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# Speaking Truth to Power: Two Conceptions of Power in Plato's *Gorgias*

> Power is, you say, a good thing; but doing what you please without understanding, even you agree that is a bad thing, don't you?
>
> —Plato, *Gorgias* 467a

> Sad and angry, can't learn how to behave, / Still won't know how in the darkness of the grave.
>
> —John Darnielle, "Cry for Judas"

The discussion depicted in the *Gorgias* is ostensibly about rhetoric, which is *inter alia* the skill of persuasion by means of speech (452E–453A). As Socrates discusses rhetoric with his interlocutors, however, the range of topics broadens to include many themes, including moral education, rule and mastery, shame and manliness, the nature and limits of expertise, realism about value, nature and convention, hedonism, statesmanship, punishment, and the methodology of philosophical discussion. Plato explores many of the complex relations between these themes during the course of the conversation. In this paper I will focus on the *Gorgias'* treatment of power (δύναμις), a subject that I believe runs close to the heart of the dialogue. I will sketch a reading on which Plato is concerned with two conceptions of power, and how to acknowledge the value of each. Socrates champions one conception of power, whereas his interlocutors support the other. The *Gorgias* is a rich dialogue, and any attempt to get to the heart of it in a short piece must fall short. Nevertheless, by focusing narrowly on the treatment of power in the dialogue I hope to draw out what I see as some of its most central concerns. I will motivate my reading by discussing Plato's development of the theme of power in the three main divisions of the text. I will argue that Plato gives us reason to doubt both the traditional and the Socratic conceptions of power, and that he leaves us with a dilemma. In the final section, I will suggest there may be a Platonic resolution of the dilemma that draws from the *Republic*, but which may strike the modern reader as unsatisfactory. However, before

I discuss Plato's treatment of power I will find it necessary to dislodge the assumption, sometimes common, that Socrates serves as a reliable mouthpiece for Plato's views.

## 1 The Problematic Socrates

I will not assume here that Socrates serves as Plato's mouthpiece, or even as a consistently good example for Plato. That Socrates wears the white hat may be a fair assumption for certain dialogues (perhaps the *Republic*, for example), but at least in the *Gorgias* Plato portrays several Socratic failures in such a way as to draw our attention to them.[1] Before I discuss the theme of power in the dialogue, and in order to highlight the problematic nature of the Socrates of the *Gorgias*, I will mention three such failures: Socrates' failure to adequately establish his main conclusions, the irony of his "Four Men" argument, and his failure to persuade his interlocutors.[2]

Nicholas Thorne argues that Socrates' positive account has devastating dialectical weaknesses (ms pp. 111–117). Throughout the dialogue, Socrates insists on several methodological measures to keep the discussion focused. In particular, he insists that the dialectic consist of questions and answers, that answers be the sincere opinion of the answerer, and that answers be short replies rather than long speeches (449B, 461D6–7, 486E5–487B2).[3] At the climax of Socrates' discussion with Callicles, he attempts very quickly to complete several arguments—that the ordered or self-controlled soul is good, that the disordered soul is bad, that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit injustice, and that the best power is the power to avoid committing injustice (506C–509E). However, Socrates has by this point lost all the methodological safeguards on which he had insisted up to this point. Socrates stops consistently insisting on Callicles' sincerity (498A1), and later Callicles releases his stake in the argument and distances himself from the content of his responses (501C7).[4] Later (506C) Callicles finally abandons his role as Socrates' interlocutor, and refuses to even pretend to guide Socrates with questions or

[1] Cooper (1999) and Thorne (ms), among others, both argue that we should read Plato as distancing himself from the Socrates of the *Gorgias* in various ways.
[2] My intellectual debt to Nicholas Thorne's reading of *Gorgias* is most apparent in this opening section. Thorne's reading is currently articulated in an unpublished dissertation, hereafter referred to as Thorne (ms).
[3] Line numbers are based on Dodds' (1959) Greek text. English translations are by Griffith (2010, ed. Schofield).
[4] Kahn (1983) and Thorne disagree with me about Callicles' withdrawal. Each of them suggests that Socrates successfully refutes Callicles. However, others have convincingly argued that this is not the case. Cooper (1999, p. 73) argues that after 499c Socrates stops refining and objecting to Callicles' view, opting instead to expand upon his own. Gentzler (1995) argues that Socrates misrepresents Callicles' view from the beginning in order to embarrass him. Urstad (2011) argues that regardless of Socrates' motivations, Callicles' view is never properly articulated, and therefore not refuted. There are many reasons to doubt the success of Socrates' refutation of Callicles, not least of which is the one I mention: that Socrates insists throughout the dialogue on methodological constraints on discussion that have by that point been abandoned for the sake of completing Socrates' arguments expediently.

to temper him with objections. Callicles' withdrawal is made more salient and ironic by the fact that Socrates carries on the pretense of a dialogue by ostensibly speaking both for himself and for Callicles, as if Callicles were participating. Eventually Socrates abandons even this pretense (507D), and proceeds to give a long speech. All this happens while Socrates attempts to establish the crucial theses on which the rest of his views depend. According to Thorne,

> this brief section (507A7–C7) contains the crux of Socrates' case against Callicles, Polus, and Gorgias. His whole argument in the dialogue depends on his claims here. What must above all be established by Socrates is precisely what is glossed over. (ms 114)

Thorne takes these dialectic anomalies to be evidence that "Plato does not consider the argument at this point to be sufficient to achieve its purpose" (ms 114). Socrates himself acknowledges that his conclusions could be shaken, if only someone were up to the task of objecting properly (508A8–B2, 509A4–7). Of course, Plato *will* give Socrates the chance to defend the same conclusions at greater length in the *Republic*, but the conspicuous inadequacy of the arguments here gives us sufficient reason to think that Plato distances himself from the Socrates of the *Gorgias*.

Another dramatic fault of Socrates' argumentation is the irony of his Four Men argument (513D–517A). Socrates argues that four great citizens of Athens—Pericles, Cimon, Miltiades, and Themistocles—were not good at politics, since in the end the people turned on them. After all, Socrates says,

> if the same thing happened with someone who had the care of donkeys or horses, or oxen, you'd think he wasn't much good—if they didn't kick him or butt him or bite him when he took them on, but he left them fierce enough to do all those things. Or don't you think any keeper of any animal is not much good, if he takes on his animals in a tamer state, and leaves them fiercer than when he took them on? (516A5–B2)

So someone cannot be a good politician if the people are benign and friendly at the time when she takes power, but the people become fierce and unruly under her rule.[5] The argument has been criticized for a number of reasons (Dodds 1959, pp. 355–6). In particular, however, the argument appears to apply to Socrates, who invites the comparison by saying later to Callicles "I am attempting the true science of politics (ἀληθῶς πολιτικῇ τέχνῃ), and I think I am the only one practising politics among people today" (521D6–7). By putting these words into Socrates' mouth, Plato invites us to think of Socrates as a

[5] See also *Protagoras* 319A: "You seem to me to be talking about the art of politics, and promising to turn men into good citizens."

kind of politician and therefore as subject to the kind of criticism expressed in the Four Men argument. Plato and his audience know that the people of Athens turned on Socrates at the end of his life, condemning him to death for impiety and corrupting the youth. Plato makes this fact more salient by having Callicles make some prescient remarks to Socrates:

> As things stand now, if someone seized a hold of you or one of your kind [philosophers], and carted you off to prison, claiming you were acting unjustly when you weren't acting unjustly, you know you'd have no way of helping yourself... You'd be had up in court, find yourself facing some altogether contemptible and vicious accuser, and if he chose to demand the death penalty for you, you'd be put to death. (486A–B)

So we have three elements in place: Socrates' endorsement of his Four Men argument, his claim to be the sole true politician of his day, and Callicles' prediction that the people of Athens will turn on Socrates as they turned on the Four Men. It is no great interpretive stretch to combine these elements; Socrates' claim to be a politician is made in reply to Callicles reminding him of the prediction: "as if living a quiet life means you couldn't be dragged off to court, probably by someone utterly worthless and contemptible" (521C). Although Socrates claims to be the only practitioner of the true art of politics, and that his inability to defend himself in court is no objection to his claim, he cannot have been a good politician by his own lights if he holds to the Four Men argument.[6] The objection is obvious enough that Dodds tells us it was much noted in antiquity,[7] and Plato makes the objection salient by giving us the resources to make it and juxtaposing them in the text. The Four Men argument and its context will also appear in several arguments below, in the main discussion.

However, Socrates also suffers a practical failure, which is perhaps more conspicuous than his failure to establish his conclusions: he fails to persuade any of his interlocutors. Recall that ostensibly the original topic of discussion with Gorgias was the nature of rhetoric, the end of which is persuasion by means of speech (452E–453A). Although Socrates does not claim to be an orator, his failure to achieve that end himself is conspicuous. Socrates draws attention to the inconsistency in Gorgias' statements (460E5–461A), but Gorgias concedes nothing to Socrates before Polus interrupts. Toward the end of the second act, Polus checks out of his discussion, saying "Well, it seems extraordinary to me, Socrates, but I dare say you find it agrees with what went before" (480E1–2). He

[6] Thorne similarly observes this irony (ms p. 17).
[7] By, for example, Aristides and Olympiodorus (Dodds 1959, p. 155). Dodds understands the fittingness of the objection as a Platonic criticism of democracy, rather than of the Gorgianic Socrates (Dodds 1959, p. 33). However, Socrates apparently makes the argument in earnest. The same cannot be so clearly said of, for example, his argument against the possibility of *akrasia* (*Protagoras* 351B–356C) which relies on a hedonistic premise unlikely to be accepted by Socrates.

admits that Socrates' arguments have confounded him, but not that he has been persuaded. Callicles protests almost continuously during the final act of the dialogue, most explicitly at 513C4–6 where he says "I'm sure you're right, Socrates—in some sense which is beyond me. But I still feel what most people feel: I simply don't believe you." After Callicles releases his stake in the discussion at 501C7 he is not a sincere interlocutor, and by the end of the discussion it is clear that Callicles still does not accept any of the conclusions that Socrates takes himself to have established at 509.

What happens here is odd—Socrates confounds his interlocutors and produces arguments to which they have no adequate reply; both Polus and Callicles admit that Socrates' arguments seem unassailable to them. However, their convictions remain unchanged. No doubt Socrates' failure to convince his interlocutors is in part their fault—they lack the intellectual sophistication or the dialectical wherewithal to either challenge him on his own terms, or to concede in the face of argument. However, given that Plato has drawn our attention to the inadequacy of Socrates' arguments by his own lights (at 506C–509E), and his fallibility (e.g. the irony of the Four Men argument), we should resist predispositions to assume that Socrates is clearly the good guy. We may suppose that Socrates' practical failure to persuade his interlocutors is at least partially his own fault, or a fault of the way of life he represents. The remainder of my discussion will proceed on this supposition.

## 2 Two conceptions of power

I will focus my discussion of the *Gorgias* here on the two conceptions of power that emerge from the discussion, one with progressive clarity by Socrates' three interlocutors, and the other by Socrates. A similar conclusion has been advanced by Thorne, who calls the two conceptions of power temporal power and Socratic power (120–122). However, Thorne's reading is troubled by the fact that he requires two slightly different glosses on that distinction in order to make sense of the text. The first kind of power, championed by the interlocutors, is roughly the power to avoid being wronged. The second kind of power, championed by Socrates, is the power to avoid doing wrong. However, Thorne also identifies this distinction with that between the power to do what seems best (δοκεῖν), and the power to do what is in fact best (βουλέσθαι) (ms p. 176). Surely Plato does explore the relations between these distinctions, and Thorne's formulations preserve contrasts drawn in the text,[8] but the theme of power runs more deeply in the discussion of the

[8] For the first formulation, see e.g. 509B, 509D4–5, 509E1–2. For the distinction underlying the second formulation, see e.g. 467B.

dialogue than he claims.[9] This can be seen if the contrast between the two kinds of power is formulated in a way that stands at greater distance from what the characters of the dialogue say—as the contrast between *power as efficacy* and *power as understanding*. In more modern parlance, the contrast might be expressed as that between being able to realize an intention and being able to reason to the right intention, either prudentially or morally.[10] Socrates' interlocutors are impressed by the power to realize one's will or one's desires in the world. Each one takes that sort of power to be a standard by which they praise rhetoric and, most clearly in the Callicles' case, by which to judge people, actions, and ways of life. Socrates, by contrast, highlights the shortcomings of such a standard by drawing our attention to the ways that the ideal of efficacy seems unattractive when uncoupled from proper understanding. In particular, Socrates values having the right will or the knowledge of the right actions. However, Socrates champions an ideal of understanding uncoupled from efficacy that is unattractive for reasons that Plato makes salient; the *Gorgias* then raises a question that it does not answer about how to reconcile the values of efficacy and of understanding.

The *Gorgias* can be read as having three major acts,[11] corresponding to Socrates' discussions with his three interlocutors—Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, respectively. Dodds observes that the dialogue has a spiral structure in which the same themes are raised repeatedly, but with progressively more insight and in more analytic depth, in each act of the dialogue (1959 p. 5). I will explain and motivate my reading by discussing the development of the distinction between the two conceptions of power at three significant moments of the text, one in each act.

[9] But my differences with Thorne are a little more subtle than this. On Thorne's reading, the distinction between two kinds of power are just one aspect of the distinction between what he calls the "two worlds" of concrete reality and Socratic ideality (ms pp. 11–14, 179–184). Thorne's reading is not narrower than mine, for the 'two worlds' reading accommodates many of the concerns I will raise. However, my reading is less metaphysical than Thorne's—I will not argue that the distinction anticipates the Theory of Forms, at least without ample extratextual supplementation.

[10] In fact, the Socratic conception of power as understanding can be extended into the dialectical context. Plato explores what it means to be philosophical or understanding vs. merely rhetorical or efficacious. The *Gorgias* contains many excellent depictions of the Socratic concern with definitions, which play out as a sort of methodological subplot running through each act of the dialogue. This subplot comes to a head in Socrates' conversation with Callicles, where it is revealed that the stakes of the discussion are no less important than how to live one's life, and Socrates finds himself defending the philosophical life from Callicles' relatively articulate objections. Less dramatically, the tension between understanding and efficacy can be read into the tension between dialectic and eristic discourse throughout the dialogue (for a discussion of eristic in *Gorgias*, see e.g. Gentzler 1995). However, considerations of space preclude me from discussing the methodological subplot of *Gorgias* in the present essay.

[11] Though this is an imperfect scheme for dividing the text, and there are other ways to divide the dialogue depending on one's purpose (cf. Thorne ms, pp. 3–5).

## 2.1 Gorgias: establishing the medical analogy

The first clear appearance of the contrast between power as efficacy and as understanding occurs in Socrates' discussion with Gorgias. The climax of Gorgias' apology for rhetoric—before Socrates begins closing the pincers of *elenchus* around him—is his account of the special power of rhetoric. Here Gorgias claims that, in a sense, rhetoric is a master art, for "rhetoric embraces virtually all powers (δυνάμεις), and gathers them under its wing (456A7–8). His "proof" of this claim is not an argument *per se* but a story:

> I have often been with my brother and his doctor colleagues, and visited someone who was ill but who refused either to drink medicine or put himself in the doctor's hands for surgery or cauterisation. And when the doctors couldn't persuade him, I have persuaded him, using only rhetoric and no other art or science. (456B1–5)

Thus, Gorgias claims that rhetoric is the master art because the orator can produce results when another expert cannot; for example, Gorgias can convince a patient to undergo treatment better than a doctor can. "The orator has the *power* (δυνατὸς) to speak against anyone, and about anything, in a way which makes him more persuasive among large crowds about—to put it in a nutshell—anything he pleases" (457A5 –B1). It is clear, however, that this claim is short-sighted. An orator cannot, using only skill at rhetoric, diagnose a patient, or prescribe treatment, or even administer a difficult treatment such as surgery. What Gorgias seems to want, in claiming here that rhetoric is a master art, is evidence that rhetoric can accomplish what the other arts do, but more effectively. However, in order to take his story as evidence for this claim we must understand the medical art very narrowly, as an art of convincing patients to undergo treatment, and not as an art that involves diagnosis or treatment. Gorgias is tempted to see rhetoric as a master art because he has found one way in which rhetoric is more powerful than medicine, since it is more efficacious when it comes to convincing patients to undergo treatment. Gorgias does not see or does not care that the practice of medicine involves an understanding that orators do not possess *per se*, and that the power or ability conferred by skill at medicine might consist in the application of that understanding.

This suggestion about where Gorgias goes wrong can be made more tempting if we accept Christopher Moore's (2012) claims about the opening scene of the dialogue. In the opening scene, Socrates and Chaerephon arrive to see Gorgias, but too late to witness his rhetorical *epideixis*. Apparently the reason for their late arrival was that Chaerephon detained Socrates in the agora, asking him questions and discussing philosophy. Charephon assures Socrates that he will rectify the situation, saying "I'll also cure it [ἐγὸ γὰρ καὶ ἰάσομαι]" (447B1, trans. qtd in Moore 2012, p. 195) and that as a friend of Gorgias' he will be able to convince Gorgias to put on another demonstration. However, Socrates

does not accept Chaerephon's offer; instead he wishes to ask Gorgias questions and engage him in his usual dialectic. Moore claims, following Olympiodorus and Dodds, that the remark alludes to the story of Telephus. In that story, Telephus was wounded by Achilles' spear, but after years the wound did not heal. The oracle revealed that the wound could only be cured by what caused it. According to Moore, a crucial element of the story is Odysseus' diagnosis that Telephus' wound is not to be cured by Achilles, who wounded him, but by material taken from Achilles' spear. Like Achilles in the story, Chaerephon hopes to be able to cure the wound he caused Socrates when he made Socrates miss Gorgias' demonstration. However, like Odysseus, Socrates seeks to cure the wound not by the intervention of the wounding person, but by the reapplication of the wounding instrument, in this case philosophical discussion. If Moore is correct then the opening scene introduces, by way of this allusion, the distinction between curing and diagnosis. Chaerephon hopes to cure Socrates, but has the wrong plan about how to do it. Socrates, whose role in the allusion parallels Odysseus', corrects Charephon's diagnosis (Moore 2012, pp. 203–205).[12]

However, in line with the reading I propose, we could also draw a contrast not between curing and diagnosis, but between power as efficacy and power as understanding. It is not that Chaerephon cures whereas Socrates diagnoses. Chaerephon has a power (an efficacy) in virtue of his personal relationship with Gorgias, and he is eager to use that power before he has investigated what he should use it for. Socrates foregoes Chaerephon's offer to have Gorgias give a second demonstration, opting instead to engage Gorgias in philosophical conversation. The contrast here is between Chaerephon's efficacy and Socrates' understanding. Going somewhat beyond the stricter parallel that Moore draws (and perhaps picking up on a different theme), Socrates' wish is not to be entertained by a Gorgianic *epideixis*, but to understand more about Gorgias and about rhetoric by asking Gorgias questions about his art. Nevertheless, Moore's conclusion allows us to draw an intratextual parallel between medical diagnosis and understanding as a power.[13] When Gorgias praises rhetoric for outstripping medicine in efficacy, while paying no mind to the importance of diagnosis, he reveals the value that he places on efficacy at the expense of understanding.

Socrates' *elenchus* of Gorgias does not quite turn upon Gorgias' relative valuations of efficacy and understanding. Socrates traps Gorgias by getting him to admit—apparently uncharacteristically—that he will teach virtue as a part of rhetorical

[12] Moore goes on to support his emphasis on the difference between curing and diagnosis by appeal to remarks in the *Phaedrus* (at 268B–E) and the story of the slave doctor in *Laws* (720C–E) (Moore 2012, pp. 206–7). Moore also explores the connection between his claims and Gorgias' story about his brother (p. 207).

[13] Medicine is of course suggested as a model for philosophy in several dialogues, including *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Protagoras*.

education (460A–461A).[14] However, the amorality of the rhetorical art is a reflection of its absorption in power as efficacy, to the exclusion of power as understanding. After all, if the orators of the dialogue value efficacy independently of understanding, then moral focus is precisely what they lack, since they value the efficient accomplishment of ends rather than reflection on which ends to have. This point is developed in the second act, during Socrates' discussion with Polus.

## 2.2 Polus: expanding the medical analogy and the two conceptions of power

The first topic of discussion in the second act of the *Gorgias* is Socrates' view of rhetoric, and his model of the division of arts and flatteries (cf. 463D–465D). Much can be said about the concepts of art (τέχνη) and of a skill or knack (ἐμπειρία) that Socrates describes, but inter alia it is the case that the possession of an art requires the ability to give a rational account (λόγος), whereas a skill requires only a reliable ability to bring about a result. Rhetoric, which according to Socrates is a skill and not an art, is "an activity which is not scientific (τεχνικὸν), but characteristic of a soul which is intuitive, bold, with a natural gift for handling people" (463A6–8). However, he clarifies later,

> It is not a science [τέχνην] but a skill [ἐμπειρίαν], because it can give no rational explanation [λόγον] of the thing it is catering for, nor of the nature of the things it is providing, and so it can't tell you the cause [αἰτίαν] of each. And I don't give the name 'science' [τέχνην] to something which is unreasoning [ἄλογον]. (465A2–6)

Thus, the main difference Socrates identifies between an art (what Griffith translates as 'science') and a skill is that arts require an understanding of causes, and not merely a knack for getting results. It may be objected that skills as Socrates describes them also seek after the appearance of pleasure rather than after the good, whereas arts seek after the good.[15] However, it is plausible that seeking after the appearance of pleasure is a requirement of flattery (κολακεία), which is a subdivision of skill (ἐμπειρία), and not a requirement on skill in general. There are two points I would like to make in connection with Socrates' development of this division. The first is that on my understanding of the division, arts involve understanding (i.e. reasoning about causes) whereas mere skills involve efficacy without understanding. So the distinction between the two conceptions

[14] It does not really matter whether Gorgias is genuinely caught out here about whether or not he will teach his students about virtue. Polus suggests that Gorgias concedes only because he is ashamed (461B). Kahn suggests that Gorgias' claim to teach virtue in the dialogue is not sincere (Kahn 1983, pp. 79–80) and is at odds with what we know about the historical Gorgias (cf. *Meno* 95B–C, Dodds 1959, p. 212). What matters here is that Plato has introduced a topic that will continue to develop into prominence over the course of the discussion.

[15] That is, echoing Thorne's second formulation of the contrast between Socratic and temporal power: the power to do what is in fact best, and the power to do what seems best.

of power is reflected in the distinction between arts and skills. The second point I would like to make about Socrates' typology of skills is that the medical analogy, introduced in the first act, is central to his typology. He uses the arts and skills that concern care for the body (fitness training, medicine, fashion, cookery) as a model for understanding the arts and skills that concern care for the soul (legislation, justice, sophistry, rhetoric).

In my discussion so far, it may have seemed odd to think of understanding as a conception of *power*, rather than as an alternative value (the old adage that "Knowledge is power" notwithstanding). However, Plato begins to associate understanding with power when Socrates questions Polus about whether the orator is really powerful. Polus claims that orators are powerful like tyrants, for "they put to death anyone they will, confiscate property, and banish from their cities anyone they please" (466BII–C2). Socrates, however, claims that although orators can do such things, they are not powerful.

> SOCRATES: Didn't you just say something like this: 'Don't orators put to death those whom they will, like tyrants? Don't they confiscate property, and drive whoever they please out of their cities?'
>
> POLUS: Yes, I did.
>
> SOCRATES: In which case, I tell you there are two questions there, and I will give you an answer to both. I maintain, Polus, that both orators and tyrants have the least power [δύνασθαι] in their cities, as I said a moment ago. They do virtually nothing of what they will [βούλονται]—though they do as they please. (466C9–E2)

Once again, I suggest that there are two conceptions of power in play here. Polus is impressed by the efficacy of the orator, who like the tyrant can effectively realize her intentions. Therefore he calls the orator powerful. Socrates, by contrast, is unwilling to call the orator powerful as long as she does not know which actions are good to perform. So there are indeed two questions: are orators and tyrants powerful in the sense of being efficacious, and are they powerful in the sense of possessing understanding? Socrates and Polus agree that orators are efficacious, but Socrates claims that they do not possess understanding. On that basis, Socrates claims that orators are not powerful: "Power [δύναμίς] is, you say, a good thing; but doing what you please [δοκεῖ] without understanding, even you agree that is a bad thing, don't you?" (467A). So Socrates and Polus disagree here about what power consists in. Their conversation is the most explicit in the dialogue about the two conceptions of power. The first, intuitive conception of power as efficacy is endorsed implicitly by Gorgias, and explicitly by Polus and Callicles. The second, unintuitive conception of power is endorsed by Socrates who thinks that power,

since it is good, must consist in understanding and right behavior.[16] As I claimed in the previous section, however, we should hesitate to identify Plato's beliefs too closely with Socrates' claims. Socrates is a fallible figure in the *Gorgias*, and his denial that tyrants have power is deeply unintuitive.[17] In the third act of the dialogue it becomes salient that Socrates values right understanding even in the absence of efficacy, and that the Socratic ideal is flawed.

## 2.3 Callicles: criticism of the Socratic conception

Many discussions of Socrates' conversation with Callicles focus on their disagreement about hedonism (Kahn 1983, Cooper 1999, Gentzler 1995, Urstad 2011), which is resolved before Socrates begins describing his positive view (in the dialectically disastrous fashion described above in Section 1). Although much could be said about the relation between power as efficacy and Callicles' ideal of desire-fulfilment, I will focus here on the conclusion of the third act. The rough plot of Socrates' and Callicles' conversation after Socrates attempts to give his argument a "head" (505c–509c) goes like this: Socrates has concluded that it is a greater evil to act unjustly than it is to be treated unjustly. He claims that "treating me and my things in any way unjustly is both worse and more disgraceful for the person acting unjustly than for me who am being treated unjustly" (508e4–6, cf. also 509c6–7). Socrates goes on to claim that just as we need a power or art [δύναμίν τινα καὶ τέχνην] to protect ourselves from being treated unjustly, we require an art to protect ourselves from acting unjustly (509b–510a). Callicles, who is apparently unable to follow the structure of Socrates' argument, insists unresponsively that rhetoric is good because it allows one to protect her life. Socrates agrees, but concludes that rhetoric, like military engineering and helmsmanship, is merely an art that protects us from being treated unjustly (511d–512d). What art, then, can prevent us from acting unjustly? By way of transition, Socrates discusses the Four Men who, though they are often praised, failed to make the Athenians better citizens (515c–517c). This brings Socrates and Callicles to their final exchange, in which the topic of power reappears more explicitly than elsewhere in the third act.

Socrates returns to the medical analogy, likening politics to medicine for the soul, or to moral fitness training (520a–d). The true politician makes people better by removing

[16] This Socratic view about the importance of understanding of course interacts with Moore's concern with "diagnosis," as well as James Allen's (2006, pp. 24–25) suggestions about the dark significance of an "art of measurement" in *Protagoras*. "Would the people agree, when confronted by this argument, that the science of measurement would be our salvation?" (*Protagoras* 356e). However, discussion of the thematic and structural connections between *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*—which are many—is beyond the scope of this essay.

[17] Socrates' distinction between willing (βουλέσθαι) and pleasing (δοκεῖν), which he makes at the same time that he defends his claim that the tyrant is not powerful (roughly at 466b–468e), is similarly unintuitive (Schofield 2010, p. 32n33).

injustice from their souls (cf. 520D1–2) and making them want to do good (520e9). Socrates endorses this conception of the political art, but Callicles claims that he would rather be a flattering servant of the Athenian *demos* than a healer of souls:

> Socrates: So which way of caring for the city are you urging upon me? Make that distinction for me: the one which involves battling with the Athenians to make them as good as possible, like a doctor—or the one which involves becoming their servant and trying to please them in my dealings with them?
>
> Callicles: I say the one which involves becoming their servant. (521A2–8).

Callicles' reason, apparently,[18] is the familiar one that his way—the way of the flattering orator rather than the gadfly—is the only way one can avoid being harmed. Callicles suffers a serious dialectic failure here, for he does not seem to understand Socrates' position that the truer power is in understanding, especially moral understanding, rather than efficacy. At any rate, Callicles' replies are not responsive to Socrates' position. Still, Callicles can be understood as insisting on an objection: that it is absurd to endorse a view on which one can be powerful and yet be wrongly put to death. This objection is a putative *reductio ad absurdum* of Socrates' view. Callicles' argument is the complement to Polus' concern: on Socrates' view not only is the tyrant not powerful, although she can impose her will as she pleases, but Socrates is powerful even though he cannot defend himself from being treated unjustly. In reply, all Socrates offers is his reiteration of his own claims:

> Callicles: Do you think it is a good thing, Socrates, for a person in the city to be in that position, and have no power [ἀδύνατος] to protect himself?
>
> Socrates: Yes, Callicles, provided he has the one thing which you have often agreed he should have—provided he has already protected himself by not saying or doing anything unjust in his dealings either with men or with gods. This we have several times agreed to be the most powerful [κρατίστη] form of protection he can have. Now, if someone were to prove me wrong, and show that I do not have [ἀδύνατον] this form of protection available to protect myself or anyone else, then I would be ashamed to be proved wrong... And if I were put to death because of this inability [ἀδυναμίαν], I would be very distressed. But if I met my end for want of sycophantic rhetoric [κολακικῆς

[18] I say apparently because Socrates, by now in quite bad dialectical form, does not allow Callicles to say himself why he sticks by his claim. Socrates puts these words in Callicles' mouth—that Callicles is concerned with self-preservation—and Callicles does not argue. It is of course a plausible assumption that Socrates is right about Callicles' reasons, for as Socrates observes Callicles (and Polus before him) has been pursuing the self-preservation argument for some time.

> ῥητορικῆς], I have no doubt you would see me enduring death quite cheerfully (522c4–e1).

This is where the discussion ends—Callicles offers a *reductio* that is at bottom unresponsive to Socrates' preferred conception of value, and Socrates bites the bullet. After this exchange Socrates describes his eschatological myth about judgment and punishment in the afterlife and the dialogue ends.

Socrates' claims are not in *terrible* shape. It is not an objection to Socrates' ideal of power by his own lights that he was unable to protect himself from his accusers in court. If it is true, as I have suggested, that Socrates endorses a view of power as understanding, then he can accept the absurd consequence that Callicles describes. Socrates can be powerful and yet have no power to escape wrongful punishment. However, Callicles' absurd consequence does constitute a serious objection to Socrates' claim to have *political* prowess, and this is a problem for Socrates, though an *ad hominem* one. To see why, let us briefly return to the medical analogy and Gorgias' story of his brother. Above I argued that Gorgias was wrong to reduce medical expertise to the ability to convince patients to undergo treatment. In particular, I suggested that the ability to diagnose ailments and prescribe treatment were essential to medical expertise. However, Gorgias is right at least that the ability to implement treatments is also essential. A doctor who can diagnose and prescribe treatment, but fails to successfully perform any treatment, fails to be a good doctor since she still fails to heal her patients. That is, a doctor who possesses *understanding* but is *inefficacious* is still a bad doctor. The Socrates of the *Gorgias* is like this doctor. If we assume for the sake of argument that Socrates possesses moral understanding, and is therefore powerful on his own view, his failure is still twofold. As I observed in the previous section, Socrates fails to persuade any of his interlocutors. And as Callicles reminds us, Socrates fails to improve the citizens of Athens, as evidenced by the fact that they will unjustly put him to death. Consequently, just like the Four Men, Socrates "[makes] use neither of the true rhetoric [τῇ ἀληθινῇ ῥητορικῇ]—since if [he] had used it [he] would not have been overthrown—nor of the flattering rhetoric [τῇ κολακικῇ]" (517a5–6). It is Socrates' lack of efficacy that undermines his claim to be a good politician. Callicles is wrong in a sense that Socrates' vulnerability to unjust treatment constitutes a responsive objection to Socrates' claims about power. However, his objection is in the neighborhood of a truly devastating objection—Socrates' actual execution and his failure to convince his interlocutors are symptoms of the inability of Socrates' view to provide for political success. Since concern about the "true art of politics" is Socrates' own, this objection is grounds for an *elenchus* of the position of the Socrates of the *Gorgias*.

I discussed the development of the notion of power through the three acts of the *Gorgias*. In the first act, Gorgias introduces the medical analogy in his problematic argument for the mastery of rhetoric. My critical reading of his argument is illuminated by (and illuminates) the allusion to the story Telephus in the dialogue's opening scene. In the second act, Socrates and Polus articulate the two conceptions of power as understanding and as efficacy. Socrates also describes a typology of arts and skills that is articulable in terms of the two conceptions of power, and which reinforces the importance of the medical analogy to his own view. In the third act, Socrates develops his conception further against argumentative pressure from Callicles, accepting Callicles' absurd consequence. However, although Socrates is entitled to accept the absurd consequence from Callicles' *reductio* objection and maintain his view of power, there is a deeper objection to Socrates that can be constructed from the resources that Plato gives us in the Four Men argument. If we attribute to Socrates a concern with taking seriously the medical analogy that Gorgias introduces and that Socrates develops in his positive view, then Socrates is subject to an objection that is complementary to the objection that hobbles Gorgias' argument. Whereas Gorgias fails to account for the importance of understanding to medical expertise, Socrates fails to account for the importance of efficacy in moral practice and the true art of politics.

## 3 The Platonic dilemma

Plato's characters articulate two conceptions of power, and furnish us with resources to criticize both. Specifically, both conceptions of power are incomplete. Efficacy without understanding is at best amoral, and at worst it produces tyrants like Archelaus who cause significant material harm to others and moral harm to themselves. However, understanding without efficacy is incapable of reforming the moral constitution of others, just as Socrates fails to reform his interlocutors and the people of Athens. The easy solution is to suggest that it is best to have both understanding and efficacy. But Plato leaves us with a dilemma about how this is possible, for Socrates argues that seeking after efficacy produces moral corruption, and seeking after understanding requires foregoing efficacy. The two conceptions of power are incompatible, since acquiring one precludes the possibility of acquiring the other.

First, the cultivation of power as efficacy precludes the development of moral understanding. Socrates claims that in order to be safe from being treated unjustly, "a person needs to be either ruler himself—or even tyrant—in his city, or else a friend of the existing regime" (510A8–10). Callicles agrees enthusiastically. It was agreed earlier, with Polus, that tyrants like Archelaus tend to be unjust (471A–C). Here Socrates argues to Callicles that being a friend of a tyrant makes one unjust (510A–511A). The argument,

briefly, is that one must strive to be like the tyrant in terms of moral judgment in order to be a good friend, for the tyrant will fear someone better and despise someone worse. The tyrant prefers "someone of the same character as himself, someone who condemns and approves of the same things—but is prepared to be ruled and submit to the ruler. This person will have great power in this city, this person no one will treat unjustly without regretting it" (510C7–D1). However, for such a person who becomes the friend of a tyrant, "the greatest evil will be his, maimed in soul and in a bad way as he is through his imitation of the despot and the power it gives him" (511A1–3). Effectively, then, Socrates provides us with a general argument that those who seek efficacious power will inevitably be morally corrupt, at least in a corrupt city. For the powerful tyrant is usually corrupt, and anyone else who seeks influence must model herself after the tyrant, thereby becoming corrupt herself. Therefore, in seeking after power as efficacy one finds moral corruption.

While this argument is given on the supposition that the state is ruled by a tyrant, it need not. It can be made more general if we rearticulate it in the following way: in order to become powerful in the state one must curry favor with the powers that be. In order to curry such favor effectively, one must imitate those powers. However, one becomes morally corrupt if one imitates a corrupt power. Therefore, in order to become powerful in a corrupt state one must become morally corrupt. On this version of the argument, its scope remains limited to states with corrupt rulers. However, it can apply whether political power is held by a single ruler, or a collection of oligarchs, or the people as a whole. Indeed, Socrates concludes his argument by suggesting to Callicles that in order to position himself for influence in Athens, he is remaking himself in the image of the Athenian *demos* (513B). The suggestion is that in a democratic city like Athens, one cannot be efficacious without becoming a moral sellout.

Shortly after giving Socrates this argument, Plato also has Socrates suggest that cultivating moral understanding precludes efficacy. Or more precisely, understanding coupled with the ambition to practice the true art of politics is a recipe for personal disaster in the city. Socrates claims that the true politician will be "forever thinking about how he can breed justice in the souls of the citizens, and get rid of injustice, how he can breed restraint and get rid of indiscipline, how he can breed virtue in general and get vice to depart" (504D8–E3).[19] Socrates claims that the Four Men—particularly Pericles—were popular at first because they indulged the desires of the Athenians rather than taking care of the souls of the Athenian people. When Callicles claims that the Four Men

[19] Actually, in the quoted passage, Socrates is describing the *orator* who is "artful and good." However, when Socrates refers back to this description later in his discussion with Callicles, he applies it to the good politician as well: "Haven't we now agreed several times that this is what the man who knows how to practice politics ought to be doing?" (515C). Cf. also Socrates at 513E–514A.

were greater politicians than those of the present day, Socrates rebuts that they were merely better "servants":

> I think they were much better servants than the people now, and more capable of providing the city with the things it wanted. But... If it's a question of changing desires rather than giving in to them, of coaxing and compelling in the direction which would lead to the citizens becoming better people, then there was effectively no difference between those people and these. (517B2–C1)

When it comes to his own case, Socrates expects that his efforts at "battling with the Athenians to make them as good as possible" (521A3–4) will go unappreciated. He claims that "because I say the things I say on any occasion not out of any desire to please, but with a view to what is best rather than what is most pleasant... I won't have anything to say in court" (521D8–E1). In particular, he admits, "I shan't be able to tell them about pleasures I have provided for them, which they regard as benefits and acts of assistance" (522B4–6). Therefore, since, it seems, the true art of politics is bitter medicine, "it would be no great surprise if I were put to death" (521D3). Socrates embellishes his claims here with the simile that he "shall be like a doctor on trial before a jury of children, with a chef as prosecutor" (521E). Socrates provides no explicit argument, but the logic of his claims is reasonably clear. Practicing the true art of politics involves correcting the virtue of the people and when necessary punishing them for their bad character,[20] rather than indulging their tastes and flattering them. However, as established above, the acquisition of power as efficacy in the city requires flattery and imitation, at least of the ruling power. So the cultivation of understanding precludes power in any city where the ruling power fears wisdom, and in a democratic city like Athens the project of true politics is inconsistent with the aspiration to power as efficacy.

The textual resources I have identified so far allow us to articulate a Platonic dilemma. As I said above, both conceptions of power are incomplete. Understanding without efficacy is politically empty; efficacy without understanding is morally blind. However, cultivating efficacy precludes cultivating understanding, at least in the city where the politically powerful are corrupt. And cultivating wisdom and spreading it precludes political power, either in the corrupt city or in the democratic city. So it would seem that in the best case we are doomed to the best of a bad lot, and Socrates and his interlocutors disagree without resolution about which conception of power is the better. To find a Platonic resolution of the dilemma, I will look outside the *Gorgias*.

[20] For a good discussion of the corrective conception of punishment in play here, and its relation to the eschatological myth that concludes the dialogue, see Sedley 2009.

## 4 Platonic education

The discussion of the *Gorgias* lacks a satisfying resolution. In the end Socrates completes an *elenchus* on each of his interlocutors (sometimes several), but convinces none of them. Reason is arguably on Socrates' side, but conviction lies with his opponents. The dialogue concludes with Socrates nevertheless imploring his interlocutors, though an eschatological myth, to follow his recommendations. The lack of evidence for the truth of the myth, and Socrates' urgent exhortations, only underscore Socrates' rhetorical failures in the dialogue. So what are we to make of the Platonic dilemma about power? Martha Nussbaum (1979) identifies a similar Platonic dilemma about *eros* in *Symposium*: Socrates and Diotima provide us with a highly intellectualized vision of erotic love, which is complemented by the more passionate visions presented by Aristophanes and Alcibiades. In the end, she claims, "The *Symposium* now seems to us a cruel and terrifying book. It starkly confronts us with a choice, and at the same time it makes us see so clearly that we cannot choose anything" because both alternatives seem unacceptable in their own way (p. 168). Nussbaum offers no tidy resolution to the dilemma of *Symposium*, but *Gorgias* contains some clues as to its own resolution, and points outside itself.

The way out of the dilemma, if we accept the Socratic arguments establishing it, is to attend to the conditions in which the arguments do not apply. On the first horn, that seeking efficacy precludes achieving understanding, Socrates pointed out that political efficacy requires one to ingratiate herself to the powers that be. I said above that one need not be a tyrant or live under a tyrannical government for Socrates' concerns to take hold; they can be generalized to apply to any corrupt government. However, there is no problem reconciling efficacy and understanding, Socrates' argument notwithstanding, so long as the political system that one must flatter is a *good* one. In that case, the flattery requirement on efficacy is not inconsistent with being good. Similar qualifications apply to the argument establishing the second horn of the dilemma, that understanding precludes efficacy. That argument held that by fighting with people to help them become better, rather than doing what is pleasant to the powerful, one invites persecution. However, one can enjoy the protection of the law and the state if the politicians and judges are wise, and themselves judge on the basis of true understanding rather than on appearances. The Socratic dilemma about the impossibility of being both efficacious and understanding does not arise in the city that is just, and that has wise leaders and judges. Of course, Plato provides a fuller discussion of the topic of the wise and just city in *Republic*. *Republic* opens with a series of three conversations that are similar to the three conversations in *Gorgias*, and both dialogues treat many of the same issues. The main claims of the *Republican* Socrates, discussed at much greater length than any topic in *Gorgias*, are that it is better to be good than to be bad, and that if one is bad it is better

to be punished than to escape punishment. These are the claims that Socrates attempted to establish in an unsatisfactory fashion when he gave his argument a "head" (506c–509e).[21] So we may plausibly look to *Republic* for a fuller picture of Plato's own solution to his dilemma about power.

The dilemma can be resolved for those who live in a just city with wise rulers and judges, but how can these circumstances be assured, and given such a city how does one practice the true art of politics? That is, how does one turn the people of the city into good citizens? This is a question of moral education, which is one of the stronger secondary themes in *Gorgias*. The setting of the dialogue, after all, is immediately following a demonstration put on by Gorgias, who is interested in attracting students. Gorgias and Socrates discuss whether teachers should be held responsible for the actions of their students (456–457) and whether Gorgias teaches his students to be just (459–461).[22] But Plato's concern with education runs deeper than this. As Thorne suggests (ms, pp. 185–190), the progression of interlocutors indicates a multigenerational trend toward moral skepticism from Gorgias, who is somewhat contrary but ultimately conventional, to brash young Polus, who is his admirer and student, to the moral danger of Callicles (and *Republic I* depicts a similar progression from Cephalus to Polemarchus to Thrasymachus). Dodds famously claims that "Gorgias' teaching is the seed of which the Calliclean way of life is the poisonous fruit" (1959, p. 15). And some have claimed that Socratic dialectic, haphazardly administered, can also be a germ that produces a toxic crop. This is what Nussbaum (1981) argues in her discussion of what Aristophanes got right about Socrates in *The Clouds*. The Socrates of the *Gorgias* only half-anticipates this, acknowledging that he may be prosecuted successfully "if anyone says I am ruining the young by reducing them to a state of paralysis, or that I offend those who are old by the bitter taste of the things I say either in private or in public" (522b). The poisonous fruit borne of Socrates' teaching is dramatized in the character of the traitor Alcibiades who is mentioned twice in the *Gorgias*: as Socrates' love (481d: Socrates is to Alcibiades as Callicles is to Demos, or to the Athenian *demos*) and as someone who like Callicles might become hated by the Athenian people (519a). We know little about the historical Callicles, but Socrates' "prediction" is certainly true of Alcibiades. Alcibiades was of course not the only Athenian who was influenced by Socrates. So we might ask, how can one direct moral education to produce specimens like Plato, instead of ones like Alcibiades? If we follow Plato's clues directing us to look to *Republic* for a fuller treatment of the problems raised in *Gorgias*, we find an alarming solution to his dilemma.

[21] For a review of links between *Gorgias* and *Republic*, see Thorne ms, pp. 184–185, esp. p. 184n271.
[22] Plato's concern with education is also underscored by the structural similarities between *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*. Both dialogues take place during the visit of a famous itinerant foreign teacher, after whom the dialogue is named. Both dialogues concern moral education and punishment (among other things). There is also a common structure to the opening of Socrates' questioning of the title character about the nature of his profession (rhetoric for Gorgias, sophistry for Protagoras).

The *Republic* of course includes an extensive discussion of education which is notorious for Socrates' advocacy of extreme censorship, particularly of art, poetry, and music (*Republic* 379–392), and of the noble lie that justifies a strict caste system (*Republic* 414–415). Plato's solution to the dilemma raised in *Gorgias* is the *Republican* doctrine that modern readers find most unsavory.

The opening line of *Gorgias* may indicate Plato's interest in education. In keeping with the spiral or cyclical development of discussion in the *Gorgias*, it helps to read the opening line of the dialogue in light of the discussion that comes later (cf. Thorne ms, p. 174). I already described Moore's reading of the opening scene, which made much of an allusion to the story of Telephus. However, the first line is telling in a different way. The dialogue begins with Callicles, who says "You're in nice time, Socrates. For war or battle, as the saying goes" (447a1–2). Callicles' words refer to the conventional wisdom that it is best to be "first at a feast, last at a fray" (Dodds 1959, p. 189), and establishes the plot point that Socrates has arrived too late to witness Gorgias' rhetorical demonstration. But the allegorical suggestion, emphasized by the fact that Callicles is the speaker, is that Socrates has arrived on the scene too late to do anything about the problematic moral and intellectual education in democratic Athens. In particular he appears to be too late to care for Callicles' moral health, for Callicles already has well-developed views on the "law of nature" and the rule of the strong, and appears to be incapable of being moved by sincere argument with Socrates.

I argued that in *Gorgias* Plato is concerned largely (though of course not exclusively) with the notion of power. Over the course of the dialogue's three acts, he develops a contrast between two rival conceptions of power: power as efficacy, or the ability to realize one's intentions and desires, and power as understanding, or the ability to reason to the right intentions. Each conception of power is flawed. Power as efficacy is flawed because it is morally blind, and those who become efficacious without understanding are prone to cause widespread suffering like the tyrant Archelaus or Alcibiades. Understanding without efficacy may not lead to moral error, the risk of persecution notwithstanding, but it is an ineffective combination for the true politician who hopes to make her fellow citizens better people. Socrates is the obvious example of someone who possesses understanding, but not efficacy. The flat-footed response to these two ideals would be that it is best to possess both efficacy and understanding, but Socrates gives us resources to construct a dilemma: the possession of power according to either conception precludes the possession of the other. I argued further that there is a Platonic resolution to the dilemma: that the dilemma does not arise in a just city with wise rulers and judges, and that the way to pursue the true art of politics is through moral education of the citizens. Un-

fortunately, Plato's favored program of moral education involves censorship and propaganda. Of course, I have not provided strong arguments (nor, I believe, has Plato) that such an illiberal educational program is the best or only way to produce a populace of good men and women. However, the critical evaluation of Plato's solution is beyond the scope of the present essay. I aimed only to argue that the educational program of *Republic* is Plato's solution. However, I would remark that despite his vagueness and anachronism, Plato remains one of the ablest critics of contemporary liberalism. And it is one of the most troubling problems of contemporary liberalism that Plato's criticisms of democracy in *Gorgias* and *Republic* are more trenchant, and more evocative of the condition of rhetoric in the public sphere, than J.S. Mill's defense of free speech in *On Liberty*.

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