
Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on Plato's *Gorgias*

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Abstract: Plato's *Gorgias* sets out to discuss the nature and aim of rhetoric. The dialogue was held in high esteem among late ancient Platonists and it resurfaced in Renaissance discussions about ethics. Olympiodorus (6th century) produced an extensive commentary on the dialogue, emphasising its ethical content. In 1409, Leonardo Bruni (1369-1444) provided the first complete Latin translation of the *Gorgias* with preface and annotations. Later in the Renaissance we find direct and indirect commentaries by George of Trebizond (1395-1472/1473) and Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). I argue that Ficino's translation of, and commentary to, Plato's *Gorgias* was a significant, but perhaps also unintended, contribution to the dissemination of ancient sophists in the Italian Renaissance. Ficino's commentary to the *Gorgias* defends a legitimate and philosophical use of rhetoric, including the one we find in Plato's own writings. Furthermore, Ficino treats the character Callicles – together with several other sophists in Plato's dialogues – as an enemy of the Platonic-Pythagorean ethical ideal, maintaining that the sophists were wrong. Moreover, he treats ancient sophists as a fairly homogeneous group, unlike some of the ancient sources.

Keywords: Plato's *Gorgias*, sophists, Marsilio Ficino, rhetoric, philosophy.

1. Ficino and Renaissance sophistry

This article examines the Florentine humanist and philosopher Marsilio Ficino and his contribution to Renaissance sophistry. At first sight this may appear as an unpromising topic, since Ficino, an important Plato translator and Platonist, generally sided with Plato in his criticism of ancient sophistry: How could Ficino possibly have made a contribution to Renaissance sophistry?

The writings of ancient Greek sophists were lost in antiquity, and their ideas were mainly known through reports made by a variety of ancient authors. Plato was one of these authors, and he was the most important one, since he portrayed several sophists and their ideas in a series of his dialogues. As is well known, Plato did not do so in order to provide a detailed and objective account of the sophists' ideas, but in order to refute their ideas. Hence we have good reasons for believing that his account was biased.

To the Medieval Latin tradition, Plato's works were inaccessible with the exception of his *Timaeus* (up till 53b), which was available in Latin throughout the Medieval period. His *Meno*, *Phaedo* and his *Parmenides* were

translated in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but, apart from the *Meno*, none of the dialogues conveyed much about ancient sophists. In the *Timaeus* we find the speaker *Critias*, whose relation to the speaker with the same name in the Plato dialogue entitled *Critias* is disputed, but the central point is that Critias in the *Timaeus* did not convey theories under the banner of sophistry.¹ In *Meno* 93c, Meno had related that sophists (*sophistai*) promised to teach virtue (*aretē*), adding that he admired Gorgias (probably a reference to Gorgias of Leontini), for his refusal to make such a promise; all he did was to teach oratory. Gorgias of Leontini (485-380) was a historical figure, who went to Athens on a diplomatic mission in 427, and Plato's *Gorgias* was clearly a reaction to his influence on Athenian rhetoric and politics.² In *Meno* 75e, Socrates had referred to Prodicus, but without linking his name to the sophists. In short, in the Medieval period there was no Plato dialogue available in Latin in which a sophist featured as a speaker, incarnating and articulating sophistic theories and arguments in an elaborate manner. This situation meant that little, apart from names and brief assertions, were known about the ancient Greek sophists in the Medieval period through the texts of Plato, the chief exponent of ancient Greek sophists.

It should be noted, however, that even though Plato's dialogues offered the most elaborate (though biased) account of ancient sophists and sophistry available to posterity, non-Platonic accounts of ancient sophists and sophistry existed in antiquity, and some of these were transmitted to the Latin Medieval tradition well before Ficino's 1484 translation of Plato's works. Notably, Aristotle had dealt with sophistry and sophisms in his logical as well as in his non-logical works, and these works had been available in Latin translation for several centuries before Ficino's Plato translation came out.³ It should be observed, however, that Aristotle rarely referred to individual sophists, so even though Medieval, Latin translations of Aristotle's works proceeded Ficino's Latin translation of Plato's dialogues and letters, these translations of Aristotle's works conveyed very little about the ancient sophists themselves, implying that to Medieval authors the 'sophist' was a virtually empty category, whereas 'sophistry' and 'sophism' denoted fairly well-known logical categories. Albert the Great (ca. 1200-1280), for instance, was familiar with the sophist name Gorgias through Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations* (183b37), where Aristotle had criticised Gorgias for not conveying the art (*technē*) of rhetoric itself to his pupils, only its results; Albert's knowledge about Gorgias did not transcend these and other scattered notes found in Aristotle's work.⁴

There is, however, another important source to an-

cient sophists that pre-dated Ficino's Latin translation of 1484, namely ancient doxographer Diogenes Laertius. In 1433, the Florentine humanist Ambrogio Traversari completed a Latin translation of Laertius' *Lives*, which subsequently circulated in manuscript form before it was printed in Rome in 1472. In general, this work became a major source of information of ancient Greek philosophy in the Renaissance, but it was almost silent as regards the ancient sophists. In 9.50-56, Laertius presented a short entry on the life of one prominent ancient sophists, namely Protagoras. In 8.58, in the section on Empedocles, he made a brief note on another ancient sophist, Gorgias of Leontini: Laertius claimed that Gorgias was a pupil (*mathētēs*) of Empedocles, an accomplished orator, and the author of a manual on the art of rhetoric.⁵

In 1484 Ficino published the collected works of Plato, containing a number of dialogues portraying some of the most influential ancient sophists. Given the restricted knowledge about sophists in the medieval period, this was a major event. We normally think of Ficino as the one who transmitted Plato's ideas to the Latin tradition, but we should reckon that by doing so Ficino also played an important role in the transmission of ancient sophistry. Ficino did so by providing Latin translations of Plato's dialogues discussing sophists and by writing commentaries to these dialogues — commentaries, that were printed together with the dialogues themselves in the 1484 publication and in many subsequent publications of Plato's collected works. Even though Ficino by and large sided with Plato in his rejection of the sophists, he inadvertently promoted their ideas in the Renaissance. For this reason I think Ficino's translations of, and especially his commentaries to, Plato's dialogues on the sophists is a promising topic, if we want to understand the uses of the ancient sophists in the Renaissance. It may be useful to clarify the historiographical concept of sophists before I examine Ficino's discussion of ancient sophists.

2. Who counted as sophists to Ficino?

Who should be included in the group of ancient sophists, and can one legitimately speak of them as one unified group?⁶ This is an acute problem in modern scholarship dedicated to ancient Greek sophistry, but it is also a problem when dealing with Ficino's stance towards the sophists as they were presented in Plato's dialogues. As regards the first question — who should we count as sophists — we may, at least for a start, consult the 1952 list in Diels-Kranz' sixth edition of their *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, section D, entitled *Ältere Sophistik*.⁷ Their list includes the following early Greek sophists: Protagoras, Xenias, Gorgias, Lykophron, Prodicus, Thrasymachus, Hippias, Antiphon, Critias and the anonymous Iamblichus. We should be aware, however, that Diels-Kranz' list is premised on historiographical assumptions that can be debated, and that the identification of the group among ancient Greek and Latin authors was a contentious issue. Given this situation, combined with our limited knowledge about the reception and interpretation of ancient sophists in the Renaissance, I prefer to be cautious and to refrain from establishing a list of ancient thinkers perceived as sophists in the Renaissance. To Renaissance

authors, including Ficino, the tag 'sophist' denoted a battle field rather than a well-defined profession. For this reason my second question — were ancient sophists a unified group — becomes even harder to answer, and I shall leave it open.

The present article is on Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Gorgias*. Was the protagonist Gorgias regarded as a sophist by Plato and Ficino? Let me first turn to Plato. In his *Gorgias*, the character Gorgias presents himself not as a 'sophist' but as an orator (*rhētōr*) (449a6) mastering rhetoric (*rhētorikē*), whose status as a craft (*technē*) is subsequently contested by Socrates. The fact that Plato has Gorgias presenting himself as an "orator" (*rhētōr*) does not exclude, of course, that he is regarded as a sophist in other of Plato's dialogues. Besides, the orator and the sophist may well co-exist in one person. This possibility is affirmed in some of Plato's other dialogues. In the *Apology* 19e, Socrates groups Gorgias of Leontini together with other sophists (*sophistai*) like Prodicus of Ceos and Hippias of Elis: They were itinerant teachers of young people. In the *Meno* 95c, Meno asserts that Gorgias differs from (other) sophists by not promising his pupils that he can teach virtue; he only teaches rhetoric. In (pseudo-)Plato's *Greater Hippias* 282b4-5, Gorgias of Leontini is spoken of as "Gorgias of Leontini, the famous sophist" (*Gorgias te gar houtos ho Leontinos sophistēs*). Now let me turn to Ficino: Did he regard Gorgias as a sophist?

Ficino, in his *Gorgias* commentary, describes sophists as those who, under the guise of truth, divert men towards what is false.⁸ Gorgias of Leontini, the portrayed speaker in Plato's *Gorgias*, did not aim at truth and justice, but conformed with popular opinion, which prefers what has the appearance of truth and likelihood, Ficino says.⁹ In his *Phaedrus*, Ficino continues, Plato criticised Lysias, in the *Gorgias* he criticised Gorgias of Leontini.¹⁰ Ficino affirms in his *Protagoras* commentary that Plato has Socrates criticising the "sophists" in the dialogue *Gorgias*, though in an elegant manner.¹¹ The sophists referred to here probably includes Gorgias himself, but possibly also the two other speakers in the *Gorgias*, namely Polus and Callicles. Callicles, however, may simply have been a fictitious character and not a historical person.¹² At any rate, Gorgias features as a sophist in Plato's *Apology* 19e, and Ficino perceived Gorgias in this manner. For this reason, Ficino's *Gorgias* commentary is a contribution Renaissance debate over ancient sophists.

3. The reception of Plato's *Gorgias*

I now pass on to the reception of Plato's *Gorgias*. The dialogue was held in high esteem among late ancient Platonists, some of whom considered it as a work on political virtue.¹³ Olympiodorus, active in the 6th century, produced an extensive commentary on the dialogue, emphasising its ethical content. In 1409, Leonardo Bruni (1369-1444) provided the first complete Latin translation of the *Gorgias* with a preface and annotations.¹⁴ Later in the Renaissance, still in the fifteenth century, George of Trebizond (1395-1472/1473) and Ficino made important uses of the dialogue. In his *De laudibus eloquentiae*, George of Trebizond cited approvingly Gorgias' definition of rhet-

oric in Plato's *Gorgias* 456c-457c as part of his anti-Platonism.¹⁵ Ficino composed a commentary on the *Gorgias* that took up six folio pages in his 1576 *Opera*.¹⁶ In the sixteenth century, Girolamo Cardano wrote a dialogue against Plato's *Gorgias*, namely his *Antigorgias dialogus sive de recta vivendi ratione (Anti-Gorgias, or On the Right Way to Live)*, published in 1566.¹⁷ Given this material, the reception of Plato's *Gorgias* in the Renaissance is a promising starting point for studying the reception of ancient sophistry in the Renaissance and early modern period.

Ficino, in his 1484 publication of Plato's collected works, did not only write commentaries to Plato's *Gorgias*, but also to a number of other Plato dialogues that were given sophist names, and which presented sophist speakers, for instance the dialogues *Euthydemus*, *Protagoras*, *Hippias* and *Critias*. In addition, Ficino wrote a commentary on Plato's *Sophist*, and he dealt with several of the ancient sophists included in Diels-Kranz' 20th-century list of ancient sophists in these and other dialogues.

Ficino's *Gorgias* commentary is mainly organised according to the characters in Plato's dialogue and their respective discussions with Socrates as they unfold within the compositional structure. Ficino introduces his commentary by a general distinction between good and bad uses of rhetoric and poetry, after which he largely follows the composition of the dialogue.¹⁸ He sets out reporting Socrates' discussion with Gorgias and his follower Polus about the nature of rhetoric, that is, the first part of the *Gorgias* (*Gorgias* 447a1-481b5).¹⁹ It should be noted that Plato did not discuss rhetoric in conjunction with poetry in his *Gorgias* — it is Ficino who introduces poetry into Plato's examination of rhetoric in his *Gorgias*. In the second part of Plato's dialogue (481b6-522e8), Ficino comments on Socrates' discussion with Callicles about temperance. The final part of Ficino's commentary is a rather independent interpretation of Socrates' after-life myth, which we find in the third part of the *Gorgias* (523a1-527e7).²⁰

4. Roadmap

In the remaining part of this article I single out a few aspects in Ficino's commentary, where he departs from a simple summary of the *Gorgias* and advances his own interpretation or views. In section five I summarise Socrates' and Gorgias' respective views on rhetoric and sophistry in the first part of Plato's *Gorgias* (447a1-481b5), which is discussed in the first and longest part of Ficino's commentary.²¹ In section six I examine Ficino's analysis of different uses of rhetoric, especially the rhetoric employed by Socrates in his refusal of orators and sophists. I point out that Ficino draws on Plato's *Phaedrus* and its theory of rhetoric as a key to understand Plato's own use of rhetoric in his *Gorgias*. In section seven I focus on Ficino's explicit statements on sophists in his *Gorgias* commentary: Who and what are they, and how do Ficino's identifications fit into his historical context? In section eight I offer a brief account of what I see as the second part of Plato's *Gorgias* (481b6-527e7), where Callicles introduces a new theme, ethics, and I ar-

gue that Socrates' rejection of rhetoric entails an affirmation of a certain way of living, which Callicles finds problematic, and a denial of another way of living, linked to the mastery of rhetoric, which Callicles defends. Socrates argued, against Callicles, that temperance (*sōphrosynē*) in the human soul should lead it to emulate the structure of the universe. In section nine I examine Ficino's commentary to this second part of the *Gorgias*, arguing that Ficino accommodates Plato's ethico-cosmological agenda to his own astronomy and ethical ideas, and that Ficino thereby connects his discussion of Callicles to his *De vita coelitus comparanda* and to his *Timaeus* commentary.

5. Plato on orators and sophists (*Gorgias* 447a1-481b5)

Socrates asks what kind of craft rhetoric is, what it is able to accomplish and what it makes claims about and teaches (447c1-4). Gorgias defines rhetoric as the art of producing persuasion (*peithein*) by means of speeches (*logoi*) in the following contexts: "judges in a law court, councillors in a council meeting, and assemblymen in an assembly or in any other political gathering that might take place." (452e14, trans. Zeyl.) Hence Gorgias divides rhetoric according to its operative contexts, that is, forensic and political rhetoric.

Socrates argues that if rhetoric is to be regarded as a genuine craft (*technē*), it has to fulfil three requirements: (a) a *technē* must aim at what is best (*beltiston*) for the object processed by the *technē*. That is, *technē* is governed by some sort of teleology (464c3-d3, repeated 503d5-e5); (b) the craftsman mastering a certain *technē* is able to provide an account or definition (*logos*) of the nature (*physis*) of the object pertaining to the *technē* (465a2-5). Socrates clarifies that this *logos* regards the nature and the cause of the object (500e4-501a3); (c) the craftsman mastering a *technē* is able to indicate the cause (*aitia*) determining the state of the object falling under the *technē* in question (465a4-5). Rhetoric does not fulfil these three requirements, for which reason it does not qualify as a *technē*. If rhetoric is no craft, then what is rhetoric? It is in his answer to this question that Socrates defines the sophist and distinguishes him from the rhetorician.

According to Socrates, the opposite to craft (*technē*) is a knack and routine (*empeiria kai tribē*), producing flattery (*kolakeia*) and pleasure (*hēdonē*). Rhetoric and sophistry, Socrates continues, both belong to the category of flattery. His use of the Greek term *kolakeia* may allude to Eupolis's comedy named *Kolakes (The Flatterers)*, the plural form of the Greek word for a flatterer, *kolax* — a comedy that was staged in 421 BCE and which targeted sophists like Protagoras.²² In Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates deploys an analogy to explain the difference between craft and flattery: In the case of the body, gymnastics (*technē gymnastkē*) and medicine (*technē iatrikē*) are *technai* for the body, since they provide what is best for the body. Reversely, cosmetics and pastry baking are forms of *kolakeia* for the body, since they do not provide what is best for the body, but only what gives pleasure. In the case of the soul, legislation and justice are *technai* providing what is best for the soul; legislation corresponds to gymnastics, since they both procure what is best,

that is, they are prophylactic crafts; similarly, medicine corresponds to justice.

These two *technai* of the soul, legislation and justice, are opposed to two forms of *kolakeia* for the soul, namely sophistry and rhetoric: Just like the pastry chef, with his pleasing dishes, pretends to procure what is best for the body and hence to appear more attractive to common people than the doctor, who actually knows about medicine and what is best for the body, likewise sophists and rhetoricians pretend to procure what is best for the soul without offering anything else but pleasure; in the realm of politics, sophistry pretends to do this in the context of legislation (*nomothetikē*), rhetoric in the context of justice (*dikaiosynē*). Hence, both sophistry and rhetoric are pleasing, but deceptive. Socrates admits, however, that people tend to confuse sophists and rhetoricians, because they work in the same field (463a5-465c8).

Plato proposed different characterisations of sophists in different dialogues, depending on his philosophical agenda, and it would be difficult to reduce his characterisations to one single formula, e.g. sophists professing falsehood. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates' depiction of sophistry is keyed to a forensic and political context, and his criticism of sophistry targets the sophists' aim to flatter (i.e. to produce *kolakeia*) rather than to seek what is best for its object, the citizens of the *polis*. What characterises *Gorgias*' speeches, we are told at the beginning of the dialogue (447a-c), is *epideixeis*, that is, rhetorical show-pieces intended to impress and dazzle his listeners. Socrates wants nothing of it, but insists that Gorgias leaves behind his lengthy monologues and commits himself to a dialogue structured on questions and answers, that is, dialectics.

There is some subtlety involved on Plato's part. He has not Socrates proclaiming that sophists are uttering statements which are false and which the sophists themselves know are false when they utter them: It may well be the case that the statements are false, but not necessarily that the statement-making agents themselves, the sophist employing rhetoric at forensic and political contexts, *know* that the statements are false when they utter them. Instead, Socrates argues that the sophists' desire to flatter and please an audience, combined with their ignorance about the object of their discourse, enables them to affect the beliefs of the audience, but also that these beliefs, if put into practice, turn out to be false and potentially disastrous to the audience itself. Of course, it may also be the case that the sophist knows that he is uttering false statements when he utters flattering and pleasing words, which would make the case even more problematic, because of the moral purpose, but this is not the issue in the *Gorgias*: The issue is the desire to flatter and please an audience with words, without having real knowledge about the object in question.

6. Ficino on good and bad uses of rhetoric

In his commentary on the *Gorgias*, Ficino first summarises Socrates' position on rhetoric and sophistry, partly reported in the previous section.²³ However, Ficino is eager to avoid what he sees as a potential misunderstanding of Plato, namely that Plato downright rejected rhetoric. He did not do so, and Plato himself was very elo-

quent. In order to substantiate these points, Ficino takes recourse to Plato's *Phaedrus* and its positive evaluation of rhetoric. Ficino says as follows in his *Gorgias* commentary:

But anyone who may think that Plato, by far the most eloquent of all, is comparing legitimate rhetoric [*eloquentia*] to pastry baking, must read the *Phaedrus*, in which he approves of it [rhetoric] and speaks of its aim, function and rules in a precise manner, claiming that it is similar to medicine [*medicina*].²⁴ (My trans.)

The important word in this quotation is "legitimate". As explained in section one, in Plato's *Gorgias* we find Socrates claiming that pastry baking is a form of flattery, *kolakeia*, for the body, representing the deceptive nature of rhetoric and sophistry. In the *Gorgias*, pastry baking is not regarded as a *technē*, but as an *empeiria*, a knack. In the above quotation from Ficino's *Gorgias* commentary, however, Ficino juxtaposes this negative view of rhetoric with the positive view of rhetoric found in the *Phaedrus*, where, so Ficino points out, legitimate rhetoric is compared not with pastry baking, but with medicine (*medicina*). In Plato's *Gorgias*, medicine, in Greek, *technē iatrikē*, is regarded as a genuine craft, namely a craft whose object is the body's health and care. Clearly, Ficino refers to this reverse evaluation of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*, partly in order to give a fuller interpretation of Plato's view on rhetoric, partly in order to justify the fact that Plato, though critical of rhetoric, valued rhetoric and was very eloquent himself.

What does Plato say about rhetoric in his *Phaedrus*, and can Plato's eloquence be defended on this score, as Ficino thinks? I shall leave out the last question, since it is too broad, but I shall address the first. In his *Phaedrus* 266b-272b, rhetoric is compared with medicine, and Socrates states explicitly in 270b1-2 that the craft of rhetoric is very much like that of medicine (*technē iatrikē*).²⁵ Compared with Plato's *Gorgias*, this is a notable statement, because in that dialogue Socrates had denied that rhetoric was anything but knack and routine (*empeiria kai tribē*) and he had denied that it was a *technē*.

Admittedly, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates repeats the accusation that rhetoric is nothing but knack and routine (270b1-9), but he adds that rhetoric may qualify as a craft, if and only if, it fulfils three requirements. The good orator must: (1) possess knowledge about the nature (*physis*) of the object under discussion; (2) prescribe a certain action to be carried out and towards what or whom it is directed; (3) possess adequate taxonomies of the audience's souls and of the different kinds of speeches. Besides, he will know when to deploy a certain kind of speech when facing a certain kind of audience in order to produce the desired effects (271a4-271b5). The overall function of rhetorical speeches, thus understood, is to lead souls to persuasion (*psychagōgia*), Socrates adds (271c10-d2).

These three requirements to rhetoric as a craft, stated in the *Phaedrus*, largely correspond to the requirements to any craft laid down by Socrates in the *Gorgias*, as reported above. His second requirement in the *Gorgias* regards the orator's ability to provide an account of the nature (*physis*) of the object considered; this requirement corresponds to the first requirement in the *Phaedrus*. His

third requirement in the *Gorgias* regards the orator's knowledge about causal connections pertaining to the object discussed; this requirement corresponds to the third requirement in the *Phaedrus*. Socrates' comparison of rhetoric with medicine in the *Phaedrus* is premised on the assumption that the doctor too must know the nature of the body and the causes leading to health and disease (270c3-5).

An orator and politician like Pericles, Socrates continues in the *Phaedrus*, qualified as such a speaker, because he had knowledge about the nature, the *physis*, of his object, that is, the Athenians (270a3-8). The problem with those who now write treatises on rhetoric, Socrates continues, is that they conceal the nature of their object, the human soul, even though they know it well; until they bring out this knowledge in the open and conform with the requirements mentioned by Socrates, they do not comply with the precepts of a genuine craft (271c1-4).

When Ficino, in the above quotation from his *Gorgias* commentary, brings forth Plato's claim in the *Phaedrus* that rhetoric may qualify as a craft, he does so in order to give a broader and more comprehensive account of Plato's stance towards rhetoric, as mentioned already, but he also does so in order to justify Plato's eloquence: Plato is eloquent, that is true, but his eloquence is supported by a solid knowledge of the nature of his object, the human soul, and he discloses this knowledge in an open and truthful manner.

Relying on the *Phaedrus* as a key to understand the examination of rhetoric in the *Gorgias*, Ficino explains rhetoric and its parts as follows in his *Gorgias* commentary:

In order to understand clearly what follows, it should be noted that rhetoric may be considered either in its genus or in its species. In its genus it is defined as a diligence that is indeed ready to produce persuasion in civic matters, either by means of a critical skill or by means of a high degree of eloquence. For this reason rhetoric has been founded as the craft of speaking and the craft of poetry. Considered so far, rhetoric is good for the intellect [*intellectus*]; to the will [*voluntas*] however, it is neither good nor evil.

There are two species of rhetoric. One is philosophical, the other is agreeable to the common people [*popularis*] or flattering [*adulatoria*]; the first is good, the second bad. The aim of the first is to lead the audience to a common good by stating the reasons of things, words and moral traditions. This species of rhetoric he praises as the highest in the *Phaedrus*, and it is derived from philosophy and serious poetry. The aim of the second species of rhetoric is to succeed, in whatever way it fancies, in obtaining agreement through plausible conjectures and excitements of the souls in a crowd. We place this form of rhetoric between sophistry and popular poetry, since it is a mixture of these two, which he denounces in this dialogue.²⁶ (My trans.)

The division of rhetoric into two species in the second paragraph may well refer to Plato's distinction in the *Phaedrus* between two kinds of rhetoric, one that fulfils Socrates' requirements to rhetoric (dubbed the 'philosophical' in the *Gorgias* commentary), and one that does not fulfil these requirements, but which may still be agreeable and flattering to the audience; the Latin adjective *adulatoria* picking up on the Greek noun *kolakeia*.

In the first paragraph of the above quotation, we find the following sentence: "rhetoric is good for the intellect

[*intellectus*]; to the will [*voluntas*] however, it is neither good nor evil." The dichotomy between the concepts 'will' and 'intellect' is not advanced in Plato's *Gorgias* or in his *Phaedrus* — it is Ficino's own addition. It may feed into the late Medieval discussion of intellectualism and voluntarism, to which Ficino contributed by means of his *Symposium* commentary, *Da amore*: If the individual human soul is to have a unificative experience with the divine, the human intellect is insufficient in itself, it needs the will as well. The will, in turn, is to be understood as the human soul's *amor*, its love, which is moved by beauty.

7. Ficino on sophists and philosophers

In my last quotation we saw Ficino divide rhetoric into two, one philosophical and one "agreeable to the common people (*popularis*) or flattering (*adulatoria*)". The latter he placed between sophistry and popular poetry. This predominantly negative view of sophistry occurs elsewhere in his *Gorgias* commentary. At the very beginning, Ficino proclaims that there are two great powers in the human soul, namely cognition (*cognitio*) and affection (*affectus*), of which the "sophists, under the guise of truth, turn [the crowd's] cognition towards what is false."²⁷ Hence Plato condemns sophists completely, Ficino notes.²⁸ Poetry, which sophistry resembles, as we have just seen, is not condemned in the same absolute manner: Popular poetry agitates the affections and as such it may pose a danger to youngsters who are led by emotions and ignorant of the allegorical meaning in poetry. For this reason, Ficino continues, Plato condemns popular poetry from the city (*urbs*), referring to the *Republic* for this view.²⁹

In his *Gorgias* commentary, however, Ficino makes the following general statement about sophists and philosophers:

Understand that the [charges] which Callicles raises against philosophers [i.e. *Gorgias* 484c-486d] do not target genuine philosophers, but [a] partly the most sluggish of the sophists, and partly those [b] who misuse the study of philosophy when they pursue logic alone, thereby by-passing the other areas of speculation; or [c] when they attach themselves to speculation alone, thus ignoring the philosophical precepts of tradition and the civic institutions.³⁰ (My trans.)

It is hard not to read this statement as Ficino's comment on Plato's *Gorgias* as well as on contemporary philosophers, especially scholastic philosophers. In Plato's *Gorgias* 484c-486d, which Ficino probably comments upon by these words, we find no explicit references to philosophers pursuing logic alone, i.e. [b], which would indeed be hard to find at that time, given that logic was only developed after Plato, namely by Aristotle. Those philosophers charged by Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* 484c-486d are not boys or youngsters taking an interest in philosophy as part of their education, but those men who persevere and study philosophy well into their adulthood, and who lose the skill to make persuasive speeches in political assemblies and court rooms. Socrates is one case in point, and Callicles scorns him and encourages him to abandon his interest in philosophy.

To whom, then, may Ficino refer by the two groups [b] and [c]? Group [b] may refer to scholastic philosophers in general. In the fourteenth century, one of the founders of humanism, Petrarch, had identified dialecticians at the University of Oxford as sophists, and Ficino may allude to this wide-spread humanist criticism of scholastic philosophers dedicating themselves to logic exclusively.³¹ Group [c] may partly refer to the same group, but it may also refer to scholastic philosophers working within natural philosophy and metaphysics, thus ignoring ethics and political philosophy, areas that were part of and ancient philosophy and dear to Renaissance humanists.

8. Plato's Callicles: desire and greed (*Gorgias* 481b6-527e7)

In the second and third part of Plato's *Gorgias* (i.e. 481b6-527e7), Callicles enters the scene and changes the theme from rhetoric to ethics; Callicles objects that Socrates' rejection of rhetoric entails an ethical ideal about a certain way of living, which Callicles contests.

According to Callicles' theory of natural law, the stronger is allowed by nature (*physis*) to have a greater share than the weaker and to exert his power over the weaker (488b-491c). Callicles develops his ethical view by adding a theory of hedonism, supporting his theory of natural law. According to nature, happiness consists in the fulfilling of one's desires (*epithymiai*). Self-control (*sōphrosynē*), on the other hand, is a hindrance to this aim. However, the majority of people is impotent and unable to pursue the kind of happiness prescribed by nature, for which reason they perversely praise self-control as an ideal. The truth is, Callicles triumphs, that a lack of self-discipline (*akolasia*) is an ethical ideal according to nature (491d-494a). Socrates disagrees with Callicles, and he argues that the soul able to experience happiness is a soul characterised by self-control, allowing it to curb its desires (*epithymiai*), and that this idea is reflected in the order of the universe.

9. Ficino against Callicles: the ethical ideal of the self-controlled soul

Ficino, in his *Gorgias* commentary, seems to misrepresent Callicles' theory of natural law, since he attributes to Callicles, and to Thrasymachus (a noted sophist, depicted in Plato's *Republic*) "and many others" the view that customs and laws are not based on the order of nature (*naturae ordo*), but on men's opinion (*opinio*) and imagination (*ficitio*).³² This view was, perhaps, more typical of an early Greek sophist like Antiphon than of Plato's character Callicles; Antiphon had stated a conflict between laws (*nomoi*) and nature (*physis*), whereas Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* claimed that laws ought to conform with nature, though he admitted that present-day democratic Athens did not do so.³³ However, Callicles did in fact base his concept of justice on his notion of nature.³⁴ It seems to me that this is one example of Ficino lumping together some early Greek thinkers into one single group entitled sophists, which was in fact a quite diverse group of thinkers.

These are Ficino's words on Socrates' reply to Callicles, who scorned the value of self-control:

Socrates, however, girds up his loins to prove that self-control is not founded on human opinion, but on the order of nature. In fact, the natural order requires that the lower parts of the soul obey the higher parts and the whole soul is in harmony with itself in all respects, and that it is beautiful and does not act randomly, but pursues the proper aim. This is the moral disposition and life of the self-controlled human being. In the human being lacking self-control, on the other hand, reason [*ratio*], the queen of the human being, caters for servile lust, and [such a human being, or its reason] is marked by disturbance and weakness, struggling in its endeavour to fulfil, always pursuing fleeting pleasure [*voluptas*], despite incomparable trouble.

All this Socrates explains by means of the views of the Pythagoreans, especially Philolaus and Empedocles, using the two-fold method of fable [*fabula*] and example [*exemplum*], in which it is being discussed whether the soul within the body is entirely dead: The soul lacking self-control being condemned to the lower [world], where it is miserably inflicted by vain and relentless toil, as it continuously struggles with the leaky jar, that is, depraved and false judgement, to refill the other jar, that is, insatiable desire [*concupiscentia*], with the water of delights [*oblectamenti*].³⁵ (My trans.)

In the first paragraph, Ficino argues that Socrates bases his argument on the value of self-control on the order of nature. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates does so in his rejection of Callicles — for instance, in his famous cosmological passage (507e3-508a8), where he argues that there is an analogy between the parts of the human soul and the parts of the universe. At the end of his commentary, Ficino spells out a cosmological order, which does not appear in Plato's *Gorgias*, but which introduces the familiar Ficinian cosmology with the planets Saturn ruling over Jupiter, Neptun and Pluto, thereby engrafting a universal law into the order of nature.³⁶ Ficino's elaboration of the cosmological element connects his *Gorgias* commentary to some of his other works on natural philosophy, in particular his *De vita coelitus comparanda* and his *Timaeus* commentary. Here too, the human soul is part of a cosmic order, and its ethical value is largely determined by its conformity with this order.

In the second paragraph of the last quotation, Ficino refers to the two images of the water carriers and the leaky jars in the *Gorgias* 492e-494a, illustrating Socrates' theory of the undisciplined soul, illustrating Callicles' ethical ideal.³⁷ Plato himself did not reveal his sources to these images, but Ficino clearly hold that Plato is drawing on Pythagorean ideas, especially those advanced by Philolaus and Empedocles.³⁸ In Diogenes Laertius' *Lives* 8.33, however, Pythagoras is attributed the following view, which may play a role in the first paragraph of the above quotation: "Virtue [*aretēn*] is harmony [*harmonian*], and so are health [*hygieian*] and all good [*agathon*] and God himself; this is why they say that all things are constructed according to the laws of harmony [*kath' harmonian synestanaī ta hola*]. The love of friends is just concord [*isotēta*] and harmony [*enarmonion*]." This passage does not mention Philolaus and Empedocles, but it does affirm that the theory of the soul's harmony was central to Pythagoreans.

The upshot is, however, that in the eyes of Ficino, sophists like Callicles, Thrasymachus and many others

were up against the Platonic-Pythagorean ethical ideal, and that the sophists were terribly wrong.

Concluding remark

There is no doubt that Ficino's *Gorgias* commentary played a significant role in the reception of ancient sophistry. As my brief account of Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Gorgias* makes clear, sophists not only discussed the nature and legitimacy of rhetoric, they also discussed ethics and political theories, e.g. Callicles in the *Gorgias*. Ficino was sensitive to this dimension of sophistry and responded to it. I tend to think that he got Callicles' political theory wrong, as mentioned earlier, but that is less important in this context: The important point is that ancient sophists were perceived by a Renaissance thinker like Ficino as having views outside the realm of rhetoric, in this case political theory, natural law theories in particular.

This opens up for another line of research: Did the Renaissance introduction of ancient sophistry have any impact on political theories in the early modern period? Perhaps the answer is a blunt 'no', partly because Aristotle's account of sophistry (falseness presented as truth) was more influential than Plato's intricate discussion in his sophist dialogues, partly because ancient sophists were perceived as having outrageous views that were not taken seriously by political thinkers in the early modern period. To me, however, it remains an open question.

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Notes

- For Critias in Plato's dialogues, see Nails 2002, 106-111.
- For Gorgias of Leontini and his impact in Athens, see *ibid.* 157.
- For instance, Aristotle, *Topics* VIII 162a12-18; *Sophistical Refutations* 1 165a22, 11 171b27-34, 34 183a37-183b6; *Metaphysics* III.2 996a32-

996b1, IV.2 1004b17-26, VI.2 1026b15, VII.6 1032a6-7, IX.8 1049b33; *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.1 1164a30-35, X.9 1180b35-1181a13; *Politics* V.5 1307b36; *Rhetoric* I.1 1355b20, III.2 1404b38, III.18 1419a14. For the reception of Aristotle's works, see Steenberghen 1955.

⁴ Anzulewicz 2002, 222.

⁵ For the reception of Laertius' *Lives*, see Gigante 1988; Tolomio 1933. Laertius' *Lives* not only served as a source of information about ancient thinkers — it also served as a model of narrating philosophy's past. For this theme, see Baker 2017.

⁶ These and related questions have been addressed in Guthrie 1969; Jarratt 1991; Vegetti 1999; Lloyd 2002.

⁷ Diels and Kranz 1951-1952, vol. 2, section C, 'Ältere Sophistik', 252-416.

⁸ Ficino, *In Gorgiam*, 1315.1-4.

⁹ *Ibid.* 1315.19-20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 1315.25-29.

¹¹ Ficino, *In Protagoram*, 1297.14-16: "Idem in Gorgia elegantissime. Facere admonendum et urbane in Hippia. Scite et argute in Euthydemo. Artificiose etiam in Protaogora, saepeque similiter." I owe this observation to MacPhail 2011, 47. For Protagoras in the Renaissance, see Trinkaus 1976.

¹² See Dodds 1959, 12-15. For a discussion of the political forms of rule represented by Callicles, see Kerferd 1974.

¹³ [Anonymous]. *Prologomènes a la philosophie de Platon*, §26.

¹⁴ For Bruni's translation, see Hankins 1990, 53-57, 394-396.

¹⁵ For George of Trebizond's uses of Plato's *Gorgias*, see Monfasani 1976, 242-243, 258-259; Hankins 1990, 169-170.

¹⁶ For Ficino's *Gorgias* commentary, see Allen 1998, 996-107, 111; MacPhail 2011, 13, 21, 39-40; Katinis 2013, 53-55. For Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Sophist*, which is also relevant to his *Gorgias* commentary, see Ficino, *In Sophistam* and Allen 1989.

¹⁷ For Cardano's use of Plato's *Gorgias*, see Giglioni 2012, 176, 186-191.

¹⁸ Ficino, *In Gorgiam*, 1315.1-30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 1315.30-1320.18.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 1320.18-1320.46.

²¹ *Ibid.* 1315.1-1318.6.

²² I owe this reference to Nightingale 1995, 186.

²³ Ficino, *In Gorgiam*, 1316.48-1317.7. For rhetoric in the Renaissance, see Vickers 1988.

²⁴ Ficino, *In Gorgiam*, 1317.9-12: "Sed nequis existimet Platonem longe omnium eloquentissimum legitimam eloquentiam coquinariae comparare, legat Phaedrum, in quo et eam probat, et finem officiumque et praecepta eius subtilissime tradit, asserit que ipsam esse similem medicinae."

²⁵ The noun *iatrikē* mentioned in Plato's *Phaedrus* 268a-b, 268c.

²⁶ Ficino, *In Gorgiam*, 1316.37-48: "Caeterum ut quae sequuntur, plane intelligantur, advertendum est, oratoriam vel in genere, vel in speciebus, posse considerari, atque in genere quidem definiri, industriam ad persuadendum in materia civili promptissimam, tum quadam probationis facultate, tum vel maxime eloquii gratia. Ideoque inter artem quandam disserendi, poeticamque esse quodammodo constitutam. Hactenus oratoria intellectui quidem bonum est, voluntati vero neque bonum est, neque malum.

Huius autem duae sunt species, philosophica et popularis, sive adulatoria, illa bonum, haec vero malum. Illius quidem finis est, certis rerum, verborum, morum rationibus, audientes ad commune bonum perducere. Quam maxime laudat in Phaedro ex philosophiae poesique graviore compositam. Alterius autem finis est, per coniecturas turbae verisimiles, concitationesque animorum, quodcumque libuerit impetrare. Hanc inter sophisticam vulgaremque poesim ponimus, ex utrisque permixtam, quam in hoc dialogo detestatur."

²⁷ Ficino, *In Gorgiam*, 1315.1-2: "Cum due quaedam in animo potissima sint, cognitio et affectus, conitionem quidem sophista sub veritatis specie ad falsa detorquent."

²⁸ *Ibid.* 1315.5-9.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 1315.4-15. For Ficino on the popular poets, see Allen 1998, 93-123, 213-217, especially 96-107, 111, which discusses Ficino's views on poets in his *Gorgias* commentary.

³⁰ Ficino, *In Gorgiam*, 1318.9-15: "Quod vero afferre videntur Callicles contra philosophos, intellige non contra legitimos philosophos esse dicta, sed partim adversus ignavissimos sophistarum, partim adversus eos, qui philosophiae studio abutuntur, dum vel ita solam logicam sectantur, ut partes speculationis alias deserant, vel ita solam speculationem capesunt, ut philosophica morum praecepta instituta que civilia negligant."

³¹ Vasoli 1968, 11-39. For instance, Ficino 1990, 100, 176, characterises Aristotelian philosophers as "vain sophists" (*sophistae leviculi*).

³² Ficino, *In Gorgiam*, 1318.6-8.

³³ For Antiphon, [*Fragments*], 812.

³⁴ For Callicles' notion of justice based nature, see Plato, *Gorgias* 481b-484c.

³⁵ Ficino, *In Gorgiam*, 1318.40-53: "Socrates autem mox ad demonstrandum sese accingit, temperantiam non opinione humana, sed ordine naturae constare. Profecto naturalis ordo requirit, ut inferiores animae partes superioribus pareant, totusque animus consonans undique sit et pulcher, neque agat frustra, sed finem propositum consequatur, qualis est habitus vita que temperati. Contra vero in homine intemperato ratio regina hominis servili servit concupiscentiae, dissonat quoque et languet, opusque in explebile molitur, incomparabilique molestia volentem sequitur voluptatem."

Id totum Socrates Pythagoraeorum praesertim Philolai et Empedoclis sententiis explicat, duplici praecipue via, scilicet per fabulam et exemplum, in quibus ipse considera, animam in hoc corpore omnem quidem esse mortuam, intemperantem praeterea inferis deputari, irritato asiduoque labore miserbiliter agitatam, dum quodam perforato vase, id est, depravato fallacique iudicio continue machinatur perforatum quoque vas alterum, id est, concupiscentiam inexplebilem fluentibus oblectamentis implere."

³⁶ *Ibid.* 1320.21-28.

³⁷ For a discussion of this passage in Plato, see Carone 2004.

³⁸ For a discussion of Plato's sources to this passage, see Doods' note to the *Gorgias* 493a2-4.