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Title: Philosophical Rhetoric and Sophistical Dialectic: Some Implications of
Plato's Critique of Rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* and the *Sophist*
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1. Introduction

In present-day argumentation theory, a distinction can be made between two types of theories: dialectical and rhetorical theories.¹ One of the most important differences between these theories – approaches, or perspectives – relates to the type of criteria involved when analyzing and evaluating argumentative discourse. Dialectical theories tend to use procedural criteria, which implies that argumentation is evaluated positively as far as it is in accordance with a number of rules that ensure its reasonableness. In rhetorical theories, the emphasis lies on the effect produced by the argumentation, which implies that argumentative discourse is analyzed and evaluated in view of its potential to persuade the audience.

To some extent, these differences between dialectical and rhetorical theories may seem insurmountable. At the same time, there is a growing consensus amongst present-day scholars that it is desirable to overcome the limitations of a one-sided approach by combining in their theories both dialectical and rhetorical insights.² In the research project I am taking part in, 'Rhetorical and dialectical analysis,' this combination is achieved by incorporating rhetorical insights in the pragma-dialectic theory of argumentation. My contribution to this project consists in clarifying the philosophical rationale of such an integration of dialectic and rhetoric. In particular, I am studying the relationship between the two disciplines and its historical development. Pinpointing the origins of the discord between dialectic and rhetoric will serve as a starting point for the development of a framework on the basis of which the integration of the two disciplines may be further legitimized.

Since antiquity, it is a matter of dispute which philosophers 'invented' dialectic and rhetoric as disciplines.³ However, it is clear that, in the earliest period, both disciplines evolved more or less independently. The question of the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric emerges only in the work of Plato and Aristotle. These philosophers not only described the subject and the ends of dialectic and rhetoric, they also reflected explicitly on the relationship between these two disciplines. Throughout his dialogues, Plato argues for the primacy of dialectic, whereas Aristotle emphasizes that dialectic and rhetoric are 'counterparts.'⁴

I shall concentrate on Plato's critique of rhetoric and the implications of this critique for his view of the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric. As it is generally perceived, for Plato, the relationship between both disciplines coincides with the relationship between the philosopher and the sophist. After all, Plato designated dialectic as the outstanding method of philosophy, and, in close connection with this, he criticized

rhetoric as it was practiced and taught by the sophists. The philosopher is a dialectician, and the sophist perpetrates rhetoric. I shall elucidate this view of the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric by giving a short description of the three phases of dialectic that can be discerned in Plato's dialogues, as well as his well-known critique of rhetoric in the *Gorgias*.

A revision of Plato's critique of rhetoric in two other dialogues, the *Phaedrus* and the *Sophist*, leads to a refinement of this view. In section 3 of this paper I shall discuss the *Phaedrus*. This dialogue contains, apart from a critique of sophistic rhetoric, a description of a philosophically valid art of rhetoric, which implies that the philosopher may no longer be exclusively associated with dialectic. In section 4, I shall discuss the *Sophist*, in which eristic and elenchus – two dialectical discussion techniques – are both called sophistic, which implies that the sophists cannot be exclusively associated with rhetoric.

The sophistic character that Plato attributes to eristic in the *Sophist* corresponds to his account of it in other dialogues. To the elenchus, however, Plato attributes a philosophical status in earlier dialogues. In section 5 of this paper, the question of what the systematical place of the elenchus should be will be elaborated by coordinating it with the way in which Plato generally distinguishes eristic from elenchus.

2. General view of the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric according to Plato

The view that the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric coincides with the relation between the philosopher and the sophist stems from Plato's frequent equation of philosophy and dialectic on the one hand, and sophistic and rhetoric on the other. As far as the association of philosophy with dialectic is concerned, it is of importance to notice that there may be discerned three phases in the development of dialectic: in the early dialogues, the Socratic elenchus is prominent, in the middle ones, dialectic means 'hypothetical method,' and in the later dialogues, dialectic is formulated as a method of synthesis and division.⁵ In all cases, dialectic is understood as a philosophical discipline, aimed at finding the truth, and in which a method is developed and used that is appropriate for this goal.

As far as the association of sophistic with rhetoric is concerned, Plato's critique of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* is of great importance. In this dialogue, Socrates criticizes the pretensions of rhetoric as a tool for personal and social success. He describes sophistic and rhetoric as a form of flattery.⁶ The upshot of his critique is that sophistic and rhetoric, just like the other forms of flattery here discerned (cookery and cosmetics), are exclusively aimed at pleasance instead of the good. Socrates further says that sophists and rhetors are hard to distinguish, because they work on the same domain and deal with the same subjects.⁷

Plato's description of dialectic as a philosophical discipline and his critique of sophistic rhetoric are to a considerable extent responsible for the emergence of the general view that for Plato, the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric coincides with that between the philosopher and the sophist.⁸ This is reflected in the scheme below:

Relationship between dialectic and rhetoric (1)

	<i>philosopher</i>	<i>sophist</i>
<i>dialectic</i>	elenchus/hypothetical method/ synthesis and division as described <i>passim</i>	
<i>rhetoric</i>		rhetoric as described in the <i>Gorgias</i>

3. Plato's critique of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*

To a certain extent, this general view of the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric can be brought into line with what Plato says about rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*. For in this dialogue, Socrates criticizes writers of handbooks on rhetoric on three issues: they deal only with preliminaries, they lack the necessary knowledge of logical proof, and they leave it up to their students to find out how to achieve unity in their speeches.⁹ But besides critique, the *Phaedrus* also contains information on the requirements rhetoric will have to meet in order to be a philosophically valid art. I quote Kennedy's summary of these requirements: "[...] a speaker should have good knowledge of the subject discussed, a good understanding of logical proof, and a knowledge of human psychology that makes it possible for arguments to be adapted to an audience."¹⁰

According to Kennedy, this philosophically valid art of rhetoric is best exemplified in dialectic.¹¹ However, since none of the forms of dialectic described earlier corresponds with the philosophical rhetoric as described in the *Phaedrus*, a distinction has to be made between philosophical dialectic and philosophical rhetoric. Therefore, the scheme of the relation between dialectic and rhetoric needs to be adapted in the following way (new information is underlined):

Relationship between dialectic and rhetoric (2)

	<i>philosopher</i>	<i>sophist</i>
<i>dialectic</i>	elenchus/hypothetical method/ synthesis and division as described <i>passim</i>	
<i>rhetoric</i>	<u>philosophic or 'good' rhetoric</u> <u>as described in the <i>Phaedrus</i></u>	<u>sophistic or 'bad' rhetoric</u> <u>as described in the <i>Gorgias</i></u> <u>and the <i>Phaedrus</i></u>

4. Plato's critique of the sophist in the *Sophist*

Apart from the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*, the *Sophist* is another Platonic dialogue that is relevant for the clarification of the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric. In this dialogue, a certain 'stranger from Elea' formulates seven distinct definitions of a sophist.¹² It has been made plausible that these seven definitions correspond to various persons or groups that played a role in the early history of rhetoric and sophistic. I shall briefly describe these definitions and correspondences.¹³

Definitions I-IV define the sophist as a hired hunter of rich young men, as a merchant, as a retail dealer, and as a manufacturer and salesman of information respectively. These definitions probably apply to rhetorical sophists and lecturers of the type represented in the fifth century by Protagoras, Gorgias and Hippias. Definition V defines the sophist as eristic, professionally represented by men like Euthydemus and his brother, the dialecticians of the Eleatic school, and the Megarians. Definition VI provides an adequate account of the elenchus as it was practiced by Socrates. Finally, definition VII defines what is essential of all these sophists, namely that they are makers of a false conceit of wisdom.

On the basis of these definitions of sophistry, the scheme of the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric can now be completed. The part that encompasses sophistic rhetoric will be further specified, and the fifth and sixth definition of the sophist, which apply to eristic and the Socratic elenchus respectively, are as different variants included in the sophistical dialectic part. Additions are underlined.

Relationship between dialectic and rhetoric (3)

	<i>philosopher</i>	<i>sophist</i>
<i>dialectic</i>	philosophic or 'good' dialectic: elenchus/hypothetical method/ synthesis and division as described <i>passim</i>	sophistic or 'bad' dialectic: <u>eristic and elenchus as</u> <u>described in the <i>Sophist</i></u>
<i>rhetoric</i>	philosophic or 'good' rhetoric as described in the <i>Phaedrus</i>	sophistic or 'bad' rhetoric as described in the <i>Gorgias</i> , the <i>Phaedrus</i> , <u>and the <i>Sophist</i></u>

This scheme serves as a framework that clarifies the way in which Plato conceived the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric. Within this framework, both the philosophic and the sophistic variants of dialectic and rhetoric have their own systematic place. The Socratic elenchus, however, is mentioned twice. In order to clarify this double listing, I shall continue with an elaboration on the way in which Plato distinguishes between elenchus and eristic. First, I give an account of the structure and the rules of the Socratic elenchus, and the absence of these rules in an eristic discussion. Then I argue that the elenchus is solely a philosophical mode of dialectic which has its sophistic counterpart in eristic.

5. Elenchus and eristic

The term 'Socratic elenchus' refers to the method that is used by Socrates in Plato's dialogues. The argumentative goal of this method is the refutation of the standpoint of the interlocutor. This standpoint is brought into the discussion by answering a question that was posed by Socrates (the 'main question'). Thereupon, Socrates poses a number of other questions, each of which is answered by his interlocutor. Usually, the elenchus takes the form of a syllogism in which the answers that are given function as premises. By 'syllogizing' these answers, Socrates deduces either a contradiction or the negation of the answer to the main question. In both cases, the standpoint of the interlocutor is considered refuted.¹⁴

The elenchus is a part of the dialectical 'method of hypotheses' endorsed by Plato in his middle period.¹⁵ This method consists in a procedure for testing the truth of a hypothesis. The elenchus represents the negative part of this procedure; by finding out whether or not the consequences of the hypothesis are consistent (internal as well with the hypothesis itself), the hypothesis may either be rejected or provisionally accepted. In the positive part of this procedure, the plausibility of the hypothesis may be increased by deducing it from a 'higher' hypothesis. From the fact that the elenchus is an important part of this philosophical method, it may be concluded that the elenchus is a philosophically valid art of dialectic as well.

Eristic has the same structure and the same negative aim as the elenchus. An eristic disputer tries to win the discussion by deducing a contradiction from the answers of his interlocutor, thereby refuting his standpoint. This might be the reason why they are both called 'sophistic' in the *Sophist*. In order to make it clear that eristic, unlike the elenchus, is a sophistic technique of refutation, I shall describe two rules of the elenchus, that are absent in eristic.

1. *The 'clarification' rule.* The elenchus may be described as a game for two persons; the one is asking questions, and the other is giving answers. It is the task of the questioner to refute ((*ex-*)*elégchein*) a certain thesis, and it is the task of the answerer to defend it (*logon/elegchon didónai*).¹⁶ These roles are fixed and cannot be changed during the game.¹⁷ The answerer, however, is allowed to ask for a clarification in case he does not understand the question.¹⁸

2. *The 'say what you believe' rule.*¹⁹ This rule guarantees that the answerer is convinced of the truth of the statements he puts forward in the discussion. Socrates explicitly refers to the existence of this rule when the interlocutor turns his standpoint into a conditional (*éstoo*: let it be the case that / let's assume), cites somebody else's opinion, or refers to the opinion of the crowd. In his reaction to such discussion moves, Socrates states that he will take the utterances as the personal opinion of the interlocutor, and expects him to defend it as such.²⁰

In the eristic discussion mode, both rules are lacking.²¹ The first rule, which concerns the possibility of the clarification of utterances that have remained unclear, would frustrate the attempt to win the discussion. The eristic questioner deliberately tries to trick the interlocutor by using ambiguous expressions. He thereby often attributes a meaning to an utterance of the interlocutor that is different from the meaning the latter intended.²² In the *Euthydemus*, for instance, Dionysodorus replaces the predicative

meaning of 'being' with the existential meaning in the course of the discussion. By doing so, he is able to blame his interlocutors for wanting their pupils not to become wise, but to die. If he would have obeyed the first rule, he could not have performed this trick. This might be the reason why, later on in the dialogue, Dionysodorus gets so angry when Socrates asks for clarification of the meaning of an utterance.²³

Evidently, eristic furthermore differs from the elenchus because of the fact that it has no rule that guarantees any personal engagement with the truth of a standpoint. Since it is the exclusive aim of eristic to win the discussion, it is not important whether or not the standpoints somebody put forward in a discussion are considered true by that person. The second rule of the elenchus is therefore also absent in eristic.²⁴

6. Conclusion

So far, I have made it clear that the general view of the way in which Plato conceives the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric can be refined in two respects. These refinements can be accommodated with the fact that Plato values dialectic higher than rhetoric and philosophy higher than sophistry by changing the general view into the following one: *Plato values the philosophical variants of dialectic and rhetoric higher than their respective sophistic counterparts.*

However, there is one more problem to be solved. Why is the elenchus in the *Sophist* portrayed as a sophistic variant of dialectic? One possible reason for this has already been given: both refutation techniques share the same structure. But there might be another reason: unlike the more advanced part of the 'method of hypotheses' (the deduction of a hypothesis from a higher one), the elenchus does not produce any positive results. The elenchus therefore only represents the negative side of dialectic.

This view appears to be confirmed by Aristotle's description of the type of arguments used in dialectic and the elenchus. The dialectician makes use of so-called peirastic arguments when he confines himself to the role of questioner, which means that he does not put forward and defend alternative viewpoints of his own. Apart from this, he uses dialectical arguments in the strict sense whenever he takes the role of answerer, supporting his thesis with reputable premises (in the absence of self-evident, demonstrative arguments).²⁵ We may conclude that Socrates was, in Aristotle's view, a semi-dialectician, because he only wanted to play the role of questioner.²⁶

But also the dialogue the *Sophist* itself contains an indication for the right place of the elenchus in the scheme of the relation between dialectic and rhetoric. Closer examination of the status of the sixth definition of the sophist gives support for the thesis that the Socratic elenchus, which corresponds in certain respects to the sophistic method of refutation, nevertheless can be understood as a philosophical variant of dialectic. After having given his account of the elenchus, the 'stranger from Elea' says that he is reluctant to call the people who practice this art sophists. In the end, he decides to do so, but not after having clarified that the sophist resembles the practitioner of the elenchus like the wolf resembles the dog.²⁷ Therefore, the scheme below, although it does not reflect the final opinion of the 'stranger from Elea,' does express the hierarchy Plato himself installed correctly:

Relationship between dialectic and rhetoric (4)

	<i>philosopher</i>	<i>sophist</i>
<i>dialectic</i>	philosophic or 'good' dialectic: elenchus/hypothetical method/ synthesis and division as described <i>passim</i>	sophistic or 'bad' dialectic: eristic [<u>and not elenchus</u>] as described in the <i>Sophist</i>
<i>rhetoric</i>	philosophic or 'good' rhetoric as described in the <i>Phaedrus</i>	sophistic or 'bad' rhetoric as described in the <i>Gorgias</i> , the <i>Phaedrus</i> , and the <i>Sophist</i>

Notes

¹ See van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002).

² *Ibidem*.

³ In his *Sophist*, Aristotle calls Empedocles the 'inventor' of rhetoric (see Diogenes Laërtius IX, 25 and VIII, 57). In his *Synagogè technon*, however, he identifies Corax en Tisias as the 'inventors' of rhetoric (see Kennedy (1994, 11). Furthermore, Aristotle calls Zeno of Elea the 'inventor' of dialectic (see Diogenes Laërtius IX, 25 and VIII, 57), whereas the use of the term 'dialectic' as a *terminus technicus* originates from Plato (see Robinson (1953, 69) with reference to Plato, *Meno* 75d; *Republic* 511b, 533c; *Phaedo* 90b; *Sophist* 227a).

⁴ Plato's critique of rhetoric as practised by the sophists is a recurrent theme in his dialogues, esp. the *Gorgias*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Sophist*. For Aristotle's view on the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric, see for instance *Rhetorica* 1354a and 1356a.

⁵ For a description of these various forms of dialectic see Robinson (1953), Stemmer (1992), and Cornford (1935).

⁶ Plato, *Gorgias* 462a-466a.

⁷ See Plato, *Gorgias* 465c and 520a.

⁸ To put it mathematically, as favored by Socrates: *dialectic* : *rhetoric* = *philosopher* : *sophist*.

⁹ Plato, *Phaedrus* 269bc. See Kennedy (1994, 30-31 and 42).

¹⁰ Kennedy (1994, 42) with reference to Plato, *Phaedrus* 277b5-c6.

¹¹ Apparently, Kennedy (1994, 39) sticks to the general view: "Finally, Plato regards true rhetoric as best exemplified in dialectic with which the philosopher persuades and ennobles the soul of his beloved."

¹² A schematical account of these definitions can be found in Cornford (1935, 171)

¹³ See Cornford (1953, 173).

¹⁴ For descriptions of the structure of the elenchus, see Robinson (1953, 7-27), Vlastos (1999), and Stemmer (1992, ch. III).

¹⁵ For an account of this method, see Robinson (1953, 105-109).

¹⁶ In Stemmer (1992, 101), some of the terms Plato uses in relation to the elenchus are mentioned.

¹⁷ See Stemmer (1992, 97-99) with reference to *Charmides* 163e5 ff.; *Protagoras* 330e3-332a1; *Alcibiades I* 112e-113c en 116d5.

¹⁸ See Stemmer (1992, 99) with reference to *Euthydemus* 295b3-9; *Meno* 75c8-d7. The questioner may also ask for clarification in case he does not understand the answer. In relation to this possibility Stemmer mentions *Euthyphro* 11e7-12d3, 13a1-b6; *Meno* 77b6-78c2; *Republic I* 338c4-339a5.

¹⁹ This rule is formulated, amongst other places, in *Gorgias* 500b, *Republic* 346a en 349a, *Critias* 49cd, *Protagoras* 331c, and 333bc (see Vlastos (1999, 42-45). Furthermore, Vlastos (1991, 111) mentions *Gorgias* 495a, *Cratylus* 49cd. Robinson (1953, 78) mentions *Laches* 193c, *Meno* 83d, *Parmenides* 137b.

²⁰ See Vlastos (1999, 42-45).

²¹ According to Robinson and Vlastos, the distinction between elenchus and eristic is exclusively expressed in the 'say what you believe' rule. This view is criticised by Stemmer, who considers the first rule as the only one that is relevant for the distinction. See Stemmer (1992, 96-113). As far as I am aware, neither of them mentions the passage in the *Meno* in which both rules are explicitly mentioned in one and the same sentence: "And the dialectical style [contrary to the sophistic style] maybe requires that one should not only give an answer that is true, but that one should also use words of which the questioner has declared that he knows their meaning" (Plato, *Meno* 75c-d, *m.t.*).

²² Examples in Stemmer (1992, 100) include *Euthydemus* 278b2-c1; *Republic I* 340d1, 341a5-10; *Theaetetus* 167d7 ff. See also Stemmer (1992, 106-107).

²³ Plato, *Euthydemus* 295b-d. See Stemmer (1992, 107).

²⁴ See Vlastos (1999, 39 and 43) with reference to the definition of eristic wisdom in *Euthydemus* 272a-b.

²⁵ See Vlastos (1991, 95, n. 55).

²⁶ The famous 'socratic irony' may therefore have a purely methodic character.

²⁷ *Sophist* 231a. See also Cornford (1935, 180-182) who reverses the analogy.

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