Gorgias Note, 1973

Editorial Headnote

At the time he died on October 18, 1973, Leo Strauss was writing an essay on Plato's Gorgias intended to be the fourth chapter of his Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). The brief manuscript available here (from box 6, folder 13 in the Leo Strauss Archive in Special Collections at the University of Chicago Library) dated 18 September 1973—, is probably the last thing Strauss wrote for publication. It is a revised version of one he wrote dated December 25, 1971— (in box 19, folder 9 in the Leo Strauss Archive). The transcription available here is by Nathan Tarcov assisted by Svetozar Minkov and includes one editorial insertion in square brackets based on comparison with the 1971 version.
On Clean Sing
18. July 1973
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On Rhetoric; Gorgias
18, September 1973—

Introduction

Taken as a whole, the Gorgias points to three other works: the Clouds, the Republic, and the Phaedrus.

Accompanied by Chaerephon and somebody else, S has set out to converse with Gorgias. In no other dialogue does he set out to converse with anyone in particular while being accompanied by Chaerephon. When he set out after his return from Potideia to converse with the young in the Lykeion, he happens to meet there Chaerephon; Chaerephon did not accompany them (Charmides 153a ff.) Chaerephon is however the companion par excellence of S in the Clouds. In the Clouds S is presented as an altogether unpolitical man (a similarity between him and Strepsiades) and teaching among other things the art of speaking and in particular forensic rhetoric; his art includes the ability to make the weaker speech (the Unjust Speech) the stronger; the Unjust Speech, commissioned by S., claims that he can ruin the Just Speech amongst the many (Clouds 892) and he makes good the claim. In the Gorgias however S. is presented as the intransigent opponent of Gorgias’ art and as a truly political man. When S. sets out in the Protagoras to converse with Protagoras about sophistry, the sister art of Gorgias’s art, i.e. of rhetoric, he is accompanied by Hippocrates. In fact it is Hippocrates who induces S. in a rather extensive private conversation to go with him to Protagoras. In the Gorgias however S. spontaneously seeks the conversation with Gorgias, and no private conversation between S. and Chaerephon is presented — either in the Gorgias or elsewhere in the Platonic dialogues. Hence incidentally we do not know anything about the “background” of Chaerephon’s inquiry with the god in Delphi about S’s wisdom. The preceding remarks supply the beginning for understanding why the Gorgias is a performed dialogue and the Protagoras a narrated dialogue (hence the locality is described in the Protagoras but not in the Gorgias).

The Gorgias presents the victory of S’ Just Speech over the Unjust Speech. That victory is not presented in the Republic in which S. refutes the rhetorician Thrasymachus, just as in the Gorgias he refutes the rhetorician Gorgias and Gorgias’s adherents Polus and Kallikles. The kinship of
the Gorgias and the Republic is shown by the similarity of their structures. Let us first compare the Gorgias with the First Book of the Republic.

In the First Book of the Republic S. converses first with Kephalus and Kephalus’ son Polemarchus, then with Thrasymachus, and finally with Glaukon and Glaukon’s brother Adeimantus. That is to say, in both dialogues S. converses first with those who are not Athenian citizens (metics or strangers) and then with Athenian citizens. In both dialogues the conversation with the Athenian citizens in question is the most extensive and impressive. The kinship between Kallikles’ Unjust Speech and Glaukon’s Unjust Speech is obvious. Yet: Glaukon attacks justice because he wishes to hear S’ defense of justice; he believes in the superiority of justice to injustice; the opposite is true of Kallikles. Hence, while Kallikles is enamored of ordinary, democratic politics, Glaukon is the fit addressee of the founding in speech of the best regime. Glaukon takes the side of S; Kallikles is and remains opposed to S. In order to understand the difference between the Gorgias and the Republic, one must start from the most obvious difference between the two dialogues: the theme of the Gorgias is rhetoric (and its ground) the theme of the Republic is justice (and its grounds).

Rhetoric is the comprehensive theme also of the Phaedrus. But there rhetoric is considered an art of composing erotic speeches, i.e. of speeches which are addressed to a single beloved youth and not to crowds.