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052185847X - The Unity of Plato's Gorgias: Rhetoric, Justice, and the Philosophic Life

Devin Stauffer

Excerpt

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## Introduction

Few philosophers have endured more criticism and abuse in modern times than Plato. As one of the great figures of the classical tradition, Plato was subjected to powerful attacks by the founders of modern philosophy and their followers, who set out to succeed where they thought the naïve and utopian ancients had failed. And the attacks on Plato continue unabated today, as postmodernists look back to his works to find the source of the faith in reason that they want to root out of the West. Yet, for all that, Plato has not lost his power to attract and enchant. Those who first sought to overthrow the intellectual authority of classical philosophy, men such as Machiavelli and Hobbes, would be amazed to learn that their foe continues to attract partisans and even devotees. And more recent critics, such as Derrida and Rorty, are similarly dismayed that their efforts finally to put Plato to rest have not succeeded. Is it not a strange feature of our late modern or postmodern age that there still remains serious interest in Plato?

Yet perhaps the very difference between Plato and his critics, from the early moderns to those of our time, can help us to understand why his works have not lost their appeal. For one of the most powerful things drawing readers back to Plato today is their sense that his works contain a richer and truer account of human life, of the soul and its deepest concerns, than one can find even in the greatest works of modern philosophy. In particular, many sense that the modern philosophers, by emphasizing man's undeniable fear, self-interest, and desire for power, fail to do justice to the loftier aspects of our humanity and

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to the highest aspirations that are, if not always the most effective, perhaps the most revealing expressions of human nature. And more simply, readers are drawn to Plato by what has always drawn readers to him, but now is made all the more appealing by its absence from modern thought: an answer to the question of the best life, conveyed by a moving portrait of a noble figure who lived that life.

Of course, to feel an initial attraction to a thinker is not yet to understand his thought, to say nothing of judging its adequacy. Especially for those of us who are drawn to Plato by an enchantment with his vision of the philosophic life as it was lived by Socrates, that initial attraction, if it is to be more than the idle dreaming that his modern critics claim Plato encourages, must transform itself into a more serious encounter with his work. What precisely *is* Plato's account of the philosophic life? How is it related, for instance, to his understanding of virtue, his estimation of political life, and his analysis of human nature and human concerns? When we probe questions such as these, we are likely to find ourselves before long in a state that Plato would have called *aporia* – a state of perplexity, or, translated more literally, a state of being “without a path.” The primary source of our *aporia* is the apparently chaotic, strikingly foreign, and undeniably daunting world that one enters in reading Plato's dialogues. Plato's dialogues, for all of their immediate attractiveness, are extremely complex and difficult, perhaps especially so on basic questions such as those I have just posed. It is true – and part of their appeal – that Plato's works address some of the simplest questions of human life. But they treat those questions in ways that are anything but simple or straightforward. They certainly were not written for readers with the habits formed by our modern embrace of convenience and efficiency. The experience of reading Plato, then, is likely for many of us to be a mixture of attraction and frustration, or of initial attraction followed by a sense of the great difficulty of understanding Plato's treatment of the issues under discussion in the dialogues.

This mixed experience in reading Plato is provoked by no dialogue more than by the *Gorgias*. On the one hand, Plato presents Socrates

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in the *Gorgias* as the noble figure whose intransigent defense of moral principle and the philosophic life draws so many admirers. Especially in his dispute with Callicles, the most outspoken critic of the philosophic life that we find in Plato's *corpus*, Socrates comes to sight as a hero. In this most memorable part of the dialogue, Socrates confronts and responds to an attack that has been called, in a famous remark by Paul Shorey, "the most eloquent statement of the immoralist's case in European literature."<sup>1</sup> The tension and gravity of the conflict between Socrates and Callicles have led commentators to speak of the "unforgettable intensity," the "moral fervor and splendor," the "vast scope and profundity," and the "peculiar emotional power" of the *Gorgias*.<sup>2</sup> If a story attributed by Themistius to a lost dialogue of Aristotle is to be believed, they are probably also what led a Corinthian farmer, after reading the *Gorgias*, to abandon his farm and devote his life to Platonic philosophy.<sup>3</sup> More broadly, the conflict between Socrates and Callicles – especially the heroic role that Socrates plays in that conflict – makes it easy to understand why the *Gorgias* has always been regarded as one of Plato's greatest works, and why it has been popular in every age in which Plato has been read, including his own.

On the other hand, the conflict between Socrates and Callicles occupies, roughly speaking, only half of the dialogue. And when one surveys the dialogue as a whole, it quickly becomes a bewildering maze without any clear unifying theme. Largely for this reason, most

1. Shorey, *What Plato Said*, 154; Shorey is quoted by Dodds, *Gorgias*, 266, Newell, *Ruling Passion*, 10–11, and Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 126. See also Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 22: "Once at least in the history of philosophy the amoralist has been correctly represented as an alarming figure, in the character of Callicles." So powerful is Callicles' attack on Socrates that several commentators have expressed the view that Plato must have felt considerable sympathy with it. See Dodds, *Gorgias*, 13–14; Jaeger, *Paideia*, 2:137–8; Kagan, *The Great Dialogue*, 161.
2. These phrases are from Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 125; Taylor, *Plato*, 103; Jaeger, *Paideia*, 2:126; Dodds, *Gorgias*, 31.
3. The passage from Themistius can be found in Grote, *Plato, and the Other Companions of Sokrates*, 2:317n.

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interpretations of the *Gorgias* have focused almost entirely on the second half of the dialogue, especially in their general pronouncements of what the dialogue is about. We are told, for instance, that the dialogue is about “the challenge of defending the basic principles of Socratic morality against attack from spokesmen for its most drastic alternative”;<sup>4</sup> that its purpose is “to put a typical life of devotion to the supra-personal good against the typical theory of the ‘will to power’ at its best” such that “life and the way it should be lived . . . is the real theme”;<sup>5</sup> and that “in the *Gorgias* Plato sets out to defend the Socratic belief about justice” especially by “compelling even a highly critical interlocutor to accept the Socratic belief.”<sup>6</sup> These claims reflect the most widely held view of the dialogue. Broadly speaking, the *Gorgias* is most often read as a crucial part of Plato's presentation of – or, according to some, a crucial stage in his development of – a moral position capable of overcoming the arguments and attractions of even the most radical immoralism.<sup>7</sup> Yet this view of the dialogue takes its bearings primarily by the section of the dialogue in which Socrates confronts Callicles. The claims I have quoted display the common but questionable tendency to begin from the second half of the *Gorgias* in trying to make sense of the whole. Admittedly gripping and important as the Callicles section is, it is doubtful that the unity of the dialogue and its true theme can be understood without an adequate consideration of the entire dialogue. Attempts to treat the dialogue as a whole, however,

4. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 127.

5. Taylor, *Plato*, 106.

6. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*, 95.

7. Allowing for considerable differences of nuance and emphasis, this view is especially common in works that treat the *Gorgias* in broader studies of Plato's thought or that discuss the development of classical philosophy as a whole. For a sense of the very wide range of sources in which a version of this view can be found, see, in addition to the sources from which I have quoted above, Jaeger, *Paideia*, 2:136–59; Shorey, *What Plato Said*, 141–50; Voegelin, *Plato*, 24–45; Santas, *Socrates*, 218–21; Seung, *Plato Rediscovered*, 1–7; Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, 156–60; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 140–1.

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are rare, and, in my view, none has successfully explained how its different parts fit together.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, the temptation to move quickly to the conflict between Socrates and Callicles is great. Not only are the intensity and gravity of that section attractive, but even a brief overview of the movement of the dialogue can show how complex and apparently disorganized it is. Before the battle between Socrates and Callicles, the dialogue opens with Socrates' arrival at a site in Athens where the famous rhetorician Gorgias has just finished giving a display of his rhetorical powers.

8. While there have been many discussions of the *Gorgias* in broad studies of Plato's thought, these discussions generally make only cursory mention of large sections of the dialogue, often virtually ignoring the first half. This is true also of the many articles that have been written on the *Gorgias*. Of the few book-length works devoted entirely to the *Gorgias*, two are the well-known commentaries of Terence Irwin and E. R. Dodds. Since these are written as commentaries accompanying editions of the Greek text, however, they provide many interpretive remarks without offering a complete or unified interpretation of the dialogue as a whole. Beyond the works of Irwin and Dodds, Ilham Dilman's *Morality and the Inner Life* is subtitled *A Study in Plato's Gorgias*. Dilman himself stresses, however, that his book is intended less as a close textual interpretation of the dialogue than as a wide-ranging reflection on "a cluster of questions presented in the *Gorgias*" approached "as having a life independent of the dialogue" (vii). Dilman's study, in any case, proceeds in a very different way from my own, and it leads to very different conclusions. The same is true of George Plochmann and Franklin Robinson's *A Friendly Companion to Plato's Gorgias*. While Plochmann and Robinson search, as I do, for the unity of the dialogue, they end up, in their final attempt to "provide an intuitive awareness" of "the unity that binds together the dialogue," listing nine conclusions that have more to do with unity in the cosmos as a whole than with unity in the sense of the coherence of the parts of the *Gorgias* itself (see 350–1). Finally, one of the most interesting and impressive interpretations of the *Gorgias* is Seth Benardete's *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy*, half of which is devoted to the *Gorgias*. Although I have benefited from Benardete's study, his many fascinating observations are pieced together in a cryptic fashion that seems intended more to point the reader down intriguing roads of reflection than to present a clear path that leads from the surface of the text to a unified interpretation of the dialogue.

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Socrates speaks first with Gorgias and then with a young admirer of Gorgias named Polus. A summary of the main themes discussed in these conversations and then in the Callicles section can suffice to bring out the difficulty of grasping their unity. After discussing with Gorgias the character of the art of rhetoric and its relationship to justice, Socrates argues with Polus about the nobility of rhetoric, and then engages him in a longer argument about the temptations of tyranny and about whether it is worse to do injustice or to suffer it. The conclusion of Socrates' argument with Polus – in particular, the conclusion they reach that doing injustice is indeed worse than suffering it – prompts Callicles' entry into the conversation. Callicles responds to a brief provocation from Socrates by delivering a long, vehement attack both on the position Socrates took in his argument with Polus and on Socrates' way of life as a whole. But following Callicles' attack, which seems initially to bring a measure of clarity to the dialogue by directing the conversation to the question of the best life, Socrates returns first to the question of justice, then abruptly turns away from that question to discuss moderation and self-control. The discussion of moderation and self-control is followed by a critique of hedonism, after which Socrates returns to the theme of rhetoric, turns for some time to the issues of virtue and the proper aims of politics, and then finally comes back again to rhetoric and to the contest between the philosophic life and the political life. This is an oversimplified summary of the dialogue that does not include, among other things, the theme of punishment, the issue of self-protection, or the account of the afterlife at the end of the dialogue. What could possibly tie this apparent chaos of a dialogue together?

The unity of the *Gorgias* can be brought out only by a careful study of the dialogue as a whole, one that follows its every twist and turn, constantly examining the connections between its various parts. Beyond even what is typical of Plato's dialogues, the *Gorgias* is full of strange passages, questionable arguments, and confusing transitions. Only a reading of the dialogue that begins from the surface and works through the complexities that appear even or especially on the surface can

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reasonably hope to uncover what the dialogue is really about. Such a reading is what I have attempted in what follows. I have tried to avoid imposing an order on the dialogue that is not its own. Rather than defending from the outset a thesis about the dialogue's meaning or ultimate aim, I have attempted to follow the path of the dialogue itself, raising and wrestling with questions as they come up in the course of thinking one's way through the text, and allowing the themes of the dialogue and the connections between them to disclose themselves gradually. In short, I have tried in my writing to reproduce something close to my own experience of reading and reflecting on the dialogue.

Admittedly, my approach requires some departure from the most common modes of analysis and presentation, which have advantages in terms of clarity and structure of argument. Yet it seems to me that Plato's own art of writing requires a mode of reading and writing that cannot be tightly bound by conventional practices. Without entering deeply here into the complex arguments over the significance of Plato's dialogue form, let me state my basic view.<sup>9</sup> Because Plato's dialogues are written as unfolding dramas, full of puzzles, perplexities, and even intentionally flawed arguments, they require readers to do more than take in information and arguments as they read. They require readers to wonder, to question, even to speculate and then test speculations against later passages, and, above all, to think about the issues under discussion in a way that at once leads beyond the text and also returns continually to the details and movement of the conversations Plato presents. In my view, what more conventional approaches to reading and writing on Plato gain in clarity and orderliness of presentation,

9. There are a number of excellent discussions of the character of Plato's dialogues and how they should be read. Those that I have found most valuable are Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno*, 3–31; Strauss, *The City and Man*, 50–62, "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy," 348–52; Alfarabi, "Plato's Laws," 84–85; Schleiermacher, *Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato*, 17–18; Bolotin, "The Life of Philosophy and the Immortality of the Soul," 39–41, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship*, 12–13; Sallis, *Being and Logos*, 1–6; Ahrens Dorf, *The Death of Socrates and the Life of Philosophy*, 3–7.

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they lose in arbitrariness of interpretation, which is the result of taking passages out of context and imposing on Plato's writings a structure that is not their own. For these reasons, too, I think it is counterproductive to give at the outset of an interpretation a full description of where one is headed. The journey through a Platonic dialogue should be a journey of gradual discovery, and that process is distorted if the destination is announced before one begins.

Nevertheless, let me try to provide some orientation by saying a word about the issues in the *Gorgias* and the place of the dialogue in Plato's *corpus*. In the following study, as I have indicated, I try to follow the movement of the *Gorgias* on its own terms or as it comes to sight by following the movement of the text. Yet it is important to keep in the back of one's mind the relationship of any particular dialogue to the broader whole composed of all of Plato's dialogues. But what does that mean? Since there are many ways of viewing Plato's *corpus* – many ways of looking at its overall purpose, many ways of ordering the dialogues, many ways of dividing them into groups, and so forth – any attempt to consider the place of a single dialogue would seem to cast one into a sea of difficult questions that have been the subject of long-running controversies. As with the question of the significance of Plato's dialogue form, these controversies are too vast to be considered in detail here.<sup>10</sup> I would submit, however, that it makes the most sense to approach Plato's *corpus* in the way that is suggested by a sweeping look at the most obvious theme of the dialogues as a whole. That theme is the life of Socrates. Accordingly, Plato himself would seem to recommend an approach that focuses, in the first place, on his account of Socrates' life, and that follows the indications the dialogues provide about the contribution each of them makes to understanding that life.

10. The most helpful discussion of these controversies, and especially of their roots in the nineteenth century, divide between Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Friedrich Hermann, is Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 36–48. For two discussions that approach the same issues from a perspective different from Kahn's, see Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*, 3–16, and Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 45–106.

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Unlike the common efforts to uncover the development of Plato's own thought as it purportedly moved away from its Socratic origins, this approach is in accord not only with the surface of the dialogues but also with Plato's claim that there are no writings of Plato but that those that bear his name belong to a Socrates who has become "beautiful and young."<sup>11</sup>

If one takes this approach to Plato's dialogues, the dialogue that most immediately suggests itself as the proper starting point, and as a guide to the others, is the *Apology of Socrates*. Although this dialogue occurs near the end of Socrates' life, it contains the most direct portrait of that life. Socrates' defense speech at his trial, as it is reported in the *Apology*, even includes a kind of Socratic autobiography. According to this autobiography, the most important event in Socrates' life – the event that gave his life its distinctive character – was a report he received of a pronouncement by the priestess who spoke for the god at Delphi that no one surpassed him in wisdom.<sup>12</sup> Socrates responded to this report by devoting much of the rest of his life to the examination of his fellow citizens as a way of testing the god's claim, and thus was born his distinctive form of philosophizing.<sup>13</sup> Now, whatever one makes of Socrates' response to the pronouncement of the Delphic Oracle – whether one admires it as a model of piety, or raises an eyebrow at Socrates' unwillingness simply to bow to the authority of the god – one of its outcomes, as Socrates stresses, was to arouse the ire of many of Socrates' fellow citizens. This outcome would have been

11. *Second Letter* 314c2–4. While Plato's remark points to the central importance of his portrait of Socrates, it also suggests that that portrait may be an embellishment of the historical Socrates. This remark from the *Second Letter* should be considered together with *Seventh Letter* 341b7–342a1, another important statement by Plato on his own writings that is in harmony with the statement in the *Second Letter*. Although the authenticity of Plato's letters has been challenged, a strong defense of their authenticity is Morrow, *Plato's Epistles*, 3–16. See also Caskey, "Again – Plato's *Seventh Letter*," 220–27; Rosen, *Plato's Symposium*, xiii–xviii.

12. *Apology* 20c4–21b5.

13. *Apology* 21b8–23c1.

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predictable, for Socrates' examinations of the claims to wisdom made by some of his fellow citizens not only led to the humiliation of a number of prominent Athenians, but also implied a refusal on his part to accept the conventional or orthodox views of justice, nobility, and other important matters.<sup>14</sup> To make matters worse, Socrates did not confine this refusal to himself but spread it to at least some of the young Athenians who became his followers.<sup>15</sup> Even in Athens, which was far from the strictest of the ancient cities, such heterodoxy did more than make one an outcast from the comfortable circle of communal belief. We must not forget the simple fact that Socrates was on trial for his life on charges of not believing in the gods of the city and corrupting the young. If the fury of the Athenians is hard for us to grasp, that is a reflection of the great difference between our own modern liberal political orders and earlier ones that were not shaped by the modern efforts to do away with the conflict that led to Socrates' execution. In short, the picture of Socrates' life that emerges from the *Apology* is one that confirms and goes a considerable way toward explaining the conflict between that life and the city. The *Apology* teaches us never to forget Socrates' activity of relentless questioning, nor the ultimate response to that activity by the city of Athens.

The picture of Socrates' life that emerges from the *Apology* should remain in our minds as we approach Plato's other dialogues. This is especially true of the *Gorgias*, for the *Gorgias* and the *Apology* are linked in both minor and major ways. One of the minor links comes at the very beginning of the *Gorgias*, where Socrates arrives on the scene together with his friend Chaerephon, the same man whom he credits with asking the crucial question of the Delphic Oracle in the *Apology*. Of the connections of more obvious significance, the clearest is the prominence of rhetoric as a theme in both dialogues. In the *Apology*, Socrates denies that he either practices or teaches rhetoric, and he traces the city's hostility toward him, in part, to the fact that he was slandered

14. See especially *Apology* 21c3–23a7.

15. See *Apology* 23c2–d1, 33b9–c4.