The Purpose of Rhetorical Form in Plato

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1. Introduction

I have elsewhere addressed the issue of Socrates’s missing “great speech” in Plato’s Gorgias, a speech in defense of philosophy that would serve as a response to Callicles’s disparagement of the philosophical life at 482c–486d. In that paper, I argue that a close reading of the dialectical moves that occur after Callicles’s speech provides us with most of the material that would be the essence of a speech that Socrates could give Callicles in defense of the life of philosophy.

In this paper I want to zoom out a little and consider the purpose of rhetorical form quite generally in the Gorgias. Even if the essence of Socrates’s response to Callicles’s speech can be pieced together from their subsequent exchanges in the dialogue, it remains the case that Plato deliberately does not have Socrates deliver a prolonged speech in defense of philosophy that is comparable in form to the one produced by Callicles at 482c–486d, though he provides several cues in the text that such a speech will be forthcoming (see 500c1–8, 505c7–d7, 506b4–c1). Why, then, do we not get Socrates’s own great speech in the Gorgias?

An easy answer to this question draws on Socrates’s two comments to Gorgias and Polus at 449b4–c6 and 461c8–462a5, where he expresses his distaste for long speechmaking and his preference for the considered kind of deliberation that occurs through back-and-forth dialectic with an interlocutor. But this cannot explain the fact that Socrates is quite willing to produce a lengthy speech of his own at various stages in the Gorgias: the point is emphasized especially at 464b–465d, 517b–519d, and 523a–527c. So either Socrates is guilty of inconsistency at these stages in the text or his aversion to speechmaking is not absolute and can be outweighed by other considerations in select circumstances. I argue in this paper that the latter is the case and that a closer inspection of how, when, and why Socrates delivers long speeches in the dialogue explains his reluctance to do so in defending the life of philosophy against Callicles.

I shall proceed, first, by surveying those parts of the Gorgias where Plato draws our attention to Socrates’s attitude toward speechmaking before explaining, next, why a lengthy speech in defense of the philosophical life would be inapt as a response to Callicles. Briefly put, there are

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reasons internal to the text concerning Socrates’s engagement with Callicles as well as reasons external to the text concerning Plato’s engagement with his reader that require an investigation of Callicles’s views through careful analysis. It is only by exploring the assumptions that underlie his views on the good life that Callicles can see the flaws in his own position, and in doing so Socrates engages Callicles in a persuasive endeavor ill-served by a single speech. Nevertheless, Socrates uses a variety of rhetorical devices (including sustained speechmaking) that together build a cumulative case throughout the Gorgias for the choiceworthiness of the philosophical life. Callicles himself may not be in a state at the end of the dialogue to acknowledge the benefits of the life of philosophy, but by showing us how Socrates systematically dismantles Callicles’s understanding of the good life—by means of argument and by means of speechmaking—Plato leaves us in a position to do so. Such an inquiry therefore sheds significant light on Plato’s style as a writer and his views on the use of rhetoric in general, where what matters to him ultimately is less the exact form of a piece of discourse and more its conduciveness to understanding.

2. Under What Conditions is Speechmaking Warranted?

The most tempting way to address Plato’s views on the use of rhetoric in the Gorgias, particularly in relation to his conception of philosophy, is in terms of pairs of binaries: rhetoric versus dialectic; long speeches versus short speeches; flashy oratory versus sober-minded discussion. Such binaries seem to be supported by Socrates’s remarks early in the text about how he wishes to engage his interlocutors in argument. From the start at 447a–b, we learn that Socrates has missed a dazzling display speech (ἐπίδειξις) delivered by Gorgias and there is every reason to think his late arrival is intentional: Socrates says he has come not to listen to such speeches but to take part in discussion (διαλέγεσθαι). Soon after at 448d, he admonishes Polus for engaging in “what is called rhetoric” (τὴν καλουμένην ῥητορικήν) rather than discussion (διαλέγεσθαι), and when he begins his exchange with Gorgias at 449b–c he lays down some ground rules by asking Gorgias to refrain from speechmaking (τὸ ... μὴκος τῶν λόγων) and to participate instead in the short give and take of dialogue.³ The same rules are affirmed later at 461d–462a where the one request that Socrates makes of Polus before they engage with each other is that Polus desist from making long speeches (μακρολογία).

Significantly, however, when Callicles delivers his great speech at 482c–486d—an elaborate and sustained piece of rhetoric unlike any other in the Platonic dialogues—Socrates does not fault the speech for its extravagant length. Here is his immediate reaction and the exchange with Callicles that follows:

SOCRATES: If I actually had a soul made of gold, Callicles, don’t you think I’d be pleased to find one of those stones on which they test (βασανίζουσιν) gold? And if this stone to which I intended to take my soul were the best stone and it agreed that my soul had

been well cared for (καλῶς τεθεραπεύσθαι), don’t you think I could know well at that point that I’m in good shape and need no further test (βασάνου)?

CALLICLES: What’s the point of your question, Socrates?

SOCRATES: I’ll tell you. I believe that by running into you, I’ve run into just such a piece of luck.

CALLICLES: Why do you say that?

SOCRATES: I know well that if you concur with what my soul believes, then that is the very truth (τάληθη). I realize that a person who is going to put a soul to an adequate test (βασανιέσθαι) to see whether it lives rightly or not (πέρι ὅρθως τε ζώσης καὶ μή) must have three qualities, all of which you have: knowledge, good will, and frankness. (486d2–487a3)

Neither here nor at any stage in their further conversation does Socrates take issue with the length of Callicles’s speech. On the contrary, he is by all appearances delighted with it. What he finds in the speech is evidence of Callicles’s knowledge, good will, and frankness: qualities that are indispensable in an ideal interlocutor. This is especially surprising given the unmistakable scorn that Callicles displays in his speech for Socrates’s chosen vocation as a philosopher. In no other dialogue do we see a character express greater contempt for the practice of philosophy and Socrates’s pursuit of it as a way of life. But rather than take offence, Socrates singles out this line of criticism in the speech as particularly commendable:

And most admirable of all (πάντων δὲ καλλίστη), Callicles, is the examination (σκέψις) of those issues concerning which you took me to task, that of what a man must be like (ποῖον τινα χρή εἶναι τὸν ἀνδρὰ), and of what he must pursue (τί ἐπιτηδεύειν) and how far (μέχρι τοῦ), when he’s older and when he’s young (487e7–488a2).

Now, one could no doubt read these remarks as insincere or ironic: the standard refuge of those who find it baffling when Plato has Socrates respond to hostility with decency. Yet this explaining away of the praise that Socrates heaps on Callicles after his speech fails to do justice to the content of the piece. Callicles’s speech is not a work of high-flown oratory of the sort that Polus attempts (and Socrates rightly censures) in extolling the practice of rhetoric earlier in the dialogue at 448c4–9, but a finely wrought and well-thought-out case for choosing the rhetorical life over the philosophical life. It is no stretch when Socrates calls the speech an

4 The evidence is provisional, no doubt, and Callicles eventually turns out to be far from an ideal interlocutor. As Socrates puts it later in the text: “I didn’t suppose at the beginning that I’d be deceived intentionally by you, because I assumed you were a friend” (499c2–4). For discussion, see Richard McKim, “Shame and Truth in Plato’s Gorgias” in Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings, ed. Charles Griswold (London: Routledge, 1988), 40; Marina McCoy, Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 103–6; Franco Trivigno, “Paratragedy in Plato’s Gorgias,” Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 36 (2009), 95–6.

5 For a similar contrast, see Socrates’s criticism of Agathon’s speech on love in the Symposium at 198b1–199b5 versus the more favorable attitude he displays toward Diotima’s speech. Of course, the fact that Socrates thinks highly of Callicles’s great speech does not preclude the need for Callicles’s views to undergo examination. The point remains, however, that Socrates has no objection here to the use of speechmaking per se.
“examination” (σκέψις, 487e8) of the kind of life a man should live, for Callicles’s advocacy of the rhetorical life is based on a general theory of human nature and our relations with others that leads quite plausibly to the need for rhetoric in democratic politics.

That is to say, Socrates sees that Callicles’s speech is based on reasons. The doctrine of natural justice that Callicles develops in the first part of the speech is sophisticated, and he appeals to it both as a justification for the claims he advances in the second part of the speech to assert the choiceworthiness of the rhetorical life and as an explanation of Polus’s failure to argue for that thesis against Socrates (see 482d7–483b4). Callicles’s speech, we can say, is geared toward understanding. It shows Socrates how one might argue cogently for the benefits of the life of rhetoric without having to invoke, as Polus does, a glamorized portrait of the tyrant or the horrors of torture (see 470c4–471d2, 473b12–d2). This is why Socrates believes that the best test of whether and how well he has cared for his soul (καλῶς τεθεραπεύσθαι, 486d5-6) will come about by engaging with Callicles, for he recognizes that, unlike Gorgias and Polus, Callicles’s views are grounded in a general conception of the good life that stands in direct opposition to his own. Callicles is a genuine touchstone for Socrates in the sense that, if either of their views fail to survive critical scrutiny, Socrates will have a better understanding of what living well consists in. Seen in this light, the exact form of Callicles’s speech is irrelevant. Regardless of its status as a piece of rhetoric, Socrates values it as a piece of thinking.

2.1. The Pastry-Baking Analogy

This way of approaching the purpose of rhetorical form in the Gorgias helps us make sense of four other cases in the text where Socrates licenses the use of speechmaking; or at least, he has no objection to its use, since on each occasion Socrates himself delivers the speech. The first is his pastry-baking analogy at 464b–465d and is the most straightforward case. In this analogy, Socrates famously compares the pursuit of rhetoric (as conventionally practiced by figures like Gorgias and Polus) to the practice of pastry-baking: in the same way a pastry-baker caters only to what a customer finds most pleasant to eat, so a conventional rhetorician caters only to what an audience finds most pleasant to hear. On this basis, Socrates holds, practitioners of rhetoric like Gorgias and Polus should be understood as possessing not an art, but a mere knack for flattering the appetites of their listeners.6

Such a summary captures Socrates’s main point in the pastry-baking analogy, though the entire stretch of text (spanning about one-and-a-half Stephanus pages) contains a complicated framework within which he places a wide range of human pursuits, including cosmetics, gymnastics, medicine, sophistry, legislation, and justice. Socrates also identifies what he calls the “art of politics” (ἡ πολιτική) with the care of the soul in this part of the dialogue (464a1–c4). This claim relies crucially on a distinction he establishes between the goods of the body and the

goods of soul, and its implications recur throughout the Gorgias. Indeed, as we shall have occasion to observe often in this paper, several of the ideas first introduced in the pastry-baking analogy appear later in the dialogue and are referenced well into Socrates’s discussion with Callicles (see esp. 500e4–501c5, 502d10–503d3, 504d5–e3, 513d1–514a3, 517c7–518a5).

In many ways, therefore, the pastry-baking analogy contains material that is key to the development of Socrates’s subsequent views in the Gorgias. Further, it shows that he is amenable to producing a display speech of his own when he believes it necessary. Although the analogy falls short of logical rigour, Socrates tells Gorgias and Polus beforehand that it will display (ἐπιδείξω, 464b2) to them what he means about rhetoric. But why is such a speech warranted in this case? Socrates makes plain its justification to Polus right after the analogy:

Perhaps I’ve done a strange thing (ἄτοπον): I wouldn’t let you make long speeches (μακροῦν λόγους), and here I’ve just composed a lengthy one myself. I deserve to be forgiven, though, for when I made my statements short (βραχέα) you didn’t understand (οὐκ ἐμάνθανες) and didn’t know how to deal with the answers I gave you, but you needed a narration (διηγήσεως). So if I don’t know how to deal with your answers either, you must spin out a speech too. (465e1–466a2; emphasis added)

Socrates here expresses his willingness to engage in speechmaking as well as an openness to listening to a long speech when delivered in the service of understanding. The length of the pastry-baking analogy is justified because when he first describes the conventional practice of rhetoric as “an image of a part of politics” (πολιτικῆς μορίου εἰδωλον, 463d2), neither Gorgias nor Polus understand his view. Socrates hence produces the speech for the purposes of clarification (463d4–e4).7 Having a view of something is in this sense a kind of achievement, one based on reasons, and the understanding Socrates seeks from his audience requires that they grasp those reasons: he wants them to understand his view, as it were, from the inside. The pastry-baking analogy clarifies why Socrates calls rhetoric an “image” (εἰδωλον) of a part of politics in precisely this sense. By focusing on what’s most pleasant (ἡδίστασιν, 464d2) instead of what’s best (βελτίστου, 464d1), rhetoric is an image of a pursuit that benefits the human soul in the same way that pastry-baking is an image of a pursuit that benefits the human body.

2.2. The Water-Carriers Myth

The second use of speechmaking that I wish to highlight from the Gorgias is the myth of the water carriers that Socrates invokes early in his conversation with Callicles at 492e–494a.8 Socrates appeals to the myth after a particularly heated moment in the text at 491e–492c, where Callicles advocates a view of the good life as a life of unconstrained desire fulfillment. This hedonistic view of human happiness emerges only after a section of dialogue at 488b–491e

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7 Cf. Gabriela Roxana Carone, “Socratic Rhetoric in the Gorgias,” Canadian Journal of Philosophy 35 (2005), 228, who also observes Socrates’s positive attitude toward speechmaking for such purposes.

8 My thanks to Filip Karfik for emphasizing to me the importance of the water-carriers myth to Socrates’s conversation with Callicles, particularly in relation to their opposing conceptions of the good life.
during which Socrates questions the notion of the superior man whom Callicles had championed earlier in his great speech, and the water-carriers myth continues the same line of inquiry. We can see this more easily perhaps by arranging these parts of the text in sequence:

1. Callicles’s great speech (482c–486d)
2. Socrates cross-examines Callicles about the “superior man” (488b–491e)
3. Callicles’s promotion of hedonism (491e–492c)
4. Socrates’s water-carrier myth (492e–494a)

Together, Socrates’s discussion with Callicles in (2) and his use of myth in (4) are both attempts to get Callicles to clarify the view of the good life he assumes in (1). The fact that one attempt takes the form of a dialogue and the other the form of a long speech is irrelevant. Socrates makes this evident in responding to Callicles’s outburst after (3) by asking him “not to relax in any way, so that it may really become clear (κατάδηλον) how we should live (πῶς βιωτέον)” (492d3–5). The water-carriers myth that ensues at 492e–494a—a speech in which Socrates pointedly avails himself of figurative rather than deductive reasoning (cf. εἰκόνα, 493d5)—is put forward for just this purpose.

Notice, too, how Socrates relates the myth by first describing it in one way at 492e7–493d3 and then reworking it slightly at 493d5–494a5. In the first version, he likens the soul of the insatiable man with unconstrained desires to a leaky sieve constantly having to refill a leaky jar with water. Socrates admits that this story is quite strange (τι ἄτοπα), but having presented it (ἐνδειξάμενος) he hopes it will nonetheless make clear (δηλοῖ) for Callicles by allegorical means the benefits of an orderly life compared with an undisciplined life (493c3–7). In the second version of the myth, Socrates more directly compares the orderly life with the undisciplined life, though still by means of an allegory. The former life is likened to a man who possesses jars that are secure: after filling them with various substances, such a man rests content and does not concern himself with replenishing them further. The latter life, however, is likened to a man with jars that are rotten, who is “forced to keep on filling them, day and night, or else he suffers extreme pain” (493e8–a1). After depicting each life in the myth in this way, Socrates then has the following exchange with Callicles:

Socrates: Now since each life is the way I describe it, are you saying that the life of the undisciplined man is happier than that of the orderly man? When I say this, do I at all persuade you to concede that the orderly life is better than the undisciplined one, or do I not?

Callicles: You do not, Socrates. The man who has filled himself up has no pleasure any more, and when he's been filled up and experiences neither joy nor pain, that’s living like a stone, as I was saying just now. Rather, living pleasantly (τὸ ἡδέως ζῆν) consists in this: having as much as possible flow in (ἐν τῷ ὡς πλείστον ἐπιρρεῖν). (494a2–b2)

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9 This point has received excellent treatment recently by O’Reilly, “Jars, Sieves and Souls.”
I noted above that having a view of something is a kind of achievement according to Socrates, and this is exactly the outcome of his use of the water-carriers myth. In this case, however, it is not primarily (as with the pastry-baking analogy) Socrates’s position that receives clarification, but Callicles’s position. To understand Callicles’s view of the good life, Socrates must first grasp the presuppositions that motivate it and the implications it leads to. He wants to understand Callicles’s view, as I put it earlier, from the inside. The myth does this by getting Callicles to sharpen his identification of the good life with the pleasant life. What “living pleasantly” amounts to, for Callicles, is the greatest possible experience of pleasant sensations. Although such a life may entail pain and discomfort, the man with satisfied desires or “full jars” in the myth no longer experiences pleasure on this view and thus does not qualify as living a good life.

Read in this light, Socrates’s use of the water-carriers myth accomplishes in a brief space what his cross-examination of Callicles at 488b–491e does not. Once Callicles affirms a view of happiness as a life devoted to the maximal gratification of one’s desires, Socrates sees he has his work cut out for him. For a consequence of Callicles’s view is that it locates human virtue or excellence in the power to enlarge and satisfy one’s desires to the greatest extent possible. There were intimations of this idea already in the Gorgias (cf. 491e8–9, 492c4–6, d5–e1) but the myth makes it plain that any analysis of the human good that requires the imposition of a limit or “orderliness” on human desires will hold no significance for Callicles. From this point on, Socrates will marshal a series of arguments designed to refute the thesis that what’s good for a human being is reducible to what’s pleasant. Here of course he reverts to his usual method of questioning and testing the consistency of his interlocutor’s views until 499b–d, where Callicles finally retracts the claim that all pleasures are equally good for a human being. Yet it is the use of the myth at 492e–494a that leads Callicles to put that position on the table.

2.3. Socrates’s Critique of Earlier Politicians in Athens

Socrates’s critique of former Athenian politicians at 517b–519d is a third instance in which he finds it warranted to deliver a long speech. Like his pastry-baking analogy, this is another place in the text where Socrates engages in speechmaking to clarify his views. In fact, he draws on the analogy substantially (see 517c7–518a5), expanding on it to develop a new objection to the conventional practice of rhetoric. The question at issue in this part of the dialogue concerns whether the practice of rhetoric conduces to the good of a wider political community. Socrates contends that earlier renowned political leaders in Athens—he lists in particular Cimon, Themistocles, Miltiades, and Pericles—did nothing that really benefited the Athenian people with their oratory. Rather, just as what counts for success in pastry-baking, these politicians succeeded only in indulging the appetites of the people, “for they filled the city with harbors and dockyards, walls, and tribute payments and such trash as that, but did so without justice and moderation” (519a1–4).

Socrates then goes on to comment on the absurdity when a purportedly just leader resents being treated unjustly by his city. For a just politician skilled in rhetoric must make those over whom he exercises his rhetoric just. If the people turn out to be unjust, then the fault lies with the politician (519b8–c2). Whatever we think of his reasoning, Socrates makes it apparent that
he advances this critique as a way of explaining to Callicles why he believes that none of those held to be preeminent in politics before him possessed any genuine political expertise.\(^\text{10}\) And the rationale for this belief should be familiar to us by now: all of these politicians engaged in rhetoric merely as a form of flattery, reducing what was good for the Athenian people to what was most pleasant for them to hear. But that is a false view of the human good, as Callicles has conceded at this stage in the text. Socrates openly resorts to speechmaking here, recalling many tropes and arguments from earlier in the dialogue, and he admits to his loquaciousness freely when Callicles calls attention to the point (see 519d8–e2), yet he does so only in order to bring home to Callicles the consequences of their previous agreements.\(^\text{11}\) Again, this is a speech delivered in the service of understanding.

2.4. The Concluding Eschatological Myth

My final example of Socrates’s use of speechmaking in the Gorgias comes from the last part of the dialogue, where he spends over four Stephanus pages relating an eschatological myth at 523a–527c. This stretch of the work is the longest case of unbroken oratory in the text and a full treatment of the myth lies beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes, two points stand out as worthy of attention. The first concerns the plainly allegorical content of the myth and its use by Socrates to elucidate a claim he makes at 521d–e, where he asserts that he alone among all of his contemporaries and most of his predecessors practices the true art of politics (ἀληθῶς πολιτικῇ τέχνη, 521d7). The second (related) point concerns Socrates’s introduction of the myth at 523a1–3, where he insists that the story should be interpreted as a logos instead of a muthos.

The allegorical content of the concluding myth in the Gorgias has received excellent discussion by David Sedley, who identifies several echoes of key themes and arguments from earlier in the dialogue in the story.\(^\text{12}\) As Sedley observes, and as we have also seen, the idea that myths can be interpreted figuratively to clarify moral truths is already signalled at 493c3–7 in the myth of the water carriers.\(^\text{13}\) Most notable of all in the myth at 523a–527c is the theme of punishment and the sense in which Plato conceives of Socratic refutation as a corrective form of punishment administered to improve the soul of an interlocutor. The myth thus serves in the text as an elaboration of Socrates’s claim to be the best practitioner of politics in Athens. It follows naturally from his critique of earlier politicians at 517b–519d while amplifying ideas he develops in the pastry-baking analogy at 464b–465d concerning the art of politics.

This helps us see why Socrates regards the concluding myth primarily as a logos. Sedley claims that the designation of the myth as a logos refers to its true content, though he acknowledges


\(^{11}\) See in particular 517d5–6 where Socrates justifies his use of images specifically as an aid for Callicles to understand their argument thus far in the text (διὰ τῶν αὐτῶν εἰκόνων λέγω, ἵνα ρᾴδην καταμάθῃς).


\(^{13}\) Sedley, 53.
that its figurative nature leaves open what exactly that content is. In fact, it is not clear that an analysis of the myth in terms of its truth value is the best approach to adopt in interpreting its content, especially if Socrates’s description of the soul’s survival after death should not be read as literally true. How does one go about assessing the truth of an allegory? If the myth is advanced as an account of Socrates’s practice of refutation as a beneficial form of punishment, then it would be otiose for its status as a logos to consist in whether that account is true. For Socrates has already affirmed this point about his use of argument elsewhere in the text and believes he has demonstrated it repeatedly during his exchanges with Polus and Callicles.

Instead, the myth seems to operate on a different explanatory level in clarifying how the punishment that Socrates inflicts upon his interlocutors is beneficial, despite causing them pain. That is to say, the myth should be read as enhancing our understanding of Socrates’s claims in the dialogue—in this case his claim to be an expert in politics—rather than as a statement of their truth value. And it does so, significantly, without relying on explicit argument. When interpreted alongside earlier parts of the Gorgias, the myth functions as another piece of Socrates’s cumulative argument in the dialogue for the life of philosophy. This is most apparent from the conclusion to the myth beginning at 527a5–c4, where Socrates folds the story into a group of theses he has advanced in the text. Sedley notes that Socrates regards this package of findings as “so integral a unity that they jointly constitute a single logos.” That is indeed true, yet what this single logos apparently amounts to for Socrates is a long-drawn-out defense of the philosophical life: observe that in the very last lines of the text, he returns to the idea of the dialogue having disclosed one logos to him and his interlocutors, an account of the way of life that is best (ό τρόπος ἄριστος τοῦ βίου, 527e3). Socrates goes on to affirm the advantages of this logos over Callicles’s endorsement of the rhetorical way of life (see 527e5–7), which can only mean that by the end of the Gorgias he believes he has answered the challenge to justify the practice of philosophy. The myth at 523a–527c adds one more element to that defense.

3. The Form of Socrates’s Defense of Philosophy

Let us return now to the question with which I began this paper. As we have seen, Socrates has nothing in principle against delivering a long speech in the Gorgias provided that it serves the ends of clarification and understanding. In each of the cases we have surveyed, he himself engages in speechmaking either to illuminate the reasons for his own views or as a tool to get a better grasp of his interlocutors’ views. Indeed, despite its combative tenor, Socrates expresses admiration for and values even Callicles’s great speech in the dialogue, to the extent that it

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14 Sedley, 52, 68n. 29. Christopher Rowe, “The Status of the Myth of the Gorgias, or: Taking Plato Seriously” in Plato and Myth likewise believes that the myth’s status as a logos consists in it being a “true account or report” (190–1), though he argues for a two-level reading of the content of the myth on which we are meant to see through the conventional (and false) notion of punishment in the story and grasp the view of punishment that Socrates puts forward as true.


16 Sedley, 53n. 4.
furthers these ends. This perhaps makes it all the more perplexing why Socrates refrains from defending the life of philosophy in a way that’s comparable in form to Callicles’s speech. And yet the answer should be clear at this point: if Socrates chooses not to produce such a speech, it must be because he believes it would not promote the goal of understanding his conception of the good life.

Why is this? The fact that Socrates effectively has two audiences seems relevant here. On the one hand, within the drama of the dialogue, Callicles needs to recognize that despite the sophistication of his doctrine of natural justice and the attractiveness of the rewards that rhetoric can provide a man in democratic politics, there are (it appears unbeknownst to him) various problems with the views of human nature and human excellence on which his conception of the good life depends. It is only in the absence of such views that Socrates’s own position has any traction. On the other hand, outside the drama of the dialogue, Plato wants us to see that, for all the allure of Callicles’s theory of the strong man who shakes off the restraints of the masses and advances his own interests by disregarding custom and convention, there are flaws at the heart of Callicles’s position that imply the value of the philosophical life over the rhetorical life. Callicles himself is evidently not prepared to accept this inference by the end of the dialogue, but we are clearly meant to draw it.¹⁷

Disabusing Callicles of his reasons for championing the life of rhetoric and explicating these same flaws for us requires that Socrates call attention to the fragility of Callicles’s doctrine of natural justice and his notion of the superior man. This is not something he can achieve in a prolonged speech. For suppose that Socrates did deliver a lengthy display speech in response to Callicles that championed the life of philosophy. Such a speech would rule out any inquiry into and evaluation of the assumptions that underlie Callicles’s position. We would be presented instead with the juxtaposition of two opposing theories of the good life in competition with each other, a pair of dueling set pieces where the choice between them would reduce simply to a matter of preference between the goods provided by the practice of rhetoric and the goods provided by the practice of philosophy. But conceiving of the choice between the rhetorical life and the philosophical life in these terms misses precisely what Socrates wants to insist upon in the dialogue: by itself, the civic power that the pursuit of rhetoric provides is no good for us at all—structuring our lives around this pursuit would deprive us of what we hold “most dear” (φιλτάτοις, 513a6)—while the power that one acquires by engaging in philosophy, wisdom, is the only good we need.

This might make it seem as though the only way Socrates believes theoretical inquiry can be conducted is through the back-and-forth of dialectic and the careful analysis of the premises underlying his interlocutors’ views, as well as those that underlie his own. Yet this does not follow. Refutation might demand elenctic discussion, but before that Socrates must get his interlocutors’ and his own views adequately on the table. For such inquiry, there is nothing that makes the form of a long speech unsuitable for Socrates’s aims. In fact, we have observed

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¹⁷ The implication is clear from the last lines of the text, though it is equally clear that Callicles is some way off from accepting it: see 527a5–8.
how his use of the water-carriers myth proves more suitable than his characteristic method of cross-examination in getting Callicles to articulate his understanding of the life of pleasure and sharpen his sense of what human virtue is. Protracted rhetoric of the sort we see here and elsewhere in the Gorgias can serve the ends of philosophy just as well as dialectic. The question is how, at what stage, and for what purpose such speechmaking is deployed.

This use of rhetoric is supported by a distinction between two kinds of persuasion that Socrates establishes with Gorgias early on in the dialogue. The first kind of persuasion, employed for instance by an arithmetician, is the kind that occurs from being taught (διδασκαλικής, 455a1; cf. 453d7–e3); the second is the kind that occurs from being convinced (πιστευτικής, 455a1). This distinction between teaching-based and conviction-based persuasion plays an important part in Gorgias’s subsequent efforts to define the nature of rhetoric (see esp. 458e6-a1), but once he affirms to Socrates that a conventional rhetorician concerns himself only with producing conviction in an audience, the possibility of a kind of persuasion that has teaching or (as Socrates also puts it) learning (μάθησις, 454d2) or knowledge (ἐπιστήμη, 454e4; εἰδέναι, 454e4) as its aim is left undeveloped in the dialogue and has not, as far as I am aware, received much consideration by scholars.

My suggestion in this paper is that Socrates’s use of rhetoric in the Gorgias conforms more to teaching-based persuasion than persuasion aimed at mere conviction. For we have found that he typically engages in speechmaking to clarify for his interlocutors as best he can either the reasons he has for his views or the reasons they have for their own. Notice that after he relates the water-carriers myth, Socrates openly expresses his interest in persuading Callicles about the disadvantages of a life committed to the endless satisfaction of one’s desires: “When I say this,” he asks Callicles, “do I at all persuade (πείθω) you to concede that the orderly life is better than the undisciplined one, or do I not?” (494a3–5). Socrates does not succeed here, but a consequence of the water-carriers myth is that it puts Callicles in a better position to understand his own views. That is, the myth prompts Callicles to consider what it is he means in identifying the happy life with the pleasant life, and therefore what benefit he believes the conventional practice of rhetoric confers on a man.

The import of this last point bears stressing. We saw in the previous section how Socrates admires Callicles’s great speech as a piece of thinking. A key result of their ensuing conversation in the text—consisting of pieces of argument, speechifying, analogy, myth, and exhortation—is that it deepens Callicles’s thinking, enabling him to form a sense of the tenets and internal workings of his own commitments. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Callicles thereby learns something about himself, to the extent that he reflects more carefully on his convictions about the superiority of the life of rhetoric. This is one example of the way Socrates’s use of different rhetorical devices in the dialogue has a teaching function that benefits his interlocutors. A response to Callicles’s speech that consisted only of a lengthy speech of Socrates’s own would fail to achieve such an excavation of Callicles’s commitments.

Ultimately in the Gorgias, it turns out that the life of rhetoric amounts to the life of a flatterer, equipping an aspiring democratic politician with the power to satisfy his desires at the expense
of others or to protect himself from the predations of others. Callicles admits this point late in the text at 521b1–3 but he never makes explicit in his speech the notions of human excellence that motivate his advocacy of the rhetorical life. It takes dialectic but also a considerable use of speechmaking for Socrates to draw out these unspoken features of Callicles’s position. He does so by extracting from Callicles, first, the idea that virtue (ἀρετή) lies in “the filling up of desires (τὸ τὰς ἐπιθυμίας ἀποτιμηλάναι)” (503c5; cf. 492c3–6, 492d5–e1) and, second, the idea that “preserving oneself and one’s belongings (τὸ σῶζειν αὐτὸν καὶ τὰ ἑαυτοῦ ὄντα), no matter what sort of person one happens to be, is what virtue is (τοῦτ’ ἐστὶν ἀρετή)” (512d3–4). Once these grounds for the life of rhetoric have been examined and rejected, Socrates at last has the space to promote the life of philosophy.18

If this is right, we can see how well Callicles acts as a “touchstone” for Socrates’s commitment to philosophy and a test for how he has cared for his soul, in just the way that Plato has us anticipate at the start of their conversation. Recall Socrates’s remark there to Callicles: “if this stone to which I intended to take my soul were the best stone and it agreed that my soul had been well cared for (καλῶς τεθεραπεύσθαι), don’t you think I could know well at that point that I’m in good shape and need no further test?” (486d5–7). While Callicles never comes around to agreeing about the value of philosophy, by participating in an inquiry into the nature of the good life he allows Socrates to secure the agreements necessary to test the strength of their different commitments.19 For Callicles must at least come to see by the end of the dialogue how confused he is about the human good and how much more he has to learn about human virtue. What living well requires, he accepts, is neither maximal pleasure nor maximal protection; it requires, instead, getting clear on what is worth taking pleasure in and protecting oneself from. And that, Socrates believes, requires philosophy.

So while Socrates eschews giving a speech that champions the philosophical life in the Gorgias, from the pieces of conversation in the text where he addresses Callicles’s views and explicates his own, Plato encourages us to construct the elements of that defense for ourselves. The use of rhetorical form figures in Socrates’s engagement with an interlocutor only insofar as it serves as a vehicle for teaching and learning, and by adopting a “show rather than tell” strategy in presenting Socrates’s defense, Plato engages in the same kind of persuasive endeavor with us.20 The result is a more immersive reading experience in which we achieve a deeper understanding of Socrates’s position, an understanding that would be impossible in the absence of a thorough accounting of Callicles’s position. Yet as we have found, this does not bind Plato to employing any single form of discourse in the dialogue. Rather, he uses a variety of rhetorical forms and all of them qualify as an active engagement in philosophical inquiry, for him and for us.

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18 I argue for this reading of Socrates’s final exchange with Callicles in Irani, “Socrates’s Great Speech.”
20 Similar claims about teaching and learning as the proper ends of speechmaking can be found in the Phaedrus at 277e6–9 and 278a2–5.
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