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**The Ethical Function of the *Gorgias*’Concluding Myth**

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Cebes laughed and said: assuming that we were afraid, Socrates, try to change our minds, or rather do not assume that we are afraid, but perhaps there is a child in us who has these fears; try to persuade him not to fear death like a bogey.

You should, said Socrates, sing a charm over him every day until you have charmed away his fears. (*Phaedo* 77e­3­–7)

The *Gorgias* ends with Socrates telling an eschatological myth that he insists is a rational account (*logos*) and no mere tale (*muthos*) (523a1–3).[[1]](#footnote-1) Using this story, Socrates reasserts the central lessons of the previous discussion: that it is always better to be just than unjust, that philosophy is a worthwhile pursuit, and that truth is more important than appearance. However, it isn’t clear how this fanciful story can persuade any of the characters in the dialogue. Those (such as Socrates) who already believe the underlying philosophical lessons don’t appear to require the myth, and those (such as Callicles) who reject these teachings are unlikely to be moved by this far-fetched tale. For whom, then, is this myth told?

This paper argues that the myth is told for the sake of Socrates himself and those who aspire to follow him (i.e. Socratically-minded philosophers). The myth aims to address uncertainties about the viability of the philosophical life to those w­­ho are already sympathetic to that life. These doubts partially stem from the nature of embodiment: as embodied beings, one cannot fully apprehend real value and one’s true nature (section 2). And these doubts partially stem from the connection between justice and happiness (*eudaimonia*): one might accept the truth of Socrates’ arguments as a matter of logic but still be left (justifiably) unconfident that these arguments *really* entail that it is always better to be just than unjust and that justice secures blessed happiness (section 3).[[2]](#footnote-2) The myth assists with the former by presenting an image that draws a philosopher away from the goods of the body towards the goods of the soul. The story assists with the latter by presenting an image of cosmic justice, thereby securing happiness in proportion to virtue.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**1. The Myth**

There are three main parts of the myth. The first part focuses on the divine judicial system (523a–524a). The myth explains how certain legal policies changed when Zeus, Pluto, and Poseidon took sovereignty from their father, Cronus. Socrates explains that there is a divine law that holds that those who live justly and piously will be rewarded by being sent to the Isles of the Blessed when they die, whereas those who live unjustly and impiously will be punished in Tartarus (523a–b). Call this divine order the “proportionality law.”

During Cronus’ reign and early in Zeus’ tenure, the proportionality law was improperly applied: many unjust and impious humans were sent to the Isles of the Blessed, while many just and pious humans were sent to Tartarus (523b). Three policies contributed to this error: (1) both the judged and judges were alive and clothed (523a), (2) witnesses attended the judgment and testified (523c–d), and (3) humans had foreknowledge of their death (523d–e). With these policies, people were judged on the appearance of their character rather than on the true condition of their soul. After Pluto and the overseers of the Isles of the Blessed confronted Zeus about how out of proportion the proportionality law was, Zeus reversed each of these conditions: now (1) the judged and the judges are dead and naked, revealing their souls (523e), (2) no witnesses are allowed at the judicial proceeding (523e), and (3) no one has foreknowledge of their death (523e).

The second aspect of the myth focuses on the nature of death and punishment (524b–526d). Socrates explains that death is the separation of the soul from the body (524b; *Phd*. 64c). However, the body and the soul are similar in that the scars from life remain in death. Just as the body retains its physical form after death (at least, initially), the soul retains its psychological form (524b–d). Viciousness disfigures the soul, rendering it ugly and subject to righteous punishment in the form of pain and suffering (524e–525b). This punishment can serve two purposes: it can make the subject better, and it can make the subject an example so that others may learn that injustice is harmful (525b–c). The latter purpose especially applies to those who have committed heinous crimes and are beyond repair (525c–d). The majority of these incurable souls come from the ranks of the politically powerful (524d, 526a). Socrates ends this part of the myth by highlighting the rewards of the philosophical life: those who live piously, justly, privately, and devoted to truth will be sent to the Isles of the Blessed (526c).

The final aspect explicitly ties the myth to the philosophical lessons of the dialogue (526d–527e). Socrates reaffirms his philosophical convictions and encourages Callicles to follow him:

But among so many arguments this one alone survives refutation and remains steady: [a] that doing what’s unjust is more to be guarded against than suffering it, and [b] that it’s not *seeming* to be good but *being* good that a man should take care of more than anything, both in his public and his private life; and [c] that if a person is bad in some respect, he’s to be disciplined, and that the second best thing after being just is to become just by paying one’s due, by being disciplined; and [d] that every form of flattery, both the form concerned with oneself and that concerned with others, whether they’re few or many, is to be avoided, and [e] that oratory and every other activity is to be used in support of what’s just. (527b2–c4)

One doesn’t have to think too hard to see how the myth reaffirms a–e and how these points reaffirm Socrates’ central arguments in the dialogue. Because we are judged in the afterlife by the actual condition of our soul (and not by our physical appearances, rhetorical pleas, and gifts to the judges), and because justice makes the soul good and injustice makes it bad, we ought to strive to be as just as possible. When we err, we shouldn’t run from punishment but should embrace it and contemplate how we might improve.[[4]](#footnote-4) For these reasons, rhetoric and political power aimed at injustice are not beneficial since they merely make one appear good. Philosophy, by contrast, is truly beneficial because it aims at truth, justice, and goodness.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Things are not so simple, however. Socrates’ insistence that this myth is no mere tale but a rational account signifies that he wants Callicles to take it (or, at least aspects of it) seriously, but the myth, problematically, doesn’t seem to be the type of thing Callicles would (or, even could) take seriously (523a, 527a; Ferrari 2012, 66; Annas 1982, 125; see also *Tht*.176e–177a).[[6]](#footnote-6) In general, Callicles rejects conventional ethics and customs. Furthermore, Callicles is unmoved by Socrates’ actual arguments and has become increasingly frustrated with Socrates during this exchange and appears to have given up on the conversation. This evidence suggests that he is unlikely to be persuaded of the ethical lessons of the myth and its accompanying metaphysical extravagance (see especially 483e, 484a, and 493d; see also *Seventh Letter* 335a–b). Just as the threat of hell and the promise of heaven is unlikely to persuade an ardent atheist to take up Christianity, Socrates’ myth is unlikely to move Callicles to pursue the philosophical life.[[7]](#footnote-7) Indeed, Socrates seems to acknowledge this himself when he says that Callicles will “think that it’s a mere tale” (523a1–2). Perhaps, then, the myth isn’t aimed at Callicles but is for Socrates’ own sake. Yet, it isn’t clear that the tale is capable of persuading Socrates––not because he finds the story implausible, but rather because he seems to accept it already, and in order to be persuaded of something, one must move from a state of (at least, partial) non-acceptance to a state of (at least, partial) acceptance.

Generalizing from these claims, an agent, *A*, must meet the following two conditions in order to be persuaded:

1. *Unbelief*: *A* must not already fully believe the myth. If *A* fully accepts the myth, then it cannot persuade *A*.

2. *Plausibility*: *A* must be open to the plausibility of the myth. If *A* is committed to the complete implausibility of the myth, then it cannot persuade *A*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Thus, in order to be persuaded, one must be capable of not only believing a claim but also of unbelief. The problem is that our two main characters, Socrates and Callicles, seem to meet only one of these conditions. Socrates appears to meet the plausibility condition but not the unbelief condition, while Callicles appears to meet the unbelief condition but not the plausibility condition (cf. Austin 2013, 48–51). Is the myth, thus, mere rhetorical flair aimed at gratifying Socrates and salting Callicles’ wounds?

I argue that the myth provides a metaphysical landscape that assists Socrates and his followers on their philosophical journey. Since Socrates and his followers already meet the plausibility condition, my task is to show that they also meet the unbelief condition. Broadly speaking, there are two ways for *A* to satisfy the unbelief condition:

1a. *Non-Belief*: *A* has never thought about the myth.

1b. *Doubt*: *A* is capable of doubting the myth.

Since I wish to argue that myth persuades and benefits Socrates (and his followers), and Socrates is the one telling the tale, non-belief is not possible; thus, I must show that Socrates is capable of doubting the myth. In the next section, I argue that Socrates maintains that all humans face doubt and anxiety during embodiment.

**2. Embodiment and Death**

*(a) Embodiment*

The first hint that our embodied nature misleads us occurs in Socrates’ discussion with Gorgias and Polus concerning crafts. Socrates explains that there is a craft of the soul and a craft of the body. The study of the body and the study of the soul can each be subdivided: Gymnastics and medicine examine and aim at the health of the body, while legislation and justice examine and aim at the health of the soul (464b–c). Flattering knacks imitate each of these crafts: pastry baking impersonates medicine, cosmetology wears the mask of gymnastics, oratory imitates justice, and sophistry attempts to pass for legislation (465b–c). Following this, Socrates says:

In fact, if the soul didn’t govern the body *but the body governed itself*, and if pastry baking and medicine weren’t kept under observation and distinguished by the soul, *but the body itself made judgments about them*, making its estimates by reference to the gratification it receives, then the world according to Anaxagoras would prevail…all things would be mixed together in the same place, and there would be no distinction between matters of medicine and health, and matters of pastry baking. (465c7–d6, emphasis added)

In this passage, Socrates is asserting that the body itself is unable to distinguish that which aims at health from that which aims at pleasure. Since health is the good of the body, the body alone cannot discover its own good––it requires the soul. If the body itself is unable to discern its own good, it certainly cannot determine the good of the soul. Judicial and legislative decisions made by the body will simply aim at what is most pleasing and least painful, and it will conflate these with judgments about what is best for the souls of the citizens.

Though this passage suggests that the body *inhibits* the soul’s ability to discern things as they truly are, strictly speaking, it only supports the weaker claim that the body *requires* the soul in order to make correct evaluative judgments. For support of the stronger claim, we must turn to Socrates’ discussion of the leaky jar. After Socrates asserts that the person in need of nothing is happy (*eudaimōn*), Callicles cleverly remarks that stones and corpses must then be the happiest (492e). It might be strange to think that the Socratic life of living as a corpse or a rock is the happiest, but it is also odd to think that the best life is the Calliclean life of *pleonexia*––a life of insatiable desire––or so asserts Socrates (492e). For this reason, it wouldn’t surprise Socrates if the following lines of Euripides were true:

But who knows whether being alive is being dead

And being dead is being alive? (492e10–11)[[9]](#footnote-9)

Socrates explains that he once “heard one of the wise men say that we are now dead and that our body [*sōma*] is our tomb [*sēma*], and that the part of our soul in which our appetites reside is actually the sort of thing to be open to persuasion and to shift back and forth” (493a1–4). Hence, some clever person named this part of the soul “jar” (*pithos*) on account of it being persuadable (*pithanon*) (493a6–7). Fools (*anoētoi*), so named uninitiated (*amuētoi*) (493a7–b1), have uncontrolled and insatiable appetites, making their souls like leaking jars being filled by leaky sieves (493b). Hence, those who lack self-control––the foolish and uninitiated­­––are miserable since they are never satisfied (493b–d).[[10]](#footnote-10)

This passage breaks away from the soul/body dichotomy and instead discusses a part or aspect of the soul. Given that both the body and the appetitive part of the soul have similar characteristics (e.g. both lack control and seek gratification) and seek similar objects (e.g. food, drink, and sex, and by extension, power, wealth, and renown), it is safe to assume these refer to roughly the same aspect of moral psychology. Thus, Socrates distinguishes a reflective and reasoning aspect of psychology from a raw and uncontrolled aspect of psychology. The former is more related to the soul and directs us towards what is good, whereas the latter is more connected to the body and misleads us about the good.

We can gain further insight into Socrates’ concerns about embodiment by turning to the *Phaedo*, which shares the *Gorgias*’ (524b) conception of death as the separation of the soul from the body. Philosophy, Socrates paradoxically asserts, is the practice of dying and death, or separating the soul from the body (64a–c); indeed, “the soul of the philosopher most disdains the body, flees from it and seeks to be by itself” (65c11–d2; see also 64e–65a, 67a, d). Philosophers despise the body because it misleads and restricts the soul: the body fills us with corporeal desires and fears, requires constant upkeep, and it is the source of war and civil conflict (66b–d). When we finally get respite from bodily concerns and practice philosophy, the desires and fears of the body still taint and infect our philosophical investigations, and thus the body prevents us from grasping truth in its entirety (66d–e) and obtaining pure virtue (66d–e, 68d–69d).

The only way to obtain pure knowledge and virtue is to escape the influence of the body. Death, the separation of the soul from the body, is what allows philosophers to achieve this (66e). This is why philosophers try to separate the soul from the body as far as possible by prioritizing goods of the soul over goods of the body. The life of philosophers, thus, differs significantly from the life of the majority. Speaking about this, Simmias says,

By Zeus, Socrates, you made me laugh, though I was in no laughing mood just now. I think that the majority, on hearing this, will think that it describes the philosophers very well, and our people in Thebes would thoroughly agree that philosophers are nearly dead and that the majority is well aware that they deserve to be. (64a10–b6)

Socrates replies, “And they would be telling the truth, Simmias, except for their being aware. They are not aware of the way true philosophers are nearly dead, nor of the way they deserve to be, nor of the sort of death they deserve” (64b7–9; see also 65a). This returns us to the lines of Euripides: where the majority sees death, the philosopher sees life, and where the majority sees life, the philosopher sees death.

This subsection demonstrates two ways embodied philosophers can doubt the myth: (a) the body misleads and distracts the soul, and (b) the life of a philosopher will clash with the life of the many. In the following subsection, I support this account by explaining how the concluding story helps assuage these sources of disturbance.

(*b) Death*

The myth identifies the corruptive aspect of embodiment in two ways. First, during Zeus’ rule, unlike in the time of Cronus, *both* the judges and the judged are dead and naked (523a, d–e). It is obvious why the judged must reveal their uncloaked soul, but why must the judge? Presumably, the answer must be tied to the corruptive nature of embodiment: it is not sufficient for the judges to be wise; instead, they must also be divorced from their embodied state. What this reveals is that even the best embodied humans are vulnerable to error (see Trivigno 2009; cf. 524a). Hence, the concluding myth suggests that just and wise decisions come when one’s soul makes judgments without the influence of the body, and that when one does this, one will see that bodily goods are not as important––what truly matters is the health of one’s soul.

Second, the myth suggests that one reason embodiment misleads is that it is necessarily tied to death, and the thought of death is a source of great confusion and fear (see Baima and Paytas 2021, ch. 4; Austin 2010). This idea is implicit in the aspect of the myth in which Zeus deprives us of the foreknowledge of our demise (523d–e; cf. Fussi 2001). Why does Zeus order Prometheus to remove the prescience of our mortality, and how does this newly gifted ignorance enhance our lives? Although the text doesn’t provide a straightforward answer, with a bit of imagination and assistance from Greek literature, we find two plausible interpretations: the gloom reading and the charm reading. Let’s begin with the former.

In Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus removes foreseeing the doom of death (250), thereby causing “blind hopes to dwell within” (252). The Chorus comments that Prometheus’ actions greatly benefited humanity (253). Prometheus, then, remarks that he also gave humans fire (254). The hope is blind in that humans are now in a more ignorant state: blind to their future doom. Such a state, in accompaniment with the gift of fire, brings optimism about the future: what was once a closed horizon is now open. The gloom reading holds that the knowledge of one’s future, including one’s death, leads to despair. Thus, Zeus orders the removal of our knowledge of death so that we will not dwell on our demise, thereby making us more hopeful.

We find support for the gloom reading in Cephalus’ discussion of old age in the *Republic*.Cephalus asserts that now that he is elderly, he has begun to fret about dying. Cephalus worries that the stories about the unjust suffering in Hades—stories he used to disregard as childish—twist his soul. As a means of enduring this fright, Cephalus tries to practice justice so that when he dies, he will not suffer­­ if these stories turn out to be true (1.330d–331a; Irwin 1979, 243; cf. *Laws* 11.922c).

But why would Plato’s Zeus be averse to people having foreknowledge of death if it drives them to be more concerned about justice? After all, Cephalus’ fear of death has made him more conscientious. Moreover, nothing in the *Gorgias*’concluding myth suggests humans wailing in despair; instead, the tale conjures up the image of humans gaming the divine legal system (Dodds 1959, 378). Knowledge of death allows humans to prepare for their final judgment, not in the philosophical way Socrates encourages in the *Phaedo*, but in a shallow way, like orators preparing to charm judges. Perhaps, then, the main reason Zeus orders the removal of the knowledge of death is to prevent us from trying to charm the judges. However, the charm reading faces problems of its own. The problem is that the other legal changes that Zeus implements are sufficient to prevent the judges from being charmed: both the judge and the judged are naked and dead, revealing the actual condition of their souls, thereby making the gaming of the divine legal system impossible.

Fortunately, we don’t have to choose between these readings since they share a commonality that is sufficient for resolving our present question: on both readings, foreknowledge of death alters our attitude and behavior towards justice, making our reasons for acting justly less pure. For instance, on the gloom reading, it is the thought of death––and not the inherent value of justice––that motivates Cephalus to act more conscientiously. Indeed, Cephalus’ views about the afterlife and the divine seem to affect his conception of justice. Justice, for Cephalus, involves simple rule-following, giving sacrifices, and paying back what you owe (1.331a–b). Such practices mesh with thinking of justice and piety in terms of bartering and trading (*Eu*.14b–15b)––and not as a condition of one’s soul. Cephalus’ ideas about the divine and justice are similar to the ones found in the charm reading. Similar to Cephalus, on the charm reading, those with knowledge of their death try to buy and persuade their way into a divine reward––as if justice were something you could simply get through payment or transaction. Therefore, both readings point to the claim that the thought of death excites emotions that drive us to focus on the appearance of virtue rather than virtue itself.

I have argued that the *Gorgias* presents embodiment as a source of confusion, doubt, and anxiety. Thus, insofar as the Socratically-minded philosopher is embodied, they will be capable of doubt and thereby satisfy the unbelief condition. The concluding myth assists the Socratically-minded philosopher by reminding them that their true self is their soul/character, which transcends their bodily nature. Life should be lived in preparation for death, and the myth informs us that there is no preparation for death other than a just life, which cannot be bought or charmed but is cultivated through life-long philosophical pursuit.[[11]](#footnote-11) Provided that the life of philosophers will be at odds with the ways of the many, the myth can strengthen their resolve in the face of unavoidably external threats and pressures. Additionally, when aspiring philosophers fail to live up to the standards of virtue, they can find comfort in the idea that any divine punishment they receive will be proportionate, just, and ultimately aimed at making them better. Finally, the myth presents all of this in a way that embodied beings can grasp. It is hard to understand what exactly a soul-harm/benefit is, and it is impossible to entirely remove ourselves from ordinary ways of thinking about value in terms of pleasure and pain. Thus, the myth simultaneously pulls philosophers from earthly values while speaking to them in ways that they can understand while on earth (see Edmonds III 2012; Rowe 2012).

Whereas in this section, I considered the ethical function of the myth with respect to problems concerning embodiment and philosophy generally, in the next section, I consider the ethical function of the myth with respect to Callicles’ critique of the philosophical life. This discussion will bring to light issues concerning the connection between happiness, virtue, and honor.

**3. Self-Defense, Justice, and Proportionality**

*(a) Self-Defense*

Socrates introduces the myth as a means of responding to Callicles’ accusation that philosophy will leave him in a pathetic state—unable to defend himself or anything he loves (522b­–c; see also 483a–b, 484c–486d, 492b–c, 508c–511c 521a–522c; *Cr*. 45e; Thuc. 2.40). Callicles reasons that since philosophers ignore public politics and oppose the opinions of the many (cf. 521d; Shaw 2011), they will live a life that upsets other people and will lack the power needed to protect themselves and their loved ones from external harm (see especially 483a–485e, 508c–511c, and 521b–522c).

Socrates agrees with Callicles that a practice that leaves one defenseless is bad and shameful, but he disagrees about what self-protection means. Contra Callicles, self-defense isn’t found in the might of arms, the shine of gold, or the slyness of speech but in the preservation of justice (522c–e, 524c–527e; see Ferrari 2012, 74). The myth is Socrates’ “account” of how justice is the only means of securing what truly matters—the health of one’s soul. Injustice renders one helpless in this contest (526e), disfiguring the soul and making divine punishment necessary. Indeed, Socrates responds to Callicles’ accusation by charging that Callicles’ life is devoid of courage and integrity since it puts the preservation of life above all else (511b–513b, 521b–522d). Thus, we see that the myth essentially inverts Callicles’ claims about philosophy and power: while in this embodied life, it may appear that power and wealth offer protection, they do not since they do not protect one’s soul—only philosophy and true virtue do that.

However, a closer look at Callicles’ and Socrates’ positions complicates this picture; in fact, both of their accusations of each other seem to miss the mark. Socrates’ accusation that Callicles places self-preservation above all else isn’t true, for Callicles says that “no man would put up with suffering what’s unjust; only a slave would do so, one who is better dead than alive, who when he’s treated unjustly and abused can’t protect himself or anyone else he cares about” (483a8–b4). The claim that being ignoble is worse than being alive is incompatible with the claim that we ought to preserve our lives at all costs. Nor is Callicles unaware of the potential conflict between pursuing nobility and pleasing the many.[[12]](#footnote-12) I suspect that Callicles’ thoughts, though not worked out in a coherent fashion, are more complicated and partly include the reasonable belief that in order to preserve what one values in this life, one must be powerful, and being powerful requires mastering how to engage with the many. In addition, Callicles values these goods because of what having and preserving them means and because of what the failure represents. Callicles’ self-conception requires certain outcomes in this life, and what he most fears is those outcomes not coming to pass since this would reveal him, like tragic Ajax, “naked and without glory” (Sophocles, *Ajax* 464).

Callicles, for his part, accuses Socrates of not understanding the fact that if he ignores the appetites of the many, they will put him to death—as if Socrates were ignorant about the possible consequences of his actions (485a–486d, 511a–b, and 521c). Socrates is aware of these consequences and accepts them willingly (ibid.; see also *Apology* 28b–c, 29a, 30c–d, 39a–b, 40b–41d). But that said, it is misleading to think that Socrates is utterly indifferent to death, the thoughts of the many, and “externals” in general.

Consider, for instance, Socrates’ decision to practice private politics rather than public politics. At the end of the myth, Socrates tells Callicles that they should first practice excellence before they turn to public politics because they currently lack a proper education (527d–e; see also 514a–515b).[[13]](#footnote-13) However, it is unlikely that epistemic humility is the only reason Socrates doesn’t practice public politics since in the *Apology* he says:

Be sure, men of Athens, that if I had long ago attempted to take part in politics, I should have died long ago, and benefited neither you nor myself. Do not be angry with me for speaking the truth; no man will survive who genuinely opposes you or any other crowd and prevents the occurrence of many unjust and illegal happenings in the city. A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time. (31d6–32a3)

Do you think I would have survived all these years if I were engaged in public affairs and, acting as a good man must, came to the help of justice and considered this the most important thing? Far from it, men of Athens, nor would any other man. (32e2–33a1)

There are just and good things that Socrates could do if he took up a life of public politics, but doing this would expose him to the risk of early death, and a dead Socrates can benefit neither himself nor others. An alternative is to practice public politics in a way that would preserve his life, but this would involve compromising ethical values he rightly holds dear, which is unacceptable and shameful. Weighing these options, he judges that it is best to avoid public politics when morality permits it and to practice it privately through philosophy.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Hence, both men are concerned about practical matters and bodily goods, and thus with things beyond their control. For Callicles this is rather obvious since he directly places fundamental value in the goods of the body (e.g. honor, wealth, pleasure, etc.), whereas for Socrates this is less obvious since he places fundamental value in goods of the soul (e.g. the virtues and knowledge). Yet, as we’ve just seen, Socrates’ decision to focus on private politics was partially motivated by thoughts about self-preservation­––not because he judges that he should seek to live at all costs, but because he believes that justice requires that he seek to preserve his life by avoiding certain actions and pursuing others. Such a view is neither cowardly nor unreasonable. But if it isn’t shameful for Socrates to factor external goods into his practical deliberations, then what is wrong with Callicles doing the same?

The preceding discussion brings to the fore three ideas. First, it illustrates a non-metaphysical, or practical, way of understanding how embodiment obstructs the soul from pursuing knowledge and virtue. When we seek virtue in the material world, we must deliberate about how to act with respect to various things that are not under our control, using limited information. This makes it difficult to see not only virtue itself but also what to do in any particular situation.

Second, it shows a psychological tension in being a Socratically-minded philosopher: on the one hand, philosophers must take into account various bodily goods when considering how to act, but, on the other hand, they must recognize that they are not as valuable as goods of the soul. Thus, they must continue to care about worldly things, but not in the way that the many do—this is no easy task (see Epictetus *Disc*.2.5).

Third, it demonstrates a way in which Callicles’ critique of philosophy might be more damning than Socrates lets on. If philosophers are concerned about bodily goods to some extent, and Callicles is right that the life of the philosopher neglects these goods, then the philosophical life cannot provide the shelter it promises in safeguarding virtue and happiness. And if the philosophical life doesn’t overlook external goods but prioritizes them as a means of securing virtue and happiness, then how does Socrates’ life retain its purity? Therefore, the life of a philosopher is vulnerable to being either unhappy, vicious, or shameful. And if this is so, what becomes of Socrates’ criticism of Callicles’ life? In the next sub-section, I’ll explain how the myth overcomes these worries through its account of proportionality.[[15]](#footnote-15)

*(b) Justice and**Proportionality*

One of the central aspects of Socrates’ conception of justice is proportionality. In contrast to Callicles preaching the values of *pleonexia*, Socrates esteems the value of order (*kosmos*) (493c, 503e, 504b–505b, and 506c–508b; see also *Lysis* 214b, 215c–216a; *Symp*.186b–188e). Socrates argues that the source of Callicles’ mistake is that he “neglects geometry” (508a7–8) and thus fails to appreciate that true justice involves “geometric or proportionate equality” (*hē istotēs hē geōmetrikē*)(508a6), and proper proportion––even for the noble––involves recognizing limits.[[16]](#footnote-16) A life of greed and unrestricted hedonism is not only inconsistent with justice but also happiness and honor: insatiability always leaves one dissatisfied and wanting more, and integrity requires limitations on the things one can pursue and want (493a–494d).

Socrates’ arguments against reckless hedonism and greed are plausible, and if correct, they show that we have sufficient reason to avoid extreme forms of injustice and intemperance, and that it is in virtue of justice and temperance that one can restrain oneself in a manner that is conducive to well-being. But Socrates’ goal was more ambitious. He hoped to establish both a comparative claim and an absolute claim about justice. The comparative claim is that it is always better to be just than unjust such that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit injustice, and that when we act unjustly, it is better to receive punishment than to go unpunished. The absolute claim is that the just person is happy (*eudaimōn*) and blessed (*makarios*).[[17]](#footnote-17)

It isn’t clear that showing that justice is beneficial and injustice is harmful is sufficient to establish the comparative claim (see Irwin 1979, 227–228­). This is especially true on a Socratic conception of virtue, which is intimately tied to knowledge (or an epistemic state close to it) (see Martinez and Smith 2018). Suppose that happiness requires virtue and virtue requires knowledge. Knowledge requires staying alive a sufficient amount of time, and if one’s goal is to be virtuous and thus happy, then it could make sense to act ignobly or unjustly to a small extent in order to preserve one’s life so that one could obtain knowledge and thus obtain virtue and happiness. Consider an alternative version of Socrates’ trial, a version in which Socrates is much younger. Is it really unwise for young Socrates to use dishonest methods and to pander to the many in order to preserve his life if his accusers are dishonest and sleazy? Wouldn’t it be overall better—for Socrates and the world—if young Socrates does what it takes to stay alive?

One might respond that it is not only shameful but also morally confused to do something unjust for the sake of trying to cultivate moral knowledge, and thus this objection doesn’t undermine the comparative claim (cf. Foot 2002, 129–130; Baima and Paytas 2021, ch. 3). Perhaps so, but we might still wonder about whether a life that is tragically cut short in the pursuit of justice is all that blessed and happy (see Martinez and Smith 2018; cf. *Ap*. 30d, 41d; Epictetus *Disc*. 3.20). Or imagine that Zeus hadn’t overturned Cronus’ misapplication of the proportionality law, and hence the just were given eternal torment along the lines of the incurables. Would such a life still count as blessed and happy? In other words, even if the comparative claim holds, we might still have doubts about the absolute claim (see Irwin 1979, 223–226, 248–250; Sidgwick 1874, 473; 1981, 404–405, 508). “Doubt” is the keyword, for even if Socrates’ arguments established the absolute claim, a Socratically-minded philosopher might still doubt it because it conflicts with the way things ordinarily appear to us. As embodied beings striving to be just in this world, we are tethered to this perception.

The myth overcomes these worries by providing a divine framework in which (a) what truly matters is the condition of one’s soul (this is what one truly is); (b) virtue benefits the soul, whereas vice damages it; and (c) the existence of the soul and its condition extend beyond the embodied life. It follows from a­–c that it is never rational to act against the goods of the soul for the sake of bodily goods. This embodied life is but a brief moment in our cosmic existence, and when assessed from this perspective, one will see that it is foolish to tarnish one’s soul for the sake of external goods. Death simply moves our soul from one place to another, and so we needn’t be concerned about it negatively impacting our happiness; we need only be concerned about what is just and true.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The myth, thus, goes beyond the arguments offered to Callicles in securing the connection between virtue, rationality, and well-being, for these arguments only focus on a and b but are silent about c (see Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi 2017; cf. Morgan 2000, 159). In providing a rational, just, and divine framework—a framework in which happiness is proportionate to virtue—the myth lessens the role that luck and external goods play in a successful life and demonstrates that in all situations, injustice is worse than justice (Annas 1982, 123).

Now, some scholars object to Socrates securing justice and happiness through this myth on the grounds that the myth fortifies the value of virtue by appealing to external benefits—the Isles of the Blessed and the escape from Tartarus—and that this is in tension with the idea that virtue is its own reward (see Irwin 1979, 248–249; Annas 1982, 123–125; Daniels 1992, 275–276). In response to this objection, Daniel Russell (2001) argues that the myth doesn’t face this problem because the Isles of the Blessed doesn’t promise luxuries or extra bonuses outside those that Socrates associates with living virtuously and philosophical: namely living in “complete happiness, beyond the reach of evils” (*pasēi eudaimoniāi ektos kakōn*) (523b2; cf. Hes. *Op*. 115). Russell writes, “What awaits the virtuous, then, are not external rewards secured by virtue, but the smooth continuation of virtuous activity itself” (Russell 2001, 564). I agree with Russell that the myth doesn’t promise superficial external goods, and it doesn’t detract from the inherent value of virtue. Still, it does seem to imply that one will not face external hindrances in the Isles of the Blessed—one, for instance, won’t be tortured or shouted at by mobs of idiots. So, there are external benefits of a sort: they are those that allow one to pursue virtue and philosophy pleasantly (see 469b–c, 522c).[[19]](#footnote-19)

Not only does the myth forge an adamantine link between justice and happiness, but it also reveals a weakness in Callicles’ worldview. In the previous subsection, I suggested that Callicles and Socrates give some consideration to self-preservation when figuring out what to do, and such considerations do not in themselves make one cowardly. But with the connection between virtue and happiness secured for eternity, a philosopher could never have a self-regarding reason to do something that she deems ignoble (such as acting unjustly) out of concerns for self-preservation. However, the same cannot be said for Callicles: if there is no divine order that eternally secures virtue and happiness, and one judges that in order to live well, one needs certain outcomes, then one will always be vulnerable to various conflicts between happiness, virtue, and honor (see 508e–509a, 527a–e).

**5. Conclusion**

I have argued that the concluding myth plays an important psychological role for Socratically-minded philosophers. The philosophical life is difficult because it requires that one reject the values of the many and focus on the goods of the soul instead. Yet, it also requires practical engagement and hence proper use of the body. Thus, not only are philosophers pulled in different directions, they are also living a life that is contrary to others. Such a life comes with many *apparent* sacrifices and risks, which can make one doubt the value of philosophy. The tale aims at overcoming these concerns by providing psychological support for philosophers through a story that secures the connection between virtue, truth, and happiness. Just as Callicles clings to life as a means of securing a certain outcome, Socrates and his followers can cling to this myth as a means of securing a perspective that safeguards the value of philosophy in all circumstances. Aspiring philosophers, unlike Callicles, can find safety in this myth because its underlying account makes sense to them.[[20]](#footnote-20)

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1. For helpful discussions on what it means for a *muthos* to be a *logos*, see Ferrari 2012; Rowe 2012; Dodds 1959, 376–377; Irwin 1979, 242; Morgan 2000, 158–159, 187–191. For my view, see Baima and Paytas 2021, ch. 1. Translations of Plato follow those in Cooper and Hutchinson 1997, and the Greek follows Burnet 1900–1907. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In this chapter, the word “justice” refers to the Socratic conception of justice and not Callicles’ conception at 482c–484c. The boundary between Socratic justice and ordinary justice will be left nebulous. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Austin (2013) argues that the myth aims at persuading Callicles to pursue justice. For reasons I’ll discuss, I don’t believe that the myth can persuade Callicles; accordingly, this chapter explores how the myth might assist Socrates and his followers. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is clear that Socrates’ intends punishment in the afterlife to be capable of improving the person getting punished (in the case of the curables) and the person witnessing the punishment (in the case of the incurables) (525b). Dodds (1959, 373, 380–381) suggests that the idea of progress suggests reincarnation; cf. Irwin 1979, 245–246; Annas 1982, 124–125. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For accounts of how the myth relates to Plato’s theory of punishment and its comparison to the Athenian model, see Sedley 2009; Edmonds III, 2010; Irwin 1979, 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. My contention is not that Callicles couldn’t be moved by Socrates’ arguments, he somewhat is at 513c; rather, my claim is that if Callicles isn’t sufficiently moved by Socrates’ philosophical arguments or sympathetic to certain metaphysical perspectives, then Socrates’ myth will not persuade him; cf. Daniels 1992, 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Austin (2013, 35­­–43) for a discussion on the connection between hedonism and the belief that there is no afterlife. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The doubt and plausibility conditions include both the metaphysical details in the myth and the myth’s underlying lessons. I take it that these are both connected to each other. For example, if one is incapable of believing in the immaterial soul, then it isn’t clear how the myth could persuade one that justice benefits and injustice harms. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. We have fragments of Euripides’ works that discuss this subject; see *Phrixus TrGF* 5.2 F. 833; *Polyidus TrGF* 5.2 F. 638. Aristophanes pokes fun at this aspect of Euripides in his *Frogs* 1477–78. Socrates’ comments are especially revealing in light of Callicles’ earlier statement that Socrates turns everything “upside-down” (481b). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In this part of the text, Socrates is playing with the similarity of various Greek words. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This calls to mind Epictetus’ example of a diviner examining entrails and discovering the basic Stoic distinction between things up to us (internals) and everything else (externals) (*Disc*.1.17.20–29). His point is that since goodness and badness are not found in anything outside us, learning about the future cannot teach us whether good or bad things will happen (2.7; see also 1.29.4). See Fussi (2001) for a discussion on the philosophical importance of not knowing the moment you will die with respect to the concluding myth. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Socrates shows Callicles how his honor-loving and democratic aspects conflict at 494d; see Shaw 2015, ch. 8; Austin 2013, 40–42; Klosko 1984; Williams 2006, ch. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Throughout the *Gorgias*,the philosophical life is portrayed as a private life and not a public one; see especially 484c–486d, 501c–d, 515a, 526c, 527b–c. On private politics and ancient philosophy, see Brown 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In the *Apology*, Socrates makes it clear that he will not perform actions that he thinks are unjust. He, for instance, refused to follow the order of the Thirty Tyrants to bring Leon from Salamis to be unjustly executed (32c). Furthermore, throughout the dialogues, Socrates doesn’t sit idly by when he hears people speak about politics, virtue, and the good. Nonetheless, some scholars have argued that Socrates doesn’t always promote positive public justice (see Woodruff 2007; Vlastos 1994), and others have argued that he participated in activities that he saw as morally conflicted (see Austin 2017; Anderson 2005). Klosko (1983) argues that the *Gorgias* is tragic because it shows how philosophy without political power is ineffective (cf. *Grg*.505e; *Chrm*.166d; *Ap*.30e­­–31b, 36c–d). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Dodds (1959, 381) points out how externals play a role in the myth: the fact that the incurables come from powerful people, while those who are unjust but curable come from lower positions (525d–526b; cf. Irwin 1979, 246). If there are unlucky incurables, then this would raise a problem for the proportionality law, but this isn’t established sufficiently. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Geometric equality stands in contrast to arithmetic equality. The latter distributes power/resources equally, while the former distributes them in proportion to desert/merit; see Dodds 1959, 339–340; Irwin 1979, 226. See *Laws* 6.757b­–c; Aris. *Pol*. 5.1.1301b29–1302a8; *NE* 5.3.1131a25–5.5.1133b28. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Both the comparative claim and the absolute claim are expressed in the myth. The comparative claim is conveyed in the measuring of the just life against the unjust life, while the absolute claim is expressed at 523a–b, 527d. The comparative claim is also built into the very structure of the dialogue; for additional references to the absolute claim, see 470e, 507c. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This isn’t to say that virtue doesn’t require considerations dealing with one’s material conditions. Virtue requires practical wisdom, and practical wisdom involves understanding how to act virtuously under various conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. It is useful to compare Socrates’ account here to that of Kant and Epictetus. Kant was concerned that there is a gap between virtue and happiness that cannot be secured unless there is a rational or intelligent order, and such a perspective requires a certain religious outlook (see especially KU5.458, 5:542; KpV 5:110–115, 5:122–126; see Wood 1970; Paytas 2020). The crucial difference between Kant, Socrates, and Epictetus is that for Kant happiness is much closer to an ordinary and pre-philosophical account (see KpV 5:23–24, 5:124; G 4:393; MS 6:387). Epictetus takes an alternative approach to this problem; rather, than positing an afterlife like Kant and Socrates, he maintains that virtue and happiness are entirely up to us, and that we can be confident of this for theological reasons (see Long 2002, ch. 7). Socrates, as I’ve interpreted him in the *Gorgias*, sits in the middle: similar to Kant and unlike Epictetus, he believes that some external things matter for blessedness/welfare and these things are secured through an afterlife; but similar to Epictetus and unlike Kant, his conception of happiness is more moralistic. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Thank you: Anna Christensen; Brad Inwood; Jeremy Garcia-Diaz; Ashley Kennedy; Sarah Malanowski; Tyler Paytas; Rachel Parsons; Brian Reece; Jeremy Reid; Max Robitzsch; J. Clerk Shaw; Sophia Stone; Mark Tunick; and my students at FAU Honors College. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)