Gorgias

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PLATO PLATO

Plato is one of the most important philosophers who ever lived, and his thought has influenced the entire subsequent Western philosophical tradition. He was born Aristocles into an aristocratic Greek family, along with two brothers and a sister. The young Aristocles was said to have been given his nickname, Plato, by his wrestling coach (*platon* means "broad" in Greek). According to tradition, in his youth, Plato wanted to become a playwright—but in his late teens or early twenties, he heard Socrates teaching in the marketplace and decided to devote his life to philosophy. Plato continued to study under Socrates until the age of 28, in 399 B.C.E, when the older philosopher was tried and executed for impiety. After this, Plato spent time traveling around the Mediterranean before settling down in Athens to write and establish his Academy, the predecessor of the modern university; Aristotle became his most famous student. The Academy persisted until 86 B.C.E. Plato also invented the dialogue, a literary form which depicts a conversation between one or more characters with the goal of solving a problem or uncovering a profound truth. Some of Plato's most famous dialogues (he wrote more than 20) include *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *The Symposium*, and the *Republic*. Plato died at the age of 81.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In Plato's day, oratory, or rhetoric, was becoming popular in elite Athenian circles—both listening to speeches and training in specialized schools (such as Isocrates's school of rhetoric, founded shortly before Plato's own Academy). The sophists, itinerant teachers of rhetoric (like Gorgias), claimed to be able to impart a comprehensive body of knowledge—a claim which Plato (through the character of Socrates) noticeably resists throughout the dialogues, especially *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias*. The historical Gorgias was a Sicilian-born sophist who lived from c. 483–375 B.C.E. Despite Plato's contempt for Gorgias's methods, Gorgias's highly ornamented and paradoxical style had a strong influence on classical Greek rhetoric. Finally, Plato's own influence as a philosopher made both an immediate and ongoing cultural impact—his most famous Academy student, Aristotle, became the tutor of the young Alexander the Great, and Plato's writings launched the academic discipline of philosophy from antiquity onward.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Another dialogue in which Plato addresses the subject of rhetoric—arguing that it must be concerned both with truth and with the nature of the soul—is *Phaedrus*, likely written a bit later in Plato's career. The *Republic*, his most famous work, develops Plato's ideas about politics and the ideal city-state, which are touched on toward the end of *Gorgias*. Aristotle, who studied under Plato at his Academy, built off of Plato's views on speech in his treatise *On Rhetoric*, perhaps the most important work on the art of persuasion up to modern times. Plato cites Homer's *Odyssey*, one of the foundational works of Greek literature, in his account of the judgment of souls.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Gorgias
- **When Written:** c. 380 B.C.E.
- **Where Written:** Athens, Greece
- **Literary Period:** Classical Greek
- **Genre:** Socratic dialogue
- **Setting:** 5th-century B.C.E. Athens, Greece
- **Antagonist:** Orators; Politicians

EXTRA CREDIT

Gorgias the Philosopher. The historical Gorgias was one of the founding sophists, or "wise men," who traveled around the Hellenic world delivering oratory and providing oratorical instruction for a fee. Though Gorgias voiced criticisms of philosophy much as Plato criticized rhetoric, Gorgias authored philosophical writings himself, notably *On Non-Existence*, which considers the nature of being and the limits of knowledge.

Ancient Artifact. Though ancient papyrus fragments survive, the oldest surviving full manuscript which contains *Gorgias*—a Greek volume catalogued as the "Clarke Plato"—was commissioned by a Cappadocian bishop in 895 C.E. It is now housed in Oxford's Bodleian Library.

PLOT SUMMARY

Socrates (a philosopher), Chaerephon (Socrates's follower), and Callicles (a politician) are talking outside a public building where Gorgias (a famous orator) has just given a talk. Socrates missed the lecture, but he wants to have a face-to-face dialogue with Gorgias, which his friends arrange. Specifically, Socrates wants to learn what Gorgias's craft accomplishes. Gorgias identifies his craft as oratory and himself as an orator. He says that oratory's goal is making speeches, especially speeches that persuade audiences in public settings. Socrates presses for specifics, so Gorgias explains that oratory's speeches are

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concerned with what's just and unjust. Socrates also presses him to distinguish between knowledge and persuasion—orators don't teach about what's just and unjust, Gorgias admits, but rather persuade. In other words, orators don't actually have to be experts in the subject they're speaking about; they just have to *appear* that way in front of fellow non-experts.

Gorgias also says that orators shouldn't be blamed if their students use their oratorical skills in an unjust manner—much like a boxing trainer wouldn't be blamed if his student attacked others for no reason. Seeking clarification, Socrates asks if it's true that someone who knows about a particular subject is the sort of person his expertise makes him—for example, someone who's learned what is just would be a just person. When Gorgias agrees, Socrates says Gorgias is being inconsistent here. After all, if oratory is concerned with what's just (making its practitioners just), then an orator wouldn't use his skill unjustly, as in Gorgias's earlier example.

At this point, youthful orator Polus jumps in indignantly, saying Socrates is being rude and wanting to know what sort of craft oratory is according to Socrates. Socrates says he doesn't think oratory is a craft at all; rather, it's merely a knack that gives people satisfaction and pleasure. Moreover, it's a form of flattery: orators flatter audiences much like pastry bakers gratify their customers. Socrates thinks that both body and soul have crafts which deal with them, like **medicine** for the body and justice for the soul. Flattery masks itself as a craft and pretends to be concerned for people's benefit, but it's really just concerned with giving people what's pleasant at the time. A craft also has an understanding of its subject which enables it to aim at the subject's long-term benefit, whereas a knack doesn't need such an understanding.

When invited to respond, Polus argues that orators are admirable because, like tyrants, they hold the most power in a city—they can have people exiled or put to death, after all. Socrates counters that this isn't actually true, because tyrants aren't really doing what they *want* to do. Expanding on this, he argues that we want what's good, and we do things for the sake of a greater good (like taking unpleasant medicine for health's sake). If an orator or tyrant executes someone unjustly (not for a greater good) while believing it's a good thing to do, then is he really doing what he wants? Polus concedes that he's not.

Socrates builds on this point by arguing that acting unjustly is actually a greater evil than suffering what's unjust. Polus agrees that people who act unjustly deserve punishment, but that many have evaded punishment and are therefore happy. Socrates denies that an unjust person can be happy unless he faces the consequences of his crime. After all, justice is a kind of discipline which rids the soul of the corruption caused by unjust behavior. Therefore, the person whose soul has been rid of evil is happier than the one who's gotten away with committing it. Oratory, Socrates suggests, is useless unless it encourages the unjust to face discipline for the sake of the soul's benefit.

Callicles chimes in, accusing Socrates of simply trying to please his audience. Furthermore, he disagrees with Socrates's view of what's just and unjust. He thinks that most claims about what's "unjust" are really just the weak trying to unfairly restrain the strong—he deems it natural for the "superior" to rule the "inferior" in society. Socrates would grasp this, he thinks, if Socrates didn't waste his time on philosophy and engaged in public life instead. Socrates pushes back, arguing that even if it were true that supposedly superior people *should* rule society, their ability to rule themselves—to control their appetites—is the most important thing. Callicles thinks this is ridiculous, because he equates an excellent life with one that lacks discipline (i.e., unrestrained fulfillment of one's desires).

Socrates wants to prove to Callicles that, on the contrary, the orderly life is always to be preferred to the undisciplined one. He draws a distinction between the pleasant and the good. He demonstrates this by pointing out that experiencing something pleasant (like a refreshing drink) doesn't mean that someone is actually doing well (he might still be dying of thirst). The more important point is to draw a distinction between benefit and harm. That is, some pleasures are actually harmful, while some pains are beneficial. Socrates suggests that a craftsman is needed in order to discern between good and bad pleasures. This whole discussion ultimately comes down to the best way to live: is it better to engage in political life or philosophy?

Socrates and Callicles agree that there are forms of flattery that apply to the soul as well as the body, with oratory being the ultimate one. Most orators aren't concerned with helping to create good citizens; they're only concerned to gratify their audiences and promote their own interests. Socrates suggests that the soul should be well-organized, and that a good orator (if such existed) would consider the nature of the well-ordered soul when giving his speeches—much as a doctor would consider long-term health when applying the craft of medicine to the body.

Returning to the subject of committing versus suffering injustice, Callicles asserts that the best way to protect oneself against suffering injustice is to obtain power in one's city. In other words, the most important thing is to seek long life at all costs, using things like oratory to avoid political danger. Socrates argues that there is more to goodness than simply the preservation of life—it's more important to live *well* in whatever time one has. He further argues that if it's the concern of politics to make a city and its citizens as good as possible, then what a city really needs isn't someone who will flatter people by telling them what they want to hear, but someone who will treat people's souls by aiming at what's best for them.

This being the case, Socrates agrees with Callicles that Socrates would likely fare poorly in court. People don't want to hear that a philosopher's harsh words were intended for their own benefit, any more than a child wants to hear that a doctor's

painful treatments were better for them than a baker's pastries. But that's okay: Socrates doesn't fear an adverse judgment in court or anything else people could do to him. He only fears facing the final judgment in Hades with a corrupted soul. Using a story of the judgment of souls from Homer's *Odyssey* as an example, Socrates urges Callicles to join him in pursuing the best life possible. That way, Callicles won't arrive at the final judgment with a corrupted soul, unable to defend himself.

The dialogue concludes with Socrates summarizing his argument. He maintains that it's been proven that doing what's unjust is worse than suffering it, and that being good is more important than *seeming* to be good; that discipline is good and flattery is bad; and that oratory should only be used in support of what's just. If someone wants to be happy both in this life and in the afterlife, that person should follow the way of philosophy, not the worthless pursuit of politics and oratory.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Socrates – Socrates (c. 470 B.C.E.–399 B.C.E.) was Plato's teacher and appears as a main character in many of Plato's dialogues, including *Gorgias*. Though he left no writings of his own, he is considered the founder of Western philosophy. He was executed for alleged impiety at the end of his life. In *Gorgias*, Socrates engages in dialogues with orators Gorgias and Polus and politician Callicles. His preferred dialogic method is called dialectic, an exchange of questions and answers designed to arrive at an understanding of the nature of something. His major arguments include the point that doing what's unjust is worse than suffering what's unjust, that discipline is good while flattery and mindless indulgence are bad, and ultimately that oratory (persuasive speech) should only be used in support of what is just. In Socrates's view, the oratory of his day is not used in that manner and is therefore useless. Socrates also argues that the philosophical life is superior to the political life, which he believes relies upon oratorical flattery and false posturing. Because Socrates aims at the improvement of people's souls (making them better citizens), not at flattering and indulging them with what they want to hear, he holds that he is Athens' truest politician.

Callicles – Callicles was a politician and host of famous orator Gorgias. Callicles thinks nature is more important than law (or culture)—that is, he thinks it's natural for the strong to rule over the weak, rather than for the weak to dominate the strong by imposing laws. In *Gorgias*, this opinion makes him the opposite of Socrates (who represents Plato's own views) throughout their dialogue. He also opposes Socrates in his ardent belief in the superiority of politics to philosophy, and he criticizes Socrates as childish, weak, and irrelevant for favoring philosophy. He further argues that it's natural and admirable for people to indulge their appetites as much as possible, leading Socrates to argue for a distinction between the pleasurable and the good, and that a self-controlled life is better than an indulgent one. Socrates finally disproves Callicles's view of the superiority politics by arguing that it's not power and long life that are most important, but the improvement of the soul for the sake of both earthly life and the afterlife.

Gorgias of Leontini – The titular Gorgias was an influential rhetorician and orator. At the beginning of the dialogue, Gorgias has just delivered a lecture to an admiring crowd. Then, Socrates initiates a dialogue with Gorgias, wanting to learn what his craft of oratory is all about. Gorgias says that oratory's goal is to persuade audiences regarding what is just and unjust, and that it's not necessary for orators to be experts in their subjects, only to *appear* to be. Gorgias comes across as rather boastful, claiming that nobody's asked him a new question in years, and that nobody's better at giving brief answers than he is. Socrates identifies holes in Gorgias's arguments in order to prove his own points about the shortcomings of oratory—especially Gorgias's claim that orators don't have to be experts in what's just.

Polus – Polus is an orator with whom Socrates dialogues. Socrates describes him as youthful and impulsive; he is quick to defend Gorgias and quick to take offense at Socrates's questioning. In the dialogue, he tends to give long, ornate speeches instead of short, clear answers, which Plato likely intends as a parody of the historical Gorgias's oratorical style. Polus tries to argue that orators are admirable because of their political power and that powerful people who escape punishment for their unjust behavior can be truly happy. Socrates counters that only someone whose soul has been purged of corruption can be happy.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Chaerephon – Chaerephon is Socrates's close friend and follower. He's also friends with Gorgias and gets him to speak to Socrates personally after Chaerephon and Socrates miss his public lecture. He speaks little in the dialogue.

TERMS

Oratory – The Greek term for oratory is *rhetorike*, or "rhetoric." Oratory is defined by **Gorgias** as persuasive speech. This kind of speech occupied a very important role in Athens in the fifth century B.C.E., as citizens could use it to try to influence outcomes in Athens' political institutions. This also meant that oratory was a key to personal advancement in career and society. Popular orators, called sophists, won acclaim for their public oratorical performances. In *Gorgias*, **Socrates** argues that

oratory, as practiced in his day, is mere flattery that isn't truly concerned about the improvement of people's souls.

Craft – According to **Socrates**, a craft, or *techne*, is a procedure which is moving toward some specific end, and something which its practitioner intends to produce a specific good. It aims to bring about some greater benefit, and it must have an account of the nature of the thing it's dealing with. Socrates distinguishes a craft from a knack, in that a knack lacks such an account of something's nature and doesn't aim at a greater benefit.

Knack – A knack, *empeiria* in Greek, roughly translates to "experience." **Socrates** distinguishes a knack from a craft in that a knack—such as flattery—aims at what is pleasant at the moment, not at a long-term benefit. A knack doesn't account for the nature of the thing it's dealing with. For example, a doctor (a craftsman) must have an understanding of the nature of health in order to aim at people's healing, but a pastry baker (who has a knack) doesn't require any understanding in order to aim at pleasing people.

THEMES

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THE PRACTICE AND GOAL OF ORATORY

Gorgias, a dialogue by Plato written around 380 B.C.E., primarily explores the nature of oratory, or the art of public speaking. In Ancient Greece, oratory, or rhetoric, was central to social and political life. Particularly in Athens, any free citizen could speak before political bodies such as the Assembly, Council, or law courts, using their persuasive skills to influence important decisions. Oratory, then, was an important tool for realizing one's political ambitions. Traveling orators called sophists even earned popular acclaim for their rhetorical talents. In *Gorgias*, however, the philosopher Socrates questions whether oratory is truly beneficial to society. The dialogue is set in Athens, where a wealthy, sought-after orator named Gorgias has just given a flashy oratorical performance. Socrates didn't attend the speech, so he questions Gorgias about it directly—a discussion that delves into the nature and goal of oratory. By having Socrates point out the inconsistencies between Gorgias's views of the practice and the goal of oratory, Plato argues that oratory, as practiced in his day, doesn't truly benefit society.

Both Socrates and Gorgias agree that the goal of oratory is to persuade listeners about what is just and unjust. According to Socrates, oratory, as a craft (or art), must have a goal—it must produce something. For example, weaving produces clothes, and composition creates music. According to Gorgias, the product of oratory is persuasion. He even asserts that oratory is "the source of freedom for mankind itself and […] the source of rule over others in one's own city." In other words, oratory is the ability to persuade crowds, especially political bodies that meet in public. As Socrates restates Gorgias's point, "oratory is a producer of persuasion." With the overarching purpose of oratory firmly established, Socrates then asks what oratory produces persuasion *about*. After all, one distinguishes a painter from other painters by asking what his paintings are about. And there are other crafts that produce persuasion about their particular subjects (for instance, mathematics). Gorgias replies that oratory produces persuasion about what is just and unjust, thus establishing a clear goal.

But because oratory's goal is persuasion, an orator doesn't actually have to be an expert in his subject matter—an orator only needs to *appear* to be an expert. Socrates proposes that there are two types of persuasion: "one providing conviction without knowledge, the other providing knowledge." He and Gorgias agree that oratory produces conviction without knowledge. It's not the same as teaching, in other words, which is concerned with instilling specific information. Through persuasive skill, an orator can merely *appear* to be an expert. After all, Gorgias explains, "if an orator and a **doctor** came to any city anywhere you like and had to compete in speaking […] over which of them should be appointed doctor, the doctor wouldn't make any showing at all, but the one who had the ability to speak would be appointed, if he so wished. […] That's how great the accomplishment of this craft is, and the sort of accomplishment it is!" Essentially, an orator has the skill to be more persuasive in a gathering (of others who aren't experts, presumably) than one who actually *has* knowledge about the subject at hand. So, in short, oratory is basically just a persuasive tool. As Socrates sums it up, "Oratory doesn't need to have any knowledge of the state of [a subject]; it only needs to have discovered a persuasion device in order to make itself appear to those who don't have knowledge that it knows more than those who actually do have it." Given that he has already explained that the purpose of oratory is to persuade people about what is just versus unjust, Gorgias is implicitly saying that an orator doesn't actually have to have any real knowledge surrounding justice and injustice; they only need to look like they do.

Countering Gorgias, Socrates argues that oratory cannot really serve justice unless orators are experts in what is just—and orators can only be experts in justice if they are just themselves. Socrates asks how it can be that oratory is concerned with what's just unless orators actually know that themselves: "Does he devise persuasion about [justice and injustice], so that—even though he doesn't know—he seems […] to know more than someone who actually does know? Or is it

necessary for him to know, and must the prospective student of oratory already possess this expertise before coming to you?" In other words, a student of oratory has to know what is just in order to become persuasive on the subject. Socrates further argues that "a man who has learned a particular subject [is] the sort of man his expertise makes him." In other words, a person who has learned what is just does just things. And it follows that an orator who's speaking about what's just would also *be* just. Ultimately, then, Socrates argues that an orator cannot both be concerned with persuading others regarding what is just and unjust *and* merely give the appearance of expertise in this matter. Unless an orator is himself just, he cannot persuade others regarding justice.

Ironically, it takes a philosopher (Socrates) to explain the practice of oratory, not an orator (Gorgias) himself. This turns out to be significant for the arguments Plato will offer in the remainder of the dialogue about the nature of justice, the nature of a good life, and the relative value of orators and philosophers in commending that life to others. Already, though, it's evident that Plato's opinion of the practice of oratory in his day was not very high.

JUSTICE, INJUSTICE, AND THE TREATMENT OF THE SOUL

After Socrates questions Gorgias about the practice of oratory, debunking some of Gorgias's claims about it, a man named Polus who has been following the conversation indignantly questions Socrates. If Socrates doesn't think Gorgias understands oratory properly, then what does Socrates say it is—what sort of a craft is it? To Polus's surprise, Socrates replies that he doesn't think oratory is a craft at all. A craft, like **medicine**, is concerned with bringing about some greater benefit. Oratory, in contrast, is merely a knack—specifically, it's a knack "for producing a certain gratification and pleasure," much like flattery. Although Gorgias had stated earlier that oratory is concerned with what's just and unjust, Socrates now argues that oratory—with its flattering tendency—isn't up to the task, especially since injustice, in Socrates's view, is the greatest evil a soul can suffer. Through an examination of what happens to a soul when it's marred by injustice, Plato argues that oratory, as a preoccupation with pleasure, is unsuited to deal with humanity's most serious problem.

Socrates argues that oratory is a knack, not a craft, because it only seeks to give pleasure. According to Socrates, both the body and the soul have "crafts" that correspond to them. The body has a craft in two parts: gymnastics and medicine. The craft for the soul is called politics, which further divides into legislation (corresponding to gymnastics), and justice (corresponding to medicine). Both body and soul have a state of fitness which those crafts work to create and maintain, and an "apparent state of fitness" that's just an illusion. One can merely *look* physically fit, for example, and only a doctor or a trainer could easily determine otherwise. Contrary to expectations, Socrates argues that oratory doesn't actually fit the description of any of the crafts. In fact, oratory, because it flatters, is actually a "knack," not a craft. In other words, it doesn't promote the genuine fitness of body or soul, but merely the *appearance* of fitness. To illustrate flattery, Socrates describes a pastry baker who pretends to be an expert in nutrition. If the pastry baker and a doctor had to compete in front of a group of children to determine which of them is the real nutritional expert, the pastry baker would definitely win. Flattery, then, "guesses at what's pleasant with no consideration for what's best." Unlike a craft, which has a beneficial goal, a knack like oratory doesn't really understand the nature of the things it's dealing with (such as the soul), because it simply doesn't need to.

Socrates explains that having injustice in one's soul is the worst possible evil and requires treatment, not flattery. Committing injustice is worse than suffering injustice. From Socrates's perspective, someone who puts another to death unjustly, for example, should be pitied more than the person who is unjustly put to death. This is because, according to Socrates, doing what's unjust is the greatest of evils. Dealing with injustice requires the long-term treatment of a craft, not just the "knack" of oratorical flattery. Justice is inherently admirable, so if a person is being justly disciplined (meaning that the injustice in the soul is being rooted out), then an admirable thing is happening to that person—a good thing not in the sense of being pleasant but of being beneficial. Because having injustice in the soul is such an evil, a person who purges this evil through unpleasant discipline is actually happier than one who manages to avoid discipline. Just as a child is fearful of the pain of medical treatment because he doesn't understand the nature of health, so someone who avoids facing discipline is "blind to [the] benefit" of discipline and "ignorant of how much more miserable it is to live with an unhealthy soul than with an unhealthy body." So while suffering injustice is an evil, the most serious evil is letting the injustice in one's soul go untreated; such a person is miserable, despite what they might think at the time.

Because proper treatment for the soul is as crucial as proper treatment of the body, listening to a flattering orator is worse than useless—much like taking a pastry baker's advice about nutrition. If someone cares about having acted unjustly, Plato argues through Socrates that such a person should go to the place where the evil in their soul can be treated, "anxious that the disease of injustice shouldn't […] cause his soul to fester incurably." Oratory, then, is not suited to dealing with life's most pressing problem.

THE PLEASANT LIFE VS. THE GOOD LIFE

After his debates with Gorgias and Polus, Socrates builds on his arguments about oratory and the soul in an exchange with politician Callicles. Callicles argues that if too many people engage in philosophy, or if a person engages in it for too long, humanity will be undone. According to Callicles, someone who engages in philosophy excessively is ignorant of what constitutes a good life—not just in public fields like law or business, but "also in human pleasures and appetites and, in short, […] in the ways of human beings altogether." Socrates, in contrast, equates philosophy with the best life because it's "the life that is adequate to and satisfied with its circumstances at any given time instead of the insatiable, undisciplined life." In other words, he thinks that Callicles misunderstands what goodness really is. By drawing a distinction between the pleasurable and the good, Plato argues through Socrates that an orderly life governed by philosophy isn't naïve or inhumane, as Callicles has portrayed it, but is actually the truly good life.

Callicles argues that the best life entails the indulgence of one's appetites. When Socrates tells Callicles that a person must rule himself by "being self-controlled […], ruling the pleasures and appetites within oneself," Callicles rejects this. Instead, he argues 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." In other words, the good life doesn't consist of restraining one's desires, as Socrates maintains, but of knowing how to indulge one's desires in the best way possible. Excellence, Callicles argues, is the fulfillment of one's appetites. It can't be true, as Socrates suggests, that those who have no need of anything are happy—if that were true, then "stones and corpses would be happiest." In Callicle's eyes, such people are inert and lifeless, missing out on what makes a person human.

To counter Callicles's view of the happy life, Socrates argues that what is pleasant is different from what is good. Socrates argues that the good has to be something more than just pleasure. The good, in other words, can't be "just unrestricted enjoyment." For one thing, one can experience pleasure without experiencing something good. Socrates uses the example of thirst to demonstrate that one can be suffering pain (being thirsty) at the same time that he's feeling enjoyment (drinking). A thirsty person isn't necessarily in a good state just because he's experiencing the momentary pleasure of a drink. So then, "feeling enjoyment isn't the same as doing well […] the result is that what's pleasant turns out to be different from what's good." Pleasure might strongly resemble goodness and even overlap with it, but one must be able to discern the difference in order to live well. Further, good and bad people experience pain and pleasure to about the same degree, which reinforces the idea that the good and the pleasant aren't the same. To unpack this, Socrates points out that Callicles has taken for granted that if one feels enjoyment, it's because of the presence of good things in him; so one who feels enjoyment is a good man. Likewise, one who feels pain because of the presence of bad things in him would be considered bad. Yet, Socrates points out, Callicles had also argued that an intelligent and brave man is good, while a foolish and cowardly one is bad—but that both men feel pain and enjoyment to the same degree. So if pleasant things are the same as good things, this would mean that the bad man "is both good and bad to the same degree as the good man." Callicles's view of goodness, then, requires greater nuance.

In the end, Socrates says, not all pleasures are good—clearly, some are good and others are bad. Socrates and Callicles come to an agreement that good pleasures are beneficial ones, and bad pleasures are harmful ones. In the same way, there are both beneficial and harmful pains. It makes sense, then, that a person desiring a good life should pursue good things—beneficial pleasures and pains—rather than pursue pleasure indiscriminately. In addition, pleasant things should be done for the sake of ultimately good (beneficial) things and not good things for the sake of merely pleasant things. A life that's oriented toward the good instead of the merely pleasurable also requires a craftsman's ability to draw distinctions. That is, not everyone can determine which pleasures are good or bad. Socrates's implication here is that philosophy isn't just something to be pursued in moderation or for a certain period of life, but that the craft of philosophy is always needed in order to help a person orient their life properly. In short, because philosophy governs the appetites in the right way, philosophy is essential to the good life—it's not something that's out of touch with what makes us human.

PHILOSOPHY VS. POLITICS

Besides his critique of philosophy as supposedly ignorant of what makes for a good life, Callicles also argues that philosophy is unsuited to public life. If a person truly wants to be useful to society, in other words, they should pursue politics (including oratory) instead of philosophy. What good, for example, is Socrates's argument about suffering injustice, if Socrates found himself hauled off to prison and completely tongue-tied when he faced his accuser? It's better to live "an active life […] where you'll get a reputation for being intelligent." Through Socrates, Plato overturns and refutes Callicles's argument. Building off Socrates's earlier arguments that oratory is flattery and that the craft of philosophy is necessary for determining the good life, Plato argues that philosophers, being craftsmen, are essential to society in a way that politicians, being mere flatterers, cannot be.

First, Socrates revisits the idea that there's a craft for obtaining

both the pleasant and the good—a knack obtains what's merely pleasant, while a craft, with an eye toward long-term benefit, obtains what's good. Just as a pastry baker seeks to gratify the body, practices like oratory seek, through flattery, to merely gratify the soul. Socrates and Callicles agree that things like flute-playing, trained choruses, and tragic plays are for the purpose of giving pleasure. If things like melody and meter are stripped away from these activities, then just speeches are left—popular oratory "of a kind that's addressed to men, women, and children, slave and free alike," which he and Callicles both dismiss as mere flattery. Oratory that's addressed to free Athenians is no better, Socrates argues. Do orators always speak, he asks Callicles, with the aim of making their hearers better citizens, or "are they, too, bent upon the gratification of the citizens and, slighting the common good for the sake of their own private good, do they treat the people like children, their sole attempt being to gratify them?" Orators, in other words, treat people as children by offering them "pastries" for the soul—words that just gratify them, instead of taking thought for what's truly best for them.

Souls require craftsmen, not flatterers. Socrates argues that a good craftsman always has a vision for what he makes: such a person doesn't "say whatever he says [...] randomly but with a view to something." No craftsman would "select and apply randomly what he applies, but so that he may give his product some shape[.]" A soul ought to be carefully shaped, too—or, as Socrates puts it, "lawful." That is, the craftsman of the soul should lead people to be "law-abiding and orderly," possessing justice and self-control. Thus, a good orator should seek to apply justice and self-control to people's souls—to create justice in souls and rid them of injustice, to build self-control and purge lack of discipline. Just as a **doctor** wouldn't let a sick patient eat and drink as much as he wants, so a soul should be kept away from those appetites that contribute to indiscipline and injustice.

If the condition of citizens' souls is important for public life, then a city needs philosophers more than it needs politicians. If it's best to make souls as good as possible, Socrates goes on, then "Shouldn't we then attempt to care for the city and its citizens with the aim of making the citizens themselves as good as possible? For without this, [...] it does no good to provide any other service if the intentions of those who are likely to make a great deal of money or take a position of rule over people [...] aren't admirable and good." In other words, if those who are likely to take positions of power aren't good, then the city won't flourish no matter what else is accomplished politically. If a citizen is going to be in charge of other citizens, they should have a proven ability to build up the souls of those in their charge. Socrates gives the example that, before undertaking some public work, like building a ship or a temple, it's wise to check whether the builder was well trained and can demonstrate experience in having built good structures in the past. Likewise, it would be ridiculous to put someone in a position of public leadership if they'd never successfully improved another person's soul. Socrates tells Callicles that "I believe that I'm one of a few Athenians [...] to take up the true political craft and practice the true politics. This is because the speeches I make on each occasion do not aim at gratification but at what's best." Socrates, contrary to Callicles's opening critique, is the true politician, because he is a craftsman of the soul, not a flattering orator.

Addressing another part of Callicles's critique, Socrates admits it's true that a philosopher might never be successful at defending himself in court, for example—"For I won't be able to point out any pleasures that I've provided for [people], ones they believe to be services and benefits [...] Nor will I be able to say what's true if someone charges that I ruin younger people by confusing them or abuse older ones by speaking bitter words against them in public or private. [...] So presumably I'll get whatever comes my way." In other words, a philosopher like Socrates might provide what truly benefits people through his well-crafted words, but that doesn't mean he'll be appreciated in his own day. Yet, paradoxically, this is better than being an orator, who wins acclaim and adulation while gratifying people with useless pleasures.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MEDICINE

Throughout *Gorgias*, Socrates uses the craft of medicine to symbolize the work of the philosopher. Socrates draws a distinction between the body and the soul, with certain crafts designed to benefit the body and others designed to benefit the soul. Medicine is meant to heal the body, in other words, as philosophy is meant to heal the soul. The symbol of the doctor also allows Socrates to contrast flattery with genuine benefit—that is, a baker "flatters" people's bodies by indulging their appetites, in contrast to a doctor, whose treatments may be painful but whose goal is to benefit long-term health. Socrates likens this to philosophy, which heals and benefits souls, even if the healing is difficult. By contrast, Socrates views the practice of oratory as flattering people's souls by telling them what they want to hear.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Hackett edition of *Gorgias* published in 1987.

449a-461b Quotes

GORGIAS: I'm referring to the ability to persuade by speeches judges in a law court, councillors in a council meeting, and assemblymen in an assembly or in any other political gathering that might take place. […]

SOCRATES: *Now* I think you've come closest to making clear what craft you take oratory to be, Gorgias. If I follow you at all, you're saying that oratory is a producer of persuasion. Its whole business comes to that, and that's the long and short of it.

Related Characters: Gorgias of Leontini, Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

So far in *Gorgias*, philosopher Socrates has been questioning orator Gorgias about the nature of his craft. To understand their discussion, it's necessary to understand what Socrates means by a "craft." With this term (*techne* in Greek), Socrates refers to sets of practices which have a specific goal in mind, particularly an intention of producing something. Gorgias maintains that his craft of oratory produces speeches, but Socrates points out that other crafts—like mathematics or medicine, for example—also produces speeches about their particular subjects.

Gorgias finally explains that oratory specifically seeks to produce persuasion in public settings, especially in political bodies. Although Socrates goes on to ask further questions, he agrees that this is a sound, concise explanation of what oratory produces. This quote is an example of Socrates's desire—prominent in all of Plato's dialogues—to ensure that ideas are as clearly defined as possible. Socrates often leads his discussion partner through a series of questions and answers in order to arrive at such definitions—a practice called dialectic.

GORGIAS: Oh yes, Socrates, if only you knew all of it, that it encompasses and subordinates to itself just about everything that can be accomplished. […] And I maintain too that if an orator and a doctor came to any city anywhere you like and had to compete in speaking in the assembly or some other gathering over which of them should be appointed doctor, the doctor wouldn't make any showing at all, but the one who had the ability to speak would be appointed, if he so wished. And if he were to compete with any other craftsman whatever, the orator more than anyone else would persuade them that they should appoint him, for there isn't anything that the orator couldn't speak more persuasively about to a gathering than could any other craftsman whatever. That's how great the accomplishment of this craft is, and the sort of accomplishment it is!

Related Characters: Gorgias of Leontini (speaker), Socrates

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Through his questioning of Gorgias, Socrates has been trying to clarify exactly what sort of persuasion oratory produces. Is it the same thing as teaching, in other words—something which produces knowledge—or is it different, producing conviction *without* knowledge? Gorgias says it's the latter, and he sees this as being a point in oratory's favor. As an example, he gives the rather unlikely example of an orator and a doctor competing, through public speeches, for the reward of being appointed as a city's doctor. According to Gorgias, the doctor would win every time—and the same would hold true if the orator came up against any other sort of craftsman.

In Gorgias's eyes, this is what makes oratory the greatest of all crafts. It certainly shows how, in the Ancient Greek context, mastery of oratory was a key to gaining political power. If a person can speak persuasively on any topic, with the result that they can consistently win people to their side, they can have a significant impact on their city, for good or ill. While Gorgias celebrates this as a great thing, Socrates will use Gorgias's point to poke holes in Gorgias's overall argument that oratory is good for society.

❝ Imagine someone who after attending wrestling school, getting his body into good shape and becoming a boxer, went on to strike his father and mother or any other family member or friend. By Zeus, that's no reason to hate physical trainers and people who teach fighting in armor, and to exile them from their cities! […] So it's not their teachers who are wicked, nor is this a reason why the craft should be a cause of wickedness; the ones who misuse it are supposedly the wicked ones. […] And I suppose that if a person who has become an orator goes on with this ability and this craft to commit wrongdoing, we shouldn't hate his teacher and exile him from our cities. For while the teacher imparted it to be used justly, the pupil is making the opposite use of it. So it's the misuser whom it's just to hate and exile or put to death, not the teacher.

Related Characters: Gorgias of Leontini (speaker), Socrates

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Gorgias has just finished defending oratory's position of being the most superior of all crafts, as he sees it. Then, in this quote, he makes another point which he sees as supporting his argument: he suggests that a student of oratory who misuses his craft is like a boxer who uses his skill to attack the innocent. In the latter case, he says, nobody would turn on athletic trainers and blame them for their students' wicked behavior. In the same way, Gorgias thinks that if an orator uses his skill for unjust ends, the orator who trained him should not be blamed for his pupil's behavior. In other words, oratory, like boxing, is just a set of skills; it's up to each practitioner whether those skills are used for good or bad ends.

Though Gorgias employs this point in oratory's defense, Socrates will later turn it on its head. Gorgias has been trying to argue both that oratory is concerned with what's just and unjust, *and* that oratory is only concerned with persuading people and doesn't have to be concerned about knowledge. Socrates will point out that Gorgias is being inconsistent. If knowledge is irrelevant, then how can an orator (or his teacher, for that matter) be blamed if oratory is used in unjust ways?

461b-481b Quotes

❝ Pastry baking has put on the mask of medicine, and pretends to know the foods that are best for the body, so that if a pastry baker and a doctor had to compete in front of children, or in front of men just as foolish as children, to determine which of the two, the doctor or the pastry baker, had expert knowledge of good food and bad, the doctor would die of starvation. I call this flattery, and I say that such a thing is shameful, Polus—it's you I'm saying this to—because it guesses at what's pleasant with no consideration for what's best. And I say that it isn't a craft, but a knack, because it has no account of the nature of whatever things it applies by which it applies them, so that it's unable to state the cause of each thing. And I refuse to call anything that lacks such an account a craft.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Polus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This quote demonstrates the difference between a craft and a knack in Socrates's thinking. He argues that body and soul have various crafts that apply to them—for instance, medicine for the body and justice for the soul. These crafts aim at long-term benefits, and accordingly, they must offer an account of the nature of their subjects—an understanding of how they work, in other words. For example, medicine aims at the benefit of health, and in order to achieve health, medicine must understand the nature of the body.

In contrast, a knack only aims at immediate pleasure, and because of this, it doesn't need to concern itself with the nature of a thing. Knacks "mask" themselves as crafts, but in reality, their goals are totally different. So, for instance, pastry baking is only a knack, whereas medicine is a craft. Socrates draws a comparison between oratory—which he sees as flattery—and pastry baking by arguing that pastry baking flatters the body much as oratory flatters the soul. Both things aim at short-term pleasure instead of long-term benefit, even if they *appear* to offer benefits, deceiving people in the process. In this way, Socrates suggests that oratory doesn't benefit the soul, even if it *claims* to be concerned with matters like justice. Because of this deceptive aspect, in fact, he argues that oratory is a sinister influence in society instead of a beneficial one.

SOCRATES: I take it that these people have managed to accomplish pretty much the same thing as a person who has contracted very serious illnesses, but, by avoiding treatment manages to avoid paying what's due to the doctors for his bodily faults, fearing, as would a child, cauterization or surgery because they're painful. Don't you think so, too?

POLUS: Yes, I do.

SOCRATES: It's because he evidently doesn't know what health and bodily excellence are like. For on the basis of what we're now agreed on, it looks as though those who avoid paying what is due also do the same sort of thing, Polus. They focus on its painfulness, but are blind to its benefit and are ignorant of how much more miserable it is to live with an unhealthy soul than with an unhealthy body, a soul that's rotten with injustice and impiety.

Related Characters: Polus, Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

Leading up to this quote, Socrates has been trying to persuade Polus that it's worse to do something that's unjust than to suffer as a result of someone else's unjust behavior. Even worse than doing something unjust is failing to face discipline for that behavior. Polus remains skeptical, so Socrates resorts to the analogy of medicine: he argues that someone who avoids punishment for unjust actions, fearing pain, is doing basically the same thing (with regard to the soul) as a sick person who's avoiding necessary medical treatments out of fear. Such a person is behaving like a child who isn't thinking in terms of long-term benefit, but only in terms of immediate unpleasantness. And it's far worse, Socrates argues, to live with an unhealed soul than an unhealed body. This ties into Socrates's earlier argument that oratory is just a knack, not a craft. A craft, like medicine, understands the nature of health and is concerned for long-term physical wellbeing. A knack, like oratory, doesn't have to understand the nature of its subject and disregards long-term benefit in favor of immediate comfort.

SOCRATES: If these things are true then, Polus, what is the great use of oratory? For on the basis of what we're agreed on now, what a man should guard himself against most of all is doing what's unjust, knowing that he will have trouble enough if he does. Isn't that so?

POLUS: Yes, that's right.

SOCRATES: And if he or anyone else he cares about acts unjustly, he should voluntarily go to the place where he'll pay his due as soon as possible; he should go to the judge as though he were going to a doctor, anxious that the disease of injustice shouldn't be protracted and cause his soul to fester incurably.

Related Characters: Polus, Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49

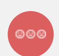
Explanation and Analysis

Prior to this quote, Socrates has been arguing that doing what's unjust—and letting that injustice linger in the soul—is the worst of all evils that can befall people. He has tried to persuade Polus that unjust acts corrupt the soul, and that someone who evades punishment for unjust acts might *think* they're happy, but that their misery is all the greater because of the rot in the soul. Here, Socrates builds on this argument in order to make the case that oratory is useless if it doesn't promote the healing of the soul. Someone who's acted unjustly and who truly cares about the state of his soul would hasten to a judge in order to face discipline—in other words, to have their rotten soul cured. Essentially, justice occupies the same relationship to the soul as medicine does to the body. If this is true, then the only use of oratory is to promote the realization of justice. In Socrates's view, that's exactly what oratory—which merely flatters its hearers instead of concerning itself with their long-term benefit—fails to achieve in his day.

481b-491d Quotes

Philosophy is no doubt a delightful thing, Socrates, as long as one is exposed to it in moderation at the appropriate time of life. But if one spends more time with it than he should, it's the undoing of mankind. For even if one is naturally well favored but engages in philosophy far beyond that appropriate time of life, he can't help but turn out to be inexperienced in everything a man who's to be admirable and good and well thought of is supposed to be experienced in. Such people turn out to be inexperienced in the laws of their city or in the kind of speech one must use to deal with people on matters of business, whether in public or private, inexperienced also in human pleasures and appetites and, in short, inexperienced in the ways of human beings altogether.

Related Characters: Callicles (speaker), Gorgias of Leontini, Socrates

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

After Socrates's debate with Polus, Callicles, a politician and friend of Gorgias, cuts in. Callicles fundamentally disagrees with Socrates's view of the world. Whereas Socrates has just argued that unjust behavior causes corruption in the soul, Callicles doesn't even agree with Socrates's view of what's unjust—he believes it's natural for the strong to dominate the weak, for instance. However, he also disagrees with Socrates that philosophy is an appropriate remedy. Callicles finds it unseemly that someone would engage in philosophy beyond a certain season of life. In other words, philosophy a fine pursuit for a young student, but once a person has reached maturity, persisting in this field of study is a way of hiding from the really important things in life—like politics, persuasion, and even indulgence of one's appetites. Callicles's objection sets up the crux of Plato's argument in *Gorgias* by highlighting the deepest difference between Callicles and Socrates—in essence, the contrast between politics and philosophy as competing ways of life.

And so then, my dear Socrates […] don't you think it's shameful to be the way I take you to be, you and others who ever press on too far in philosophy? As it is, if someone got hold of you or of anyone else like you and took you off to prison on the charge that you're doing something unjust when in fact you aren't, you can know that you wouldn't have any use for yourself. You'd get dizzy, your mouth would hang open and you wouldn't know what to say. […] And yet, Socrates, "how can this be a wise thing, the craft which took a well-favored man and made him worse[?]" […] "Practice the sweet music of an active life[.]"

Related Characters: Callicles (speaker), Socrates

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Callicles's major objection to philosophy is that it makes a person unsuited to public life. In other words, if someone spends all their time thinking about life, then they are ill-equipped to actually participate in it. Callicles even suggests that if Socrates were to be hauled off to prison on false charges, he would be helpless to speak in his own defense, having presumably failed to master the skill of persuasive speech. This is ironic, because Plato's readers would have known that Socrates was put on trial for alleged impiety in 399 B.C.E. and did speak in his own defense against his detractors, as presented in Plato's dialogue *Apology*.

Far from being caught flat-footed and open-mouthed, as Callicles envisions here, Socrates is portrayed by Plato in *Apology* as offering a sound, reasonable, and measured self-defense. But Callicles's outlook doesn't have room for a philosopher who can engage with the public on its own terms—an outlook Socrates will go on to challenge in the rest of *Gorgias*. The lines quoted toward the end of this passage ("How can this be a wise thing…", "Practice the sweet music…") are from Euripides's play *Antiope* (5th century B.C.E.), which only survives in fragments, but which Plato's audience presumably would have been familiar with.

491d-509c Quotes

[W]hat in truth could be more shameful and worse than self-control and justice for these people who, although they are free to enjoy good things without any interference, should bring as master upon themselves the law 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, 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!

Related Characters: Callicles (speaker), Socrates

Related Themes:

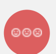
Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is a good example of the contrast between Callicles's and Socrates's outlooks. Callicles rejects Socrates's suggestion that the self-disciplined life is the good life; he holds that the opposite must be the case. This difference is rooted in the two men's differing views of what is natural: Callicles's view is that the stronger rightly dominate over the weaker. Part of strength is fulfilling one's appetites, not submitting oneself to rules about self-control that have been put forward by the weaker. Doing so is, according to Callicles, essentially a form of slavery. Socrates, he thinks, holds to an unnatural view of the human being—an idea of self-restraint that reminds Callicles of lifeless forms like corpses and rocks. Happiness consists in the opposite: pursuing the greatest amount of pleasure possible. This disagreement sets up Socrates's rebuttal that "pleasure" isn't the same thing as goodness. Moreover, it reinforces the contrast between politics and philosophy, anticipating Socrates's argument that philosophy enables a happier life because it aims at true, lasting goodness instead of mere short-term pleasure.

For you see, don't you, that our discussion's about this [...] about the way we're supposed to live. Is it the way you urge me toward, to engage in these manly activities, to make speeches among the people, to practice oratory, and to be active in the sort of politics you people engage in these days? Or is it the life spent in philosophy? And in what way does this latter way of life differ from the former?

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Callicles

Related Themes: 

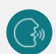
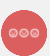
Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Callicles and Socrates engage in a lengthy discussion about the nature of pleasure versus goodness. Callicles is invested in a lifestyle that sees the pursuit of pleasure as the ultimate goal—in his mind, there's no distinction between the pleasurable and the good. Socrates challenges this by pointing out that not all pleasures are good, in the sense of bringing about long-term benefit; in fact, some are harmful. So drawing distinctions between kinds of pleasures is actually a key to determining the best way for a human being to live, as Socrates argues here. What sort of life helps direct a person toward the right pursuits—oratory or philosophy? Thus, for Socrates, there are direct connections between goodness and philosophy, pleasure and politics. These connections become clearer as Socrates expands his argument about flattery versus craftsmanship. The goal of the politician or orator, he will argue, is to flatter people by gratifying their pleasures. The goal of the philosopher, in contrast, is to make people better by teaching them self-control.

SOCRATES: What about the oratory addressed to the Athenian people and to those in other cities composed of free men? What is our view of this kind? Do you think that orators always speak with regard to what's best? Do they always set their sights on making the citizens as good as possible through their speeches? Or are they, too, bent upon the gratification of the citizens and, slighting the common good for the sake of their own private good, do they treat the people like children, their sole attempt being to gratify them?

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Callicles

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Socrates leads Callicles through a discussion of flattery versus craftsmanship. They agree that, just as pastry baking is a kind of "flattery" of the body—aimed only at immediate pleasure—certain activities are just "flattery" for the soul, too. They identify activities like musical performances,

tragic plays, and popular speeches (addressed indiscriminately to people of various stations and situations in life) as being this kind of flattery.

More controversially, however, Socrates suggests that even the ostensibly more respectable form of oratory—that which is addressed to free Athenian citizens—is no better than flattery. According to Socrates, craftsmanship always aims at a greater benefit. In his view, oratory doesn't do this—it's not concerned with making people into better citizens, but with giving people what they want to hear, and promoting the orator's own interests in turn. So, much like giving pastries to children, giving pleasing speeches to citizens is just another form of gratifying immediate pleasures, rather than aiming at what will actually improve them and benefit the city as a whole.

❝❞ SOCRATES: And the name for the states of organization and order of the soul is "lawful" and "law," which lead people to become law-abiding and orderly, and these are justice and self-control. [...] So this is what that skilled and good orator will look to when he applies to people's souls whatever speeches he makes as well as all of his actions [...] He will always give his attention to how justice may come to exist in the souls of his fellow citizens and injustice be gotten rid of, how self-control may come to exist there and lack of discipline be gotten rid of, and how the rest of excellence may come into being there and evil may depart.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Callicles

Related Themes:

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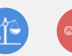
Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Socrates summarizes what oratory would do if it were actually concerned with the improvement of the human soul. He has just argued that when a craftsman undertakes any sort of task—anything from weaving to shipbuilding to medicine—there's a certain orderly procedure that is followed and that has an end product in view. Likewise, Socrates holds that there is an orderly condition of the soul—one which is characterized by justice and self-control—and a method for obtaining it. Any good orator will have this end product in mind when he makes speeches. Their goal should be to root out any corrupt conditions of the soul—like injustice and lack of discipline—and instill justice and self-control. So, in Socrates's view, it's possible for oratory to do much good for society, when orators concern themselves with the health of souls and apply their skills toward that end. He later concludes, however, that no historical or contemporary orator is renowned for having done this; oratory in his day is primarily concerned with gratification and self-advancement.

❝❞ SOCRATES: Now, isn't it also true that doctors generally allow a person to fill up his appetites, to eat when he's hungry, for example, or drink when he's thirsty as much as he wants to when he's in good health, but when he's sick they practically never allow him to fill himself with what he has an appetite for? [...] And isn't it just the same way with the soul, my excellent friend? As long as it's corrupt, in that it's foolish, undisciplined, unjust and impious, it should be kept away from its appetites and not be permitted to do anything other than what will make it better.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Callicles

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

This quote gives further insight into Socrates's view of proper oratorical technique. As he does elsewhere in *Gorgias*, he draws on the comparison of medical doctors, argues that doctors treat a healthy patient very different from a sick one. A healthy person is generally allowed to heed his appetites, because there's no underlying condition to be concerned about. In other words, if a person is healthy, their understanding of their own condition is probably trustworthy, and they can continue behaving as seems best to them. If a person is sick, however, they can't be allowed to eat or drink whatever they want. The doctor will instruct the person to curb those appetites for the sake of restoring health.

It's the same with the soul, Socrates argues: a soul that's in an unhealthy condition should be discouraged from indulging the appetites that got it there in the first place. Healthy appetites should be recommended in their place. According to Socrates, not just anyone is capable of discerning between what's healthy and what's unhealthy when it comes to the appetites—so the medical comparison

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supports his developing argument that philosophers (who can make such determinations) are necessary to the good of society.

509c-522e Quotes

But if "better" does not mean what I take it to mean, and if instead to preserve yourself and what belongs to you, no matter what sort of person you happen to be, is what excellence is, then your reproach against engineer, doctor, and all the other crafts which have been devised to preserve us will prove to be ridiculous. But, my blessed man, please see whether what's noble and what's good isn't something other than preserving and being preserved. Perhaps one who is truly a man should stop thinking about how long he will live. He should not be attached to life but should commit these concerns to the god[.] He should thereupon give consideration to how he might live the part of his life still before him as well as possible.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Callicles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

This quote builds Socrates's argument against Callicles concerning what constitutes the good life—politics or philosophy. Callicles has just been arguing that it's most important to protect oneself against unjust actions by others. For example, if someone wants to enjoy immunity from being put to death, then they should befriend the most powerful rulers in the city by liking the same things those people like and adopting the same qualities. That way, the person's alliances will ensure that they're safe from being unjustly being put to death.

Socrates objects to Callicles's notion that preservation of one's life is the most important thing—especially if that involves putting oneself in a position to act unjustly toward *others*, which he earlier established to be one of the worst things of all. Socrates argues that it's not length of life that's most important (after all, that's out of one's hands), but how well one lives. He sees this as the most significant distinction between a politician and a philosopher. A politician is mainly concerned about doing what's pleasant for the body (preserving life), whereas a philosopher is concerned about doing what's best for the soul (ensuring a good life).

[W]e'd have to check, wouldn't we, whether we've ever built a work of construction in private business [...] and whether this structure is admirable or disgraceful. And if we discovered on examination that our teachers have proved to be good and reputable ones, and that the works of construction built by us under their guidance were numerous and admirable, and those built by us on our own after we left our teachers were numerous, too, then, if that were our situation, we'd be wise to proceed to public projects. But if we could point out neither teacher nor construction works, either none at all or else many worthless ones, it would surely be stupid to undertake public projects and to call each other on to them.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Callicles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

Socrates continues his argument concerning the role of the politician and the philosopher in the city and which is more truly beneficial to citizens. He makes the comparison that if he and Callicles were going to undertake some public building project on behalf of the city, they would first need to consider their credentials. For example, do they have previous experience in that business? What is the quality of their previous work? Who trained them? If this scrutiny reveals that their past work was excellent, then they should proceed in undertaking their project. Otherwise, it would be foolish to do so.

The same holds true in work that doesn't primarily benefit the body, but the soul. If it can't be demonstrated that someone is both a just person and has successfully established justice in the souls of others, then that person has no business seeking the betterment of the city. Socrates associates politics with the body and philosophy with the soul—and the improvement of the soul, in his view, has far longer-lasting benefit than the improvement of the body. With this point, he's moving toward his climactic argument that philosophers are more important to the city than politicians are.

I believe that I'm one of a few Athenians—so as not to say I'm the only one, but the only one among our contemporaries—to take up the true political craft and practice the true politics. This is because the speeches I make on each occasion do not aim at gratification but at what's best. They don't aim at what's most pleasant.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Callicles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

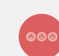
Explanation and Analysis

In this section of the dialogue, Socrates has been leading Callicles toward the conclusion that philosophy benefits society more than politics does. He makes this argument on the basis that politics doesn't actually help citizens to become better people. Rather, it benefits the body—aiming at what's pleasing to people—instead of the soul. By contrast, philosophy aims at what's truly good, meaning that it seeks to improve people's souls, not just gratify their pleasures.

If the ultimate point of politics is to make the city and its citizens as good as possible—not just to appear good—then Socrates is a true politician, not Callicles, who confuses the people's goodness with their pleasure. Thus, Socrates overturns Callicles's argument that philosophers are useless to society because they supposedly isolate themselves from public life. According to Socrates, a philosopher is better equipped to diagnose and treat society's ills—because he understands the nature of people—than a politician, who merely seeks to give people what they want and to increase their own power in the process.

For I'll be judged the way a doctor would be judged by a jury of children if a pastry chef were to bring accusations against him. Think about what a man like that, taken captive among these people, could say in his defense, if somebody were to accuse him and say, "Children, this man has worked many great evils on you, yes, on you. He destroys the youngest among you by cutting and burning them, and by slimming them down and choking them he confuses them. He gives them the most bitter potions to drink and forces hunger and thirst on them. He doesn't feast you on a great variety of sweets the way I do!" What do you think a doctor, caught in such an evil predicament, could say?

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Callicles

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of this section, Callicles charged that Socrates would be helpless to defend himself against unjust treatment in court, because he's inexperienced in public speech. Socrates answers this accusation by returning to his comparison of a pastry chef and a doctor competing in front of a group of children: the pastry chef represents the flattering orator, and the doctor represents a philosopher. The children represent citizens who only want to be gratified instead of helped. Under such circumstances, it would be easy for the philosopher to be accused of evil. Instead of offering children sweets, he carries out painful treatments like surgery and cauterization, puts them on diets, and gives them disgusting medicines. It's no wonder, then, that the children would call for his condemnation.

In the same way, a philosopher treats people's souls through words and practices that seem unpleasant at the time. In a way, Socrates grants Callicles's point—no matter what a philosopher might say in his own defense, he'd be powerless to persuade people that he'd been acting in their best interest. That's because people (especially those who need a philosopher's help the most) want to be flattered. They're in no position to know what's best for themselves, much less welcome what a philosopher has to say.

But if I came to my end because of a deficiency in flattering oratory, I know that you'd see me bear my death with ease. For no one who isn't totally bereft of reason and courage is afraid to die; doing what's unjust is what he's afraid of. For of all evils, the ultimate is that of arriving in Hades with one's soul stuffed full of unjust actions.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Callicles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Socrates makes the point that public condemnation and execution aren't the worst things that could happen to him. Up till now, Callicles has contended that the politician's highest goal should be to prolong his life by securing the most power. This is done by ingratiating oneself with the powerful and endearing oneself to the public through flattering oratory. Callicles holds that anyone who fails to do this and faces public condemnation is in a shameful position.

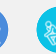
Paradoxically, Socrates argues that being put to death under

such circumstances (suffering injustice) would be worse than avoiding it through an assertion of power (doing what's unjust). That's because, in his view, death isn't the thing to be feared most—it is far worse to face death with unjust actions marring his soul. This quote alludes to Socrates's actual trial and death for alleged impiety and corruption of youth—something with which Plato's audience would undoubtedly be familiar. Plato vindicates his teacher, Socrates, by presenting him as someone who'd be unafraid in the face of injustice and death.

523a-527a Quotes

❝❝ So I disregard the things held in honor by the majority of people, and by practicing truth I really try, to the best of my ability, to be and to live as a very good man, and when I die, to die like that. And I call on all other people as well, as far as I can—and you especially I call on in response to your call—to this way of life, this contest, that I hold to be worth all the other contests in this life. And I take you to task, because you won't be able to come to protect yourself when you appear at the trial and judgment I was talking about just now. When you come before that judge, [...] and he takes hold of you and brings you to trial, your mouth will hang open and you'll get dizzy there just as much as I will here, and maybe somebody'll give you a demeaning knock on the jaw and throw all sorts of dirt at you.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Callicles

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

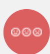
Socrates begins wrapping up the dialogue by giving an account drawn from Homer's *Odyssey* about the final judgment and afterlife. His point in doing this is to argue that living a good life isn't just a concern for the present; it has eternal repercussions. It's another way of saying what he's been arguing all along—that a good life is worth pursuing for its own sake, not for political expediency, the desire to please others, or any other reason. Living and dying well are their own reward.

Further, Socrates calls Callicles to undertake philosophy just as Callicles called Socrates to practice oratory. He describes the philosophical life as a form of combat, presumably against the corruption in one's own soul. Finally, he turns Callicles's argument—that Socrates would be speechless and helpless before a judge—back on Callicles himself. He suggests that unless Callicles pursues a philosophical life, he will arrive at the final judgment with an unhealed soul, at which point it will be too late for him—a far worse fate than earthly punishment.

527a-e Quotes

❝❝ As it is, you see that there are three of you, the wisest of the Greeks of today—you, Polus, and Gorgias—and you're not able to prove that there's any other life one should live than the one which will clearly turn out to be advantageous in that world, too. So, listen to me and follow me to where I am, and when you've come here you'll be happy both during life and at its end, as the account indicates. Let someone despise you as a fool and throw dirt on you, if he likes. And, yes, by Zeus, confidently let him deal you that demeaning blow. Nothing terrible will happen to you if you really are an admirable and good man, one who practices excellence.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Gorgias of Leontini, Polus, Callicles

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Socrates concludes Gorgias by summarizing the argument he has developed in dialogue with Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles throughout. He rejects the other men's arguments on the grounds that ultimately, they are focused exclusively on the present life and don't help a person obtain happiness in the afterlife. In other words, the best of the day's orators prove unable to satisfy Socrates that their way of life is superior to his—itself meant to be a point in philosophy's favor.

If Socrates's listeners—both the three above-named characters and the dialogue's audience, too—choose to follow his way, they will find greater happiness than the earthbound wisdom of politics can give them. Whereas politics and oratory are preoccupied with winning others' approval, philosophy is indifferent to the disdain and even the abuse of others. Because the philosophical life is its own reward, nothing others can inflict on a philosopher can truly do him lasting harm.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

447A-449A

Callicles, Socrates, and Chaerephon are talking outside of a public building where Gorgias has just delivered a lecture. Socrates and Chaerephon were too late for the lecture, but Chaerephon and Callicles both have personal connections with Gorgias, so it will be easy to get Gorgias to give Socrates a personal encore. But Socrates doesn't want a performance; he'd prefer to have a dialogue.

The Greek term used for "lecture," epideixis, *refers to the kind of oratorical performance often given by sophists (popular, wandering orators) as a demonstration of their skill. This suggests that Gorgias was in high demand, and that his skills will play a central role in the dialogue. For his part, Socrates would prefer to exchange questions and answers with Gorgias, seeing this as a more straightforward mode of communication. The two types of speech reflect the two men's respective ways of life: orator and philosopher.*

Socrates wants to learn from Gorgias what his craft accomplishes—what it makes claims about and what it teaches. Callicles says that Gorgias is happy to answer any question, so Socrates gets Chaerephon to ask Gorgias "what he is." For example, someone who makes shoes would be a cobbler. Gorgias has now joined them, and he boasts that nobody has asked him anything new in years. Polus chimes in, giving a miniature speech in which he claims that Gorgias participates in the most admirable craft, though he doesn't say what it is.

The word translated "craft" is the Greek techne. *At this point, it's clear that for Socrates, a "craft" should be "about" something (meaning it progresses toward some specific end), and its practitioner must learn or produce something beneficial. Polus's interjection—a lot of words saying little—might be Plato's parody of Gorgias's oratorical style.*

Socrates says he'd rather hear it from Gorgias, since Polus seems more interested in oratory than in discussion. After all, Socrates didn't ask what Gorgias's craft is like, but what it *is*, and what Gorgias would be called. He redirects these questions to Gorgias himself, hoping for a briefer answer.

Socrates contrasts oratory with discussion, suggesting that oratory—composed, targeted speeches—is less useful than organic discussion for getting to the heart of a subject. It's already clear that Socrates doesn't hold oratory in high esteem.

449A-461B

Gorgias says that his craft is oratory. He also confirms that this makes him an orator. He agrees with Socrates that part of his craft is to make others orators, too. Socrates approves of these brief answers and asks Gorgias if he's willing to continue discussing in this manner, instead of resorting to long speeches like Polus did. Gorgias agrees, adding that nobody is better at brevity than he is.

The Greek term for oratory is rhetorike, *or "rhetoric." Oratory occupied a very important role in Athens in the fifth century B.C.E., as even ordinary citizens could use such persuasive speech to try to influence outcomes in Athens's political institutions. This also meant that oratory was a key to personal advancement in career and society. Orators often took on students, too.*

Socrates asks what things oratory is concerned with. For example, weaving is concerned with producing clothes; music is concerned with composing tunes. What, then, is the purpose of oratory? Gorgias answers that oratory is concerned with speeches. It also makes other people capable of speaking and of being wise in doing so.

Both of Socrates's examples name crafts that produce something specific—things that benefit others in some concrete way. Along these lines, he's trying to understand what oratory produces and how it benefits society.

Socrates continues his questioning. Doesn't the medical craft, for example, also make others able to both have wisdom and to speak about those who are sick? Since that's the case, the medical craft is concerned about speeches, too. The same can be said of other crafts—so why aren't *these* referred to as "oratory"? Gorgias says it's because these other crafts are mostly concerned with various types of manual labor. Oratory, on the other hand, depends entirely on speeches.

Socrates's point is that other crafts are also concerned with speaking and wisdom, not just oratory. In other words, what makes oratory's speaking different from that in the medical field or in other crafts? His questions and answers are meant to lead Gorgias deeper into the subject and arrive at an understanding of oratory's nature.

Socrates presses Gorgias further. Precisely what is it that distinguishes oratory from other crafts—such as arithmetic—that exercise influence through speech? For example, the speeches of arithmetic are about numbers, and the speeches of astronomy are about the sun, moon, and stars. Gorgias replies that oratory's speeches are concerned with "the greatest of human concerns." Socrates argues that this is debatable—after all, a **doctor**, a physical trainer, and a financial expert would all assert the same thing about their respective crafts: each would respectively see health, strength, or wealth as the greatest good.

Socrates's process is called dialectic—Socrates's favored method of seeking wisdom through asking questions, leading his discussion partner step by step through a problem. In this case, Socrates is still trying to help Gorgias specify what makes oratory distinct. Gorgias is still using vague, extravagant language—"the greatest of human concerns"—that doesn't communicate anything precise about the nature of oratory.

Gorgias replies that this "greatest good" is humankind's source of freedom—namely, the ability to persuade through speeches in a public setting, such as a court, council meeting, or other political assembly. Socrates agrees that Gorgias has concisely defined oratory: its goal is to produce persuasion in its audience.

Gorgias finally identifies exactly what oratory does to Socrates's satisfaction: much like weaving produces clothing, oratory produces persuasion in those who hear it. However, it remains to be seen whether Socrates agrees that the ability to persuade is humanity's "greatest good."

Socrates wants to be perfectly clear what this sort of persuasion is about. After all, if he were inquiring about a particular painter, it wouldn't be enough to identify that painter as someone who creates pictures—he'd want to know what *sort* of pictures. So does oratory alone create persuasion, or do people who teach various subjects also persuade people? Gorgias grants that other crafts, like arithmetic, do persuade people about their subjects. What then, Socrates asks, is oratory's persuasion about? Gorgias replies that oratory is concerned with determining what's just and what's unjust.

Socrates resumes his questioning, this time focusing on the idea of persuasion. Namely, don't other crafts involve persuasion, too? Again, what makes oratory different? Gorgias confirms that oratory doesn't just persuade about any subject, but is concerned with specific matters: what's just and unjust.

Socrates shifts to examining another point. He asks Gorgias if having learned and having been convinced are the same or different. Gorgias grants that they're different, because there's such a thing as true and false conviction, but no such thing as true and false knowledge. It follows, then, that there are two types of persuasion—one that asserts of sense of conviction without real expertise, and one that provides others with genuine knowledge on a topic. Which type is oratory? Gorgias concedes that oratory results in persuasion without knowledge, meaning that orators don't teach about what's just and unjust, but rather *persuade*.

Socrates now focuses on what distinction there is, if any, between learning and being convinced of something. Gorgias's reply is that, basically, knowledge is objective—one either knows something or doesn't—but conviction has a subjective aspect. In other words, someone can be wrongly convinced of something. Orators, then, don't teach something objective, imparting knowledge; they seek to convince without necessarily imparting knowledge.

Gorgias goes on to argue that oratory subordinates just about everything else to itself. For example, he's sometimes accompanied his brother, a **doctor**, to a patient's sickbed and successfully persuaded the patient to take medicine or undergo surgery when the doctor's advice had gone unheeded. In fact, he thinks that if an orator and a doctor spoke before any assembly regarding which of them should be appointed doctor, the orator would win the audience's approval every time.

Gorgias champions oratory in this section. In his view, oratory can persuade a person where mere knowledge has failed to move them to action. He even says that an orator, lacking expertise in the field, could persuade people to award him a medical position—that's how powerful oratory is. Gorgias sees this as a point in oratory's favor, but Socrates will likely attack this perspective due to the dishonesty and artificiality it rests upon.

Gorgias gives a caveat, however. He says that just because someone trained in boxing or other martial arts might attack his family or friends, that's no reason to hate and exile teachers of these skills. In the same way, just because a student of oratory might go on to use his skill in an unjust manner, that's no reason to blame the orator who trained him, with the intention that the imparted skill be used justly.

Gorgias anticipates a possible critique of oratory. He knows that an orator getting a doctor's job would be unjust, and that orators have been accused of acting unjustly in other ways. He argues that such behavior shouldn't be blamed on oratory or its teachers themselves, any more than a boxing trainer would be blamed for the crimes of a student who goes rogue.

Socrates replies that he thinks Gorgias is contradicting himself. He wants to pursue this discussion further, but only if Gorgias understands that Socrates isn't attacking him personally and shares Socrates's commitment to arriving at the truth. Socrates points out that it's better to be refuted than to persist in arguing something that's untrue. Chaerephon, Callicles, and other onlookers are eager to hear more, so Gorgias agrees to keep going with the discussion.

With his point about the goodness of being refuted, Socrates is anticipating a point he'll make later about the goodness of discipline, which purges evil from a person. It's more important, in other words, to be corrected than to persist in a wrong belief. Truth is more important than the discomfort of being refuted.

Socrates clarifies the points Gorgias has made so far, concluding that, according to Gorgias, oratory doesn't need to have expertise about the subjects being spoken about—it only needs to persuade non-experts of its expertise. So, for example, if an orator lacks knowledge about **health**, then presumably he's in the same position regarding what is just and unjust. The important thing is that he *seems* to be knowledgeable about it. Socrates then asks Gorgias if this means that, when a prospective student of oratory comes to him for instruction, that student must already possess knowledge about justice and injustice—or will Gorgias teach him these things? Gorgias says that he will.

Socrates focuses on the point that, according to Gorgias, oratory doesn't have to communicate accurate knowledge about its subject—an outward appearance of expertise is enough. This suggests that oratory isn't inherently concerned about the truth (significantly, something Socrates has just identified as being of primary importance to himself). Socrates focuses on the implications of Gorgias's beliefs for what's just and unjust—which Gorgias said is oratory's chief concern.

Socrates focuses on this point. He asks whether a person who has learned a particular subject is defined by his expertise" For example, a person who's learned carpentry is a carpenter, and a person who's learned **medicine** is a doctor. Therefore, doesn't someone who has learned what become a just person? This would mean that an orator is necessarily just and wants to do what's just, not what's unjust. Following this line of reasoning, an orator wouldn't have done what's unjust, like Gorgias's earlier example of one who uses his oratorical skill unjustly. Since Gorgias defined oratory as persuasion regarding what's just and unjust, Socrates had taken it for granted that oratory wouldn't concern itself with injustice.

Socrates's point is that someone is a reflection of their training—someone who's studied medicine is a doctor, etc. If it's true that one becomes what they've studied, and Gorgias maintains that learning what's just and unjust is key to becoming an orator, then how can an orator not *be a just person? How is it possible to be an unjust orator, like the example Gorgias gave (which suggested that someone who's trained in oratory might very well behave unjustly)? With these questions, Socrates suggests that there's a flaw built into Gorgias's claim that oratory is concerned with what's just and unjust, but that oratory also doesn't require expertise in these matters. How can both be true?*

461B-481B

At this point, Polus speaks up indignantly. He thinks Socrates's way of pointing out Gorgias's supposed inconsistency is very rude. Socrates says he's happy to be set straight by Polus, as long as Polus agrees to avoid long speeches and is willing to be subjected to questioning and refutation like he and Gorgias were. Polus agrees. He starts by asking Socrates what *he* thinks oratory is, since Socrates disagreed with Gorgias's view.

Gorgias's defender, Polus, jumps in with characteristic rashness. Socrates is content to debate with the younger orator, too, as long as Polus is willing to abide by the norms of discussion and is actually interested in discovering truth. In this way, Socrates employs a philosophical dialogue structure to ensure that the discussion stays logical and focused on the objective truth (rather than subjective opinions).

Socrates clarifies that Polus wants to know what sort of craft oratory is. Polus agrees, so Socrates says that he doesn't think oratory is a craft at all; instead, he thinks it's a "knack" that creates a certain kind of satisfaction and pleasure. He then introduces pastry baking as a comparison. It, too, is a knack for producing gratification and pleasure.

For "knack," Socrates uses the Greek term empeiria, *"experience," to contrast with* techne, *"craft." In other words, Gorgias had argued that oratory is a craft—which aims at producing something beneficial (persuasion)—but a knack's aim isn't nearly so lofty. Controversially, Socrates claims that oratory is only concerned with producing pleasure.*

Socrates continues by explaining that, in his view, oratory is part of a practice that isn't admirable because it isn't actually "craftlike." This practice appeals to clever minds; he calls it "flattery." Practices like pastry baking, cosmetics, and sophistry are aspects of flattery, too. Oratory, in particular, is a shallow aspect of politics. Since Polus grows frustrated at this point, Gorgias chimes in to ask Socrates what he means by this.

Socrates sees oratory as something that doesn't truly pursue what's beneficial (like a craft), but merely pursues what people like to hear. In that way, it looks *like a craft, but it's a deception—like cosmetics can give a deceptive appearance of beauty, or sophistry (popular speech-making) can give a deceptive appearance of wisdom.*

Socrates explains that body and soul each have a state of fitness and an apparent state of fitness. For example, someone might *appear* to be physically fit, and only a doctor or a fitness expert could determine otherwise. Both body and soul also have crafts which apply to them. The craft for the soul is called politics, which can be divided into legislation and justice; the craft for the body likewise consists of two parts: gymnastics and **medicine**, which correspond to legislation and justice. In caring for body and soul, these four crafts are always concerned about what is best.

According to Socrates, there are ways in which either body or soul can be in a fit (healthy) state and ways in which they can just appear *to be healthy—and it's not always easy to tell which is which. But there are crafts whose aim is to bring about this healthy state. Socrates's division of the crafts can be a bit confusing, but the key point here is that politics is the craft which treats the soul; as mentioned in the previous section, Socrates sees oratory as an* appearance *of one of the parts of the craft of politics (but not the real thing).*

Flattery, on the other hand, divides itself into the above-named four parts, masks itself with them, and pretends to be the characters of those masks. It does not actually concern itself with what's best, but with what's most pleasant at the time. For example, pastry-baking might pretend to be **medicine**, with a pastry-baker persuading children (or childish adults) that he's the real nutritional expert, not an actual doctor. This is an example of flattery—it's a knack because it offers no account of the nature of its subject. Anything which lacks such an account, in Socrates's view, cannot be a craft.

Flattery can take on the guise of any of the crafts Socrates has just named. Flattery is only concerned about pleasure, not benefit. Pastry-baking masks itself as the craft of medicine, for instance, but it's really just "flattery" for the body. As a knack, it doesn't actually have to understand anything about the nature of the body or what it needs. The implied danger is that a knack (or rather the person who wields it) can deceive people into believing they're getting what's good for them, while really they're just being allowed to indulge in what feels good.

In a similar way, cosmetics wears the "mask" of gymnastics by giving an appearance of beauty, sophistry wears the mask of legislation, and oratory wears the mask of justice. So, oratory is "the counterpart in the soul to pastry baking, its counterpart in the body." Socrates concludes his point, apologizing for having given a lengthy speech himself when he asked Polus not to do the same. He invites Polus to respond as he sees fit.

Socrates explains that oratory masks itself as justice—an aspect of politics, the craft which applies to the soul. So oratory is no better for the soul than pastry baking is for the body; it just gives the appearance *of imparting justice to the soul, as pastry baking can give the appearance of imparting nutrition to the body.*

Polus says that he considers orators to be well-regarded because they hold the most power in their cities. Socrates counters that, if "having power" is defined as being good for the one who holds power, then he thinks orators hold the *least* power in their cities. Polus points out that orators can, like tyrants, put to death, confiscate the property of, or banish anyone they see fit. Socrates replies that in this case, orators and tyrants do little that they *want* to, even if they're doing what they see fit.

When Plato uses the term "city" in the dialogue, he uses the Greek polis, *which doesn't necessarily refer to an urban center, but can also refer to a group of villages spread over the countryside. For these purposes, it refers to any place where someone can wield power over others. Polus sees tyrants and orators as powerful because they can basically do what they want—but Socrates has a more complicated understanding of what it means to do what one wants.*

Socrates argues that it isn't good for a person who's unintelligent to do what seems fit to him. If Polus can prove that orators have intelligence and that oratory is a craft, not flattery, then perhaps it's true that orators have great power. Polus is baffled, so Socrates questions him in order to make his point clearer. He asks if people do things because they want the thing they're doing at the time, or because they want the thing for the *sake* of which they're doing it. For example, isn't it true that people take **medicine** not because it's pleasant, but for the sake of getting healthy? Polus agrees with all this.

Socrates's point is a bit hard to follow. For now, his main argument is that when people do things, they don't necessarily want the thing they're doing—rather, they do things for the sake of some greater benefit (like taking medicine for health's sake). His point about orators seems to be that unless orators are aiming at some greater benefit (as in a craft), then "powerful" actions like exiling or executing people have no intrinsic meaning. Orators are simply doing what they want at the time (flattery).

Socrates suggests that people are put to death, or banished or their property confiscated, for the sake of what's considered to be a greater good—it's not that we *want* to kill or exile or confiscate. We want things, after all, that are good. So if an orator or tyrant does such things because they think it's better for themselves when actually it's worse, they're still doing what they sees fit. If doing these things is actually bad, then are they really doing what they *want*? Polus concedes that he's not, and that in this case, he doesn't really have great power, if indeed having power is something good. Socrates concludes, then, that it's possible for someone who does what seems fit in their city to lack power and to be missing out on what they actually want to do.

Orators or tyrants of cities do things they think they want with the belief that those things are good (like putting someone to death). But if those things are actually not *good, then the orator or tyrant is wrong to believe that they're doing what they truly want (since we are meant to want things for the sake of a greater good). Socrates's implication is that an orator might do unjust things because of his distorted understanding of what's good versus what's merely pleasurable to him at the time.*

Polus continues to argue that the ability to do what one sees fit is enviable—whether it's just or unjust. Socrates says that we're not supposed to envy the miserable, but rather to pity them. He further states that the one who unjustly puts another to death is most pitiable. This is because acting unjustly is actually the ultimate evil—a greater evil than suffering what's unjust.

Polus still thinks that people who can do whatever they want are to be envied, but Socrates—moving into the next major argument of the dialogue—argues that such people aren't truly happy. In fact, anyone who behaves unjustly is actually doing the greatest possible evil.

Socrates argues that if he carried a dagger and had the arbitrary power to put to death anyone he saw fit in a crowded marketplace, even Polus would agree that this wasn't a legitimate form of power. Polus agrees, because someone who acted that way would deserve to be punished. But he also claims that many people who behave unjustly, like Archelaus (who illegitimately seized kingship from his brother) and the King of Persia, are nevertheless happy.

Socrates uses this illustration to demonstrate that power, coupled with the freedom to do whatever one wants, isn't necessarily good. But Polus isn't convinced of Socrates's earlier point that the unjust are necessarily miserable, naming supposed counterexamples: a Macedonian ruler of the 400s B.C.E., and the King of Persia, who was thought to embody supreme happiness.

Socrates rejects Polus's misleading "oratorical style" and argues that the root of the disagreement is a failure to recognize who's happy and who's not. He claims that the only way an unjust man can be happy is if he faces the consequences of his crime. To demonstrate this, he argues that in whatever way a thing acts upon something (like a **surgeon** cutting deeply), the thing acted upon is acted upon in just that way (the patient is deeply cut). That being the case, isn't it true that someone who is justly disciplined is being acted upon justly when he pays what's due? In other words, that person is being benefited, and his soul is improved.

Socrates says that Polus is lapsing into oratory—trying to be persuasive through his style—rather than engaging in actual argument. He identifies the point of disagreement between himself and Polus: what makes a person happy? For Socrates, happiness has to do with the long-term benefit of what someone undergoes. So, paradoxically, someone who's disciplined can be genuinely happier than someone who avoids discipline.

Socrates continues that the person being justly disciplined is being rid of evil in his soul. He gets Polus to concede that such evil is more serious than other evils, like poverty or poor physical condition. And though there are other corruptions of the soul, like ignorance or cowardice, injustice is the worst form of corruption. Just as there are crafts to get rid of poverty (financial management) and disease (**medicine**), there's also one to get rid of the soul's injustice: justice. If having evil in one's soul is the most serious kind of evil, then the happiest person is the one who doesn't have evil in his soul, and the second happiest would be the one who's gotten rid of it.

The point of discipline is to purge the soul of evil (namely the marring of the soul that occurs when someone acts unjustly). Such evil is worse than other kinds of sufferings a person can undergo, both physical and spiritual. Justice is the craft which purges evil. According to Socrates's reasoning, then, someone who faces justice and has his soul cleansed is happier than someone whose soul goes untreated.

Socrates argues that if someone shrinks from medical treatment out of fear, it's because they don't understand how it feels to be **healthy** and physically fit. In the same way, someone who avoids discipline is focusing on the pain involved instead of the benefit; they don't understand that living with an unhealthy soul is even worse than living with an unhealthy body.

Someone who dreads and avoids medical treatment isn't focusing on long-term health benefits, but on short-term fear. It's the same with discipline: someone who avoids it isn't thinking about what's really best for the soul or what will ultimately make them happy.

Polus now agrees with Socrates that failure to face discipline when it's due is the greatest evil of all, and that the one who does what's unjust is more miserable than the one who suffers what's unjust. This being the case, one who commits something unjust should voluntarily seek out discipline, lest the "**disease**" should cause one's soul to decay. Further, this means that if oratory is used to defend injustice, then it's useless. In such cases, oratory should rather be used to accuse oneself or others of injustice and encourage the offending party to face the unpleasantness of discipline for the sake of long-term benefit to the soul. Polus thinks that Socrates is being absurd.

Polus grants Socrates's points about the nature of evil, discipline, and happiness. Socrates's larger point about oratory is that if it's used to persuade people that what's unjust is actually just, then it's not actually pursuing the greater benefit of those who hear it—it's just flattering them. Oratory's goal should be to point out injustice and urge people to face discipline to restore their souls' health, but Socrates doesn't believe that oratory actually does this.

481B-491D

Callicles chimes in to say that he thinks Socrates is just grandstanding. Even though Socrates claims to be pursuing the truth, he's just using crowd-pleasing tactics. Callicles claims that such tactics "are admirable only by law and not by nature." He argues that Socrates is being inconsistent by changing the rules of debate—when Polus argued something according to law, Socrates would respond in terms of nature, and vice versa. He further argues that according to nature, suffering what's unjust really is more shameful. He thinks that most claims about what's "unjust" are really just the weak trying to unfairly restrain the strong. Callicles thinks it's actually just for the stronger, better person to have a greater share in society. In general, it's natural for the superior to rule the inferior.

Ironically, Callicles accuses Socrates of the same ill that Socrates believes politicians like Callicles commit: telling people what they want to hear. Callicles's reference to law and nature is grounded in ideas common in the fifth century B.C.E. In short, he holds that law (or custom) involves the weaker members of society devising rules to restrain the stronger. He believes such laws should be rejected in favor of "nature," which rules that the stronger are entitled to rule the weaker. Basically, Callicles rejects Socrates's argumentation on the grounds that, in his view, it goes against what's "natural"; accordingly, he disagrees with Socrates's view of what's just and unjust.

Socrates, too, says Callicles, will acknowledge these truths, if he turns away from philosophy and moves on to what's more important. Philosophy is good in moderation, but if someone engages in it beyond a certain period of life, that person will be inexperienced in all that's truly good in life—in laws, in speech, in business, and in all the things that make one human. When such people try to venture into public life, they end up becoming a laughingstock.

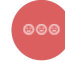
Callicles thinks that Socrates will agree with him if he stops thinking like a philosopher. He thinks philosophy is an indulgence that should be limited to a certain period of one's life. Philosophy doesn't actually prepare someone to engage in public life (like oratory and politics), which Callicles sees as the ultimate parts of human life.

Callicles goes on to say that he thinks of philosophers as grown adults who act like children. It's fitting for a young man to engage in philosophy, but it's shameful in an older man—such a man generally avoids the city center and marketplace, instead spending his life in seclusion, discussing irrelevant things with younger boys. Though Callicles likes Socrates, he believes he's neglecting more important things in life. If he ever had to defend himself in court, for instance, he'd find himself tongue-tied—he'd end up being unjustly condemned for something.

Plato is likely using dramatic irony here. His readers would know the circumstances under which Socrates died—having been executed for alleged impiety and corruption of the youth. Callicles's reference to old philosophers hanging out with younger men hints at this, and his claim that Socrates couldn't defend himself is challenged by one of Plato's other dialogues, Apology (set just before Socrates's death).

Socrates says that he's lucky to have run into Callicles, whose "knowledge, good will, and frankness" will put Socrates's soul to a good test. Both Gorgias and Polus were wise and well-meaning, but insufficiently frank; but Callicles is so well-rounded that if he and Socrates come to agreement on anything, they're sure to have arrived at the truth. Best of all, Callicles has pressed Socrates on the most important point: how men should strive to be, and what they should pursue.

In Callicles, Socrates believes he's finally found a suitable discussion partner. Perhaps that's why he takes this opportunity to articulate the question only hinted at so far, which will prove to be the heart of the dialogue: what a person should be like, and what life should be all about.



Socrates restates Callicles's belief that the superior, the better, and the more worthy should rule over and receive a better share than the inferior, worse, and less worthy. Callicles also confirms that "superior," "better," and "stronger" have the same definition in his mind. But Socrates keeps pressing him on this point—Callicles doesn't really mean, after all, that a group of slaves is superior just because they are stronger, does he? Callicles is annoyed by Socrates's criticism of his words, but Socrates's point is that Callicles is using words without being careful about their meaning. For example, if a large group of people were assembled with a supply of food and drink, should a **doctor**—the most intelligent of the bunch—get the greatest share of food and drink because he's superior in intelligence, even if he isn't the strongest? Or should a weaver have the most clothes, or a farmer the biggest share of land?

Characteristically, Socrates keeps pressing for greater accuracy in Callicles's statements, wanting to arrive at his real meaning. He wants to get at the heart of what Callicles really means by such words as "better." Socrates shows that superiority can mean different things in different contexts. In other words, Callicles's tendency to use words in imprecise ways (which Socrates sees as an inherent weakness of oratory) is an impediment to truth, preventing the discussion from progressing.

491D-509C

Callicles is frustrated with Socrates's talk of "shoemakers and cleaners, cooks and **doctors**," arguing that he's not referring to such people, but to those with the intelligence to manage a city. Socrates points out that while Callicles is accusing him of being slippery with his words, Callicles is actually doing the same thing: never saying the same thing about the same subjects. Even if it's granted that supposedly superior people should be the rulers of the city, what about those people's rule of themselves—their self-control over their desires and pleasure-seeking tendencies?

Callicles objects to, or misses the point of, Socrates's practice of drawing examples from everyday life. He sees this as confusing the issue, but Socrates turns things around on Callicles, charging that it's actually Callicles who's not being precise enough in his meaning. He then brings the discussion to its next major point: rule over others is one thing, but what about rule of oneself?

Callicles finds this amusing—someone who is self-controlled is simply stupid. Someone who wants to live in the right way, he argues, should let his appetites grow as big as possible and not try to restrain them—in fact, he should dedicate himself to fulfilling his appetites as much as possible. People who criticize such a life are just ashamed of their own impotence, and they restrain better people because they can't satisfy themselves. It's shameful for naturally superior people to subject themselves to the criticism of others, adhering to supposedly admirable rules of justice and self-control. In Callicles's view, forgoing discipline leads to a better, happier life.

Hearkening back to Callicles's preference for nature over law, he believes that someone who practices self-control is behaving unnaturally. On the contrary, it's natural—therefore better—for someone to do exactly what he wants, as much as he wants. If people object to that, it just means they don't have the power to do what they want, meaning that they're inferior. A good life, in Callicles's view, is an unrestrained life in which someone pursues what they want, not worrying about other people's definitions of what's good.

Socrates asks Callicles if he really means that it's wrong to claim that those who have no need of anything are happy. Callicles agrees, because if that were so, then inanimate objects and dead people would be the happiest. To the contrary, Socrates wants to persuade Callicles that living in a disciplined manner and being satisfied with one's circumstances is always preferable an indulgent, undisciplined life.

In Callicles's view, someone who doesn't need or desire anything is as good as dead—there's no point in life for such a person. Socrates believes the opposite: satisfaction with what one has is always better than never being satisfied. The two have fundamentally different views of what constitutes a good life.

Socrates gives various examples, like someone who continuously scratches an itch, or the life of a catamite, to challenge Callicles. When Callicles objects to this shameful comparison, Socrates argues that this is what happens when one defines happiness as enjoying oneself, without discriminating between "pleasant" and "good." Are there pleasures that *aren't* good? Put another way, is goodness something other than "unrestricted enjoyment"?

In Ancient Greece, catamites were boys with whom young men engaged in sexual relationships. Though this was a widely accepted practice, Callicles finds it unseemly for Socrates to use such a blunt comparison. Socrates's point, though, is that just because something's enjoyable does not make it "good," or worth pursuing indefinitely.

Callicles resists Socrates's point, so Socrates tries another tack. Would Callicles say that knowledge and bravery are the same thing? Callicles says that they're different. Socrates thinks Callicles will come to realize that, in fact, this isn't what he really thinks. He argues that someone who does well has the opposite experience from someone who does badly. Similarly, **health** and sickness are opposite experiences. Doesn't this mean, then, that thirst and drinking are opposite experiences—that is, thirst is pain and drinking is enjoyment? In other words, it's possible to experience pain and enjoyment at the same time—meaning that feeling enjoyment isn't the same thing as doing well, suggesting, in turn, that what's pleasant isn't the same as what's good.

Socrates contrasts two different types of experiences—doing well or badly, or being healthy or sick. This leads him to the assertion that pain and enjoyment are likewise opposites. Since pain and enjoyment can be experienced simultaneously (like thirst and quenching thirst), this suggests that enjoyment can't be simply equated with the experience of "doing well" (one can be enjoying oneself while actually doing poorly). Just because something is pleasurable doesn't mean it is good.

Socrates then tries another approach. Wouldn't Callicles agree that he calls people good because of the presence of good things in them? If that's true, would he call foolish and cowardly people good? Then has Callicles ever seen a foolish person feeling enjoyment, or an intelligent person feeling pain? When Callicles acknowledges that he has, Socrates asks whether intelligent or foolish people feel pain or enjoyment more. Callicles says that there's little difference. Callicles also agrees that, in the event of an enemy retreat, both cowardly and brave soldiers feel enjoyment to about the same degree. This means that good people (the intelligent and brave) experience enjoyment and pain to about the same degree as the bad (the foolish and cowardly).

Socrates means that a good person can experience enjoyment and pain to about the same degree that a bad person does. In other words, just because someone is experiencing pleasure doesn't make him good, and by the same token, just because someone is experiencing pain doesn't make him bad. Again, pleasure and goodness aren't the same things.

Moving on, Socrates points out that if good people are good and bad people are bad because of the presence of good or bad things in them—as Callicles had claimed earlier—then this means that both good things (pleasures) and bad things (pains) are present in the good person, and the same is true for the bad person. Then isn't Callicles saying that the bad person is both good and bad to the same degree as the good person?

Socrates restates his argument that pleasures and pains are present both in those whom Callicles would call "good" and those he would call "bad." In other words, Callicles's definitions of good and bad are too simplistic.

Callicles dodges these questions. Socrates continues, saying that good things are beneficial and bad things are harmful. Then wouldn't this mean that some pains are beneficial and some pleasures are harmful? When Callicles agrees, Socrates reminds him that we should do all things for the sake of what's good—including pleasant things for the sake of good things, but not good things for the sake of pleasant things.

Socrates complicates the definitions of good and bad. He defines "good" as beneficial and "bad" as harmful—but pains can be beneficial, and pleasures can be harmful. So, by these definitions, living a good life might very well involve acceptance of pain and restraint of pleasure. The measure of goodness, then, is the object for the sake of which *we do things (such as improvement of the soul, for example).*

Then, Socrates goes on, can everyone decide what pleasures are good and which are bad, or is a craftsman needed to discern this? Callicles agrees that a craftsman is required. Socrates then reminds him of the knack of pastry baking, which is concerned only with pleasure, and the craft of **medicine**, which is concerned with what's good. Doesn't Callicles see that this whole discussion is about the way people are supposed to live? Are we supposed to make speeches and engage in active political life, or engage in philosophy? What distinguishes these two ways of life?

Socrates's point is that since pleasures aren't necessarily good—some only aiming at immediate indulgence of one's desires—one needs a craftsman to help determine which are good and which are bad. In other words, one doesn't just need the equivalent of a pastry baker for the soul (who merely flatters), but the equivalent of a doctor (who genuinely treats). All this comes down to a distinction between two different ways of life—one that's geared toward pleasure and flattery of the soul (politics) and one that's guided by what's genuinely beneficial to it (philosophy).

If the pleasant is different from the good, there must be a procedure for obtaining both the pleasant and the good, respectively. Socrates then returns to the knack of pastry baking and the craft of **medicine**—the former is irrational, not needing to consider the nature or cause of pleasure, whereas the latter necessarily investigates both. If these things are true in the case of the body, then do a similar knack and craft apply in the case of the soul? In other words, is there a form of mere flattery, or gratification, that applies to the soul just as pastry baking "flatters" the body?

Socrates reiterates the difference between a knack and a craft in the case of the body and in the case of the soul. A knack doesn't need to have any higher understanding of its subject (it only needs to know what's desired), whereas a craft needs a careful and sensitive understanding of the subject, as well as what truly benefits it.

Callicles agrees to this, so Socrates gives some examples and asks Callicles to identify them as either flattery or not. They agree that fluteplaying, lyreplaying, trained choruses, and tragedies merely serve to gratify spectators by giving pleasure. Socrates points out that if melody, rhythm, and meter were stripped away from these things, only speeches would be left—a kind of popular oratory that's indiscriminately addressed to men, women, children, slave, and free. Callicles agrees.

While there's nothing inherently wrong with things like listening to musical performances or watching tragic plays, these things don't have any higher aim, according to Socrates—their only goal is pleasure. Socrates then points out that the most common and sought-after form of oratory is really no different—its only goal is to appeal to an audience, with no regard for the nature of that audience or what their needs are.

If Socrates and Callicles agree that this sort of oratory is mere flattery, what about the sort that's addressed to free citizens? Do such orators speak with the goal of making the best possible citizens? Or do they only seek to gratify their hearers and to pursue their own private good instead of the common good? If a beneficial type of oratory really exists, has Callicles ever seen it?

Socrates next turns to the question of whether there's any difference between popular oratory and the supposedly higher kind that's used in Athens's political institutions. What is its goal, in other words—does it even have one? It's theoretically possible for a beneficial kind of oratory to exist, so the question is whether oratory has ever actually been practiced in a non-flattering way that was intended for the betterment of its audience.

Callicles can't think of any contemporary orators who fit this bill. For historical examples, he names Themistocles and Pericles, among others. Socrates decides to examine these figures to see if Callicles is correct. First, he explains that a craftsman will keep his ultimate goal in view rather than just applying techniques randomly. For example, a painter, shipwright, or other craftsman goes about his craft in a specific order. The same holds true with **doctors**.

Themistocles was a leading Athenian statesman in the early fifth century B.C.E.; among his achievements was building up the Athenian navy. Pericles was prominent in the middle part of the same century, especially notable for his role in strategy against Sparta during the Peloponnesian War. To assess such figures as orators, Socrates first reviews the general procedure of a craftsman.

So, if all that's true, what about the soul—shouldn't it, too, be properly organized? Callicles agrees. Socrates applies the term "healthy" to bodily excellence and applies "lawful" to the orderly soul, which is characterized by justice and self-control. Callicles agrees to that, too. So, the latter things are what a good orator should consider when he's applying his speeches to people's souls. After all, a **doctor** wouldn't let a sick person indulge his or her appetites indiscriminately. Likewise, an undisciplined soul shouldn't be permitted to indulge corrupt appetites.

Socrates believes that the craftsmanship of the soul should be just as organized as the procedure for shipbuilding, medicine, or any other craft. If an orator is a genuine craftsman, his goal will be to instill justice and self-control in the souls of his listeners and to discourage the indulgence of mere appetites.

Callicles has grown weary of Socrates's relentless questions, so Socrates carries on by questioning and answering himself. He reviews the points he and Callicles have agreed upon so far and concludes that it's the possession of justice and self-control that makes people happy, and the possession of evil that makes people miserable. Then he turns to Callicles's criticism of him, that Socrates would find himself helpless if he faced exile, confiscation, or death—what Callicles deemed the most shameful position of all. Socrates restates his belief that the person who commits injustice is in a more shameful position than the person who suffers as a result of injustice.

For Socrates, justice and self-control are the key to the good life. Having demonstrated this point, Socrates reconsiders Callicles's earlier charge that Socrates, because of his alleged inexperience with public life, wouldn't be able to defend himself in court. In response, Socrates points out that having such injustice committed against himself really would be less shameful than committing it would be. That's because he believes the good life is lived in adherence to just law, in contrast to Callicles's belief in "nature."

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509C-522E

Socrates asks another question. Since doing what's unjust and suffering it are both evils to be avoided, how might a person protect himself from both of these? Callicles says that someone should acquire a power or craft against both. To avoid suffering anything unjust, Socrates argues that one ought to be a ruler in his city. He goes on to say that a friend is someone who is most like another. That being the case, a savage tyrant would certainly fear a person in his city who was much better than he; the same goes for someone inferior to him. A man of similar character to the tyrant, on the other hand—who thinks like the tyrant and goes along with him—will likewise enjoy power and security in the city. Such a person would have to be accustomed from childhood onward to the tyrant's way of doing things. Wouldn't this person then be immune from unjust treatment, "as you people say?" Callicles agrees.

In this section of the dialogue, Socrates applies what he's previously established about the soul being characterized by justice to politics and living happily in general. How does philosophy apply to the life of the city? If avoiding suffering what's unjust is truly one's priority in life, Socrates says, then one should be in a position of power that lets them avoid such suffering (something Callicles agrees with). This inevitably involves befriending those in power and agreeing with them. Socrates's implication here ("as you people say") is that this is what orators (politicians) do—rather than pursuing a life of integrity, they seek self-protection through political alliances.

On the other hand, Socrates goes on, because of his position of power, such a person would have the ability to commit wrongdoing and avoid punishment—meaning that, after all, he's susceptible to suffering the greatest evil, corruption in the soul. Callicles points out that, at the same time, that person would have the power to put to death the one who refuses to imitate the tyrant. Socrates concedes this—but this isn't the worst thing. Does Callicles think that a person should seek long life at all costs and practice crafts which will prevent against dangers, like oratory? Callicles heartily agrees.

The problem with being in such a position of power is that it also places a person in the position to do wrong to others—and to avoid being called to account for it. In other words, it makes for exactly the kind of miserable, shameful life Socrates has already condemned. It basically forces a person to dedicate his life to looking out for his own safety and security by flattering those whose approval he needs.

Socrates gives examples, like expertise in swimming or in helmsmanship, by which a person's life might be preserved. Isn't it true that a helmsman of a ship doesn't know which of his passengers might have been better off drowning during the voyage, either because of an incurable disease in body or (worse) in soul? That's why a helmsman doesn't boast about his career. Yet "you people" constantly boast about politics and urge others to join in, saying that other careers are worthless.

Socrates's point in these examples is that mere prolongation of life isn't necessarily the best thing. Ship captains don't brag about their ability to safely transport people because they don't know if a longer life necessarily benefits any given passenger. Socrates suggests that the same is true of politicians and orators—yet they boast as if their flattery of people (only paying attention to the pleasures of life) is a great achievement.

Socrates argues that there's more to goodness than thinking about how long one will live. A person should be more concerned about living well during the time that's allotted to them. Can it really be true that living well means endearing oneself to a political regime?

Socrates comes to his main point about the goal of philosophy: it's more important to focus on the goodness of one's life than its length. There has to be more to life than seeking power in order to preserve one's position in life.

Callicles is unconvinced. Socrates recalls the distinction between flattery and craft, the latter aiming to make its subject as good as possible. Isn't it the case that we should try to care for the city and its citizens by making them as good as possible? Without that effort, there's no good in offering anything else to citizens.

Here, Socrates argues that politics is actually misguided in the way it goes about caring for citizens. Politicians might boast of providing good things that improve people's lives, but these things generally don't make leaders into better people themselves.

Socrates offers an illustration. Suppose that he and Callicles were taking up building projects, like constructing a city's walls, ships, or temples. Wouldn't they first have to examine themselves to determine whether they're experts in building? And wouldn't they also need to check whether they'd previously built structures, and whether those structures were admirable or not? If so, then it would be wise to proceed. But if not, it would be foolish. The same would hold true if they were seeking to establish a public medical practice. It would be folly to do so without having established Socrates's and Callicles's state of **health** and whether they'd ever improved anyone else's health.

Socrates imagines that he and Callicles are undertaking a public building project—something that would be foolish to pursue unless they could demonstrate competence in this area. Unless they can show expertise, past experience, and successful outcomes in building, then they should never presume to undertake such a role. The same is true for medicine—how can the unhealthy presume to improve others' health?

Building on this, Socrates continues. If he and Callicles were to engage in the business of the city, shouldn't they first examine whether either of them had ever improved any citizens? In other words, is there anyone who was wicked before who is now good? After all, this is what they've agreed that a person active in politics ought to be concerned about. Did Pericles make his citizens better than he found them? If he was truly a good politician, shouldn't his people have turned out more just than they were before? Socrates goes on to name other Athenian politicians, like Themistocles, who were ostracized, impeached, or exiled by the people.

These same principles apply to the management of a city, Socrates continues. If neither of them can prove that they've made anyone else a better citizen—the purported goal of politics—then they shouldn't take on that role. Socrates suggests that the fates of historical figures—their people's hostile treatment of them—shows that these rulers didn't succeed in improving their citizens. For example, Pericles was put on trial by Athens for embezzlement in 430 B.C.E.

Socrates concludes that, despite Callicles's earlier assertion, they don't really know any politicians who have done the city good. This shows that, if any of those men were orators, they didn't practiced neither authentic oratory nor mere flattery.

Socrates can't name any politicians who have benefited their cities in this way. Therefore, they didn't practice oratory as a genuine craft. And, for that matter, they failed to effectively flatter their citizens, too—so they didn't even master oratory as a knack.

Socrates observes that even though they've established that there are crafts which apply to both the body and soul, and that the former are subservient to the latter, Callicles keeps naming politicians as exemplary who've primarily been caretakers of bodies and servants of the people's appetites. When this indulgence leads to sickness later, people blame those advisers who try to tend the sickness, while praising those who caused the sickness in the first place. But it's those earlier leaders who have made the city what it is.

Socrates says that Callicles still misunderstands what politics ought to be—he persists in thinking of good politicians as those who give people things that they like. Such indulgence actually harms citizens. When others (implicitly philosophers) later bring this harm to people's attention, they blame the messengers, not those who indulged them and led them to such condition in the first place.

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Socrates asks Callicles what type of care for the city Callicles is calling him to—trying to make Athenians as good as possible, like a **doctor**, or simply gratifying them? Callicles suggests it's the latter, implying that if Socrates doesn't do this, he'll be put to death. Socrates thinks that's likely. He explains why: he thinks he is one of the only Athenians who *truly* practices politics. That's because his speeches don't aim at what's most pleasing, but at what's best.

Callicles again says that he thinks Socrates should practice the flattering kind of oratory. It's not clear if he fully disagrees with Socrates's critique of such oratory, or if he's just warning Socrates that ignoring this practice will likely lead to his own death. Socrates actually agrees that this will probably happen—because he genuinely cares for the city (practices true politics), people will condemn him for failing to give them what they want.

In the end, then, if Socrates wound up accused in court, he would be in the same position as a **doctor** facing a pastry chef in front of children. He would be accused of harming the children by cutting them, making them hungry, and forcing bitter potions on them, instead of giving them sweets. If he gave the defense that he was acting in the interest of health, it would cause an uproar with the judges. That's exactly what would happen to Socrates in court. He wouldn't be able to point out any pleasures he'd given the people, or to counter the charge that he'd confused the young or abused the old. Presumably, then, he'd get a harsh punishment.

Socrates comes back to Callicles's earlier critique of him. Callicles is right that Socrates probably wouldn't fare well in court—but this is because people like to be flattered. Like children, they would object to Socrates's harsh "medicine" of philosophy and reject his claim that he's doing what's best for them. Therefore, it doesn't matter what Socrates would say under those circumstances—the people would probably condemn him anyway.

Callicles asks if a man like that is to be admired. Socrates says yes, if such a man has protected himself against doing anything unjust—the most important kind of protection there is. If he were put to death because he failed to be a flattering orator, he'd accept such a death peacefully. That's because death shouldn't be fearful for a reasonable person. Only doing what's unjust—arriving in Hades with a soul marked by unjust actions—is something to be feared.

Callicles still doubts that a condemned man can be admirable. According to Socrates's view of what's good and just, such a person is the most admirable of all—much more so than someone who preserves life by aligning oneself with the unjust. For someone who behaves justly, death holds no fear.

523A-527A

Socrates illustrates his previous point by telling an illustrative tale from Homer. He says that Zeus, Poseidon, and Pluto took over the kingship from their father Cronus, dividing his sovereignty among themselves. At that time, just and pious human beings went to the Isles of the Blessed after death. Unjust and godless people, however, went to a place of retribution. They'd face judges right before death, while fully dressed, but the judges handled the cases poorly. Zeus decided that this was because wicked souls are often beautifully dressed and are able to get witnesses to testify to their good lives. Now, people will be prevented from knowing ahead of time when they'll die. They'll be judged after death, when they're naked. This will allow the judge to study each soul in isolation and without obstruction. Zeus appoints three of his sons as judges.

Homer's Iliad *and* Odyssey *(written in the 8th or 7th century B.C.E.) were Ancient Greece's foundational literary works. Homer's tales would have been familiar to anyone in Plato's audience. So Socrates's retelling of an episode from Homer, far from being an odd digression, would be seen as a fitting capstone for the arguments he's been making. This story involves the judgment of souls at death. It used to be that souls were judged before death, but this allowed the wicked to manipulate the judges for their own advantage.*

From this story, Socrates concludes that death is the separation of the soul and the body. When these parts separate, they remain in basically the same condition they were in during life. The treatment the person's body received during life—whether indulgence or injury or suffering inflicted by someone else—will be evident on their corpse. In the same way, the condition of the person's soul during life will be evident after death. Studying this condition, without regard for the person's identity or station in life, will allow the judge to make a just judgment.

Socrates explains that the soul after death will bear clear evidence of the way it was treated during life, thus determining the person's eternal destiny. This means that Socrates's arguments about the corruption of the soul, the difference between a pleasant life and a good life, and the indispensable role of philosophy have eternal repercussions.

Anyone who's punished will either become bitter or will benefit from it, or else will serve as an example to others, allowing those others to become better. Those who are benefited have curable souls. Those who become examples to others have incurable souls, so their punishment serves no other purpose to them. Tyrants and other powerful people are often among this group—this is because it's difficult to live justly when one has the freedom to behave otherwise.

Socrates says that punishment is of use to a curable soul, but to some hardened souls, punishment can only benefit onlookers by giving them an example of what not to become. He even suggests that the powerful—those most admired and defended by Callicles and Polus—are often among the incurable, because they become so accustomed to behaving unjustly and shirking the benefit of discipline.

Socrates finds Homer's account convincing, and he hopes to reveal to the judge the healthiest soul possible. This is why he rejects what most people consider to be the good things in life and tries to live the best life he can, so that he'll die in the same way. He encourages other people, including Callicles, to do the same—lest Callicles find himself tongue-tied at the judgment.

Socrates's belief in the final judgment of the soul guides his way of life. This means rejecting much that is considered to be part of "the good life"—like the indulgence of pleasure—and instead aiming at a far greater, even eternal, benefit. Turning Callicles's warning on its head, he warns his friend to do the same—rather than Socrates becoming a politician, Callicles should become a philosopher.

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Socrates sums up his argument. He says that even these wisest of Greeks—Callicles, Polus, and Gorgias—have been unable to prove that people should live in any other way besides the path that will reap benefits in the afterlife as well. He maintains that it's been proven that doing what's unjust is worse than suffering it, and that being good is more important than seeming to be good; that discipline is good; that flattery is bad; and that oratory, as well as everything else, should only be used in support of what's just. Following Socrates's way will ensure happiness both in this life and the next. Callicles's way, Socrates concludes, is worthless.

Socrates concludes that even the best wisdom of the day, as symbolized by his three discussion partners, falls short of aiming at what's best: the afterlife. The best advice that the day's orators can offer is to entangle oneself in this life—not with the ultimate goal of improving one's soul, but of flattering others and promoting oneself, all with the goal of extending earthly life for as long as possible. Only Socrates's philosophical life truly benefits the soul and, by extension, society as a whole.

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