

## Conspiracy as allegory in Callicles' great speech

[DRAFT: Please do not quote]

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20<sup>th</sup> April 2010

### I. Introduction: The structure of Callicles' *rhêsis*; summary of paper's main claims

Callicles' great speech (the *rhêsis*, as Dodds calls it) sets the agenda for his conversation with Socrates, the last, longest and by far the most intense of the three conversations that form Plato's *Gorgias*. The *rhêsis* falls naturally into two halves: in the first (482c4-484c3), Callicles criticises Socrates for dishonestly equivocating, in his refutations of Gorgias and Polus, between the natural and conventional senses of key ethical terms, especially *justice*. He explains the natural conception of justice, defends it as the true conception, and theorises a kind of conspiracy among the mediocre majority to explain the appearance of widespread allegiance to the conventional conception. In the second half (484c4-486d1), he launches an aggressive attack on philosophy as a way of life, and argues that those who follow it (in particular: Socrates) would be much better off devoting their time to the affairs of their *polis*.

This paper is intended as a contribution to our understanding of the first half of the *rhêsis*. Callicles is usually understood as expressing here a radical kind of "moral scepticism" which amounts to a much more dangerous philosophical challenge to Socrates than anything Gorgias or Polus had to say. According to the interpretation I offer here, although Callicles clearly stands opposed to basic principles of Socratic ethics, in the *rhêsis*'s theory of natural and conventional justice he is made to express figuratively certain important and plausible Platonic claims about the ethical outlook of most human beings, claims which are not inconsistent with Socratic ethics and indeed help motivate Socratic philosophising. I call these claims *Platonic* because they are not asserted by any speaker in the dialogue, but are rather substantiated by the ways Plato makes Gorgias and Polus talk and act. The claims, and the fact of Callicles' expressing them, have been obscured, partly because the *rhêsis* has not been read with sufficient attention to the earlier conversational episodes of the *Gorgias* it purports to describe, and partly because of certain misleading implications of calling Callicles a "moral sceptic."

I will begin by summarising my main claims.

Callicles' accusation of dishonesty against Socrates faces two problems. First, it depends upon his own description of Socrates' conversations with Gorgias and Polus; but there are a number of distortions in this description. Some of these distortions, whereby Callicles tries to exculpate Gorgias, as well as later episodes in the conversation, indicate that Callicles is himself subject to just

the sorts of social pressure he diagnoses in the others – sometimes *even as he makes the diagnosis*. Others of the distortions, whereby unconscious influences on the words and deeds of Gorgias and Polus are transformed into knowingly self-interested calculations, will turn out to be very important for our interpretation of Callicles' ethic of natural justice. Our second problem is that this ethic itself also independently undermines Callicles' accusation of dishonesty against Socrates.

Callicles is usually thought of as expressing 'moral scepticism' in his *rhêsis*, but this is an anachronistic and misleading way of speaking, which obscures the true significance of his position as a great dialectical advance which aligns him in important respects with Socrates against Gorgias and Polus. The point of Callicles' conception of natural justice is to draw attention to a region of conceptual space unacknowledged by Socrates in other 'Socratic' dialogues: the possibility that justice may retain its essential characteristic *qua* virtue of bringing advantage to its possessor, while radically departing from its traditional interpretation as involving a readiness to respect the interests of (some) others. Merely by drawing attention to this possibility, Callicles blocks a typically Socratic mode of argument for the necessity of justice as requiring one to refrain from harming others – a mode of argument that depended on ignoring precisely this possibility. The real point of the contrast with conventional justice is to expose Gorgias, Polus and the many as reliant upon an inconsistent and viciously self-serving combination of ethical ideas.

If we take it quite literally, Callicles' theory of natural justice and of the conspiracy to obscure it with the ideology of conventional justice faces serious difficulties, as we shall see. Yet there is something compelling about Callicles' picture: for all its surface inconsistencies, it strikes us, or anyway strikes me, as getting something important right. I aim in my account to do justice to this sense of recognition, by pressing the question: what is the most sense that can be made of his picture? or, equivalently, what are the minimum revisions required to make it tell us something plausible about the ethical outlook of human beings? I will argue that Plato indicates just what it is in Callicles' position he considers correct, and that this is enough to vindicate a modified version of Callicles' criticisms of Polus and the mediocre majority. These Platonic claims, which Socrates in the *Gorgias* never refutes or even challenges, emerge from the first half of the *rhêsis* if it is read, contrary to Callicles' intention, as a kind of hyperbolic allegory. Now, there is a natural sceptical retort to the suggestion that Plato presents the *rhêsis* as *figuratively* true: is this not just a roundabout way of conceding that he presents it as simply (ie literally) *false*? I shall argue that the allegorical content of the *rhêsis* is independently attested by the episodes in the earlier conversations Callicles purports to describe and diagnose. For Plato intends the action and characterisation of the dialogue to contribute to its own philosophical content. He indicates this by making it clearly appropriate for Callicles to appeal (in vain, as it happens) in support of his own philosophical position to what Gorgias and Polus do, and thereby reveal themselves to be, in their conversations with Socrates.

Here we encounter the second, deeper significance to some of the distortions in Callicles' description of the relevant episodes in Socrates' earlier conversations. The distortions direct our attention back to the events themselves, which Callicles misrepresents as involving much more in the way of consciousness and conceptual sophistication than can really be found in them. He appeals to his partly falsifying account not only as a way of criticising Socrates for manipulating his earlier interlocutors, but also as an illustration of typical attitudes toward the rival ethics of natural and conventional justice – the 'bad faith' attitudes that fit with his subsequent conspiracy theory.

Those earlier conversational episodes themselves, in turn, point to an answer to our question about the minimum modifications necessary to Callicles' conspiracy theory to make it tell us something plausible and important. The natural suggestion at this point is to revise Callicles' conspiracy theory so that it lines up, not with what Callicles falsely claims was going on in Socrates' conversations with Gorgias and Polus, but with what Plato represents as *really* going on there. The main overarching claim of the paper is that *if Callicles' conspiracy theory is revised in this way, it is no longer vulnerable to our earlier objections*. The conspiracy theory then stands revealed as a literally false but figuratively plausible exaggeration of the ethical outlook of human beings in general. The conversations with Gorgias and Polus themselves reveal the ethical-psychological reality to which Callicles' conspiracy story may then be seen as giving a hyperbolic, allegorical expression. What is more, Callicles' conspiracy theory, read in this allegorical way, has the effect of highlighting just what it is in the outlooks of Gorgias and Polus that is base and objectionable. That is, the conspiracy theory, on the one hand, and the relevant episodes from the earlier conversations, on the other, effectively interpret each other.

## II. Callicles' allegation of dishonesty against Socrates: two problems

From the very start of the *rhōsis*, Callicles' mask of propriety begins to slip, and his first move effects a daring reversal which epitomises the startling hostility of his entire speech: he denounces Socrates as *a strutting demagogue*, immediately taking up the *alter ego* theme suggested by Socrates' 'two loves' speech (481c5-482c3), to which he is responding. The basis of his charge is that he has manipulated Gorgias and Polus into contradicting themselves, by exploiting an ambiguity between the natural and conventional senses of key terms<sup>1</sup> (A):

Socrates, your style of speech strikes me as having a youthful swagger about it, like that of a real mob-orator. And you're playing the orator right now because exactly the same thing has happened to Polus as he denounced Gorgias for suffering at your hands. You may recall that he said that when you asked Gorgias whether he would teach a prospective student of rhetoric about justice if he came to him ignorant of that, it was shame that made him say that he would teach him, in that any other answer would have outraged received opinion (*to ethos tōn anthrōpōn*); and that it was this concession that forced him to contradict himself, which is just what you love (*se de auto tonto agapan*) (482c4-d5).

Callicles implicitly endorses the judgment of Polus he here reports, that this sort of entrapment in contradiction is "just what Socrates loves" (482d5). So although he began by asking Chaerephon whether Socrates was joking (481b6-7) rather than, like Polus, accusing him straight out of deceit (461b3-c4), he turns out to be questioning Socrates' good faith after all: not (as Polus went on to, 471e1) in the substance of his ethics, but in the spirit in which he practices philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> On Socrates' implicit acquiescence in Callicles' diagnosis of Gorgias's and Polus's fall into *aporia* see above, [ref to section on Gorgias].

*Callicles elaborates his accusation of dishonesty against Socrates by describing it terms of the distinction between nomos and physis*

In developing his account of Socrates' entrapment of Polus, Callicles uses it as an object-lesson in how to distinguish *physis* (nature) from *nomos*. *Nomos* means *law*, of course, but may also include, as in Callicles' usage, the non-legal social sanctions of shame and embarrassment; this secondary meaning corresponds to the sense of the English *convention* in which to call someone conventional is nowadays often a criticism. The corresponding sense of *nature* is then how things are in a true estimation undistorted by fear of such embarrassment. It thus applies both to Gorgias's *aporia* (460c7-461b2) in Polus's diagnosis (461b3-c4) and to Polus's (475d1-476a1) in Callicles'. According to Callicles, Polus's crucial admission, that it is more shameful (*aiskheion*) to commit injustice than to suffer it, was conventional in just this sense. Callicles' charge against Polus is that he is subject to the fear of social disapproval (the mechanism by which adherence to conventional platitudes is enforced) and, against Socrates, that he knowingly but deceitfully manipulated this predictable fear in order to convict Polus of contradiction (**B**):

And he [sc Polus] laughed at you [sc Socrates] on that occasion – rightly, in my opinion. But now he has suffered the very same fate in turn. I myself have a low opinion of Polus for letting this happen, by conceding that committing injustice is more shameful than suffering it. Once he had agreed to this, you could bind and gag him with arguments, because he was ashamed to say what he thought. The fact is, Socrates, that although you claim to be in search of the truth, you're bringing vulgar rhetorical devices into the conversation, which are admirable only according to convention and not by nature. Generally speaking, nature and convention stand opposed to each other, so if a man is too ashamed to say what he really thinks, he's forced to contradict himself. You've thoroughly assimilated this piece of wisdom, and make unscrupulous use of it in argument: if someone speaks intending a conventional meaning, you reply in the language of nature; if they intend a natural meaning, your reply is conventional. This is exactly what happened just now, in the discussion about committing and suffering injustice. While Polus spoke about which was more shameful by convention, you fixed your sights on the natural meaning of the term. By nature, you see, the more shameful thing is always just what's worse for one: in this case<sup>2</sup>, suffering injustice, whereas committing injustice is only conventionally more shameful. This isn't the sort of thing that happens to a *man* – suffering injustice, I mean – but to some slave who'd be better off dead than alive, since he can't protect himself or his dependents against injustice and abuse (482e2-483b4).

*The first problem: Callicles' ethic of natural justice tends to undermine his accusation of dishonesty against Socrates*

Now the idea of dialectic as a microcosm of human life is a recurring theme in the conversation with Callicles, and these charges of his against Polus and Socrates remind us that dialectical conversation is itself a sort of human interaction in which injustices can be perpetrated and suffered. But this shows us that Callicles' position is already rather awkward. His assertion of nature as against convention vindicates his criticism of Polus: he couldn't protect himself against dialectical injustice, and so deserved all he got. But on what grounds can he complain against Socrates? How can they *both* be in the wrong? It will emerge as a central contention of Callicles' outlook that the fundamental source of ethical norms is simply *what happens*: those who are able, by superior intelligence and

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<sup>2</sup> Reading *hoion* with Dodds.

cunning, to dominate others and commit what is conventionally regarded as injustice against them *ipso facto* have the ‘natural’ right to do so. But Socrates’ dialectical swindling of Polus, in Callicles’ own account, fits this description perfectly. If Socrates has humiliated Polus by using conventionally unjust tricks to expose *his very subservience to convention*, he deserves Callicles’ applause, surely? Well, one might respond, we can hardly deny Callicles the right to complain if others make “unscrupulous use” of ambiguity in argument: it would effectively prohibit his participation in dialectic all together if he may not hold interlocutors to account for their sophistry. But this (I conjecture) is precisely Plato’s point: there is an instructive irony in Callicles’ complaining about Socrates’ subterfuge practically in the same breath as he calls shame on the victim rather than the perpetrator of injustice. The ‘conventional’ norms of justice and their founding thought – “How would you like it?” – are not so easily dispensed with as the radically antinomian ethicist would like to think, and he tends to be just as quick as his less articulate cousin – the instinctively unscrupulous scoundrel – to appeal to ‘conventional’ norms when his own interests are threatened.<sup>3</sup>

*The second problem: Callicles’ own account of Socrates’ dishonesty toward Gorgias and Polus is itself distorted by nomos-related inhibitions of exactly the sort he ascribes to them*

There are further awkwardnesses in Callicles’ account of the previous conversations. The first point that alerts us that something fishy is going on is that Polus had not “laughed at” (*katagela*) Socrates for his manipulation of Gorgias. His laughter came later (473e1-2), at Socrates’ claim that the unpunished tyrant was miserable; the tangled syntax of Polus’ interruption of the conversation with Gorgias (461b3-c4) expressed a highly unamused indignation. Secondly, Callicles tries to construct a parallel: Socrates deserved ridicule then; Polus deserves ridicule now. But something has gone wrong here: the parallel doesn’t fit. If Polus deserves ridicule now, it is because he allowed himself to be trapped in contradiction through misrepresenting his own views under pressure of convention. Yet no-one supposes that in the earlier case this was something *Socrates* was guilty of! Not only was Socrates (in Callicles’ view) the *perpetrator* of dialectical trickery against Gorgias (as against Polus) which, while conventionally unjust, would have to be acknowledged by Callicles as naturally just – so that the question arises here, too, of what grounds Callicles could have for criticism, or for approving Polus’ fictitious laughter. But the *victim* of the naturally just subterfuge, who, like Polus in the latter case, failed to protect himself, and so ought to be compared by Callicles to a slave who would be better off dead, can be none other than *Gorgias*. In short, Callicles goes out of his way to avoid making explicit the glaring implication that Gorgias deserved ridicule for allowing shame to make him vulnerable to elenctic refutation; but by having Callicles mangle the parallel between the cases of Gorgias and Polus so badly, Plato draws the reader’s attention to the implication all the more. The overall point, once again, is that the inhibiting forces of social propriety cannot be so easily shrugged off. For Callicles to draw ridicule down on *Gorgias*, of all people – the most famous orator in the Greek world, the darling of the Athenian *beau monde* (and a guest at Callicles’ house (447b6-7)!) – would be social, political and professional suicide. In the very act of taking his interlocutors to task for their susceptibility to manipulation through their ‘conventional’ social inhibitions, Callicles unwittingly makes it clear that, in his own way, he is no less inhibited himself. Since his deference to Gorgias is deference to what the *démos* defers to, and he manifests it by

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<sup>3</sup> Cf P T Geach, *The Virtues* (?) [ref]

‘twisting this way and that’ to avoid giving offence, it fits very well Socrates’ allegation, that he is the *dēmos*’s lover.

### III. The conspiracy of conventional justice

Let us now turn to the main substance of Callicles’ *rhêsis*, where he sets out his ethical ideal (C).

As I see it, the people who make the laws (*nomous*) are the weak – and, therefore, the many. So they make those laws, and assign praise and blame, with an eye to themselves and their own benefit. They terrify the stronger sort of person, so that they won’t get more than themselves, although they’re capable of doing so. The weak say that greed is shameful and unjust, and that to try to have more than others is to commit injustice. I think they’re very happy to get an equal share, you see, because they’re inferior.

This is why it’s conventionally (*nomôi*) said that it’s unjust and shameful to try to have more than the many, and they call it committing injustice. But I think that nature herself reveals that it’s just for the better man to have more than the worse, and the stronger than the weaker. Nature shows repeatedly that this is how things are. Whether we look to other creatures or to entire cities and races of human beings, this is what justice is judged to be: that the strong man rule over the weak and have more than him. After all, by what kind of justice did Xerxes march against the Greeks, or his father against the Scythians? Examples could be multiplied indefinitely. No, I think that these men acted in accordance with the *nature* of what’s just – and, by Zeus, in accordance with the *law* of nature – although I dare say *not* with the laws we make. We take our best and strongest when they are young, like lions, and bewitch them and enslave them with soothing charms, saying that we must have equality, and that this is fine and just. But *I* think that if a man is born with enough natural ability, he’ll break through all these things, shrug them off and escape, trampling underfoot our inscriptions, deceptions, charms and conventions as all of them against nature, and our slave will reveal himself in his rebellion to be our master, and the justice of nature will suddenly shine forth. Pindar seems to me to be making exactly the same point in the ode where he says

Law, which is king of all,  
Both mortal men and immortals

This, he goes on to say

Conducts and makes just the uttermost violence  
With the hand of power; I judge  
From the deeds of Heracles, since – without paying a price – ...<sup>4</sup>

He says something like this, anyway – that is, I don’t know the ode properly – but he says that Heracles drove off Geryon’s cattle without paying for them or being given them as a gift, because this was by nature just, and that cattle and all the other goods of inferior and weaker men belong to the better and stronger (483b4-484c3).

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<sup>4</sup> Translation of lines from Pindar after Dodds, *Gorgias*, 270.

[It is an anachronistic error to describe Callicles' position as "immoralism" or "moral scepticism"]

This famous speech is sometimes described as Callicles' statement of an "immoralist" or "moral sceptic" position,<sup>5</sup> but that is a bad way of talking, and not only because the Greeks had no word for *morality*.<sup>6</sup> It is true that what Callicles calls "conventional justice," and Socrates' own conception of justice, in their aspirations to capture *the* virtue that governs our dealings with our fellow mortals, have something in common with what we call morality: all these systems of ideas include it as a basic principle that the man who behaves in a way that befits a man is committed to taking into account the interests of other people – or at least fellow-citizens – *as such*: these others have a fundamental claim on our efforts to help them – or at least not harm them. The virtue of justice further resembles our concept of morality in being in part *legally structured*: more than other virtues, justice is a matter of not being prepared under any circumstances to contravene certain principles. Thus Callicles tends to talk of both sorts of justice as systems of norms, so that the rival *virtues* are to be understood largely derivatively, as the right kinds of pattern in the soul of thought and feeling that dispose the agent to abide by the rival sets of norms. Nevertheless there are a number of important differences between the Socratic and conventional conceptions of justice on the one hand and our conception of morality on the other, of which I want to focus on one in particular. This other-directedness is an *essential* feature of our concept of morality: a modern-day Callicles who claimed we had no obligation to take others' interests into account would not be described as putting forward an idiosyncratic morality, but of destroying morality, in this sense, all together. This feature of morality is essential to it; it is not essential that *the agent* benefit from her adherence to moral norms. Many Kantians and consequentialists alike maintain that our commitment to moral norms should not be conditional in any way on our benefiting from our observance of them, and even that this is partly definitive of their being moral norms. This may be conceptually peculiar in various ways, and is certainly more peculiar than most moral theorists are liable to acknowledge, but nobody complains that it contravenes the essence of morality to talk this way.

It is the other way around with the Greek concept of justice. This is (among other things) the concept of *a virtue*, and as such it is of its essence that it benefit the agent, by making him a more excellent specimen of humanity – it must make him better at being a human being. If a Greek said that justice, although a genuine virtue, nevertheless left its possessor at an overall disadvantage, he would be regarded as talking nonsense. At the same time, although the concept of justice, particularly when interpreted as a system of norms, was strongly associated in the Greek mind with benefiting at least some others, this feature is not essential to justice *as a virtue*. This is shown by the fact that Callicles' conception of 'natural' justice is not, in its thoroughgoing egoism, self-contradictory, as it would be if it were put forward (*per impossibile*, chronologically speaking) as a version of 'morality'. Socrates never gives the slightest sign of accusing Callicles of an abuse of terms when he applies the name *justice* to a quality of character that is manifested in dominating others rather than helping them. The reason is that Callicles' claim – and Socrates certainly does take issue with this – is that this quality is the one that best befits a man – or at least a strong and talented man – in his dealings with others. It therefore automatically qualifies as a *bona fide* candidate (in the case

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<sup>5</sup> Eg, ???

<sup>6</sup> See G E M Ascombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (1958), 1-19, and B A O Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), esp chs ??

of such men) for the virtue of justice. Just as with Socrates' and Polus's argument about power, Socrates and Callicles are agreed that justice must benefit its possessor but disagree, given *that*, about how it should be further specified. Socrates subscribes to 'conventional' justice at least to the extent that he thinks the just man will not harm fellow-citizens (this is entailed by Socrates' stronger claim, that the just man will not harm *anyone*<sup>7</sup>), while in Callicles' view the men who stand to benefit from natural justice *will* typically and rightly harm others in exercising it.

[*Examination of the conspiracy theory: it seems to get something right – but what? We must make as much sense of it as we can*]

Callicles claims in the *rhêsis* that the mediocre majority have conspired to propagate the ideology of 'conventional' justice for their own benefit. They intend that the strong and talented minority be taken in by this ideology; that is, that they come to believe that "equality is right" and the strong should not dominate the weak or have more assets than they. This ideology, if it is successfully inculcated, clearly protects the majority from the depredations of the strong. But this runs counter to what real justice – 'natural' justice – requires, which is, precisely: that the strong dominate the weak.

There is *something* compelling in Callicles' picture of bad faith at the heart of much ordinary ethical thinking: then as now, everyone is supposed to care, but no-one really seems to know *why*. The speech does not have the entirely alienating effect of the babbling rationalisations of a mundane villain. Even the most ethically 'conventional' may find themselves applying a remark of Callicles himself in response to a later piece of Socratic philosophical anthropology: "You seem to me to speak well..., although I don't understand why; and I have the same experience as many people do: you don't entirely convince me" (513c4-6). We shall see that Callicles' ethical vision is in crucial respects underdescribed and otherwise problematic. Our current task is to make of it the most sense it will allow.

[*The conspiracy story cannot be taken literally*]

In the first place, the full-on conspiracy theory cannot be taken literally: interpretative charity prohibits us from supposing that Callicles is postulating a full-fledged agreement, explicit among the mediocre majority, secret from the talented minority, to promulgate the norms of conventional justice. (Callicles is a *narcissist*, not a *paranoiac*.) We must instead understand Callicles' 'conspiracy' talk as a *façon de parler*; any theory of this sort, if it is to be remotely plausible, must be akin to functional explanations in modern sociology and anthropology, or appeals to unconscious 'strategies' in psychoanalysis. On this construal, conventional justice in some sense *performs the function* of protecting the weak majority from the strong minority, and this is non-coincidentally related to its rise and survival as an ideology; but the teleology invoked must operate to a large extent beyond the consciousness of individual agents. How is this supposed to work?

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<sup>7</sup> See *Crito*, ??

*[The pressing and difficult question: what do the weak and the strong believe and know?]*

The ‘conspiracy’ story, taken literally, entails that the weak majority believe that conventional justice is spurious. Does Callicles intend that this entailment be taken literally even though the conspiracy is at best figurative? After all, it is separable: a group of people may find themselves putting about a story they all know, and know each other to know, to be false, without ever having explicitly agreed to do so, or even acknowledging to one another that this is what they are doing. Indeed, this state of affairs is depressingly common. And some of the things Callicles says do suggest that he thinks that people are generally aware of the spuriousness of conventional justice.

*[Callicles himself points to Gorgias and Polus as inhibited by nomos, and so an examination of their beliefs may shed light on our difficult question (especially as Plato seems to conceive of them as conventional-minded and hence representative)]*

In reading the *Gorgias*, we have tried to devote as much attention to what the dramatic interaction of the characters shows as to the content of what the characters say. We saw that, in his account of Socrates’ refutations of Gorgias and Polus (482c4-483b4), which forms the preface to his ethical ‘conspiracy theory’, Callicles himself took up the same method of interpretation *within* the dialogue. He began by offering a commentary on the dialogue up to this moment, according to which Socrates’ refutations point to something beyond the inconsistencies they expose. Considered as dialectical exercises, the *reductiones* of Gorgias’s and Polus’s theses at best establish no more than the falsity of one or more of the beliefs constituting the premises that led to them.<sup>8</sup> As conversational episodes, according to Callicles, they indicate Gorgias’s and Polus’s dissimulation about their real views about justice, and the social pressures to which that dissimulation was a response: “[N]ature and convention stand opposed to each other, so if a man is too ashamed to say what he really thinks, he’s forced to contradict himself” (482e5-483a2). On this part of Callicles’ account, the real thoughts that Gorgias and Polus are too ashamed to utter amount to their consciousness that conventional justice is a myth hiding the reality of natural justice.

*[Gorgias’s and Polus’s ethical attitudes, as revealed by Callicles’ accounts of their conversations with Socrates]*

About Gorgias he simply endorses Polus’s own account: “when you [sc Socrates] asked Gorgias whether he would teach a prospective student of rhetoric about justice if he came to him ignorant of that, it was shame that made him say that he would teach him, in that any other answer would have outraged received opinion (*to ethōs tōn anthrōpōn*); and ... it was this concession that forced him to contradict himself, which is just what you love” (482c7-d5). Gorgias is here described as answering contrary to his real view in signalling his allegiance to conventional justice, so that his real view would be that it is a sham. We cannot be certain that Callicles regards Gorgias as typical in this respect; but Gorgias has shown very little independent ethical thought – certainly relative to

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<sup>8</sup> See G Vlastos, “The Socratic Elenchus,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* I (1983), 27-58. This is all that need be conceded by a reader or onlooker, who need not be committed to Gorgias’s and Polus’s premises. As addressed to Gorgias and Polus, however, who are so committed, the elenchi, if sound, do refute their theses, just as Socrates claims. Vlastos mistakenly denied this; see J Doyle, “The Socratic Elenchus: No Problem,” in J Lear and A Oliver (eds), *The Force of Argument*, (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2010)

Callicles' own standards, revealed by the *rhêsis* to be rather high. And we should not be misled by Callicles' implication that "received opinion" subscribes to conventional justice, for *ethos* means merely *custom* or *habit*, and could easily indicate here nothing more than lip-service – which may in its defensiveness be more liable than sincere conviction to "outrage" at being challenged. About Polus, Callicles says to Socrates: "Once he had agreed [that committing injustice is more shameful than suffering it], you could bind and gag him with arguments, because *he was ashamed to say what he thought* (*aiskēbuntheis ha enoei eipein*)" (482d8-e2, my emphasis). Our assertions about what is shameful are themselves subject to the inhibiting forces of shame, with the result in this case, Callicles implies, that Polus felt compelled to conceal his real belief, that suffering injustice is more shameful, as well as (and because) worse, than committing it. Polus seems, too, to conform to the *typical* human pattern of reaction in these matters, and even to take pride in his conformity – witness his taking refuge in the authority of the many in the face of Socrates' claim that the unpunished tyrant is more miserable than the punished (473e4-5).

So Callicles' view seems to be that Gorgias and Polus think that natural justice is true justice and conventional justice is spurious; and it is hard to see why he would think of them as unrepresentative of the many in this respect. If they are representative, then, although the majority have not literally conspired, according to Callicles they do realise that the dominant ideology of conventional justice is a scam. Socrates himself provides some confirmation that this is Callicles' position, and even that it is correct about the *beliefs* of the many – although not about their truth. His general characterisation of that position, from which Callicles does not dissent, is that he (Callicles) "say[s] clearly what other people (*hoi alloi*) think, but aren't willing to say" (492d2-3).

[ *Initial conjecture that Gorgias and Polus favour 'natural' justice must be rejected: if the many see through 'conventional' justice, how can the epiphany of the "young lion" be a cognitive achievement?* ]

But this can't be right! According to Callicles, the few who stand to benefit from true (ie natural) justice are *stronger*, and this turns out to mean, in the first place, *more intelligent* (489e7-9, 490a6-8). How could the more intelligent be taken in by a story the less intelligent see through? It seems we are still taking too literally Callicles' talk of a conspiracy of the many against the few. When he describes the deception in more detail, we find that the strong natures are taken in by being conditioned from birth (483e4-484b1), but this conditioning is presumably universal. If there is a conspiracy here, it is of the old against the young. This brings us closer to a coherent account, but not all the way there. The young, let us suppose, are programmed, strong and weak alike, to admire and adhere to conventional justice; but then he thinks the many see through conventional justice when they are grown up, although they will not acknowledge their disillusionment to each other and continue to foist what they see as a discredited ideology on *their* children. But if the many see through it, then so *a fortiori* do the wiser few. So why does Callicles portray the "young lion's" epiphany of natural justice as, among other things, a glorious and distinctive *cognitive* achievement? (from **C**)

*I think that if a man is born with enough natural ability, he'll break through all these things, shrug them off and escape, trampling underfoot our inscriptions, deceptions, charms and conventions as all of them against nature, and our slave will reveal himself in his rebellion to be our master, and the justice of nature will suddenly shine forth* (484a2-b1).

The answer, I think, is that the many don't see *right* through it. This will become clear if we look beyond Callicles' account of what happened with Gorgias and Polus, back to the conversations themselves.

*[This points to shortcomings in Callicles' accounts of the earlier conversations, which must now be examined directly]*

Callicles' logical point was that the refutations were sophistical because they traded on unacknowledged ambiguities between the 'natural' and 'conventional' senses of terms. The refutations were only effective *ad homines*, because Gorgias and Polus conspired in their own downfall by disregarding the crucial ambiguities – as Callicles would have it, out of shame (from **B**):

I myself have a low opinion of Polus for letting this happen, by conceding that committing injustice is more shameful than suffering it. Once he had agreed to this, you could bind and gag him with arguments, because he was ashamed to say what he thought... [N]ature and convention stand opposed to each other, so if a man is too ashamed to say what he really thinks, he's forced to contradict himself. You've thoroughly assimilated this piece of wisdom, and make unscrupulous use of it in argument: if someone speaks intending a conventional meaning, you reply in the language of nature; if they intend a natural meaning, your reply is conventional. This is exactly what happened just now, in the discussion about committing and suffering injustice. While Polus spoke about which was more shameful by convention, you fixed your sights on the natural meaning of the term (482d7-e2, 482e5-483a7).

*[Callicles attributes too much understanding and conceptual sophistication to Gorgias and Polus]*

Callicles certainly gets something right here about what has happened in the dialogue so far but, given his character and doctrines, we should not be too quick to assume that we are intended to take his interpretation entirely at face value. And surely he overinterprets what Gorgias and Polus said. Did they really give any indication of feeling "bound and gagged" – as if frustrated at their knowledge that, if only they could have spoken freely, they would have had *no trouble* avoiding Socrates' refutation? Did they give the impression of *knowing*, as Callicles would have it, *just as well as Socrates*, that he was making them *seem* to harbour contradictory beliefs simply by hemming them in with politically correct norms they secretly despised? On the contrary: if we go back and look at what they said, they come across as strikingly similar to the victims of Socrates' cross-examinations in other Socratic dialogues: *they simply don't have any very clear conception of what is going on*. In a way, Callicles acknowledges this point too. For he introduces the distinction between conventional and natural justice as an explanatory *innovation*. Certainly, it is supposed to help us understand how Gorgias and Polus got into dialectical trouble with Socrates. Yet we cannot gain this understanding by attributing to them beliefs about conventional justice (for example, that it is spurious) and natural justice (for example, that it is true justice) *under those descriptions*. For if Callicles' introduction of the distinction is an explanatory innovation, it cannot have been available to Gorgias and Polus, and presupposed all along in what they think and say about an ambiguous *justice*. So although Callicles' invocation of the distinction between the two kinds of justice is supposed to explain their inconsistencies, on the most plausible formulation of that explanation, the distinction does not contribute to it by figuring in the *content of what Gorgias and Polus believe and say*. It enters into the explanation, rather, as a way of expressing what they do not themselves understand.

I have argued elsewhere<sup>9</sup> that Gorgias does not have a sufficiently evolved understanding to lay claim to full-fledged belief on many of the topics of his conversation with Socrates, such as whether justice is (part of) the subject-matter of rhetoric. His incompatible commitments concerning what Callicles calls conventional and natural justice are simply another case of the confusion and indeterminacy that reigns among his attitudes on these crucial questions about rhetoric and ethics. He wants to come across (to himself as much as to anyone else; he is not an especially *devious* person) as committed to the norms of (what Callicles would call) conventional justice. Thus he was eager to maintain that the subject-matter of rhetoric (or of the persuasion it generates – he doesn't distinguish between these) was justice or right and wrong (454b5-8). (There can be no question that when Gorgias and Polus refer to justice they have in mind what Callicles calls 'conventional' justice – the idea of 'natural' justice is, as I have emphasised, a radical Calliclean innovation.) He even claims to be committed to *propagating* those norms, telling Socrates that if a student orator was ignorant of them, he would teach them to him (460a3-4). Yet alongside these 'conventional' commitments we find expressions of something more akin to what Callicles would call natural justice; most notably in his account of the personal advantages expertise in rhetoric brings (D):

[B]y means of this power [sc of rhetoric] you will have the doctor as your slave, and the trainer will be your slave too. And the businessman you mention will turn out to be making money not for himself, but for someone else: for you, in fact, as the one who has the power of speaking persuasively before the crowd (452e1-8).<sup>10</sup>

Turning to the case of Polus, we recall that he got into trouble because he wanted to maintain that suffering injustice was worse (*kakion*, 474c5-6) but that doing it was more shameful (*aiskheion* 474c7-8); he therefore ran afoul of a plausible principle on which Callicles and Socrates interestingly agree: that whatever is worse is *ipso facto* more shameful.<sup>11</sup> But this was not merely a logical blunder on Polus's part. His ignorance of the ambiguity between the conventional sense of injustice, whereby it is a more shameful thing to commit, and the natural sense, whereby it is a worse thing to suffer, enabled him to conceal from himself his desire to have it both ways. He wanted to affirm with Socrates and the conventional ideology that it is shameful to commit injustice, but also, in line with the Calliclean 'realism' of 'natural' justice, that it is advantageous. The refutation shows that this outlook is at bottom inconsistent.

Polus's attitudes are rather differently combined from Gorgias's. In Gorgias the professions of allegiance to 'conventional' justice were more prominent: the gleeful celebration of the power of rhetoric to enslave the doctor, trainer and businessman was something of a distasteful obtrusion. With Polus the commitment to 'conventional' ethical ideas took the somewhat residual and perfunctory form of an acknowledgement that committing injustice is more shameful than suffering it. (It is Callicles' reversal of this formula that enables him to take the dialectic forward, with a

<sup>9</sup> James Doyle, "Socrates and Gorgias," *Phronesis* 55 (2010), 1-25.

<sup>10</sup> Compare the historical Gorgias, *In Praise of Helen* [quote, ref].

<sup>11</sup> I here ignore the complications that arise if one presses the question "Worse for *who*?", since what is at issue here is Callicles' diagnosis, which itself ignores these complications. See G Vlastos, "Was Polus Refuted?", *American Journal of Philology* 88 (1967), 454-60.

position as yet unrefuted by Socrates.) A half-acknowledged admiration for the Calliclean ethic of domination has the upper hand in Polus's soul. Power on his conception is something good for its possessor (466b8) and consists of doing whatever one pleases – in particular, in the ability to kill, banish and confiscate the property of whomever one likes (466b11-c2). His undisguised envy of the tyrant Archelaus shows that he also accepts the entailment, that it is good to be able to kill, banish and confiscate the property of whomever one likes.

*[The reality of Gorgias's and Polus's attitudes is more complicated but less sophisticated than Callicles suggests]*

Callicles misunderstands the structure of his own explanation, then, when he says of Polus that he was “ashamed to say what he thought” (482e2; he implies the same about Gorgias, but is himself inhibited from coming out with it, presumably by fear of what others will think!). What Polus is prevented by shame from saying – that suffering injustice is more shameful than inflicting it – is not something he wholeheartedly believes, because what Callicles calls conventional justice does not exert its influence on him simply as the inhibiting force of public opinion impinging on him from outside, and is never conceptualised by him as “merely conventional”: these are ideas he has (incompletely) *internalised*. Polus's reaction to being refuted is epitomised by his (surely unfeigned) response to Socrates' argument that the unjust benefit from being punished (**E**): “It seems strange to me, Socrates; but then you make it agree<sup>12</sup> with what we said before” (480e1-2). If Polus knew that the argument had simply taken off from premises he did not believe but had been forced to assent to out of fear of social censure, what would strike him as “strange” about the conclusion not squaring with what he really thought? No: the strangeness derives from Polus, like so many of Socrates' interlocutors before him, having been led, by dialectical steps he could not impugn, from theses he felt comfortable with (perpetrating injustice is more shameful than suffering it) to theses he finds outrageous (punishment is the greatest benefit the unjust can receive).

Callicles clearly doesn't take himself to share the ethical outlook of the many, and his opening question to Chaerephon as to whether Socrates is serious (481b6-7) shows that he doesn't take Socrates' assertions to be expressions of conventional wisdom either. We have seen that Callicles does not suppose that the majority are wholeheartedly committed to the ‘conventional’ justice of their official ideology. All citizens are subject to roughly the same acculturation, which leaves none as yet with a clear view of what Callicles takes to be the ethical reality of natural justice, although some will have a clearer view than others. Thus we can after all make sense of his implication that it is (among other things) a cognitive achievement on the part of the “man of natural ability” eventually to see through the “soothing charms” and rebel against the conventional ideology in the name of natural (ie true) justice. The ethical mindset of the many is neither the thoroughgoing cynicism of Callicles nor the sincerity of Socrates, nor yet literally conspiratorial. The examples of Gorgias and Polus show what we have independent reason to expect: the many occupy various positions strung out along the spectrum between Callicles and Socrates, harbouring varying proportions of straight hypocrisy, self-deception and unstable combinations of publicly-avowed and privately-held commitments to incompatible ideals. Their attitude, in other words, is in some respects *like* that of conspirators in the promulgation of a false ideology, with the interesting difference that they have come in varying degrees to believe it. Callicles' account of a conflict

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<sup>12</sup> Trans after Dodds' note *ad loc*, *Gorgias* 259.

between people serves as an allegory for a conflict *within* people. The line between the conspirators and their victims runs *through the souls of the many*.

Note that the *Gorgias*, on any plausible chronology, is the first Platonic dialogue in which the soul is spoken of as having *parts* (493a3ff). At the beginning of his long duel with Callicles, after some pregnant and enigmatic remarks about the directedness of *erôs*, Socrates warns him of the harmful consequences of inner conflict:

[I]f you allow this to go unrefuted, Callicles, I swear by the dog which the Egyptians worship that Callicles will never be at peace with himself, but will remain at variance with himself all his life long. Yet I think, my good fellow, that it would be better for me to have a lyre or a chorus I was directing in discord and out of tune, better that the mass of mankind should disagree with me and contradict me, than that I, a single individual, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict myself (482b4-c3)

Gorgias and Polus and, by implication, the many, of whom they stand as representatives, turn out to suffer from

[*Superiority of Socrates' and Callicles' attitudes to Polus's and Gorgias's. Nature of superiority of Socrates' attitudes to Callicles'*]

I have dwelt on Callicles' diagnosis of Socrates' refutations of Gorgias and Polus and its basis in the attitudes they expressed because the diagnosis is not what it may initially appear to be. That is to say, it is not *only* a rhetorically effective prelude, by way of "an object-lesson in how to distinguish *phusis* (nature) from *nomos* (convention)" (as I called it above), to his unmasking account of the 'conspiracy' of 'conventional justice'. It is also a case study in how his metaphorical talk of conspiracy is to be cashed out. For Gorgias and Polus embody exactly the confused hybrid combination of incompatible commitments to elements of both 'natural' and 'conventional' justice we are led by Callicles' 'conspiracy' theory to expect to find among the many, along the spectrum between Socrates and Callicles. Socrates and Callicles alone avoid these confusions (for all that Socrates will go on to convict Callicles of others); here we see the 'alter ego' theme emerging again. Gorgias and Polus are confused because, unlike Socrates and Callicles, they are simply *unreflective*: they lead the unexamined lives which are, according to a fundamental and never-abandoned principle of Socrates and Plato, an essential mark of the many. (The violence of Callicles' attack on philosophy may make us overlook the fact that, uniquely among the interlocutors, *he also defends it*; and his *rhêsis* is, intermittently, a brilliant piece of philosophy itself, fully bearing out his earlier acknowledgement, which sets him so far apart from the others, that things may be very different from how they appear: "For if you are serious [Socrates], and what you say turns out to be true, won't men's lives be completely the wrong way round, so that everything we do is the opposite of what we should?" (481c1-4).) Plato also gives us independent indications that Gorgias and Polus should be taken as ethical representatives of the many. It is hard to conceive of a more conventional (in the ordinary, non-Calliclean sense) character than Gorgias, and Polus's explicit deference to the ethical conceptions of the many as obviously authoritative is one of the clearest symptoms of his extremely unphilosophical nature.

