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*The Western Political Quarterly*, Volume 36, Issue 4 (Dec., 1983), 579-595.

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*The Western Political Quarterly*  
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# THE INSUFFICIENCY OF REASON IN PLATO'S *GORGIAS*

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THE *GORGIAS* is unquestionably the most important of Plato's political dialogues prior to the *Republic*. In this confrontation between Socrates and three rhetoricians — two of whom, Gorgias and Polus, teach rhetoric, and a third, Callicles, who wishes to employ it toward the advancement of his political career — Plato rails at length against the Sophists and their teaching, while the political implications of this are drawn in full. The connections between oratory and democracy are probed in depth, culminating in Plato's denunciation of the Athenian democracy and the well-known political figures who had made it what it was: Pericles, Themistocles, Miltiades, and Cimon (esp. *Gorg* 515c ff.). Moreover, and more significant for our purposes, in the climactic confrontation of the work between Socrates and Callicles, not only does Plato supply Callicles with a series of powerful arguments — which have been described as “the most eloquent statement of the immoralist's case in western literature” (Shorey 1933: 154) — but he allows Socrates to counter with strong arguments of his own, which clearly anticipate the main political teaching of the *Republic*.

What interests me in this paper is the relationship between the *Gorgias* and the political teaching of the *Republic*. In many respects the connections are both clear and familiar to students of Classical Political Theory. It is hard to deny the similarity between the critical attitude taken toward democracy in the *Republic* — next to tyranny the worst form of state — and the direct criticisms of democracy found in the *Gorgias*. Similarly, the immoralism of Callicles is closely related to the view espoused by Thrasymachos in *Republic* I (esp. *Rep* 343b-44c). As Friedlander especially has pointed out, even the basic structure of the *Gorgias*, three debates in order of ascending seriousness and depth, anticipates the makeup of *Republic* I (1958-69; II, 244-45). In addition, Socrates' eventual description of the true political art as a molding of souls<sup>1</sup> contains in germ the political theory of the *Republic*. These and other connections have been pointed out many times.<sup>2</sup>

It seems, however, that not all the ways in which the *Gorgias* anticipates the *Republic* have been recognized. The purpose of this paper is to develop one which has been overlooked. This will be seen to be important, not only

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NOTE: Translations are from Loeb Classics Library editions; thus for the *Gorgias*, I use Lamb's 1925. For the *Republic* I use the translation of Grube 1974. Translations are occasionally modified slightly.

<sup>1</sup> Esp. *Gorg* 502e-505b; on this, see Dodds 1959: 327-28; Irwin 1979: 212-17.

<sup>2</sup> Irwin: “The programme for the ‘true rhetor’ or ‘true politician’ sounds like a first sketch for the regime described in the *Republic* . . .” (1979: 215); see also Barker 1947: esp. 165-67; Pohlenz 1913: 152-64.

for helping to understand a feature — in fact a central feature — of the *Gorgias* that has generally gone unnoticed, but it will also contribute to a better understanding of the development of Plato's political theory between the early Socratic dialogues and *Republic*.<sup>3</sup>

The Argument here is conducted in two parts. In Section I, I discuss the place of the *Gorgias* in the sequence of Plato's dialogues, and some important themes in the development of Plato's political theory. In Section II the *Gorgias* is situated in the development of Plato's political thought, and those aspects of the work I wish to examine are explored at length.

## I

It has long been recognized the the *Gorgias* occupies an unusual position in the development of Plato's thought. It is commonly classified with the early dialogues, and the stylometric evidence seems to support this.<sup>4</sup> At first sight, the evidence of the work's dramatic aspects also supports this view. The opening of the *Gorgias* is that of a typical Socratic dialogue, and Socrates appears to be up to his usual tricks, asking questions in order to examine the views of others, rather than expounding views of his own. But the work does not end when Gorgias, the initial interlocutor, has been refuted, and in the continuation of the discussion Socrates undergoes a transformation. During the course of his discussion with Polus, he finds himself answering questions rather than asking them, and from roughly this point on the *Gorgias* is devoted to an exposition of Socrates' views. This is taken to such an extent that, when Callicles withdraws from the discussion, Socrates continues on alone, both asking and answering the questions (on this more below), and the work as a whole is concluded with an eschatological myth, similar to that found at the end of the *Republic* — and that in the *Phaedo* as well. Thus the Socrates of the *Gorgias* changes during the course of the dialogue, from the elenctic Socrates of the early dialogues, to a figure recognizable as the Socrates of the *Republic* and the other middle dialogues, expounding a positive doctrine with passionate certainty, and speaking in mythological terms about aspects of human existence about which we cannot possibly know.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For the chronology of the dialogues, see Guthrie 1962-81: IV, 41-56, and the discussions of the individual dialogues, in Vols. IV-V. By "early dialogues" I mean especially the *Apology*, *Crito*, *Hippias Minor*, *Protagoras*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, and *Charmides*. It should be noted that I exclude the *Euthyphro*, because it anticipates the theory of Ideas (see below, note 9). For ease of reference, I refer to the political theory represented in these works as that of "Socrates," and that contained in the middle dialogues as "Plato's." In keeping with the majority of scholars, I believe that the views presented in the dialogues listed above are closely related to those Plato associated with the historical Socrates, in keeping with his intention in these works of representing the character and teaching of Socrates. The "Socratic Problem" is well treated along the lines taken in this paper by Guthrie (1962-81: III).

<sup>4</sup> For a brief summary of this evidence, see Dodds 1959: 18-19; for the date of the *Gorgias*, see Dodds: 18-30; Irwin 1979: 5-8; Guthrie 1962-81: IV, 284-85.

<sup>5</sup> Dodds is good on the transformation of Socrates 1959: 16-17; also see Irwin 1979: 6-8.

These differences of form are not the only ones. The positive doctrine Socrates expounds in the *Gorgias* departs markedly from what is found in the early dialogues in a number of important respects. What concerns us most in this context is the new psychological views Socrates begins to present. As many scholars argue, the psychological views expounded in the middle dialogues, rooted in the tripartite soul, represent a sharp departure from the rationalistic, intellectualistic psychology found in the earlier works.<sup>6</sup> It is clear that this new moral psychology begins to appear in the *Gorgias*,<sup>7</sup> no doubt in conjunction with other doctrines common in Plato's middle dialogue which are also encountered in the *Gorgias*.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, one reason the *Gorgias* anticipates the political theory of the *Republic* is that the new moral psychology introduced in the work leads Plato to discuss a conception of virtue — and consequently a conception of the means of making people virtuous — that is in many ways closer to the views of the *Republic* and the middle dialogues than to those of the early works.

For these reasons, I think it is clear that the *Gorgias* occupies a sort of transitional place between the early and middle dialogues in both its form and its content. This is seen in many respects and is widely agreed upon by scholars — insofar as anything in Platonic scholarship is agreed upon. It should be noted that the *Gorgias* is not the only dialogue employed this way.<sup>9</sup> And it is not the only dialogue in which Plato raises the political theme discussed in this paper in the particular way he does in the *Gorgias*. Similar themes are encountered in a number of other works,<sup>10</sup> though in this paper I will concentrate on the *Gorgias* alone. This seems advisable, not only for reasons of space, but because the theme in question is more prominent in the *Gorgias* than in any other work, and because of the widespread recognition accorded the *Gorgias* as an important political dialogue. Thus I will reserve treatment of this theme in other works for additional articles.<sup>11</sup> It should be borne in mind, however, that seeing the

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Walsh 1964: chapters I and II); Pohlenz 1913: 156-7; Irwin 1977: esp. 191-216, 328 n.21. For the psychological views contained in the early dialogues, see Klosko 1980.

<sup>7</sup> Irwin (1979) is good on non-Socratic elements in the psychology of the *Gorgias*; see his notes on 491d4, 493a, 499e-500a, 505bc, 507ab.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Orphic and Pythagorean doctrines, which are very important in the middle dialogues; on this see Guthrie 1962-81: IV, 305-6, where references to other literature can be found; and Dodds 1959: 337-38, 296-99; cf. 372-76).

<sup>9</sup> For instance, the *Meno* and *Euthyphro*, both of which are similar to the early dialogues in many respects — and the *Pheado* as well, insofar as it concerns the death of Socrates — play transitional roles in introducing the theory of Ideas. For anticipations of the theory in the *Euthyphro*, see Allen 1970. A brilliant account of the "proleptic" nature of the early dialogues is given by Jaeger 1939-45: II, 87-106).

<sup>10</sup> Especially the *Philebus*, *Meno* (the depiction of Anytus), *Euthyphro* and *Symposium* (in the encomium of Alcibiades). The *Philebus* is a late work; the *Symposium* is a middle one; I take the *Meno* and *Euthyphro* to be transitional (see the last note). Such matters of classification are notoriously imprecise and controversial, but it is not unreasonable to assume that by the time Plato had written all of these works, he had come to reject the political views of the earlier dialogues.

<sup>11</sup> A preliminary treatment of this theme in all the dialogues is contained in Klosko 1977.

*Gorgias* in relation to these other dialogues (a) would lend strong additional support to the reading of the *Gorgias* presented below, and (b) would also help to show the depth of Plato's concern with the theme I raise and the importance of its role in the development of his political thought.

The aspect of the *Gorgias* I wish to explore is most easily introduced by turning to the opening of the *Republic* — which, we should note, was reportedly worked on by Plato with great care (Adam 1902: *ad loc.*; Allan 1953: *ad loc.*). At the beginning of the *Republic*, as Socrates and Glaucon head back to Athens from the Peiraeus, they are stopped by Polemarchos and some friends. Polemarchos initiates the discussion:

"Socrates, it looks to me as if you had started on your way back to the city."

"Quite right," said I [Socrates is narrating].

"Do you see how many we are?" he said.

"Of course I do."

"Well," he said, "you must either be stronger than we are, or you must stay here."

"Is there not another alternative," said I, "namely that we may persuade you to let us go?"

"Could you," said he, "persuade men who do not listen?"

"Not possibly," said Glaucon.

"Well, you can take it that we are certainly not going to listen."

(*Rep* 327c.)

Socrates is persuaded to stay, and the entire company moves to the house of Polemarchos, where the rest of the dialogue takes place.

The points made in this little scene are fairly obvious, but though some have been noted by previous commentators (Sesonske 1961; Strauss 1963: 59-60; Bloom 1968: 311-12), I believe that they have additional important implications. For the situation depicted here, Socrates attempting to persuade some interlocutor or interlocutors who are unwilling to listen, cuts to the heart of Plato's political theory. It can be shown that this motif occurs in Plato's depiction of Socrates in dialogue after dialogue (see above, note 10), while as we shall see, the *Gorgias* especially draws its considerable dramatic power from Socrates' valiant, doomed attempt to sway an interlocutor who simply refuses to listen.

I believe that this repeated failure on the part of Socrates is taken by Plato to be a failure of philosophy itself, and that it strikes an important chord in the development of his political theory. Though reasons of space prevent a full exploration of this in the present context, I believe it can be demonstrated that the political theory of the *Republic* represents the rejection of the very different political theory of the Socrates of the early dialogues.

The political position of Socrates is rooted in his intellectualistic psychological views. Put very simply, the Socrates of Plato's early dialogues holds that people are basically rational, that, in the words of the *Protagoras* (352c), "knowledge is something noble and able to govern man, and that whoever learns what is good and what is bad will never be swayed

by anything to act otherwise than as knowledge bids."<sup>12</sup> It seems clear that this psychological view forms the necessary underpinning for the elenctic mission to which Socrates devoted his life. For this mission — Plato's fullest account of which is presented in the *Apology*, and in the pursuit of which he depicts Socrates in a number of dialogues — represented an attempt by Socrates to reform his fellow-citizens by *persuading* them to be virtuous. Thus Socrates' mission had a political *objective* — the moral reform of his fellow-citizens — but it was "political" in a somewhat restricted sense, in that Socrates rejected the use of political *means*. In keeping with his intellectualistic psychological views, Socrates believed that such means were unnecessary. Since men were basically rational, they could be reformed through the use of reason and reasoned arguments alone.

In the *Apology*, Socrates describes his mission as follows:

. . . I go about doing nothing else than urging you, young and old, not to care for your persons or your property more than for the perfection of your souls . . . (30a-b).

. . . and I go about arousing and urging and reproaching each one of you, constantly alighting upon you everywhere the whole day long (30e-31a).

Socrates directs his message at each of the Athenians in turn. He is indiscriminate, addressing all individuals who cross his path, taking each aside "individually like a father or an elder brother" (*Ap* 31b), urging each to care for virtue. As Cornford notes, this mission must be understood as nothing less than an attempt to reform his *city* indirectly by reforming the individuals who composed it (1950: 59-60). And in the pursuit of this mission, Socrates spent more thirty years of his life.<sup>13</sup>

The political character of Socrates' mission should not be overlooked simply because Socrates rejects traditional political means. Both in the *Apology* and the *Gorgias*, he dissociates himself from the Athenian political process, arguing that it is hopelessly corrupt and that an honest man pursuing justice "within the system" would be committing suicide (*Ap* 31c-32e; *Gorg* 512d-19d, 471e-72b). The political character of the mission is explicitly claimed in the *Gorgias*:

I think I am one of the few, not to say the only one, in Athens, who attempts the true art of statesmanship (*τῆ ἡσ ἀληθῆς πολιτικῆ τέχνης*), and the only man of the present time who manages affairs of state: hence, as the speeches that I make from time to time are not aimed at gratification, but at what is best instead of what is most pleasant . . . (521d).

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<sup>12</sup> See Klosko 1980. The historical Socrates is notoriously associated with extremely intellectualistic psychological views. Aside from Plato's early dialogues, the most important evidence is that of Aristotle. This is conveniently collected and translated into French by Deman (1942: esp. 82-116).

<sup>13</sup> For dating Socrates' mission, see Burnet 1915-16: 238-40. The events Burnet relies upon, esp. Aristophanes' use of Socrates as his chief Sophist in the *Clouds*, are taken for granted by Plato's Socrates; see esp. *Ap* 19c.

To understand Socrates' mission, then, one must realize that he pursued a political end, the reform of his fellow citizens, but without recourse to political means. He lived and died in the conviction that logical arguments alone were enough to sway people to the pursuit of virtue.

If we compare the political theory of Plato's middle dialogues, fully expounded in the *Republic*, it is clear that there are enormous differences. Again reasons of space preclude a detailed discussion of these in the present context, so they can only be mentioned.<sup>14</sup> To put matters as simply as possible, Plato believes the method of Socrates to be inadequate, and he rejects it in the middle dialogues. He does not see arguments alone as a suitable means of moral reform.<sup>15</sup> This is what is implied in the passage from the opening of the *Republic* quoted above. In keeping with his rejection of Socratic psychology in favor of the tripartite psychology of the *Republic* and the middle dialogues, Plato is led to reject Socratic political tactics as well.

According to Plato's view in the *Republic*, persuasion alone is not capable of reforming corrupt individuals. Plato argues throughout this work that virtue consists of a combination of proper moral opinions and a proper ordering of the parts of the soul, while the latter can be achieved only through an intensive process of habitation and conditioning. It is primarily the need to impose this order upon his subjects' souls that forces the philosopher to seek political power. Plato believes that individuals are most malleable when they are very young. Thus the moral reformer must control his subjects' early education, which would be primarily a shaping of character, rather than a process of intellectual education.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, in light of Plato's strong emphasis on the effects of the social environment on the souls of the inhabitants, the reformer must have complete control over his entire society. He must be a king as well as a philosopher. The nature and intended results of moral education in the ideal state are of course central themes of the *Republic* and are quite familiar. What is important to realize here is that this view implies a decisive break with the political tactics of Socrates. Though Plato believes that the ideal state can be brought into existence by a philosopher-king (*Rep* 473c-e; see Klosko 1981), he believes that the philosopher without power, the philosopher living in a corrupt society, must avoid political affairs — including a Socratic style mission of reform. Such an individual “keeps quiet and minds his own business.” “Like a man who takes refuge under a small wall from a storm of dust or hail driven by the wind, and seeing other men filled with lawlessness, the philosopher is satisfied if he can somehow live

<sup>14</sup>The break between the early and middle dialogues is discussed at length in Klosko 1977, and more briefly in Klosko 1981.

<sup>15</sup>A sensible critique of the Socratic method of moral reform is given by Aristotle in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in the transition to the *Politics* (*EN* 1179a35 ff.). Though Socrates is not mentioned by name here, it is probable that he is the target of Aristotle's remarks (as Gulley points out [1968, pp. 135-38]). See also *EE* 1216b4-25; *MM* 1183b8-18.

<sup>16</sup>*Esp. Rep* 400d-402a; for the shaping of the souls of the lowest class in the state, see Klosko 1982.

his present life free from injustice and impious deeds, and depart from it with a beautiful hope, blameless and content" (*Rep* 496d-e).

And so, I believe, the political theory of the *Republic* represents the rejection of the very different political teaching of the early dialogues, of Socrates. What I believe can be shown, and this is the central concern of this essay, is that the rejection of Socratic political tactics is a major element of the political teaching of the *Gorgias*. I do not believe that this has been noted by any previous scholar. The reason for this, as it seems to me, is that it is not *expounded* in the *Gorgias*, but is *illustrated* in the dramatic structure of the work. I think this can be shown quite clearly, and in fact, though unrecognized, is a prominent feature of the work. It should also be noted that, to the extent that Plato can be seen to be concerned with Socratic political tactics and their obvious shortcomings in the *Gorgias*, the account of Socrates' mission and its relationship to the political theory of the *Republic*, as presented briefly in this section, is given strong additional substantiation.

## II

I think it can be seen that Plato manipulates the dramatic elements of the *Gorgias* to make some important points. The work is structured around a complex dramatic irony. That Plato employs various types of irony in the *Gorgias* is clear. To cite an obvious example, at one point Polus makes a lengthy case for the life of the tyrant, Archelaus, as the best of all possible lives (470d-471d). The irony is that Archelaus was assassinated in 399 B.C., and so, by the time the *Gorgias* was written, Plato's readers were well aware of the drawbacks to his particular life of crime. In fact, in the pseudo-Platonic *Alcibiades II*, Archelaus is cited as someone who led an unenviable life (*Alc II* 141c-e).<sup>17</sup>

Along similar lines, a recurrent feature of the *Gorgias* is Callicles' repeated prophecy that Socrates' philosophical ways might one day result in traduction and a trial at which he would be powerless to defend himself (486ab; cf. 521b-22c). This is an obvious dramatic irony, as are allusions to Socrates' trial and death in other dialogues.<sup>18</sup> In fact, given that nothing is known of the historical Callicles, it is possible that a deeper dramatic irony pervades the *Gorgias*. If, as Dodds suggests, Callicles actually was a political man of the kind depicted in the work, it is not improbable that so little is known of him because he was killed in one of the multitudinous political squabbles during the last years of the Peloponnesian Wars (1959: 13). If this is in fact the case, a new light is cast on Callicles' arguments in favor of the political life, while in one of Socrates' remarks can be detected another prophecy *post eventum*, as at 519a he tells Callicles that the Athenian people

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<sup>17</sup> Given that Archelaus was assassinated in 399, the same year in which Socrates was executed, at which time Alcibiades was some five years dead, the use of this example in *Alc II* is a serious anachronism.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., *Tht* 172d-75b; *Rep* 494d-e, 517a, 337d (cf. *Ap* 38b-c).



“will lay hold of you, if you are not on your guard” — as they turned on Pericles, Themistocles, Miltiades, and Cimon.<sup>19</sup>

It is my contention in this paper that a more complicated irony also pervades the *Gorgias*, and that this is used by Plato to move beyond the purely Socratic philosophy of the early dialogues. In order to demonstrate this, however, I must introduce a concept. I think it can be seen that a silent commentary on Socrates' mission is found in the dramatic action of a number of different dialogues, in the way Plato manipulates the relationships between his characters. Put as simply as possible, in order for Socrates to be able to persuade a given interlocutor of the need to be virtuous, he must be able to establish and maintain a certain kind of relationship with him, one characterized by some degree of mutual understanding and trust. This kind of relationship must be in existence in order to insure that serious discussion of moral questions is possible, that, in other words, the necessary conditions for persuading that individual to be virtuous are met. We can refer to that kind of relationship in which these basic conditions are met as the “dialectical relationship.”

Though it is not easy to say exactly what the dialectical relationship consists of, and it is not easy to be certain if such a relationship exists in any given discussion between Socrates and an interlocutor, we need not be directly concerned with these questions. For there are certain cases in which it is quite clear that the dialectical relationship *does not exist*, and these are all that need concern us here. It is especially apparent that the dialectical relationship does not exist when we see various interlocutors either refusing to state their true convictions on matters under discussion or simply refusing to answer Socrates' questions. It follows, then, that in these cases, the necessary conditions for logical persuasion do not exist. In such cases Socrates cannot possibly succeed in regard to the avowed purpose of his mission, to persuade his fellow-citizens to be virtuous. In addition, in these cases, Socrates cannot use his powers of persuasion to *establish* the necessary conditions for logical discussion. Their very absence renders persuasion ineffective.

This series of themes concerning moral persuasion could be shown to be a major component of Plato's depiction of Socrates' mission in an entire series of dialogues. The remainder of this paper will be dedicated to showing that it is perhaps the central component of the dramatic action of the *Gorgias*. It will be seen that Plato uses this aspect of the *Gorgias* to deliver an unmistakable message about the prospects for Socrates' mission of reform. For as Plato is well aware, Socrates is fighting against forces that are too powerful for him. Like Sophocles' Oedipus, Socrates is not aware of exactly what he is up against; and like Oedipus, he is inevitably destined to lose.

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates is explicitly said to speak not only for himself but for philosophy as well (482a-b). The ironic message of the work is that, in Socrates' hands, philosophy is dealt a crushing defeat. In a dialogue in

<sup>19</sup>The interlocutors in other works as well (e.g., *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Republic*) are carefully chosen for ironic purposes; see Strauss 1963: 63.

which attempt after attempt is made to set up a dialectical relationship that will last, Socrates is left talking to himself, because nobody will reply to his questions. In this duel between a dialectician and three rhetoricians, in which time and again Socrates chastises his opponents for the excessive length of their answers, he is left with no recourse but to attempt to reach them through their own rhetorical means. In this work in which Socrates explicitly states that unless he succeeds in convincing his opponents, he has accomplished nothing (472b-c), he is left discoursing to someone who still disagrees with him. And in a work which abounds with allusions to the type of tactics political men are able to employ in their defense — a false accusation, leading to a trial and a sentence of death — the defeat of philosophy in the shattered realm of argument is seen to foreshadow the doom of Socrates in the Athenian courts.

The entire dramatic action of the *Gorgias* cannot be summarized here in detail. Nor is this necessary. The work, of course, is made up of three different discussions, between Socrates, and Gorgias, Polus and Calicles, in turn. Let it suffice to say that Socrates' discussion with Gorgias is generally cordial, and he is soon able to engineer his opponent's refutation. What is striking is the amount of attention given to discussing the nature of the discussion itself, especially the attitudes of the participants. *Three* times Socrates feels it necessary to procure Gorgias' explicit agreement about the kind of attitude that should govern their dealings.<sup>20</sup> To illustrate the general tenor of this material, I will quote one of Socrates' speeches at length:

Now I am afraid to refute you lest you imagine I am contentiously neglecting the point and its elucidation, and merely attacking you. Therefore, if you are a person of the same sort as myself, I should be glad to continue questioning you: if not, I can let it drop. Of what sort am I? One of those who would be glad to be refuted if I say anything untrue and glad to refute anyone else who might speak untruly; but just as glad, mind you, to be refuted as to refute, since I regard the former as the greater benefit, in proportion as it is a greater benefit for oneself to be delivered from the greatest evil than to deliver some one else. For I consider that a man cannot suffer any evil so great as a false opinion on the subjects of our actual argument. Now if you say that you too are of that sort, let us go on with the conversation; but if you think we had better drop it, let us have done with it at once and make an end of the discussion (457e-58b).

Again, it should be noted that Socrates feels it necessary to make similar points twice more as well.

The debate between Socrates and Polus does not require detailed summary either. Only a few points must be indicated. First, it should be noted that the debate is filled with squabbles and strife. From the beginning, this is a recurrent feature (e.g., 466b, 466c, 466e-67b). Polus is

<sup>20</sup>453a-c, 454bc, 457e-58b. One major difficulty in interpreting the *Gorgias* is relevant here and should be mentioned: the work seems to be structured around the depiction of a more or less formal verbal competition (an *agôn logôn*), to the conventions of which Socrates' remarks here could, perhaps, bear some relationship. This would make the *Gorgias* similar to the *Prt*, as discussed in Klosko 1979.

frequently seen to be uncooperative, and Socrates has to drag him along, almost forcing him to answer (468c, 468d). But what interests us especially is the lengthy series of exchanges which ensues when Socrates finally manages to drive home his conclusion, for Polus simply denies it (see 467c-68e). As a necessary precondition to convincing Polus of the truthfulness of his position, Socrates must inform him of the nature of philosophical discussion. In the exchanges that follow, Socrates gives the most complete account of these matters found anywhere in Plato's corpus.

According to Socrates, he and Polus have been arguing at cross-purposes. Polus is a rhetor, while dialectic and rhetoric have different aims. The business of rhetoric is to create beliefs without knowledge, generally before assemblies of people (esp. 454e-55a). The rhetor is interested in the *appearance* of truth, and the problem Socrates faces with Polus is that he thinks that the techniques of rhetoric are used in dialectical discussions as well. Thus Socrates sets out to inform him of the true nature of dialectic. Once engaged in a philosophical discussion, rhetorical devices must be left behind. Once someone has entered such a discussion, all his opinions are suspended. The only standard of truth is mutual agreement, the only truths what both parties accept as true. Accordingly, the only way Polus can refute Socrates is by securing his assent to the denial of his thesis. The opinions of onlookers, of the entire world outside the discussion, are irrelevant:

SOCRATES: . . . you attempt to refute me in rhetorical fashion, as they understand refuting in the law courts. For there, one party is supposed to refute the other when they bring forward a number of reputable witnesses to any statements they may make, whilst this sort of refutation is quite worthless for getting at the truth; since occasionally a man may actually be crushed by the number and reputations of the false witnesses brought against him. And so now you will find almost everybody, Athenians and foreigners, in agreement with you on the points you state, if you like to bring forward witnesses against the truth of what I say: . . . (471e-72a).

Polus can bring in all the witnesses in the world. Though a jury judging the case might decide in his favor, such considerations have no weight in philosophical discussion: "I, alone here before you, do not admit it, for you fail to convince me; you only attempt, by producing a number of false witnesses against me, to oust me from my reality, the truth" (472b).

Socrates goes on to describe the other form of refutation, that practiced by dialecticians, which is a guiding principle of his mission:

. . . if on my part I fail to produce yourself as my one witness to confirm what I say, I consider I have achieved nothing of any account towards the matter of our discussion, whatever it may be; nor have you either, I conceive, unless I act alone as your one witness, and you have nothing to do with all these others (472b-c).

Thus, in contrast to Polus who cites various authorities to uphold the validity of his view, Socrates affirms that truth is to be discovered within the bounds of the discussion, while everything outside of this is irrelevant.

After a protracted struggle, Socrates is able to get Polus to submit to the discipline of genuine philosophical discussion (474c). Having established this realm of discourse with which his opponent is willing to abide, Socrates is able to prove his case. Polus is led to assent to the conclusions of Socrates' arguments (474-80). The stage is set for Callicles.

Had the *Gorgias* ended here, it would be accounted a victory for Socrates. But there is an act left to play, and the ensuing discussion with Callicles brings him to a crushing defeat.

The opening exchanges of their discussion, the thrusting and counterthrusting as Socrates and Callicles feel each other out — about seven pages in all (481b-88b) — plagues the commentator with an embarrassment of riches. Considerations of space allow only a few points to be made. First, Socrates draws a sharp contrast between himself and his opponent. Both he and Callicles are in love with two things. Socrates loves philosophy and Alcibiades, while Callicles loves the Athenian Demos (the people, collectively) and Demos, the son of Pylilampes. Their attitudes towards the objects of their love, however, are dramatically different. Callicles will say anything to gain the favor of the Athenian Demos, and his behavior with that other Demos is similar (481d-e). Socrates, on the other hand, speaks with the voice of his darling, philosophy, and she is not fickle. Though Socrates' other love, Alcibiades, "is ever changing his views . . . philosophy always holds the same," and it is her speech that Callicles now hears (482a). Thus Socrates, as the spokesman of philosophy, is consistent in his beliefs and only alters them when compelled logically to do so, while Callicles has no integrity of this sort and speaks only for effect — whatever suits some given circumstance. This difference is seen in the upcoming debate, as Callicles shifts his position repeatedly, while Socrates is steadfast as ever — and is even criticized for saying the same thing over and over.

In Socrates' eyes, Callicles' entry into the discussion implies certain commitments. According to the rules of the discussion, both parties are bound to accept the conclusions that come to light. And so if Socrates can force Callicles' assent to his own ethical paradoxes, Callicles too is bound to accept them. In this particular case, Socrates does not have to do even this much. The conclusions have already emerged — in the discussion with Polus. If Socrates can prevent them from being refuted, Callicles too is bound to accept them. Socrates points this out at length (482b-c).

Callicles' response is his famous speech (482c-86d). This is far too long to be summarized here, but two points should be mentioned, neither of which is promising for Socrates. First, the speech is a rhetorical showpiece. Despite all that has gone before, Callicles attempts to refute Socrates through the tactics of rhetoric. Second, from the highly sophisticated nature of Callicles' presentation, Socrates can be seen to be defeated before he even starts, for Callicles recognizes that, in philosophical discussion, the philosopher is at an advantage:

So when they (philosophers) enter upon any private or public business they make themselves ridiculous, just as on the other hand, I suppose,

when public men engage in your studies and discussions, they are quite ridiculous. The fact is, as Euripides has it —

Each shines in that, to that end presses on,  
Allotting there the chiefest part o' the day,  
Wherein he haply can surpass himself . . . (484d-e).

Callicles does not expect to win the debate. In fact, he cares little for the philosopher's realm of argument. It is the world outside the discussion that interests him, and it is this world that he advises Socrates to heed. That which happens in the argument means little to him, for he knows that he can always walk away. And if he walks away from the discussion unconvinced, although Socrates may have won the debate proper, he has not won much.

The only way Socrates can triumph is if he can construct a dialectical relationship tight enough to hold Callicles, and he proceeds to do so. (So careful is his effort that it occupies almost two pages: 486d-88b.) Socrates outlines the necessary procedures for the discussion and insists that the only standard of truth is mutual agreement (487d-e). Though the conclusions that emerge might not be true in any ultimate sense, they are the best possible for now, and must be accepted as true until better arguments can be found to replace them. Socrates believes that he and Callicles should live their lives in accordance with the results of the argument. Callicles had undertaken to wean him from philosophy. If he can prove his case, Socrates would be happy to comply:

For I assure you that if there is any fault of conduct to be found in my own life it is not an intentional error, but due to my ignorance; so I ask you not to break off in the middle of your task of admonishing me, but to make fully clear to me what it is that I ought to pursue and by what means I may attain it; and if you find me in agreement with you now, and afterwards failing to do what I agreed to, regard me as a regular dunce and never trouble any more to admonish me again . . . (488a-b).

At least tacitly, Callicles too must either abide by the results of the argument or show himself to be "a regular dunce."

Though one might have thought that Callicles would attempt to refute Socrates, this does not happen. Socrates asks the questions throughout, undoubtedly intending to convert Callicles to his views. It should be noted that though Callicles causes trouble from the beginning (e.g., 489a), the argument itself gives Socrates little trouble. After six quick questions, he has Callicles in a contradiction (488b-89b), but Callicles rebels: "What an inveterate driveller the man is! Tell me, are you not ashamed to be wordcatching at your age, and if one makes a verbal slip, to take that as a stroke of luck?" (489b-c).

Callicles shifts his ground and the discussion begins again, but the going is far from smooth. Socrates can't pin Callicles down. At least three times in as many questions he has to ask him to clarify what he means (489d, 489e, 490b). As for Callicles' attitude:

You refer to food and drink and doctors and drivel: I mean something different (490c-d).

What have clothes to do with it? (490d).

Shoes — what have they to do with it? You keep on drivelling (490e; and see 490e-91a).

Socrates struggles along, upbraiding Callicles for continually shifting his ground (491b-c). He finally succeeds in drawing out the implications of Callicles' views, forcing him to assent to a version of hedonism so extreme he could not possibly hold it. Callicles, however, does not allow himself to be contradicted: "Then, so that my statement may not be inconsistent through my saying they are different, I say they are the same" (495a). Before continuing, Socrates secures Callicles' assurance that the view in question is his actual view, and this is the basis for the ensuing discussion (495c).

Socrates unveils the first of a matched pair of complex arguments (495c-97a). Callicles answers the questions grudgingly, but still committing himself to the results of the argument (495d, 496c, 496d). However, when Socrates winds the argument to a close, Callicles refuses to accept the conclusion:

CALLICLES: I cannot follow these subtleties of yours, Socrates.

SOCRATES: You can, but you play the innocent, Callicles. Just go on a little further. . . .

CALLICLES: I cannot tell what you mean. (497a-b.)

At this point Gorgias must intervene. As in other works,<sup>21</sup> it is only the intervention of onlookers that keeps the discussion here from breaking down.

GORGIAS: No, no, Callicles, you must answer him, for our sakes also, that the argument may be brought to a conclusion.

CALLICLES: But Socrates is always like this, Gorgias; he keeps on asking petty, unimportant questions until he refutes one.

GORGIAS: Why, what does that matter to you? It is not for you to estimate their value;<sup>22</sup> so just permit Socrates to refute you in such manner as he chooses.

CALLICLES: Well then, proceed with those little cramped questions of yours, since Gorgias is so minded. (497b-c.)

The last exchange is revealing. Though Callicles can be induced to continue, the debate means nothing to him, and it is only in the realization of this that he allows it to go on. Though Callicles will continue to answer Socrates' questions, his compliance is purely formal. He has no stake in the argument, and even this degree of cooperation will not last long.

Thus we see the fundamental ironic tension built into the structure of the *Gorgias*. The work is constructed around contrasting progressions. Philosophically it reveals a constant deepening and intensification: from

<sup>21</sup> E.g., *Protagoras* (335a ff.); *Hippas Minor* (373a ff.); *Republic* (344d).

<sup>22</sup> I incorporate Dodds' revisions of the text into the translation here (see 1959, *ad loc.*).

the nature of rhetoric, to a criticism of rhetoric on moral grounds, to an in depth analysis of the moral arguments themselves, while the dialogue concludes with the achievement of heights not reached in any of Plato's earlier works, in the first of Plato's eschatological myths. The dramatic action of the work portrays a carefully correlated contrasting development: from some measure of courtesy and restraint in the argument with Gorgias, to frequent outbreaks of hostility with Polus, to the complete collapse of the discussion with Callicles. These diverging progressions are manifested most clearly from this point onward. Once the discussion resumes, we will see Socrates' relationship with Callicles deteriorate rapidly, while at the same time the subject matter of the debate can be seen to rise to the supreme heights of moral philosophy.<sup>23</sup>

Callicles resumes answering questions, and Socrates attacks with a second highly complicated argument (497c-99b). Though Callicles continues to answer, again the going is not smooth (497e), and when Socrates has completed his refutation, Callicles reacts with "a shameless *volte face*" (Guthrie 1962-81: IV, 291). He never held the extreme position he had earlier maintained — and repeatedly declared to be his true position (499b). Knowing full well what he is up against, Socrates gathers his strength to begin anew: "it seems I must, as the old saying goes, e'en make the best of what I have got, and accept just anything you offer" (499c).

But the worst is not behind Socrates. Shortly after the debate resumes, it collapses entirely. Callicles is unwilling to participate any longer:

CALLICLES: Why not name it yourself, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Well, if you prefer it, I will; and do you, if I seem to you to name it rightly say so; if not, you must refute me and not let me have my way. (504c.)

Socrates carries on virtually alone. At the conclusion of each long question, he asks, "Is this true?" "yes or no?" or something similar, and Callicles mechanically yields an affirmative response (504c-505c). But Callicles does not remain even this compliant for long. He expresses his wish that the dialogue end: "I have no idea what you are referring to, Socrates; do ask someone else" (505c). And so the discussion has broken down. Socrates cannot continue until he can restore the dialectical relationship, and he cannot restore the dialectical relationship, because Callicles is simply no longer interested:

SOCRATES: Very good. So now, what shall we do? Break off our argument midway?

CALLICLES: You must decide that for yourself.

SOCRATES: Why, they say one does wrong to leave off even stories in the middle; one should set a head on the thing, that it might not go about headless. So proceed with the rest of your answers, that our argument may pick up a head. (505cd.)

<sup>23</sup>See Duchemin 1943: 280-83. Note the similar structure Friedlander discerns in the *Euthydemus* 1958-69: II, 183-84.

Callicles is no longer biting. "How overbearing you are, Socrates!" he replies. "Take my advice and let this argument drop, or find someone else to argue with" (505d).

Given the present company, Socrates has only one possible interlocutor left; he is forced to continue the argument alone, replying to his own questions. Socrates attempts to outline a new framework for the discussion (505e-506a), but the result is almost a parody of itself. The procedures Socrates suggests are those basic to dialectic, but in this context, when Callicles is unwilling to reply to the questions and nobody else volunteers to take his place, there is no chance that the procedures will be implemented properly.

The pattern we have seen dominates the debate between Socrates and Callicles. At one point Callicles does seem to change. As the end of the debate approaches, suddenly, almost inexplicably, Callicles appears to weaken: "It seems to me, I cannot tell how, that your statement is right, Socrates, but I share the common feeling. I do not quite believe you" (513c). Socrates knows the reason for this: "Because the love of Demos, Callicles, is there in your soul to resist me: . . ." (513c). But though Socrates realizes that he has competition for his subject's soul, his faith in his method is unshakeable. He is certain that he will eventually prevail: "if haply we come to examine these same questions more than once, and better you will believe . . ." (513c-d).

But Callicles' weakening is temporary (514e-15c), and there is little left to tell. Callicles is entrenched in his views, though he can neither defend them nor criticize Socrates' position. Though, as Socrates has said, the argument stands firm "fastened . . . with reasons of steel and adamant" (509a), and Callicles cannot begin to undo this chain, it has no effect on him. As we wind to a conclusion, Callicles' choice of how he is going to live is the same as it has always been: he will pursue the political life (521a-b), and he has no defense for his position, except that Socrates' way of life may one day result in his being tried on some false charge, with dire consequences (521c).

It is the cruelest of ironies that the *Gorgias* ends with the dialectical relationship destroyed, and with it any possibility of reasoned argument. Left with no other recourse, Socrates concludes the discussion with a tale of the transmigration of souls and an impassioned rhetorical exhortation for Callicles to follow the path of the conclusions that have come to light (527e).

The *Gorgias* could be called the tragedy of philosophy. Having explicitly made the point that his opponent must be convinced if he is to be accounted successful, Socrates is unable to convince Callicles of anything. Having gone to enormous pains to outline the procedures for discussion and construct dialectical relationship after dialectical relationship, he is forced to see the discussion collapse, and has to finish it alone. And this point cannot be overstated, Socrates, who asserts that he is speaking not for himself but for philosophy, in this confrontation with three rhetoricians, concludes the encounter with a rhetorical plea.



Although technically, having been left unrefuted, Socrates is victorious in the discussion, it is a hollow victory indeed. It is limited to the realm of argument and can have no repercussions in the outside world. Thus Plato's ironic message in the *Gorgias* sounds the death-knell for Socratic politics. As the preceding summary shows, this is nothing less than a major theme of the work, and Plato's meaning is clear. Reason is unable to overcome those who refuse to listen to reason. To reach such individuals, the philosopher must resort to other means.

To conclude, then, the problems Plato depicts concerning Socrates' inability to prevent discussions from breaking down are not logical problems. The very breakdown of the dialectical relationship, which is the problem logic must overcome, renders its use ineffective. They are *political* problems. The philosopher cannot force people to listen, unless he has the *means* to force them. The slender hold of the dialectical relationship must be replaced by the might of the state.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Note on texts: all quotations from Plato are based on the standard edition, of Burnet 1900-07. All departures from this are noted.

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