Saying and Showing in Plato's *Gorgias*

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Introduction

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Plato wrote the *Gorgias* probably around 390-385 BCE[1]. It depicts an encounter during the late fifth-century visit to Athens of Gorgias, the world-famous Sicilian orator.[2] He has just finished giving a display of his rhetorical virtuosity before a highly appreciative audience.[3] 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. In the first of them (449a2-461b2), Gorgias tries repeatedly, at Socrates' request, to define a term (*rhetoric*, his trade), but each attempt is shown to be inadequate and Socrates ends up making Gorgias seem to contradict himself (460d1-461b2). This conversation therefore resembles many conversations typical of the Platonic dialogues scholars call Socratic. Polus's indignant interruption sets in motion the second conversation (461b3-481b5). Polus openly values rhetoric as a means to the acquisition of political power, ideally to the absolute degree of the *tyrant*, who can get others to do whatever he wants – a purpose Gorgias had been rather equivocal about (compare 452e1-8 with 456c7-457c3). He challenges Socrates to explain and defend his contention that rhetoric is not a genuine *tekhnê* (systematic body of practical knowledge) but just a kind of knack for flattery. Socrates' response leans heavily on the distinction between what appears or is believed to be good and what really is good. On the basis of this distinction he further maintains, in the face of Polus's mounting incredulity, that even if orators and tyrants can do whatever seems good to them, this does not make them powerful or enviable. He reproaches Polus for his open admiration and envy of unjust tyrants, claiming that a person will be happy if, and only if, he or she is educated, just and all together virtuous and that, in fact, committing injustice is the worst of all evils (and therefore worse than, in particular, being a victim of injustice). Once Polus has conceded that committing injustice is the more *shameful* condition, he can see no way to resist Socrates' argument that it is also *worse* and so less choiceworthy, and that the unjust man is better off for being punished, just as a sick man benefits from medical treatment. At this point Callicles intervenes.

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[1] On the date of the *Gorgias*'s composition, see Dodds (1959: 18-30).

[2] Gorgias did visit Athens in 427 BCE, but no year can qualify straightforwardly as the *Gorgias*'s dramatic date, as its indications are (perhaps deliberately) contradictory. See Dodds 17-18.

[3] The admiring response of Callicles (447a5-6) is presumably intended to allude to the Athenians' ecstatic reception of Gorgias's oratory during his visit of 427 BCE. See (Nails 2002: 157).

This last conversation takes up well over half the dialogue (481b6-527e7) and includes some bitterly hostile exchanges. Callicles gleefully abandons Polus's residual concession to convention, that committing injustice is more shameful, and defends a proto-Nietzschean ethic of domination of the weak by the strong, combined with a thoroughly hedonistic theory of value. The discussion ranges widely over tragic poetry, Athenian political history, divisions in the soul, the justification of punishment and ultimately eschatological myth, as Socrates tries to undermine Callicles' alternative to his own account of virtue and its relation to happiness – a much more cogent and (relatedly) much more extreme alternative than Polus's. Callicles is increasingly reluctant to take part in the discussion and ends up refusing outright, so that Socrates concludes his argument in monologue.

My primary aim in this book is to bring to light meaning in Plato's *Gorgias* that has so far gone unremarked. This is not in itself a matter of new interpretations of claims or arguments put forward by speakers in the dialogue. My primary account (that is, the account that serves the primary aim) is of what the *Gorgias does*: of what it makes happen when Socrates tries to engage his interlocutors in philosophical conversation. Since this engagement is partly a matter of putting forward distinctive claims and arguments, my primary account will depend in part on interpretations of these. But in this introductory chapter I would like to present the main ideas involved in the primary account, and explain how these ideas fit together. Where that account depends on controversial readings of arguments or claims put forward by the speakers in the dialogue, I will defer my defence of these to the body of the book.

In order to present the relevant ideas, I want to raise three puzzles whose solution seems to me necessary to an adequate understanding of the *Gorgias*, but which have been generally neglected. These concern (i) Socrates' conception of philosophy there, particularly as compared to the *Apology*; (ii) the nature of the critical distance between Plato and his hero; (iii) Plato's use in the *Gorgias* of the special expressive power that accrues to him as author of a dialogue. The puzzles arise as follows:

(i) The *Gorgias* is the most self-conscious about method of all the Socratic dialogues. Its main sequence of argument about rhetoric, justice and happiness is punctuated by several sets of remarks by Socrates about philosophical method (457c4-458e2 (to Gorgias); 471d3-472d1 (to Polus) and 486d2-488b1 (to Callicles)), in which he sets out his principles of philosophical conversation and defends them as uniquely conducive to such conversation's ultimate aim, which is finding the truth about the most important subject there is. The only comparable examination of method is in the *Apology*, when Socrates describes the philosophical activity to which his life was devoted. It is usually thought that the *Apology* description of philosophising functions as a kind of template for the way Socrates carries on in other 'Socratic' dialogues. Yet in the case of the *Gorgias*, at least, this is not true. We shall see that in the *Gorgias* Plato goes out of his way to emphasise that Socrates is *not* following the procedure he ascribes to himself in the *Apology*. What does this discrepancy mean?

(ii) In the *Gorgias* Plato depicts Socrates' attempt to engage his interlocutors in philosophical discussion as a very conspicuous failure by the explicitly Socratic criterion of psychic improvement – Callicles even seems to have been made worse. It is not plausible to suppose that Plato would reject either the main claims Socrates puts forward, or the rules of philosophical discussion he tries to impose. So what is it about Socrates' approach here that makes it misfire so badly? Or, in other words, what is the real target of the implicit Platonic critique?

(iii) Plato wrote the *Gorgias* not just as a dialogue but as a *drama*. The vivid depiction of these characters and their interaction clearly mattered a lot to him. Why? How does our understanding of the *Gorgias* as a drama bear upon our interpretation of it as philosophy?

Our three puzzles will turn out to be very closely connected. The primary account is intended to solve them all in one go, like simultaneous equations.

Socratic methods in the Apology *and the* Gorgias

With regard to the *Apology*, I want to start with what looks like a blatant contradiction in Socrates' speech. By *blatant* I mean that it is not deeply buried, or to be distantly inferred from what Socrates says: it is right there in the text. I concede that, if I am right about this, it is a bit of a mystery why no-one has noticed the contradiction before. But there we are.

The contradiction concerns what Socrates has to say about *philosophy*. We know that he thought of philosophy as a process of examination, typically of one person by another (although self-examination is also possible (38a4-5)), by means of asking and answering questions that bear upon a single fundamental question, which I will call *the Question*. It is a measure of how fundamental this Question is that it can be expressed in various ways which may initially seem to indicate diverse questions. For example: Who is truly happy (*Gorgias* 472c6-d1)? How should I live (*Apology* 38a5-6, *Gorgias* 500b5-c4)? What are the virtues (*Protagoras* 329d1-3, *Meno* 71d3-4, *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, *Laches passim*)? If we reflect on how the concepts *good life*, *virtue*, *happiness* and so on fit together for Socrates, we can see why, in various Socratic dialogues, he calls each of these seemingly diverse questions *the* single most important question one can ask: at bottom they are one and the same.

Now, Socrates says he has devoted his life to philosophy, and that this is why he has alienated the Athenians so much that they now want to kill him (*Ap* 22e6-23a5, 23c2-24b2, 28a4-b2, 31a2-7). He offers a rather surprising explanation for why he has led his life this way: he came to believe and, it seems, to believe himself to *know*, on the basis of the response the Delphic oracle gave to a question from his friend Chaerephon, that a god, or as Socrates says *the* god, had commanded him to lead such a life. This is the core of his defence: he has been accused of impiety because he led a peculiar sort of life, but he only led this life, as he thought, out of obedience to the god, which is to say, out of piety. Yet he doesn't ask the jury to take his word for this. He has an argument – *and only one argument* – as to why they should believe that he *believed*, rightly or wrongly, in such a command. If he *didn't* think he had been so commanded, he says, *his life wouldn't make any sense:*

> I am just the sort of person that the god would give to the city, as you might realise from the following: it *doesn't look like human nature*, for me to have neglected all my affairs, and to put up with *the neglect of my personal interests* for so many years now, *always acting in your interest instead*, going to each of you in private like a father or an elder brother, to persuade you to care about virtue. Now, if I was deriving some benefit from doing these things by taking payment for these exhortations, *there would be some sense in it;* but now you can see for yourselves that my accusers, for all the shamelessness of their other accusations, could not be quite so brazen as to produce a witness to say that I ever made any money, or asked for any. But I believe I can produce sufficient witness for the truth of what I'm saying: namely, my poverty (31a7-c3; my emphases).

So Socrates seems to believe

> P1 Absent a divine command, it makes no sense to devote oneself to philosophy

However, the command, he thought, was not just to philosophise. It was also to *get everyone else to philosophise*, partly by serving as an example (23a5-b7, 29b9-30b4). Socrates famously describes himself as a *gadfly* and as a *gift from the god* (30d5-31c3). But this means he takes himself to have a very special status as divinely commanded, and he believes he is doing a great service by urging people to philosophise (36b3-37a1). He is doing his fellows a great service because *the unexamined life is not worth living* (37e3-38a6). The Question of how to live is the most important question one can ask because trying to answer it is a necessary precondition of one's life having any worth whatsoever. The importance of the Question is clearly independent of anyone's being commanded by god to philosophise, and in any case Socrates clearly didn't think that people in general had been so commanded. So Socrates also seems to believe

> P2 Even absent a divine command, it makes no sense *not* to devote oneself to philosophy

Actually, this is a good example of a paradox that is even worse than a contradiction. To contradict P1, one would merely have to claim that it makes *some* sense to devote oneself to philosophy. But P2 takes philosophising way beyond the realm of the merely reasonable option, and makes of it an unconditional, universal human necessity!

What makes the case even stranger, at first sight, is that there seems to be an immovable obstacle to solving the paradox by the hackneyed philosopher's procedure of disambiguation, whereby what Socrates described as insane absent divine command would not be quite the same thing as what everyone is supposed to make their most urgent priority. For Socrates says that he was commanded to serve as an example (*paradeigma*). How could he be doing this, unless what he was trying to get them to do was *the same activity* as what he was doing himself – and doing *qua* giving them an example?!

Yet there *is* a way of distinguishing two activities here, consistently with acknowledging Socrates' role as example, so that in one sense Socrates was doing the same thing he was urging others to do and in another sense not. It is a slightly complicated matter to explain how this can be. (The details are given in my paper "Socratic Methods" and have to do with the peculiar way we count actions, and what it is to serve as an example.) The philosophical activity Socrates ascribes to himself in the *Apology* and features in P1, which I will call *missionary* philosophising, is pursued out of a supernatural necessity: the Duty to obey a divine command. The philosophical activity that, partly by example, Socrates urges upon all human beings and features in P2, which I will call *lay* philosophising, is pursued out of a natural necessity: the Need to formulate some kind of answer to the inescapable Question of how to live – a Need rooted in the basic and universal natural conditions of human life.

Socrates in the *Apology* describes his own procedure thus:

> If you [sc the jury] said to me, "Socrates, …we acquit you, but on one condition: that you spend no more time in this investigation, and stop philosophising; and if you're caught still doing this, you shall die" – if you were to acquit me, as I say, on these terms, I would say to you, "Men of Athens, I have nothing but respect and affection for you, but I will obey the god rather than yourselves, and as long as I draw breath and am able, I will not stop philosophising and exhorting you, and pointing out the following *as usual* to any of you I come across, with these *familiar* words, 'Good sir, you are an Athenian, from the greatest city with the best reputation for wisdom and power: aren't you ashamed to be preoccupied with accumulating as much wealth as possible, and reputation and honour, while you don't care or worry about wisdom or truth, or making your soul as good as you can?' And if any of you disputes this and says he does care, I won't just let him walk off, or leave the spot myself, but I'll question him and test him and cross-examine him (*all' erêsomai auton kai exetasô kai elengxô*); and if he seems to me not to have virtue (*aretê*), but persists in claiming to have it, I'll reproach him for spending least time on the most important things, and spending most on worthless things. This is how I'll treat anyone I come across, young or old, foreigner or citizen, but especially the citizens, because you are that much more kin to me. Make no mistake: *this is what the god orders me to do; and I think you have no greater benefit in the city than my service to the god* (29c5-30a7; my emphases).

Missionary philosophising, then, besides its different rationale from lay philosophising (supernatural Duty rather than natural Need), includes certain *formal features* lacking from lay philosophising. I call them formal features because they do not belong to the *content* Socrates intends to convey by example, but are features of his own procedure necessary for what he did to function as an example in the first place. Prominent among these features are the following: (i) Socrates is prepared to coerce his interlocutors and will reproach them if they show no interest in the Question; (ii) Socrates asks the questions. There is a third feature I will come to later.

Does Socrates' procedure in the *Gorgias* conform to these principles of missionary philosophy? Among the many meanings of the opening scene is a kind of symbolic flouting of *both* principles. Concerning (i) preparedness to coerce, on the first page we read:

> CAL: …. Gorgias is staying with me, and he can give you a demonstration [of his rhetorical skill].
> SOC: That's very good of you, Callicles; but *would he be willing* (*etheleîseien*) to enter into discussion with us? (447b7-c1, my emphasis)

This is a long way from the stern insistence of the *Apology* self-description. On (ii) Socrates' role as questioner, we find, still on the first Stephanus page, that the dialogue's first philosophical investigation, into Gorgias's way of life, is initiated not by Socrates but by his friend *Chaerephon*, *at Socrates' own invitation:*

> SOC: Ask him [sc Gorgias], Chaerephon.
> CHAER: Ask him what?
> SOC: *Who he is* (*hostis estin*).
> …
> CHAER: …I'll ask him. Tell me, Gorgias…(447c9-d1, d6).

Plato is signalling right at the outset that Socrates does not conceive of himself as having a uniquely interrogative role in this dialogue, by contrast with the procedure he describes as his in the *Apology*.

That is just the opening scene. Plato goes so far out of his way throughout the subsequent dialogue to distance Socrates both from any inclination to coerce his interlocutors, and from any claim to special status as questioner, that it may seem mysterious how the conception of 'Socratic' dialogues as enacting Socrates' missionary procedure in the *Apology* ever gained such wide currency. What follows is only a sample of the evidence.

To Gorgias, Socrates at one point expresses an apprehension that he might be taken as speaking from a desire for victory, and so give rise to hostility and acrimony. Everything turns, he says, on whether Gorgias shares his attitude to discussion which, at least in his own description, remains a sublime philosophical ideal:

> SOC: …I'd be glad to go on questioning you, if you're the same sort of person as myself; *otherwise, I'd rather let it go*. And what sort of person am I? I'm the sort who's *glad to be refuted* if I'm saying anything that's not true, and glad to refute if anyone else is – and no less glad to be refuted than to refute. In fact, *I consider being refuted a greater*[4] *good*, inasmuch as it's a greater good to be rid of the greatest evil oneself than to rid another of it. You see, I think there's nothing so

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[4] Plato's emphasis on *greater* (*meizon* first word in its clause); other emphases here are my own.

> bad for a person, as false belief about the subject of our current argument. If you're telling me you're this sort of person too, let's carry on with the discussion. But *if you think we should drop it, let's have done with it straight away and abandon the argument* (458a1-b3).[5]

This is clearly at odds with both of the features that distinguished the missionary procedure in the *Apology*. Socrates cannot very well welcome the prospect of being refuted himself if his own dialectical activity is confined to *asking* questions; and his unwillingness to coerce his interlocutor into taking part in the discussion could not be more plain.

Nevertheless, although Socrates' abdication from the role of questioner is envisaged in the conversation with Gorgias, it is not enacted there: like the first episodes of the *Republic* and the *Meno*, this discussion seems to be a pastiche of the 'Socratic' or 'elenctic' dialogue, upon which the subsequent conversations may be seen as a kind of critical commentary. Elenctic orthodoxy is quickly and explicitly abandoned in the conversation with Polus, whom Socrates invites to "cross-examine and be cross-examined" (462a4-5) by "asking and answering questions in turn" (3-4). "Which do you want to do right now?" he asks. "Ask questions or answer them?" "All right," replies Polus; "you answer me, Socrates" (462b1-3).

Besides surrendering his role as questioner, Socrates offers to defend any claims Polus disputes (465a6-7), he proposes that they both set out their answers at more length if necessary for clarity (465e1-466a3), and he invites Polus several times to refute him (eg 467a8-b2, 469c8, 473b7): it is clear that he sees himself and Polus as formally equal partners in the dialectic.

The abandonment of the missionary method of the *Apology* is most pronounced of all, however, in the conversation with Callicles. Socrates tells Callicles to refute his claim that wrongdoing and impunity are the greatest of harms for the perpetrator (482b2); and he commends Callicles on having the qualities of a good interlocutor; which is to say, one whose partnership in dialectic will lead to the truth: "You see," he says, "I come across a lot of people who aren't capable of *interrogating me* because they're not wise like you" (487a3-5, my emphasis). He invites Callicles repeatedly, as he invited Polus, to refute him (eg 506c1-3, 508a8-b3); but in this final conversation, in the face of Callicles' refusal to co-operate, Socrates' role as answerer takes a new, more surprising and problematic form: he is driven to *answering his own questions:*

> SOC: And then what about what arises in the soul as a result of order and proportion? Try and find a name to call this, as in the other case.
> CAL: Why don't you say it yourself, Socrates?
> SOC: Well, I will answer, if you prefer it (504c1-5).
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> CAL: What a bully you are, Socrates! If you take my advice, you'll leave this subject alone, or discuss it with someone else.

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[5] See also 506c1-3: SOC [to Callicles] "If you refute me, I won't be annoyed with you as you were with me, but you shall be recorded in my memory as my greatest benefactor."

> SOC: Who else would be willing? We shouldn't leave our argument incomplete, you know.
> CAL: But couldn't you finish the argument yourself – by making your own speech, or answering your own questions?
> SOC: And take on the task Epicharmus describes: "I'm to suffice by myself for what two men were saying before"? It looks as though that's how it'll have to be after all (505d4-e3; cf also 519d5-e2).

At this point Socrates stops engaging in dialogue and begins, Plato-like, to compose one.

Of course, Socrates does ask most of the questions in the *Gorgias*, but this is merely a reflection of his supreme dialectical skill. The missionary procedure he describes in the *Apology* does not merely require that he ask the bulk of the questions: it is simply *his interrogative procedure*, and so it presupposes that he will be the questioner. It is nowhere implied that he could obey the command of the god by *answering* others' questions. Socrates in the *Gorgias* views all the discussants, himself included, as being fundamentally 'dialectically equal', in that the ground rules of the discussion do not themselves accord special prerogatives to any one participant – although the more skilful (Socrates, Callicles) may exert more *de facto* influence on the shape of the conversation. In the *Apology*, by contrast, Socrates' procedure marks him out as playing a special role *in principle*, as befits his special status as agent of the god. He is distinguished, in other words, as the dealer (whatever his competence) is distinguished in blackjack, whereas the distinction he enjoys in the *Gorgias* is earned, as by exceptional card-play.

The difference between missionary and lay philosophy lay not just in observable procedure but also in rationale: supernatural Duty *versus* natural Need. The command of the god, of course, is nowhere mentioned in the *Gorgias*; but can we discern anything by way of positive reason for the participants' dialectical activity there, on Socrates' conception of it? It turns out that we can discern plenty. Consider what Socrates goes on to say to Callicles as he assumes the 'task of Epicharmus':

> Let's adopt this method [sc Socrates answering his own questions] by all means. My view is that we should all be eager for victory in the struggle to find out what's true and what's false in the subject we're talking about; *it's a good common to all that this should become clear*. So I'll go through the argument as it appears to me; but if it looks to any of you as though I'm getting myself to agree to things that aren't true, you must seize upon these points and try to refute them. I won't be speaking as one who knows anything much at all, you see; rather, *I'm a seeker in common with you*. So if there proves to be anything in what the dissenter says, I'll be the first to give way to him. I say this, of course, on the assumption that you think we should bring the argument to a conclusion; if you don't want to do this, let's give it up immediately and go our separate ways (505e2-506a7; my emphases).

Again, we see a fundamental radial symmetry in Socrates' conception of the communal activity, even as he contemplates continuing with the argument alone:

nowhere in the *Gorgias* does he ascribe to himself any reason for taking part in the discussion that he doesn't see as applying equally to the other participants. The goal – truth – is the same for everyone; and the truth in question concerns the most important matter there is.[6] Plato gives this a very pronounced emphasis, as he has Socrates affirm in only slightly different words to each interlocutor that the subject of their conversation (the Socratic Question of how to live) is such that false belief about it is the worst of all evils (458a8-b1, 472c6-d1, 487e7-488a2, 500c1-4). Their discussion therefore aims at the most advantageous form of knowledge there is, and this gives the reason all the discussants, including himself, have for engaging in it, according to Socrates. But this is the very reason for such discussion Socrates ascribes to all human beings in the *Apology*.

It is beyond doubt, then, that the Socratic method of the *Gorgias* corresponds not to Socrates' missionary procedure in the *Apology* but to the "lay" philosophising he there described himself as urging upon all human beings. Our first puzzle is: why should this be? That is, can we discern a philosophical purpose of Plato's that might be served by this discrepancy?

An implicit Platonic critique of Socrates?

Socrates in the *Gorgias* makes it very clear that he conceives of his conversations with Gorgias, Polus and Callicles as deriving their entire point from providing a special benefit to all concerned. This benefit is in fact the greatest benefit anyone can seek: the removal of false beliefs, and perhaps the acquisition of true ones, about the Socratic Question of how to live (458a1-b1; 500b5-c4; 505e3-506a5). Yet, with the interesting exception of the *Apology*, no other dialogue of Plato's comes close to the *Gorgias* in its vivid dramatisation of the abject failure of the Socratic project, to a degree that threatens to destroy its Socratic rationale of improving the souls of the participants. It is true that Polus and (to a much lesser extent) Callicles are forced by the rules of Socratic conversation to concede Socrates' various claims: that orators and tyrants have no real power, that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it, that hedonism is false and self-control is the key to happiness, and so on. But the reader's reaction is likely to be: so much the worse for the rules of Socratic conversation, for these concessions do not bring with them improvements in the interlocutors' souls. On the contrary: at least in the case of Callicles, Plato makes it very clear that the conversation leaves him philosophically and ethically *worse off*. Plato makes such a meal of this that we are naturally led to wonder what it is about Socrates' approach that makes it unfit for purpose. Yet it is hard to see what Plato himself might object to. It is not plausible that he rejects the main Socratic *doctrines*. Why would he have the interlocutors mount such ineffective opposition? Besides, they are affirmed in too many other dialogues: the core principle that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it, for example, was something "Plato continued to maintain…to the end of his life," as Dodds observes (245).[7] Nor is it plausible that Plato would himself reject the rules he has Socrates try to impose: they have a warrant deeply grounded in the truth-directedness of the enterprise. So our second puzzle is: What sort of critique can Plato be engaged in? (And, returning to (i) above, why is its object a procedure so markedly different from the one Socrates ascribes to himself in the *Apology*?)

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[6] It is therefore absurd to suppose that Socrates deliberately dissimulates in the *Gorgias*; this would be to strike at the foundation of the enterprise as he conceives it. See McTighe (1992), especially 280-281, and Weiss (1985, 1992); cf Doyle (2007).

(I will return to our third puzzle, concerning the use made by Plato of the expressive resources of the dialogue form, after presenting solutions to the first two.)

Solutions to the first two puzzles

I said above that Socrates' conception of philosophical conversation in the *Gorgias* has none of the distinctive features of missionary philosophy as that is described in the *Apology*. But that is not quite right.

Gorgias is an old man. The setting of the *Gorgias* surely alludes to the sensational visit he made to Athens in 427 to seek support for Leontini against Syracuse,[8] when he was already sixty (he is reputed to have lived to be over a hundred). He claims that no-one has put a new question to him for many years (448a2-3), and Socrates refers to himself and Gorgias as "we older folk" (*presbuteroi*) at the start of the conversation with Polus (461c6). Polus meanwhile is young: in the same speech Socrates calls him "one of the younger generation" (*neôteroi*) and implies that he is young enough to be his own or Gorgias's son (*ibid*); later Socrates says he has the impatience of youth, punning on his name, which means "colt" (463e2; cf Dodds *ad loc*). Gorgias and Polus are both foreigners – both Sicilians, in fact –

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[7] One Socratic doctrine Plato may be thought to call into question in the *Gorgias* is *intellectualism*, according to which the soul's being in a good state is simply a matter of its harbouring the right beliefs (about how to live), and the acquisition of these beliefs, so far as it lies within our power, is simply a matter of engaging in philosophical conversation. This is the rationale for lay philosophy given in the *Apology*, and Plato does seem to come to reject it, and its associated conception of the soul (See Lear 1998: 56-60). But Socrates' commitment to intellectualism, perhaps as a reflection of Plato's, wavers in the *Gorgias*. True, he does say that there is no worse evil than false belief about the Question (458a2-b1); he proposes to Gorgias that one who has learnt about justice will be just (460b1-5); and he maintains against Polus that everyone desires their real good (458c5-7), which implies that one only needs to know what this is to live well. But this is objectionably intellectualist (in Lear's sense) only if there are not supposed to be any *non*-intellectual preconditions to the expulsion of false belief or learning about justice or knowing what one's real good is. But things Socrates says later in the *Gorgias* suggest that he does suppose that there are such preconditions: in particular, his "two loves" speech to Callicles (481c5-482c3), and his proto-theory of the composite soul (493aff). These imply that there are key determinants of the soul's ethical state which yet cannot be understood in terms of true and false belief: the *directedness of eros* within the soul in the former case, and harmony among the parts of the soul in the latter. (These may turn out to be the same determinant.)

[8] See n 3 above.

but Callicles is an Athenian. Plato emphasises the contrast: Socrates refers to Callicles' deme (district of Athens) (495d3), while the latter announces in the opening scene that Gorgias is staying at his house (447b7-8), and Socrates mentions Polus's recent arrival in the city at the start of their conversation (461e1-2).

So: Gorgias is old, Polus is young, Callicles is a citizen, the first two are foreigners. This way of putting things may have a familiar ring – an echo of *Apology* 30a2-4: "This is how I'll treat anyone I come across, young or old, foreigner or citizen, but especially the citizens, because you are that much more kin to me." Socrates' procedure in the *Apology* has a *universal constituency*, and this is another distinctive feature – the last one! – of *missionary* philosophy, as opposed to the lay variant. Socrates' next sentence in the *Apology* is "Make no mistake: *this is what the god orders me to do*" (a5): the command of the god cannot explain a feature of his procedure if it is already a feature of the only rational response to the universal conditions of human life (sc lay philosophy). Socrates might as well try to explain his *breathing* by appeal to a command of the god. Socrates' interlocutors in the *Gorgias* symbolise the universality of missionary philosophy – right down to the citizens being more kin, for Callicles is a kind of Socratic alter ego. But they also instantiate this universality, for it is clear from the entire dialogue that no-one would have *selected* Gorgias, Polus or Callicles as suitable partners in philosophical discussion: their enthusiasm for rhetoric and tyranny has left them blind to the real point of dialectic. This is the only missionary feature of Socrates' philosophising in the *Gorgias*. We saw that Plato takes great care to make it clear that Socrates doesn't insist on asking the questions in the *Gorgias*, and is not prepared to coerce or reproach his interlocutors. Now we can see that he takes no less care to make it clear that he is still willing to engage anyone he comes across in philosophical conversation.

Our first puzzle about the *Gorgias* was the discrepancy between Socrates' philosophical methods there and in the *Apology*; our second was the nature of Plato's implicit critique of Socrates. My suggestion is that the significance of the discrepancy lies in its isolating the object of critique. That is to say: the discrepancy between the methods in the two works serves to emphasise the remaining feature they have in common: Socrates' willingness to engage all comers in philosophy. (Recall again that Socrates is late for Gorgias's rhetorical display because *Chaerephon detained him in the marketplace* (cf Doyle 2006).) Plato thus pinpoints the reason for the inevitable failure of the discussion: not everyone is a suitable candidate for philosophy. The *Apology* sometimes gives the impression that it was Socrates' reproachful and coercive manner that alienated so many of his interlocutors. The extraordinary psychological realism of the *Gorgias* makes it a kind of controlled experiment whereby it is shown that even if these ingredients of the missionary method are subtracted, the mere commitment to *logos* by itself is sufficient to alienate if, like the missionary Socrates, one is not selective about one's interlocutors.

Plato makes this point by *dramatising* it. This brings us back to our third puzzle.

Callicles' rhêsis *as a guide to reading the* Gorgias

Why did Plato write dialogues rather than (say) treatises? How should the interpretation of Plato take account of his choice of form? This sort of question was largely neglected by the main stream of work on Plato in the latter half of the twentieth century; which is to say, by the tradition inspired by the pioneering work of Gregory Vlastos. More recently, such questions have begun to receive attention again. If they are posed in a general way, in regard to Plato's entire output, any substantive answer seems hopelessly speculative. Besides, why suppose that there *is* a general answer? Might not the form serve very different purposes in different dialogues?

Perhaps something useful can be said on this subject, then, in the particular case of the *Gorgias*. We are not reduced to speculating in a vacuum here, because Plato has made his two main characters, Socrates and Callicles, interpreters of the dialogue from within. In fact, we might think of them as offering rival strategies of interpretation, between which the reader is invited to adjudicate. For Socrates, as we have seen, the *logos* is all. Philosophical conversation is a co-operative endeavour, whose entire point is to benefit all participants by getting a clearer view of the truth about the most important issue there is. The means for obtaining this benefit is a kind of controlled competition between the participants who, interacting pairwise, try to refute each other on the basis of agreed premises.[9] As in an adversarial legal system, the aim of refuting one's opponent is strictly subordinate to the common good of getting closer to the truth – this is why Socrates says it is really better to be refuted than to refute. If the discussion is to have any point, any given refutation must be taken by the discussants to show that the refuted thesis is false.

Callicles' method of interpretation is very different, because he refuses to take all refutations at face value in this way. He is prepared to see a refutation as revealing, not something about the subject-matter of the discussion, but something about the psychology of the discussants. In his Great Speech near the beginning of his long conversation with Socrates, he claims that Gorgias and Polus, in their own conversations with Socrates, had been led into contradiction on the subject of justice because 'false shame' made them answer Socrates' questions contrary to their real thoughts. So inhibiting was this shame that Polus succumbed to it even though he had just criticised Gorgias for doing just that:

> 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 tôn anthrôpôn*); and that it was this concession that forced him to contradict himself, which is just what you love (*se de auto touto agapan*). And he [sc Polus] laughed at

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[9] On the relativity of Socratic refutation to the conversational pair, see Doyle (2009).

> 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[10], suffering injustice, whereas committing injustice is only conventionally more shameful. This isn't the sort of thing that happens to a *man*[11] – 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 (482c4-483b4).

Callicles' account of what had happened in these earlier conversations turns out to be very important for his own account of justice. According to that account, roughly speaking, people generally realise that it is advantageous to dominate and exploit others if they can, and so the ability to do so constitutes the true, 'natural' virtue of justice. This is of course not what people usually say about justice, so Callicles also needs to postulate a kind of vast conspiracy whereby people pay lip service to 'conventional' justice (roughly: altruism), and exact this lip service from each other, contrary to their real views (483b-484c). So Gorgias and Polus, in Callicles' account, illustrate perfectly a general human tendency to cynical dissimulation about justice, which in turn forms a crucial component of Callicles' own theory of natural and conventional justice and their roles in human life and thought.

We shall look very closely at this passage in chapter 6, where we shall see that Callicles' interpretation turns out to be problematic in many of its details. He misdescribes what happened in those earlier conversations, and uses these misdescriptions to support an ethical theory Plato and Socrates certainly consider to be dangerously false. I will argue in chapter 6 that for all the literal falsity of these descriptions and theories of Callicles', they are yet suggestive of important Platonic ethical claims: claims which are supported by a *correct* understanding of those earlier conversations misrepresented by Callicles. So I am interested right now not in the content of Callicles' argument, which Plato certainly rejects, but in its structure, which (I will argue), he implicitly accepts. I am especially interested in the sort of interpretation of Gorgias and Polus the argument depends upon. Callicles is not simply concerned, in the manner of a cross-examining Socrates, or

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[10] Reading *hoion* with Dodds.

[11] Plato's emphasis (word order).

(for that matter) of a late-twentieth-century interpreter of a Socratic dialogue, with the content of what Gorgias and Polus say – with whether their premises are true and their inferences sound. Their self-contradictions were the end-points of Socrates' *elenchi*, in accordance with his own descriptions of his method; but for Callicles these are just starting-points. The real quarry of his interpretations is not what is said but what is shown: what *the fact that they asserted these contents* can tell us about *how they think* and more generally *what they are like*.

Here, then, are two ways of looking at the conversations that constitute the *Gorgias*. Socrates' conception of the only point of philosophical discussion requires him to view the conversations as instruments for getting closer to the truth about the Question of how to live. While he does regard the interlocutors' utterances as evidence of their psychological states, this is so only in the sense that his procedure requires him to suppose that the contents of their assertions are the contents of their beliefs. Callicles sees the discussants' words as revealing their states of mind in a much more complicated and interesting sense. When Polus says that committing injustice is more shameful than suffering it, for example, this does not show that that is what Polus really believes. According to Callicles, what Polus's assent really tells us about is the inhibiting force on Polus's soul of ubiquitous but unacknowledged social norms that require him to speak contrary to what he believes or even knows. This is what it means to say that Calliclean interpretation refuses to take a conversational episode at face value.

The point of the dramatic action of the *Gorgias* – of what Plato conveys by the distinctive expressive power he commands as the author of a dialogue – is, I contend, to show that the interlocutor's words cry out for a Calliclean, rather than a Socratic, interpretation. Plato uses the dialogue form to show us a great deal about the characters of the speakers, and what we learn in this way makes it impossible for us to take much of what they say at face value, as Socrates is required by his procedure at least to pretend to do. Gorgias implies at one point (460a3-4) that the subject matter of rhetoric includes justice, but earlier he had said that justice is instead the subject matter of the persuasion that constitutes rhetoric's product. Which does he really believe? I argue in chapter 3 (and in Doyle (2010)) that this question has no good answer, because Plato makes it clear that Gorgias has not grasped the distinction between the two propositions. We have to take his assertions not, as Socrates has to, as expressing his beliefs but rather, in accordance with Calliclean interpretation, as indicating something more complicated, namely confusion. Polus, as we have seen, gives his assent to Socrates' claim that committing injustice is more shameful than suffering it. Does he really believe this? I argue in chapter 5 that he cannot straightforwardly be said to: not because, as Callicles implies, he is part of a conspiracy to disseminate what he secretly knows to be false, but because, as Plato's characterisation makes clear, he is genuinely conflicted about the matter. While Callicles' interpretation is false in its details, his *mode* of interpretation is once again vindicated. And if we turn to Callicles' own conversation with Socrates, we see that many of his own words can only be understood in accordance with that hermeneutic of suspicion he himself applied to his fellow-interlocutors. Once again, it is Plato's characterisation that makes it clear that many of his assertions express, not his beliefs, as required by the Socratic rules of the game, but that attitude of *philonikia* or love of victory which is expressed no less eloquently by his eventual refusal to carry on with the discussion.

It is one of the many ironies of the *Gorgias* that the correctness of the Calliclean mode of interpretation as applied to the words of Gorgias, Polus and above all Callicles himself, entails that the whole dialogue is damned to philosophical futility – for its participants, although not, of course, for its readers. A fundamental rule of lay philosophy, on Socrates' conception, is an especially stringent version of *say what you believe*. The whole point of the Socratic enterprise is to remove false belief by means of refutation. The refutation can only target what is asserted, and so can only remove false belief if there is a straight identity of content between assertion and belief. But one of the things the drama of the *Gorgias* shows us is that this identity is constantly breaking down – whether because there is no determinate belief to be expressed, as in the case of Gorgias, or because the assertion is made on behalf of only part of the soul, as in the case of Polus, or because the real aim of the apparent assertion is simply not to lose the argument, as in the case of Callicles. It is because this identity breaks down that the Calliclean mode of interpretation is the correct one. But this is simply to say that there is no hope whatsoever of securing that benefit that gives Socratic lay philosophising its only point: a clearer view of the truth about how to live. If this is the most that philosophy can amount to, Callicles is surely right to say that the man who devotes his life to it deserves "a good kicking" (485d1-3).

Conclusions

Recall the solutions to our first two puzzles: (i) The point of the difference between Socrates' methods in the *Apology* and the *Gorgias* was to call attention to the single feature of the missionary philosophising of the former that survives in the otherwise entirely lay method of the latter: Socrates' willingness to engage anyone and everyone in philosophical conversation. Plato's implication, I claim, is that the *Gorgias*'s whole sequence of conversations is philosophically fruitless because this single surviving feature leaves no safeguard against Socrates' interlocutors being, for want of a better expression, *the wrong sort of people*. Hence our answer to (ii): given the dialogue's total philosophical failure in Socratic terms, the target of the implicit Platonic critique is precisely this universality of constituency. There's nothing wrong with the Socratic method of lay philosophy *as such* – at bottom, that's just what philosophical dialectic *is* – but you have to be very careful who you practice it with. It is not hard to see how this implication of the *Gorgias* places it on a trajectory of Platonic thinking that culminates in the *Republic*'s confinement of philosophical activity to a tiny elite.

Our third puzzle was: how should our understanding of the *Gorgias* register the fact that it is a dialogue and not (eg) a treatise? Our solution is as follows. Because it is a dialogue, we can distinguish between two sorts of content: what it *says* and what it *shows*. What it says is what the characters say, and especially those sayings that are up for evaluation with respect to truth and validity – the assertions and inferences. Formally speaking, this is what the dialogue has in common with a treatise. What it shows is what these sayings tell us about the characters, and this shown content is the product of precisely that additional kind of expressive power that accrues to Plato as the author of a dialogue. Socrates' conception of the discussion as exclusively devoted to the *logos* requires him to focus exclusively on what is said. What I have called Calliclean interpretation aims to bring to light what is shown – the psychological reality that lies behind an assertion, say, that *p*, on the assumption that this is not, or not only, a belief that *p*. I have argued that, to the extent that Calliclean interpretation is appropriate, the discussion must be a philosophical failure. The *Gorgias* is replete with shown content that can only be interpreted along Calliclean lines. It follows that *the special expressive power that accrues to Plato as the author of a dialogue is ideally suited to his conveying why the discussion is a philosophical failure*. As a dramatist, Plato can simply make manifest in his characters those psychological obstacles to philosophy that will be encountered by anyone who, like Socrates in the *Apology and* the *Gorgias*, is prepared to engage in philosophical conversation with anyone who thinks they will benefit from it. For these reasons, the *Gorgias* is Plato's most effective synthesis of dramatic form and philosophical function.

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