

## **Socrates' View of Persuasion**

I do not believe Socrates would agree with the following statement: “Persuasion is about getting what you want from others, without using force.” Socrates believed in bringing the truth out of people through questions. Words are a powerful instrument, whose use can be directed toward various ends. One end is persuasion. Arguments are used to induce belief in the audience. Socrates and Plato held that some beliefs are better than others: true belief is always the most desirable outcome of argumentation. Thus, they clashed with the Sophists, who taught their students how to argue without concern for whether true belief is produced as a result. The concept of true belief is itself a difficult one, with which Plato and philosophers to the present day have wrestled.

The Sophists abandoned science, philosophy, mathematics and ethics. What they taught was the subtle art of persuasion. A Sophist was a person who could argue eloquently – and could prove a position whether that position was correct or incorrect. In other words, what mattered was persuasion and not truth. The Sophists were also relativists. They believed that there was no such thing as a universal or absolute truth, valid at all times. Everything is relative and there are no values because man, individual man, is the measure of all things. Nothing is good or bad since everything depends on the individual. Gorgias was a well-paid teacher of rhetoric and famous for his saying that a man could not know anything. And if he could, he could not describe it and if he could describe it, no one would understand him.

Socrates was not a Sophist himself, but a philosopher, a lover of wisdom. He did not reveal answers. He did not reveal truth. Many of his questions were, on the surface, quite simple: What is courage? What is virtue? What is duty? What Socrates discovered, and what he taught his students to discover, was that most people could not answer these fundamental questions to his satisfaction, yet all of them claimed to be courageous, virtuous and dutiful. So, what Socrates knew, was that he knew nothing, upon this sole fact lay the source of his wisdom. Socrates was not necessarily an intelligent man – but he was a wise man. There is a difference between the two.

The Sophist would agree that “Persuasion is about getting what you want from others, without using force” because they were inclined to view thought and language primarily as instruments of persuasion. Whereas Socrates viewed thought and language as instruments for getting to truth. His "rhetoric" is a means of testing people and ideas rather than a means of imposing his ideas upon others.

The style of the Plato's dialogue is important – it is the Socratic style that he employs throughout. A Socratic dialogue takes the form of question-answer. It is a dialectical style as well. Socrates would argue both sides of a question in order to arrive at a conclusion. Then that conclusion is argued against another assumption and so on. There is a reason why Socrates employed this style, as well as why Plato recorded his experience with Socrates in the form of a dialogue. Socrates taught Plato a great many things, but one of the things Plato more or less discovered on his own was that mankind is born with knowledge. That is, knowledge is present in the human mind at birth. It is not so much that we "learn" things in our daily experience, but that we "recollect" them.

In other words, this knowledge is already there. This may explain why Socrates did not give his students answers, but only questions. His job was not to teach truth but to show his students how they could "pull" truth out of their own minds. It is for this reason that Socrates was considered a midwife in the labor of knowledge. This is the point of the dialogues. For only in conversation, only in dialogue, can truth and wisdom come to the surface.

Gorgias took pride in rhetoric rather than sophism, wanting to teach the ability of persuasion, as Plato shows in the dialogue *Gorgias*, where to the question from Socrates of what art he is skilled in, Gorgias bluntly replies: "Rhetoric, Socrates." And he goes on to admit proudly that he is able to teach others the same – in essence: "the ability to persuade with speeches." This power of persuasion was not necessary to hold the truth, but to make believable – something abominable to Socrates, as the unusual arrogance and harshness of his words in this dialogue indicate.

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates defines rhetoric as a "knack" that is akin to cooking and cosmetics. While arguing with the sophist Gorgias and his students Polus and Callicles, Socrates claims that the study of rhetoric only helps people use persuasion to do wrong. After Gorgias and Polus are forced to concede Socrates' claim, Callicles then argues Socrates to a draw by positing sinisterly that "might makes right." Therefore, according to Callicles, using rhetorical skill to be powerful in the city-state is "right" because the power to do what one wishes is the only reliable criterion for good. At the end of the *Gorgias*, the definition of rhetoric seems to balance between Socrates' argument that

rhetoric is merely a cosmetic 'knack' that only helps people do wrong and Callicles' equally unsatisfying argument that "rhetoric equals power, and power equals right."

Soc. Now I was it to know about rhetoric in the same way;-is rhetoric the only art which brings persuasion, or do other arts have the same effect? I mean to say-Does he who teaches anything persuade men of that which he teaches or not?

Gor. He persuades, Socrates,-there can be no mistake about that.

Soc. Again, if we take the arts of which we were just now speaking;-do not arithmetic and the arithmeticians teach us the properties of number?

Gor. Certainly.

Soc. And therefore persuade us of them?

Gor. Yes.

Soc. Then arithmetic as well as rhetoric is an artificer of persuasion?

Gor. Clearly.

Soc. And if any one asks us what sort of persuasion, and about what,-we shall answer, *persuasion which teaches the quantity of odd and even; and we shall be able to show that all the other arts of which we were just now speaking are artificers of persuasion, and of what sort, and about what.*

Gor. Very true.

Soc. Then rhetoric is not the only artificer of persuasion?

Gor. True.

Soc. Seeing, then, that not only rhetoric works by persuasion, but that other arts do the same, as in the case of the painter, a question has arisen which is a very fair one: Of what persuasion is rhetoric the artificer, and about what?-is not that a fair way of putting the question?

Gor. I think so.

Soc. Then, if you approve the question, Gorgias, what is the answer?

Gor. I answer, Socrates, that *rhetoric is the art of persuasion* in courts of law and other assemblies, as I was just now saying, and about the just and unjust.

Both Socrates and the Sophists taught the art of persuasion as a way to gain more knowledge and become more aware. The difference lies in their views of knowledge and awareness. Socrates saw it getting closer to those ideals, becoming aware of those transcendent points of reference. The Sophists saw it as being able to outwit and out-argue the rest and becoming aware that knowledge is power, and those with the most power rule.

The persuasion that Socrates represents, true persuasion, involves a presentation of the best arguments in an attempt to persuade using the truth. A person is persuaded when they "listen" and can by reflecting on the arguments come to their own conclusion. Socrates' reasons or the reasons that come out in the course of the Socratic conversation

become their reasons. In between these two extremes of force and true persuasion are intermediate forms of persuasion that all involve some measure or other of force. I can get you to do something, persuade you, by threatening to use force. One can be persuaded by manipulation of emotions and be induced to join the crowd. It may not seem like force, but if it is not you deciding to do something or believe something for your own reasons, it may be viewed as a subtle form of force. This philosophical activity of persuading using the truth becomes the model of Platonic education.