Introduction

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Late in the *Gorgias*, Socrates urges Callicles to take their conversation seriously and speak his mind: "for our discussion is about this: how one should live" (500b–c). Many find the work's treatment of this topic profoundly moving. An example in antiquity is the Corinthian farmer who supposedly abandoned farming for philosophy after reading the *Gorgias*.[1] The dialogue's effect is not usually so drastic, but the *Gorgias* still speaks urgently to many readers on this central question we all face.

The dialogue unfolds through three exchanges of increasing length between Socrates and Gorgias (a teacher of rhetoric), Polus (Gorgias' pupil), and Callicles (his host in Athens). Also present are Socrates' friend Chairephon and an audience that just heard a rhetorical display from Gorgias, as a sort of advertisement for his teachings. The theme of a choice of lives emerges along two tracks. The first is a choice between philosophy and rhetoric (and the ordinary political life it enables). The second is a choice between justice and injustice (and later on, temperance and intemperance). Socrates advocates for philosophy, justice, and temperance, and the opposing views are most fully articulated by Callicles. (Importantly, Callicles does not initially see himself as an advocate for injustice, but for a sort of "natural justice" opposed to conventional justice.) Naturally, scholarship on the *Gorgias* tends to focus on these core issues: how should we understand each way of life individually, and how Plato depicts the dialectical and personal confrontations between them? Almost all of the papers in this volume touch centrally on these questions. However, the volume begins with two papers that primarily aim to situate the *Gorgias* historically.

First, Josh Wilburn considers the *Gorgias'* relation to the past, arguing that the character Gorgias is not merely a convenient placeholder for a

[1] Themistius reports this at *Or.* 295c–d, and comments that Aristotle wrote a dialogue in his honor – possibly the *Nerinthus* listed in his works at Diogenes Laertius V.22.

generic critique of rhetoric. Rather, Plato engages with key themes in the works of the historical Gorgias, most notably: (i) the claim that speech can exert tremendous power, akin to physical force; (ii) the claim that power and wish (*boulêsis*) are individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for effective action; and (iii) the distinction between belief and knowledge, especially as these bear on an audience's susceptibility to the power of speech. These are not mere targets for Socrates, who assimilates versions of them into his own views – for example, when he argues that rhetoric aims to convince and instill belief rather than to teach and instill knowledge, or that power is only worth having if it satisfies one's wishes.

Next, Harold Tarrant sketches the ancient reception of the *Gorgias*, with particular attention to rhetorical theorists and Platonists of various sorts. What emerges is a vital picture of the work's audience that can alter our understanding of the text and of later philosophy. The essay contains many helpful observations and arguments, but two stand out. First, Tarrant argues that Isocrates may have read an early version of the dialogue that only dealt with Gorgias and Polus. If so, this might caution us against too easily reading early portions of the text in terms of an architectonic plan (although Plato could of course have revised an earlier draft to fit such a plan). Second, he argues that after a period of relative neglect (by Aristotle and the early Academy), a revival of interest took place. This raises interesting questions about why the *Gorgias* might have soon been considered obsolete by earlier readers, only to seem newly important to later ones.

The rest of the essays gradually shift focus from examining Socrates and his way of life, through his attempts to engage Callicles and others, to a greater focus on Callicles' position, concluding with reflections on where the debate between ways of life leaves the reader of the *Gorgias*.

As noted, Socrates advocates a way of life with two main facets: he plumps for philosophy and justice. These are clearly related somehow, but Hugh Benson argues that they should be seen as distinct. After all, Socrates is clearly an exemplary philosopher, but he denies having political expertise (which includes the expertise about justice needed to reliably act justly). On Benson's view, philosophy is nothing more or less than refutation by appeal to views sincerely held by the person refuted. One might think that such refutation promotes justice by improving people's grasp of the value of justice and virtue. However, Benson rejects this view: Socrates often refutes people who already seem fully committed to the goodness of justice and virtue, and he often aims to improve people's grasp of the value of

justice and virtue through means other than refutation. He argues that philosophy promotes justice and virtue simply by removing the false conceit to knowledge, thereby prompting his interlocutors to inquire.

Eric Brown and I then analyze Socrates' discussion of power and wish in conversation with Polus (466a–468e). Polus admires orators for the tyrannical power they have. However, Socrates argues that orators and tyrants lack power worth having: the ability to satisfy one's wishes or wants (*boulêseis*). He distinguishes wanting from thinking best, and grants that orators and tyrants do what they think best while denying that they do what they want. His account is often thought to involve two conflicting requirements: wants must be attributable to the wanter from their own perspective (to count as *their* desires), but wants must also be directed at objects that are genuinely good (in order for failure to satisfy them to matter). We offer an account of wanting as reflective, coherent desire, which allows Socrates to satisfy both desiderata. We then explain why he thinks that orators and tyrants want to act justly, though they do greater injustices than anyone else and so frustrate their own wants more than anyone else. In contrast to Benson, our concluding reflections on the relationships among coherence, justice, and goodness suggest a close connection between refutation (which exposes incoherence) and virtue (which is psychological order and organization).

Nich Baima considers a puzzle about Socrates' account of the afterlife. His myth cannot really aim to convince Callicles, who will never find it plausible. But it also cannot aim to bolster Socrates' own views about the value of philosophy and justice, because he is already fully convinced of those views. For similar reasons, Plato cannot use the myth to persuade readers who sympathize with either party. Nevertheless, Baima argues that the myth aims to bolster Socrates' own views, and to speak to readers sympathetic to him. Socrates' views need bolstering for two main reasons. First, embodiment produces confusion and doubt about his arguments, and the myth addresses these confusions and doubts in a way that embodied people can understand and appreciate. Second, Socrates has some concern for worldly effectiveness. For example, he avoids public politics so as not to be killed prematurely. This concern for worldly effectiveness drives a wedge between virtue and happiness, since worldly effectiveness is not determined by virtue. The myth addresses this concern by providing a larger context in which virtue always secures long-term success.

The topic of shame pervades the *Gorgias*, both as an emotion involved in the process of refutation and in the content of the discussion. Olivier Renaut notes that shame seems multifaceted in the dialogue: sometimes it appears to be merely a form of fear before popular opinion that conduces to social conformity (even if insincerely). At other times, it seems to affect the subject's sense of their deeper values, as in the case of Callicles, whose shame at the implications of hedonism leads him to better grasp and refine his views. The latter sort of shame raises the question of whether there is a form or use of shame that conduces to genuine moral improvement and to the truth. Renaut argues that the various manifestations of shame in the dialogue do not require distinctions among *kinds* of shame. They result instead from contingent features of the subject, those before whom they feel shame, and other specifics. In particular, pedagogically effective shame requires both some degree of good character already in the subject and a close, persistent connection of love or friendship between the subject and those before whom they feel shame.

On one common reading of the *Gorgias*, discussion breaks down at a certain point and progress is halted, because Socratic dialectic cannot effectively engage the nonrational passions that rule his interlocutors (especially Callicles). Frisbee Sheffield rejects every facet of this reading. She argues that Plato in fact depicts Callicles as making progress over the entire span of his discussion with Socrates. She then analyzes this progress along two dimensions. The first dimension concerns the content of the discussion: Socrates successfully sways Callicles towards seeing his objects of love and desire as foul or shameful rather than fine or admirable, thereby eroding his attachment to them. The second dimension is even more ambitious: Sheffield argues that the norms of Socratic dialectic thematized throughout the *Gorgias* have an ethical, character-shaping aspect. She then argues that talking to Socrates constitutes one episode of habituation that, if repeated frequently, might lead Callicles to imitate Socrates' intellectual (and thereby moral) example. This is what Socrates himself suggests, when he says that Callicles will be persuaded by repeated and improved examination of the same topics (513c–d). The reading that Sheffield rejects must see him as a deluded optimist; Sheffield shows how one might instead vindicate Socrates' bold prediction.

Terence Irwin considers Socrates' praise of Callicles as an interlocutor with whom he can pursue the truth. He focuses especially on two aspects of this characterization: whether Callicles holds a plausibly coherent position worth examining, and whether he is willing to examine his position

frankly. On the question of plausible coherence, Irwin focuses on the seeming tension between Callicles' identity as a political democrat and his advocacy of natural rather than conventional justice. He argues that there is no real conflict. As an advocate of natural justice, Callicles denies that laws restraining aggression are justified because aggression is unjust. Rather, laws restraining aggression are justified because they provide political stability that enables the superior to pursue their ends. Callicles' commitment to democracy amounts to this: democratic laws are best at providing such a social context for superior men like Pericles (and aspirationally, himself). His view does contain tensions, especially between (i) a hedonism implicit in rejecting self-restraint beyond what is needed to secure an appropriate environment for the pursuit of one's ends, and (ii) a commitment to wisdom and courage not merely as a means to pleasure, but as ends in themselves. However, his willingness to acknowledge this tension and refine his views to avoid it (by rejecting hedonism) supports Socrates' optimism about Callicles as an interlocutor.

Ryan Balot aims to explain the role of freedom in the views of Gorgias and especially Callicles, and uses his explanation to clarify their positions and the unfolding of their arguments. Balot reads their comments on freedom as reflecting a conception of *freedom as domination of others*, which allows the free person or city to have more and do whatever they like. This conception of freedom reflects the political rhetoric of the day, in which the Athenian empire was justified by the freedom it brings. Both in the political context and in the *Gorgias*, this outlook includes two values in tension with each other: acquisitiveness and glory. The relevance of this political vision to understanding Callicles is clearest in his admiration of men like Pericles and Themistocles, who embody such a vision. Balot thus aims at three interpretive goals simultaneously: he attributes an intelligible view to Callicles, shows how the initial phases of Socrates' argument leverage the glory-seeking side of his view against the acquisitive side, and explains why Callicles ultimately thinks that Socrates fails to refute him.

Finally, Allison Murphy considers the commonly held view that the dialogue as a whole ends in stalemate, and considers what results for Socrates and for readers of the *Gorgias*. She sketches the stalemate in novel terms. Socrates accuses oratory of being merely an imitation of true politics (which is closely connected to philosophy). However, his antagonists in turn accuse Socrates of being merely an orator pretending to be something else. Murphy argues that there is no neutral ground on which to resolve

these symmetrical accusations. Socrates himself maintains his trust in his own view by reference to antecedent commitments to cosmic harmony that he flatly asserts at the close of his account of virtue (507e–508a) and again in his final myth. However, he never argues for these commitments in the *Gorgias*. Readers are left needing to reflect on their own antecedent commitments, in light of which alone we can attempt to discern for ourselves which of the symmetrically situated views – if either – to accept.