"IF WE LINK THE ESSENCE OF RHETORIC WITH DECEPTION": VINCENZO ON SOCRATES AND RHETORIC

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If one "makes Socrates into a species of Sophist who construes rhetorical strategies in order to deceive others for their own good," then "the only difference between Socrates and the Sophists would be that the latter utilized rhetorical strategies to deceive others to the advantage of the rhetorician himself while Socrates utilized rhetorical strategies for the advantage of his interlocutor." Vincenzo argues that this is a wrong way of putting the matter because the rhetoric of Socrates "arises out of an entirely different point of departure; and . . . its primary function is not to produce deception, but truth."[1] Vincenzo's argument deserves some discussion, if only because it combines the traditional defense of Socrates (which sees him as a philosopher entitled to nothing except admiration) with a rejection of the Aristotelian approach to rhetoric, which is currently so widespread (rhetoric as an "embellished argumentative maneuver composed in order to dissemble"). "If we link the essence of rhetoric with deception," Vincenzo warns, "rhetoric becomes not an original disclosure of first truths but an *ancilla* to argument." This position would leave room for "the dangerous possibility of using the name 'rhetoric' to justify any and all ends."[2]

I would argue that any time one is concerned with establishing communication, an attempt to force the hand of the intended audience is necessarily at work, and that this is the case even if the goals to be attained through a given unit of communication show (almost) no wish to prevail over the intended recipients. Any time there is some effort to establish a careful and pointed unit of communication (regardless of what makes it careful and pointed), even when the speaker (or writer, actor, etc.) wants to start an exchange rather than to prevail over the addressees, he or she cannot avoid doing his or her best to ensure that the recipients receive the unit

Philosophy and Rhetoric, Vol. 26, No. 4, 1993.

of communication with favor, with sympathy, at least without defiance. Hence, to be reassuring *is* to force one's hand, *regardless of the real merits of what is actually submitted.* Refinement is a means: the ends to be pursued may range from self-satisfaction to persuasion, from mere sympathy to intellectual adherence, from approval to surrender, from involvement to applause, from the expression of a favorable opinion to deep excitement.

Communicational wisdom is present to steer the reaction of the intended audience; this is why it is important for the speaker to consider the likely reaction of the intended audience when faced with his or her communicative performance. Without such an evaluation—not necessarily a fully conscious analysis—the speaker could hardly reduce to a minimum the range of unexpected, unusual, unpleasant, disturbing, or harmful reactions. Suspecting some danger is a preliminary step, very helpful to the speaker because it urges him or her to find a way to prevent it. For example, a teacher plans units of communication to present a given state of affairs in a way that allows the class to absorb the information with confidence *regardless of its reliability.* Generally speaking, communicational wisdom is present to condition the intended audience in a direction that the speaker believes to be helpful in view of his or her ends. If it were not so, there would be no worthwhile communication, no rhetorical *mise-à-point.*

It is obvious that communicational wisdom may well exist just to enact "an original disclosure of first truths," or to open someone's mind. However, the crucial issue is the danger—indeed, the fact—of forcing the hands of the recipients. No matter how valuable what is being submitted is, no matter how genuine the speaker's intellectual and emotional adherence to what he or she is submitting is, no matter how beneficial his or her intention is, no matter how grateful the recipients may feel, the intended audience is unfailingly led to absorb what is being submitted with greater confidence and to a greater extent, *greater than what would have been the case if they had had to face a rough and careless moment of communication.* Communicativeness is a way of formatting (recall the command "format" in most personal computers) not only the unit of communication itself, but also its intended recipients, through the conscious attempt to instill in them the idea that there are several possible reactions that would be inappropriate. But whether the claim of the speaker is well-grounded is of no importance for this purpose. Therefore, there is a permanent danger of

dispossessing the recipients on some (possibly crucial) points, and therefore being responsible for a subtle, gentle (indeed, the more subtle and gentle, the more insidious) violence. I would say that here lies the essential link between rhetoric and deception.

This assertion is nothing but a preliminary step, since entire sets of additional variables are to be taken into account: for example, the range of rhetorical strategies and devices available in a given milieu, or the quality of the goal one pursues. I assume that a typology of the former would be inappropriate here; however, the latter may well deserve some comments (one reason is that most treatises still pay scarce attention to the role of goal in the attainment of persuasion).

Goals may range from mere politeness (i.e., a certain attention to set up a generically sympathetic atmosphere) to the enactment of a complete mental shock (*positive saturation*).[3] Especially when the pursuit is positive saturation, a high level of functional organization is strictly required of the communication unit. Highly functional organization demands not only a wise *dispositio,* but also a functional selection and emphasis of its 'content', since a climax is to be wisely reached (or rather prompted into the recipients' minds). To pursue saturation is to do one's best to ensure that the critical distance literally collapses.

Now let us assume that *dispositio* is present to lead the recipients' minds to follow the train of thought (and/or emotions) the speaker wants to communicate (or, perhaps, instill into the audience's minds), i.e., to prevent the danger that any of the recipients remain free to follow their own thoughts and emotions, wherever they lead. Let us also assume that emphasis is present to amplify some features of the speaker's topic at the expense of others. From this it follows that the selection of what is considered appropriate for a given communication unit may well amount to an attempt to force the audience's hands in such a way that the recipients accept what is being submitted without feeling that they have been intentionally deceived. There is a danger because the communicational strategy is present to prevent the intended audience from realizing that the selection, being goal-directed, is somewhat unnatural, artificial, not strictly unavoidable, not exactly unobjectionable. All this may not be enough to attain positive saturation; however, no positive saturation will be achieved without recurring to it in some way or another.

A very special kind of positive saturation is *provocation.* When a

speaker wants to provoke the intended audience, he or she in fact prepares a trap: the speaker foresees how the intended audience is likely to react to the communication unit and takes this reaction into careful consideration to ensure the attainment of a very special goal (which will be wisely dissembled). So, once more, the final aim of the speaker is to attain a sort of surrender of the intended audience.

Three basic steps may be envisaged: (1) to try to *overwhelm* the intended audience (i.e., to make them deeply indignant, deeply aware of how intolerable the present state of affairs is); (2) to make them realize that there is no way out, except one; and (3) to wait. The game is such that the speaker does his or her best to ensure that the intended audience remains wholly unaware of the strategy employed. As a matter of fact, an alerted or otherwise trained audience would be careful not to give the impression (or the satisfaction) of feeling outraged, or of looking for exactly the way out that the speaker has cunningly foreseen.

However, the state of being momentarily overwhelmed (something that is clearly linked with saturation, and also with arguments carried on through a process of elimination) may be deliberately provoked even if the speaker's goal is not to raise indignation or to deprive the audience of its normal self-control. This is the case when one strives to force the intended audience to change its mind on a given point, or to undertake a very unusual course of action. Mussolini and Hitler, for instance, must have been very skilled in provoking the state of being overwhelmed at the expense of very large audiences. To trap an interlocutor (or a whole host of readers) in a paradox (for example, the famous sphinx enigma, or the liar paradox) is a way of overwhelming the intended audience. Zeno of Elea must have been a great master in the art of overwhelming those sharing the commonsensical notion of movement (i.e., most readers). But also Aeschylus and Sophocles were commonly able to create a number of mentally overwhelming atmospheres on stage, and to let the audience absorb them. In fact, thriller movies usually make use of a similar strategy; even exhilarating situations are, in a sense, quite overwhelming. I will prove shortly that Socrates, too, often enacted an overwhelming atmosphere, although primarily for the benefit of his interlocutors.

The ability to provoke others to become overwhelmed results from special training (or at least a special attitude, something like a personal obsession). It is a way of forcing the hands of the recipients, no matter exactly why and how—and let me grant that rhetoric has more than something to do with it.

(Gorgias, on the contrary, was a master of overwhelming in a particular way, which we may provisionally label a kind of mental anaesthesia.)[4]

One should also distinguish between undeserved and (almost) deserved saturation. Whenever speakers, writers, actors, and other similar issuers of a communication unit succeed in their attempts to force the recipients' hands, they achieve an undeserved saturation point. Saturation rarely is fully or almost fully deserved (perhaps only in the highest and purest poetry); one could argue that even great classical works in philosophy or literature often attain a partially undeserved saturation, since at least the "formatting" procedure likely brings about the forcing of the hands of the intended audience. What is at issue, therefore, is, not whether a given communication unit attains a deserved or undeserved saturation point, but, rather, to examine to what extent and on what grounds it is undeserved—what features manifest an attempt to force our hands and what ones are quite unobjectionable—i.e., why we feel entitled to judge.

These assumptions bring us closer to the crucial question to which I would like to suggest an answer. My question is: "Was Socrates accustomed to the practice of temporarily overwhelming some of his interlocutors, though essentially for their benefit?"

My contention (or, if you will, my *demonstrandum*) is that to keep in mind the analytical tools I have just outlined is at least helpful (or, perhaps, indispensable) in gaining a clear understanding of what exactly happens with respect to Socrates' average interlocutor in most Socratic dialogues (or at least in the best ones). A couple of sample analyses may be appropriate.

Example One: Take the famous *Alcibiades*, written by Aeschines of Sphettus.[5] Here Socrates strives to instill a good measure of self-contempt into Alcibiades' mind and does not leave him in peace until he collapses, i.e., until he cannot handle the intellectual and emotional tension any more, until he becomes unbearably anxious and is overcome by deep (and not exactly reassuring) emotions. Compare Augustine, *De civ. Dei* xiv 8 [= VI A 47, ll. 10–12): "cum sibi beatus videretur, Socrate disputante et ei [i.e., Alcibiades] quam miser esset, quoniam stultus esset, demonstrante flevisse." Socrates' pressure leads (or rather compels) Alcibiades

to feel the *need* of abandoning his well-established way of life, and to become involved in a first-order *metanoia*. Isn't it true that the outcome is the kind of saturation we have just labeled the state of being overwhelmed and that Socrates was consciously trying to overwhelm his much admired interlocutor?

We see that to attain this kind of saturation Socrates sets up a whole series of unpleasant surprises (not necessarily a network of unobjectionable arguments). For instance, he offers the famous parable about Themistocles (one of Alcibiades' most admired models) to show that Themistocles' wisdom, though admittedly superior to Alcibiades', was insufficient to avoid banishment, ingratitude, and finally murder (as historians report). Socrates reminds Alcibiades that the course of actions leads to the reasonable inference that Themistocles was unable to watch over his own destiny (*phulaxasthai:* 6.A50, l. 40). Then Socrates goes on, saying, "How much greater may be the risk for those who, not unlike you, take no care at all of themselves (for those *en mēdemiai epimeleiai heautōn ousin*)?" Once Alcibiades is caught in a sequel of arguments like this one, he becomes less and less able to dispel a sense of oppression, and finally the desired crisis arrives.

Socrates has deliberately provoked it, possibly with an eye to his own emotional satisfaction. Nonetheless, the primary aim is the benefit of Alcibiades: He was clearly forcing Alcibiades' hand—his arguments are far from being stringent. As a matter of fact, *in principle* it would have been quite possible for Alcibiades to react in a different way. For example, he could have argued that he is a trained politician, full of experience, able to face a large audience and to manage complex political and military issues; that he has in the past found ways out of very difficult situations; or that he may rely on a large body of associates; or that every politician must face some dangers and cannot be sure that his friends and supporters will *never* betray him or trap him, and that active involvement in politics (and especially the status of leader) is worth these dangers. But the point lies elsewhere: it is the overall atmosphere (which includes intimacy with Socrates, friendliness, the sense of an intellectual and emotional pause during which, at least for some time, there is no room for the accidents of political strife) that prevails over Alcibiades' mind, leading him to lose sight of ways out that *in principle* could have been available to him. So undeserved saturation has been reached, and further analysis should have been carried out to argue these points in more detail.

Example Two: Further evidence will be drawn from one of the best dialogical passages of Xenophon's *Memorabilia,* section iv.2. When a learned young man, Euthydemus, is still nothing more for Socrates than a superficial acquaintance, the latter realizes (or rather senses) that he should try to attract Euthydemus into his own mental and emotional world. At the same time he senses that the young man cannot be so easily involved in it (i.e., in the way Socrates would like to have him involved). He therefore develops an overall strategy to overcome the kind of reluctance he guesses is present in Euthydemus.

To accomplish this task, Socrates begins with several preliminary exchanges of ideas, which are very sketchy and usually indirect. Moreover, he attenuates them in several encounters that take place in the semi-public space that he frequents with some young friends of his. During each encounter with Euthydemus, Socrates is very careful to set up just a "flash," i.e., to send him nothing but a brief and fleeting provocation, without involving him in a more direct or sustained exchange. After a number of brief unidirectional messages of this kind, Socrates senses that Euthydemus is less guarded than during the previous contacts; indeed, by now he is clearly eager to deepen the level of communication with the philosopher. He is ripe for a more sustained talk.

The next time, Socrates returns alone and remains quiet for a moment, long enough to let Euthydemus come and sit near him. A gentle exchange of ideas begins, with Socrates exhibiting his admiration for the young learned man, just to prepare the atmosphere for an impressive shower of questions and counter-examples. Euthydemus lacks the special training needed to resist the attack; so step by step he can only draw back more and more. After half an hour or so Euthydemus feels nothing but mentally overwhelmed, an outcome that Socrates was clearly expecting. So the moment comes when, full of shame, Euthydemus gives up. He has become deeply saturated.

Nevertheless, Socrates decides to carry the tension a bit farther. Once the climax has been reached, rather than lessen the tension, he lets the disheartened Euthydemus get up and take leave without a word of encouragement or comprehension, as if he (Socrates) had had nothing to do with the sense of discouragement he has consciously provoked. At this stage of the exchange nothing seemingly survives in Socrates of the benevolence he exhibited at the beginning: Socrates guesses that, contrary to what could be judged

at first sight, the tension instilled into the young man has not really reached the saturation point, so he dares to let the process carry its effect longer—a night, or perhaps a whole week. Socrates clearly bets that the desired positive reaction will come, and it does come. This time Euthydemus, who is already full of admiration for the philosopher, goes in search of Socrates.

A point worthy of consideration is the value of the counter-examples that lead Euthydemus to become overwhelmed.[6] The examples show how the definition offered by Euthydemus cannot account for some special cases, since it is less comprehensive than his interlocutor can guess. The definitions he submits do not stand fully, although for a wide majority of obvious examples they undeniably work well; it is far from obvious that they deserve to be abandoned or ignored. At least in principle Euthydemus could have argued that the class of behaviors a given definition covers corresponds to what is *commonly* meant by the word, and that the special cases, more difficult to deal with, need not be taken into account; or he could have argued that he does not claim to be trained *in matters of definitions*. Strictly speaking, to be unprepared to cope immediately with most counter-examples is not enough to be forced to experience so dramatic a shock. If surprise turns into discomfort, the reason is in the emotional and intellectual syndrome that Socrates has carefully and wisely concocted *ad hoc*. As a matter of fact, Socrates did force Euthydemus's hand to cause him to become overwhelmed. Such an outcome would have been simply *un*attainable unless he had recurred to a first-order communicational wisdom, i.e., one outside the realm of rhetorical wisdom.

Moreover, Socrates does not hesitate to exploit his advantage and force Euthydemus to compete with him on a topic that is familiar to the philosopher, but new to the young learned interlocutor named Euthydemus. Socrates induces not even an amateur, but a mere beginner to compete with a great champion like himself. In addition, he does his best to ensure that the former does not realize the tremendous gap between the two for a long while.

Therefore, Socrates has been clearly unfair with Euthydemus, at least in part (as he was with Alcibiades in the previous example); but from this it does not follow that he is insincere when claiming that he has acted the way he did for the *sole* benefit of his interlocutor, namely, to ensure that he would be involved in a serious shock (something suitable to open new avenues for his intellectual and

emotional life, especially in terms of a more refined organization of his mental universe). We should, rather, acknowledge that the end is noble, even if the means employed do include some powerful tricks.

It is also easy to detect a didactic attitude at work: a didactic especially devised for an (almost) adult and surely intellectually endowed pupil like Euthydemus. However, this kind of didactic is undeniably a *cura da cavallo,* a kind of electroshock, something like a head-on collision. In order to provoke so powerful a trauma with words, it is simply unimaginable not to rely on surprise, which in turn amounts to setting up a well-conceived deceptive maneuver, thus a kind of rhetorical strategy that is undeniably linked with deception.

I certainly do not claim that it is always Socrates' procedure to cause his interlocutors to become momentarily but seriously overwhelmed, since it is often enough for him to enact softer substitutes, such as *aporia* or surprise. However, his strategy commonly envisages the enactment of a crisis aimed at making his interlocutors feel the need of a sharp breach in their usual attitudes toward behavior, as well as in a wide range of beliefs to which they have been long accustomed. He always favors something like a new beginning in their mental and emotional life: conversion, *metanoia* must have been a goal usually pursued, and something like being overwhelming must have been considered the standard preliminary step to open the way to *metanoia.*

If this is the case, how could it be wrong to "make Socrates into a species of Sophist who construes rhetorical strategies in order to deceive others for their own good"? This position in no way denies the existence of showy differences between Socrates' own preferred communicational strategies and those commonly used by people such as Gorgias or Antiphon. The issue is rather to qualify the difference without implying that the rhetoric of one of them (Socrates) amounts to an unproblematic avenue to truth. In the most unmistakable and typical of his exchanges, Socrates often is even cruel and does not refrain from making use of the worst devices to be dramatically helpful to his interlocutor. But there is no scandal in it, since it amounts exactly to what Hamlet confesses to his queen: "I must be cruel, only to be kind" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* 3.4.178). In the "Euthydemus" (as I like to label *Mem.*, 4.2) an otherwise rather superficial writer offers a magnificent re-

port of the extreme cruelty and deceptiveness Socrates used when necessary to overcome an otherwise unconquerable impasse. If he dared to be dramatically deceptive, he did so to destroy the (particularly strong) psychological defenses of an Alcibiades or an Euthydemus for what he considered the benefit of such interlocutors: namely, to let them discover what he believed to be both an important truth and an important attitude toward truth.

Of course the same strategy may be employed for so different a purpose as the serious deception of other people. But this was not the case with respect to the Socrates better known to us, so what could be the advantage of establishing, as Vincenzo does, so sharp a dichotomy between the rhetoric that is admittedly linked with deception and the rhetoric that claims to be firmly rooted in truth? It is almost pointless to ask whether Socrates, given his powerful communicational wisdom, deserves to be treated as a Sophist (no doubt, he was a completely different kind of man).

One should rather try to characterize the rhetorical strategies that were peculiar to him and possibly notice, for example, that the Socrates known to us had a strong penchant for dissimulation and made use of a powerful crypto-rhetoric marked by prominent anti-rhetorical emphasis; that as long as the intended audience does not become sensitive to it, such a strategy is quite effective in inducing others not to be on their guard (this, in turn, makes it all too easy for the speaker to force their hands as he or she pleases); that Socrates was especially able in "formatting" an interlocutor's mind—and so on.

A very interesting topic is the syndrome that, so far as I can see, has induced most readers of Socratic dialogues and most modern scholars to overlook Socrates' rhetoric, to naïvely take his recurrent anti-rhetorical claims substantially at face value. As a matter of fact, linking rhetoric with Socrates is in no way a paradoxical or oxymoronic move; what is paradoxical is rather the attitude of regarding such a link as an oxymoron to be put aside.

We may conclude that on these points Professor Vincenzo remains unnecessarily ambiguous. According to him there is indeed rhetoric in Socrates, and one should account for it. In comparison with the Sophists', Socrates' rhetoric is marked by the tendency not to exploit the emotional response alone, although, *pace* Nietzsche, without falling into the opposite mistake, that of moving exclusively from reason. But Vincenzo claims that the kind of rhetoric peculiar to Socrates is so well-balanced and so firmly

rooted in truth alone that it ends up being a sort of blessed rhetoric, worthy of angels.[7] On the contrary, I argue that Socrates' rhetoric is deeply rooted in human communicational wisdom, that it is often seriously deceptive and commonly unable to reach a fully deserved saturation point, but that, that notwithstanding, it is consciously engaged in searching out the good of at least certain special interlocutors. His unusual communicational wisdom is at the same time deeply rooted in rhetoric and able to exert a highly commendable influence on others, something wholly unknown to his contemporaries. Rhetoric is very often associated with deception. It is time to acknowledge, once and forever, that within a common denominator like deception there is room for the greatest variety of aims and effects.

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Notes

1. J. Vincenzo, "Socrates and Rhetoric: The Problem of Nietzsche's Socrates," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25 (1992): 162–79.

2. Ibid., 179f.

3. Saturation should count as a key concept in this field, since it evokes what may be sufficient for the intended audience (not necessarily the same for every audience, of course), what is able to raise a very strong emotional (and/or intellectual) involvement on its part. At the same time, the saturation points mark the (usually fragile) limit between the attainment of a point of surrender and the surfacing of a measure of defiance, if not of disgust, regardless of the merits of a given communication unit (mannerism, baroque, hyper-realism, or kitsch are outstanding examples of a limit that has been just crossed). It is a bit surprising that this critical point has not yet attracted much attention from commentators, except with reference to a few only-too-well-codified versions of positive saturation (especially the sublime). In principle saturation is such as to evoke *the* point of equilibrium, while degrees in saturation are everyday experience. Of course, the critical point is subject to first-order oscillations among different (groups of) recipients of the same unit of communication.

4. Recall two Gorgianic key words: *apate* and *pharmakeuein*. The difference between being overwhelming and anaesthesia as standard goals to be attained by means of high quality communication deserve noticing. I hope to deal with Gorgianic anaesthesia elsewhere.

5. Fragments are now available in *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae*, compiled and edited by G. Giannantoni (Napoli 1990: Bibliopolis), vol. 2, section 6 A (pp. 605–10).

6. The desired reactions of Xenophon's readers are not my concern here.

7. See page 171, where the theoretical stance reached by Plato in the *Phaedrus* is taken to count as a real (indeed a standard) feature of the historical Socrates devised for true rhetoric.