

Callicles' Critique & the Argumentative Structure of Plato's *Gorgias*

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ABSTRACT

In his great speech in Plato's *Gorgias*, Callicles mounts a critique of Socrates' earlier argument that doing injustice is worse than suffering it. The nature of this critique has not much preoccupied commentators, a neglect that this paper aims to remedy. A second aim of this paper is to address the issue of why Plato returns us, armed with Callicles' critique, to an earlier argument. I argue that Plato sends us back because he intends subsequent discussion to address the critique. In this sense, Callicles' critique is agenda-setting for subsequent discussion. However, this creates a puzzle, for Socrates only directly responds to the critique once and that response fails. Subsequent discussion appears to forget all about the critique as well as the claim that doing injustice is

worse than suffering it. I argue that this appearance is misleading: subsequent discussion does address the critique but does so indirectly. It proceeds by attacking the underlying basis of Callicles' critique, namely, his views on temperance and the good life. I argue that Callicles' views about temperance and the good life shape and inform his critique. By attacking that basis, Socrates responds to the critique and disarms it.

Keywords: *Gorgias*, Callicles, Justice, Temperance

INTRODUCTION

In his great speech or ῥῆσις (482c4-486d1), the third and most able of Socrates' interlocutors in the *Gorgias*, Callicles, expresses in fulsome terms his philosophical outlook. Befitting his protean views, the speech is many things, among them: a critical account of the moral order, a characterization of the distinction between convention (νόμος) and nature (φύσις) as well as a history of the former's ascendance over the latter, and a critique of the life of the φιλόσοφος together with a corresponding commendation of the life of the ῥήτωρ. But the speech is something else as well: a strident critique of Socrates' dialectical behaviour in his engagements with the two previous interlocutors, Gorgias and Polus.

Callicles accuses Socrates of arguing in bad faith against both interlocutors by employing dubious rhetorical techniques – techniques distinctive of the very δημηγόροι of whom Socrates is so critical in the dialogue. Among these techniques is Socrates' conspicuous use of shame to compel his interlocutors to agree to things contrary to their considered beliefs. Callicles' critique of the *Gorgias* exchange is brief and comparatively minor, repeating as it does a critique already expressed by Polus earlier in the dialogue. By contrast, his critical account of the Polus exchange is original to him as well as being more involved and well-developed. This account targets one of the several arguments Socrates deploys against Polus: the argument that doing injustice is worse than suffering it.

Callicles makes a few different points in his critique of that argument, but one line of criticism is particularly powerful and important. It is that Socrates willfully and intentionally misinterprets one of Polus' claims, which enables him to derive a conclusion that he would

not be able to derive otherwise. Indeed, Callicles suggests that Socrates' argument against Polus ceases to be valid once the misinterpretation is corrected and laid bare. This would be a remarkable result, for not only does the conclusion that doing injustice is worse than suffering it have a claim to be one of the most important and central of the entire dialogue, but the argument against Polus is the only argument that seems to be understood by Socrates and Plato as establishing that result.

It is, therefore, surprising that interpreters of the *Gorgias* have not carefully scrutinized Callicles' critique of Socrates' exchange with Polus. One of my aims in this paper is to remedy this neglect. My intention in doing so is not, however, merely to acquire a more precise understanding of Callicles' critique. In Callicles' ῥῆσις, Plato intentionally and conspicuously returns us to a particular earlier argument, but he does so with a twist: we are now armed with Callicles' critique of that argument and primed to see its inadequacies. Why should Plato elect to do this? That is, what is he trying to communicate to his readers by proceeding thus? My second aim in this paper is to address these questions. I shall urge that Plato sends us back to the argument with Callicles' critique in tow because he wishes for us to see subsequent discussion as responding to Callicles' critique. In other words, Callicles' critique sets the agenda for subsequent discussion: it will be geared towards responding to the critique.

The view of Callicles' critique as agenda-setting generates a puzzle, however. For only once in subsequent discussion does Socrates directly respond to Callicles' critique and that response fails. After that failure, Socrates appears to forget all about Callicles' critique and move on to other things, most obviously, the issues of temperance vs. intemperance

and hedonism. Indeed, it looks as though Socrates has forgotten about Callicles' critique altogether. I shall argue that this appearance is misleading. In fact, Socrates *is* responding to Callicles' critique in subsequent discussion, but he is doing so indirectly. Rather than putting forth positive arguments for the conclusion that doing injustice is worse than suffering it, Socrates instead responds to Callicles' critique by attacking its *basis*, that is, the underlying commitments of Callicles that inform and shape his critique. By showing that those underlying commitments are mistaken or false, Socrates in effect disarms Callicles' objection to his argument with Polus and thereby vindicates that argument.

1. SOCRATES VS. POLUS (475A8-C9)

To understand Callicles' critique of Socrates' argument against Polus, it is necessary of course to understand, at least in outline, that argument.

Polus is the second of Socrates' interlocutors in the *Gorgias*. Arrogant, brash, and impulsive – as suggested by his name (463e2) – he repeatedly balks at Socrates' various arguments against him, despite being serially refuted and having little recourse beyond insult and outrage. Among Socrates' several arguments, one in particular deserves emphasis, for it concerns one of the central and most important claims of the entire dialogue; this is Socrates' argument that doing injustice is worse than suffering it – a claim that astonishes and irritates Polus. In reply to Socrates' remark that not only Polus but all men believe the claim, Polus retorts:

take suffering injustice over doing it, would you?

SOCRATES: Yes, and so would you and everyone else.

POLUS: Far from it! I wouldn't, you wouldn't, and nobody else would, either.¹ (474b6-10)

In response, Socrates asks Polus a slightly different question: whether he thinks it's more *shameful* to do injustice than to suffer it, to which Polus replies affirmatively. Socrates then asks: "if doing it is in fact more shameful, isn't it also worse?" (474c8-9); and it is here that Polus demurs, for he is convinced that it is not the case "that the same thing is fine and good or bad and shameful" (474c9-d2). In subsequent argument, Socrates aims to show that Polus is being inconsistent: he cannot coherently maintain that doing injustice is more shameful but not worse than suffering it.

The argument Socrates employs can be fairly briefly and easily stated as follows:

- (A) 1. For all x, y , x is more shameful than y iff x is more painful or worse than y . (475a8-b2)
- 2. *Doing injustice* is more shameful than *suffering injustice* iff *doing injustice* is more painful or worse than *suffering injustice*. (475b5-8) [from 1]
- 3. *Doing injustice* is more shameful than *suffering injustice*. (475b3-5)
- 4. *Doing injustice* is more painful or worse than *suffering injustice*. [from 2-3]
- 5. *Doing injustice* is not more painful than *suffering injustice*. (475b8-c5)
- 6. *Doing injustice* is worse than *suffering injustice*. (475c6-9) [from 4-5]

And I do believe that I don't, and that no other person does, either. So you'd

The crucial premises are 1, 3 and 5, for from these premises the conclusion is meant

to follow. Since Polus accepts all three premises, he is forced to the conclusion and thereby revealed to be inconsistent in maintaining that doing injustice is more shameful but not worse than suffering it.

On the face of it, (A) certainly *appears* valid: 2 follows from 1 by universal instantiation; 4 from 2 and 3 by *modus ponens*; and 6 from 4 and 5 by disjunction elimination. But to many interpreters this appearance is misleading. Beginning with Gregory Vlastos' influential article, "Was Polus Refuted?"², there has been much discussion of the validity of the argument with Vlastos, in particular, arguing that it is not valid and that, furthermore, Plato may have been ignorant of this fact. Commentators have rushed to Plato's (and Socrates') defense, urging that once certain ambiguities and misleading modes of expression are corrected, the argument is actually valid, even if it might be problematic in other ways.³

Despite the interest and importance of this debate in the literature, I think that my particular aims in this paper make it possible for me to avoid entering it. The reason is that my interest is not in whether the argument *in itself* is valid or invalid, but rather in how the *characters* themselves receive and understand the argument. For Plato certainly depicts the characters in the *Gorgias* as showing no awareness of the precise issues upon which the Vlastos-inspired debate rests. This is particularly true of Callicles, for while he criticizes and rejects the argument, what forms the basis of his critique is quite removed from what forms the basis of the controversy in the literature.

As I've presented it, (A) is a positive argument for the conclusion that doing injustice is worse than suffering it. But for reasons I have already intimated, this is slightly misleading, for in the text the argument is

deployed somewhat differently. Rather than being a constructive, positive argument for the conclusion, the argument is employed as a negative, destructive argument showing Polus' inconsistency. Socrates succeeds in getting Polus to agree to 1 and 3, which is what enables him to deduce 6; however, Polus is on record as denying 6. Hence, the argument shows an inconsistency in Polus' set of beliefs rather than establishing the truth of the conclusion. The argument shows that Polus must abandon his belief in one of 1, 3, 5 or the negation of 6 to retain consistency; indeed, this appears to be *all* the argument shows. After all, this argument is an instance of Socrates' infamous *elenctic* method: 'refuting' a person's belief by showing that it is inconsistent with their other beliefs. It is interesting, however, that this is not how Socrates understands the argument, as he clearly expresses in summing it up:

I was speaking the truth, then [Ἀληθῆ ἄρα ἐγὼ ἔλεγον], when I said that neither you nor I nor any other person would take doing injustice over suffering it, for it really is worse [κάκιον γὰρ τυγχάνει ὄν]. (475e3-6)

Clearly, Socrates thinks that (A) does not merely show an inconsistency in Polus' set of beliefs, for here he insists that it demonstrates the *truth* of the conclusion; it is on the basis of this argument that we can conclude that doing injustice "really is" worse than suffering it. Now, it is a genuine issue why Socrates (and, behind him, Plato) thinks that this elenctic mode of argument establishes the relevant conclusion,⁴ but, in the words of Charles Kahn, "that he does so is plain."⁵

The issue of why Socrates thinks (A) establishes the truth of its conclusion, rather than merely showing the inconsistency of Polus' set

of beliefs, is an important one, but beyond the scope of this paper. What is important for my purposes is, first, that Socrates and Plato behind him seem convinced that the argument does not merely refute Polus, but also establishes that doing injustice is worse than suffering it, and, second, that Socrates and Plato behind him view the argument as of fundamental importance to the entire dialogue. This second point has been persuasively argued by Kahn, who has noted the tremendous “logical and dramatic weight” put upon the argument in the *Gorgias*.⁶ In what follows, I accept Kahn’s point and employ it as a crucial piece of my argument. For if Kahn is right, then Callicles’ critique of (A) attacks one of the most important arguments in the entire dialogue. Clearly, Socrates and Plato have strong motivations therefore to reply to that critique; they cannot let it go unanswered on pain of abandoning this crucial argument altogether.

2. CALLICLES’ CRITIQUE (482E2-483A8)

“Socrates, I think you swagger in your speeches, like a true mob-orator [ὡς ἀληθῶς δημηγόρος ὢν].” (482c4-5) So begins Callicles’ critique of Socrates’ dialectical behaviour in his previous arguments with Polus and Gorgias. The critique has the effect of turning the tables on Socrates, for the latter has just finished describing (481c5-482c3) *Callicles* as evincing pandering behaviour towards the δῆμος, behaviour most distinctive of the δημηγόρος, and now Callicles returns the favor.⁷ But Callicles does not rest easy with vague and general insults of the sort we might expect from the aggressive but crass Polus. Unlike Polus (and, indeed, Gorgias), Callicles is philosophically sophisticated and subtle: he attacks a precise point in Socrates’ previous dialectical interac-

tions, specifically, Socrates’ argument against Polus that doing injustice is worse than suffering it. He levels a quite precise objection to that argument: that Socrates willfully and intentionally misinterprets one of the key claims of the argument. Once the misinterpretation is made manifest, the argument ceases to be valid.

And these, nature and convention [ἣ τε φύσις καὶ ὁ νόμος], are for the most part opposed to each other, so if a person is ashamed and doesn’t dare to say what he thinks, he’s forced to contradict himself. This is in fact the clever trick you’ve thought of, with which you work mischief in your discussions: if a person makes a statement in terms of convention, you slyly question him in terms of nature; if he makes it in terms of nature, you question him in terms of convention. That’s just what happened here, on the question of doing what’s unjust versus suffering it. While Polus meant that doing it is more shameful by convention, you pursued the argument as though he meant by nature. (482e6-483a7)

According to Callicles’ account, Socrates, fully aware of the fact that Polus in (A) 3 meant doing injustice is more shameful by *convention* than suffering it, nevertheless, interpreted Polus as claiming that doing injustice is more shameful by *nature* than suffering it. By itself, this might not seem a problem; after all, it could be that doing injustice is more shameful by nature than suffering it if and only if doing injustice is more shameful by convention than suffering it. However, the latter seems to be precisely what Callicles wishes to deny. For at the outset of this above passage, Callicles says,

"nature and convention...are for the most part opposed." Indeed, Callicles seems to take this opposition to imply, more precisely, that while doing injustice is more shameful *by convention* than suffering it, it is not more shameful *by nature* than suffering it (483a7-8).

What permitted Socrates to misinterpret Polus' claim in the way he did is the fact that, as stated in (A) 3, Polus' claim was ambiguous, for Polus assents to the claim that doing injustice is more shameful than suffering it, but that claim does not explicitly state that it is more shameful by convention but not by nature. As Callicles describes Socrates' dialectical malfeasance, in addition to ignoring the fact that Polus meant more shameful by convention but not by nature in (A) 3, Socrates also interpreted (A) 1 (and, consequently, 2) as if it meant more shameful by nature. Now, Callicles does not seem to think that this misinterprets Polus; however, it does cause serious problems for the argument's validity. For it means there is a clear equivocation in the meaning of "more shameful" between premises 1-2 and 3. To see this, we can disambiguate (A) in conformity with Callicles' interpretation of its claims as follows:

- (A') 1. For all x, y , x is more shameful by nature than y iff x is more painful or worse than y .
- 2. *Doing injustice* is more shameful by nature than *suffering injustice* iff *doing injustice* is more painful or worse than *suffering injustice*.
- 3. *Doing injustice* is more shameful by convention, but not by nature than *suffering injustice*.
- 4. *Doing injustice* is more painful or worse than *suffering injustice*.
- 5. *Doing injustice* is not more painful than *suffering injustice*.

6. *Doing injustice* is worse than *suffering injustice*.

(A') captures how Callicles understands the argument, once ambiguities have been corrected and Socrates' dialectical malfeasance has been exposed. Clearly, (A') is invalid, for 4 no longer follows from 2 and 3, which means the conclusion cannot any longer be derived. With (A) disambiguated as (A'), Polus can cheerfully and, more importantly, consistently assent to claims 1-3 and even 5, but reject the conclusion. In this way, he can maintain that doing injustice is more shameful but not worse than suffering it.

Callicles' critique is quite powerful, as it stands. To be sure, it is dependent on some controversial assumptions, most importantly that doing injustice is more shameful by convention but not by nature than suffering it. Nevertheless, given its assumptions, it does show that Socrates' argument is invalid and so fails to establish its conclusion. This is a striking result, for it shifts the burden of proof in the dialectic from Polus back on to Socrates: he must either respond to the critique or accept it and abandon the argument. In light of the apparent importance of the argument for establishing such a vital result, Socrates is surely compelled to reply.

Is Callicles' account of Polus' misstep accurate? That is, do premises 1-2 and 3 in (A') really more accurately and precisely reflect Polus' understanding than 1-2 and 3 in (A)? Certainly, some scholars⁸ have argued that Callicles' critique accurately diagnoses where Polus went wrong, without necessarily subscribing to my account of Callicles' critique. However, in light of my analysis, I am forced to agree with James Doyle: Callicles almost certainly "overinterprets" (Doyle's word) Polus' agreement.⁹ There is little evidence that Polus

subscribes to the view that nature and convention are opposed or that Polus was tripped up by ambiguities in the argument. After all, as Doyle notes: Callicles' distinction between nature and convention is introduced "as an explanatory *innovation*."¹⁰ At the same time, this aspect of Callicles' critique – whether it correctly captures *Polus*' thinking – seems far less important than the fact that the critique accurately reflects *Callicles*' thinking on the matter. Whether or not Polus was fairly and genuinely persuaded by Socrates' argument, it is clear that Callicles was not and for the precise reasons he adduces.

3. WHY SEND US BACK?

In Callicles' ῥῆσις, Plato references an earlier argument in the dialogue. In so doing, he sends his readers back to that earlier argument. But he does so with a twist: his readers are now armed with Callicles' critique of that argument and primed to see it as inadequate in light of that critique. The effect of this reference to the earlier argument is to place Socrates (and Plato) dialectically on the back-foot: they must respond to the objection or relinquish the argument. Why does Plato elect to do all of this? What is he trying to communicate to his readers in proceeding thus? The obvious, natural, and, I think, correct answer is that Plato wishes to announce to us that subsequent discussion in the *Gorgias* will be devoted, at least in part, to responding to Callicles' critique. In this way, Plato sets the dialectical agenda of subsequent argument in the dialogue. If this, however, is to be more than mere speculation, we need some evidence that Plato is indeed proceeding in conformity with this agenda.

Thankfully, I think we get precisely such evidence in the text. Shortly after Callicles'

ῥῆσις, Socrates embarks on his own ῥῆσις (486e5-488b6), which amounts to a sort of encomium on the virtues of Callicles, his promise as interlocutor, and the likelihood that, working together, they will discover the truth. After this – frankly, overcooked – hymn to Callicles, Socrates gets down to dialectical business and starts by a familiar Socratic tack, inquiring into Callicles' conception of justice. Socrates then deploys the elenchus to refute Callicles' claims; the details of Socrates' argument need not concern us so much as what he concludes:

It's not only by convention, then, that doing injustice is more shameful than suffering it, or just to have an equal share, but it's so by nature, too. So it looks as though you weren't saying what's true earlier and weren't right to accuse me when you said that convention and nature were opposed to each other and that I, well aware of this, am making mischief in my statements, taking any statement someone makes meant in terms of nature, in terms of convention, and any statement meant in terms of convention, in terms of nature. (489ab)

This makes plain that Socrates' first order of business is to respond to Callicles' critique. He attempts to show here that doing injustice is more shameful by convention *and* nature. If this argument were successful, then Socrates would have effectively replaced premise 3 so as to make (A') valid, thereby shifting the burden of proof back onto Callicles to show that the argument fails. Unfortunately, Callicles is not persuaded and the defense seems to fail, for Callicles insists that Socrates has misunderstood his position. This prompts

further discussion aimed at determining Callicles' actual position, which is apparently adequately achieved at 491c6-d3.

In light of the failure of Socrates' defense against Callicles' critique, we might expect him to take up the task again of defending (A) from that critique. He might proceed in any of a variety of ways but whatever he does, it is natural to suppose that he must secure the conclusion that doing injustice is worse than suffering it. He may do this by repairing or replacing some of the premises of (A') – as he does in the above argument; alternatively, he might cobble together some new premises to show the conclusion nevertheless follows. What is striking is that if one carefully investigates the rest of the *Gorgias*, one finds no obvious instance of any such sort of argument. In fact, any *mention*, let alone argument, regarding doing/suffering injustice disappears for the next 16 or so Stephanus pages (until 508b8-c1). When it is finally mentioned again, one is left scratching one's head:

We must either refute this argument and show that it's not the possession of justice and self-control that makes happy people happy and the possession of evil that makes miserable people miserable, or else, if this is true, we must consider what the consequences are. These consequences are all those previous things, Callicles, the ones about which you asked me whether I was speaking in earnest when I said that a man should be his own accuser, or his son's or his friend's, if he's done anything unjust, and should use oratory for that purpose. Also what you thought Polus was ashamed to concede is true after all, that doing what's unjust is as

much more evil than suffering it as it is more shameful, and that a person who is to be an orator the right way should be just and have expert knowledge of what's just, the point Polus in his turn claimed Gorgias to have agreed to out of shame. (508a8-c3)

This is a puzzling passage, for Socrates here claims that a consequence – presumably a logical consequence – of the claim that justice and self-control make people happy and that the possession of evil makes people miserable is that “doing what's unjust is as much more evil than suffering it as it is more shameful.” Now, it is, to say the least, *far* from clear how the latter follows from the former and Socrates does not bother to explain this. Moreover, there is no obvious evidence in the previous pages of an argument designed to show how the latter follows from the former. Nevertheless, Socrates goes on to insist that the thesis that doing injustice is more shameful than suffering it has been established “by iron and adamant arguments” (509a1-2).

Instead of a direct response to Callicles' critique, we get something quite different in the discussion between 491d3 to 508b8. A rough and general itinerary of the discussion might proceed as follows. First, from 491d-494e, we get a discussion of and comparison between the life of temperance, recommended by Socrates, and the life of intemperance, recommended by Callicles. In that discussion, Socrates tries to show the superiority of the life of temperance over intemperance. The discussion then proceeds – from 495a-499b – to the subject of hedonism or the identification of the pleasant and the good, with Callicles defending and Socrates attacking the hedonistic life. Finally, from 499b-508b, the issue of temperance vs. intemperance is raised again

and Socrates argues that temperate life is the best or happiest life while the intemperate life is the worst and the most miserable.

Clearly, then, in the course of the discussion that follows Callicles' critique, there is no explicit reference to the claim that doing injustice is worse than suffering it or that doing injustice is more shameful (whether by convention or nature) than suffering it. Despite the absence of any explicit reference, Socrates appears to think he has *shown* that doing injustice is both more shameful and worse than suffering injustice. We seem to be trapped in a puzzle. On the one hand, we cannot claim that Socrates or Plato merely forgot or decided against providing a response to Callicles' critique in the intervening pages, for Socrates declares more or less explicitly that he *has* provided such a response. On the other hand, we cannot simply accept that Socrates has shown that doing injustice is more shameful or worse than suffering it, for we can find no such arguments in the intervening pages! What, then, are we to do?

There is, I think, a solution to this puzzle, one that depends upon expanding our sense of what an adequate response to Callicles' critique would be. In discussing the absence of arguments related to suffering/doing injustice, I have assumed that any response to Callicles' critique would have to show, somehow, that doing injustice is worse than suffering injustice or, perhaps, that doing injustice is more shameful by nature than suffering it. But this is not the only way Socrates might respond. There is an alternative response that would work as well: Socrates could show that Callicles' critique fails because of the failure of commitments that underly and inform that critique. This might be so in particular if the critique depends upon commitments that Socrates can show are false. If the basis of Callicles'

critique fails, then his critique itself lapses. On this approach, (A) would be defended by showing that the commitments underlying the interpretation of it as (A') are false.

This gives us a new lens through which to examine the puzzling passage we encountered earlier. In that passage, Socrates claimed that a logical consequence of the claim that possession of justice and self-control makes people happy and possession of evil makes them wretched is that doing injustice is worse than suffering it. I pointed out that it is far from clear how the one claim follows from the other. But we now have another way of understanding how this might 'follow.' On this understanding, it is *not* the case that we can derive the one claim from the other. Instead, what Socrates is indicating is that if the first claim is true, then the basis of Callicles' critique of the Polus argument is removed; the critique therefore fails. But if the critique fails, this means that the argument against Polus is vindicated and can remain in effect; the efficacy and cogency of it are not compromised.

More importantly, the approach I am suggesting *also* gives us a new lens through which to examine the intervening pages between 491d3 to 508b8. For now, we should see those pages *not* as offering positive arguments for the claim that doing injustice is worse or more shameful than suffering it. Instead, their function is to attack the basis underlying and informing Callicles' critique of (A). According to this approach, the discussion from 491d3 to 508b8, despite appearances to the contrary, *does* constitute a response to Callicles' critique, but it responds indirectly by attempting to remove the basis of that critique, that is, by arguing that the commitments underlying and informing that critique are false.

In order, therefore, to show that and how 491d8-508b3 attack what I am calling the basis

of Callicles' critique, we need to determine what that basis is and how it underlies and informs the critique. It is to this issue that I turn in the next section.

4. RESPONDING TO CALLICLES' CRITIQUE

The central claim of Callicles' critique is that doing injustice is more shameful by convention, but not by nature, than suffering injustice. This is a twofold claim: first, that doing injustice is more shameful by convention than suffering it and, second, that doing injustice is not more shameful by nature than suffering it. The first claim seems uncontroversial, for all the parties to the debate appear to agree with it; it is, rather, the second claim that occasions dispute and doubt. In light of this dispute, it is natural to ask *why* Callicles is so convinced that doing injustice is not more shameful by nature than suffering it. Partly this rests on how Callicles appears to understand what it is for something to be "more shameful by nature" than something else. For immediately after his critique, Callicles remarks:

For everything more shameful by nature is also worse, like suffering injustice, whereas by convention doing it is more shameful. (483a7-8)

Clearly, therefore, Callicles thinks that doing injustice is not more shameful by nature than suffering it *because* he thinks that suffering it is actually worse than doing it. Callicles' commitment to the latter claim is emphasized by how he goes on in the passage:

No, no man would put up with suffering what's unjust; only a slave would do so, one who is better dead than alive,

who when he's treated unjustly and abused can't protect himself or anyone else he cares about. I believe that the people who institute our conventions are the weak and the many. They do this, and they assign praise and blame with themselves and their own advantage in mind. They're afraid of the more powerful among men, the ones who are capable of having a greater share [πλέον ἔχειν], and so they say that getting more than one's share [τὸ πλεονεκτεῖν] is "shameful" and "unjust," and that doing injustice is trying to get more than one's share [τὸ πλεον τῶν ἄλλων ζητεῖν ἔχειν]. They do this so that those people won't get a greater share [πλέον ἔχωσιν] than they. I think they like getting an equal share, since they are inferior.

These are the reasons why trying to get a greater share than most [τὸ πλεον ζητεῖν ἔχειν] is said to be unjust and shameful by convention and why they call it doing injustice. But I believe that nature itself reveals that it's a just thing for the better man and the more capable man to have a greater share [πλέον ἔχειν] than the worse man and the less capable man. (483a8-d2)

Callicles here further expresses his conviction that suffering injustice is worse than doing injustice, going so far as to claim that suffering injustice is the worst thing there is – so much so that death is preferable to a life of suffering injustice. By contrast, the life of doing injustice is portrayed as good and even just according to nature, though not of course according to convention.

This passage is also helpful because in it Callicles articulates more precisely *what* he

means by doing injustice and suffering injustice. It is clear that he equates *doing injustice* with something like “getting more than one’s fair share”: τὸ πλεονεκτεῖν or τὸ πλεόν ἔχειν.¹¹ Hence, to do injustice is to get or have more than is equitable, while presumably suffering injustice is precisely the opposite: to get *less* than is equitable. In Callicles’ world, it is naturally just for the superior few to get and have more than their equitable share at the expense of the inferior many who thereby have less than their equitable share.

We might expect Socrates to defend himself from Callicles’ critique by attacking his view of justice/injustice, but he does not do so. Nowhere in 491d3 to 508b8 does Socrates explicitly and directly attack the view that doing injustice is good, while suffering injustice is bad, indeed, the worst thing. Nor does he attack the view that doing injustice is getting more than one’s share and suffering it is getting less – indeed, it is natural to suppose that Socrates *agrees* with this characterization of doing/suffering injustice. Instead of addressing Callicles’ view of doing/suffering injustice, Socrates proceeds to depart from a discussion of justice/injustice altogether, preferring to move on to a discussion of temperance. Indeed, the dominant topic of discussion from 491d3 to 508b8 is precisely temperance. Even the two arguments deployed against hedonism at 495a–499b are deployed against a view that Callicles appears to take to *follow* from his elevation of intemperance as a virtue, as Sommerville notes: “Callicles appears to view the limitless pursuit of pleasure as a corollary to his deepest commitment, namely, the view that the superior man ought reject all restraint.”¹² Moreover, while Callicles does eventually abandon his commitment to hedonism, saying that his commitment to it was nothing more than a joke and that he

clearly accepts that some pleasures are better and others worse (499b4–8), it is clear that he never relinquishes his commitment to intemperance, for Socrates still feels obliged to argue against it once Callicles has relinquished his commitment to hedonism.

The turn towards temperance is strikingly abrupt. Socrates begins by trying to further articulate Callicles’ views about the nature of the superior few for whom it is naturally just to do injustice, requesting that Callicles tell him whom he means by the better and the superior and what they are better and superior in (491c4–5). Callicles replies that he means those who are fitting rulers of cities (491c7–8), at which point Socrates raises the question whether these rulers will rule themselves “with a suddenness that causes most commentators to take notice.”¹³ Several questions arise about this abrupt change of course towards temperance: what is its relation to the foregoing discussion of justice/injustice? Why does Socrates shift the discussion in the way he does? Now, it is noteworthy that, while Callicles initially finds it difficult to understand Socrates’ question, when he finally realizes what Socrates is asking – namely, whether the superior few will be temperate – he has no difficulty in seeing the connection to the earlier discussion about justice/injustice:

...this is what’s admirable and just by nature—and I’ll say it to you now with all frankness—that the man who’ll live correctly ought to allow his own appetites to get as large as possible and not restrain them. And when they are as large as possible, he ought to be competent to devote himself to them by virtue of his bravery and intelligence, and to fill them with whatever he may have an appetite

for at the time. But this isn't possible for the many, I believe; hence, they become detractors of people like this because of the shame they feel, while they conceal their own impotence. And they say that lack of discipline is shameful, as I was saying earlier, and so they enslave men who are better by nature, and while they themselves lack the ability to provide for themselves fulfillment for their pleasures, their own lack of courage leads them to praise self-control and justice [τὴν σωφροσύνην καὶ τὴν δικαιοσύνην]. As for all those who were either sons of kings to begin with or else naturally competent to secure some position of rule for themselves as tyrants or potentates, what in truth could be more shameful and worse than self-control and justice [σωφροσύνης καὶ δικαιοσύνης] for these people who, although they are free to enjoy good things without any interference, should bring as master upon themselves the convention of the many, their talk, and their criticism? Or how could they exist without becoming miserable under that "admirable" regime of justice and self-control [τῆς δικαιοσύνης καὶ τῆς σωφροσύνης], allotting no greater share to their friends than to their enemies, and in this way "rule" in their cities? Rather, the truth of it, Socrates—the thing you claim to pursue—is like this: wantonness, lack of discipline, and freedom, if available in good supply, are excellence and happiness; as for these other things, these fancy phrases, these contracts of men that go against nature, they're worthless nonsense! (491e6-492c8)

It is natural to focus discussion of this passage on Callicles' elevation of intemperance to a sort of virtue. Certainly, there can be no doubt that he thinks that a good and happy life is one in which an individual encourages her appetites to become as large as possible and employs intelligence and bravery in satisfying them – this is a picture of the happy, good, and virtuous life as precisely the life of unrestrained intemperance, a life of "wantonness, lack of discipline, and freedom."

But there is another aspect of Callicles' discussion worthy of note for our purposes and that is the connection between justice and temperance. Three times in this passage, Callicles yokes together temperance and justice. Indeed, an interpreter could understandably suppose that he identifies the two virtues. But, in fact, there is a weaker reading of his grouping of them together, one that has the benefit of a textual basis. Later in the *Gorgias*, Socrates remarks on an important connection between temperance and justice:

And surely a self-controlled person would do what's appropriate with respect to both gods and human beings. For if he does what's inappropriate, he wouldn't be self-controlled. —That's necessarily how it is. — And of course if he did what's appropriate with respect to human beings, he would be doing what's just, and with respect to gods he would be doing what's pious, and one who does what's just and pious must necessarily be just and pious. —That's so. (507a7-b4)

In this passage, Socrates takes doing what's just to *follow from* temperance: the temperate person will do what is appropriate and that means that in the specific case of relation to other hu-

man beings, she will do what is just. Indeed, on this view, doing what is just is nothing more than behaving temperately in relation to other human beings. Precisely this conception of the relation between justice and temperance seems to inform Callicles' discussion in the passage. Now, it is true that at this stage of the discussion, Callicles is sulking and refuses to participate in Socrates' arguments, but his fundamental objection is to Socrates' view that temperance and justice are virtues, not that temperance and justice are related in the way Socrates suggests. Indeed, nothing in Socrates' characterization of the *relation* between temperance and justice should strike Callicles as inconsistent with his position.

One might wonder, at this point, why I have been emphasizing the connection between justice and temperance. The reason is, I think it explains *why* Socrates (and Plato behind him) shift the discussion to one about temperance. For it is precisely Callicles' views about temperance and intemperance, specifically, his view that temperance is a vice and intemperance a virtue, which underwrite his views about doing and suffering injustice. Recall that doing injustice for Callicles is understood as getting more than one's fair share. I want to suggest that, in the language of the previous passage, getting more than one's fair share is *precisely* what results when one encourages one's appetites to get as large as possible and satisfies them; by contrast, getting less than one's fair share is precisely what results when one's appetites are not satisfied and perhaps even frustrated. In other words, Callicles thinks doing injustice is good and suffering injustice is bad *because* he views the life of intemperance (at least when one's appetites are satisfied) as happy and good and the life of temperance as bad and miserable.

If the previous line of thinking is correct, then the shift to a discussion of the temperate vs. the intemperate life should be seen as an at-

tempt to address the commitments underlying Callicles' critique. To see this, it will help if I briefly draw the various threads of my discussion together. Callicles' critique of (A) partly turns on his contention that doing injustice is worse than suffering it. His conception of doing injustice and suffering injustice is informed by and dependent upon a view he has about what the good life is for a human being. On this view, the best and happiest life for a human being is an intemperate life of maximal appetitive satisfaction, the worst and most miserable life is a temperate one of appetitive frustration. Socrates in 491d3 to 508b8 is concerned to attack specifically Callicles' view of the best and worst lives, precisely by inverting Callicles' conception and showing that, in his words, "it is...by possession of justice and temperance that the happy are happy and that the wretched are...wretched by the possession of vice." In so attacking Callicles' position, however, he attacks the basis of Callicles' critique of (A): it is, after all, this conception of the good, happy life and the bad, miserable one that informs and determines that critique. By attacking the basis of Callicles' critique of (A), Socrates effectively nullifies the critique that it gives rise to. Once that critique has been shown to fail, (A) is thereby vindicated and can remain in force. According to my account, we can now read 491d3 to 508b8 as, in effect, an extended response to Callicles' critique in his ῥῆσις, a response designed to reinstate as legitimate (A) by showing that the critique of it rests on false foundations.

CONCLUSION

One of the central aims of Callicles' rich and varied ῥῆσις is to criticize Socrates' dialectical behaviour in his arguments with previous interlocutors in the dialogue. Callicles'

critique of Socrates' discussion with Polus is particularly pointed and focused, centering as it does on the argument that doing injustice is worse than suffering it. One of my aims in this paper has been to carefully and precisely explain Callicles' critique of this argument. I have also endeavoured to show that the critique should not be treated as an isolated broadside against Socratic methods of argument in the dialogue. For by means of it, Plato returns us to an earlier argument for a claim that is among the most important and central of the entire dialogue. In so doing, Plato primes us to see the discussion following Callicles' ῥῆσις as designed to respond to that critique. However, apart from one isolated argument that conspicuously fails, Socrates does not seem to respond directly to the critique by arguing for the conclusion that doing injustice is worse than suffering it. I argue that the reason we encounter no such argument is that Socrates adopts a different tactic in responding to Callicles' critique. Instead of meeting it head-on and trying to repair or supplement the argument that it criticizes, Socrates proceeds by attacking the basis of the critique in Callicles' deeper commitments. Among these deeper commitments is Callicles' view of the good and happy life as a life of appetite's unrestrained encouragement and fulfillment. In attacking this view, Socrates aims to disarm Callicles' critique by showing that it depends upon a false foundation. In thus proceeding, Socrates is able to vindicate the original argument that doing injustice is worse than suffering it by showing that the Calliclean critique lapses.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 All translations of the text are adapted with occasional alterations from Zeyl 1987 in consultation with Irwin 1979. The Greek text employed is Dodds 1959.
- 2 Vlastos 1967.
- 3 Following Vlastos in the charge of invalidity: Irwin 1979, 157–8 and Santas 1979, 236–9. Arguing instead for validity: Kahn 1983, 87–92, Berman 1991, Johnson 1989, 200–2, and Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi 2017.
- 4 For discussion of the issue specifically in relation to the *Gorgias*, see Kahn 1983, 110–121; for the general issue, see Vlastos 1983.

- 5 Kahn 1983, 110.
- 6 Kahn 1983, 86-7.
- 7 We have here a conspicuous instance of what Doyle
2021, 66 calls “the alter ego theme” in the *Gorgias*.
See also Doyle 2021, 63-4.
- 8 See, for instance, Archie 1984 and Johnson 1989,
200-2.
- 9 Doyle 2021, 77.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 For the significance of these phrases and the cog-
nate term *πλεονεξία*, see Balot 2024, 178.
- 12 Sommerville 2014, 240.
- 13 Klosko 1984, 127.

