

THE FUNDAMENTAL CONFLICT IN PLATO'S *GORGLAS*

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The action of Plato's *Gorgias* is easily described. It is the late fifth century B.C. Gorgias, the world-famous Sicilian orator, is visiting Athens. He has just finished giving a display of his rhetorical virtuosity before an audience. He is with two friends and admirers – Polus, a young and avid student of rhetoric, and Callicles, a man of burning political ambition – as Socrates and his friend Chaerephon come upon the scene. After a brief opening conversation, Socrates talks at some length with Gorgias, Polus and Callicles in turn. These three conversations are of increasing length and intensity; the last of them takes up well over half the dialogue and includes some bitterly hostile exchanges. The dialogue begins with these words:

CALLICLES: This is how they say you're supposed to approach a war or a battle, Socrates.

SOCRATES: What's that? Are we late for a feast, as the saying goes?¹

CAL: You certainly are, and a most elegant feast it was. Gorgias has just finished showing us all kinds of beautiful things.

SOC: But this is all Chaerephon's fault, Callicles: he made us linger in the market-place (447 A 1-8).

Greek word-order is far more flexible than English, and Plato has chosen to make the first words of Callicles' admonition – the first words of the dialogue – *polemon kai machês*, which means *war and battle*. As with several of his dialogues, Plato seems to have chosen the first words of the *Gorgias* as having a special significance in relation to what follows.² The words 'war and battle' presage the most contentious drama Plato ever wrote: Socrates' long conversation with – who else? – Callicles, which will not begin for another thirty-four Stephanus pages. When Socrates threatens to bring his conversation

with Gorgias to a premature end, Callicles protests: 'I've been present at many discussions, but I don't know that I've ever enjoyed one as much as this; I'd be happy for you to carry on talking all day long!' (458 D 1-4) But once his own confrontation with Socrates is under way, this tone of carefree *badinage* and warm encouragement will deteriorate to the level of such exchanges as the following:

CAL: This man won't stop talking rubbish. Aren't you ashamed at your age, Socrates, to be setting verbal traps, and thinking it a godsend when anyone makes a slip of the tongue?...

SOC: ...My dear fellow, please adopt a gentler style of teaching – or I may run away from your school!

CAL: You're being sarcastic, Socrates.

SOC: Not at all; I swear it by Zethus, whom you invoked just now in your sarcasms at my expense (489 B 7-C 1, D 7-E 3).

CAL: I don't understand your subtleties, Socrates.

SOC: Oh yes you do, Callicles; you're just playing dumb. Take the argument a little further.

CAL: What's the point of carrying on with this drive!

SOC: So you may see what a wise teacher you are (497 A 6-B 1).

SOC: Discipline, then, is better for the soul than licence – contrary to what you thought just now.

CAL: I don't know what you're talking about, Socrates. Ask someone else.

SOC: Here we have a man who can't bear being improved, by making himself subject to what we're talking about: discipline.

CAL: I couldn't care less what you say. I was only answering you to oblige

Gorgias...What a bully you are, Socrates! If you take my advice, you'll leave this subject alone, or discuss it with someone else (505 B 11-C 6, D 4-5).

Nowhere else in Plato does the reader get such a sense that *the gloves are off*, and it is just this sense that gives the confrontation its uniquely urgent intensity. The opening exchange establishes a lighthearted rapport between the *Gorgias*'s main protagonists, but forebodes in its very first words a subsequent degeneration into naked hostility. This breakdown of the initially cordial relations between Socrates and Callicles is one of the most dramatic and alarming psychological reversals in all of Plato. I shall argue that part of its meaning lies in a certain kind of *opposition* between Socrates and Callicles. By this I do not mean the familiar fact that Socrates and Callicles take opposed positions in their discussion or that they descend into personal conflict; this is part of what the whole reversal consists in, and so it is part of what has to be explained. I mean that Socrates effectively represents himself and Callicles as politically opposed archetypes: politically opposed to such a degree that the entire terrain of political possibility is encompassed in the space between them. This is as yet, of course, obscure and metaphorical; it will become clearer in the course of the argument. Before we get to argument proper, we need to understand certain features of Socrates' conception of rhetoric, and how that bears upon his understanding of the nature of philosophy and politics.

With this in mind, let us return to the opening words, this time considering the context in which they are spoken. Gorgias was the most famous orator in the Greek world of his time. His embassy to Athens in 427 BC caused a sensation and revolutionised the practice of rhetoric.³ Of the many Athenians who thought of themselves as interested in intellectual culture, very few would have missed a chance to attend a demonstration of Gorgias's rhetorical techniques. Yet Socrates didn't even show up! The opening exchange shows more than it says: Callicles' mock-indignant words draw attention to Socrates' late arrival, without registering its real significance: *Socrates thinks that rhetoric is a worthless, in fact a pernicious pursuit*. (His contempt for rhetoric, signalled by the dramatic construction of the opening scene, is mirrored by Plato's own

attitude, signalled by his decision to have the *Gorgias* begin *after* the end of Gorgias's rhetorical display – as if to intimate: What interest could such an event hold for real philosophers who (as the subsequent dialogue confirms) will naturally reject rhetoric for dialectic?) Socrates will not make his disdain for rhetoric explicit until after Gorgias has proven unable to produce a satisfactory definition of it, whereupon Polus insists that Socrates give a definition of his own. He complies reluctantly, because he is afraid that what he says may offend Gorgias, and we can see why:

SOC: ...The whole activity, of which what I call rhetoric is a branch, is not admirable in the slightest.

GORGAS: What activity, Socrates? Speak out, and don't spare my feelings.

SOC: All right, Gorgias: it doesn't strike me as having anything to do with *tekhnai* at all; rather, it's the sort of business that suits a shrewd and bold spirit with a natural aptitude for dealing with men. I call the activity as a whole *flattery*. It has many other branches, I believe, one of which is cookery, which has the appearance of a *tekhne* but, as I understand it, is not a *tekhne*, but a knack acquired through practice. What I call rhetoric is another branch, along with cosmetics and sophistic: four branches, each with its own activity (463 A 2-B 6).⁴

After the disclosure of Socrates' low opinion of rhetoric, much of the dialogue can be understood in terms of Polus's and Callicles' responses to it. Polus says that Socrates must nevertheless concede that those proficient in rhetoric have great power over others; but Socrates, to Polus's mounting incredulity, denies precisely that. His explanation of why they lack power requires him to expound further theses which sound no less fantastic to Polus, such as that *happiness depends upon virtue*, and that *it is better to suffer injustice than to inflict it*. Socrates' critique of rhetoric also provokes Callicles to a sneering denunciation of philosophy: as in the opening exchange, he gives as good as he gets. Nothing else in Plato's Socratic dialogues comes close to the finely-wrought contempt for Socratic philosophising of Callicles' great speech, of which Dodds wrote,

with characteristic acumen, ‘One is tempted to believe that Callicles stands for something which Plato had it in him to become (and would perhaps have become, but for Socrates)²⁵:

I like philosophy in a young lad...but when I see an older man still philosophising and refusing to give it up, well, Socrates, in my view this is a man who needs a good kicking...He will never be a real man...shunning the centre of the city and the market place where, as the poet says, ‘men win renown,’ he spends the rest of his life sunk in obscurity, whispering with three or four boys in a corner, and never coming out with anything grand or free-spirited or adequate to the occasion (485 C 3-4, D 1-E 2).

The bulk of the long conversation with Callicles consists of Socrates’ attempts to undermine the ideal of life – the pursuit of power and pleasure, uninhibited by respect for the ‘conventional’ virtues – which Callicles opposes to the Socratic pursuit of virtue through philosophy.

For all the distinctive intensity of the confrontation, it is still continuous with what went before it, at the level of the fundamental juxtaposition of ideas; in particular, with the opposition of *rhetoric* and *philosophy*, introduced in the dialogue’s opening pages:

SOC: Now, are you willing to carry on with our conversation the same way as we did just now, Gorgias? – that is, asking and answering questions in turn, and postponing for another time the kind of long speeches Polus was trying to start in with (449 B 4-7).

It is a remarkable feature of the *Gorgias* that the contrast between speeches and interrogations is introduced so unobtrusively – as if it were a mere matter of formal convention, of no substantive import – only for it then gradually to assume a global ethical significance, as it becomes the defining opposition of the dialogue. At the same time, Socrates effects an association of *rhetoric* and *philosophy* each with their own constellations of ideas, which also stand opposed to each other. Rhetoric is characterised (i) as concerned only with persuading the audience, indifferent to the truth of the

propositions of which they are persuaded (454 E, 459 A-C); (ii) as manipulating the appearance of good (centrally, pleasure) with no concern as to where the real good lies (464 B-465 D); and (iii) as having tyranny – the usurpation of political power – as its natural end (452 E). Socrates consistently depicts philosophy (or *dialectic*), on the other hand, as (i) ascribing to persuasion of the interlocutor a value strictly conditional upon the truth of the propositions he thereby comes to believe (495 A, 505 E-506 A, 471 E-472 C); (ii) concerned above all with the real good and indifferent to the apparent good (482 A, 494 E-495a A; and (iii) assigning no value to the accumulation of (so-called) political power for its own sake (468 C). As we shall see, Socrates does not associate the ideas within these two constellations merely analogically – he thought that there are important, necessary, inferential connections between, for example, (i) seeing extended speechmaking as the paradigm intellectual activity and a corrupted ethical outlook that prizes the accumulation of brute power and denigrates the ‘conventional’ virtues, and between (ii) a commitment to philosophy, seeking the truth by brief question and answer, and the correct conception of how to live. This isn’t just because one is most likely to hit upon the correct way of life if one inquires into it philosophically: it’s also a conceptual truth that the philosophical life consists partly, but essentially, of an inquiry into how best to live (cf. *Apology* 38 A).

The very casualness with which this distinction, between speechmaking and discussion, is introduced may lead us to suspect that it is too superficial, too much a matter of mere style of discourse, to bear the tremendous ethical and philosophical weight Socrates comes to place upon it. We may also object that it is in the end a distinction of degree rather than of kind: doesn’t an answer to a question posed in discussion *become* a piece of speechmaking once it exceeds a certain length? In a sense, these objections should be conceded. The distinction in question can’t literally be a matter of mere form. A ‘discussion’ with a sufficiently compliant or mesmerised

interlocutor is surely not preferable, by any criteria that could interest Socrates, to a speech, as many passages in Plato's 'non-Socratic' dialogues illustrate all too well; the paradigmatic discussions recounted in the 'Socratic' dialogues, for their part, can easily be imagined read aloud by a single speaker, thereby becoming, technically, 'speeches'! As for the distinction being one of degree, Socrates himself concedes this in acknowledging that certain discussions make necessary long answers that amount to speeches (465 E 1-466 A 2). The distinction Socrates is really interested in is one that the distinction between speechmaking and discussion *characteristically stands for*; and this is a distinction between the basic stances of orator and discussant as such: put briefly, the orator seeks to persuade, while the discussant seeks the truth.

Yet rhetoric in the *Gorgias* is opposed not only to philosophy or dialectic; it is also contrasted with another dominant theme: justice. In the hopelessly mismatched debate between Socrates and Polus, and in the long, climactic confrontation between Socrates and Callicles, Plato interweaves the dialogue's chief themes of rhetoric, justice and well-being (*eudaimonia*). The juxtaposition of rhetoric and justice as defining themes of the *Gorgias* raises an important question for the twentyfirst-century reader: what do these have to do with each other, that Plato think it a good idea to treat them together in the same dialogue? There is no prominent debate in the current journals of rhetoric or of political philosophy about important connections between these subjects, conceptual or otherwise. It is sometimes suggested that the yoking together of these themes strikes us as odd or dated because rhetoric played a far more important role in the ancient world, and especially at classical Athens. This may appear to be a reason for thinking that the *Gorgias's* relevance to our own urgent moral and political problems is limited by a dependence upon conceptions of politics and society that no longer apply. The important thing to understand about this way of thinking is that it gets everything completely the wrong way about. The *whole point* of Socrates' critique of rhetoric in his

conversation with Polus is that it is simply a miscellany of tricks for getting people to think what you want them to think, and as such there is no unifying theory of it by reference to which it can be more profoundly understood: rhetoric is simply whatever mechanisms are used for the purpose of persuasion. Nothing in Socrates' arguments about rhetoric or its relation to justice turns on whether the mechanism in question consists of a man in a *himation* speaking to a crowd on a hill, words issuing from loudspeakers at Nuremberg, images on a television or computer screen or on the cover of a magazine. The multiform proliferation in our own time of media of persuasion strongly confirms Socrates' view that rhetoric, in this broad sense, is not the kind of thing for which we should expect to be able to provide an underlying theory. It is not difficult to see important questions of justice about the use of all such means of persuasion, which have become immeasurably more powerful and intrusive in the last hundred years or so, and seem now to be entering upon a new period of positively pandemic expansion. The *Gorgias* may be unique among Plato's dialogues in being even more relevant to us than it was to his contemporaries.

Bearing in mind these observations about Socrates' conception of rhetoric and how that shapes his understanding of the nature of philosophy and politics, let us return to the confrontation with Callicles, and the dramatic reversal that represents. When an incredulous Callicles interrupts Socrates' conversation with Polus ("Tell me, Chaerephon: is Socrates being serious about this, or is he joking?"), Socrates' response defers confrontation with a typically urbane appeal to what seems to be common ground:

My dear Callicles, if people didn't have certain feelings in common – some sharing one feeling, some another – but some of us had unique feelings unshared by the rest, it would not be easy to reveal one's experience to one's neighbour. I say this because I've noticed that you and I actually find ourselves in the same predicament. We are both lovers, and in each case our love has two objects: mine is for Alcibiades the son of Cleinias and for

philosophy, while yours is for the people (δῆμος) of Athens and Demos the son of Pylampes. Now, I observe that whenever your loves say anything to you, for all your cleverness you find it impossible to contradict the substance of what they say; instead you twist and turn this way and that. If you say something in the assembly and the Athenian people disagree, you change your story to what they want to hear; and you are the same way with that handsome young man the son of Pylampes. In fact, you are so far from being able to oppose your loves' wishes or words that, if someone expressed surprise at the bizarre things they typically cause you to say, you would probably tell them, if you were willing to tell the truth, that unless someone stops your loves from speaking this way, you won't stop saying these things either.

So you should be ready to accept a similar answer from me, and not be surprised at what I say, unless you can stop *my* love, philosophy, from speaking this way. You see, my dear friend, she is always saying what you are hearing from me right now, because she is far less capricious than *my* other love. That son of Cleinias says something different every time he opens his mouth; but philosophy always says the same thing: precisely what amazed you just now, and you were there yourself when she said it (481 C 5-482 B 2).

Here we see some typically Socratic manoeuvres: (1) the self-deprecating reference to his own libidinous nature and, more specifically, his mock-obsession with Alcibiades (cf., of course, *Symposium* 215 A-219 D); (2) the disavowal of the *logos* in question as originating with himself; Socrates often tries to cast himself and his interlocutor(s) alike in the role of co-operative followers of the *logos*; cf. e.g. his quotation from Homer (*Iliad* X, 224) in the *Protagoras*: 'when two men go looking together, one sees before the other' (348 D 1) etc., and, perhaps the most prominent and curious case, the attribution of the *logoi* of the *Crito* to the 'laws and the city of Athens' (50 A ff.), which seem to drown out Crito's own *logoi* like the flutes of the Corybantes (54 D); (3) the yoking together of the dynamics of *erōs* with the dynamics of philosophy (cf. *Phaedo* 66 E 2, *Symposium* 210 A-212 B, *Phaedrus* 244 A-257 B); and (4) the subtle disparagement of the interlocutor, although this is perhaps

more typical of the *Gorgias* (and of the *Euthyphro*) than of Socratic procedure generally. Dodds writes of Socrates' reply that it is 'couched in playful terms which make the comparison inoffensive' (*Gorgias*, 260) but I suspect he has missed a trick here. Socrates is using the same kind of rhetorical procedure as he did with Polus, exposing the commitments of the advocate of rhetoric as base and unworthy even on their own terms. He argued, in the face of Polus's exasperated incredulity, that since orators and tyrants don't attain their real good, but what they (like everyone) really want is their real good, and power consists in doing what one really wants, orators and tyrants have no power. Some commentators have professed themselves unable to believe that this argument is intended seriously, on the ground that its conclusion cannot be seriously meant.⁶ Yet there is reason to think of this as a saying we can intelligibly *hope* to be true. Polus and, especially, Callicles are obviously very much taken with the glamorous allure of political power. Callicles' position, as set out in his great speech, is a subtle and compelling one, brilliantly expressed. Unlike the modern 'moral sceptic', a merely notional figure, Callicles articulates a way of life that is not only a real option, but was to some extent a lived reality among many members of the political class to which he belonged, and had some of its roots in the heroic tradition with which all educated Greeks were imbued. There is nothing anomalous in his having inspired Nietzsche – not a superficial man – and there is nothing fantastic in Dodds' conjecture that he represents Plato's conception of what he might himself have become had he not quit politics.⁷ Polus is in thrall to as much of Callicles' ideology as he understands, and for Socrates to tell Polus that tyrants actually have *no power* is to hit him where it hurts. If power is worth seeking, it makes perfect sense to hope that it is not, after all, what tyrants have found, so that one can neutralise the attraction political power holds for people like Polus by telling no more than the truth about tyrannical impotence.⁸ This insight into the glamour of political power pervades the *Gorgias*, and it shows that Plato, unusually among moralists, refuses to

assimilate all vices to what is mean, conniving and parasitic in human beings. Nor is it easy to see how the *Gorgias*'s conception of moral danger can be made consistent with the assimilation of all vice to ignorance, which Socrates seems to insist upon in many of the shorter dialogues. Part of the 'latent content' of the argument addressed to Polus is: 'You worship power, and desire to acquire it more than anything else? Then forget about orators and tyrants, because *they don't have any!*' In depicting Callicles as in thrall to his 'two loves', the Athenian *dēmos* and Demos son of Pyrilampes, Socrates (anticipating the details of Callicles' position) may be understood as saying: 'You think of your advocacy of rhetoric as of a piece with a grand, forceful life, lived in accordance with 'natural' rather than 'conventional' justice, and in utter disregard of the feeble subterfuges of the Lilliputian masses, by which they seek to constrain strong and talented natures like your own. But here is the reality of your life: you spend it in a mercenary sequence of changes of opinion dictated by the necessity of keeping pace with the fickle thinking of the *dēmos* – for all the world as if you were a desperate lover seeking your beloved's approval. What's worse, it's distinctive of your very own view that the *dēmos* is to be despised – yet here you are chasing after it and fawning before it.' And it's hard to avoid a further implication of the *dēmos*/Demos comparison: that Callicles' ultimate purpose in flattering the *dēmos* is the same as his purpose in flattering Demos: to ingratiate himself in order to achieve physical gratification in a way that precludes respect for either quarry – by screwing them, as one might say.

I want to suggest, then, that the force of the '*dēmos*/Demos' passage runs counter to its apparently mollifying content. Socrates presents himself as pointing out something that he and Callicles have in common, but his real purpose is to undermine the allure of Callicles' conception of 'natural' justice, and thereby his conception of himself. But more than this: when understood in the light of what comes later, this

passage gives us a crucial clue as to why Socrates and Calicles cannot in the end make dialectical contact: why, in other words, their views and personalities are *so* fundamentally opposed that, unlike Socrates and Gorgias, or Socrates and Polus, they end up unable to take part in the same discussion.

This becomes clear, I suggest, if we look ahead to Socrates' argument at 509-12, that in a tyranny one must choose between doing and suffering injustice. He has claimed, in his conversations both with Polus and with Calicles, that it is worse to do injustice, although both are evils.

At 509 B-C Socrates responds at last to the charge that he should be ashamed at not being able to protect himself from injury or death (generally: from suffering injustice). It is interesting to compare the response here to the *actual* accusation, made with reference to Socrates' *hypothetical* trial and execution, with his response to the very same accusation made *hypothetically*, in the *Apology*, with reference to his *actual* trial and (impending) execution (28 B-30 B). There Socrates relied upon conventional notions of heroism and shame, comparing himself with Achilles, and insisting that there is nothing necessarily shameful about adhering to a course one knows will result in one's death. Here in the *Gorgias* he goes much deeper: the reason why there need be nothing shameful about it is that the most shameful and ridiculous condition is the failure to protect oneself against the worst of misfortunes or evils – and this is to *commit* injustice, not to suffer it.

Here he proposes that escaping the worse evil, doing injustice, requires only an effort of the will; but to avoid suffering injustice one must acquire 'some sort of power or skill': namely, either the power of tyranny itself, or the protection that comes with the tyrant's friendship. Clearly, in becoming a tyrant one is committed to doing injustice. But the same is true, Socrates argues, of becoming the tyrant's friend. For the tyrant fears and

resents those who are better than himself, and has only contempt for those who are worse; so the person who desires his friendship must become *like him* – and it is impossible to imitate the tyrant without imitating his injustice:

SOCRATES: So if a young man in a city like this were to ask himself: ‘How can I get great power and ensure that no-one can treat me unjustly?’, the answer would seem to be this: by accustoming himself from an early age to liking and disliking the same things as his master, and by ensuring that he’s as similar to him as possible. Isn’t that right?

CALLICLES: Yes.

SOC: Such a man will have achieved the goal of immunity from being treated unjustly and of possession of great power in the city, according to you and your friends.

CAL: Certainly.

SOC: But what about ensuring that he won’t *commit* injustice? Not likely – not if he’s really going to resemble this ruler and wield great power under him, since the ruler himself is unjust. No, I think that the man’s plan will be the exact opposite of this: to enable himself to commit with impunity as much injustice as possible (510 D 4-E 8).

...

If you suppose, Callicles, that anyone can furnish you with the sort of know-how (*tekhne*) that will make you very powerful in this city, without your thereby acquiring, for better or worse, the same nature as its ruling class, then I’d say you’re not thinking straight. It’s not enough to mimic these people: there must be a genuine natural likeness, if you’re going to make any real progress in the affections of the Athenian *demos* – or of Pnylamps’ Demos either, for that matter. So whoever can make you most like them is the man who will make you what you want to be: a politician and an orator. Demos and the *demos* alike, you see, enjoy hearing speeches made in accordance with their own

nature, and hate the reverse. Or perhaps you disagree, my dear fellow? Is there anything to be said against this, Callicles?

CAL: What you say strikes me as impressive, Socrates, although I couldn't say why. Then again, I'm in the same boat as a lot of your hearers: I'm not entirely convinced (513 A 7-C 6).

The significance of this argument does not lie in its details, many of which are questionable. Socrates seems to elevate sociological rules of thumb to the status of exceptionless scientific laws; and he treats only of the case where avoiding suffering injustice is the very highest priority. Nevertheless, as Callicles himself (of all people!) finds himself saying: 'What you say strikes me as impressive, Socrates, although I couldn't say why.' There is *something* important in Socrates' argument, and perhaps it is this: *you must take sides*. Unless you are literally a hermit, you cannot remain above the fray: if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem; if you're bent on avoiding suffering injustice, you must ally yourself with evil. And surely there is truth in this.

Furthermore, this argument circles back to that elaborate simile Socrates deployed at the start of his conversation with Callicles: the comparison between his attitudes to Demos the son of Pyrilampes and the Athenian *dēmos*. Callicles seeks above all to avoid being the victim of (conventional) injustice: that is why he allies himself, exactly in accordance with Socrates' argument, with the tyrant of Athens: the people at large. And in slavishly imitating them, he cannot avoid *committing injustice*.

At 512 Socrates insists on a point familiar from the *Apology*: ensuring and preserving the *quality* of one's life must always take precedence over any attempt to prolong it. And here is the material for an attack on Callicles from another angle: how do his acquisition of rhetorical skill, his pandering to the Athenian *dēmos*, his planned acquisition of political

power, etc., -- all of which are undertaken for the sake of physical security and gratification – improve the quality of his life (i.e. of his soul)? They do not: they only make it worse, because in imitating the *dōmos* he becomes enmired in injustice. Calicles himself is an object lesson in Socrates’ thesis that the person who seeks to avoid suffering injustice will necessarily end up committing it.

The case of Socrates himself, of course illustrates the other side of this thesis:

So where power is in the hands of a brutal and uneducated despot, anyone in the city who’s far superior to him will be very much feared by him, and he’ll never able to be on terms of genuine friendship with him (510 B 7-C 1).

In the context of the argument, the consequences of failing to establish terms of genuine friendship with the ‘brutal and uneducated despot’ (a description that applies to the Athenian *dōmos*) include the liability to suffer injustice – up to, and including, death. And of course this is what befell Socrates: he refused to protect himself against the possibility of suffering injustice precisely because he knew that he could only do so by committing injustice (pandering to the *dōmos* and disobeying the god, which are fused in a single imagined case in the *Apology* (29 C-30 B), when Socrates imagines the *dōmos* allowing him to go free on condition that he give up philosophising).

So in their respective courses of action, Calicles and Socrates serve as perfect exemplars of the two sides of Socrates’ ‘birds of a feather’ argument. They have chosen opposite sides, and never the twain shall meet. (This pessimism about the power of dialectic may seem to distinguish the *Gorgias* from the bland intellectualist optimism often taken to typify the Socratic dialogues. But then we remember Socrates’ words to Crito:

One should never do wrong in return, nor injure any man, whatever injury one has suffered at his hands. And Crito, see that you do not agree to this contrary to your belief. For I know that only a few people hold this view or will hold it, and *there is no common ground between those who hold this view and those who do not, but they inevitably despise each other's views* (49 C 8-D 4.)

Plato saw that there was something attractive in Callicles' outlook, and it is exactly what attracted Nietzsche: the idea of a strong personality spurning the masses. Yet Socrates' conversation with Callicles shows that this is a mirage: the true entailment of Callicles' view is not the ability to rise above the masses, but the necessity of abasing oneself before them. The final irony is that it is Socrates, with his seeming allegiance to 'conventional' justice, who has the real opportunity of rising above the herd; and that is why they must kill him. Callicles is the slave of Socrates' persecutors: no wonder, in the end, that they have nothing to say to each other.

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¹ Presumably Calicles is invoking a proverb along the lines of ‘first at a feast, last at a fight’. See Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato’s Gorgias*, trans. R. Jackson, K. Lycos and H. Tarrant (Leiden, 1998), 1.3. See also E. R. Dodds, *Plato’s Gorgias: A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary [Gorgias]* (Oxford, 1959), 188, and W. Hamilton, *Plato: Gorgias* (Harmondsworth, 1960), 19 n. 1.

² Scrutiny of Plato’s first words begins with Proclus’s commentary on the *Parmenides*. See M. F. Burnyeat, ‘First Words: A Valedictory Lecture’, *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 43 (1997), 4-8; cf. P. Friedländer, *Plato* (New York, 1964), vol. 2, 245. See also my ‘On the First Eight Lines of Plato’s *Gorgias*’, *Classical Quarterly*, forthcoming 2006.

³ See D. Nails, *The People of Plato* (Indianapolis, 2002), 157.

⁴ I leave *tekhnē* untranslated because all the going one-word translations (‘art’, ‘craft’, ‘science’, ‘skill’) are very misleading. Mathematics, astronomy, playing the lyre and making shoes are all examples of *tekhnai*; the features of *tekhnai* especially relevant to this context are their having some measure of rational theoretical structure distinct from and governing their associated activities.

⁵ Dodds, *Gorgias*, 14.

⁶ See e.g. K. McTighe, ‘Socrates on Desire for the Good and the Involuntariness of Wrongdoing: *Gorgias* 466 A-468 E’, in H. H. Benson (ed.) *Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates* (Oxford, 1992), 263-297; R. Weiss, ‘Ignorance, Involuntariness and Innocence: A

Reply to McTighe', *Phronesis* 30 (1985), 314-22, and 'Killing, Confiscating and Banishing at *Gorgias* 466-468', *Ancient Philosophy* 12 (1992), 299-315.

⁷ Dodds, *Gorgias*, *ibid.*

⁸ See my 'Desire, Power and the Good in Plato's *Gorgias*', in S. Tenenbaum (ed.) *New Directions in Philosophy: Moral Psychology* (Amsterdam, forthcoming 2006).

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