

Plato SRR

Phaedrus is a dialog between Phaedrus and Socrates concerning the nature of Truth, reality, and language. Plato, through this interaction, makes it evident that he sees rhetoric as both the vehicle through which Truth is discovered and the method through which one is brought to Truth. Socrates states “is not rhetoric in its entire nature an art which leads the soul by means of words,” positioning language in a metaphysical relationship with those who use it (or are used by it). In the conversation, the two men construct rhetoric as analogous to love. Good rhetoric, like seemingly love, is persuasion to knowledge, specifically a knowledge that can better an individual soul (which can then eventually better other souls); bad rhetoric is simply persuasion to belief. Plato sees this as wicked; it simply uses a person to bring him or her to a conclusion, which is just as selfish as desire without good intent.

In order to persuade an audience correctly, Plato contends (again through the dialog between Phaedrus and Socrates) that the orator or rhetor must possess an extensive knowledge of the soul and the different classifications of soul, which requires, I think, more of a metaphysical understanding of audience and persuasion. This closely connects with Plato’s belief in the transcendental nature of the soul and of Truth. There is also tension in the text between spoken language and writing: the argument appears to be that memory will be negatively affected. However, this distrust not receive as much attention as it does in the *Gorgias* (if I am remembering that text correctly).

Of course, the obvious idea with which one can take issue in this understanding of rhetoric is that Truth is transcendental and absolute rather than historically bound and socially agreed upon. According to Plato, we can return to that Truth through language, because we have already come into contact with it before we become material beings. Plato’s theory of epistemology and language is predicated on a belief in the ethereal and the intangible, which by contemporary understandings of reality and being is problematic. It is incredibly difficult for me to conceive of this kind of Truth because of the time and place in which I sit. However, it does help me situate an historical understanding of the nature of rhetoric. Later on, I know that rhetoric will become divorced from invention and the making of knowledge, but in the *Phaedrus*, rhetoric(/language) is the very means by which we discover and share knowledge.

Also, I find the love analogy difficult to grasp. However, Bizzell and Herzberg do make a great point that love-as-a-way-of-understanding-rhetoric helps us understand the reciprocal relationship between rhetor and audience: both parties should be inspired and bettered by the interaction or it is not “good” rhetoric. (Here, I think it’s important to note that I think “good” means just and right in this particular context, instead of simply persuasive or effective. This distinction will be helpful as we progress toward Burke and his understanding of the scapegoat, which is the victim of effective yet victimizing rhetoric.)

I do not necessarily see Plato attending to exigency – this could be, of course, that the term is a Bitzerian invention – so I am left wondering what the appropriate moments for discourse are in this Platonic theory of rhetoric. I think he might argue that the moments for rhetoric are moments when a rhetor perceives that an audience needs to be moved to the Truth. Also, it seems that Plato sees every audience as rhetorical (unlike Bitzer) if the rhetor understands the soul(s) of the audience and how to best move it (them). Also, after reading Aristotle (which reads more like a template or heuristic for the production of different kinds of effective rhetoric), Plato’s theories seem even more grounded in the abstract and the intangible, which I’m not sure is a “bad” thing. It does seem to be a precursor to feminist research in the current moment seeks to tap into that which cannot be measured

(embodiment, the role of the spiritual in writing, alternative ways of knowing and making knowledge). This, of course, could be a stretch, but it does make me think about those epistemologies as a part of a longer tradition.