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CALLICLES' RETURN: *GORGLIAS* 509-522 RECONSIDERED

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RÉSUMÉ. Le débat sur la confrontation entre Socrate et Calliclès dans le *Gorgias* s'est principalement concentré sur ses deux premières étapes : l'exposé par Calliclès de ses thèses et leur tentative de réfutation par Socrate (481-500), ainsi que ses tentatives subséquentes de leur substituer sa propre conception de la vie bonne (501-509). On a accordé beaucoup moins d'attention à la dernière étape (509-522). C'est pourtant celle dans laquelle Platon met en scène la discussion la plus soutenue du dialogue entre les réponses concurrentes (et leurs conséquences) à ce qu'on a montré être sa question centrale : le plus grand mal est-il de commettre l'injustice ou d'en être victime ? Cet article examine en détail les étapes clefs de ce débat, auquel Calliclès est à nouveau invité à participer par Socrate, après qu'il a refusé de continuer à mi-chemin de la seconde phase du parcours dialectique. La thèse défendue est que le but de Platon dans cette dernière section est de montrer exactement pourquoi et comment Socrate peut entamer et poursuivre avec succès une confrontation intellectuelle avec un jeune politicien intelligent, désireux de réussir sa carrière dans la démocratie athénienne, tel qu'a été décrit Calliclès. Il échoue à le convaincre. Mais contrairement à ce qui est parfois supposé, cela n'a rien d'un échec en termes de communication intellectuelle ; la question est de savoir plutôt quels engagements fondamentaux différents Platon cherche à nous faire distinguer.

SUMMARY. *Discussion of the confrontation between Socrates and Callicles in the Gorgias has mostly focused on its first two phases: Callicles' statement of his views and Socrates' attempted refutations (481-500) and Socrates' subsequent attempt to substitute his own conception of the good life (501-9). Much less attention has been paid to the final phase (509-22). But this is where Plato stages the most sustained debate in the dialogue between alternative answers – with their consequences – to what has by now proved to be its central question: is committing injustice or falling victim to it the greatest evil? This article examines in detail the key moves in the debate, in which Callicles is again tempted by Socrates to participate, after refusing to continue midway through the second phase of the dialectic. It is argued that Plato's aim in this final section of the conversation is to show just why and how Socrates might successfully initiate and sustain*

intellectual engagement with an intelligent young politician hoping to rise within the Athenian democracy, such as Callicles is portrayed as being. He fails to persuade him. But this is not, as is sometimes supposed, a failure of intellectual communication. It is a matter of what Plato wants us to understand as different fundamental commitments.

1. Introduction

The *Gorgias* has unsurprisingly been attracting considerable philosophical attention in recent times. No one who has got into Plato ever forgets the perennially intriguing figure of Callicles presented there, perhaps the most eloquent and passionate of all Socrates' discussion partners in the dialogues, invested – some readers have felt – with an unusual personal emotion. And the confrontation Plato stages in the dialogue between Callicles and Socrates and its many theoretical dimensions has stimulated much fine philosophical scholarship of late.

Discussion however has largely been confined to Callicles' initial presentation of his position (482-6), to Socrates' ensuing critique (487-500), and to his subsequent attempt to substitute his own view of the good life as governed by order and restraint (*sophrosune*) (501-9). These are the stretches of argumentation which (for example) Charles Kahn and John Cooper in two significant studies make their focus.¹ And one might sometimes get the impression that, although the dialogue has almost another twenty pages to run, it will present no further philosophical conversation of much import between Callicles and Socrates.

Indeed one of the latest contributions to study of the *Gorgias* says just that:²

at 505d Callicles announces that he will no longer cooperate with Socrates. He tells him to either stop or carry on the discussion with someone else. Since no one present is willing to take over from Callicles, Socrates performs the remarkable feat of going it alone for almost another twenty pages. For the largest part of the remainder of the dialogue he asks and answers his own questions – a peculiar picture, unparalleled in Plato's writings.

There have naturally been plenty of exceptions to the general neglect of the argumentation of 509-513 in particular. Both Rachana Kamtekar and

1. Kahn 1983, Cooper 1999.

2. Dimas 2015 p. 84.

James Doyle, in articles to which I shall recur, have written interestingly on that material.³ But these are not pages of the dialogue on which scholars generally dwell most – despite the importance of the material: which is what in this article I shall be trying to bring out. I offer a fairly detailed commentary on the progress of the discussion in these pages between Socrates and Callicles, with briefer comments on its further development from 513-522. Readers will find a résumé of its general upshot in my short concluding section.

The truth is that – contrary to what Panos Dimas suggests in the passage just quoted – Callicles resumes his role as Socrates' answerer at 509c.⁴ Nor does he subsequently again relinquish it in the passage launched by the combination of Socrates' question there and his reply, which is an extended one (509-522). The words that prompt him to reenter the conversation are those Socrates speaks in a return to what has become its central topic of debate, and will remain so to the very end of the dialogue: the question of what is the greatest evil that can befall someone – committing injustice, or being its victim? That finished up as the main and final focus of Socrates' preceding conversation with Polus (from 469b onwards). Socrates' increasingly provocative stance on the issue was what precipitated Callicles' initial intervention at 481b. And in summing up the morals he thinks should be learned from the dialogue's discussions as a whole, Socrates begins (527b):⁵

Among so many arguments, while the others are proved wrong, this argument alone stands its ground – that we should more beware of acting unjustly than of being treated unjustly, and that more than anything, what a man should practice, both in private life and public life, is not seeming to be good, but being good.

So with Callicles' reengagement in argument at 509c, Plato not only announces a new phase in the treatment of the issues being discussed. It is also his way of engineering a move away from preoccupation with Callicles' own distinctive position on the good life, and with Socrates' attempts first to refute it and then to build an alternative conception of his own, back to what will end up being represented as the core argument of the entire dialogue in that passage on the last page of the retailing of the myth. In short, this is marked as a moment of extraordinary significance in what is by any measure one of Plato's most important works – and as it happens, longest, too (only *Republic* and *Laws* are longer). It is strange that it has not attracted greater attention.

3. Kamtekar 2005, Doyle 2006; see also e.g. Ober 1998 p. 207-209.

4. Socrates' virtuoso solo double act in fact lasts from just 506c to 507c: one Stephanus page only.

5. Sedley 2009 p. 53-54 points out that the morals Socrates draws here all in fact relate in the first instance to the arguments of the Polus section.

2. Reengaging Callicles

What most immediately pulls Callicles back into argumentative engagement is a question about security: which is the most important form of security a person needs to be able to provide for himself (and his friends and family)? Socrates sums up a key observation he has just made on the issue in the preceding context as follows (509c):

The credit of being able to help against each evil, and the disgrace of being unable, depends in each case on its magnitude.

And he then addresses Callicles:

Is that wide of the mark, Callicles, or is that how it is?

Callicles breaks his prolonged silence and responds:

No, it's not wide of the mark.

To understand why it should be at just this point that Callicles is drawn back into the discussion once more, we need to do a little retracing of Socrates' steps. Almost a page before Socrates has concluded the line of reasoning launched by his solo double act with the words (508c):

These things being so, let us ask ourselves what exactly your complaint is against me. Is it fair comment or not, when you say the result [i.e. of Socrates' position that committing injustice is a greater evil than being treated unjustly] is that I am incapable of helping either myself or any of my friends, or family either, or of rescuing them from the greatest dangers?

In other words, Socrates is signalling that he is now returning to the basic disagreement between him and Callicles. He goes on to insist famously that while he is not claiming to know the truth of the conclusion he asserts, the reasoning he had developed in the Polus conversation for the thesis that treating someone else unjustly is both worse and more disgraceful for the perpetrator than for the person being treated unjustly is "held in place and secured by arguments made of iron and adamant" (508e-509a). Then he draws an inference, concluding with the summing up observation quoted above (509b-c):

I take the view that this is how things are. If injustice is the greatest of evils for the person acting unjustly, and greater still than this greatest, if such a thing were possible, is for the person acting unjustly not to pay the just penalty, what then is the 'help' of which it really is true to say that if a person can't provide it for himself he will become a laughing-stock? Isn't it that help which will avert the greatest harm from us? It necessarily follows that this is the help it is most disgraceful not to be able to give, whether to oneself or to one's friends or family. Second would be help against the second greatest evil, third help against the third, and so on. The credit of being able to help against each evil, and the disgrace of being unable, depends in each case on its magnitude.

I have two proposals to offer regarding the argumentative sequence I have set out here. First, what renews Callicles' interest in rejoining the conversation is precisely Socrates' return to what he correctly describes as Callicles' chief complaint against him: of being powerless in the face of injustice. Second, what elicits his agreement with Socrates is naturally not the thesis that committing injustice is worse than being its victim, but simply the observation Socrates makes in summing up the train of thought he is now presenting: "The credit of being able to help against each evil, and the disgrace of being unable, depends in each case on its magnitude."

What should lend persuasiveness to my first claim is the way Callicles formulated his ideas when he burst in upon Socrates' discussion with Polus in the first place. He formulated his theory of natural justice at the outset in terms of what is naturally most shameful or disgraceful (483a), turning the terminology Socrates had resorted to in the Polus argument on its head, and rejecting as contemptible the slavish person "for whom death is preferable to life – who when he is treated unjustly and downtrodden is incapable of helping himself or anyone he cares for" (483b). It was Callicles, too, who in that same context introduced the talk Socrates recycles here of what makes someone a "laughing-stock" (484d-485c), which morphed into the charge that Socrates' philosophizing would land him with the disgrace of being quite unable to help and save himself or anyone else from "the greatest dangers" – such as being hauled before the court and ending up by being put to death (486a-b). So when Socrates at 508c explicitly recurs to these complaints, no wonder if his appetite for argument is freshly piqued.

Now for my second claim: when it is first introduced, the proposal that not being able to provide the help needed to avert the greatest harm from us represents the height of what is disgraceful or shameful is presented as contingent upon a condition. The suggestion is that we should adopt it if we accept the Socratic view that "injustice is the greatest of evils for the person acting unjustly, and greater still than this greatest, if such a thing were possible, is for the person acting unjustly not to pay the just penalty." But 'if' does not equate to 'if and only if'; and as the passage goes on, Socrates enunciates the proposal in terms progressively less specific, almost as an abstract calculus, until in his final formulation it takes the entirely general assertoric form of the proposition that the greater the magnitude of the evil against which help is needed, the greater the disgrace of not being able to supply it. And most immediately, of course, that is the formulation of which Socrates asks: "Is that wide of the mark?" With such a formulation he offers Callicles something to which his interlocutor can assent, without necessarily implying acceptance of Socrates' identification of what the evil of greatest magnitude should be taken to be. Indeed it could only be the general abstract formulation of the proposition that would have any chance – at this stage of the

dialectic of the dialogue – of constituting any common ground between him and Socrates, and of drawing him into anything other than violent disagreement once more.

3. Power and assimilation

What now follows is an exploration by Socrates – in which Callicles is kept actively engaged – of the kind of resources (the “help”) people need if they are to protect themselves from harm. It will crucially involve introducing considerations of power, and the development of what I shall be calling the assimilation thesis. In this section of the paper I present a commentary on the way Socrates first gets Callicles’ assent to proposals put to him about power and assimilation, and then seeks to get his agreement to what will be represented as a consequence he will find disconcerting.

Here, then, is how Socrates begins to pursue the question of what help or resources are relevant for the relevant self-protection (509c-d):

Socrates: Of the two, then – acting unjustly and being treated unjustly – we are saying that acting unjustly is a greater evil, and being treated unjustly is a lesser. What form of self-help, then, could a person equip himself with so as to have both these forms of protection – against acting unjustly and against being treated unjustly? Is it power or will he needs? Let me put it like this: will he avoid being treated unjustly if he wants not to be treated unjustly, or if he equips himself with some power of not being treated unjustly?

Callicles: Clearly the second – if he equips himself with some power.

“We are saying that acting unjustly is a greater evil, and being treated unjustly is a lesser.” In Socrates’ previous speech it was “I take the view that this is how things are.” And that was in a context in which his personal stance in philosophy was what was being stressed (*ego* and its related adjective occur emphatically no less than twelve times in the preceding sixteen lines of text: 508d-509a). Presumably the ‘we’ (but this is an unemphatic ‘we’) indicates that Socrates is proceeding here as though Callicles’ agreement to what he had said there was not merely to the general proposition about the need for help against harm, but to identification of committing injustice as what constitutes the greatest harm.

However what he then goes on to put to Callicles is a question about the kind of self-help needed to stave off both acting unjustly and being treated unjustly: is it power or will? And interestingly – at this point we begin to sense the development of a Socratic tactic for keeping Callicles not merely talking, but genuinely engaged – the version of the question for which he specifically invites a response from him relates to being treated unjustly. That is to say, he takes first the case that in Callicles’ scheme of things does indeed represent a very great danger, although a lesser one than committing injustice as Socrates himself sees it. So, of course, Callicles has no difficulty in conti-

ning to cooperate, and to answer that the resource one needs is power.

Socrates can accordingly continue the questioning (509d-e):

And what about acting unjustly? Is it just a question of not wanting to act unjustly? Will that be enough – he won't act unjustly – or is there a need in this case too to equip himself with some power and art or science, because if he doesn't learn them and put them into practice, he will act unjustly? That's the question I need you to answer, Callicles. Do you think the agreement Polus and I were driven to earlier in the discussion was correct, when we agreed that no-one acts unjustly on purpose, but that all those who act unjustly do so unwillingly?

Callicles' response to this question demonstrates that he is after all very far from having come round to Socrates' thinking about the evil of committing injustice. He indicates that he is prepared to say "Yes", but only to assist completion of the argument, not because that is what he really thinks (510a):

It may as well be, Socrates, if you like. Just so you can finish the argument.

Socrates is prepared to accept the answer as agreement enough. He continues (510a):

It looks, then, as if here too we do need to equip ourselves with some power and some art – to stop us acting unjustly.

Callicles assents – "We certainly do" – but presumably once more to enable completion of the argument, rather than out of conviction.

With the next shift in the questioning, however, Socrates moves the discussion right back towards prime Calliclean territory – and Callicles is delighted (510a-b):

Socrates: In which case, what is the art or science that equips people with the power of not being treated unjustly at all – or as little as possible? See if you think as I do. This is what I think it is: I think a person needs to be either ruler himself – or even tyrant – in his city, or else a close associate (*hetairos*) of the existing regime.

Callicles: Do you see, Socrates, how ready I am to give praise when you get something right? I think what you've just said puts it quite admirably.

By now we may not be surprised that in raising this question about the requisite power to provide needed resource against harm, Socrates first takes the case – being untreated unjustly – for which Callicles may be expected to be truly keen to find an answer. What however might come as a shock is the suggested answer that Socrates has volunteered, and not least the insertion in it of the elaboration "or even tyrant". The idea that tyrants are those who have great power was earlier the line Polus took – quite mistakenly, as Socrates argued (e.g. 466a-e). And a little further on in this exchange with Callicles he indicates once again that he for his part distances himself from that notion: "as you and your lot would argue it" (510e).

But Socrates' stance is perhaps more complex than one might on that basis infer. The issue most immediately at stake in that part of the Polus conversation was whether a tyrant who puts someone to death demonstrates in doing so the power to do what he really wants – to achieve something good – rather than what he merely pleases. That was what Socrates contested. Yet if a tyrant (or anybody else) had the power to protect himself or others from being subject to injustice, the same line of argument could not easily be used to deny that that was at least a power of some significance. Nor would Socrates have similar motivation to argue that it was not. He had agreed earlier in the conversation with Polus (469c) that he himself would not want to be treated unjustly (but would rather that than act unjustly). And at the latest stage of that discussion, where he was arguing paradoxically for not bringing enemies to justice, he had inserted the rider “provided we are not ourselves being unjustly treated by our enemy” (480e). In truth there is nothing that is intrinsically ‘tyrannical’ in the power to protect against injustice, even if it was thought characteristic of tyrants to surround themselves with bodyguards (*R.* 8, 566b).

Nonetheless in reintroducing the tyrant into the conversation, Socrates is undoubtedly shifting discussion into territory that Callicles might be expected to find more appealing than much other Socratic talk. No wonder that Callicles makes in response his most enthusiastic answer in the entire dialogue. Why the resort to this argumentative expedient? Precisely because Socrates needs to find a premise Callicles is truly happy to embrace, consistently with the fundamental beliefs about power he articulated in his long speech (especially at 483a-484c), which can then be exploited to drive him at last into something like genuine confession of the inadequacy of his entire stance.

Socrates starts the process of trying to achieve just that by developing next at some length what we may think of as the highly significant *assimilation* thesis, first in general terms (510b-d):

Socrates: Very well. Then see if you think I'm right about something else as well. I think one person is most a friend to another when it's a case, as wise men of old say, of 'like to like'. Don't you think so too?

Callicles: I do.

Socrates: So where a tyrant is a savage and uncivilised ruler, if there were someone in the city much better than him, would the tyrant presumably fear him, and be incapable of ever becoming friends wholeheartedly with him?

Callicles: That is so.

Socrates: And even if there were someone much inferior, this person couldn't be his friend either. The tyrant would despise him. He'd never be able to take him seriously as a friend.

Callicles: That's true as well.

Socrates: The only friend left worth speaking of, then, for a person like this, is someone of the same character as himself, someone who condemns and approves 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. Isn't that how it is?

Callicles: Yes.

Then Socrates applies the thesis to the likes of Callicles himself (510d-e):

Socrates: In which case, suppose one of the young men in this city were to wonder: "In what way could I have great power and make sure nobody treats me unjustly?" There is a way for him, it seems, which is to accustom himself, from an early age, to have the same likes and dislikes as the despot, and take appropriate steps to become as like him as possible. Isn't that how it is?

Callicles: Yes.

Socrates: So for this person, the goal of not being treated unjustly and having great power in the city – as you and your lot would argue it – will surely have been accomplished.

Callicles: Indeed it will.

The intention to exhibit the *ad hominem* attractions of this scenario for his interlocutor could not be underlined more clearly.

The assimilation thesis is eventually going to prove crucial for the attempt to undermine Callicles' conviction that friendship with the tyrant or other ruler will afford a person with the power to protect himself against unjust treatment. And that (not the commission of injustice, which is what of course concerns Socrates himself more) has remained the focus throughout the present stretch of argument. It is therefore important that Callicles is represented as entertaining no qualms whatever about the thesis. One might wonder whether he might have objected that only the appearance of assimilation is needed for such friendship. That is a possibility Socrates will envisage being raised as an objection later on in this section of the dialogue (513b), and will be discussed at the appropriate point below. One might also wonder whether it is being too easily taken for granted that the security friendship is assumed to bring can be treated as unqualified? What if the ruler or tyrant ultimately turns on his friend (before the friend turns on the tyrant)? Socrates will indeed exploit something akin to that possibility in due course (515e-516e). However perhaps Plato calculates that it will seldom be a possibility sufficient to deter those hungry for power from cultivating friendship with the ruler, even if – as would be likely enough – such eventualities occur to them. The security of the friendship is simply the hypothesis they will act upon, to protect themselves from injustice as best they can at the hands of others.

So it is understandable if Callicles is represented as content with the reasoning he is presented with. But by now we might almost have forgotten

that the question of the help needed to secure ourselves against great evils was originally raised by Socrates in the context of reiteration of his own claim that the greatest of all evils is committing injustice. Now he returns to that topic of acting unjustly (510e-511c):

Socrates: And not acting unjustly as well? Far from it, if he's going to be like the ruler, assuming an unjust one, and exercise great power alongside him. No, I think it'll be just the opposite. He will so equip himself as to be able to do as much injustice as possible, and not pay the penalty for it when he does act unjustly. Yes?

Callicles: It looks that way.

Socrates: So 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.

Callicles: I don't know how you keep twisting the argument, Socrates – turning it upside down. Don't you realise that this person who does imitate the tyrant will, if he feels like it, put the person who doesn't imitate him to death, and confiscate his possessions?

Socrates: Yes, I do realise that, my worthy Callicles. I'm not deaf. I've heard it enough times today from you and Polus – and from pretty well everybody else in the city. Now it's time for you to listen to me. Yes, he will put him to death, if he feels like it, but it will be someone bad putting a fine, upstanding individual to death.

Callicles: Isn't that what's so upsetting about it?

Socrates: Not if you look at it sensibly, as the argument shows. Do you think a person needs to equip himself for this: to stay alive as long as possible, practising those skills which always preserve us from danger – like the rhetoric which you instruct me to practise because it keeps us safe in the law courts?

Callicles: Yes, very sound advice too, for goodness' sake.

This is another rich and richly indicative passage. First of all, we should notice that Socrates now makes clear – if that was not already clear – the distance between his own position and the idea of friendship with a tyrant as supplying the power we need to stave off the greatest evils. As James Doyle points out, his initial suggestion in this argumentative sequence effectively implies that 'if you are bent on avoiding suffering injustice, you must ally yourself with evil' – or at least it does if your conception of power is a tyrannical one.⁶ Callicles' response – "It looks that way (*φαίνεται*)" – sounds as though we are meant to think this turn in the conversation takes him somewhat by surprise. The impression is reinforced by his next reply: the accusation that Socrates is "twisting the argument".

What prompts that further reply is Socrates' use next of the most forceful vocabulary at his disposal. The assertion that if someone equips himself

6. Doyle 2006 p. 98.

with the ability to commit as much injustice as possible, and to get away with it, then 'the greatest evil will be his, maimed in soul and in a bad way as he is', is strong meat. In expressing himself in such terms, Socrates reverts not only to the position he had eventually argued in the conversation with Polus (to Callicles' violent indignation), but to language reminiscent of the Polus episode too: e.g. his talk there of a soul that is "rotten" (479b), or again "festering and incurable" (480b).

When Callicles then accuses Socrates of "twisting the argument" and "turning it upside down", his further comment indicates – in the vein Polus had worked before him (470c-471e) – that he has no problem with the thought that the tyrant's imitator and friend will be prepared to commit murderous injustice against someone who is not such an imitator and friend, and (presumably) that he will prosper that way. He for his part makes clear his continuing disbelief that any sane person could rate committing injustice a worse evil than being put to death and having one's property sequestered.

Perhaps the most interesting element in the exchange is Socrates' subsequent observation: "Yes, he will put him to death, if he feels like it, but it will be someone bad putting a fine, upstanding individual to death", and the way Callicles replies: "Isn't that what's so upsetting about it?" His talk of someone "bad" (*poneros*) putting to death a "fine, upstanding individual" (*kalos kagathos*) interestingly combines his own characteristic vocabulary with language Callicles is himself happy to use. "Bad" (*poneros*) once more calls the Polus conversation to mind. Socrates had there (477b-e; cf. 470e) identified injustice as what above all makes for "badness of soul" (*psuches poneria*). It is presumably on that identification that he relies in calling "bad" the person who equips himself with the ability to commit as much injustice as possible. *Kalos kagathos*, on the other hand, is an expression Callicles uses (not in general Socrates himself in this dialogue): in talking of the aristocratic ideal to which he aspires (484d), and indeed as something for which Socratic philosophy cannot equip a person.

So at this point Socrates is switching into a form of words that Callicles might well find resonating with his own scheme of values. Terry Irwin⁷ appositely draws attention to a passage, again in the Polus conversation (470e), where Socrates contrasts someone who is *kalos kagathos*, and as such happy, with the "unjust and bad (*poneros*)" person, whom he calls "wretched". Socrates would presumably there intend *kalos kagathos* to imply a Socratic ideal of virtue,⁸ whether or not he means it to convey its usual aristocratic connotations.⁹ But Polus can take it simply in that latter sense. He has

7. Irwin 1979 p. 230.

8. So Dodds 1959 p. 242-243, in an excellent note.

9. Dodds says that "Socrates deliberately excludes the social meaning here" (and at 515a, also cited). But how would Polus be meant to know or accept that? I find Socrates' dialectical

just introduced a mention of Archelaus, ruler of Macedon. And when he responds to Socrates' contrasts it quickly becomes clear that an aristocratic *kalos kagathos* is very far from what he takes Archelaus, the duplicitous and ruthless son of a slave, to be (471a-c).

What should we make of Callicles' reaction: "Isn't that what's so upsetting about it?"? Dodds comments: "We need not (with Ast and Stallbaum) construe this as malicious mockery; Callicles feels genuine *eunoia* (487a3) towards Socrates and the Socratic man, however mistaken he thinks them."¹⁰ I think it more likely that what disturbs Callicles is the thought that an aristocratic *kalos kagathos* might be the victim of the injustice of the tyrant or his friend.¹¹ In his responses to Socrates' probing he had earlier taken the view that the "better" are the "more powerful" (488b-489d, with further subsequent clarifications). But when Socrates introduces the idea of two sorts of rhetoric – one designed simply to flatter people and indulge their desires, the other to make them better citizens – Callicles has no difficulty in accepting it, and suggests Themistocles, Pericles, and others as practitioners of the second type (502d-503d). Clearly this is a different way of thinking about "better" than one which predicates it only of the powerful.

Moreover, earlier in this very sequence of argument he has had no qualms about agreeing to consider the case Socrates puts to him of someone "much better" than a "savage and uncivilised ruler", and therefore no realistic candidate for his friendship (510b-c). The earlier equivalence between "better" and "more powerful" begins to show its colours, as something extorted from Callicles under dialectical pressure, but not fully representing the rather contradictory set of values he actually seems to hold. There is much of the traditional civic-minded aristocrat about him. So he can perhaps see as real possibility the prospect that such an admirable person might be victimized by a despot, or by the friend of a despot. And he owns that this is indeed an upsetting thought. I would suppose that he does make the remark in a sarcastic spirit (*contra* Dodds):

Of course, Socrates. The point all along has been that we "fine, upstanding individuals" do need to be in a position to wield power ourselves if we are to defend ourselves against being unjustly treated.

So Socrates' comment in response to the charge that he is "twisting" the argument does not begin to shift Callicles from his position. The turn it took was meant to start focusing on the "bad" person who commits injustice. What concerns Callicles, however, remains the harm sustained by the person unjustly treated. And right to the end of the dialogue he will continue

tactics in these contexts rather more ambiguous than does Dodds.

10. Dodds 1959 p. 346. His construal of Callicles' comment here perhaps better fits the similar but not quite identical exchange at 521b-c.

11. So Irwin 1979 p. 230-231.

to prove impervious to Socrates' suggestion that he should take the "sensible" view: by which, I take it, is meant the view that being treated unjustly is not nearly such a bad thing as committing injustice, as indicated by what "the argument shows" (the argument developed at 474c-475e, in the Polus conversation, already referred to just previously at 508c-509a). But by adopting what I have supposed to be Callicles-speak at this point ("fine, upstanding individual" – further telling use of related Calliclean talk of the real "man" will shortly be made: 512d-e), Socrates succeeds once again in keeping him engaged in the conversation.

4. Security

In one sense Socrates has so far achieved very little in the dialectic since Callicles decided to rejoin the conversation. On the central issue of what the greatest harm is that a person can suffer, they remain as far apart as ever they were. On the other hand, the introduction of the issue of how one should avoid getting into the shameful position of being unable to secure oneself against harm has certainly succeeded in tempting Callicles back into re-engagement with Socrates. He is particularly pleased with the return to a preoccupation with power. And there is one key proposition he is prepared to accept: the assimilation thesis. But once the conversation shifted to the issue of committing injustice, any hope of further convergence of view disappeared.

Callicles' latest response – avowing some distress at the prospect of some "fine, upstanding individual" being unjustly put to death – gives Socrates an opening for taking discussion back to the issue of self-protection, which is where his questioning has so far been most productive. He says (511b-c):

Socrates: Not if you look at it sensibly, as the argument shows. Do you think a person needs to equip himself for this: to stay alive as long as possible, practising those skills which always preserve us from danger – like the rhetoric which you instruct me to practise because it keeps us safe in the law courts?

Callicles: Yes, very sound advice too, for goodness' sake.

Socrates' initial remark ("as the argument shows") refers back to the Polus section of the dialogue, on whether acting unjustly or being treated unjustly is worse (474c-475e), and recalled by him just before Callicles reenters the discussion (508c-509a) as "arguments made of iron and adamant". But he now changes tack: to consider the general question of techniques needed to ensure self-preservation. When Callicles is challenged outright as to whether what he attaches importance to is the acquisition and practice of life-preserving skills, such as the rhetoric of the law courts that he encouraged Socrates to take seriously in his great speech (485e-486d), he gives a robust positive answer. That triggers the following brief exchange (511c):

Socrates: Is it really, sir? And what about knowing how to swim? Are you equally impressed by that as a branch of knowledge?

Callicles: Oh, for heaven's sake! Of course not.

At this point Socrates adopts a further change of tack: not in subject matter, as in the extracts of text just quoted, but in mode of argument. He reacts to Callicles' enthusiasm for rhetoric by launching into an extended torrent of rhetoric himself. He starts by comparing in familiar style the view we take of generally recognized life-saving skills, such as those commanded by helmsmen, the makers of siege engines, and doctors. These are all very well in their way, although if the helmsman gets you safely to port that will not be of much significance, if the life you then go on to lead is not worth living. Experts such as these are aware of the limited scope of their skills, and for that reason give themselves no great airs. Here is what Socrates ends up saying about the makers of siege-engines (512c-d):

When you call him a maker of engines, it's by way of disparagement. You wouldn't be prepared to give your daughter to his son in marriage, nor would you take his daughter for your son. And yet, given your reasons for praising your own accomplishments, what justification do you have for looking down on the maker of engines and the other people I mentioned just now? I know you would say you are a better man, and of better family. Yet if better is not what I say it is, if human excellence just comes down to this – preserving oneself and one's possessions, whatever kind of person one may in fact be – then it becomes absurd, your finding fault with the maker of engines and the doctor and all the other arts and sciences which have been developed with a view to keeping us safe.

And he now invites Callicles to consider a different point of view, appealing to that conception of the real "man" Callicles himself had etched in his portrait of the ideal of the "fine, upstanding" individual (512d-513a; cf. 483b, 484d):

Would you deign to consider whether the noble and the good may not be something other than keeping safe and being kept safe? Maybe this is something – living for a particular length of time – which the real man should forget about, and maybe he should not be too devoted to life, but trusting to god in these matters, and believing the old wives' tale that nobody can escape his destiny, should on that basis decide how he can best live whatever time is given him to live – whether by assimilating himself so far as possible to the political system in force where he is living?

It is the final question appended to this longish sentence that crystallises the challenge to Callicles that Socrates is throwing down. Is the prospect of security through assimilation to the ruling power really what is consistent with his talk of the real "man", and with a conception of the best way to live that measures up to that? It is the sort of question that might already have

been prompted by Callicles' passionate opening speech (482c-486d), in which he advocates successively shattering and overriding law and convention, but then working within them, in each case as what someone who wants a realistic strategy for protecting himself against injustice will do.¹²

5. Assimilation with the *demos*

But Socrates has not yet dropped his bombshell. That is delivered in the next sequence of remarks that he makes. Here Socrates points out that assimilation to the Athenian *demos* is what Callicles must embrace if, committed to the assimilation thesis as he has expressed himself, he is to cultivate the prevailing local power (513a):¹³

But in that case you should now be making yourself as much like the Athenian *demos* as you can, if you are going to endear yourself to it and have great power in the city. See if that is in your best interests and mine. Heavens, we don't want what they say happens to those who draw down the moon – the women of Thessaly – to happen to us. We don't want our choice of this degree of power in the city to cost us the things that are dearest to us.

This is a personal address to Callicles in which Socrates includes himself too, I suppose attempting a human gesture of friendship towards and solidarity with him. Presumably he does so as someone who himself sets great store by independence from the way the mass of people behave and think: an address quite different in style from the impersonal generalities about the real “man” in the immediately preceding passage. The unspoken thought behind it is an assumption on Socrates' part, that when Callicles earlier subscribed to the assimilation thesis, it never occurred to him that the ruling power there discussed in general terms might in practice have to count as the *demos*, in the case relevant to his own situation.

He now tries to preempt any attempt that Callicles might now make to argue that he could obtain the power he wants without assimilation to the *demos* as the city's ruler (513a-c):

But if you think that anyone in the world is going to pass on to you some art or science of the kind which will make it so that you have great power in this city – whether for better or for worse – without assimilating yourself to its political system, then in my view, Callicles, you are making a big mistake. It's not just a question of mimicking these people. You have to be like them in your very nature, if you are to make any real progress towards friendship

12. See Woolf 2000.

13. I make a stronger break than do Dodds or the OCT between the clause beginning here (“But in that case”) and the question that closes the previous extract. Socrates now switches from considering an issue articulated in general terms, initially by use of impersonal verbs before introducing third person locutions, to addressing Callicles directly in the second person, and soon including himself in the considerations he puts to him.

with the Athenian *demos*¹⁴ – or in heaven's name with the son of Pylilampes, come to that. That's why it's the person who will make you most like these people – that's the person who will make you into a politician and rhetorician in the way you want to be a politician. All groups of people take pleasure in speeches that conform to their own *ethos*, and are offended by an *ethos* that isn't theirs.

Why will only real assimilation to the *demos*, not the pretence or apeing of it, produce the political relationship with them that Callicles or any aspiring Athenian politician desires?¹⁵ It is easy enough to conceive of a general argument which would deliver this conclusion: e.g. that those who pretend assimilation to a tyrant must already like him have an overpowering appetite for power, leading them to make the pretence, which shows that it is no mere pretence.

Socrates offers a general consideration of a different but similar kind, with its focus on rhetoric making it particularly relevant to politics in Athens. In effect he is suggesting that what counts there is the pleasure people take in the political oratory they hear (one of the dialogue's major themes, of course), and that crucial to that is the *ethos* or – as Dodds explains it – the "spirit"¹⁶ which informs the rhetoric. *Ethos* or spirit is evidently taken to be something that cannot easily be simulated and then sustained, whether in politics or indeed in love (as the emphatic reference to the son of Pylilampes, recapitulating Socrates' initial salvo on the subject of Callicles' affections (481d), is designed to remind us). The implication is that, given an Athenian political context, assimilation to the ruler or "the existing regime" (510a) must mean becoming like "the weak and the many" that Callicles despises (483b), the more convincingly and authentically so if one has accustomed oneself "from an early age to have the same likes and dislikes" (510d) – but at the cost of "the things that are dearest to us" (513a).¹⁷

Socrates now seeks a response from Callicles (513c-d):

Socrates: Or do you disagree, dear friend? Do we have any answer to this, Callicles?

14. Kamtekar 2005 constitutes a sustained examination of what for a politician functioning like Callicles in the Athenian democracy friendship with the *demos* should be taken to consist in. What should be noted, however, is that in the present context the idea of friendship with the *demos* is introduced without further elaboration simply as an instance of the general notion of friendship with a ruler or despot: where it is represented as involving accustoming oneself "from an early age, to have the same likes and dislikes as the despot, and take appropriate steps to resemble him as closely as possible" (510d).

15. Kamtekar 2005 p. 330-334 supplies an interesting discussion of this question.

16. Dodds 1959 p. 351.

17. As Irwin 1979 p. 232-233 points out, the interpretation of the dynamics of democratic politics that Socrates suggests here is further developed in the *Republic*, in which the *demos*, not the politician, is in the driving seat: see in particular *R.* 6, 493a-c.

Callicles: In a way I can't put my finger on, that is well said, I think, Socrates. But I still feel what most people feel: I'm not being entirely persuaded by you.¹⁸

Socrates: That's because you have the love of the *demos* in your soul, Callicles. That's what I'm up against. But if we examine these same questions often enough, and in a better way, you will be persuaded.

Callicles is not made to say what in Socrates' long speech he finds attractive, nor why he is not entirely persuaded. But it is probably safe to suppose that he is not impervious to the suggestion that a real "man" will have higher aspirations than simply staying alive. After all, the ideal he articulated in his advocacy of "natural" justice was of the right of those possessing superior intelligence and courage to exercise mastery over the weak (483a-485a). What is disconcerting him, and leaving him not yet convinced, must surely be meant to be Socrates' "bombshell": the concluding argument that for an Athenian politician the *demos* is the ruler to whom he has to assimilate himself. This is of course the first time that the generalities of the assimilation thesis – where the ruler or the "existing regime", when discussed in more specific terms, has so far been imagined as a tyrant or despot – have been applied specifically to Athens and to the pursuit of power in the Athenian democracy. While it is one thing to uphold the assimilation thesis with enthusiasm, as specifying a key general condition for acquiring power and so security, it is quite another to think through and accept the implications of its application to politics in Athens. Socrates catches Callicles unawares, unprepared for the idea that the successful Athenian politician must have assimilated himself to the *demos*.

That is certainly the interpretation that Plato has Socrates put on his response: "That's because you have the love of the *demos* in your soul, Callicles".¹⁹ In other words, the diagnosis is not in the first instance of any more purely intellectual slowness. Blindness to what is in front of his nose must be put down to something else. *Eros* has to be the explanation. Presumably the suggestion is that Callicles is so infatuated that he cannot see that, for all his talk of the real "man", he is already assimilated to the *ethos*

18. "I'm not being entirely persuaded by you": so most translators. But Schofield and Griffith 2010 p. 97 have "I simply don't believe you." Either rendering of the Platonic Greek is possible, but the usual rendering might fit better with Callicles' first statement.

19. This *eros* for the *demos* has little affinity with the tyrannical *eros* driving every kind of lawless desire that governs the behaviour of the tyrannical kind of individual described in Book 9 of the *Republic* (9, 572d-575a). Of course, by the time Socrates has pressed Callicles on the psychology of the naturally superior man presented in his initial outburst at 482c-486d, that turns out (491e-494c) to be not far removed from the *Republic's eros tyrannos*. But what emerges in the later stretch of dialogue that concerns us is the gulf between Callicles' professed ideals and ambitions and the reality of the *eros* for the *demos* that actually drives him.

of the *demos*, to its likes and dislikes.²⁰ And with it Plato connects with a theme in Athenian political discourse given most memorable articulation in surviving Greek literature in Aristophanes' *Knights*. There, as Victoria Wohl explores in an exemplary study, Cleon (in the guise of a Paphlagonian slave) presents himself as lover (*erastes*) of the *demos*, personified as his master Demos (*Knights* 732): "Pericles' noble 'love of the polis' becomes, in Cleon's debased enactment, political prostitution."²¹

We now start to appreciate Plato's rationale in launching Socrates' entire conversation with Callicles with a passage on their parallel twin love affairs. For himself, he said, it is with Alcibiades²² and philosophy,²³ for Callicles the *demos* and the son of Pyrilampes. Here are the relevant comments he made on Callicles' behaviour and mental state (481d-482a):

I notice that, clever as you are, it's the same every time. Whatever your darlings say, however they say things are, you have no power to oppose them, but keep changing your ground this way and that. In the assembly, if you say something and the Athenian demos disagrees, you change your ground and say what it wishes; and with the son of Pyrilampes, that beautiful young man, the same kind of thing happens to you. You are incapable of resisting the proposals and arguments of your darlings, with the result that, if anyone were ever to express surprise at the absurdity of what they are getting you to say on any particular occasion, you would probably say – if you wanted to tell the truth – that unless someone makes your darling give up this way of talking, then you won't ever stop saying these things either.

6. Callicles' choice

So, once again, there is argumentative success and failure: Socrates has retained Callicles' participation in discussion. But Callicles has not been persuaded away from the stances he has adopted throughout. Socrates

20. Ober 1998 p. 208 rightly says: "This is a pregnant moment, and perhaps the most optimistic in the dialogue." Much more doubtful is his further comment: "Callicles has, at least momentarily, come to realize that he is infected with a certain 'illness' and the source of his illness is 'the many' – the very *demos* he has been taught to try to imitate, even to the point of losing his individual identity and voice." As I read the exchange, and particularly Callicles' confession that in a way he can't quite put his finger on, he finds what Socrates has argued "well said, I think", he is represented as being very far from precise in any application he might make of it to self-understanding.

21. Wohl 2002 p. 75. Readers of her chapter "*Pornos* of the people" (Wohl 2002 p. 73-123) will find multiple anticipations of the *Gorgias*'s treatment of democratic rhetoric in the material on Cleon from Aristophanes and Thucydides that she discusses.

22. Whom Socrates, in the first of the *Alcibiades* dialogues attributed to Plato, fears will be corrupted by becoming an *erastes* of the *demos*: see *Alc.* 1 132a, with discussion in Wohl 2002 p. 124-170.

23. For reflections prompted by the *Gorgias* on what Plato might there (and subsequently in the *Republic*) take the role of *eros* in developing philosophical understanding to be, see Woolf 2000 p. 24-40.

sees no way of moving him on except by “more and better arguments” about these same questions – which (he says) will persuade him (513c-d). The reader might find such Socratic confidence in the power of reasoning over-optimistic. Logic does not often cut much ice with the infatuated. However, as we shall be seeing shortly, in this instance it does obtain some degree of further success by the end of the long concluding stretch of the conversation now continued by Socrates and Callicles (513d-522d). To anticipate: the considerations Socrates will here put to Callicles do in the event succeed in getting him to see and understand his *eros* for the *demos* for the humiliating servility it really adds up to – but he will fail to talk him out of the commitments and behaviour that have been given momentum by that *eros*.²⁴

Socrates’ talk of “more and better arguments” is the cue for a first instalment of further reasoning. In what follows Socrates approaches the same issues from a different angle, which is indicated in his opening sally (513d):

Anyway, remember how we said the activities that are directed to looking after each of these things – body and soul – were two in number. We said that one of them approaches its object with a view to pleasure, the other with a view to what is best, not indulging it but battling with it. Weren’t those the definitions we laid down earlier?

Callicles had agreed previously to this distinction, albeit only to “get your argument here completed, and do Gorgias here a favour” (501b-c); he now confirms that that was so. There follows an attempt to get him to reflect upon what is his conception of political activity, and whether he is equipped to engage in it, initially by the usual Socratic method of analogy with other activities of public significance, such a public building project. Despite some reluctance to volunteer a view on Callicles’ part, he eventually reiterates his earlier opinion that there have been politicians in Athens who were good citizens and “made the citizens better rather than worse”: Pericles, Cimon, Miltiades, and Themistocles – for whom he shows sustained admiration (515c-d; cf. 503b-c, 517a-b).

This is the proposition Socrates now attacks, in an extraordinary passage mingling philosophical considerations put to Callicles with extended rhetorical denunciation (acknowledged as “real demagoguery” by Socrates himself: 519d) of the statesmen he has singled out for their achievement of good for the city. They did not succeed in making the citizens better; and in the end the people turned upon each and every one of them. Those who say they made the city great do not realize that “the city is now a swollen,

24. I hope this distinction helps to meet a pertinent question put by the reviewer for *Philosophie antique*: whether that *eros* for the *demos* “rend vaine toute tentative de Socrate pour persuader Calliclès de l’incohérence de sa position”. See further p. 27 below, and my remarks in Section 7, “Conclusion”.

festering sore because of those figures of the past" (518e-519a). In fact they were no better than sophists, who similarly claim to be teachers of human goodness, but then incongruously and illogically accuse their pupils of injustice and ingratitude when they do not pay their fees or otherwise express their appreciation of their teachers. Callicles agrees that he has nothing but contempt for such illogicality on the part of such practitioners; and he agrees that the sign of a truly good practitioner is that the person who is well treated by him wants to do good in return (519e-521a).

So Socrates is now ready to put the crucial question to him: what is the right way to care for the city? Is it "battling with the Athenians to make them as good as possible"? Or is it becoming their "servant" and trying to please them? He invites Callicles to speak "well and nobly". What is the response?

Callicles: I say the one that involves becoming their servant.

Socrates: Nobly spoken! So you invite me to become a sycophant – a flatterer!

And Callicles – through gritted teeth – agrees (521a-b).

Socrates has still not achieved the persuasion he hoped "more and better arguments" would have achieved. Nonetheless he has made progress. He has not attempted to orient the reasoning to get more decisive recognition from Callicles that the assimilation thesis applies to the situation of a power-hungry politician in Athens as much as it does under tyranny – although Callicles' final response suggests that he does now recognize just that. What the argument has instead taken as its basis is indeed something "better": an articulation of a more elevated conception of politics, contrasted with the politics of gratification. Callicles is represented as exhibiting not a little attraction to this conception; and Socrates' use of the vocabulary of nobility in that final exchange is presumably an attempt to indicate that this notion of politics is the conception that marries more readily with the vision of a true man articulated in his original statement of his ideals. When in response Callicles explicitly couches his reply in terms of the thoroughly demeaning alternative: "becoming their servant", this represents all but explicit acknowledgement that the *demos*, not the real "man", will be master. He must now be aware that there is something incoherent and conflicted at the core of his whole outlook, as Socrates had predicted at the start of their encounter (482b).

The conversation continues (521b-d):

Callicles: Otherwise ...

Socrates: Don't tell me what you've told me over and over again – that anybody who wants to will put me to death. I don't want to have to say again that it will be a question of an evil man putting to death a good man. And don't say he will confiscate whatever I possess. That will save me saying: "Well, when he's confiscated it he won't have any good use for it. Just as he confiscated it from me unjustly, so, once he has taken it, he will use it unjustly. And if unjustly, then disgracefully. And if disgracefully, then badly."

Callicles: You really do seem confident, Socrates, that none of these things will happen to you. As if living a quiet life means you couldn't be dragged off to court, probably by someone utterly worthless and contemptible.

Socrates: Then I really am an idiot, Callicles, if I don't realise that in this city anything can happen to anybody. One thing I do know, and that is that if I go to court, to face one of these dangers you are talking about, the one bringing me there will be an evil man – no decent person would take somebody who was not acting unjustly to court – and it would be no great surprise if I were put to death. Do you want me to tell you why that is what I expect?

And with that Socrates introduces his famous comparison with what would happen to a doctor prosecuted by a chef before a jury of children.

For his part Callicles wavers not a moment from his conviction that having no power to protect oneself from injustice is the worst thing that could happen to someone (522d). And when Socrates indicates that he will tell a myth to spell out the consequences of acting unjustly that will be visited upon perpetrators after death, he makes it clear that as far as he is concerned the conversation, one-sided as he now represents it, is – finally – over (522e):

Callicles: Well, you've worked your way through the rest of the discussion, so you'd better work your way through this too.

7. Conclusion

"Socrates and Callicles cannot in the end make dialectical contact", says James Doyle, articulating a not uncommon assessment.²⁵ I hope this article will have done something to show that the situation is not in fact what that verdict might suggest. On the reading of the last section of conversation between the two protagonists offered here, these pages of the *Gorgias* emerge as something else. They are an attempt by Plato to show just why and how Socrates might successfully engage intellectually with an intelligent young politician hoping to rise within the Athenian democracy, such as Callicles is portrayed as being. All communication between them had broken down at 506c (effectively a page earlier, at 505c). But at 509c Callicles reenters the conversation when Socrates returns to the question of how we best protect ourselves against the greatest evils. That is territory he is willing to explore jointly with Socrates – or in other words, to allow Socrates to question him about. On some things they find a measure of agreement, on others not. At more than one point Socrates abandons dialectic for rhetoric, in his efforts to persuade Callicles to look at things differently from the way he is predisposed to do. In general, however, there is no radical failure of mutual comprehension.

25. Doyle 2006, p. 96-97.

At one juncture, it is true, where Socrates spells out what he takes to be the implications of the assimilation thesis in the context of the Athenian democracy for a politician wanting to cultivate the friendship of the ruling power, Callicles is in effect made to confess that he neither fully understands nor is altogether persuaded by Socrates' line of thought (513c). *Eros* for the *demos*, is Socrates' immediate diagnosis: Callicles is blinded by the way the likes and dislikes of the *demos*, reinforced by his rhetorical training, have already shaped his soul. His affections have clouded his ability to grasp reality. Yet after several more pages of Socratic talk in more than one mode, he does take the point he could not quite grasp there: he bites the bullet, and gives it as his view that good politics and good citizenship have to be a matter of flattering and gratifying the city's ruling power (521a-b).

So there is no ultimate failure of intellectual communication between them, at least in any basic sense. Plato does not represent the intelligent Athenian democratic politician as "unable to take part in the same discussion"²⁶ with Socrates. What prompts Callicles to tell Socrates to finish things off himself, when after all Socrates is not actually inviting him to engage in further conversation, is something else. Callicles is now absolutely clear that, despite their best efforts, he and Socrates will never find enough agreement on what they value most to make further conversation worthwhile. That is a matter of what Plato wants us to understand as different fundamental commitments, not of mutual incomprehension, nor even of incompatible intellectual styles.²⁷

26. Doyle 2006 p. 97.

27. Translations used are those of Schofield and Griffith 2010 (with occasional minor variations). I am grateful for comments from audiences in Athens (BSA), Princeton, Yale, Prague, Oxford, Stanford, UCLA, and Berlin (Humboldt University) who heard a talk from which this version has been developed, and to the reviewer for *Philosophie antique* for further comments and corrections.

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