

**THE RHETORIC OF ACTION.
A REFLECTION ON PLATO'S *GORGIAS** †**

**La retórica de la acción.
Una reflexión sobre el *Gorgias* de Platón**

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ABSTRACT

This paper will attempt to comment on the tension between politics and philosophy in the Platonic dialogue *Gorgias*. The aim is to ground this discussion through an analysis of the character of Callicles who plays the role of sparring partner as it were, testing and challenging Socrates' positing of philosophy as an end in itself and the best life, and not as a preparation and cultivation for the life of action. The mimetic exchange between Socrates and Callicles stems from their common experience as erotic men. Socrates will try to elaborate his teaching upon this shared sense of longing. But Callicles is reluctant. As we will see he grows impatient with Socrates and at some point refuses to converse, or even listen: his motivation for an active life animates him, and for this he will need not only courage, but also *phronesis*, a political prudence that he aspires to learn from Gorgias, his teacher.

Key Words: Political Philosophy, Education, Socratic Dialectic, *Eros*, *Phronesis*, Rhetoric.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo propone un comentario a cerca de la tensión entre la política y la filosofía en el diálogo Platónico *Gorgias*. Nuestro propósito es centrar esta discusión a partir de un análisis del carácter de Calicles, quien reta a Sócrates a demostrar la veracidad de su postura donde este afirma a la filosofía como un fin en sí y como la mejor manera de vida, y no como preparación y cultivación para la vida de la acción. El intercambio mimético entre Sócrates

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y Calicles brota desde su experiencia común como hombres eróticos. Sócrates intentará basar su enseñanza a partir de esta fuente y sentido compartido de búsqueda. Pero Calicles tiene sus reservas. Como veremos, Calicles se llena de impaciencia y en un punto rehúsa a seguir dialogando. Calicles está animado por la vida activa, y esto requerirá no sólo valentía, sino también *fronesis*, la prudencia política que este aspira aprender de Gorgias, su maestro. **Palabras Clave:** Filosofía Política, Educación, Dialéctica Socrática, *Eros*, *Fronesis*, Retórica.

Introduction

56 The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between politics and philosophy in the Platonic dialogue *Gorgias*¹. The choice of this platonic text follows from its representation of the complex, uneasy, multifaceted relationship between action and thought. The art of rhetorical mastery is taught by the sophist Gorgias, and is vividly impersonated by the character Calicles, the enlightened politician, who seems to aspire to participate in democratic politics. Socrates, on the other hand, makes his case for the primacy of philosophy as a way of life that ought to serve as the standard not only for self-knowledge, but also for the understanding of right private and public action. Their debate is a Platonic logographic creation that attempts to present to the attentive reader a contrast between these two psycho-political forces.

The paper will be composed by the following subsections:

- A). Calicles I
- B). Rival Beloveds?
- C). Youth, Pride, Fortune.
- D). Philosophy and Man
- E). Philosophy for the *Kalos Kagathos*?
- F). From *Pleonexia* to Spiritual Initiation.
- G). Intermezzo: Gorgias in Athens.
- H). Enter Polus.
- I). *Techne* and *Phronesis*.
- J). Teaching Rhetoric.
- K). Calicles II
- L). Denouement

¹ Unless otherwise indicated translations of passages from the *Gorgias* are my own. I have used with profit the revised text with introduction and commentary by E.R. Dodds (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979). Other references from the Corpus Platonicum are from *The Complete Works of Plato*, ed. John M. Cooper (Cambridge: Hackett, 1997). Citations are by Stephanus number. References from Aristotle are from *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001).

My aim is to ground this discussion through an analysis of the character of Callicles who plays the role of sparring partner as it were, testing and challenging Socrates' positing of philosophy as an end in itself and the best life, and not just as a preparation and cultivation for the life of action. The mimetic exchange between Socrates and Callicles stems from their common experience as erotic men. Socrates will try to elaborate his teaching upon this shared sense of longing. But Callicles is reluctant. As we will see he grows impatient with Socrates and at some point refuses to converse, or even listen: his motivation for an active life animates him, and for this he will need not only courage, but also *phronesis*, a political prudence that he aspires to learn from Gorgias, his teacher.

Callicles I

In contrast to the sophists' distinction between nature and convention both Socrates and Callicles are striving to find a natural basis for human action. Socrates' assertion that doing injustice is worse than suffering it (474d-475d) is nonsensical to Callicles—is Socrates putting up a pious pretence (458c3-4)? To a large extent Socrates criticizes rhetoric rhetorically. This is something not uncommon in Plato's dialogues: recall Socrates' poetic criticism of the poets in the *Republic* (392c-398b). Platonic irony critiques, to some or even a large extent, Socrates' criticism. And Socrates' ironic tone both affirms and critiques his own criticism. Callicles swears by the gods (*tous theous*) that Socrates better explain whether he means what he is saying, otherwise he would be turning upside-down all that human beings (*anthropoi*) actually do. Callicles has a hard time dealing with irony: he is no longer a child (485b-c; consider also *Laws* 643b4-7²). His first intervention in the dialogue after a long time of silence (why does he not interrupt Polus earlier?) gives the reader a sense that he is perhaps anxious, though he comes across as quite confident. Callicles is both eager and demure. He is preparing himself to become a serious man (*spoudaios*), which he is not (yet), for otherwise he would know better how and when to speak and remain silent (*Phaedrus* 721d11-14 and 272a5—10).

Callicles is a lover (481d5). Notice the mimetic strength of Socrates: philosophy presupposes erotic longing—a passion that fuels the search for the object of love, that aims to possess it always. Love also has to do with seeing mirrored in others the personal qualities we have that make us proud, which are validated by a shared affirmation from those we admire. Socrates

² "Education (*paideia*) is guidance of children (*paides*) through play (*paidia*) to the things in which they are to be good when they have reached manhood". Leo Strauss *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws*, (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1992), pp.17.

has realized that the way to appeal to Callicles' vitality is to tap into its source: both of them are erotic men (481d). Socrates, the man who knows nothing (*Apology* 21 d), claims that, actually, he is skilled in *ta erotika* (*Symposium* 177e; *Theages* 128b-c; *Theaetetus* 150b-151d). His *eros*, as well as Callicles' is divided, torn: Whereas Callicles is in love with the Athenian *demos*, and Demos, the son of Pyrilampes, Socrates is in love with Alcibiades and philosophy. It is interesting to note that Alcibiades is, like Callicles, a lover of the *demos*.

In contrast to Callicles, Alcibiades was Socrates' student—he intimates in the *Symposium* that Socrates “always traps me, you see, and he makes me admit that my political career is a waste of time, while all that matters is just what I most neglect: my personal shortcomings, which cry out for the closest attention. So I refuse to listen to him; I stop my ears and tear myself away from him, for, like the sirens, he could make me stay by his side till I die” (216 a-b; Homer *Odyssey* xii, 38). There is a resistance on the part of many young *thumotic* men to listen to Socrates' song, let alone dance it. And not without reason. One of the dangers of philosophical study seems to be quietism (*apragmosyne*)³: the purgative effect of the philosophical education in the *Republic*, for instance, might generate a radical aversion to all opinion (even of the correct sort); thus it seems fair to provide some image to counter-balance the heavy rhetorical artillery of the cave analogy, to support and affirm civic life. If philosophy is a way of human life it must concern itself with things political: the problem is the extent to which this is possible or desirable or tolerable. Callicles is a young man ready to enter a political career. Callicles (*Kallos*, or beautiful/noble; and *Kles*, suffix from same root word for glory, *kleos*), articulates the natural erotic longing for completion that has as its aim an alluring public consummation, exhilarating because unpredictable, promising because of Callicles' conviction (and fear) that he cannot be a failure⁴.

Rival Beloveds?

A shared human feeling, or *pathos*, can be explained or communicated on the basis of common experience. Conversely, when it comes to experiences that are not widely shared, or that are somehow demanding or unique, communication becomes less commonsensical. Socrates wants to suggest that, although one should avoid suffering injustice, it is still worse

³ Contrast with Nietzsche's depiction of Hamlet as the Dionysian man in *Birth of Tragedy* section 7, close to the end. All subsequent textual references from Nietzsche are from *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, Trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2000).

⁴ Consider W.R. Newell's *Ruling Passion: The Erotics of Statecraft in Platonic Political Philosophy*. (Maryland: Rowman, 2000), pp. 9-41.

committing injustice than suffering it (480 a-481b). This statement attempts to account for human experience from a perspective distinct from suffering (*pathos*) as bodily pain. *Pathos* is what men have emotionally in common; though its manifestations and intensities may vary, it points to a passive experience, not an action: pathos is something by which we are struck fatefully, like madness, anger, or love (481c-d). The notion of *sympathy*, for instance, entails an understanding that a feeling of another is also part what I have or may undergo, thus an identification of *self* with *other* becomes possible at a gut level, so to speak. Meaningful communication depends on shared experiences. Now, the kind of *pathos* implied in Socrates' assertion involves a 'spiritual' pain that is distinct from Callicles' common sense. Pity is not a pagan virtue. We recall Machiavelli's claim that there are two fundamental human types (*Prince* Ch. ix)—characterized by particular *humors* that urge some to rule, and that make others desire to be left alone to mind their own business. There seems to be a natural misunderstanding between these two parties. The honor-loving Callicles puts forward a claim in favor of the "natural master" whose essential concern is to avoid being treated unjustly: paradoxically his defence of mastery is the result of fear from suffering at the hands (or the opinion) of others. There is a bond between the feeling of shame (494e3-4) and the love of honor.

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Socratic dialectic originates in the examination of opinions held in common, in order to perform a conscious scrutiny of motives. The intent of dialectic is ultimately therapeutic: it aims at cleansing the psyche of misconceived objects of longing. Rhetoric, on the other hand, is primarily *eristic*, it will at times make use of unexamined opinions, maintaining them in order to facilitate persuasion. To the extent that philosophy is political philosophy it has to incorporate, to some or even a large extent, the rhetorical art. Socrates is in love with philosophy, thus he keeps always pondering and saying the same things and over the same subjects (490d21). Socrates has found the proper erotic longing, which, though seemingly natural, is not self-evident (c.f. *Republic* 508b10-14, 509b5-7 with Glaucon's exclamation at 509c1).

Both of Callicles' objects of desire, though not identical, have the same name. By analogy, could Socrates' love of philosophy also be associated with his love of Alcibiades? Is Socrates' love of the people mediated by his love of noble / beautiful youths? Is the character of the man who has said that "nothing is more important to me than becoming the best man I can be, and no one can help me more than you to reach that aim" (*Symposium* 218d), an intimation of the foundation of the philosophical quest? And how do we account for Alcibiades' love of the demos—does it differ from Callicles'? The love of the people is problematic in the sense that it induces

a tendency to always please the beloved, even to its long-term detriment (481e). Also: the *demos* is capricious, fickle, always changing its mind (contrast with Machiavelli *Prince*, Ch. ix). Philosophy on the other hand always says the same things hence it is less unstable than the people, or even than Alcibiades⁵.

One of Socrates' sweethearts also loves Callicles' beloved—might there be jealousy between them? Why does Socrates prefer Alcibiades to Callicles? And is not Callicles' allegiance to Gorgias part of the reason why he refuses to listen, let alone incorporate Socrates' *logos* (497b-c, and context)? Socrates' first love though, is love of the love of wisdom—but she cannot love him in return. Can the *demos* love Callicles back? (consider 494e3-4). We seem to be the audience of a dramatic encounter between Platonic alter-egos: Callicles and Socrates, action and thought, politics and philosophy, love of the people and love of wisdom. Can the two be reconciled? What indeed is political philosophy? The eschatological/moralistic language invoked by Socrates in the *Gorgias* is, rhetorically, as maximalistic as the defence of the natural master portrayed by Callicles. Both defend their stances politically: we should not forget they are conversing in a public place (447c; 455c). Apparently they do not even sit down.

60 What is Callicles saying? His speech can be divided in two parts (482c4-484c3, 484c-486d1). In the first part he presents an argument in favor of natural right. Callicles introduces the *nomos / phusis* distinction, in order to point out to Socrates that in his former arguments he blurred their difference, to his convenience (c.f. Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1399a). The sophists made the distinction between a)- nature (*phusis*) as that which grows by itself, or comes into being on its own without human intervention, and is universal, objectively real, and, b)- convention (*nomos*) or custom, usage, mores that are artificially created for the sake of communal living. Callicles' view is that *nomos* prescribes laws that have no basis in nature. Would it be possible to apprehend a natural *nomos*? Callicles and Socrates have the same essential erotic longing, stemming from nature, directed at the search (*zetetike*) for

⁵ Listen to what Plutarch has to say about Alcibiades' character. It is worth quoting at length: "Alcibiades had the highest capacity for inventing, for discerning what was the right thing to be said for any purpose, and on any occasion. He had this peculiar talent and artifice for gaining men's affections, that he could at once comply with and really embrace and enter into their habits and ways of life, and change faster than a chameleon ... not that his natural disposition changed so easily, nor that his real character was so very variable, but, whenever he was sensible that by pursuing his own inclinations he might give offence to those with whom he had occasion to converse, he transformed himself into any shape, and adopted any fashion that he observed to be the most agreeable to them". Plutarch. *Lives*. Dryden's translation. Ed. and intro. Charles W. Elliot. (Danbury: Grolier, 1980), pp. 114, 127-128.

the true nature of things. But they differ. It is key, however, that we understand them as sharing the same longing. In principle, they should be able to communicate with each other (481d). What prevents them from mutual understanding?

Youth, Pride, Fortune

Plato did not write impersonal treatises because *logos* is always *logos* of someone, somewhere, and for something. Callicles' case in favor of natural right is rooted on who he is. There are three fundamental categories that can help us understand his politics: youth, pride, and station or fortune. As a young man (488a and context) Callicles has strong indistinct passions, which he would like to gratify indiscriminately (492c-d); love of honor, as an expression of *thumos* is his leading drive: he is hot-tempered, and cannot bear being slighted. He is also a lover of victory in the sense of desiring superiority over others: honor presupposes a sense of equality, otherwise it is reduced to mere flattery. But victory (*nike*) can be enjoyed alone. No one aims at that which he cannot attain. These notions intoxicate Callicles' sense of longing—his memory is short, and his desire is driven by the imagination, which he would like to actualize in public action (486c4-6). Callicles is heated, self-assured, vehement, restless. He seems to have undergone some philosophical rigor in his former education, and might be at the end of a somewhat extensive program of schooling: he is tired of books and lessons. He wants to be a man (*aner*) (485c-d).

Callicles is also a great-souled⁶ young man. He thinks himself worthy of great things, and rightly so. His pride is founded on his own nature; his desire to be respected has an intrinsic rightness that is *not* vainglory. He aims at the greatest of external goods, honor (484d1), which is the prize of virtue. But Callicles does not see virtue as a unity: he wants to concentrate on the virtues that suit his personality: courage and wisdom (491d). He is very impatient with Socrates' exhortation to follow the limiting virtues of moderation and justice. This psychological rift will pose a problem to Callicles' ruling passion: unless he can incorporate all of the virtues, channelling them in the direction of the public good, his desire for glory will be compromised.

Genuine pride requires nobility (484d1) and goodness of character. The proud man is in a certain way skeptical of the honors he ought to be conferred; he is moderately pleased upon their reception, for in his own mind he has always deserved them: it is not particularly surprising that he is given his

⁶ I have borrowed Aristotle's notion of *megalopsychia* from the *Nicomachean Ethics* IV, ch.3. 1329 a33ff.

due. *Thumos* is the guiding thread of Callicles' personality: wealth and reason are fundamental *means* of his desire for primacy. Callicles craves the honors he does not yet have, hence he is still all-too-keen on acquiring them; at some points in the discussion we are left with the impression that he may even be a new man (515e7; 521d7-11; see Sophocles *Oedipus Tyrannus* 540-4 and *Republic* 565c9-d5, but also Machiavelli *Prince* ch. ix). Having said this, however, his character is not portrayed as being obsequious towards others: his temperament comes across as being disdainful, sluggish towards things where no great honor or great deeds are at stake. Callicles' love of honor is intense yet diffused. Socrates knows this: one of his pedagogical purposes is to explicate more clearly the foundations of Callicles' sense of striving, acknowledging his desire for superiority and excellence, trying to shape it, mature it through the rigor of the *elenchus*. But Callicles has neither time nor patience for undergoing soulcraft through geometrical vivisection (497c3-4). To his mind his education has trained him for the duties of political leadership, to "practice the sweet music of an active life and do it where you'll get a reputation for being intelligent, leaving subtleties to others" (486c3-5).

62 Callicles is a young, proud gentleman (484d1; 487 a3-4; 487b-c). He is well-disposed towards Socrates, although he remains hesitant to grant him the upper hand (484c-d). Callicles considers himself to be beyond good and evil, and as such he has particular views on politics, philosophy, pleasure. His reasoning goes as follows: by nature, the stronger rule over the weak (483b-c). Since the stronger want to preserve their tenure of power they will have some degree of compassion towards others, on the basis of self-interest. No man (*aner*) would put up with suffering injustice, only a slave would do so, one who is better dead than alive, who when treated unjustly and abused can't protect himself or anyone else he cares about (483b1-4). The strong do what they will, the weak do what they must. Seeing this, the many weak institute laws to curtail the power of the strong. And the weak find it satisfactory to live under equal conditions—since they are inferior, it is already to their advantage to have an equal share with others (483c6). But the right of nature is different: one only has to observe how animals behave with one another; nature's justice has it that the most capable should also have a greater share than the worse man, or the less capable many (483c-d). Naturally, the strong want to rule to protect themselves from suffering injustice, and to be able to maximize their personal pleasures. This observation is also extrapolated from imperial foreign policy, like that exercised by the Persians Xerxes and Darius (both of whom led unsuccessful expeditions!) against Greece. Foreign expansion also has side-effects in the home front. Callicles swears by Zeus (483e3) and invokes the poet Pindar

as he makes his point that this is the nature of right, which is very different from the conventional formalism of Athenian *nomoi*.

Philosophy and Man

Socrates is impressed. Callicles' speech has demonstrated his knowledge (*episteme*) strength of mind (*eunoia*) and frankness (*parrhesia*) (487 a4-5). Perhaps there may be some truth to Callicles' claim. It is a common place opinion that philosophy ought to be pursued, for a while, but it is important not to be enthused with it to the point of pedantry (487d): over-qualification in philosophy can ruin you. This is the common awareness in aristocratic political clubs and circles. Every man protects his interests (484e5-6), which essentially involve the proper rearing of his descendants. Callicles advises Socrates, the same way he does his friends (consider *Republic* 498d1-2) to be aware of the emasculating influence of philosophy beyond its proper time and natural limit.

Now, there is an essential likemindedness between Socrates' and Callicles' task: both are trying to examine what a man is supposed to be like, to what he should devote himself and to what extent, whether in mature age or in youth (487e8-488a1). No one does wrong intentionally (*amathia*) but out of ignorance (*examartano*). The logical clarity of the *elenchus* is meant to bring light to the right path towards the good life (488a4-5). Is Callicles claiming that the superior should take by force what belongs to the inferior—in the manner of the Athenian generals, on Melos (488c4-5)? If the superior, the better, and the stronger are the same, then, Socrates proposes to the unreflective Callicles to consider whether the weak, by forming agglomerations, would not be in a position to outdo the strong: crowds are strongest (488d5). But perhaps after all the better and the superior are not the same as the strongest (489c2-4; consider Hobbes *Leviathan* ch. xv, 21). The 'anarchist' Socrates agrees with Callicles—his friend (489d1)—that the better and superior at the end of the day are really the more intelligent. This excellent (*ameínon*) person, in Callicles' account, would be superior to countless unintelligent ones, hence he should rule and they be ruled, he enjoying a larger share in the relishes than the others (490 a1-4; contrast with *Republic* 473c11-e1). Strictly speaking, neither the rule of strength nor the rule of wisdom would seem to be political.

Socrates, the lover of wisdom, questions Callicles' driving force, his love of the people, i.e. his thirst for fame, glory. This is problematic. Callicles seems to be ready to embark on a political career, his investment in love of the people encompasses his present identity, it is the meaning of what grounds his expectations and motivations. Socrates must reflect about this contingency: Callicles wants power and is in a position to have it. Hence he

has studied with Gorgias, who can teach him the art of swaying the majority on the basis of what they opine to be true. Socrates has to be aware of the fact that other cities too have this kind of individuals: Athens needs decisive leaders for its preservation, for other political groupings might be prepared to expand and conquer, thus thwarting Athens' democratic freedoms. Athens needs the guardian Callicles and will offer him honors (and riches he will manage to procure) in retribution for his energy. But Athens must also be wary of him, for it is in his nature to be erotically driven to risks, excess and overreaching arrogance (*hubris*).

Philosophy for the *Kalos Kagathos*?

Philosophy is a proper field of study in juvenile years, for it allows rulers to see more clearly into the nature of things—to see several moves ahead, as it were (484c5-7). However philosophy becomes unmanly, so goes the argument, preventing otherwise fine men to devote themselves to a myriad of experiences, be it private or public, from the different pleasures and appetites to business and the affairs of the city. The philosopher is laughable. High culture brings with it responsibilities, and pleasures. Callicles, perhaps in the same spirit of that other Socratic, the Athenian general Xenophon, would like to affirm both the experience of philosophy and the life of politics (cf. 485a3-4). Philosophy is the natural thing to pursue in one's youth, but it would be considered ill-bred to engage too much in it: those people will become unmanly (*anandron*) and will never be deserving in admirable or noble things, lacking in preeminence, living in hiding, whispering in a corner to three or four boys all sorts of unimportant things (485d-e). Callicles speaks with the zeal of the convert. It is interesting to note however that in some intermezzos within his rhetoric he sincerely shows warm regard towards Socrates. Moreover, his main preoccupation has not been to defend the nobility of wrong doing, but "the natural disgracefulness of suffering wrong"⁷. Callicles' speech is a wake up call to the philosopher's public persona, not unlike Aristophanes' *Clouds*. Callicles exhorts Socrates (and future philosophers) thus:

you couldn't put a speech together correctly before councils of justice or utter any plausible or persuasive sound ...my dear Socrates—please don't be upset with me, for it's with good will that I'll say this—don't you think it's shameful to be the way I take you to be? ... As it is, if someone got hold of you or of someone else like you and took you off to prison on the charge that you are doing something unjust when in fact you aren't, be assured that you

⁷ Seth Bernardete. *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy*. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1991), pp. 89.

wouldn't have any use for yourself. You'd come up for trial and face some no good wretch of an accuser and be put to death, if death is what they want to condemn you to ... such a man one could knock on the jaw without paying one's due for it, to put it rather crudely (486 a-c3).

How can Socrates' respond to such disquieting omens? Callicles wants to knock some sense into Socrates. What is the proper role of *andreia* in the philosopher's active life? Callicles is important as a political sparring partner for the philosopher: if Socrates' soul were made of gold—would he not want to find one of those stones on which gold can be tested (486d2-3)? The main point of divergence between Callicles' and Socrates' characters is that whereas Socrates is always saying the same things, on the same questions, Callicles is just the opposite, his beloved does not provide him with a stable standard of erotic longing and judgment⁸. We become what we love.

From Pleonexia to Spiritual Initiation

Courage helps to focus, to overcome or suspend confusion. Callicles is becoming—despite his initial good will—irritated with Socrates. This is so because Callicles' understanding of reason is instrumental: reason ought to be an aid for prudent calculative action, but it would be childish to consider it an end in itself. Education is a *means* to ruling. But does ruling others not also presuppose self-rule (491d-e)? *Sophrosyne* (soundmindedness) would seem to be the mirror, in the psyche, of political justice. The moralizing tone of Socrates pushes Callicles to assert a spirited riposte to the opposite effect: “the man who'll live correctly ought to allow his own appetites to get as large as possible and not restrain them” (491e9-492a1). Callicles is not at ease with Polus' pleasure in punishment, but now he is affirming *epithumetic* indulgence, as what is sought by means of bravery (*andreia*) and intelligence (*phronesis*). Since this is not possible for the many who are cowardly and 'idiotic', they affirm moderation and self-control and justice as true virtue, when in fact they are only engaging in miserly behavior (492a-d). Callicles says but does not quite mean this. He would like to affirm freedom (492c5), but here is where Socrates takes him to task—freedom for what? If Callicles' character is a mirror of the imperial city then the virtues of prudence and courage would be utilized for increasing the avenues

⁸ The good is a proper object of erotic longing but the *psyche* is not automatically or spontaneously drawn towards it. Platonic soulcraft aims at the cultivation of *eros* in the direction of self-knowledge as self-shaping, under the guidance the good. C.f. Newell *Ruling Passion*. pp. 85 y 97.

for appetite and pleasure. Callicles denies the connection between *sophrosyne* and *phronesis*. Power is for freedom. Freedom is for power or for appetite (c.f. Hobbes *Leviathan* ch. xi, 2). Socrates remarks that people without needs are said to be happy—but then so would be stones, or corpses (492e3-5).

Socrates quotes the tragic poet Euripides: “but who knows whether being alive is being dead, and being dead is being alive?” This is a Sicilian tale: perhaps we are now dead and our bodies are our tombs, and the part of our soul in which appetites reside is actually the sort of thing to be open to persuasion and to shift back and forth; and the *epitumetikon* is really like a leaky-jar which is the dominant aspect in the *psyche* of the uninitiated (*amuetoï*). This is what a Sicilian (like Gorgias and Polus) or Italian *mythologon* has told Socrates. Also: the unseen (*aides*) people in Hades—the uninitiated ones—would be the most miserable: they would carry water into the leaking jar using another leaky thing, a sieve (493a-c). A leaky-jar is not subject to persuasion. The sieve is their *psyche*: it is because of their untrustworthiness/unbelief (*apistian*) and forgetfulness (*léthen*) that they are unable to retain anything. Is this mythopoetic image sufficient to induce
66 Callicles to lead an orderly life? It would seem that Socrates’ use of images attempts to appeal to a human need for wholeness and resolution. Callicles, the man of action, views life only in terms of the ego, and not from the perspective of the whole (*Phaedo* 80-81a1).

Socrates is relentless in his puritan purgation of pleasure as the good: if both were equated, then a man with an itch can scratch all-life long, and so live happily (494c-d). Callicles accuses Socrates of bringing up Orphic imagery and of speaking nonsense, just as a regular crowd pleaser (*atechnos demegóros*). Socrates pushes the analogy further: if pleasure is happiness, then the shameful life of a catamite would be the natural result of this line of thinking⁹. Callicles is indignant, and almost “ashamed at the thought that he could be shamed into repressing his eros”¹⁰. Now, pleasure cannot be identified with the good. Why? Because pleasure and pain can occur simultaneously (one could enjoy oneself while being in pain), but this is not so with faring well and badly. Also: think of cowards who by avoiding battle may feel more pleasure than the courageous ones who put up a fight. However this may be, Callicles responds to Socrates’ stringency with

⁹ Plato’s Aristophanes suggests that homosexuals make good politicians (*Symposium* 192a-b). See Sigmund Freud “On Narcissism: an Introduction”, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14, trans. and ed. James Strachey. (London: Hogarth, 2000).

¹⁰ Newell *Ruling Passion*, p. 25.

mindless vehemence, and apathy. Now Gorgias intervenes (497b). From this point on there is a definite aloofness on Callicles' part, and he only continues discussing with Socrates to please Gorgias, his mentor and guest, who seems eager to hear where the *logos* might lead. It seems fitting to say more about this intriguing teacher. Perhaps Socrates is trying to talk to Gorgias by indirection.

Intermezzo: Gorgias in Athens

The *Gorgias* is a polemic¹¹. Perhaps at this point of our analysis we should pause to consider certain elements with regards to the character Gorgias and the Platonic dialogue under his name. The *Gorgias* is a performed dialogue, thus the action is presented to the reader without the interpretative lenses of one the characters, be it Socrates or Apollodorus, for instance, as in the case of the *Republic* and the *Symposium*. In the *Gorgias* the reader is expected to see the complete picture, in the present tense, without having to depend on second-hand recollections of story-tellers. All this occurs, of course, within the logographic sphere of Platonic authorship. One of the exegetical exercises Plato seems to be inviting us to consider is to envisage the dialogue as a totality, thus avoiding a predisposition to side with a particular character. Truth is in the whole. The dialogue is an interplay between the forces of politics and philosophy, truth and opinion, old age and youth, strength and maturity, all of them weaved together through the experiential masks of Platonic *dramatis personae*.

67

When the dialogue began Gorgias had just spoken to a large crowd on an indistinct, presumably political topic. He is a distinguished visitor from the city of Leontini, in the island of Sicily (curiously also a place of Pythagorean settlements), from where his apprentice Polus is also a native¹². Apparently, since ancient times, Sicilians have been proverbial liars. Even a liar would have to know the truth, however, if he wants to deceive an audience while avoiding self-deception. Can Gorgias and Polus be trusted? However this may be, the dialogue seems to be set in a public place, just outside a gymnasium. Presumably everyone is standing. Callicles, the Athenian new man, is the host of the foreign orator, and, being aware that there are things that cannot be shared with everyone, he suggested continuing the conversation in a less exposed setting (447c).

Socrates wants to talk to Gorgias. He arrived late to the event (rally?) because his side-kick, Chaerephon, delayed him in the market place. Socrates missed the whole talk—there are things that are more pressing to Socrates

¹¹ Contrast with Nietzsche's subtitle of *On the Genealogy of Morals*: 'Eine Streitschrift'.

¹² R.B. Rutherford *The Art of Plato*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995), pp.142.

than hearing Gorgias. Chaerephon is a long time friend of Socrates, steadfast companion in adversity, loyal, impulsive in almost any course of action: he was the one responsible for asking the Pythia at Delphi “if any man was wiser than Socrates”; the Pythia replied that no, no one is wiser (*Apology* 21 a). There may be others who are as wise as Socrates. Chaerephon also claims to be friends with Gorgias. Is Gorgias as wise as Socrates? Socrates only claims knowledge of ignorance. Callicles is somewhat surprised that Socrates wants to *hear* Gorgias. Can the two masters converse together? Perhaps the fact that the dialogue is entitled *Gorgias* and not *Callicles* or *Chaerephon* ought to indicate that there is a particular emphasis on the part of Plato with regards to which character the dialogue intends to focus our attention. Is Socrates’ moralizing tone in this dialogue directed at Gorgias? Because, as an educator, Socrates knows well that this kind of language is unappealing to the young (*Republic* 378e). For most of the dialogue Gorgias remains silent: is he rejecting, acquiescing, pondering on Socrates’ argument? Socrates accepts Callicles’ invitation to his private quarters to continue the discussion, but somewhat abruptly and before they get going he says that he would like to question Gorgias on what his craft can accomplish: what exactly does Gorgias teach? For the rest of the discussion, they remain at the gates of the gymnasium.

68

Enter Polus

In the meeting that just ended Gorgias asked the public to raise any question of their fancy. For a long time nobody has asked Gorgias anything new (448 a). Socrates couches his question employing the *techné* analogy: if, say, a shoe-maker is considered a cobbler, what is Gorgias to be considered? The comparison is somewhat unfitting for someone of Gorgias’ dignity. Gorgias is also an old man, and the previous presentation has left him fatigued (448 a-c): perhaps one of his companions can be of help to Socrates. Polus belittles the democratic Chaerephon, claiming that there is no need to have the master himself responding his questions. Chaerephon poses a somewhat more “sophisticated” analogy than Socrates: since Gorgias’ brother Herodicus is knowledgeable (*epistemon*) in the art of medicine, and since Aristophon is so in the art of painting—what would Gorgias’ knowledge pertain to? The ‘positivist’ Polus replies that there are many crafts that have been advanced due to experience (*empeirion*), and that this plus the avoidance of inexperience and chance (*tuche*), is indeed the motive behind their progressive advancement in recent times. The best men, Polus exhorts, are dedicated to the best crafts, and Gorgias is one of such admirable men.

Socrates stops Polus. Polus seems to be a master of adjectives. He is an expert in oratory or rhetoric, but is clearly not well-versed in the art of

discussion or dialectic (*dialegesthai*). He is more interested in impressing an audience than in its instruction (Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1357 a1-5, but consider also 1359b10-17). Polus does not grasp Socrates' point; Polus is hot-tempered, prone to get angry quickly, and with the wrong persons, at the wrong things, and more than is right (461b-c and context). He also seems to be somewhat morose, sulky: hard to appease and retaining his anger for too long. Polus, the radicalized petit-bourgeois as it were, tends to suppress his passion, and to be vengeful¹³.

For Polus the importance of rhetoric does not have to be justified beyond its influence. Power is what is powerful. He praises rhetoric's influence without pointing or defining what it is. Socrates grows impatient with Polus and inquires Gorgias about his art: Gorgias is a rhetor, and a teacher of rhetoric—a craft that can be applied everywhere. The art of rhetoric is cosmopolitan: this is one of the reasons Gorgias, though a foreigner, is well-received and listened to by the political establishment in Athens. Whereas dialectic (which is also an art) or conversation aims at closely following a speech in order to observe and amend its contradictions, rhetoric is a more indulgent type of communication, tending to gloss over contradictions, aiming at persuasion of large audiences. Rhetoric is an important political tool, particularly in a democracy.

A *techne* can be taught. It intends objects thematically; it can be falsified and also axiomatized. Can Gorgias make someone else an orator? If rhetoric is the art of persuasive speech, what would stop the trained student (if he has been taught properly) to convince the teacher that he should not pay his stipend, and if unable—why should he pay for something he was not properly taught? (c.f. 519c4-9, with Pheidippides' case in Aristophanes *Clouds*). Is rhetoric ethical? Socrates tries to keep the discussion on his terms by asking Gorgias for short, consistent answers: rhetoric should not make its case rhetorically. Gorgias claims that rhetoric makes people not only capable of speaking, but also able to know (*phronein*) what they are speaking about. Gorgias seems to be claiming that he can teach *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. But is *phronesis* a *techne*? Is *techne* a part of epistemic, or scientific knowledge? Perhaps Aristotle can provide us with some conceptual elements to approach our problem.

Techne and Phronesis

Phronesis is concerned with action. It cannot achieve the degree of exactness that scientific demonstration would require: it does not have the status of *episteme* (theoretical science), which pertains purely to *theoria*,

¹³ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1126 a 10-25.

and not to action. *Theoria* (a cognate of *theorein* “to gaze upon”) is an activity of the capacity to attain knowledge, which can be realized when one attends to it¹⁴. It is also understood as contemplation, which may be the whole, or a fundamental part of happiness (*eudaemonia*). *Episteme* deals with that which is imperishable, ungenerated, eternal, necessary. Its study requires deductively indemonstrable first principles. If we are to have unqualifiedly scientific knowledge, we require a kind of knowledge provided by intuition (*nous*); and the process by means of which intuition is tested is induction¹⁵. Induction begins with perception of particulars, which subsequently gives rise to memories. Unified memories are referred to as experience¹⁶. From the collection of many experiences, “one universal supposition about similar objects is produced¹⁷. The process of induction, at this stage, becomes deductive: we move from perception to the analysis of universal essences. The first principles of a theoretical science are presuppositions that can be defended dialectically, on the basis of generally accepted opinions (*endoxa*): “dialectic is a process of criticism wherein lies the path to the principles of all inquiries”¹⁸. *Endoxa* are only so when they are accepted by a substantive group (majority or totality) of those notable or illustrious members of the scientific community¹⁹. In a dialectical process, according to Aristotle: “we should state not only the truth, but also the cause of error—for this contributes towards producing conviction, since when a reasonable explanation is given of why the false view appears true, this tends to produce belief in the true view”²⁰.

In contrast to things that occur by necessity, there are others that are variable, including things that are made and things that are done. *Techne* (art, craft) is a matter of making (*poiesis*) and not of doing (*praxis*); chance (*tuche*) and art are concerned with the same objects, “as Agathon says ‘Art loves chance’; art is a “state concerned with making involving a true course of reasoning”²¹. *Poiesis* is an art, which presupposes some epistemic understanding in order to make the right things in the right manner. *Phronesis*, on the other hand, has to do with action and deliberation. We do not deliberate about that which is necessary or unchanging, we do so about aims that are

¹⁴ *Ibíd.* 1146b33.

¹⁵ *Ibíd.* 1139b28-29; 1141a7-8.

¹⁶ *Posterior Analytics* 100a1-6.

¹⁷ See especially *Metaphysics* 981 a1 7.

¹⁸ *Topics* 101 a36-b4.

¹⁹ *Topics* 100 b21-23.

²⁰ *N.E.* 1154^a22-25.

²¹ *Ibíd.*, 1140 a15-20. An interesting contrast can be made with Machiavelli *Prince*, Ch. XX. See especially the translation, with an introduction and notes by Leo Paul S. de Alvarez (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland, 1989).

conducive to the good life in general²². Aristotle seems to sympathize with the Gorgias characterized by Plato: Aristotle claims that “we credit men with practical wisdom in some particular respect when they have calculated well with a view to some good end which is one of those that are *not* the object of any art”²³.

Phronesis is not *episteme* because that which involves action can always be otherwise. *Phronesis* is not a *techne*, because there cannot be a scientific demonstration of things whose first principles are variable and because it does not involve making (*poiesis*), which, in contrast to action, implies an end other than itself. *Phronesis*, then, is a reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for men. Pericles, according to Aristotle, epitomizes this political virtue²⁴. *Phronesis* is important for judgment regarding human character²⁵. Excellence is possible in art, but not in prudence. Prudence deals with that which varies, and so does opinion (*doxa*). The prudent man knows that opinion is not knowledge, but since his sphere of activity is what men opine, he has to rely on his prudence and experience to properly interpret, calculate, deliberate and try to apprehend and reason about these human contingencies.

71

Teaching Rhetoric

To come back to the text: at 450a, Socrates brings up the notion that crafts are also concerned with speeches pertaining to their particular objects. Gorgias acquiesces reluctantly (450b). Why? Socrates wants him to accept that his expertise is a *techne*—otherwise, how could he claim to teach it? Gorgias, a paid teacher of rhetoric, cannot accept that it might not be possible to transmit what he understands. Moreover, he needs to claim that there is a standard with regards to what is good, otherwise, how could he offer that

²² *Ibid.*, 1140 a25.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1140a28-30.

²⁴ Aristotle points out that “Pericles and men like him have practical wisdom (*phronímous*), because they can see what is good for themselves and what is good for men in general; we consider that those can do this who are good at managing *households or states*” (*N.E.* 1140b1-9, emphasis mine). For criticisms of Periclean rule see Plato *Gorgias* 519 a; *Phaedrus* 269e; *Alcibiades* I 104 b. Consider also Hobbes *Leviathan* xi, 2 (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), pp. 58. For a counter-argument, supporting strong, enlightened leadership, especially in a democratic regime: c.f. Thucydides *On Justice Power and Human Nature: Selections from The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Trans. with Introduction and notes by Paul Woodruff. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), section II, 65. A further exploration of this debate can be found in Leo Strauss *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1989), pp. 84-91.

²⁵ Aristotle *N.E.* 1140b15-20.

what he teaches is not only effective, but good or appropriate to know? But are the truth and the good analogous, identical, distinct?

Gorgias claims that rhetoric deals with speeches about the greatest human concerns (451d). Socrates contends that an understanding of what is good precedes speech: all crafts have a notion of the good or end that they aim to attain. Either rhetoric is a *techne* that can be taught, which aims at some good—or if what it does is manipulate audiences irrespective of what is good (qua criterion of expertise), then it would not be a craft, but an anecdotal knack (*alogon pragma*, 465 a3), that cannot be taught because its field of competence and constitutive parts are unpredictable. The doctor produces health; the physical trainer beauty; the financial expert money; Gorgias claims that he is the producer of the greatest good—what would that be? (452 a-d).

72 Gorgias refers to the ability to persuade by speeches, especially crowds (*plethe*). Socrates insists on describing Gorgias' ability as a craft that produces (*poiein*) persuasion (453 a), overlooking the distinction between (political) *praxis* and *poiesis*. Oratory instills persuasion in an audience. Socrates extends an olive branch to Gorgias acknowledging that both of them, in their discussions, aim at knowing the truth (or seeking the *idea*) of the subject they are discussing (*tis allos alloi dialégetai boulomenos eidénai*, 453b2-3). Presumably even to be a good liar, or to avoid self-delusion, one would have to know the truth one is not telling. Throughout the dialogue Socrates has taken great care to avoid being disrespectful to Gorgias—he is not arguing *ad hominem* but is only trying to proceed in such a way that what they are discussing will be made clear, or so he claims.

Socrates presses further: is arithmetic a producer of persuasion? Gorgias senses what Socrates is getting at—he responds that it apparently (*phainetai*) is. We are reminded of the analogy of the divided line in *Republic* book VI, where the notion of *dianoia* is associated with mathematical knowledge and correct opinion. Mathematical hypotheses need no empirical verification; no arithmetic at all can be done before the unit of counting has been determined. *Dianoia* is persuasive at a level between knowledge and opinion. Is rhetoric analogous to mathematical knowledge? Of what sort of persuasion is oratory a craft (453b)? Instead of making the distinction between making and acting, Gorgias pauses, and continues working within the Socratic craft assumption: Rhetoric is the kind of persuasion that is effective in front of large gatherings—and is concerned with justice and injustice (454b4-6). Yet again, Socrates is careful not to offend Gorgias with his incisive questioning: he is asking questions, he claims, to conduct an orderly discussion; it's not Gorgias he is after (454c). There is a difference between learning (*memathekenai*) and conviction (*peristeukenai*). Socratic dialectic

might be appropriate for self-examination, but it cannot sway a crowd. Callicles' love of being loved by the *demos* required from him to attend to philosophical learning for self-preparation; it now leads him to embrace rhetoric to be able to rule.

Callicles II

Callicles has lost interest in converting Socrates (497a-b). He will only continue the discussion to please Gorgias. Callicles is attracted to Gorgias because he thinks Gorgias can teach him *phronesis*. Gorgias is a powerful man with political connections: courage and action substantiate his sphere of endeavor and this animates Callicles to follow suit. Socrates, on the other hand, offers him *sophrosyne*, which, to Callicles' mind is not enough: moderation and temperance are a kind of fear, and this is precisely what he is trying to combat by means of the courage for political self-assertion. Socrates' dualism, the extrication of the good from pleasure (497d)²⁶ enervates Callicles, who has always tried to base his assertions upon sense perception. But how can Callicles distinguish between better and worse pleasures without a standard? (499b-c). For Socrates (particularly in the latter part of the *Gorgias*) the good is the standard of all action even to the exclusion of all pleasure. This is clearly an exaggeration²⁷. Callicles wants to say that pleasure is inextricably linked with what is good—there is no such thing as a *human* good that at the same time could completely eliminate the pleasurable; but some pleasures are better than others, even if there is no identity between pleasure and the good (499b7-8).

In the *Gorgias* politics and philosophy are presented in a stark dichotomy, particularly from Callicles' perspective on the life of Socrates. Philosophy is proper only when you are a boy: the same way a lisp is cute in a child, it is outright ridiculous in a grown up man (485a-c)²⁸. Socrates, on the other hand, considers himself a true and even the only statesman in present day Athens (515a). He tells Callicles, his friend (500b7), that the fundamental importance of their discussion pertains to “the way [they] are supposed to live”. And he ponders: “is it the way you urge me toward, to engage in these manly activities, to make speeches among the people, to practice oratory, and to be active in the sort of politics you people engage in these days? Or

²⁶ Perhaps Socrates is also arguing from sense perception, though on the basis of ‘vision’, or, in the myth (524b1), hearing. Callicles substantiates his position with perceptions of touch, taste, and smell.

²⁷ Contrast with Socrates' erotics for the philosophic life, and the distinct kind of courage it entails, in *Republic* and *Symposium*.

²⁸ Aristophanes *Wasps* 44-45, where a reference is made about Alcibiades' lisp.

is it the life spent in philosophy? And in what way does this latter differ from the former?" (500b10-17).

Philosophy, the true political craft (521d9), is presented in the *Gorgias* as the practice that aims at healing the *psyche* the same way medicine attends to the body. Ontologically, nature is a *cosmos* that informs or inspires the *psyche* towards order and self-control, and this also holds true, by extension, for the body (506c-503a). Courage has a stoic quality of endurance and steadfastness (507b5-9; 508a-b). For Callicles on the other hand there is no fundamental distinction between *psyche* and body: this is a caricature, an old wives' tale (527a5-6), used to restrain the people (*hoi polloi*), by means of fear of the unseen (*aidos*). It is just rhetoric. But is not rhetorical expertise what Callicles is after for his political career? Socrates' love of the people (his philanthropy) is mediated by his love of the *kaloi kagathoi*, who, at least in the cases of Alcibiades and Callicles, love the love of the people (502e, and context) and solicit it, through rhetoric. If the people can only be reached by rhetoric, Socrates' *politike* becomes an appeal to reform rhetoric by instilling in the lovers of the *demos* the longing to make their beloved better, to avoid succumbing to the temptation of populist condescension, to strive to make their beloved worthy of their love.

74

Denouement

Socrates and Callicles are friends: being a friend imposes some responsibility to be open and frank about one's beliefs. Both are striving to find a natural basis for human action; they disagree, however, about the ontological meaning of nature. Throughout this paper the claim was made that the dialogue between Callicles and Socrates could be conceived as another way of formulating the question of the significance of political philosophy. Can *thumos* and reason be reconciled? Is virtue a unity? We had recourse to Aristotle to try to come to terms with Gorgias' *praxis*, in order to make sense of Callicles' desire to be his apprentice. Callicles wants to learn *phronesis*; his passion prevails as an affirmation of the love of honor, and his fear of failure. Apart from Plato's depiction in the *Gorgias* nothing else is known about Callicles. The reasons for this—if we may engage in speculation—may be various. It could have been that he was only a fictional character (thus Plato would have had to think through and not just imitate/copy Callicles' character and motivations), or that he failed as a statesman to the extent of not even being acknowledged by record-keepers, or that Socrates' exhortation was powerful enough to make him forgo a political career. Callicles' irritation with Socrates (501d; 505c1; 513c; 515b) makes the last option unlikely.

It is conceivable that Callicles tried to enter the political arena, but his very keenness for public action could have prevented him from having soundminded political judgment: democracies dislike overeager rulers. Perhaps in the end Socrates and Callicles are Platonic masks, each character making his case for the proper extent and natural limits of the philosophic and the political life—for the primacy of reason or passion—both erotic men trying to find the right way to live in accordance with the highest object of love, about which we may or may not be in agreement.