

# Gorgias

Plato

October 7 - 12, 2006

Socrates meets Gorgias, Polus and Callicles, three young Athenian orators. Those three young men are proud and consider themselves above the common creed. What is really the basis of their alleged superiority? Socrates, as usual, takes on an attitude of mock modesty, ostensibly to arrive by the means of a shared dialogue at an understanding of truth. For this to be achieved it is important that the discussion is carried through by knowledgeable people, competence in other words being a basis for all purposeful discussion, but this is not enough. In addition you need to enter with the right spirit, meaning goodwill and a willingness to stick out your neck and be frank about what you really think. Only through such an honest interchange is there any hope of achieving progress. To have your mistakes found out should not be considered as a calamity, on the contrary, no man should be happier than when being corrected about his mistakes, because this if anything means improvement. But of course Socrates is a bit disingenuous as the three men will find out at their peril. Ostensibly not concerned with winning arguments, this is actually what he pursues relentlessly, stopping not even at employing the tricks of a sophist, namely that of making the meaning of words subtly change according to your purposes. Why is Plato letting Socrates come away with it? Is it ironic? Showing that Socrates is beating his opponents at their own games, so any protests can easily be deflected as reflecting even worse on the protestors. Or is he simply out to clarify issues, not so much as to win the arguments (which is an incidental benefit), as to reveal that the opponents do not really know of what of they are talking.

Gorgias holds that Oratory is the highest of all arts. Socrates wonders at what it really consists of. A trainer of man has his expertise, namely to train the bodies of men to the highest physical perfection, or the doctor to treat those already diseased, returning them to the fold of the healthy. This clearly involves *techné* - expertise, while speaking well to Socrates seems more like a knack, acquired through practice, but involving no real systematic knowledge, more to pander and please, just as the cook prepares his food to give pleasure to those who will eat it, than to accomplish something.

Gorgias claims that oratory is a matter of convincing people, regardless of what you want to convince people of. As such it is a matter of sport whether to use or abuse, and Gorgias takes a certain pride in the fact that the skill of oratory actually transcends the subject matter. The skilled orator could as well teach wrong as right, what matters is the skill with which he performs, regardless of purpose. Thus oratory is a powerful weapon that has to be used with discretion. By conceding this, Gorgias is forced to admit that ultimately oratory aims at inducing men to the right beliefs. What is a belief? Gorgias concedes that belief is different from knowledge. Socrates counters that then it is better to convince a wise man than a collection of fools, an attitude many philosophers and commentators have taken as an aspect of Plato's basically anti-democratic conviction.

Socrates loves contradictions. Or hates them. Essentially it comes to the same thing,

namely an obsession with the technique of its exhibition<sup>1</sup>. So if the orator teaches people to do right things, it is really a matter of teaching people to be righteous, because the righteous man automatically does the right thing, because he cannot will otherwise, willing the right being the essence of righteousness<sup>2</sup>. But only a righteous orator can teach people to be righteous, and a righteous orator would of course never conceive of using his skills otherwise. Gorgias has to concede this as well, thus the bulk of his argument has been shattered. Shamefacedly he has to retreat and Polus takes on Socrates<sup>3</sup>.

Socrates claims that it is better to be wronged than to do wrong. That the only thing that saves the latter is to be punished, because there is nothing worse than being an unrepented wrong-doer. So actually, in a paradoxical aside, Socrates, no doubt tongue in cheek, argues that if you had an enemy, you would do the most to make sure he is not punished for his misdeeds, in order to make his sufferings so much more painful. To this Polus takes exception. Clearly only a fool would rather be wronged than wrong. A real happy man would be the Tyrant, who no one dares to wrong. And of course power gives right to wrong. However, Polus in the end turns out to be a conventional fellow, and soon enough Socrates makes him concede a point, and once you have conceded something to Socrates, he does not let you go, but holds on like a pitbull.

In the end there is but Callicles left. Callicles on the other hand refuses to play the game. He will not want to be the butt of Socrates sophistry. In fact he holds that philosophy may be quite right for a young man, giving him some cultural varnish, but it is pitiable in an old man, who should get on in the world instead, rather than embroil himself in useless arguments. In fact he speculates that Socrates would strike a poor figure in a court, unable to defend himself properly would he be threatened with the death sentence<sup>4</sup>. As a consequence he says very little, thus giving Socrates the opportunity to speak at length. Yet Socrates is able to entice him to say a thing or two. Callicles claims that quenching your thirst is a good thing. But on closer scrutiny it turns out that this combines both pleasure as pain, because without the pain of thirst, there would be no pleasure in its eradication. Hence, Socrates concludes triumphantly, pleasure cannot be the same as goodness, as the good and the evil cannot co-exist simultaneously, but clearly pleasure and pain can. Thus doing the good cannot be the same as satisfying your pleasure.

The subject of doing wrong as opposed to suffering wrong is brought up again, but now from a slightly different point of view. What is needed to protect yourself from suffering wrong? Clearly power to prevent people from inflicting it on you. But what about wrongdoing itself? Do you need power to prevent it, or is it entirely up to you? Being good

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<sup>1</sup> It has been argued that this method is more concerned with consistency than truth, if so a strikingly modern attitude

<sup>2</sup> Knowing what is right seems independent upon willing the right, much misery in the world has been brought about by the best of intentions.

<sup>3</sup> Later Socrates notices with glee, that a sophist that has taught a pupil good manners and morals, can never complain would he be cheated of his fee. Because he would indeed not have been so, had he taught successfully

<sup>4</sup> To which Socrates retorts that faced with a jury of children and a judge of feeble mind, rational argument is useless anyway, A comical as well as ominous reference to what will eventually befall Socrates

essentially means having the power of moderation<sup>5</sup>

The discussion turns on politics, and Socrates proposes that there should be some test for having been well ruled. If you let your cattle in the care of a friend, and on returning finding it in worse shape than before, you would not think well of his ability to tender. The same with politicians. Those who leave the populace in a worse state than when they assumed the reins of power, should clearly be judged as having failed. By this criterion the politicians of the recent past, as well as their predecessors must be considered failures. Socrates clearly does not think well of the politician who lacks expertise, but whose ambition is merely to pander to the whims of the electorate.

But why should one really be good? Would not such a question lead to an infinite recess? And here Socrates expounds on a speculative theory, that in retrospect seems to have influenced the notion of a last Judgement in Christianity, as well as suggesting that to do good is a matter of pragmatism, and not to be done for its own sake. When we die our fates will be decided on the basis on the state of our souls. The good men will be rewarded in afterlife, the wicked punished in the underworld. Thus the sting of the last judgement that terrified me as a child is being muted seeing it as part of a historical tradition, not as a divine revelation.

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<sup>5</sup> Connected to this is the notion that having power is to be able to do what you really want. The Tyrant may have little actual power, as oppsed to apparent, if he acts against his ultimate interests.