In Plato’s Gorgias Socrates discusses rhetoric with Gorgias, Polus, Callicles. Early in their conversation Socrates defines rhetoric as concerned with persuasion, and only the outcome of persuasion. Throughout their conversation the definition and understanding of rhetoric, what it does, and the roles or responsibilities of the rhetorician are challenged. Line 453a Socrates understands Gorgias as “defining rhetoric as the agent of persuasion—that persuasion is the sum total and fundamental goal of all its activity.” Rhetoric, in this sense, is only thought of as persuasion. Its goal is not to seek knowledge and understanding, but to persuade. As their conversation progresses so does their understanding of the impact of rhetoric. No longer is it just persuasion. The conversation moves to what rhetoric is capable of doing, and who should be held accountable for the actions of the rhetorician.

In 455a Socrates points out that right and wrong is not taught. Rhetoric is not concerned with ethical behavior, if its only purpose and goal is persuasion. If right and wrong are not taught Socrates believes the fault should be on the teacher of rhetoric. What is interesting here is that the concept of rhetoric changes, and holds more weight as the conversation continues. The implications of persuading an assembly, for example, alarm Socrates. The rhetorician may use, what he views as a skill, to do wrong. The importance of rhetoric is understood between them. While they differ on who should be held accountable for what the rhetorician does. Gorgias believes that the student should come to home with good morals and intentions. Socrates, of course, believes that rhetoric will do more harm than good because there is nothing taught of right and wrong.

At this point they begin to discuss what rhetoric is capable of doing. In 465e Socrates states that rhetoric “corresponds to cookery; as cookery is to the body, so rhetoric is to the mind.” Rhetoric is a skill and not a true art. It does not require expertise, and true knowledge. Gorgias views rhetoric as capable of achieving anything, and being present in various important aspects of life, but Socrates challenges this view. Socrates focuses on the risk of rhetoric, of the harm it can do because it doesn’t address morality, or work towards a good, because the goal is to persuade.

Questions

1. Why should self-interest and morality be seen as one in the same, according to Socrates?
2. Why does Socrates refer to rhetoric as cookery and flattery?