

**Socrates's Great Speech:
The Defense of Philosophy in Plato's *Gorgias***

Tushar Irani
Wesleyan University

Abstract: This paper focuses on a neglected portion of Plato's *Gorgias* from 506c to 513d during Socrates's discussion with Callicles. I claim that Callicles adopts the view that virtue lies in self-preservation in this part of the dialogue. Such a position allows him to assert the value of rhetoric in civic life by appealing not to the goodness of acting unjustly with impunity, but to the badness of suffering unjustly without remedy. On this view, the benefits of the life of rhetoric depend on the idea that virtue consists in the power to protect oneself from the predations of others. I argue that by challenging this understanding of virtue as self-preservation, Socrates both deprives Callicles of any remaining justification for the rhetorical life in the *Gorgias* and, at the same time, makes room for his own defense of the life of philosophy.

Keywords: Plato, *Gorgias*, Socrates, Callicles, philosophy, rhetoric, virtue, the good life, hedonism, self-preservation

1. Introduction

My title alludes of course to Callicles's "great speech" at 482c–486d in the *Gorgias*.¹ That speech, at the heart of the dialogue and almost four Stephanus pages in length, falls into two parts: first, Callicles offers an analysis of what is just by nature in contrast to what is just by mere convention; then, he issues a long diatribe against Socrates and the life of philosophy. The

¹ The term "great speech" is commonly used by scholars to refer to the substantial length of Callicles's speech, rather than to its qualitative merits.

reference to a “great speech” by Socrates in the *Gorgias* might be thought to indicate a similar stretch of the dialogue where Socrates waxes on at length. For despite what he says to Gorgias and Polus about his preference for short speeches at 449b4–c6 and 461c8–462a5, Socrates delivers a number of prolonged set pieces in the dialogue, including his pastry-baking analogy at 464b–465d; his critique of former Athenian political titans such as Themistocles and Pericles at 517b–519d; and his myth at the end of the dialogue at 523a–527c, which actually exceeds the length of Callicles’s great speech at over four pages.²

The speech that I have in mind, however, is not any of these long set pieces. The speech is not in fact one that Socrates *gives* in the *Gorgias* at all, but is conspicuously missing from the text. It is a speech that Socrates repeatedly suggests he *wants* to give in response to Callicles in defense of the life of philosophy (see 500c1–8, 505c7–d7, 506b4–c1). Callicles in his great speech initially invoked Euripides’s *Antiope* and a debate that occurs in that play between the two brothers Zethus and Amphion on the superiority of the practical life versus the intellectual life (see 485e2–486d1).³ Callicles, taking on the role of Zethus, urges Socrates to “abandon philosophy” (ἐάσας...φιλοσοφίαν, 484c5) and to practice instead the kind of rhetoric required for success in politics (484c8–e3).⁴ We would expect Socrates consequently to take on the role of

² The inconsistency is observed by Socrates at 465e1–3 during his exchange with Polus after the pastry-baking analogy and by Callicles at 519d8–9. This inconsistency is only apparent, however, for what Socrates values about the short back-and-forth of discussion is the way it aids understanding. Insofar as a long speech advances that goal, as Socrates tells Polus at 465e4–466a2, he is amenable to producing or receiving one. The same point has been made by Gabriela Roxana Carone, who argues that the use of long speeches for Socrates “might be justified under certain conditions” when in the service of mutual understanding (“Socratic Rhetoric,” 228).

³ Plato’s treatment of this debate receives discussion in James Arieti, “Plato’s Philosophical *Antiope*”; Andrea Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue*, ch. 2; and Franco Trivigno, “Paratragedy in Plato’s *Gorgias*.” For Plato’s use of and attitude toward poetry generally in the *Gorgias*, see Fritz-Gregor Herrmann, “Poetry in Plato’s *Gorgias*.”

⁴ Cf. 486a1–3, where Callicles appears to quote from the *Antiope* directly: “You couldn’t put an argument [λόγον] together correctly before councils of justice or utter any plausible or persuasive sound.” As an anonymous referee has pointed out to me, Callicles does not specifically advocate the practice of rhetoric in these lines or elsewhere in his speech, but Socrates’s low opinion of the value of rhetoric (expressed earlier in the dialogue with Gorgias

Amphion by explaining the benefits of the philosophical life over the rhetorical life. Yet there is no such speech to be found in the *Gorgias*.

My interest in what follows is in whether we can construct the main elements of such a speech on Socrates's behalf, given the dialectical moves that occur in the *Gorgias* after Callicles's speech.⁵ I will concentrate here on 506c–513d, a part of the text during the later stages of the work following Socrates's refutation of Callicles's hedonism at 492d–499b, primarily because this is where the question of the choiceworthiness of the philosophical life recurs, but also because this part of Socrates's exchange with Callicles has been largely neglected by scholars.⁶

and Polus) suggests that this is what Callicles has in view. More importantly, this is how Socrates interprets Callicles's exhortation later in the *Gorgias* at 500c4–7 and 511b7–c2.

⁵ To be clear, my interest is in whether Plato gives us material during this part of the *Gorgias* that serves as a *response* to Callicles and would be the essence of a speech that Socrates could give in defense of philosophy. The specific form of this response is therefore incidental to the reasons that Socrates has to affirm the choiceworthiness of the philosophical life over the rhetorical life in the dialogue. Indeed, I consider it significant that Plato does *not* have Socrates deliver a speech that champions the life of philosophy that is analogous in form to the one delivered by Callicles—perhaps, as I suggest below, because he expects us to do the work of understanding Socrates's reasoning for ourselves. A similar line has been taken by David Sedley on the myth that ends the dialogue at 523a–527c, where Plato invites us to interpret the myth allegorically and in a way that is continuous with earlier themes in the text; on this reading, the poetic form of the myth is incidental to the argument that is its proper content, which enables us to “work out why Socrates has proclaimed himself to be, in a sense, the one true practitioner of the political art” (“Myth, Punishment, and Politics,” 68).

⁶ Despite the wealth of fine scholarship on the *Gorgias* that addresses Socrates's discussion with Callicles, the lack of attention to their concluding exchange is a major gap in the secondary literature, as has been observed recently by Malcolm Schofield, “Callicles's Return.” Notable studies that pass over this part of the text include Charles Kahn, “Drama and Dialectic”; George Klosko, “Refutation of Callicles”; Richard McKim, “Shame and Truth”; Scott Berman, “Socrates and Callicles”; Jyl Gentzler, “Sophistic Cross-Examination”; John Cooper, “Socrates and Plato”; George Rudebusch, *Socrates, Pleasure, and Value*, chs. 4–5; John Beversluis, *Cross-Examining Socrates*, ch. 16; Raphael Woolf, “Callicles and Socrates”; Daniel Russell, *Plato on Pleasure*, ch. 2; Rod Jenks, “Sounds of Silence”; Marina McCoy, *Philosophers and Sophists*, ch. 4; Christina H. Tarnopolsky, *Prudes, Perverts, Tyrants*, ch. 1; Panos Dimas, “What Is Just”; and Tushar Irani, *Value of Philosophy*, chs. 3–4. Many scholars offer grounds for this neglect by claiming that Socrates's argument with Callicles in the latter part of the dialogue has deteriorated so far beyond repair that Callicles is no longer a genuine participant; see e.g. Kahn: “Throughout

This paper argues that Socrates's concluding encounter with Callicles contains a key set of argumentative moves that blocks any final attempt by Callicles to assert the superiority of the life of rhetoric over the life of philosophy. Once Socrates closes off this path, he is in a better position to claim that a moderate life governed by the pursuit of wisdom is the only life really worth living, and thus to defend his own engagement in the practice of philosophy. The contribution of this reading is that it shows us how and why Plato has Socrates argue against a new justification for the rhetorical way of life during the closing stretch of the *Gorgias*. For it is only after the use of rhetoric has been refuted on these grounds that Socrates can make room for his own positive defense of the life of philosophy.⁷

The most important move here occurs at 508c–513c, where Socrates considers the value of living a life structured around the avoidance of suffering injustice. If such a life were worth pursuing, it would elevate the ability to protect oneself against others to a virtue. This would open the door to the use of rhetoric for self-protective purposes, rather than the ends of self-gratification and aggrandizement that motivate Callicles's initial justification for the life of

the final section Callicles is no longer a real adversary but a passive, often silent interlocutor" ("Drama and Dialectic," 98); Gentzler: "Callicles has lost all of his fighting spirit and merely goes along with Socrates, conceding whatever he says in order to get the argument over with" ("Sophistic Cross-Examination," 39); Cooper: "from 499c onward Socrates is not in fact examining and refuting Callicles's views at all, but explaining and arguing directly for his own" ("Socrates and Plato," 73); Beversluis: "The discussion has degenerated into a competitive eristic contest" (*Cross-Examining Socrates*, 360); Jenks: "The energy of the dialectic encounter is now spent" ("Sounds of Silence," 203); and Dimas, who holds that Plato portrays Socrates at this stage as "an alienated character who fails to convince his interlocutors, and becomes gradually unable even to engage them in substantive philosophical conversation" ("What Is Just," 84). As Schofield points out, this is clearly not the case, since Socrates reengages Callicles in argument at 509c for over thirteen more pages in the text.

⁷ Apart from Schofield, "Callicles's Return," the small group of scholars who discuss the part of the *Gorgias* that concerns me in this paper includes F. C. White, "The Good in Plato's *Gorgias*"; Dominic Scott, "Moral Education"; Rachana Kamtekar, "Profession of Friendship"; James Doyle, "Fundamental Conflict"; Devin Stauffer, *Unity of Plato's Gorgias*, ch. 4; Emily Austin, "Callicles's Fear of Death"; and Leo Catana, "Protection." However, none of these scholars interprets Socrates's exchange here with Callicles as I do in this paper by connecting it with the debate between the two characters on the benefits of the rhetorical life versus the philosophical life.

rhetoric following his great speech. Socrates argues, however, that the ends of self-protection do not recommend the life of rhetoric.⁸ According to this argument, what one needs to live well is not the power to ensure the avoidance of suffering injustice, but the power to ensure the avoidance of doing injustice. What that requires is the ability to set one's desires and values in good order. And what that requires, in turn, is the practice of philosophy. Hence through a careful reading of this concluding part of the *Gorgias*, it appears we can assemble all the major pieces of the speech Socrates could give Callicles in defense of the life of philosophy: the speech of Amphion, as it were, in return for the speech of Zethus.

A further contribution of this reading is that it does justice to the entire line of reasoning that Socrates employs to refute Callicles in the *Gorgias* by situating their argument within the central conflict of the dialogue between Socrates's commitment to philosophy and his interlocutors' commitment to rhetoric. This assessment of Socrates's argumentative strategy in the text shows how his defense of the philosophical life does not, as some scholars have held, amount simply to exhortation and rest on Plato's literary portrayal of Socrates; nor is Socrates's argument with Callicles only a partial success, insofar as Callicles is kept intellectually alert and involved.⁹ Rather, we find in the final sections of the *Gorgias* a cogent and positive argument for the practice of philosophy. In fact, by having us make sense of this portion of the text within its

⁸ Throughout this paper, I will be using "self-protection" in its conventional sense and as Callicles does, that is, in terms of the protection of one's physical self and belongings against the predations of others. I leave open whether Socrates has his own more nuanced interpretation of what self-protection demands in the *Gorgias*, as has been argued recently by Catana, "Protection," in a thorough treatment of this topic. I take it to be complementary to this interpretation that the pursuit of (genuine) self-protection according to Socrates will entail the life of philosophy, though Catana does not argue for this point. Plato's custom in the dialogues of subverting a conventional term by subjecting it to critical scrutiny receives good discussion in David Wolfsdorf, *Trials of Reason* (see esp. 14–16).

⁹ See Kahn, "Drama and Dialectic," who claims that the case for Socrates's conception of the good life is "more in the nature of eloquent exhortation than rigorous argument" (119); and Schofield, "Callicles's Return," who finds "argumentative success" (25) in Socrates's concluding exchange with Callicles only in terms of the way Socrates retains Callicles's engagement in discussion, not in terms of Socrates's reasoning for his own views.

dramatic framework, Plato appears to invite us to do some philosophical work of our own, both in identifying the essence of an otherwise missing, hypothetical “speech” by Socrates that answers to the one delivered by Callicles, and in seeing how this speech functions dialectically as a refutation of what remains of Callicles’s position as the dialogue draws to a close.

2. Framing the Choice

The choice between a life devoted to the practice of rhetoric and a life devoted to the practice of philosophy first emerges in the *Gorgias* during Callicles’s great speech.¹⁰ From the start, Callicles frames the choice in terms of two desiderata:

And yet, Socrates, “how can this be a wise thing, the art [τέχνη] which took a well-favored man and made him worse,” able neither to protect himself nor to rescue himself or anyone else from the gravest dangers [μήτε αὐτὸν αὐτῷ δυνάμενον βοηθεῖν μηδ’ ἐκσῶσαι ἐκ τῶν μεγίστων κινδύνων μήτε ἑαυτὸν μήτε ἄλλον μηδένα], to be robbed of all of his property by his enemies and to live a life with absolutely no rights in his city? Such a man one could knock on the jaw without paying what’s due for it, to put it rather crudely. Listen to me, my good man, and stop this refuting [ἐλέγχων]. (486b4–c4)¹¹

¹⁰ While Callicles is the first to address this choice (see n. 4 above), the nature of the good life in general is at issue earlier in Socrates’s exchanges with Gorgias and Polus; cf. 458a8–b1, 472c9–d1, 487e7–488a2, 492d3–5, 500c1–4. Doyle, “Socrates and Gorgias,” is especially helpful in explaining how Socrates’s inquiry into the nature of rhetoric in the early stages of the dialogue is continuous with the question of the kind of life one should live.

¹¹ All quotes from the *Gorgias* in this paper follow Donald Zeyl’s translation in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, sometimes with minor modifications based on the Greek in *Platonis opera*, edited by John Burnet.

Without getting too far at this stage into the content of Callicles's views, we can see that he implicitly assumes above that whatever activity one chooses as a life pursuit, it should be of benefit both to oneself and to a community of others. The text does not always make clear how far Callicles's circle of concern extends beyond himself, but we need not tackle that question here. The point is that his assessment of the kind of life one should live depends on the way that life conduces to one's own good and to the good of a wider political community.¹² This twofold benefit-structure to one's way of life informs the entire ensuing discussion that occurs between Callicles and Socrates. For the most part, especially right after Callicles's speech, their debate centers on the nature of one's personal good, and this remains a focus at 506c–513d in the part of the text with which we will be concerned. But the discussion also shifts on occasion, as we shall note, to whether the use of rhetoric or the use of philosophy is more conducive to the good of others (see 500a–505b, 513d–522c).

Socrates himself adopts this twofold benefit-structure later in the *Gorgias* in considering the choice between the life of rhetoric and the life of philosophy:

These things being so, let's examine what it is you're taking me to task for, and whether it's right or not. You say that I'm unable to protect either myself or any of my friends or relatives or rescue them from the gravest dangers [ἐγὼ οὐχ οἶός τ' εἰμι βοηθῆσαι οὔτε

¹² Socrates acknowledges Callicles's place in a wider social circle at 487c1-d2 by identifying three of his friends by name, though of course there is little reason to believe from his speech that Callicles cares about the good of the political community as a whole. By contrast, I argue at length in Irani, *Value of Philosophy*, that Socrates does express this care through his own engagement with others (see esp. 79-87). Despite the anti-conventional tenor of much of his great speech, Callicles here appears to adopt a traditional Athenian conception of political virtue of the sort that Plato has Meno espouse in the *Meno*: “a man's virtue [ἀνδρὸς ἀρετή] consists of being able to manage public affairs and in so doing to benefit his friends and harm his enemies and to be careful that no harm comes to himself [καὶ αὐτὸν εὐλαβεῖσθαι μηδὲν τοιοῦτον παθεῖν]” (71e2-5; translation from G. M. A. Grube in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by Cooper and Hutchinson). My thanks to Lucas Rotondo for this reference.

ἐμαυτῷ οὔτε τῶν φίλων οὐδενὶ οὐδὲ τῶν οἰκείων, οὐδ' ἐκσῶσαι ἐκ τῶν μεγίστων
κινδύνων], and that I'm at the mercy of the first comer, just as people without rights are,
whether he wants to knock me on the jaw, to use that forceful expression of yours, or
confiscate my property, or exile me from the city, or ultimately put me to death. To be in
that position is, by your reasoning, the most shameful thing of all. (508c4–d4)

Again, putting aside for the present the precise way in which Socrates will address the issues raised in this passage, he is clearly taking up here and accepting the challenge to justify the practice of philosophy in the twofold way that Callicles had earlier framed the choice between the rhetorical life and the philosophical life. We should therefore expect Socrates's defense of philosophy to show, first, how the practice conduces to one's own good and, second, how it conduces to the good of others. Socrates evidently sees much of his previous discussion with Callicles as leading up to this pivotal juncture in the *Gorgias*, though it is worth reviewing quickly how they get here.

To recap: following Callicles's great speech, Plato has Socrates marshal a series of arguments against Callicles's hedonistic view of the good life from 492d to 499b. Callicles here promotes an indiscriminate form of hedonism, according to which all pleasures are equally good for a human being (see 491e5–492c8). But at 499b4–d3, Callicles comes to retract this view of the good life. Having driven a wedge between the pleasant and the good, Socrates next recalls his earlier conversations with Gorgias and Polus, and gets Callicles's agreement at 500a4–6 that the ability to distinguish good pleasures from bad pleasures requires an art (τέχνη) of some sort. He then returns to his pastry-baking analogy with Polus and we see the first shift of his discussion with Callicles to a political register at 500a–505b. Having confirmed that what's good for a human being is not reducible to what's pleasant, and that the art of politics requires caring for the good of others, Socrates claims that none of the preeminent Athenian politicians before him truly possessed expertise in politics, insofar as none of them sought to foster those desires that were good in their fellow citizens or to thwart those desires that were bad (see esp. 503c1–d3). Such

an art, he argues, demands disciplining the desires of others. And thus Callicles's understanding of the good life suffers a further defeat: to be moderate and have one's desires disciplined is better than to be immoderate and have one's desires undisciplined (505b1–12).

That is a brief and imperfect sketch of a long and complex sequence of arguments in the *Gorgias*, but it suffices to lead us to the following memorable part of the text, where Callicles, showing palpable disgust, withdraws from the discussion:

CALLICLES: I don't know what in the world you mean, Socrates. Ask somebody else.

SOCRATES: This fellow won't put up with being benefited and with his undergoing the very thing the argument [λόγος] is about, with being disciplined.

CALLICLES: And I couldn't care less about anything you say, either. I gave you these answers just for Gorgias's sake.

SOCRATES: Very well. What'll we do now? Are we breaking off in the middle of the argument [μεταξὺ τὸν λόγον]?

CALLICLES: That's for you to decide.

SOCRATES: They say that it isn't permitted to give up in the middle [μεταξύ] of telling stories, either. A head must be put on it, so that it won't go about headless. Please answer the remaining questions, too, so that our argument may get its head [ἵνα ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος κεφαλὴν λάβῃ].

CALLICLES: How forceful you are, Socrates! If you'll listen to me, you'll drop this discussion or carry it through with someone else.

Socrates: Who else is willing? Surely we mustn't leave the argument incomplete [ἀτελεῖ...τὸν λόγον]. (505c1–d7)

Callicles's spitefulness in defeat is the highlight of this exchange, yet the key point of significance for our purposes is Socrates's insistence that their argument remains unfinished. Plato flags the issue repeatedly in the lines above and subsequently in having Socrates accept

Callicles's suggestion that he complete the discussion on his own. Even Gorgias intervenes and expresses his interest in hearing the debate carry on: "You must finish the argument [λόγον]," he tells Socrates (506b1). Socrates then underscores the point, recalling the invocation of Euripides's *Antiope* from Callicles's great speech: "Certainly, Gorgias, and I myself would have been glad to continue conversing with Callicles here, until I had returned him the speech of Amphion [τοῦ Ἀμφίονος...ῥῆσιν] for that of Zethus; but since you, Callicles, are unwilling to join me in carrying the discussion through to the end, please do listen to me and interrupt if you think I'm saying anything wrong" (506b4–c1).

Plato gives us every signal here that Socrates's defense of the philosophical life—his own great speech—will be forthcoming in the *Gorgias*. Everything that was said earlier seems now to be subordinated to what is to come. This will be the "head" (κεφαλή, 505d1) that Socrates informs Callicles he wants to put on their argument, without which it would wander around senselessly. It will be his answer to Callicles's challenge to justify the practice of philosophy. But this is not what we receive. On the brink of addressing the matter that concerns him most of all, and after having already restated key parts of his discussion with Polus and Gorgias at 500a7–501c6, Socrates provides at 506c5–508c3 a further lengthy synopsis of his argument with Callicles in mock-dialogue form: "Now listen," he says, "as I pick up the argument [λόγον] from the beginning [ἐξ ἀρχῆς]" (506c5).

Why all of these false starts and backtracks? Far from carrying the discussion through until its end, Socrates appears intent at 506c5–508c3 on tediously recounting details that have already been established in his exchange with Callicles. However, it would be a mistake to regard this passage as a simple rehash. The synopsis has a special purpose, for it puts a new gloss on the previous discussion, and the subject that Socrates selects for consideration, as we shall see, is crucial to the argument of the *Gorgias* as it moves forward. The subject concerns the virtue or excellence (ἀρετή, 506d3) the possession of which conduces most of all to the human good. That virtue, Socrates stresses, is moderation (σωφροσύνη). For since—as he and Callicles have agreed—it is the order present in anything that makes it good, and the orderly (κοσμία) soul

is a moderate (σώφρων) soul, the moderate soul must be good (506e2–507a2).¹³ Furthermore, the moderate soul will be just, pious, and courageous, and hence is completely good (ἀγαθὸν...εἶναι τελέως, 507c2–3).

To my knowledge, there is no other place in the *Gorgias* where Socrates declares his views on the good life so emphatically. Anyone who wishes to live well must “pursue and practice moderation” (σωφροσύνην...διωκτέον καὶ ἀσκητέον, 507d1), he affirms, and he goes so far as to call this the goal of living: “This is the target [σκοπός] which I think one should look to in living, and in his actions he should direct all of his own affairs and those of his city [τὰ αὐτοῦ...καὶ τὰ τῆς πόλεως] to the end that justice and moderation will be present in one who is to be blessed [μακαρίῳ]” (507d6–e1). But now we see a problem: in the context of answering the challenge of Callicles’s great speech, how does this understanding of the good life comport with the life of philosophy? Perhaps Socrates means to propose that living moderately (and justly, piously, courageously) *requires* the practice of philosophy in some way, yet it is not obvious why that should be the case. As a matter of fact, I believe this is more or less Socrates’s response to Callicles’s challenge, and by the end of this paper we should be in a good position to see his reasons for thinking so. Before we get there, though, we need to consider another problem, one that occupies Socrates for much of the remainder of his discussion with Callicles and that bears directly on the choiceworthiness of the rhetorical life versus the philosophical life.

3. Callicles’s Last Stand

The problem is that nothing Socrates claims in the synopsis passage at 506c5–508c3 rules out the use of rhetoric—and indeed, its necessity—in living well. Callicles can agree to everything Socrates says here about the role of moderation in the good life and continue to uphold the

¹³ This is Socrates’s paraphrase of his exchange with Callicles at 503d6–e5.

superiority of the rhetorical life over the philosophical life. He will of course have to forgo the idea that the value of rhetoric lies in the power it provides to gratify one's desires and commit injustice with impunity. That view is no longer tenable after Callicles has retracted his hedonistic account of the human good at 499b4–d3. To emphasize the point, Socrates asserts in the synopsis passage that such a life is an “endless evil” (ἀνήνυτον κακόν, 507e3): apart from its harmful effects on the order within one's soul, it leaves one friendless (φιλία οὐκ, 507e5).

Nonetheless, Callicles could still argue for the superiority of the rhetorical life. He could do so by appealing not to the goodness of committing injustice with impunity, but to the badness of suffering injustice without remedy. That is to say, he could grant the view that living moderately is necessary to living well, yet insist all the same that the life of rhetoric should be chosen over the life of philosophy, given that the former provides a man with protection from mistreatment by others, while the latter leaves one vulnerable to all manner of social injuries and abuses. According to this argument, the use of rhetoric serves a prophylactic purpose, rather than the pleonectic purpose of satisfying one's every urge and inclination.

There is good reason to think that this prophylactic benefit is the ultimate value of rhetoric for Callicles. The principles of natural justice that he expounds in the first part of his great speech at 482c–484c state that it is natural for human beings to seek as much as possible for themselves at the expense of others. Based on such a view of the social world, proficiency in persuasive speaking would be a safeguard against the predations of others. In the best of circumstances, it would supply a man with unparalleled political power, but even in the worst of circumstances, it would provide a measure of insulation from political harm. Thus when Callicles turns in the second part of his great speech at 484c–486d to rebuke the philosophical life, it is the callow and unworldly nature of the philosopher that he targets for criticism and deems especially shameful (αἰσχρόν, 486a5).¹⁴ And as the speech builds to a climax, Callicles

¹⁴ See 484d2–7: “Such people turn out to be inexperienced [ἄπειροι] in the laws of their city and in the speeches one must use to deal with human beings in business, whether in public or in private, inexperienced in human pleasures and desires [τῶν ἡδονῶν τε καὶ ἐπιθυμιῶν], and, in

explains the full ramifications of the philosophical way of life by anticipating the injustices that Socrates will suffer at trial should he be wrongfully accused (486a7–b4)—one of several references that Plato makes in the *Gorgias* to Socrates’s fate as depicted in the *Apology* (cf. 508c4–d3, 521c3–522c3).

It appears, then, that Callicles has the resources in this closing stretch of the *Gorgias* to make a last stand for the life of rhetoric. So far, Socrates has argued assiduously in the dialogue for the comparative claim that acting unjustly is worse for a man than suffering unjustly.¹⁵ But this implies only that when faced with a choice between doing an injustice or suffering an injustice, one should accept the latter. In the absence of such a choice it is compatible with this view that one should, all things being equal, avoid suffering injustice. Callicles could maintain that in the real world, after all, people consistently suffer injustices at the hands of others, and on the picture of social relations he presents in his great speech that is how things are by nature.

Notice, too, that Socrates never denies in the *Gorgias* that suffering unjustly is bad. His position is that acting unjustly is *worse*, and when he refutes Polus famously on this question his argument hinges on the point that doing an injustice is worse because it *surpasses* suffering an

short, inexperienced in the ways of human beings altogether.” The contempt that Callicles has for such people is best understood in light of the first part of his speech, where he asserts that to be powerless in politics is unmanly and a life suited only to a slave: “For by nature all that is worse is also more shameful, like suffering what’s unjust, whereas by law doing it is more shameful. No, no real man [ἀνὴρ] would put up with suffering what’s unjust; only a slave would do so, one who is better dead than alive, who when he’s treated unjustly and abused can’t protect himself or anyone else he cares about” (483a7–b4). Cf. Schofield, who argues that it is on account of these views from his speech that Callicles resumes engaging with Socrates at 509c (“Callicles’s Return,” 12).

¹⁵ Socrates highlights this at 508b3–c3 as one of the critical conclusions of his conversation with Polus earlier in the dialogue. The vocabulary in this passage is masculine and I have retained it in my paraphrase here and elsewhere in this paper when it is clear that Socrates is drawing conclusions based on his interlocutors’ views. However, while Polus and Callicles clearly do not believe the conditions of the good life extend to women, it is important to note that Socrates’s perspective on this issue has much wider applications, since he explicitly includes women in arguing for the benefits of acting justly with Polus at 470e9–11. Properly stated, therefore, Socrates’s view is that acting unjustly is worse than suffering unjustly for *any* human being. Cf. n. 40 below and E. R. Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias*, 242–3 for comment.

injustice in badness (κακῷ ὑπερβάλλον [sc. ἐστίν], 475c7–8). Hence Socrates remarks during his exchange with Polus that he himself would wish for neither, but if it were necessary to choose between the two he would elect to suffer unjustly over acting unjustly (469c1–2). Likewise in his exchange with Callicles now, Socrates accepts that suffering an injustice is a bad thing: his contention is simply that it is *less* a bad thing (κακόν...ἔλαττον, 509c7) than doing an injustice.

All of this suggests the commonsense view that, even for Socrates, suffering unjustly is in fact bad for a person. So it would be open to Callicles to champion the rhetorical life on this basis. Conceding the goodness of moderation, he could argue for the concurrent goodness of the life of rhetoric by espousing a moderate and enlightened type of hedonism—a life of least possible suffering—instead of the indiscriminate hedonism that he was led to endorse against Socrates, and it seems against his own better judgement, previously in the dialogue.¹⁶

Whether Callicles continues to justify the life of rhetoric as a type of hedonist is an issue that the text leaves underdetermined. The point is that this path is left available to him dialectically as a way of maintaining the core claims of his great speech. After he abandons the view that all pleasures are equally good at 499b4–d3, the best that can be said about Callicles's convictions in the remainder of the *Gorgias* is that they are insufficiently grounded. He evidently believes at this stage that he can escape his earlier endorsement of an indiscriminate hedonism while still promoting the benefits of the life of rhetoric. He does not yet know how to salvage his position, but he remains committed to the badness of suffering unjustly, most likely because he identifies what's bad for a human being with what's painful. The idea that what's bad is reducible to what's painful features prominently as one of Callicles's key beliefs in his confrontation with Socrates at 492d–499b, typically along with the idea that what's good is reducible to what's pleasant (see esp. 498d2–e3). The “enlightened” type of hedonism I will henceforth impute to Callicles should be understood accordingly as consistent with this belief

¹⁶ Note how Callicles feels compelled to assert that all pleasures are equally good in order to best Socrates in argument at 494e7–495c2. Plato makes a point here of getting us to question whether Callicles is really committed to an indiscriminate hedonism of this sort.

and as a strategy that remains open to him in justifying the use of rhetoric for its prophylactic purposes.¹⁷

It is for this reason, I propose, that Socrates at this stage of the *Gorgias* pursues a different tack in his debate with Callicles, so as to block a new vindication of the rhetorical life. This also explains why Callicles is drawn back into conversing with Socrates at 509c and expresses a renewed interest in the discussion after refusing to participate any further at 505c–d.¹⁸ Despite that pledge to withdraw, Callicles now apparently sees a way to make a revived case for the life of rhetoric, one that coincides well with his personal beliefs. On this new view, one's main concern in life should be the avoidance of suffering injustice, and rhetoric should be practiced under these terms for its supreme protective benefits.¹⁹

All of Socrates's subsequent efforts in the *Gorgias* until 513d are devoted to refuting this new view. His argument with Callicles thus far has allowed space for the notion that one can be committed in civic life to avoiding both the suffering of injustice and the doing of injustice.

¹⁷ No doubt there are other strategies that Callicles could employ to this end (see e.g. Austin, "Callicles's Fear of Death," who argues that he is motivated by concerns about mortality). Yet as we shall observe, insofar as Callicles is committed to the view that a man must protect himself above all from the suffering of injustice, Socrates will claim that these strategies are afflicted by the same flaw.

¹⁸ Thus I disagree here with Schofield, who regards the resumption of the discussion as Plato's way of showing how Socrates can make contact with "an intelligent young politician hoping to rise within the Athenian democracy, such as Callicles is portrayed as being" ("Callicles's Return," 28). Schofield is right that Socrates reengages Callicles in argument by recalling the concerns that Callicles had raised in his great speech about being powerless in the face of injustice: see n. 14 above. Socrates's purpose, however, is not to establish common ground with Callicles, but to wrap up the debate over the choice of lives that underlies the conflict between the two characters and which Callicles himself remains keen to resolve (see 510a1–2).

¹⁹ Again, the most obvious motivation for this view would be a basic human aversion to pain. Suffering injustice must clearly be avoided on these grounds, but interestingly, so too should doing injustice, owing to concerns of retaliation from others. Superficially, then, such an understanding of the rhetorical life is one that abides by conventional norms of justice, though Socrates will soon dispute this.

Indeed, for an enlightened hedonist, avoiding the latter is a means to avoiding the former.²⁰

Socrates now seeks to eliminate this dialectical space. He starts at 509d by turning his attention with Callicles to the kind of power (δύναμις) (509d4, d6) or art (τέχνη) (509e1, 510a4, a6) that one needs in civic life for maximal protection against the suffering of injustice.²¹ Such protection, Socrates maintains and Callicles agrees, is acquired either by ruling in a city oneself as a tyrant or by befriending those with political power. Of these two methods, the first is impossible in a democracy, which leaves Socrates and Callicles to focus on the second.

This is an important move in the dialogue. The fact that Plato quickly dismisses the life of the tyrant as a way to protect oneself in politics shows that his main interest here is in arguing against the benefits of rhetoric to an aspiring democratic politician. For it is in this context that

²⁰ Cf. Epicurus, *Principal Doctrine* 31: “The justice of nature is a pledge of reciprocal usefulness, neither to harm one another nor to be harmed” (translation from Brad Inwood and Lloyd P. Gerson, *The Epicurus Reader*). Observe that an important component of this view is that it makes the pursuit of justice of only instrumental value to a person. For this reason, I disagree with Catana that an ideal form of protection according to Socrates should “enable one (a) not to act unjustly and (b) not to suffer unjustly” (“Protection,” 437). I agree of course that the notion of self-protection plays a larger role in the *Gorgias* than has generally been recognized. However, as I explain just below, Socrates is keen to argue in this concluding part of the text that one cannot devote oneself to both the avoidance of suffering unjustly and the avoidance of acting unjustly. Though he accepts that the suffering of injustice is bad, he insists at 510e4–511a3 that the doing of injustice is the worst evil (τὸ μέγιστον...κακόν, 511a1) for a human being and should therefore (see 522c7–d3) be protected against above all. At issue here are two opposing ideas of self-interest: whereas Callicles locates his self-interest in protection from suffering unjustly, Socrates locates his self-interest in protection from acting unjustly; the former requires the practice of flattering rhetoric, while the latter requires the practice of philosophy. This reading of the role that protection plays in the dialogue connects the theme more closely, I believe, with the central conflict between Callicles and Socrates regarding the choice between the rhetorical life and the philosophical life.

²¹ If not quite synonymous, the terms “power” (δύναμις) and “art” (τέχνη) are complementary in this passage, with τέχνη serving to specify the more generic δύναμις, and καί functioning epexegetically at 509e1. Note that Socrates never states explicitly here that the avoidance of suffering unjustly at all costs involves an art. He cannot, for the power in question turns out to be the use of rhetoric understood as a flattering knack, and Socrates notoriously denies in his pastry-baking analogy with Polus that this practice is a real art. For that matter, Socrates also denies that the conventional rhetorician possesses real power (see 466b4–c2; cf. 510d11–e2). He most likely uses both terms loosely at this stage in the dialogue with respect to rhetoric, rather than in the precise sense he argues for earlier with Polus.

Socrates can introduce, crucially, what Malcolm Schofield terms the “assimilation thesis” into his argument with Callicles: to fully befriend the prevailing regime in a city, one must assimilate one’s character as much as possible to the ruling class. This requires subscribing to the value judgements of those in political power, “blaming and praising the same things” (ταὐτὰ ψέγων καὶ ἐπαινῶν), and being subject to their authority (510c7–9). Socrates and Callicles concur that such a man will best avoid suffering unjustly at the hands of others. Yet when applied to democratic political conditions, the assimilation thesis entails subjugating oneself to the whims of the many, the people whom Callicles calls weak and inferior human beings in his great speech (οἱ ἄσθενεῖς ἄνθρωποι...καὶ οἱ πολλοί, 483b5–6) and for whom he has disdain. In essence, the use of rhetoric for maximal protection against others requires the life of a professional flatterer.

We find therefore in these sections of the *Gorgias* a critique of the rhetorical life on terms that Callicles should accept.²² But we also see Socrates mount a critique on his own grounds. For he argues at 510e4–511a3 that the avoidance of suffering unjustly at all costs leads necessarily to the doing of injustice. Hence Socrates holds that the use of rhetoric for maximal self-protection results in a person incurring “the worst evil” (τὸ μέγιστον...κακόν, 511a1). Callicles is far less willing to accept this line of argument: “I don’t know,” he exclaims, “how you keep twisting our discussion in every direction, Socrates” (511a4–5). And indeed, Socrates’s reasoning at 510e4–511a3 demands closer scrutiny. First of all, it is difficult to see why he issues an objection to the rhetorical way of life on these grounds, which Callicles is bound to resist, when the implications of the assimilation thesis have been adequately established: once Callicles admits that a life structured around the avoidance of suffering unjustly consigns him to being a servant of the masses whom he detests, this should be enough to provoke his misgivings about the value of rhetoric. Second, it is unclear how exactly Socrates’s reasoning works: particularly in democratic

²² Cf. T. H. Irwin, who notes that Socrates here “appeals to what was attractive about Callicles’s own position [sc. in his great speech], to expose its inconsistency with the way of life he follows” (*Plato: Gorgias*, 240); and Schofield, who refers to Socrates’s application of the assimilation thesis to Athenian politics as a “bombshell” for Callicles (“Callicles’s Return,” 24).

conditions, why will the pursuit of maximal protection against others lead necessarily to the *doing* of injustice?

Answering the second question here helps us answer the first. Again, Socrates's aim in these lines is to refute the view that one can devote oneself in civic life to both the avoidance of suffering unjustly and the avoidance of acting unjustly. Even in a democratic society, which is governed ostensibly by egalitarian norms and principles, it will generally turn out based on the assimilation thesis that a commitment not to suffer any injustice will be at odds with a commitment not to do an injustice. This is because the assimilation thesis states that self-protection in civic life is best achieved by adopting the values of those with political power. Yet those with political power in a democracy are the many, and as Plato emphasizes persistently throughout the *Gorgias*, the many believe that suffering unjustly is worse than acting unjustly.²³ So consider cases where a conflict is perceived between suffering unjustly and acting unjustly, and one can get away with acting unjustly. According to the beliefs of the many, a person has an incentive in such cases to act unjustly. Or consider the fact that the many identify what's good for a human being with what feels good (see 517b3–5, 522b4–6). Once more, those who can obtain great pleasure from doing an injustice with impunity have an incentive on this view to act unjustly.

On the basis of the assimilation thesis, then, Socrates can legitimately argue that a life of maximal self-protection in democratic conditions offers no guarantee that one will refrain from acting unjustly. Such a person must derive their understanding of justice from what most people regard as just—"accustoming himself from childhood on to like and dislike the same things as the master" (510d6–7)—but the opinions of most people about what's just are notoriously fickle and contradictory, and as likely to permit acts of injustice as to forbid them. It follows that the pursuit of such a life will typically result in the commission of injustice, if not by incentivizing

²³ This point of course receives the most emphasis at 473e4–476a2, where Socrates and Polus debate the badness of suffering unjustly versus acting unjustly at length, but it also appears in several other places in the dialogue: cf. 481c1–5, 482b2–c3, 483a2–8, 511b1–3.

unjust action, then at least by way of complicity. This makes clear why Socrates develops his own critique of the rhetorical way of life at 510e4–511a3. He accepts the badness of suffering unjustly. Yet even so, he contends, there exists no space for the view that one can be committed in politics to avoiding both the suffering of injustice and the doing of injustice. One must choose.²⁴

With these points established, Socrates is ready to take up anew the challenge that Callicles threw down in his great speech:

SOCRATES: Or do you think that a human being ought to make sure that his life be as long as possible and that he practice those crafts [τέχνας] that ever rescue us from dangers, like the rhetoric that you tell me to practice, the kind that preserves us in the law courts?

CALLICLES: Yes, and by Zeus, that's sound advice for you! (511b7–c3)

We find here at last a return to the topic of the choiceworthiness of the rhetorical life versus the philosophical life. By this stage in the dialogue, Callicles has been led to the position that the value of rhetoric lies in its use for self-protective purposes, rather than the ends of self-gratification he had championed previously in the text. During that part of his discussion with Socrates, Callicles affirmed vigorously that true virtue (ἀρετή [sc. ἡ ἀληθής]) lies in “the filling up of desires [τὸ τὰς ἐπιθυμίας ἀποπιμπλάναι]” (503c5) and a life of maximal pleasure (cf. 492c3–6, 492d5–e1). Now, though, during this concluding part of their discussion, Callicles has

²⁴ Notice that Socrates is not claiming that the avoidance of suffering injustice is *incompatible* with the avoidance of doing injustice. He argues that the power to avoid suffering unjustly results in a person acting unjustly, but does not argue conversely that the power to avoid acting unjustly will result in a person suffering unjustly. The point of the argument is that one must give priority to one power over the other. Doyle puts the matter eloquently: “There is *something* important in Socrates’s argument, and perhaps it is this: *you must take sides*. Unless you are literally a hermit, you cannot remain above the fray: if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem; if you are bent on avoiding suffering injustice, you must ally yourself with evil. And surely there is truth in this” (“Fundamental Conflict,” 98; his emphasis).

come to justify the life of rhetoric based on a new conception of human excellence, according to which “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).²⁵

Thus the rhetorical way of life turns out to depend on one of two alternative views of human virtue for Plato. He has Callicles give up the first view in the *Gorgias* after Socrates’s arguments from 492d to 499b. But the view of virtue as self-preservation remains untouched, and it appears to be consistent with Socrates’s claims about the importance of moderation to living well in the synopsis passage at 506c5–508c3. Socrates raises problems for this new view at 511c4–512d6 by asking Callicles about the value of crafts like piloting and engineering. The goal of these pursuits is also merely the preservation of some object. So if virtue lies in self-preservation alone, he argues, the practitioners of such crafts deserve our respect. Yet Callicles despises them.²⁶

It is with his next exhortation, however, that Socrates really puts Callicles’s position on the line:

²⁵ A similar account of virtue appears in the *Meno* (cited above in n. 12), suggesting that Callicles’s view here has a strong basis in convention. As with the notion of “self-protection” (see nn. 8 and 20 above), I leave open whether Socrates and Callicles possess different conceptions of self-preservation. In addition to redefining the former notion, as Catana argues in “Protection,” Socrates may hence also have an alternative sense in the *Gorgias* of what truly preserving oneself (τὸ σῶζειν αὐτόν) involves. I’m grateful to Marta Jimenez for suggesting this point to me.

²⁶ It is significant that both these crafts are concerned primarily with the preservation of objects other than oneself, either other people’s lives or their property or an entire city. Still, the other-regarding nature of piloting and engineering does not alter the point that Socrates is making here: the value of a craft of preservation depends upon the goodness of the object that it preserves. This is why pilots should take no pride in the mere preservation of their passengers’ lives, for their craft has no bearing on the quality of those lives (511d3–512b2). The implied question for Callicles is how, simply on the basis that it preserves his life, the practice of rhetoric contributes to the quality of his life.

But, my blessed man, please see whether what's noble [τὸ γενναῖον] and what's good [τὸ ἀγαθόν] isn't something other than preserving and being preserved [τὸ σῶζειν τε καὶ σῶζεσθαι]. Perhaps one who is truly a man [τόν γε ὡς ἀληθῶς ἄνδρα] should stop thinking about how long he will live. He should not be attached to life but should commit these concerns to the god and believe the women who say that not one single person can escape fate. He should thereupon examine in what way [τρόπον] he might live the part of his life still before him as well as possible. Should it be by becoming like the regime under which he lives? In that case you should now be making yourself as much like the Athenian people as possible if you expect to endear yourself to them and have great power in the city. Please see whether this is advantageous to you and to me [σοί...καὶ ἐμοί], my friend, so that what they say happens to the Thessalian witches when they pull down the moon won't happen to us. Our choice of this kind of civic power will cost us what we hold most dear [σὸν τοῖς φιλτάτοις]. (512d6–513a7)

The above passage contains Socrates's last words in the *Gorgias* against the use of conventional rhetoric for its personal benefits. He appeals noticeably in this address to the aristocratic ideal of a noble and good man from Callicles's great speech, alluding to Callicles's fixation throughout the dialogue with a certain kind of manliness (cf. 483b1, 484d1–2, 485b7–d1, 485d4, 491b2–4, 492b1).²⁷ In quoting from Euripides's *Antiope* in his speech, Callicles extolled the “sweet music of an active life” (πραγμάτων δ' εὐμουσίαν, 486c4–5). He also described those men who are preeminent (ἀριπρεπεῖς, 485d6) in politics as those able to achieve something admirable (καλόν, 485c7) and noble (γενναῖον, 485c7) in human affairs.²⁸ The problem is that a view of virtue as

²⁷ For good discussion of this point, see Irwin, *Plato: Gorgias*, 232–3; Waller R. Newell, *Platonic Political Philosophy*, 33–34; and Schofield, “Callicles's Return,” 21–22. Socrates mentions the same fixation at 500c4–5 in recalling the conflict between the rhetorical life and the philosophical life from Callicles's speech.

²⁸ The notion of the “preeminent” man refers to a passage from Homer's *Iliad* (9.440–3), where the term occurs in Phoenix's speech to Achilles. Kahn provides an excellent analysis of this

self-preservation runs contrary to these ideals, for a life of least possible suffering is not an active life at all, but one lived at the mercy of others. Socrates has stressed the claim often in the *Gorgias* and draws on it again here: some pains in life must be suffered to live well. Just as what's good for a human being cannot be reduced to what's pleasant, what's bad for a human being cannot be reduced to what's painful (see 478b7–c2, 479a5–c1, 497a3–4, 497d5–6, 499e3–5).

Now, this appeal appears to have an effect on Callicles: “I don’t know, Socrates—in a way you seem to me to be right, but the thing that happens to most people has happened to me: I’m not completely persuaded by you” (513c4–6). Yet more worth observing for our purposes is that Socrates includes himself in the above exhortation by raising the issue of what conduces to his own benefit.²⁹ He asserts that a life of maximal self-protection will lead to the loss of what is “most dear” (φιλότατοις, 513a6), both for Callicles and for himself (σοί...καὶ ἐμοί, 513a4). The reference is obscure and has not, so far as I am aware, received much attention by scholars.³⁰ Given that, as we have seen, their ideas about the good life differ so radically, what precisely are the dearest things (τὰ φίλτατα) that Callicles and Socrates together stand to lose by assimilating themselves to the Athenian people?

The answer can be found a few lines earlier in the text. Since what matters for a true man is not the length of time he lives, but the way (τρόπον, 512e4) he lives for a set length of time, understanding how to live as well as possible (ὡς ἄριστα, 512e5) must be a topic of fundamental concern for Callicles and Socrates. This requires examining one’s ends and values in life and

competitive understanding of virtue, which he calls “the art of rising to the top,” and its centrality to Callicles’s conception of the superior man (“Drama and Dialectic,” 95).

²⁹ Stauffer, *Unity of Plato’s Gorgias*, 148–9 and Schofield, “Callicles’s Return,” 22 also comment on Socrates’s inclusion of himself in the exhortation.

³⁰ Socrates’s comment about “pulling down the moon” alludes to a traditional saying about Thessalian witches who lost their sight or their family in exercising their magic: Nereida Villagra, “Thessalian Trick,” provides a thorough review of the sources. The problem is that it is not clear how this saying applies to the debate between Callicles and Socrates.

clarifying their worth. The trouble with assimilating one's views to those of the many, however, is that it makes such examination a vice. For again, the assimilation thesis requires that one adopt the values of the many for maximal self-protection in democratic politics. As Socrates puts it: "You must not be their imitator but be like them yourself by nature [αὐτοφυῶς] if you expect to produce any genuine result toward winning the friendship of the Athenian people" (513b3–5). Clearly the critical investigation of popular opinion that an examined life demands will be discouraged when the aim is such assimilation. Hence the achievement of maximal protection against others, which for Callicles is the ultimate benefit of the life of rhetoric, would indeed deprive him and Socrates of what they hold most dear: their own considered convictions about the values they wish to live by, what is good and worth desiring, what is bad and worth fearing. It would deprive them, that is, of understanding how to live.

4. Conclusion

I have focused in this paper on the first of the two desiderata that frame the choice of lives that Callicles puts to Socrates in the *Gorgias*: our interest throughout has been in how the practice of rhetoric and the practice of philosophy each contribute to one's personal good. The portion of the dialogue at 506c–513d with which we have been concerned is a discrete stretch of text preceded by Socrates's wish to complete his exchange with Callicles and put a "head" (κεφαλή, 505d1) on their argument. It ends with Socrates's exhortation that he and Callicles reject the use of rhetoric for maximal self-protection in civic life. Although this part of the *Gorgias* has been overlooked by many scholars, it is crucial to an understanding of Socrates's overall confrontation with Callicles and to an interpretation of the work as a whole. Apart from its relevance to Callicles and Socrates's debate, we have seen how the position that Callicles espouses in this portion of the dialogue is continuous with the views that he develops in his great speech and also

continuous with Socrates's discussion with Polus earlier regarding the question of doing or suffering injustice.

The entirety of Socrates's remaining conversation with Callicles from 513d to 522c explores how the practice of rhetoric and the practice of philosophy each contribute to the good of others. This part of the text shifts again to a political register as Plato considers the use of rhetoric by such legendary figures in Athenian politics as Themistocles and Pericles.³¹ The conversation then finally draws to a close before the myth that ends the dialogue with Socrates's well-known declaration that he alone, among most of his predecessors and all of his contemporaries, engages in the true art of politics (τῇ ὡς ἀληθῶς πολιτικῇ τέχνῃ, 521d7).

This final part of Socrates's exchange with Callicles owes much of its force to the passages we have examined at 506c–513d. For Socrates's profession of a certain expertise in politics, and his denial of this expertise to renowned political figures before him, depends not only on the view that politicians like Pericles did the Athenian people no real good by indulging their desires (see 517b–519d) but also on the view that by causing his interlocutors pain, Socrates does them no real harm (see 521a–522c).³² The former view gains legitimacy after Callicles concedes that some pleasures are good and others are bad following the succession of arguments that Socrates develops at 492d–499b. But the latter view needs additional support, which it receives once Socrates refutes the more enlightened type of hedonism that Callicles is drawn to subsequently in the dialogue.

Socrates's arguments at 506c–513d accordingly have a vital function in Plato's case against the rhetorical way of life in the *Gorgias*. They are not just a supplement to the earlier more spirited exchanges that Socrates has with Callicles. On the contrary, the position that

³¹ The first such shift, recall, occurs at 500a–505b.

³² Socrates of course goes further, since he believes that his use of argument actually does his interlocutors some good, despite causing them pain: cf. 473a2–3, 475d6–7, 521e2–522c2; and see Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias*, 370; Jessica Moss, "Pleasure and Persuasion"; and Irani, *Value of Philosophy*, 82–85 for comment.

Callicles advocates for during this stretch of the dialogue represents his deepest beliefs on the use of rhetoric for its personal benefits. Indeed, it is possible to interpret Callicles as a kind of hedonist even after 492d–499b once he has renounced the view that all pleasures are equally good. Far from being “no longer a real adversary but a passive, often silent interlocutor,” as Charles Kahn has claimed, Callicles continues to be actively involved in and affected by Socrates’s arguments later in the text.³³ For on their basis, Socrates can declare that the life of rhetoric should be rejected both on the grounds that it supplies a person with maximal pleasure *and* on the grounds that it supplies a person with maximal protection.

I have argued that Socrates achieves this by taking issue with the two alternative conceptions of human virtue that Callicles affirms in the *Gorgias*: first, the idea that virtue consists in the power to satisfy one’s desires against the interests of others; second, the idea that virtue consists in the power to preserve oneself from the predations of others. By 513d in the text, having refuted both conceptions of virtue, Socrates has effectively blocked any remaining attempt by Callicles to assert that the rhetorical life conduces most of all to the human good. The value of rhetoric lies neither in its pleonectic benefits nor in its prophylactic benefits. While the pursuit of such a life may result in various material and social rewards, Socrates’s point is that this provides no justification on which to hold that it truly benefits a human being.

We might infer for these reasons that the *Gorgias* should be read primarily as a ground-clearing project—that is, a project in which Socrates does not develop a positive argument for the life of philosophy, but puts forward instead a series of negative arguments against the life of rhetoric.³⁴ To conclude this paper, I want to propose that a defense of the philosophical life can

³³ Kahn, “Drama and Dialectic,” 98; and see again n. 6 above for similar readings. Callicles is no doubt chastened after the dialectical breakdown between him and Socrates at 505c–d. Yet this is not due to any collapse of his position, on my reading, but simply because he cannot see a basis on which to continue defending it. When he perceives the opening at 509c, he takes it, and his participation in argument with Socrates thereafter is unabated until 522c.

³⁴ Thus, Kahn remarks that “the most cogent argument for the Socratic moral position is the total collapse of the Calliclean alternative, with a positive counterpart in the portrayal of Socrates

in fact be retrieved from the dialogue now that the dialectical moves at 506c–513d have been suitably traced out. This defense occupies, as it were, the negative space that remains as a result of Socrates’s refutation of Callicles’s two conceptions of human virtue.

We can see this if we consider again the synopsis passage at 506c5–508c3 and Socrates’s views there on the centrality of moderation (σωφροσύνη) in the good life. He underscores the importance of this virtue—interpreted as a state of psychological orderliness—by deriving from it a number of other standard virtues: justice, piety, and courage (507a7–b8). Several commentators have been puzzled by the omission of wisdom (φρόνησις, σοφία, νοῦς) from this list. David Sedley calls the argument “remarkable” for the way in which it “excludes wisdom from the genealogy of virtue altogether.”³⁵ It is true that, taken by itself, the argument appears to disregard wisdom as a virtue. However, Sedley errs in assuming that the synopsis passage represents the last word on this matter in the *Gorgias*. For we have found that this passage is only a partial account of Socrates’s notion of virtue and requires additional elaboration.

Throughout the argument, Socrates associates the hallmark of the moderate person with the

himself” (“Drama and Dialectic,” 119). Plato very likely does think of the example of Socrates’s life as providing evidence for the superiority of the views that he advances in the *Gorgias*, yet the reasons proffered for such a life are not merely “eloquent exhortation,” as Kahn says, and do not depend solely on Plato’s dramatic representation of Socrates, but proceed from firmer argumentative grounds on my reading.

³⁵ David Sedley, “Unity of Virtue,” 74. Other scholars who note the absence of wisdom from the passage include Kahn and Cooper. Kahn believes that the omission is unproblematic because the passage is concerned with the “moral-political *technē*” and virtue in this context stands for “the *telos*, the good condition of the souls of those on whom the art is practiced” (*Socratic Dialogue*, 133). But this is not the case: while Socrates does speak of moderation at 506c5–508c3 as a state of soul that ought to be cultivated in others, the thrust of the argument is concerned with the virtue according to which one should live (δεῖ ζῆν, 507d7). Also, the fact that the moral-political *technē* is directed (in part) toward others does not explain the exclusion of wisdom as a candidate for the goal of such an art. Cooper’s reading of the passage is closer to my own: “throughout Socrates’s discussion of the two lives,” he claims, “wisdom (*phronēsis*) is plainly implied as the origin of *sōphrosunē* in any soul” (“Socrates and Plato,” 68n59). Although I think this may be implied, it is far from being plain, especially given (as Sedley observes) the near total lack of discussion of *phronēsis* in the *Gorgias*. Sedley is therefore right in believing that the synopsis passage poses a *prima facie* problem for Plato’s understanding of the relationship between virtue and the good life in the dialogue.

disposition to “do what’s appropriate” (τὰ προήκοντα πραττειν) (507a8, b2, b5–6), but as E. R. Dodds highlights, this evokes a merely conventional idea of virtue in Greek culture and demands specification.³⁶

More problematically, the practice of moderation described in the synopsis passage is compatible with a life of least possible suffering, where one’s sole aim is to avoid mistreatment by others. This conception of moderation would make the avoidance of doing injustice a means to the avoidance of suffering injustice. That is of course also the position of the enlightened hedonist. Yet Socrates’s arguments following the synopsis passage hold that such a life would be a misery. These arguments explain how the pursuit of genuine virtue entails the avoidance of *doing* injustice, not the avoidance of suffering injustice. The synopsis passage by itself cannot therefore represent Socrates’s complete understanding of virtue in the *Gorgias*.

To put this point another way: Socrates leaves the nature of moderation remarkably underdetermined in the synopsis passage. While he identifies this virtue with an orderly condition of the soul, he does not make clear which elements of the soul ought to be ordered, and so does not specify what it means exactly to make the pursuit and practice of moderation the goal of life (see 507c9–d1). Socrates does, however, assert that such order is achieved by means of an art (τέχνη, 506d7), which provides an essential piece of information when interpreted alongside his subsequent arguments against Callicles in the dialogue. As we have observed, Socrates contends at 510e4–511a3 that one cannot expect a commitment not to act unjustly to follow from a commitment not to suffer unjustly: one must devote oneself in life to pursuing either the avoidance of suffering injustice or the avoidance of doing injustice. He also argues that structuring one’s life around either of these pursuits demands a specific power (δύναμις) and art (τέχνη) (509c8–510a4).³⁷ If this is right, Socrates’s arguments against Callicles in this part of the

³⁶ Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias*, 335–6. Cf. Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, who believes that the argument relies on “meaningful wordplay” (144).

³⁷ Some scholars deny that this is the case for the avoidance of doing injustice: Scott states that Socrates believes “the mere wish is enough” to avoid acting unjustly (“Moral Education,” 20);

text imply he has a considerably richer conception of what genuine moderation requires than the synopsis passage suggests.

This leaves us with a final question. Socrates agrees with Callicles that the conventional practice of rhetoric in civic life best ensures the avoidance of suffering unjustly. But what power and art must a moderate person develop once they have set as their priority the avoidance of acting unjustly? The answer, evidently, is the power that one acquires through the practice of philosophy, namely, wisdom.³⁸ Socrates has already indicated in the synopsis passage that moderation and justice involve the cultivation of one's desires (see 507e1–3) and, significantly, he has also established with Callicles by this stage in the dialogue that such cultivation done well is an art (cf. τεχνικοῦ δεῖ, 500a6; the point is emphasized again at 503d1–2), since it requires discerning which things in one's life are worth taking pleasure in and which are not.³⁹ Socrates claims in addition that the ability to avoid acting unjustly calls for learning (μάθησις) as well as practice (ἄσκησις) (see 509d7–e2). So the ends that one should pursue to avoid acting unjustly must be the ends of philosophy, insofar as evaluating one's desires and determining their worth

likewise, Doyle asserts that while a power or art is required to avoid suffering unjustly, “escaping the worse evil, doing injustice, requires only an effort of the will” (“Fundamental Conflict,” 97). Yet Socrates draws the explicit conclusion at 510a3–4 that the avoidance of doing injustice also demands “a certain power and art” (δύναμιν τινα καὶ τέχνην, reading the καὶ epexegetically; cf. n. 21 above). See also *Hippias Minor* 375d8–9, where Socrates suggests that justice is a power (δύναμις) or knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) or both (ἢ ἀμφοτέρω). My thanks to an anonymous referee for this reference.

³⁸ This is in line with the view of Dodds: “The δύναμις is not material power but the capacity to understand our true interest; the τέχνη is the Platonic ‘moral science’ which enables us to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ satisfactions” (*Plato: Gorgias*, 343). Dodds does not, however, identify this science with the pursuit of wisdom, remarking that it is enough for Plato's purposes to show that Callicles's approach to politics falls short of a τέχνη.

³⁹ The psychological complexity that this view implies is particularly apparent at 491c4–e1 in Socrates's adoption of the vocabulary of “self-control” (ἐγκράτεια) in connection with the virtue of moderation. On this connection in the *Gorgias*, see Louis-André Dorion, “*Enkrateia* and Partition,” 38–50.

demands philosophy. Despite first appearances, the synopsis passage in its full context shows that the pursuit of moderation and justice for Socrates entails the pursuit of wisdom.⁴⁰

These considerations suggest that 506c–513d in the *Gorgias* can indeed be read as putting a “head” on the argument between Socrates and Callicles regarding the choiceworthiness of the rhetorical way of life versus the philosophical way of life. Their discussion revolves around the kind of life one should live, a topic that Socrates claims is of paramount concern to him on many occasions in the dialogue (see 458a8–b1, 472c6–d1, 487e7–488a2, 492d3–5, 500c1–4). Socrates expresses the same concern, of course, in other dialogues (see *Apology* 28b3–9, *Crito* 48b4–6).⁴¹ Plato’s great achievement in the *Gorgias* is to show how this topic was not only of special interest to Socrates, but a matter of concern for even the most antagonistic and anti-intellectual of his interlocutors. By ruling out the life of maximal self-protection as the good life, Socrates also rules out Callicles’s last remaining justification for the life of rhetoric. What we need to live well, according to this part of the dialogue, is not the power to avoid suffering unjustly, but the power to avoid acting unjustly. That requires examining the quality of our desires and making sense of our deepest commitments. It means subjecting our ends and values in life to reflective scrutiny and deliberation. In short, it means living the life of philosophy.⁴²

⁴⁰ And so I depart on this issue from Sedley, for whom wisdom “forms no part of the value system that Socrates constructs in the *Gorgias*” (“Unity of Virtue,” 75). Socrates in fact flags the role of wisdom in his value system early in the dialogue in his conversation with Polus, where he affirms that happiness as a whole (ἡ πᾶσα εὐδαιμονία), for any man or woman, hinges on one’s condition with respect to education (παιδεία) and justice (δικαιοσύνη) (470e4–11).

⁴¹ Note, furthermore, that Plato continues to emphasize this concern even in later dialogues where Socrates no longer occupies center stage. See, for instance, the following statement made by the Athenian Visitor in the *Laws*: “We do not hold the common view that a man’s highest good is simply to be preserved and to exist (τὸ σῶζεσθαι τε καὶ εἶναι μόνον). His highest good is to become as virtuous as possible and to continue to exist in that state as long as life lasts” (707d2–5; translation slightly modified from Trevor J. Saunders in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by Cooper and Hutchinson). I’m grateful to an anonymous referee for pointing this out to me.

⁴² Cf. Kamtekar, “Profession of Friendship”: “It is difficult for us (Plato’s modern and ancient audiences) to think about why we love and hate what we do, and whether we should: our desires and aversions have a self-justifying appearance; the forces that lead us to love and hate what we

Thus even Callicles should be led to see the value of philosophy by the end of the dialogue. It is with good reason that Socrates says that if they considered the same matters thoroughly (διασκοπώμεθα, 513d1), more often and in a better way (πολλάκις...καὶ βέλτιον, 513c8), Callicles would be convinced.⁴³

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do are usually difficult to pin down; asking what it would be right to love and hate, and why, leads us into the difficult terrain of philosophy" (334).

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