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# G O R G I A S .

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## INTRODUCTION.

IN several of the dialogues of Plato doubts have arisen among his interpreters as to which of the various subjects discussed in them is the main thesis. The speakers have the freedom of conversation; no severe rules of art restrict them, and sometimes we are inclined to think, with one of the *dramatis personae* in the *Theaetetus* (p. 177), that the digressions have the greater interest. Yet in the most irregular of the dialogues there is also a certain natural growth or unity; the beginning is not forgotten at the end, and numerous allusions and references are interspersed, which form the loose connecting links of the whole. We must not neglect this unity, but neither must we attempt to confine the Platonic dialogue on the Procrustean bed of a single idea (cp. Introduction to the *Phaedrus*).

Two tendencies seem to have beset the interpreters of Plato in this matter. First, they have endeavoured to hang the dialogues upon one another by the very slightest threads; and this has led to opposite and contradictory assertions respecting their order and sequence. The mantle of Schleiermacher has descended upon his successors, who have applied his method with the most various results. The value and use of the method has been hardly, if at all, examined either by him or them. Secondly, they have extended almost indefinitely the scope of each separate dialogue; in this way they think that they have escaped all difficulties, not seeing that what they have gained in generality they have lost in truth and distinctness. Metaphysical conceptions easily pass into one another; and the simpler notions of antiquity, which we can only realize by an effort, imperceptibly blend with the more familiar theories of modern philosophers. An eye for proportion is needed (his own art of measuring) in the study of Plato, as well as of other great artists. We may readily admit that the moral antithesis of good and pleasure, or

the intellectual antithesis of knowledge and opinion, being and appearance, are never far off in a Platonic discussion. But because they are in the background, we should not bring them into the foreground, or expect to find them equally in all the dialogues.

There may be some advantage in drawing out a little the main outlines of the building; but the use of this is limited, and may be easily exaggerated. We may give Plato too much system, and alter the natural form and connection of his thoughts. Under the idea that his dialogues are finished works of art, we may find a reason for everything, and lose the highest characteristic of art, which is simplicity. Most great works receive a new light from a new and original mind. But whether these new lights are true or only suggestive, will depend on their agreement with the spirit of Plato, and the amount of direct evidence which can be urged in support of them. When a theory is running away with us, criticism does a friendly office in counselling moderation, and recalling us to the indications of the text.

Like the *Phaedrus*, the *Gorgias* has puzzled students of Plato by the appearance of two or more subjects. Under the cover of rhetoric much higher themes are introduced; the world is convinced of falsehood; and the argument expands into a general view of the good and evil of man. First, after an ineffectual attempt to obtain a sound definition of his art from Gorgias, we begin by imagining a universal art of flattery or simulation; this is the genus of which rhetoric is only one, and not the highest species. To flattery is opposed the true and noble art of life which he who possesses seeks always to impart to others, and which at last triumphs, if not in this world, at any rate in another. These two aspects of life and knowledge appear to be the two leading ideas of the dialogue. The true and the false in individuals and states, in the treatment of the soul as well as of the body, are conceived under the forms of true and false art. In the development of this opposition there arise various other questions, such as the two famous paradoxes of Socrates: (1) that to do is worse than to suffer evil; and (2) that when a man has done evil he had better be punished than unpunished; to which may be added (3) a third Socratic paradox, that bad men do what they think best, but not what they desire, for the desire of all is towards the good. That pleasure is to be distinguished from good is proved by the simultaneousness of pleasure and pain, and by the possibility of the bad having in certain cases pleasures as great as those of the good, or even greater. Not

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*INTRODUCTION.*

5

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merely rhetoricians, but poets, musicians, and other artists, the whole tribe of statesmen, past as well as present, are included in the class of flatterers. The true and false finally appear before the judgment-seat of the gods below.

The dialogue naturally falls into three divisions, to which the three characters of Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles respectively correspond; the form and tone also change with the stages of the argument. Socrates is deferential towards Gorgias, playful and yet cutting in dealing with the youthful Polus, ironical and sarcastic in the encounter with Callicles. In the first division the question is asked—what is rhetoric? To this there is no answer given, for Gorgias is soon made to contradict himself by Socrates, and the argument is transferred into the hands of the younger Polus, who rushes to the defence of his master. The answer has at last to be given by Socrates himself, but before he can even explain his meaning to Polus, he must enlighten him upon the great subject of shams or flatteries. When Polus finds his favourite art reduced to the level of cookery, he replies that at any rate rhetoricians, like despots, have great power. Socrates denies that they have any real power, and this leads to the three paradoxes already mentioned. Although they are strange to him, Polus is at last convinced of them; at least, they seem to him to follow legitimately from the premises. Thus the second act of the dialogue closes. Then Callicles appears on the scene, at first maintaining that pleasure is good, and that might is right, and that law is nothing but the combination of the many weak against the few strong. When he is confuted he withdraws from the argument, and leaves Socrates to arrive at the conclusion by himself. The conclusion is that there are two kinds of statesmanship, a higher and a lower—that which makes the people better, and that which only flatters them, and exhorts Callicles to choose the higher. The dialogue terminates with a mythus of a final judgment, in which there will be no more flattery or disguise, and no further use for the teaching of rhetoric.

The three principal characters correspond to the parts which are assigned to them in the argument. Gorgias is the great rhetorician, now advanced in years, who goes from city to city displaying his talents, and is celebrated throughout Greece. Like all the Sophists in the dialogues of Plato, he is vain and boastful, yet he also has a certain dignity, and is treated by Socrates with considerable respect. But he is no match for

him in dialectics. All his life long he has been teaching rhetoric, and is still incapable of defining his own art. When his ideas begin to clear up, he is unwilling to admit that rhetoric can be wholly separated from justice and injustice, and this lingering sentiment of morality, or regard for public opinion, enables Socrates to detect him in a contradiction. Like Protagoras, he is described as of a generous nature; he expresses his approbation of Socrates' manner of approaching a question; he is quite 'one of Socrates' sort, ready to be refuted as well as to refute,' and very eager that Callicles and Socrates should have the game out. He knows by experience that rhetoric exercises great influence over other men, but he is unable to explain the puzzle how rhetoric can teach, or rather persuade, without any knowledge of the subjects of discourse.

Polus is an impetuous youth, a runaway 'colt,' as Socrates describes him, who wanted originally to have taken the place of Gorgias under the pretext that he was tired, and avails himself of the earliest opportunity to enter the lists. He is said to be the author of a work on rhetoric (462 C), and is again mentioned in the Phaedrus (267 B), as the inventor of balanced or double forms of speech (cp. 448 C, 467 C; Sym. 185 C). At first he is violent and ill-mannered, and is angry at seeing his master overthrown. But in the judicious hands of Socrates, he is soon restored to good humour, and compelled to assent to the required conclusion. Like Gorgias, he is overthrown because he compromises; he is unwilling to say that to do is fairer or more honourable than to suffer injustice. Though he is fascinated by the power of rhetoric, and dazzled by the splendour of success, he is not insensible to higher arguments. Plato may have felt that there would be an incongruity in a youth maintaining the cause of injustice against the world. He has never heard the other side of the question, and he listens to the paradoxes of Socrates with evident astonishment. He can hardly understand the meaning of Archelaus being miserable, or of rhetoric being only useful in self-accusation. When the argument with him has fairly run out,

Callicles, in whose house they are assembled, is introduced on the stage: he is with difficulty convinced that Socrates is in earnest; for if these things are true, then, as he says with real emotion, the foundations of society are upside down. Another type of character is represented in him; he is neither sophist nor philosopher, but man of the world, and an accomplished Athenian gentleman. He might be described in modern language as a cynic or materialist, a lover of power and also of pleasure,

*INTRODUCTION.*

7

and unscrupulous in his means of attaining both. There is no desire on his part to offer any compromise in the interests of morality; nor is any concession made by him. Like Thrasymachus in the Republic, though he is not of the same weak and vulgar class, he consistently maintains that might is right. His great motive of action is political ambition; in this he is characteristically Greek. Like Anytus in the Meno, he is the enemy of the Sophists; but favours the new art of rhetoric, which he regards as an excellent weapon of attack and defence. He is a despiser of mankind as he is of philosophy, and sees in the laws of the state only a violation of the order of nature, which intended that the stronger should govern the weaker (cp. Rep. 358–360). Like other men of the world who are of a speculative turn of mind, he generalizes the bad side of human nature, and has easily brought down his principles to his practice. Philosophy and poetry alike supply him with distinctions suited to his view of human life. He has a good will to Socrates, whose talents he evidently admires, while he censures the puerile use which he makes of them. He expresses a keen intellectual interest in the argument. Like Anytus, again, he has a sympathy with other men of the world; the Athenian statesmen of former ages, who showed no weakness and made no mistakes, such as Miltiades, Themistocles, Pericles, are his favourites. His ideal of human character is a man of great passions and great powers, which he has developed to the utmost, and which he uses in his own enjoyment and in the government of others. Had Critias been the name instead of Callicles, about whom we know nothing from other sources, the opinions of the man would have seemed to reflect the history of his life.

And now the combat deepens. In Callicles, far more than in any sophist or rhetorician, is concentrated the spirit of evil against which Socrates is contending, the spirit of the world, the spirit of the many contending against the one wise man, of which the Sophists, as he describes them in the Republic, are the imitators rather than the authors, being themselves carried away by the great tide of public opinion. Socrates approaches his antagonist warily from a distance, with a sort of irony which touches with a light hand both his personal vices (probably in allusion to some scandal of the day) and his servility to the populace. At the same time, he is in most profound earnest, as Chaerephon remarks. Callicles soon loses his temper, but the more he is irritated, the more provoking and matter of fact does Socrates become. A repartee

of his which appears to have been really made to the 'omniscient' Hip-pias, according to the testimony of Xenophon (Mem. IV. 4, 6, 10), is introduced (490 E). He is called by Callicles a popular declaimer, and certainly shows that he has the power, in the words of Gorgias, of being 'as long as he pleases,' or 'as short as he pleases' (cp. Protag. 336 D). Callicles exhibits great ability in defending himself and attacking Socrates, whom he accuses of trifling and word-splitting; he is scandalized (p. 494) that the legitimate consequences of his own argument should be stated in plain terms; after the manner of men of the world, he wishes to preserve the decencies of life. But he cannot consistently maintain the bad sense of words; and getting confused between the abstract notions of better, superior, stronger, he is easily turned round by Socrates, and only induced to continue the argument by the authority of Gorgias. Once, when Socrates is describing the manner in which the ambitious citizen has to identify himself with the people, he partially recognizes the truth of his words.

The Socrates of the *Gorgias* is not distinguished by any remarkable personal traits. As in other dialogues, he is the enemy of the Sophists and rhetoricians; and also of the statesmen, whom he regards as another variety of the same species. He is more paradoxical and satirical, and perhaps more unfair, than in any other of Plato's writings. There is something humorous in the situation; the ideal and ironical Socrates is provoked into a kind of extravagance by the worldliness of Callicles, 'fooled to the top of his bent,' although he is at the same time deeply serious. The presentiment of his own fate is hanging over him. He is aware that Socrates, the single real teacher of politics, as he ventures to call himself, cannot safely go to war with the whole world—in the courts of earth he will be condemned, and can only be justified in the world below. Then the position of himself and Callicles will be reversed; all those things unfit for ears polite which Callicles has prophesied as likely to happen to him in this world, the insulting language, the box on the ears, may then fall upon himself. (Compare Rep. 613 D, E, and the similar reversal of the position of the lawyer and the philosopher in the *Theaetetus*, 173–176.)

There is an interesting allusion to his own behaviour at the trial of the generals after the battle of Arginusae, which he ironically attributes to his ignorance of the manner in which a vote of the assembly should be taken (473 E). This is said to have happened 'last year' (406), and therefore

## INTRODUCTION.

9

the dramatic date of the dialogue has been fixed at 405 B.C., when Socrates would already have been an old man. The date is clearly marked, but is scarcely reconcilable with another indication of time, viz. the 'recent' usurpation of Archelaus, which occurred in the year 413 (470 D); and still less with the 'recent' death (503 B) of Pericles, which happened twenty-four years previously (429 B.C.), or with the mention of Nicias, who died in 413, and is nevertheless spoken of as a living witness (472 A, B). But we have already had reason to observe, that although there is a general consistency of times and persons in the dialogues of Plato, a precise dramatic date is an invention of his commentators.

The conclusion of the dialogue is remarkable, (1) for the truly characteristic declaration of Socrates (p. 509 A) that he is ignorant of the true nature and bearing of these things, while he affirms at the same time that no one can maintain any other view without being ridiculous. The profession of ignorance reminds us of the earlier and more exclusively Socratic dialogues. But neither in them, nor in the Apology, nor in the Memorabilia of Xenophon, does Socrates express any doubt of the fundamental truths of morality. He evidently regards this 'among the multitude of questions' which agitate human life 'as the principle which alone remains unshaken' (527 B). He does not insist here, any more than in the Phaedo, on the literal truth of the myth, but only on the soundness of the doctrine which is contained in it, that doing wrong is worse than suffering, that a man should seem rather than be, that if he is bad he should be corrected, and that rhetoric should be employed for the maintenance of the right only. The revelation of another life is also a recapitulation of the argument in a figure.

(2) The statement of Socrates is remarkable, that he is the only true politician of his age. In other passages, especially in the Apology, he disclaims being a politician at all. There he is convinced that he or any other good man who attempted to resist the popular will would be put to death before he had done any good to himself or others. Here he anticipates such a fate for himself, from the fact that he is 'the only man of the present day who performs his public duties at all.' The two points of view are not really inconsistent, but the difference between them is worth noticing: Socrates is and is not a public man. Not in the ordinary sense, like Alcibiades or Pericles, but in a higher one; and this will sooner or later entail the same consequences on him. He cannot be a private man if he would; neither can he separate morals from politics.



Nor is he unwilling to be a politician, although he foresees the dangers that await him, but he must first become a better and wiser man, for he as well as Callicles is in a state of perplexity and uncertainty (527 D, E). Neither is he quite consistent in the point of view which he maintains in this very dialogue (526 C, D; cp. Rep. 426 C, D).

And now, as Socrates says (506 D), we will 'resume the argument from the beginning.'

Socrates, who is attended by his inseparable disciple Chaerephon, meets Callicles in the streets of Athens. He is informed that he has just missed an exhibition of Gorgias, which he regrets, because he was desirous, not of hearing Gorgias display his rhetoric, but of interrogating him concerning the nature of his art. Callicles proposes that they shall go with him to his own house, where Gorgias is staying. There they find the great rhetorician and his younger friend and disciple Polus.

*Soc.* Put the question to him, Chaerephon. *Ch.* What question? *Soc.* Who is he?—such a question as would elicit from a man the answer, 'I am a cobbler.' Polus suggests that Gorgias may be tired, and desires to answer for him. 'Who is Gorgias?' asks Chaerephon, imitating the manner of his master Socrates. 'One of the best of men and a proficient in the best and noblest of experimental arts,' etc., replies Polus, in rhetorical and balanced phrases. Socrates is dissatisfied at the length and unmeaningness of the answer; he tells the disconcerted volunteer that he has mistaken the quality for the nature of the art, and remarks to Gorgias, that Polus has learnt how to make a speech, but not how to answer a question. He wishes that Gorgias would answer him. Gorgias is willing enough, and replies to the question asked by Chaerephon,—that he is a rhetorician, and in Homeric language 'boasts himself to be a good one.' At the request of Socrates he promises to be brief; for 'he can be as long as he pleases, and as short as he pleases.' Socrates would have him bestow his length on others, and proceeds to ask him a number of questions, which are answered by him to his own great satisfaction, and with a brevity which excites the admiration of Socrates. The result of the discussion may be summed up as follows:—

Rhetoric treats of discourse; but music and medicine, and other particular arts, are also concerned with discourse; in what way then does rhetoric differ from them? Gorgias draws a distinction between the art

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*INTRODUCTION.*

11

which deals with words, and the arts, which have to do with external actions. Socrates extends this distinction further, and divides all productive arts into two classes: (1) arts which may be carried on in silence; and (2) arts which have to do with words, or in which words are coextensive with action, such as arithmetic, geometry, rhetoric. But still Gorgias could hardly have meant to say that arithmetic was the same as rhetoric. Even in the arts which are concerned with words there are differences. What then distinguishes rhetoric from the other arts which have to do with words? 'The words which rhetoric uses relate to the best and greatest of human things.' But tell me, Gorgias, what are the best? 'Health first, beauty next, wealth third,' in the words of the old song, or how would you rank them? The arts will come to you in a body, each claiming precedence and saying that her own good is superior to that of the rest—How will you choose between them? 'I should say, Socrates, that the art of persuasion, which gives freedom to all men, and to individuals power in the state, is the greatest good.' But what is the exact nature of this persuasion?—is the persevering retort. You could not describe Zeuxis as a painter, or even as a painter of figures, if there were other painters of figures; neither can you define rhetoric simply as an art of persuasion, because there are other arts which persuade, such as arithmetic, which is an art of persuasion about odd and even numbers. Gorgias is made to see the necessity of a further limitation, and he now defines rhetoric as the art of persuading in the law courts, and in the assembly, about the just and unjust. But still there are two sorts of persuasion: one which gives knowledge, and another which gives belief without knowledge; and knowledge is always true, but belief may be either true or false,—there is therefore a further question: which of the two sorts of persuasion does rhetoric effect in courts of law and assemblies? Plainly that which gives belief and not that which gives knowledge; for no one can impart a real knowledge of such matters to a crowd of persons in a few minutes. And there is another point to be considered:—when the assembly meets to advise about walls or docks or military expeditions, the rhetorician is not taken into counsel, but the architect or the general. How would Gorgias explain this? Not Socrates only, but all who intend to become his disciples (and there are several of them in the company), are eagerly asking:—About what then will rhetoric teach us to persuade or advise the state?