

## PLATO'S CRITICISM OF EMPIRICISM IN THE *GORGIAS* AND IN THE *PHAEDRUS*\*

### ABSTRACT

Plato's account of empirical knowledge is often presented in the context of his discussion of rhetoric. Rhetoric is seen as an artificer of persuasion, as a technique that provides us with the tools by which we can convey any message, regardless of its content. The *Gorgias* presents the orator as a demagogue, a person who uses flattery, in order to secure his audience's support, and describes this procedure as empirical: lacking knowledge of the subject-matter, the orator confines himself to a superficial calculation of the desires of his addressees. Based on a rather negative account of Athenian democracy, Plato is unwilling to envisage an orator who, like Pericles in Thucydides, would exploit his rhetorical skills in the interest of the good. But what would have happened if Socrates or his interlocutor Polus had used instead of rhetoric the case of medicine? To suggest that the empiric doctor takes into account what looks pleasing to his patients is of course absurd; and this may be the reason why when, in the course of his more positive treatment of empiricism, in the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle uses the example of a physician who can be a successful healer on the basis of mere experience. Drawing on the use of the medical analogy in the *Phaedrus* and the *Laws*, this paper examines the reasons that Plato is prepared to provide in order to resist Aristotle's more favourable account of *empeiria* as a source of knowledge.

«There are many arts and sciences among men. They have been discovered experimentally, through experiences. Experience makes our life advance scientifically, lack of experience haphazardly»<sup>1</sup>. This famous statement

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1. Throughout my text I use the translation of M. SCHOFIELD and T. GRIFFITH (eds.), *Plato: Gorgias, Menexenus, and Protagoras*. Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

is attributed to Polus in the beginning of Plato's *Gorgias* (448 c), as an answer to a question raised by Chaerephon, concerning the content of his art. Taking note of its peculiar style, E.R. Dodds suggested that the phrase is either a *verbatim* quotation or a parody, and opted for the idea that Plato composed it in order to highlight Polus' debt to Gorgias. But later in the text, Socrates refers to a book by Polus which contained the claim that experience made art (462 b). It is possible that this book, rather than Plato's text, was the source that Aristotle used when, in the opening chapter of his *Metaphysics*, he favourably cited Polus' thesis in support of his own argument concerning the acquisition of wisdom: «... experience made art ... but inexperience luck»<sup>2</sup>. Unlike Plato, however, who used Polus' statement as a preamble for his attack on empiric rhetoric, Aristotle's more positive interest in the beginning of the *Metaphysics* turned on the example of an empiric physician<sup>3</sup>: in an argument that is of rather secondary importance to the main discussion of the chapter, he draws attention to the way in which in an art like medicine, experience may be quite sufficient as a guide to knowledge, at least to the kind of knowledge that is relevant to producing health in a particular human body. In what follows, I would like to draw attention to certain aspects of Plato's thought that would prevent him from sharing Aristotle's account on this point.

Plato's assessment of the value of experience often forms part of his criticism against current rhetorical practice<sup>4</sup>. *Ἐμπειρία* and *τριβή* are the terms that Socrates in the *Gorgias* uses in order to contrast rhetoric to a proper art (462 b–463c; cf. 501 a). Confining himself to particular cases that serve his argument, such as rhetoric and gastronomy, and addressing an interlocutor who seems unable to develop critical objections<sup>5</sup>, in the *Gorgias* Socrates proceeds to a rather problematic reduction of experience to flattery. According to his argument, the pleasure of the audience, or

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2. For the view that Aristotle possessed direct knowledge of Polus' work, see R. RENEHAN, Polus, Plato, and Aristotle, *Classical Quarterly*, 45.i, 1995, pp. 68-72.

3. I use the term "empiric" to contrast the pre-theoretical practice of the physician to the "empiricist" arguments that were later developed in the context of a controversy between particular schools of medicine, and were possibly anticipated by earlier authors, such as the Hippocratic author of *On Ancient Medicine*. For a concise introduction to the later controversy, see M. FREDE, «Introduction» in M. FREDE and R. WALZER, *Galen. Three Treatises on the Nature of Science*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1985, with further references.

4. For my present purposes I will set aside Plato's treatment of sense experience (a more complete treatment of the question should take into account the fact that the term the Greek language uses to describe sense experience is *αἴσθησις* rather than *ἐμπειρία*) and will confine myself to contexts that are relevant to the dichotomy between *τέχνη* and *ἐμπειρία*.

5. See e.g. *Gorgias*, 448 d 8-10 on Polus' lack of dialectical skills.

the satisfaction of the consumer of delicacies, is the ultimate target of the orator and the pastry cook respectively. By contrast, proper arts, such as medicine, gymnastics, justice and legislation, (a) have investigated the nature of their subject-matter and can therefore provide an explanatory account of their procedure, but also (b) aim at the good (which cannot be a matter of negotiation with non-experts)<sup>6</sup>. Interestingly enough, Plato's account in the *Gorgias* leaves no room for Aristotle's medical man, who proceeds on the basis of experience, and who, despite his failure to provide a causal account of this procedure, and, unlike the flatterers against which Socrates mounts his attack, would never aim *at the pleasure* of his patients. Socrates mentions medicine as an example of an art, a body of knowledge which presupposes a grasp of the causes that account for its product. One could suggest that Plato's unwillingness to consider the case of a practitioner who would successfully proceed without such understanding reflects a more particular or local agenda, which in the *Gorgias* concerns the refutation of rhetoric; and that since the invocation of the empiric physician was likely to derail Socrates' criticism of experience, it seemed better for Plato to avoid completely the use of this example<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, it is unlikely that, given (a) at least the possibility that arguments in support of empiric medicine were current in the time of the composition of the *Gorgias*, but also (b) the frequent use of the medical analogy in his dialogues, Plato himself would be either unaware of this objection or not interested in it.

With regard to the currency of such arguments in the time of the composition of the *Gorgias*, it is reasonable to assume that Plato was aware of relevant discussion in the context of medicine. The Hippocratic treatise *On Ancient Medicine* leaves no doubt that at least some physicians were prepared to defend their old empirical art against a more speculative approach, that claimed as its foundation a small number of theoretical concepts (ὑπόθεσις)<sup>8</sup>. Even if the text did not antedate the *Gorgias*, the views of its author must have been shared by other medical practitioners, who did not consider writing, or even participating in a debate concerning method, as part of their profession, and who therefore did not contribute

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6. With regard to (a), the ability to provide an explanatory account which is explicitly described as a mark of art by ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, 981 b 7-8 (cf. 981 b 29) is implied in *Gorgias*, 465 a, 465 a 2-3, and 501 a-b; cf. *Laws*, 857 c-d; (b) can be inferred from *Gorgias*, 503 e, 504 d-e.

7. What particularly facilitates the omission of this objection is the way in which Plato organizes the dialectical discussion of the dialogue, assigning to Polus the role of the questioner and offering Socrates that of the answerer.

8. For lucid discussion of the meaning of the term ὑπόθεσις, see M. SCHIEFSKY, *Hippocrates. On Ancient Medicine. Translated with Introduction and Commentary*, Brill, Leiden, 2005, *ad loc.*

to the development of the relevant controversy. And there were certainly others, whose work did not survive. Such is the case with Acron of Acragas, a contemporary of Empedocles, who was recognized by the Empiricists of the Hellenistic times<sup>9</sup> as a precursor of their thinking. The fact that Polus also came from Acragas may not be a coincidence<sup>10</sup>.

But medicine is not the only example of an art that claimed to proceed on the basis of experience in the time of the composition of the *Gorgias*. Interestingly enough, Isocrates, a rival of the Socratic tradition, had argued against the claim of philosophers<sup>11</sup> to turn their students away from the realm of everyday experience, training them in subjects which have no apparent practical bearing:

«...They should throw away hairsplitting, which pretends to make refutations in speech but which has long since been refuted in action. They should pursue the truth, educate their students about the affairs in which we act as citizens, and develop their students' experience of these matters, with the consideration that it is much better to conjecture reasonably about useful things than to have precise knowledge of what is useless, and that to be a little ahead in important matters is better than to excel in small matters that are no help in life», Isocrates, *Helen*, 4-5 (transl. D. Mirhady).

Isocrates' reluctance to include subject matters such as cosmology, mathematics and presumably Socratic dialectic<sup>12</sup> as part of any serious curriculum may be compared to the skepticism with which the Hippocratic

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9. For a general introduction to the controversy on method in the Hellenistic times, see M. FREDE, *op. cit.* (fn. 3).

10. CELSUS, *Natural History*, XXIX.4, connects the Hellenistic Empirics to Acron, suggesting that they were both active in Sicily; see also GALEN, *An Outline of Empiricism*, ch. 1; SUDA s.v. Ἀκρων and PS-GALEN, *Isagoge*, XIV, 683 Kühn. Cf. D.S. HUTCHINSON, *Doctrines of the mean and the debate concerning skills in fourth-century medicine, rhetoric and ethics*, *Apeiron*, 21, 2, 1988, pp. 17-52, p. 27.

11. For the question of Isocrates' use of the term "Sophist" to describe individuals that we consider as philosophers, and his own claim to teach φιλοσοφία, see A. NIGTHINGALE, *Genres in Dialogue. Plato and the Construct of Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985, ch. 1; cf. N. LIVINGSTONE, *Writing Politics: Isocrates' Rhetoric of Philosophy*, *Rhetorica*, 25. 1, 2007, pp. 15-34.

12. See ISOCRATES, *Antidosis*, 266-269; *Helen*, 1-3; *Against the Sophists*, 1. For the question of the recipients of this criticism see further J. COOPER, *Plato, Isocrates, and Cicero on the Independence of Oratory from Philosophy*, in IDEM, *Knowledge, Nature, and the Good. Essays on Ancient Philosophy*, Princeton/Oxford, Princeton Univ. Press, (originally published in *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, 1, 1985, pp. 77-96), pp. 65-80, p. 73.

author of *On Ancient Medicine* reacts to the postulation of *hypotheses* as foundations of medicine. The similarity between these two texts is hardly accidental. Both Isocrates and our Hippocratic author react to what must have been a growing tendency in the time they composed their texts, namely the attempt of philosophers to claim their respective territories (that is, rhetoric and medicine) by populating them with entities that cannot be observed but can only be inferred through reason. Insofar as history is written by the winners, our access to sources that represent the kind of antitheoretical bias that we witness in Isocrates and *On Ancient Medicine* are limited, not only in terms of quantity, but also in terms of quality, since the context in which they are found often prevents us from appreciating the spirit in which they were written originally<sup>13</sup>. A further complication with respect to the availability of relevant evidence arises from the reasonable assumption that at least some practitioners in the fields of medicine and rhetoric would not necessarily be interested to record in writing their theoretical presuppositions. Scarcity of evidence makes it difficult to infer to what extent early empiricist arguments were explicitly developed as early as at the end of the 5th century BC, where we find a number of authors, including Polus, praising the importance of experience in the production of knowledge. Both the treatise *On Ancient Medicine* and the writings of Isocrates allow us to infer that Plato must have been aware of some version of this controversy.

One aspect of Isocrates' account that often obscures his importance in the development of the kind of antitheoretical tradition that concerns us here, is the central role that he assigns to *λόγος*, a term that is translated both as speech and as reason<sup>14</sup>. According to Isocrates, *λόγος* is an essentially human capacity, manifested in our ability to use discourse in an orderly form:

«If one must summarize the power of discourse, we will discover that nothing done prudently occurs without speech (*ἀλόγως*), that speech (*λόγο[ς]*) is the leader of all thoughts and actions, and that the most intelligent people (*τοὺς πλείστον νοῦν ἔχοντα*) use it most of all ... someone who chooses to speak and write speeches

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13. Such is the case with the reference to Democritus in GALEN's *On medical experience* 9, 5, or in the case of Anaxagoras in PLUTARCH, *On Fortune*, 3.98 f. (=fr. 21 b; on the problem of authenticity of the latter, see J.T. HERSCHBELL, *Plutarch and Anaxagoras*, *JCS*, 7, 1982, pp. 141-158).

14. This is also the cognate of the terms Plato and Aristotle use to refer to what we usually render as rational parts of the soul. See further FREDE, «Introduction» in M. FREDE and G. STRIKER (eds.), *Rationality in Greek Thought*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1999, pp. 1-28.

worthy of praise and honour will not possibly select topics that are unjust or insignificant or that deal with private arguments but those public issues which are important and noble and promote human welfare. If he does not discover any such topics, he will accomplish nothing. Then from the evidence relevant to his topic, he will select the most appropriate and advantageous. Someone who is accustomed to examine and evaluate such topics will have this same facility not only for the speech at hand but also for other affairs. As a result those who are philosophical and ambitious in their devotion to speaking will at the same time speak well and think intelligently (ἄμα τὸ λέγειν εὖ καὶ τὸ φρονεῖν παραγενήσεται)», *Antidosis*, 257, 275.

What is of particular importance for our present discussion is that, unlike rationalist philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle<sup>15</sup>, Isocrates is unwilling to place λόγος on a realm that transcends everyday experience<sup>16</sup>.

Given Isocrates' prominence in the intellectual scene of the 4th century, the absence of his empiricist position from Plato's dialogues may seem surprising. The *Gorgias*, a text that introduces the idea of a radical wedge between experience and art, seems to leave no space for Isocrates' antitheoretical challenge. We have already considered the dialectical constraints that may have kept Plato from elaborating Isocrates' arguments in the context of the *Gorgias*<sup>17</sup>. But we should also take into account a question of broader philosophical economy. At the time that he composed the *Gorgias*, Plato had not developed or at least had not presented to his audience the epistemological artillery that would later allow him to introduce the separate realm of Forms. We will see how, once this is established, Plato in the *Phaedrus* is able to include in his account a more explicit argument against empiricism. Before turning to the *Phaedrus*, however, it will be helpful to consider some important aspects of the criticism of rhetoric in the *Gorgias*.

In the *Gorgias* Plato presents rhetoric as a mere instrument, which allows

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15. For Aristotle as a Rationalist see M. FREDE, Aristotle's Rationalism, in M. FREDE and G. STRIKER (eds.), *Rationality in Greek Thought*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1996, pp. 157-173.

16. For a lucid comparison of Isocrates and Plato on this question see further J. COOPER, *op. cit.* (fn. 12); for some critical remarks on Cooper's account see C. BALLA, Isocrates, Plato and Aristotle on Rhetoric, *Rhizai*, 1, 2004, esp. pp. 45-71, 47-49; for a broader reconstruction of the controversy between Plato and Isocrates see C. EUCKEN, *Isocrates. Seine Positionen in der Auseinandersetzung mit den zeitgenössischen Philosophen*, Berlin, Walter der Gruyter, 1983.

17. I have pursued this line of interpretation, see C. BALLA, Plato and Aristotle on experience and expertise: the case of medicine, *Philosophical Inquiry*, pp. XXV/3-4, 2003, pp. 178-188.

us to produce conviction (453 a). That the function of rhetoric is merely instrumental is made clear by the way Gorgias responds to Socrates' further distinction between persuasion that gives rise to knowing, which he calls διδασκαλική (as in the case of someone who teaches mathematics) and persuasion that gives rise to being convinced without knowing, which he calls πιστευτική (454 e; 455 a). To illustrate this distinction, which he happily accepts, Gorgias relates his own success in persuading the patients of his brother Herodicus, who was a doctor, without possessing any knowledge of medicine (448 b). At this stage of the text, neither Socrates nor Gorgias explicitly address the problem which would result if the orator gave his audience wrong advice, though the examples of Themistocles and Pericles, concerning the fortification of Athens, that Socrates introduces in connection to their role in public decision (455 d – 456 a), give us some useful hints. The example is at first introduced as an illustration of a possible dissociation between knowledge (which would presumably be present in the mind of an architect) and the efficacy of speech, regardless of its content (which Gorgias advertises as the strength of the power of rhetoric). But later in the dialogue, Plato comes back to these statesmen and blames them for the irresponsible advice they had given to the people, who «filled the city with harbours and dockyards and walls and tribute and rubbish of that kind, without a thought for restraint or justice» (519 a). The overall argument of the *Gorgias* points to the suggestion that men like Themistocles and Pericles could have given better advice if they did not base their judgment on the expectations of their audience. Socrates argues that Pericles...

«turned the Athenians into idlers, cowards, chatterboxes and scroungers, by being the first to make them dependent on payment for civic services», *Gorgias*, 515 e.

For the original readers of the dialogue, Plato's distinction between πιστευτική and διδασκαλική πειθῶ must have served as a subtle comment on and qualification of Thucydides' assessment of Athens' decline<sup>18</sup>. According to the latter, the reason for this decline was that...

«on the one hand, Pericles, who owed his power to public esteem and intelligence and had proved himself clearly incorruptible in the highest degree, restrained the masses freely and led them rather than was led by them, because he had not resort to flattery in addressing them, seeking power by improper means, but was able

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18. H. YUNIS, *Taming Democracy: Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens*, N. York, Cornell Univ. Press, 1996, pp. 150-151.

on the strength of public esteem to speak against them even so as to provoke their anger. At any rate, whenever he saw them unwarrantably confident and arrogant, his words would cow them into fear. And when he saw them unreasonably afraid, he would restore them to confidence again. The democracy existed in name, but in fact the first citizen ruled. But Pericles' successors, on the other hand, being more on a level with each other and yet striving each to be first, began to flatter the demos and surrender to them the conduct of affairs», *History*, 2.65.8<sup>19</sup>.

But unlike Thucydides, who wished to distinguish the time of Pericles and the time of his successors, Plato in the *Gorgias* is unwilling to endorse such a differentiation. According to Socrates in Plato's text, people like Pericles and Themistocles were responsible for the decline of Athens<sup>20</sup>, at least as much as their successors. These recognizable exemplars allow Plato to expose the general picture of the orator as a man who manipulates the emotions and the appetites of the mob<sup>21</sup> in order to please them, and by pleasing them to secure their support. This picture, which Socrates must have considered as typical of current democratic practice, is juxtaposed to the ideal of the scientific and good orator (τεχνικός τε καὶ ἀγαθός) who will impart to the souls of his audience justice and temperance (504 d). What is still missing from Plato's text, however, is a statement of the conditions that will allow such an individual to emerge<sup>22</sup>. The closest Plato comes to such an account at this point is in his description of a craftsman who purposefully proceeds, «until he has composed the whole into a thing of order and system» (503 e: ὅπως ἂν εἶδος τι αὐτῷ σχῆν τοῦτο ὃ ἐργάζεται). But he offers no explanation as to the steps that will lead the craftsman to choose this order, or the people to opt for such a craftsman. Likewise, toward the end of the dialogue, he makes Socrates' claim that he is among the very few, if not the only, Athenian who truly practices the political art (521 d). But here again what Plato offers is an exemplar, rather than an account that would explain the positive grounds on which this exemplar is endorsed. These grounds can be more clearly understood once we get to the *Republic*. Plato now introduces the idea that philosophy, in spite of the skepticism with which it was encountered

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19. Cited by YUNIS, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

20. *Ibid.*, 515 e: [Pericles] turned the Athenians into idlers, cowards, chatterboxes and scroungers, by being the first to make them dependent on payment for civic services, *Gorgias*, 515 e.

21. On the use of the word «ὄχλος» in this context see WARDY R., *The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato, and their Successors*, London/New York, Routledge, 1996, pp. 65-66.

22. It is important to note that this possibility is not ruled out by the text. This possibility may be hinted at by the use of «ἀεί» in *Gorgias*, 502 e 3.

by a number of late 5th century intellectuals<sup>23</sup>, is a useful enterprise; in fact that it is indispensable for a just city. Of course, the development of this idea in the *Republic* presupposes an account of the kind of knowledge the philosopher is going to pursue, which is, in turn, what triggers the introduction of the theory of Forms. It is this conceptual artillery that allows Plato to revisit the connection of experience and art in the *Phaedrus*.

In the *Phaedrus* Plato comes back to the question of rhetoric and discusses the conditions under which it can meet the conditions of an art. Plato here uses a rather peculiar version of medical empiricism to state his opposition to the view Polus had presented in the *Gorgias*. Just as in the *Gorgias*, so also in the *Phaedrus* current rhetoric is no more than a mere knack, ἄτεχνος τριβή (260 e), by contrast to a real art. But Socrates now moves a step further, introducing the idea of a proper rhetoric, modelled on the idea of proper medicine:

«In both cases we need to determine the nature (φύσις) of something: of the body in medicine, of the soul in rhetoric. Otherwise, all we'll have will be an empirical and artless practice. We won't be able to supply, on the basis of an art, a body with the medicines and diet that will make it healthy and strong, or a soul with the reasons and customary rules of conduct that will impart to it the convictions and virtues we want», *Phaedrus*, 270 b (transl. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff).

To an important extent, the distinction in the *Phaedrus* between rhetoric proper and its empiric counterfeit seems to develop without further qualification the criticism of the *Gorgias*. There we have seen that real arts, such as medicine and the art of justice, are distinguished because of their ability to investigate the nature of their subject matter and to offer a rational account of it; whereas their counterfeits, such as pastry-cooking or rhetoric, are merely based on experience, in the sense of a mechanistic routine. Rhetoric, according to the criticism of the *Gorgias*, proceeds without ever reflecting on the nature and cause of pleasure:

«I don't think cookery is a science, but a skill, whereas medicine is a science, because, I said, one of them has examined both the nature of the things it looks after and the reason for the things it does, and it can give an account of each of these things – that's medicine. But the other, in its concern for pleasure, towards which all its care is directed

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23. The currency of this skepticism is reflected on Plato's description of the measure of the philosopher-kings as the «third wave» (473 c).

– well, it just makes a beeline for it, quite unscientifically, without undertaking any sort of examination of the nature of pleasure, or its cause. It works in a completely unreasoning way, making virtually no distinctions at all – it has the skill of using everyday experience to keep just the memory of what usually happens, which is how it provides its pleasures», *Gorgias*, 501 a 3–b 1.

But whereas the *Gorgias* gave us a clearly negative evaluation of the counterfeits<sup>24</sup>, the *Phaedrus* introduces a more neutral attitude toward the technical skills of the professional orator. Compared to the *Gorgias*, in the *Phaedrus* we witness a shift of interest from flattery as a primary means of rhetorical success<sup>25</sup> to the question of determining the moral and epistemological constraints under which the orator must operate<sup>26</sup>. Plato now seems willing to accept the instrumental value of the various techniques of rhetoric, provided that they are considered as no more than merely instrumental, and therefore *subordinate* to a higher teleology, which is manifest in the nature of the subject matter under consideration<sup>27</sup>. Socrates compares the training of an orator who focuses merely on the use of various rhetorical tropes to that of an individual who would claim to be a physician, just because he knows how to raise or lower temperature of people's bodies, or how to induce vomit or bowel movement (268 a-b). What is present in both cases is the agent's superficial familiarity with some fragmentary information, which presupposes no critical background that would allow him to carefully reason through it<sup>28</sup>. In the case of rhetoric, Socrates' criticism must be seen against the background of the current practice of teaching speech composition by precept. It seems that rhetorical handbooks consisted in compilations of set pieces, which the students were supposed to memorize and imitate<sup>29</sup>. By the same token, in the case of medicine, Socrates seems

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24. Cf. *Gorgias*, 465 b: κακοῦργος, ἀπατηλή, ἀγεννής καὶ ἀνελεύθερος: pernicious, illusory, demeaning and slavish.

25. This is not to suggest that Plato is giving up his earlier criticism; cf. *Phaedrus*, 257 e–258 a; see also *Laws*, XI, 937 e 3 to 938 a 4.

26. A striking aspect of the *Phaedrus* is the respect with which Socrates treats Pericles. See 268 a–270 a, with YUNIS, *Taming Democracy*, *op. cit.* (fn. 18), pp. 207-210.

27. For the origin of the use of the term «τέλος» in the teleological framework that becomes so common from Aristotle onwards, see *Gorgias*, 499 e 8, with DODDS' comment in IDEM, *Plato. Gorgias*, Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1959; cf. C. KAHN, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue. The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form*, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996, p. 130 with footnote 5.

28. Plato's concern with the problem of uncritically isolating information from a technically conceived body of knowledge is illustrated in the analogy between speech and a living body (264 c; 265 e–266 a).

29. Teaching rhetorical skills on the basis of paradigmatic pieces lies at the centre of Isocrates' polemic against his rivals. See, e.g., ISOCRATES, *Against the Sophists*, 12-13.

to draw on a certain fascination that attracted young intellectuals to medical texts. Phaedrus himself, fascinated by doctors such as Eryximachus and Acumenus, but also by the relatively new technology of writing, must have been a clear case in point<sup>30</sup>. And just as a follower of Lysias, whose speech on love, memorized by Phaedrus in the beginning of the dialogue, serves as the keynote to the text, could pretend to be a rhetorician, by uncritically rehearsing a setpiece, so also a follower of medical men could pretend to be a doctor, by isolating, in an uncritical and hence also fragmentary way, information drawn on medical handbooks concerning certain medical procedures (it is tempting to think that Plato here has in mind the lists of case studies that one can find in texts like *Epidemics* I and III, but also to lists of recipes that formed part of some Hippocratic treatises)<sup>31</sup>.

Central in the kind of empiricism Plato describes here is the idea of mechanistic and in this sense also uncritical imitation. An important illustration of this aspect of Plato's criticism is in the analogy he introduces in the *Laws* between doctors and legislators. There the Athenian Stranger suggests a distinction between (a) free doctors, who have systematic knowledge of their subject-matter, and are able to convey it to others; and (b) slave doctors who pick up their skill empirically, by watching and obeying their masters (720 b). Insofar as the free doctors are in a position also to enlighten their patients about the nature of their disease and the way this necessitates a particular medical treatment, the Athenian Stranger provides them as a model for the ideal legislator, who will attempt to persuade the citizens to obey the law. On the other hand, lack of interest or respect for the patients' mental disposition, but also lack of ability to address

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On the question of teaching rhetoric by example see T. COLE, *The Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, especially ch. 5; for the importance of this practice in the philosophical criticism against rhetoric cf. C. BALLA, Plato and Aristotle on Rhetorical Empiricism, *Rhetorica*, 25.1, 2007, pp. 73-85.

30. As scholars very often have pointed out, the theme of writing is introduced in the very beginning of the dialogue: see Socrates' remarks on Phaedrus' familiarity with Lysias' *ῥητορικόν* in *Phaedrus*, 228 b.

31. For the relevant sources see L. TOTELIN, *Hippocratic Recipes: Oral and Written Transmission of Pharmacological Knowledge in Fifth and Fourth Century Greece*, Brill, Leiden, 2009. I believe it is unlikely that Socrates targets his criticism against physicians who would draw their knowledge of medicine from the study of written texts, *pace* L. DEAN-JONES, Literacy and the Charlatan in Early Greek Medicine, in H. YUNIS (ed.), *Written Texts and the Rise of Literate Culture in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003, pp. 97-121. I believe that the reference to such a physician in *Phaedrus*, 268 b-c is intended as a counterfactual, describing a caricature rather than a person who would profess to be a physician; cf. Socrates' ironic remarks concerning Euthydemus' fascination with medical texts in XENOPHON, *Memorabilia*, 4.2.10.

them as people who deserve an explanation, differentiates the more trivial procedure of the slave physicians. This, however, is not to suggest that slave physicians are unable to cure their patients: mechanistic exercise supervised by someone who possesses knowledge of the subject matter (in the *Laws* slave physicians are described as assistants of free physicians) may still serve medicine in a successful way. To this extent, one could suggest that Plato is willing to entertain Aristotle's account of an empiric doctor. But it is important to note that the qualities Plato has in mind when he describes his slave physicians are quite different from those that Aristotle wishes to grant to his successful empiric physician. And it is precisely this different way of understanding the content of a craftsman who proceeds on the basis of *ἐμπειρία* that, as we shall see, allows Plato to resist Aristotle's account for a successful empiric physician.

In an interesting passage of the *Phaedrus* (268 c-e), which to the best of my knowledge has not been sufficiently appreciated, Socrates invites us to consider the case of a man who would tell Euripides and Sophocles that he knows «how to compose the longest passages on trivial topics and the briefest ones on topics of great importance», or how he can make them «pitiful if he wanted, or again, by contrast, terrifying and menacing, and so on», and that, on account of this knowledge of his he could also teach others how to compose tragedies. According to Socrates, the famous tragedians would treat such a fellow as if they were musicians, «confronted by a man who thought he had mastered harmony because he was able to produce the highest and lowest notes on his strings» (268 d 6-8). In these cases, just as in the case of the man who would claim to have knowledge of how to lower and raise the temperature of the body, or in the case of someone who claimed to be an orator because he knew how to speak concisely or how to speak in images, what is important is to understand that we are dealing *with the preliminaries of an art, not with art itself* (268 e 4-5, in connection with the study of harmonics). To some extent, the stage Plato describes here appears to agree with Aristotle's account of the realm of experience in the beginning of his *Metaphysics*: people can, at least in some cases, mechanistically exercise a practice which to an outside observer could hardly be distinguished from art itself. But failure to provide a rational account of this practice keeps them from transmitting their skill to others<sup>32</sup>, and should also keep us from

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32. This condition is implicit in the surprise that the doctors who are «innocent of theory ... and practise medicine my rule of thumb» would feel if they came across a free doctor. According to the Visitor, a free doctor would remark: «you are not treating the patient, but tutoring him. Anybody would think he wanted to become a doctor rather than get well again» (857 d 7-e 1, transl. Tr. Saunders).

considering them as masters of an art, insofar as the transmission of one's *art* involves understanding of *the principles* that account for it<sup>33</sup>. Can it be the case, then, that Plato is prepared to agree with Aristotle (and presumably also with Polus) that an empiric physician *in practice* can be equally successful with a physician who possesses the art of medicine<sup>34</sup>? And that Plato's unwillingness to consider the case of medicine is related to his particular agenda, namely to his interest to refute *rhetoric* as an empiric routine which is based on flattery?

There are certain important aspects of Plato's account of experience that prevent us from reaching this conclusion. Plato sees experience as ultimately connected with uncritical, slavish imitation, leading to a thoughtless mechanistic routine. This is the point of the imagery of a slave physician that we considered above. By contrast, Aristotle sees in experience the presence of a capacity for generalization, which already involves some critical thinking, of the kind one exercises in ordinary, everyday reasoning<sup>35</sup>. And this is why, unlike Aristotle, who sees experience as a distinct stage that *follows* memory, Plato regards the mechanistic repetition of a routine that shapes his notion of experience as no more than an exercise which comes *before* memory and appears to further its enhancement<sup>36</sup>. This aspect of Plato's account of experience becomes particularly clear in the context of his criticism of writing.

The criticism of writing is a particularly prominent theme in the *Phaedrus*. In the very beginning of the text, Phaedrus himself is presented as carrying under his cloak a book that contains Lysias' speech on love. Phaedrus claims he is able to reproduce the meaning of Lysias' argument, and thus to deliver his own version of it<sup>37</sup>, but Socrates urges him to read the text instead. I believe that the discussion that follows undermines Phaedrus' own critical abilities, urging us to see him as a typical case of a man who is unable to

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33. This point is aptly illustrated by ARISTOTLE, *Sophistic Refutations*, 184 a 10–b 4.

34. Aristotle does not mention this comparison, he does state, however, that an empiric physician may be more successful in practice than a physician who is aware of the account (*λόγος*) without, however, having practiced on it, *Metaphysics*, 981 a 11–17.

35. FREDE, *op. cit.* (fn. 14) distinguishes this kind of «ordinary, everyday thought and reasoning» from thinking and reasoning *strictly speaking*, taking as a salient feature of the latter the ability not just to use concepts in general but to be able to use the appropriate concepts that will allow us to reach an explanation. Cf. V. POLITIS, *Aristotle and the Metaphysics*, London/New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 32.

36. I would like to thank Istvan Bodnar for drawing my attention to this point.

37. Phaedrus' suggestion here must be intended as a reflection of contemporary rhetorical education. See COLE, *op. cit.* (fn. 29), pp. 71–94. Cf. H. YUNIS, *Plato. Phaedrus*, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011, ad 282 d 7–e 1.

develop his own original thought. Plato's criticism of writing in the *Phaedrus* is concluded with the famous myth of Theuth. According to the story Socrates relates in the end of the dialogue, the god Theuth, who invented writing, presented this contribution to king Thamus, stressing its value for the improvement of memory:

«O! King, here is something that, once learned, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memory; I have discovered a potion for memory and for wisdom», *Phaedrus*, 274 e.

To which Thamus replies:

«O! most expert Theuth, one man can give birth to the elements of an art, but only another can judge how they can benefit or harm those who will use them. And now, since you are the father of writing, your affection for it has made you describe its effects as the opposite of what they really are. In fact, it will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding (οὐκ οὖν μνήμης ἀλλὰ ὑπομνήσεως φάρμακον ἤϊρες); you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. Your invention will enable them to hear many things without being probably taught, and they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing», *Phaedrus*, 275 a-b.

Plato here targets his criticism against the practice illustrated by *Phaedrus* himself in the beginning of the dialogue, that is the practice of uncritically reproducing the work of another author. The constraints of such an enterprise are best illustrated through the medical analogy. *Phaedrus* agrees that nobody can be a physician merely on the basis of «knowing» how to affect a patient's temperature; and what keeps slave physicians from failure is their dependence on a master who possesses knowledge. Plato is prepared to acknowledge the value such routines may have *when supervised by reason*. But he is unwilling to acknowledge the presence of reason within them.

Let us now go back to the *Gorgias* and to the question with which we started: what would have happened if Plato in the *Gorgias* had used the example of Aristotle's empiric physician? In the light of the preceding discussion, I would like to suggest that Plato would be unwilling to consider

Aristotle's empiric physician as empiric. The latent presence of thinking, that Aristotle himself is prepared to acknowledge in the case of experience (note his reference to ἐννόημα in *Met.*, 981 a 5-6)<sup>38</sup> marks an important departure from Plato's account on experience, which turns on the blind, mechanistic nature of the knack that an empiric craftsman demonstrates<sup>39</sup>. This is not to suggest that Plato failed to acknowledge the value of the kind of physician that Aristotle described as empiric; but, to the extent that such a physician would not confine himself to the uncritical execution of orders (or to imitation of his «free» counterpart), Plato would be unwilling to attribute his success to experience unassisted by reason<sup>40</sup>.

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38. A more complete discussion of this issue would need to take into account Aristotle's famous treatment of *empeiria* in *Posterior Analytics*, B 19.

39. Cf. PLATO, *Sophist*, 254 a 5.

40. In this respect, it is tempting to think of Isocrates as a counterpart to Aristotle's empiric physician. The enigmatic closing of the text (which makes it difficult to assess whether the reference to Isocrates in 278 e 10 ff. should be taken as serious or as ironical) may be intended to leave open the possibility that a talented orator, like Isocrates, is able to develop his thought to a proper direction, which must involve the transgression of experience. Seen in this light, Isocrates would be for Plato what the empiric physician is for Aristotle: both have the potential to guide the body or the soul respectively in a responsible manner. And insofar as neither of them fits the *Platonic* description of an empiric "artist", *i.e.* of an agent who acts on the basis of uncritically reproducing the work of another, neither of them would be described by Plato as merely empiric.

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