCRATES: So much then for the genuine art of speaking and its opposite.

PHAEDRUS: Agreed.

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1. Plato hints that the real inventor of rhetoric may have been not Tisias but Corax, whose name means crow, a bird of prey.