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Plausibility in Plato's *Phaedrus* and the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*

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Abstract: The article proposes a new interpretation of the course of the argument in Plato, *Phaedr.* 259e–274a and suggests that this interpretation can be supported by the realisation that in 273d–274a Plato critically engages with contemporary rhetorical lore on proof as preserved in *Rhet. ad Alex.* 1428a25–b9.

In the second half of the *Phaedrus*, Plato has Socrates and Phaedrus discuss contemporary rhetorical theory and practice. Those scholars who pronounce on the issue are, as far as I am aware, agreed that in broad outline the discussion proceeds like this. Socrates presents his view in the form of a provocative question (259e4–6 Ἆρ' οὖν οὐχ ὑπάρχειν δεῖ τοῖς εὖ γε καὶ καλῶς ῥηθησομένοις τὴν τοῦ λέγοντος διάνοιαν εἰδυῖαν τὸ ἀληθὲς ὧν ἂν ἐρεῖν πέρι μέλλῃ; "Is it not the case that the mind of those who are to speak well and nobly will have to know the truth about the subject they are going to speak about?"), against which Phaedrus sets a position widely held at the time: that rhetorical argument turns on what merely seems plausible to the audience (260a2 τὰ δόξαντα πλήθει).[1] Socrates explains the role which reference to 'truths' or 'realities' (260d8 τὰ ὄντα) can play in the creation of plausible statements (they guide with precision the construction of arguments, as opposed to featuring in them, 262a5–c2), then adds that a proper orator needs to attend to the study of psychology as well, in order to be able to tell how certain types of soul respond to certain types (or possibly elements) of speech (271c10–272b5).[2] To that the opponents respond by flatly reasserting their original position – that all one needs to do in order to succeed in the assembly is to say what appears plausible to the audience (272d2–273c10). Socrates replies by re-asserting his position (273d2–274a5). That the discussion should just end

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1 See G.H. Goebel, "Probability in the Earliest Rhetorical Theory", *Mnemosyne* 42 (1989) 41–53.

2 These remarks of course represent an important link between Socrates' second speech (243e–257b) and its tripartite model of human psychology (and, at one remove, the discussion of the same model in the *Rep.*) on the one hand and the section on rhetoric on the other. In the later passage Socrates makes reference to types of soul which need to be distinguished, and says in the earlier passage that the soul is a 'compound power' (246a6–7). This suggests the kind of link readers are expected to make: they are to distinguish types of soul with reference to the role the parts play in each type.

with a restatement of positions articulated earlier seems unsatisfactory, especially given that Socrates provides the opponents' response on the basis of 'what he has heard' when Phaedrus declares himself unable to do so (272c7–8). Tact and propriety would seem to require that Socrates, if he offers to speak on behalf of Phaedrus, be a better advocate.

An alternative reading would be the following. After the initial account by Socrates, the representatives of conventional rhetoric do reassert their position, but not in a stubborn refusal to grasp or take on board anything of what Socrates has said, but (i) because they believe that even in the face of Socrates' observations plausibilities need not, obliquely or otherwise, be related to truths,[3] and (ii) because they feel that their approach to plausibility somehow takes care of the need to attend to the psychology of the audience.[4] When Socrates then replies, the re-assertion of his position conveys two substantial points which were not previously stated: alluding to an etymological link between τὸ εἰκός and ἡ εἰκών 'likeness, semblance' (which was not mentioned previously and is thus only called upon now), he makes the point that plausibilities – likelihoods – are plausible *in virtue of the fact* that they resemble truths (realities) and in that sense rely, for their construction by a speaker and reception by an audience, on being 'like' truths (273d3–5 τὸ εἰκὸς τοῖς πολλοῖς δι' ὁμοιότητα τοῦ ἀληθοῦς τυγχάνει ἐγγιγνόμενον "the likely arises in the minds of the audience through its similarity with the true").[5] To fashion *such* likenesses with precision requires a grasp of truths.[6] The second point – that the psychological aspects of persuasion have to be taken care of separately – adds to what preceded by clarifying that Socrates' notion of plausibility is a more narrow one than that of conventional rhetoric, one which does not include or cover psychological aspects.

3 John M. Cooper, "Plato, Isocrates, and Cicero on the Independence of Oratory from Philosophy", in *Knowledge, Nature, and the Good* (Princeton 2004) 65–80, at 69, articulates this position.

4 Socrates says at 271bc1–3, intriguingly, that the rhetoricians do know about the soul 'very well' (παγκάλως), but refuse to disclose that knowledge.

5 Cooper (above, n. 3) at 69–71, draws attention to this argument from etymology and explains what a rich contribution to rhetorical methodology it represents. On the etymological connection, which is correct in the sense that the two words are related, see P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* (Paris ²1999) 355. On a more widely accepted explanation of the term, εἰκός was thought to mean originally 'what appears as x', whereby x could be a number of favourable qualities; see Goebel (above, n. 1) 45 and D.C. Hoffman, "Concerning *Eikos*: Social Expectation and Verisimilitude in Early Attic Rhetoric", *Rhetorica* 26 (2008) 1–29.

6 Socrates had said earlier, with a enigmatic reference to a Spartan saying, that he requires an art of rhetoric in the proper sense of the term to grasp the truth (260e5–7 τοῦ δὲ λέγειν, φησὶν ὁ Λακών, ἔτυμος τέχνη ἄνευ τοῦ ἀληθείας ἥφθαι οὔτ' ἔστιν οὔτε μή ποτε ὕστερον γένηται). On this view, craft knowledge is a skill which is specific to a certain subject matter, i.e. it is not transferable between different subjects. Rhetoric, if it was just a content-neutral skill of communicating information, would thereby not be an art, as it would not grasp whatever truths there are in the material on which it is brought to bear.

A comparison with the section on proofs from plausibility in the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* (1428a25–b9) may recommend this interpretation:[7]

Εἰκὸς μὲν οὖν ἐστιν οὗ λεγομένου παραδείγματα ἐν ταῖς διανοίαις ἔχουσιν οἱ ἀκούοντες. λέγω δ' οἷον εἴ τις φαίη τὴν πατρίδα βούλεσθαι μεγάλην εἶναι καὶ τοὺς οἰκείους εὖ πράττειν καὶ τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ἀτυχεῖν καὶ τὰ τούτοις ὅμοια, ⟨τοιαῦτα⟩ συλλήβδην εἰκότα δόξειεν ⟨ἄν⟩. ἕκαστος γὰρ τῶν ἀκουόντων σύνοιδεν αὐτὸς αὑτῷ περὶ τούτων καὶ τῶν τούτοις ὁμοιοτρόπων ἔχοντι τοιαύτας ἐπιθυμίας. ὥστε τοῦτο δεῖ παρατηρεῖν ἡμᾶς ἐν τοῖς λόγοις ἀεί, εἰ τοὺς ἀκούοντας συνειδότας ληψόμεθα περὶ τοῦ πράγματος οὗ λέγομεν· τούτοις γὰρ αὐτοὺς εἰκός ἐστι μάλιστα πιστεύειν. τὸ μὲν οὖν εἰκὸς τοιαύτην ἔχει φύσιν, διαιροῦμεν δὲ αὐτὸ εἰς τρεῖς ἰδέας. μία μὲν οὖν ἐστι τὸ τὰ πάθη τὰ κατὰ φύσιν ἀκολουθοῦντα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ⟨ἐν⟩ τοῖς λόγοις συμπαραλαμβάνειν ἐν τῷ κατηγορεῖν ἢ ἀπολογεῖσθαι, οἷον ἐὰν τύχωσί τινες καταφρονήσαντές τινος ἢ δείσαντες, εἰ καὶ αὐτὸ τοῦτο τὸ πρᾶγμα πολλάκις πεποιηκότες, ἢ πάλιν ἡσθέντες ἢ λυπηθέντες, ἢ ἐπιθυμοῦντες ἢ πεπαυμένοι τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν ἤ [πλουτοῦντες ἤ] τι τοιοῦτον ἕτερον πεπονθότες πάθος ταῖς ψυχαῖς ἢ τοῖς σώμασιν ἤ τινι τῶν ἄλλων αἰσθήσεων οἷς συμπάσχομεν· ταῦτα γὰρ καὶ τὰ τούτοις ὅμοια κοινὰ τῆς ἀνθρωπείας φύσεως ὄντα πάθη γνώριμα τοῖς ἀκούουσίν ἐστι. τὰ μὲν οὖν κατὰ φύσιν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις εἰθισμένα γίνεσθαι τοιαῦτά ἐστιν, ἅ φαμεν δεῖν συμπαραλαμβάνειν ἐν τοῖς λόγοις. ἕτερον δὲ μέρος ἐστὶ τῶν εἰκότων ἔθος, ὃ κατὰ συνήθειαν ἕκαστοι ποιοῦμεν. τρίτον δὲ κέρδος· πολλάκις γὰρ διὰ τοῦτο τὴν φύσιν βιασάμενοι καὶ τὰ ἤθη προειλόμεθα πράττειν.

"The plausible is that for which the listeners have *paradeigmata* in their minds when it is uttered. I mean, for example, if someone said that he wanted his homeland to be great and his friends to be well and the enemies to be in an unfortunate position and things which are similar to these, such things, generally speaking, would seem to be plausible. Every one of the listeners is aware that he has such desires about these matters and matters like them. So we must always pay attention in our speeches whether we seize the listeners in a situation where they

7 The *Rhet. ad Alex.* is the earliest extant handbook on rhetoric and a representative of the rhetorical tradition which is Socrates' target in the section from 259e; on *Rhet. ad Alex.* as a source for *early* reflections on rhetorical proof see T. Reinhardt, "Techniques of Proof in Fourth Century Rhetoric: Aristotle, *Rhetoric* B23–24 and Pre-Aristotelian Rhetorical Theory", in: D. Mirhady (ed.), *Influences on Peripatetic Rhetoric. Essays in Honor of William W. Fortenbaugh* (Leiden 2007) 87–104. At some stage this text was lightly revised, as can be gleaned from comparison of the text of the manuscripts and an early papyrus fragment, and it shows the influence of two rhetorical traditions which emerged early and, it would appear, more or less simultaneously; see M. Patillon, "Aristote, Corax, Anaximène et les autres dans la *Rhétorique à Alexandre*", *REG* 110 (1997) 104–125. The basic integrity of the text and its independence from Platonic and Aristotelian thought on rhetoric is, however, beyond doubt, i.e. it reflects the two traditions mentioned but is not simply a compilation of two sources. An analysis of the technical vocabulary of *Rhet. ad Alex.* and its overlap with other texts is P. Chiron, "Observations sur le lexique de la *Rhétorique à Alexandre*", *Ktema* 24 (1999) 312–340. On all these matters see also the introduction in P. Chiron (ed.) *Pseudo-Aristote: Rhétorique à Alexandre* (Paris 2002). I give Chiron's text above.

are conscious of the thing we are talking about; it is plausible that the listeners will believe those things in particular. Such, then, is the nature of the plausible; we divide it into the following three types. The first is to call in to aid our arguments, in accusation or defence, those passions which follow humans naturally, e.g. when they happen to despise or to fear something, even if they have done the thing in question often themselves, or again if they enjoy something or feel aggrieved by it, or if they desire something or have abjured it or if they have suffered a similar pain in their souls or their bodies or through one of the other emotions through which we jointly experience; passions like these and such which are similar to them are common to human nature and familiar to the audience. Experiences which are familiar to humans by nature are of this kind, on which we say one must call upon in our speeches. The second type of plausibilities is custom – what everyone does by convention. The third one is profit, for the sake of which we frequently elect to act in a manner which does violence to our nature and character."

Two things are immediately striking. First, when read with a Platonist's eyes, the definition of τὸ εἰκός is very similar to that put forward by Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, including the way in which the etymology of the term is utilised (the juxtaposition with παράδειγμα actualises the reference to the etymology in this case).[8] Socrates' position turns out to be a more pointed polemical response to contemporary theory than has been realised so far, in that he implicitly raises the question of what qualifies as a παράδειγμα for likeli-hoods: not just conventional thoughts already held in the mind, but truths or realities. Second, as the passage continues, it becomes clear that for the author of *Rhet. ad Alex.* εἰκότα are not restricted to rational attitudes, but include wishes, desires, and fears. I had suggested earlier[9] that the *Phaedrus* posits such a wide conception of τὸ εἰκός for conventional rhetoric and contrasts it with a more narrow one.

Some correspondences of detail are notable, like the use of the phrase ἐν ταῖς διανοίαις in the definition of τὸ εἰκός in *Rhet. ad Alex.*, describing the location for the παραδείγματα held by the audience, and τὴν τοῦ λέγοντος διάνοιαν εἰδυῖαν τὸ ἀληθές in Socrates' opening question (259e4–6, quoted in the first paragraph above).[10] While διάνοια is a common enough term, it is in this case a significant correspondence in that the conception of τὸ εἰκός found in *Rhet. ad Alex.* is unusual within the rhetorical tradition (see nn. 5 and 14), while in

8 A collection of passages featuring παράδειγμα in Plato is in T. Rentsch, "Paradigma", *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* 7 (1989) 74–81, at 74–75.

9 In the second paragraph of this paper, under (ii).

10 I am not troubled by the fact that Socrates speaks about the mind of the speaker, while *Rhet. ad Alex.* speaks about the minds of the members of the audience. Just as reference to a model is needed for constructing likeli-hoods, so reference to a model is required for receiving them. Given the notion of ἀνάμνησις (not to mention other issues), Plato can of course be expected to have had complex views about the cognitive processes involved.

259e4–6 it would have been more natural to say that the speaker's soul or indeed the speaker knows the truth.

It might be thought that there is a question about the different meanings of παράδειγμα. While Plato would say that ideas, 'present' in the audience's mind after their souls, or the rational parts of their souls, viewed them (partially) prior to incarnation (247c), function as 'models' for plausibilities later on, in *Rhet. ad Alex.* the rendering 'example' for παράδειγμα may seem more appropriate, although it is worth observing that a clear distinction between the two lexical senses is not to be had in every instance. The etymological play works for both senses in any case, and the notion that likeli-hoods are similar to the παραδείγματα held in the minds of the listeners is a natural and unavoidable implication.[11]

The probability that Plato responds in the *Phaedrus* to the conception of plausibility which we find in *Rhet. ad Alex.* is increased by the following three considerations. First, when Plato plays elsewhere with the notion of plausibility and its etymology, his game is a rather different one.[12] Second, in *Leg.* Plato urges that laws should be persuasive, but makes it clear that a rational kind of persuasion is envisaged, not unlike the kind Socrates is pushing for in the *Phaedrus.*[13] Third, within the rhetorical tradition, including the Attic orators, who occasionally make reference to plausibility in meta-rhetorical passages, the particular etymological explanation of the term is not to be found.[14]

There is one final piece of evidence which has caused some trouble to interpreters but which acquires an acceptable meaning when read against the findings of my paper. Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which was written with an awareness of the *Phaedrus*, develops Socrates' programme of rhetoric further, by providing a theory of rational argumentation and an account of rhetorical psychology. In the proem to Book 1, Aristotle complains that earlier rhetoricians have neglected what he calls 'the body of proof', i.e. the enthymeme, and have instead focused on playing on the emotions (*Rhet.* A1, 1354a11–18). This statement has caused some degree of puzzlement, because when one looks at the *Rhet. ad Alex.* – and

11 When *Rhet. ad Alex.* later distinguishes plausibilities from examples by saying τὸ μὲν εἰκὸς τοῦ παραδείγματος ταύτῃ διαφέρει διότι τοῦ μὲν εἰκότος ἔχουσιν αὐτοὶ οἱ ἀκούοντες ἔννοιαν ... "the plausible is different from the example in that of the plausible the listeners themselves have a notion" (1431a24–25), one is reminded that the later tradition equated Stoic concepts (ἐννοήματα) with Platonic ideas (*SVF* 1.65 = 30A Long and Sedley).

12 See Plt. *Tim.* 29b–d (and *Soph.* 236a), with H. Willms, *EIKΩN – Eine begriffsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum Platonismus* (Münster 1935) 9–10, and T.K. Johansen, *Plato's Natural Philosophy – a Study of the Timaeus-Critias* (Cambridge 2004) 50–56.

13 See C. Bobonich, "Persuasion, Compulsion, and Freedom in Plato's *Laws*", *CQ* 41 (1991) 365–388, esp. 374.

14 We can, however, compare the following passage, a fragment from the dialogue *Callias* by Aeschines of Sphettos (*fr.* 35.39–41 Dittmar): καίτοι σοφώτερόν τε εἶναι εἰκὸς ὅστις ἑαυτὸν ἀπεικάζει τῷ σοφωτάτῳ, καὶ μακαριώτερον ὑπάρχειν ὃς ἂν ὅτι μάλιστα ἐξομοιωθῇ τῷ μακαριωτάτῳ "It is plausible that he is wiser who models himself on the wisest, and that he is happier who makes himself as similar as possible to the happiest". That the use of the etymology should continue in the Socratic tradition is not surprising.

that is the text to which scholars have usually and rightly turned – the claim does not seem to be sustained: while there are references to emotions, these are limited (or embedded, as we saw) and confined to the places where one would expect them (e.g. in the section of perorations).[15] But Aristotle's criticism would acquire point if he meant that his predecessors failed to *isolate* rational argument from the emotional aspects of persuasion. Needless to say, he too assumes that rhetoric involves εἰκότα, but he uses the term to describe the epistemic status of propositions used in rhetorical syllogisms.

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15 A convenient summary of the contents of *Rhet. ad Alex.* is in Patillon (above, n. 7) 112–117.