PSC 5393 Advanced Seminar in Political Philosophy: Rhetoric and Political Theory
Dr. Mary P. Nichols Spring, 2009
300 Burleson, 710-6208 Office Hours: TR. 2-3:30 and by appointment

REQUIRED TEXTS;
1. Stanley Fish, "Rhetoric," in *Doing What Comes Naturally* (blackboard)
2. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press)
3. Plato's *Phaedrus,* trans. James H. Nichols (Cornell University Press)
4. Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (University of Chicago Press)
5. Plato's *Sophist,* trans. Seth Benardete (University of Chicago Press)
6. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, in *Plato Gorgias and Aristotle Rhetoric*, trans. Joe Sachs (Focus Publishing)

ASSIGNMENTS;
1. Stanley Fish, "Rhetoric" (blackboard)
2. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*
(especially introduction and chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, and 9)
January 13, 15 20, and 22

3. Plato, *Phaedrus* (three and a half weeks)
January 27 and 29, February 3, 5, 11, 13, and 17
Recommended reading:
Charles L. Griswold, "The Politics of Self-Knowledge: Liberal Variations in the *Phaedrus*," in *Understanding the Phaedrus*, ed. Livio Rossetti (Academia Verlag, 1992), pp. 173-190 (blackboard)
Mary P. Nichols, "Rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*: Public or Private" (blackboard)

4. Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" (two weeks)
February 19, 26 and 28, and March 3
Recommended reading: Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, ch. 6
Catherine Zuckert, "The Politics of Derridean Deconstruction," *Polity* (Spring 1991): 335-356 and "Derrida's Deconstruction of Plato," pp. 215-25, in *Postmodern Platos* (University of Chicago Press, 1996) (blackboard)
Drew A. Hyland, "Derrida's Plato," pp. 86-109, ch. 2 of *Questioning Platonism: Continental Interpretations of Plato* (State University of New York Press, 2004)
Jacob Howland, "Derrida and Deconstructionists," from "Introduction" to *The Paradox of Political Philosophy: Socrates' Philosophic Trial* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), pp.13-20 (blackboard)

5. Plato, *Sophist* (three and a half weeks)
March 5, 17, 19, 24, and 31; April 2 and 7
(note: March 7-15 is Spring break and there will be no class on Thursday, March 26)
Recommended: Catherine H. Zuckert, "Who's A Philosopher? Who's a Sophist? The Stranger v. Socrates," in *Review of Metaphysics* 54 (September 2001): 65-97 (blackboard)

5. Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric* (three weeks)
April 9, 14, 16, 21, 28, and May 5

(there will be no class on Thursday, April 30, for you to work on your final paper; there will be an optional class on May 5–optional because classes officially end on April 30)

Recommended: Mary P. Nichols, "Aristotle's Defense of Rhetoric," *The Journal of Politics* (August, 1987) (blackboard)

Course Requirements:

There will be short papers, one in the middle of the semester, the other at the end. Students will submit three possible topics or questions for the papers two weeks before each is due, I will then choose from among their suggestions and possibly add some of my own and return them to the class. Students will then have one week to write the paper. Each paper should be from 5-10 pages long, the second from 10-15 pages long. Midterm paper is due on March 3. Final paper is due on Tuesday, May 5.

Grading scale:

100-94 = A	93-90 = A-	89-87 = B+	86-84 = B	83-80 = B-
78-77 = C+	76-74 = C	73-70 = C-	69-61 = D	60-0 = F

Themes of the Course:

This course will approach the question of what is political philosophy through the question of rhetoric, examining contemporary and ancient alternatives, the former represented by Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty, and Jacques Derrida, the latter by Plato and Aristotle.

Stanley Fish argues that the history of Western thought can be understood as a quarrel between philosophy and rhetoric, "an opposition between two kinds of language." The former faithfully reflects a reality which it discovers and reports, while the latter "is infected by partisan agendas and desires, and therefore colors and distorts the facts which it purports to reflect." Fish's distinction echoes Plato's distinction between Socratic dialogue and rhetoric (see *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*), and Plato's criticism of rhetoric for "making the weaker argument the stronger" – and thus persuading its addressees to accept what is untrue and unjust. Fish, however, claims that from the point of view of rhetoric it is "philosophy" that masks its partisan agenda behind necessarily false claims to objectivity, and that philosophy is rhetoric, whether it deceives only others or itself as well. And, as Fish points out, this "rhetorical turn" now dominates the modern academy. But if this rhetorical perspective is correct, Fish's essay raises the question that our course addresses: is there a defensible alternative to the "rhetorical" approach, as both Fish and Plato describe it, and if so what is it, and how can it be defended?

Richard Rorty even more openly embraces a version of what Fish describes as the rhetorical perspective, and argues that his position is appropriate to liberal political orders that are based on and support individual freedom and equality. In fact, Rorty stakes out a position for himself that he calls "liberal irony." His work thus highlights the political significance of rhetoric and of different understandings of speech or language.

After reading selections from Fish and Rorty, the class will turn to one of Plato's classical

works on rhetoric, Plato's *Phaedrus*. There Socrates faces a challenge from the rhetoric of his day, which appears in the dialogue as a potentially tyrannical master of deception and manipulation at both a personal and a political level. The former is introduced in the dialogue in the seductive love speech of the rhetorician Lysias, with its implicit corruption of the young, the latter in its hints at the Athenian imperialism it promotes. As an alternative, Socrates lays out what he calls "the genuine art of rhetoric." In its encounter with contingency and difference in the many human souls and types it addresses, and in its consequent irony and playfulness, Socrates appears to incorporate the concerns that urge Fish and Rorty toward rhetoric without however sacrificing philosophy or the possibility of truth. We shall conclude our discussion of the *Phaedrus* by examining Derrida's attempt "to deconstruct" the dialogue in *Dissemination*, where he demonstrates that Plato's text undermines itself. Is there anything in the Platonic position in the *Phaedrus* that can resist Derrida's efforts? And is there anything in Derrida's efforts that produces the greater freedom from authority that he intends rather than the tyranny that Plato associated with the rhetoric of his day?

Plato associated the rhetoric of his day with the sophists (see *Gorgias*), and typically held up his character Socrates as the philosophic alternative. But if philosophy is a form of rhetoric as implied in the contemporary critique of Plato that we have examined, the distinction between philosophy and sophistry becomes questionable. Indeed, Derrida makes this explicit when he discusses Plato's *Sophist* at the conclusion of his essay on the *Phaedrus*, showing that the difference between the two (in Derrida's language, between ontology and grammar) falls with the dialogue's own admission that being and non-being are implicated in each other. In fact, we shall find in this next reading of the course, Plato's *Sophist*, a series of attempts to define the sophist that produce definitions that resemble Socrates. Set just before Socrates' trail and execution by Athens, the *Sophist* serves as Plato's own trial of Socrates. Yet even if Plato's critique of Socrates were a sophisticated version of the city's, would Plato himself not escape his own critique of Socrates/sophistry, thereby saving philosophy as a beneficial force in human and political life?

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle can be understood as forwarding Plato's task, by elaborating his own "genuine art of rhetoric," but making its benefits for politics clear. His *Rhetoric* is in part a handbook for rhetoricians, connecting rhetorical speech with the good, the just and the noble (or the beautiful). As Fish himself acknowledges, Aristotle presents rhetoric from a "philosophical" rather than a "rhetorical" perspective. Whereas for Fish this discredits Aristotle's claim to be a friend of rhetoric, Aristotle's work attempts to overcome the quarrel between philosophy and rhetoric that Fish discusses, or at least to defend rhetoric to both philosophy and politics. Finally, what is the relation between Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, both the rhetoric that he describes and the rhetoric that he uses, to Socratic dialogue and irony? Is Aristotle in fact that origin of the rigid "Western" understanding of speech that Fish and Rorty criticize? Or does he practice his own version of Socratic dialectic and irony, and if so what are the differences between his version and the Socratic one?