

Ancient Philosophy

6. Plato's *Gorgias*

Structural Outline of the *Gorgias*

- Introduction: Presentation (ἐπίδειξις) vs. Discussion (διαλόγος)
- Dialog #1: Gorgias & Socrates (to 461)
- Dialog #2: Polus & Socrates (461-481)
- Dialog #3: Callicles & Socrates (481-end)

Part I: Socrates & Gorgias (to 461)

The Dialog with Gorgias

- What does the “craft” (τέχνη) of oratory (rhetoric) do?
 - It is knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) about speeches (λόγοι)
 - Note the Greek word—λόγος, which is properly translated *speech*, but can also mean
 - *speaking* or
 - *an account* of something.
 - & the ability to teach others to be speakers.
 - NB: This is central to what the Sophist (as a character in Ancient Greek society) is & does.
- Socrates' conversation with Gorgias thus centers on two questions:
 - What kind of speeches? (449e)
 - What will the student learn from the orator (read, Sophist)? (455d)

What is Oratory? Oratory among the “Crafts”

- Although all “crafts” may involve some speaking:
 - Some are centered on handwork;
 - Others are centered on speaking.
- But oratory is only one of the crafts centered on speaking (or persuasion).
 - Some are about health or number.
 - Oratory
 - is found in courts & legislatures (= law & politics)
 - is about justice & injustice.

What is Persuasion?

- Distinguish
 - Conviction (believing something) is different from knowing something.
 - An argument for the distinction
 1. Knowledge cannot be divided into true and false.
 2. Conviction can be divided into true and false.
 3. So, conviction is not knowledge.
- Then distinguish
 - Persuasion & being persuaded—inducing belief (conviction) & being convinced
 - Teaching & learning—providing knowledge & acquiring it

What Does the Orator Teach his Students? I

- Gorgias' first answer
 - “A competitive skill” [an ἀγωνία, *struggle for victory*]
 - NB: The ἀγών was central to Greek society
 - The Ἀγών Ὀλυμπικός &c. in athletics
 - the dramatic *competition* in theater
 - the importance of competition in the courtroom
 - or in the assembly
 - The teacher of a competitive skill
 - presumes that the disciple will use it justly
 - but is not responsible if he does not.
 - Cf. modern controversies about the neutrality of technology
 - Oratory is just a skill.
 - It produces belief (true or false)
 - The orator (though ignorant of the matter) can produce belief better than can an expert in the matter who lacks the “craft” of oratory.

What Does the Orator Teach his Students? II

- Gorgias' second answer
 - Oratory is above all for use in courts & legislative assemblies.
 - So, oratory is about justice.
 - So, the orator must know about justice.
 - & The teacher of oratory must teach justice (to students who don't already know it).
 - So, any teacher whose student does not learn justice has failed.
 - Unjust actions on the part of the student would be a sign that the student has not learned justice.
 - So, The teacher is responsible for the behavior of his students.

The Contradiction

- The teacher of oratory is not responsible for the unjust use of oratory by his students
 - since he is responsible only for teaching the skill, not when to use it.
- The teacher of oratory is responsible for the unjust use of oratory by his students
 - since its subject matter is justice
 - If the students don't use oratory justly, then they have not learned justice.
 - If they have not learned justice, then the orator has not taught them the whole of what he was supposed to teach them.
- And a dilemma
 - On the first option, the orator is just “a non-knower who is more persuasive than a knower among non-knowers.” (459b)
 - On the second, he is responsible for the injustices of his students.

Part II: Socrates & Polus (461–481)

The Conversation with Polus

1. The Definition of Oratory [461b–466b]
 - Gorgias did not provide a satisfactory answer
 - Socrates offers a definition
 - So here, Socrates advances a thesis & is questioned, though he ends up giving a speech.
2. The Importance of Justice [466b–481]
 - a. Does the orator “have the greatest power”? [to 468e]
 - Here, Polus advances a thesis.
 - Socrates seeks a refutation (ἐλεγχος) by asking questions.
 - b. The two points of dispute
 - i. Whether doing what is unjust is the greatest of evils [469b]
 - Whether it is possible for a man who behaves unjustly to be happy? [472d]
 - ii. Whether paying what is due (διδόναι δίκην) is the greatest of evils [476a]

The Definition of Oratory

- What kind of thing is oratory?
 - Not a craft (τέχνη)
 - *Art* or *skill* would also be possible translations
 - The key is that it involves knowledge.
 - But a “knack” (ἐμπειρία) [462c]
 - ... “for producing gratification & pleasure”
 - Part of the practice of flattery [463b]

The Definition of Oratory (cont'd):
 "The Image of a Part of Politics" [463d-465e]

- Two preliminary distinctions
 - Care of the body & of the soul
 - Producing fitness & producing apparent fitness
 - Again, a distinction between appearance & reality!
- There are four kinds of τέχνη & four corresponding knacks
 - The τέχνη (producing fitness)
 - of the body: gymnastics & medicine
 - of the soul (politics): legislation & "justice"
 - The knacks (producing apparent fitness)
 - of the body: pastry-baking & cosmetics
 - of the soul: sophistry & oratory

Does the Orator have Great Power? [466b]

- "Having great power"
 - μέγιστον δύνασθαι = to be able to do the greatest thing
 - μέγα δύνασθαι = to be exceedingly capable
- For Polus, this phrase moves to one end of a possible range of meanings:
 - Not merely "being able to do something" but "having power"
 - Not merely "great" but "violent"
- Thus the comparison between the orator & the "tyrant."

The Tyrant (ὁ τυραννός)

- Definition
 - "an absolute sovereign, unlimited by law or constitution ...: not applied to old hereditary sovereignties [kings] ... for the term rather regards the irregular way in which the power was *gained*, than the way in which it was *exercised*, being applied to the mild Pisistratus, but not to the despotic kings of Persia. However, the word soon came to imply reproach, like our tyrant."—Liddell & Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*
 - That means that tyrants were not necessarily violent or unjust, but again, Polus goes to a certain extreme.
- The orator is thus like any tyrant in two ways
 - He gains power in an irregular way.
 - He is unlimited by law or constitution.
- When Polus thinks about the activities of the tyrant, he imagines:
 - executing people
 - confiscating their goods &
 - banishing them from the city.

Question 1: Whether the orator has power

- Polus makes two claims
 1. "Having power" is good (i.e., beneficial) for those who have it.
 2. The orator has great power.
- Polus' reason for #2 is as follows
 - Premises
 3. Anyone who can ... has great power.
 4. The orator can
 - His middle term is hard to state. As he lists his three examples, he changes the verb from one to another.
 - "to do what he wants" (ὄν βούλονται)
 - "to do what seems good to him" (ὁ ἂν αὐτοῖς δόξῃ βέλτιστον)
- Socrates insists on a distinction (which Polus has trouble seeing):
 - "to do what he wants" = "to do what is good for him"
 - That's why having power to do what one wants would be good.
 - "to do what seems good to him" ≠ "to do what is good for him"
 - The tyrant & orator have at most the power to do what seems good to them.
- Or, distinction between the ability to
 - execute the act he chooses
 - obtain the end he wills (seeks)
- Socrates offers two arguments for this distinction.

Socrates' First Argument
 for the Distinction

- The Ignorance Argument

1. All ignorant people might do something that is not good for them (=is not what they want).	1. Aiw
2. Some people who can do what seems good to them are ignorant.	2. Isi
3. So, some people who can do what seems good might do something that is not good for them (=is not what they want).	3. ∴ Isw
- Or

1. No one who is ignorant can (reliably) do what he wants.	1. Eiw
2. Some people who do as they see fit are ignorant.	2. Ifi
3. So, Some who do as they see fit cannot do what they want.	3. ∴ Ofw = Ifc
4. No one who cannot (reliably) do what they want has power.	4. Ecp
5. So, some people who do as they see fit do not have power.	5. ∴ Ofp
- Polus must show that the orator is not ignorant [467a].

Socrates' Second Argument
 for the Distinction

- The Ends & Means Argument

1. What we want is (identical to) that for the sake of which we act (end).	1. w = e
2. What we actually do at a given time is (identical to) an action done for the sake of what we want (means).	2. d = m
3. That for the sake of which we act is not (identical to) an action done for the sake of what we want.	3. e ≠ m
4. So, What we want is not (identical to) what we actually do at a given time.	4. ∴ w ≠ d
5. That seems good ("fit") to us is what we actually do.	5. s = d
6. So, what seems good ("fit") to us is not (identical to) what we want.	6. ∴ s ≠ w

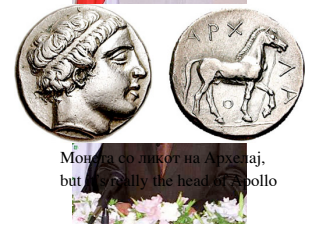
Question 2: Whether doing what is unjust is the greatest of evils

- Socrates defends the affirmative:
 - e.g., The unjust executioner is more miserable than his victim.
- Socrates' key ideas:
 - The greater the evil, the more miserable the person who "has" it.
 - Doing an injustice is the greatest of evils.
- Socrates' reason for believing these:
 - The unjust man cannot be happy.
- This Polus sets out to refute.

Can the Unjust Man be Happy?

- Socrates proposes a rule:
 - No unjust people are happy.
- Polus attempts to refute it (3rd figure syllogism) (470d–471e)
 - He contradicts the conclusion:
 - Some unjust men are happy.
 - He offers a counterexample:
 1. $\text{Καὶ τὸ ἀδικεῖν ἐστὶν ἡδυστάτευτον}$.
 2. $\text{Καὶ τὸ ἀδικεῖν ἐστὶν ἡδύφρων.$
- Socrates says, "I disagree with everything you say."
 - Which premise does he reject?

"We don't need to refer to ancient history to refute you. Why, current events quite suffice to do that."—Polus



Whether doing what is unjust is the greatest of evils (cont'd.)

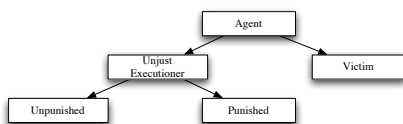
- Polus defends the thesis:
 1. Suffering what is unjust is worse (more harmful) than doing what is unjust.
- Polus' key premises:
 2. Doing injustice is more shameful.
 3. (But) Suffering injustice is worse (more harmful).
 4. What is shameful is not identical to what is bad (harmful). (Or, some shameful things are not bad (harmful).)
- Socrates' reply:
 - Anything admirable is either pleasant or useful ("good").
 - Anything shameful is either painful or bad (harmful).
 - Assume "doing injustice is more shameful" then ...
 - it must be either more painful or worse (more harmful).
 - Doing injustice is not more painful than suffering injustice.
 - So, Doing injustice must be worse (more harmful) than suffering injustice.

Application to wrongdoers: Whether for paying what is due (διδόναι δίκην) is the greatest of evils [476a]

- Socrates defends the thesis:
 - It is not: being punished for what one does is not the greatest of evils.
- His key premises:
 - Paying what is due benefits the soul.
 - The evil from which the soul is freed by punishment is the greatest of evils.
 - It is greater than the evil of poverty (an external evil).
 - It is greater than the evil of disease (an evil of the body).
 - For wrongdoers, being punished is paying what is due.
 - So, for wrongdoers, being punished benefits the soul.

Socrates' Scale of Misery

Most Miserable \longleftrightarrow Least Miserable



Josef Stalin was responsible for the death of 20 million people. On his deathbed "he suddenly lifted his left hand as though he were ... bringing down a curse upon all of us. The next moment after a final effort the spirit wrenched itself free of the flesh."



Herbert Kappler planned the deportation of Roman Jews to Auschwitz. Sentenced to life imprisonment in 1947, he was received into the Church in 1959 by a priest he had tried to kill during the war.



Bl. Roman Lysko, a Ukrainian Greek Catholic priest, was immured alive in the walls of Lontskyj Street prison in Lviv, Ukraine, in 1949.

The Possible Utility of Oratory: A Final Paradox [480a–481b]

- What use might oratory have?
 - Making sure that one's friends get punished for their misdeeds & that one's enemies get away with theirs.
- Why would one want to do that?
 - Principle
 - One should do harm to one's enemies & good to one's friends. (Cf. Matthew 6:43)
 - Application
 - Making certain that one's friends are punished for their misdeeds helps them.
 - Helping one's enemies get away with their misdeeds harms them.
- Is Socrates right about this?
 - Is it the way *you* act towards friends & enemies?
 - Why or why not?

Part III: Socrates & Callicles (481 to end)

Callicles' Summary

- Both Gorgias & Polus made admissions that they should not have made (& ended up contradicting themselves):
 - Gorgias' mistake
 - Admitting that he would (or should) teach justice to a student who did not already know it.
 - in order not to be held responsible for the unjust abuse of the skills Gorgias taught him.
 - Polus' mistake
 - Admitting that it is more shameful to do an injustice than to suffer one.
- The source of their mistakes was that Socrates tricked them into thinking about law (νόμος) rather than nature (φύσις) [482e-483a]

Φύσις & Νόμος

- Φύσις
 - Originally, nature & the nature of things
 - The subject matter of the earliest philosophers, who were called φυσικοί
 - Even as late as Kant, a contrast was made between natural philosophy & moral philosophy
 - Anthropological applications of the term φύσις
 - In medicine: The Hippocratic Corpus included a work *On the Nature of Man*
 - In ethics
- Νόμος
 - A term with a range of meanings
 - Law
 - Custom

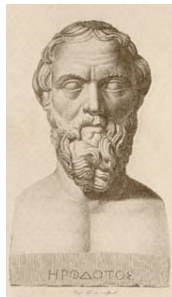
Φύσις & Νόμος

- What is the relation between φύσις & νόμος? What is the source of νόμος?
- Tradition attributed the establishment of νόμος, in some sense, to the gods.
 - See the story of Lycurgus, legendary law-giver of Sparta, who appealed to the Oracle at Delphi.
 - But new Greek colonies increasingly relied on commissions to write laws for them.
 - Pericles had Protagoras write laws for the pan-Hellenic colony at Thurii.
- Questions arose in the context of intercultural contact.
 - See the story from Herodotus (next slide).
- The nature of the relation became a theme in Sophistic thought.
 - “Archelaus [teacher of Socrates] used to say ... that what are accounted just and disgraceful are not so by φύσις, but only by νόμος.” – Diogenes Laërtius, II.16
 - Some Sophists saw νόμος as a completion of φύσις, grounded in & supplement of it.
 - For Protagoras, νόμος was important because it was useful for the community.
 - Other Sophists rejected νόμος in favor of a natural justice which allowed the stronger to do what he desired (see Callicles & Thrasymachus in Plato's dialogues)

A Story from Herodotus

“It is clear to me therefore by every kind of proof that Cambyses was mad exceedingly; for otherwise he would not have attempted to deride religious rites and customary [νομιαίος] observances. For if one should propose to all men a choice, bidding them select the best customs [νόμοι] from all the customs [νόμοι] that there are, each race of men, after examining them all, would select those of his own people; thus all think that their own customs [νόμοι] are by far the best: and so it is not likely that any but a madman would make a jest of such things. Now of the fact that all men are thus wont to think about their customs [νόμοι], we may judge by many other proofs and more specially by this which follows:

“Darius in the course of his reign summoned those of the Hellenes who were present in his land, and asked them for what price they would consent to eat up their fathers when they died; and they answered that for no price would they do so. After this Darius summoned those Indians who are called Callatians, who eat their parents, and asked them in presence of the Hellenes, who understood what they said by help of an interpreter, for what payment they would consent to consume with fire the bodies of their fathers when they died; and they cried out aloud and bade him keep silence from such words. Thus then these things are established by usage [νενομισται], and I think that Pindar spoke rightly in his verse, when he said that ‘of all things law [νόμος; custom?] is king.’”



Histories 3.38

What is Δίκη?

- Cosmically
 - Everything being in its proper place.
- In ethics
 - Again a correspondence to some order in which each person has what is appropriate for (due to) him.
 - So, not necessarily “equal” (or “fair”) shares.
 - So what, according to Callicles, is that order?
 - The powerful take from the weak
 - The intelligent rule & get more than others
 - Or maybe the intelligent (in political matters) & the brave.

Callicles' Application of the Distinction to Polus' Argument

- Polus says
 - Doing an injustice is more shameful than suffering one.
 - Suffering an injustice is worse than committing one.
- But this makes *being more shameful* different from *being worse*, which seemed to be a refutation of Polus' position.
- Callicles says Polus missed a distinction
 - By νόμος
 - Doing an injustice is more shameful than suffering one.
 - But not by φύσις. By φύσις
 - Suffering an injustice is worse than committing one & it is more shameful
 - But νόμος does not matter
 - since νόμος is just the weaks' attempt to rein in the strong,
 - a theme developed by Friederich Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*



Callicles' Sociology & its Implications

- There are two kinds of people
 - Those who are few, strong & intelligent.
 - Those who are many, weak & unintelligent.
- The relevance of this
 - The strong naturally deserve to take from, to have more than & to rule over the weak.
 - The weak make νόμος to keep the strong from taking or having the more that is due to them.
- But Callicles has trouble defending his thesis
 - Aren't the many strong if they can make laws?
 - Don't the intelligent (e.g., the practitioners of any craft) prescribe according to some rule, rather than taking the largest share for themselves?
 - Don't the intelligent have to rule over themselves (= to restrain their appetites & possibly take less)?

Summary of the Dialog

- Two Fundamental Points from each Interlocutor
 1. The ultimate human good is
 2. Rhetoric is the means of attaining that good.
- All agree that rhetoric is the means because of the importance of two institutions:
 - the law courts
 - the legislative assemblyWhat would be the counterparts in contemporary American society?
- They offer varying accounts of what the ultimate human good is.
 - Gorgias: freedom (452 d-e)
 - Polus: power
 - Callicles: pleasure (492a)How are these three related to one another?
 - Freedom is attained by having the power to resist rule by others.
 - Power is the rule over others
 - Freedom & power would be valuable only as ways to get or do something one would enjoy having or doing (pleasure)