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Believing for Practical Reasons in Plato's *Gorgias*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/rhiz-2023-0005>

Abstract: In Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates says to Callicles that “your love of the people, existing in your soul, stands against me, but if we closely examine these same matters often and in a better way, you will be persuaded” (513c7–d1). I argue for an interpretation that explains how Socrates understands Callicles's love of the people to stand against him and why he believes examination often and in a better way will persuade Callicles.

Keywords: Plato's *Gorgias*, rhetoric, gratification and pleasure, Socratic examination.

In Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates says to Callicles that “your love of the people, existing in your soul, stands against me, but if we closely examine these same matters often and in a better way, you will be persuaded” (513c7–d1).¹ I argue for an interpretation of Socrates' remarks.²

This interpretation consists in four main points: (i) Callicles's “love of the people” is his love of using rhetoric to play the tyrant to make the people work for him to bring about what he sees fit; (ii) this love “stands against” Socrates because it gratifies Callicles to believe that his life in rhetoric with the people is the good life;

1 With some minor changes, my translations of the *Gorgias* are the translations in Irwin (1979) and Zeyl (1987). Unless I note otherwise, my citations are from the Greek text in Dodds (1959).

2 Many commentators take Plato to use the *Gorgias* to show that he himself believes that Socrates cannot persuade someone like Callicles. (For an important exception to this trend in the literature, see Schofield 2017.) Woolf's interpretation is perhaps the most well-known. He argues that Plato believes that the “Socratic method of elenchus” will not persuade Callicles because he is not a “lover of consistency” (Woolf 2000, pp. 1, 32). Socrates is a lover of wisdom. Callicles is not. He loves the “people” (δῆμος) and says whatever pleases them, just he loves “Demos” (Δῆμος) and says whatever pleases him (481c–482c, 513b). Woolf takes this to mean that Callicles believes what his lovers believe even if this requires him to sacrifice the consistency of his beliefs. On my interpretation, Callicles is a much more familiar figure. He says what pleases the people (and what pleases Demos) in order to get what he wants even if it is contrary to the customary norms of behavior. This is the life Callicles loves and for which Socrates is convinced his soul will be punished in the afterlife.

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(iii) examination “often and in a better way” will persuade Callicles to accept that he is wrong about the good life because he will find that the pain he experiences in these examinations outweighs the pleasure his wishful thinking gives him; (iv) the “better way” of examination is a two-part process in which Socrates refutes Callicles in dialectic and then helps him see that his soul will be punished in death for the life he chose to live with the people.

Socrates’ remarks to Callicles about his love of the people and what will persuade him occur in the context of an investigation of the power of rhetoric. This investigation begins at the outset of the dialogue. Socrates tells Callicles he has come to see Gorgias because he wants to know what “power” (447c2) rhetoric is.³ Gorgias soon contradicts himself in his answers to Socrates’ questions, and Polus jumps in to take his turn with Socrates. To stop Polus from giving long speeches, Socrates takes the role of respondent in the dialectic and gives Polus the role of questioner. On my interpretation, what Socrates says in his role as respondent shows that he believes that rhetoric is the power to use words to make those with a propensity for wishful thinking form beliefs to gratify themselves.⁴

I argue, further, that the behavior on which rhetoric relies is on display when Polus and Callicles try to defend their lives in rhetoric against Socrates’ attempt to refute them. This can seem unlikely initially. One can think they would not make this mistake in their reasoning about the good life because they are rhetors and thus know that rhetoric relies for its success on wishful thinking. Polus and Callicles, though, do not know this. On my interpretation, this is one of the lessons of the *Gorgias*. Unlike Socrates, who proclaims his devotion to what he calls “practicing truth” (526d6) so that he lives correctly, Polus and Callicles have not thought carefully enough about what they are doing. In their inattention, they make mistakes in reasoning, which Socrates tries to help them notice and correct.

1 The psychological mechanism that gives rhetoric its power

Polus is accustomed to giving speeches, not to dialectic. He has already shown himself inadequate in the role of the respondent (448A–D), and now he shows

³ Diogenes Laertius gives *περὶ ῥητορικῆς* as a title or subtitle of the *Gorgias* (*Lives of the Philosophers* III.59). For helpful discussion of what the *Gorgias* is about, see Dodds (1959), pp. 1–5.

⁴ Socrates stresses the importance for the respondent to say what he believes. See 478A–E and 500B–C.

himself to be no better in the role of the questioner. To help Polus play the latter role, Socrates suggests to him that his question is what “art” rhetoric is. In reply to this question, once Polus agrees it is his question, Socrates tells him that rhetoric is a “practice,” not an “art,” and that it is a practice “for producing a certain gratification and pleasure” (462c7).

On my interpretation, Socrates means that the rhetor uses “gratification and pleasure” to produce beliefs in his target in order to get what he himself wants.⁵ Socrates understands the steps in this process to occur as follows. The rhetor flatters his target or otherwise does something with words the target finds gratifying. As a result, the target listens to what the rhetor has to say because he acts in accordance with the rule to “keep doing what feels good.” The rhetor guesses what the target will take pleasure in believing and ties these propositions to what he wants the target to believe. To keep the good feeling going, the target engages in wishful thinking. As a side effect of this thinking, he forms the beliefs the rhetor wants him to believe and thus acts in a way that pleases the rhetor.⁶

The historical context supplies part of the argument for this interpretation. Polus watched when Socrates got Gorgias to agree that rhetoric is for producing “persuasion” (453A2),⁷ but he is not puzzled when Socrates now tells him that it is for producing “gratification and pleasure.”⁸ The question is why, and the answer is that Plato writes with the historical Gorgias in the background. In his *Helen*, Gorgias says that “incantations [...] by means of speeches are bringers of pleasure and removers of pain” and that the “incantation, when it is conjoined with the opinion of the soul, beguiles it, persuades it” (10).⁹ Because this sounds enough like what Socrates says, Polus can easily think Socrates is repeating what Gorgias has said. For this reason, and because Polus is one of Gorgias’s followers, he is not puzzled when Socrates tells him that rhetoric is “for producing a certain gratification and pleasure.”¹⁰

5 Gorgias brags that rhetoric gives the rhetor the ability to make others his slaves (452E).

6 My interpretation is consistent with a point Penner makes in passing. “The idea of ‘flattery’ is the orator finds something the persons to be persuaded find pleasant (*think good, whether or not it is good*), and which the orator can use to help get the relevant belief accepted. (Other teenagers of the opposite sex will want to kiss you if you brush your teeth with ...)” (Penner 1991, n. 14 on p. 157; the typographical error is in the original).

7 “If I follow, Gorgias, you are saying that rhetoric is a producer of persuasion. Its whole business comes to that, and that is the long and the short of it” (453A1–3).

8 Polus’s immediate concern is for Socrates to agree to what he takes to be a consequence: that rhetoric is a “fine thing” because it provides “the ability to give gratification to people” (462c8–9).

9 This is the translation in Laks & Most (2016), p. 175. See also *Helen* 14. For discussion of Gorgias’s understanding of rhetoric, see Calogero (1957), Segal (1962), Wardy (1996), and Futter (2011).

10 Polus, however, is puzzled by Socrates’ subsequent claim that rhetoric is a part of flattery (462E–466A).

This explains why Polus accepts Socrates' characterization of rhetoric, but it leaves a more fundamental question without an answer: Socrates thinks dialectic and rhetoric are different methods of persuasion. Whereas dialectic persuades by causing the target to realize that beliefs he is unwilling to abandon commit him to the negation of what he has asserted, rhetoric produces belief by causing the target to have "a certain gratification and pleasure." This much is clear, but it remains to be shown how Socrates thinks rhetoric uses gratification and pleasure to persuade and thus to produce belief.

The evidence is not as extensive as one might hope, but there is enough for scholars to argue for interpretations of how Socrates understands what happens. The most prominent interpretation in the recent literature is Moss's. Socrates tells Polus that rhetoric is a practice of "flattery" (463B1). As Moss interprets this, Socrates believes that "[b]y pandering to the audience's uninformed opinions about value, [the rhetor] gains the appearance of expertise, and with it the power of persuasion" (Moss 2007, p. 242). Human beings like their value judgements affirmed (Moss 2007, p. 243). The rhetor gratifies this liking by praising and blaming in accordance with what he guesses that his targets value (Moss 2007, pp. 241, 246). This gives them pleasure and makes him appear to know what he is talking about.

The "appearance of expertise" in Moss's interpretation is not the belief one might form about someone with credentials from a reputable institution. The rhetor's targets do not get the "appearance" this way. Moss argues that they "fail to distinguish what pleases them and what is good for them" (Moss 2007, p. 245). From the pleasure the rhetor has given them, they infer that he has "benefited" them and thus that he has their interest in mind. This leads them to "trust" the rhetor in the way young children typically trust their parents to tell the truth (Moss 2007, pp. 230, 236, 241, 245, 248).

If Moss is correct, Socrates does not think rhetoric depends on the propensity for wishful thinking, but rather on what one might call "deference to experts." On Moss's interpretation, the target accepts the proposition the rhetor wants him to believe because the rhetor uses flattery to make himself appear as an expert. Moss's evidence for this interpretation is that Socrates gets Gorgias to agree that whereas medicine and other arts "need knowledge of the state of their subjects matters," rhetoric "only needs to have discovered a persuasive device so that to those who don't have knowledge it will seem to know more than those who know" (459B7–c2).¹¹

¹¹ Moss, in her interpretation, seems to follow Irwin. In his commentary on the *Gorgias*, he takes Socrates to assume "that the rhetor can persuade his audience only by appearing to know more than the expert" and that "the only successful persuasive device" must "be the appearance of

Socrates, however, does not have to be understood as Moss understands him. Moss takes him to say that the target comes to think the rhetor is an expert and, for this reason, comes to believe what the rhetor wants him to believe, but Socrates might instead be talking about a conclusion the target draws because the rhetor has persuaded him. The patient who is persuaded by the rhetor, but not by the doctor, would naturally come to think the rhetor knows more than the doctor.¹² On this understanding, Socrates is not explaining how the rhetor gets the target to believe what he wants him to believe.

The historical context, too, makes it unlikely that Socrates thinks of rhetoric in the way Moss's interpretation requires. The rhetor has no need to give arguments if his target thinks that he is an expert, and this is inconsistent with the considerable importance the historical Gorgias places on the use of argument in rhetoric.¹³ So insofar as the historical Gorgias's discussion of rhetoric provides the context, Socrates is unlikely to think that the rhetor's target believes what the rhetor wants him to believe because the rhetor flatters the target to make him think the rhetor is an expert.¹⁴

Moss, though, may be right about what Socrates thinks the rhetor often does first. To make the target believe what he wants him to believe, the rhetor must get the target's attention. Socrates does not say so explicitly, but insincere praise can serve this purpose. The rhetor flatters the target or otherwise does something with words the target finds gratifying.¹⁵ As a result, he listens to what the rhetor has to say. Moss takes Socrates to believe this happens because the target believes the rhetor is an expert, but the text points to a different interpretation: that the target continues to listen because he has found listening gratifying and acts in accordance with the rule to "keep doing what feels good."

knowledge" (Irwin 1979, p. 124). About this assumption itself, Irwin says that it is "dubious" (Irwin 1979, p. 124).

12 Gorgias says that rhetoric has allowed him to be more persuasive than the doctor (456b).

13 *Helen* 11, 12. Calogero (1957), p. 13, Segal (1962), pp. 115, 117, Wardy (1996), p. 45, and Futter (2011), p. 16.

14 When Socrates says that he does not "know" whether Gorgias practices the kind of rhetoric that is a part of flattery because "nothing was made clear for us in our recent discussion about just what he thinks" (463a1–2), his intention is to stop short of accusing Gorgias of using rhetoric for bad ends. Gorgias told Socrates that rhetoric should not be used for wrongdoing and that the teacher is not to be blamed if the student does (456c–457c), but he was unable to defend this view in questioning.

15 Futter argues that the historical Gorgias understood rhetoric to produce belief in "two stages." The first stage, on Futter's interpretation, does not consist in the rhetor using praise to gratify the target. Instead, the rhetor uses words to produce "aesthetic pleasure" in the target in order to cause "an attitude of openness and sympathy towards the orator's words, ideas, and arguments" (Futter 2011, p. 15).

Plato shows Callicles to guide his behavior in this way in the break in the dialectic that occurs when Socrates thinks Gorgias has contradicted himself. Socrates says that he is willing to reveal the contradiction in further questioning if Gorgias is the kind of man he is: one whose concern is “to have knowledge of the subject the discussion is about” (453B1–2) and “who would be pleased to be refuted if I say anything untrue, and who would be pleased to refute anyone who says anything untrue” (458A3–4). Gorgias replies that although he is such a man, the others may be pressed for time.¹⁶

Chaerephon speaks up in a way one expects from Socrates’ followers. He says that “I hope I will never be too busy that I would forgo discussions such as this, conducted in the way this one is, because I find it more practical to do something else” (458c4–7). Chaerephon seems to be thinking that he would never be too busy for “discussions such as this” because, as Socrates has said to Gorgias, “no bad is as great as false belief about the matters we are discussing right now” (458A8–B1).

Callicles does not have this thought. He agrees with Chaerephon that the discussion should continue, but his reason is not the Socratic one. He thinks of the discussion as a source of pleasure and wants to keep the gratification coming. He says that “although I have been at many a discussion before now, I don’t know if I have ever been so pleased as I am at the moment” and so “if you [Socrates and Gorgias] are willing to discuss, even if it is all day, you will be gratifying me” (458D1–4).¹⁷

Given that Plato takes rhetoric to persuade the many but not Socrates and his followers (481B), we can expect him to draw the sort of contrast he draws between Chaerephon and Callicles. Unlike Chaerephon, Callicles behaves in the way the rhetor needs his targets to behave. Because the target finds the rhetor’s words gratifying, he continues to listen to the rhetor. This allows the rhetor to plant the bait. On my interpretation, arguments are the bait because the rhetor relies on the target’s very human propensity to engage in wishful thinking in order to keep the gratification coming.

Wishful thinking, unlike deference to experts, is typically and perhaps always irrational. To see an example of such thinking at work, imagine I have a teenage son who is watching a meteor shower with friends on a cold night. I can stop worrying about him if I believe he is wearing something warm, but I cannot believe this simply by wishing it is true. I need an argument. A rhetor who has my attention and wants to influence my behavior might tell me that my son is responsible and that

¹⁶ It turns out that Polus and Callicles are not pleased to be refuted if they say anything untrue.

¹⁷ There is another illustration of this propensity in the *Protagoras*. Socrates is the speaker: “Protagoras ended his fine performance here and stopped speaking. I was charmed and just looked at him for a long time as if he were going to say more. I was still eager to listen” (328D3–6).

responsible people dress for the weather. I can stop worrying if I accept this argument, and I can accept it if I do not bother to remember that my son is a teenager and teenagers dress for how they look.¹⁸

Given the importance I attribute to being right about my son's well-being, I should consider this defeating argument. I fail to do so, however, because I allow the prospect of pleasure to overcome my interest in the truth. I am thinking about how I want the world to be. My test for it being this way is believing that it is. So given I have the usual background beliefs about what is in someone's interest, it would give me pleasure to believe my son is wearing something warm. I love him and want him to flourish, but even so it is not rational for me to form this belief. I am making the effort to reason because I think it is important to know whether he is wearing something warm. If I stop this reasoning to gratify myself by believing he is, I act against my own interest in knowing the truth.

On my interpretation of the *Gorgias*, Socrates understands Callicles to make this kind of mistake. He thinks that Callicles wants to live the good life¹⁹ and that he gratifies himself with the belief that he is living it. First, though, before I argue that this is true, I reply to an objection to my interpretation of how Socrates understands the psychological mechanism that gives rhetoric its power. This reply both defends my interpretation against the objection and shows how Socrates could think that the rhetors do not understand how gratification and pleasure produce belief in their targets.

2 A reply to an objection.

I have argued against Moss's interpretation in order to set up the possibility that in Callicles's reasoning about the good life, he engages in the wishful thinking on which rhetoric relies for its power. One might object that Socrates' characterization of rhetoric as a "practice" (ἐμπειρία), as opposed to an "art" (τέχνη), is inconsistent with my interpretation and with Moss's interpretation. It is inconsistent, according to this objection, because Socrates cannot think that rhetoric is a "practice" and that he himself understands how rhetoric produces belief by producing gratification and pleasure.

¹⁸ This is a variation on an example Pollock gives (Pollock 2008, p. 265).

¹⁹ This is a consequence of the lesson in *Gorgias* 468B–C. Socrates tells Polus that "it is for the sake of the good that those who do all those things [sitting or walking, running or making sea voyages, and so on] do them" (468B7–8). He later repeats the point to Callicles (499E–500A). See too *Meno* 78B.

Socrates twice denies that rhetoric is an “art.” He tells Polus that rhetoric is a “practice” (462c7) for producing pleasures, that it is something a “mind given to making guesses takes to, a mind bold and naturally clever at dealing with people” (463a7–8), that rhetoric is a “practice and routine” (463b4), and that it “guesses at what is pleasant with no consideration for what is best” (465a1–2).

Socrates later repeats this point in more detail to Callicles. He tells him that as a “practice,” rhetoric “proceeds toward its object quite inexpertly (ἀτεχνῶς), without having at all considered either the nature of pleasure or its cause” (501a4–6), that it “does so completely without reason (ἀλόγως), making practically no distinctions,” and that by “routine and practice it merely preserves the memory of what customarily happens, and that is how it also supplies its pleasures” (501a7–b1).

Socrates does not further explain what he has in mind when he says that rhetoric is a “practice,” but it is plausible to think that he believes that an understanding of what happens in the soul when gratification and pleasure make someone believe something is not part of rhetoric as Gorgias teaches it.²⁰ For Gorgias and his followers, rhetoric is just a routine they have learned through experience that helps them get what they want. How it produces belief is not something they understand.

This, though, in no way prevents Socrates himself from having a view about what happens. The historical Gorgias, the historical Socrates, and Plato are part of a tradition that takes an increasing interest in how the soul functions,²¹ and one of the lessons of the *Gorgias* on my interpretation is that Socrates has a deeper understanding of the power of rhetoric than the rhetors possess.

Socrates’ characterization of rhetoric as practice, then, does not rule out my interpretation. It is possible that he has a view about what goes on in the soul when rhetoric produces belief and that the rhetors do not. Further, given that the rhetors lack this understanding, the fact that they use rhetoric to get what they want is itself no reason to believe they would be careful to avoid wishful thinking in their reasoning about the good life. On my interpretation, Socrates takes Callicles to

²⁰ The distinction Socrates draws between “practice” and “art” seems to be an instance of the one Plato draws between the medical practitioner and theorist in the *Laws* IV. 720a and IX. 857c and that Aristotle draws in more detail in the *Metaphysics* A. 1 980a. The rhetor, in this case, is better than the layman in using pleasure to produce belief, but he does not have a theory to explain what is happening.

²¹ The historical Gorgias is a transitional figure in this tradition. He has an interest in what happens in the soul when the rhetor produces belief, but he also has one foot within the poetic tradition, which, as Segal characterizes it, regarded “the power of artistic utterance as a divine gift and therefore mysterious and, like all such psychic powers, incomprehensible to ordinary mortals” (Segal 1962, p. 120).

make this very mistake in his reasoning.²² Callicles engages in wishful thinking. He wants to live the good life, and he accepts the argument from nature to gratify himself with the belief that he is living this life.

3 The mistake Callicles makes in his reasoning

At the outset of the dialogue, Socrates explains why he seeks Gorgias out.²³ He tells Callicles, as I noted, that he wants to know from Gorgias what power rhetoric is. Socrates does not explain why he wants to know this, but the reason is not hard to see. Socrates is a lover of wisdom. The rhetors are not. By questioning Gorgias about the power of rhetoric, Socrates is trying to test the beliefs that guide his life to determine whether he is making a mistake in living the way he does (486D–488A).

Socrates finds that Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles all have the beliefs he has. They do not live as he does, though, because they are confused. They somehow have also formed beliefs Socrates himself lacks. My interpretation of how Callicles formed these beliefs builds on Dodds's remarks in his edition of the *Gorgias*. About the “origin” of the “Calliclean way of life,” Dodds says that Plato “seems to imply” that one “cause” is “the *trahison des clercs* by which men like Gorgias put a deadly instrument into unscrupulous hands for the corruption of simple people” (Dodds 1959, p. 15).²⁴

Gorgias and “men like” him made it possible for Callicles to come to like using rhetoric to do what he thinks is fitting even when this is contrary to the custom-

²² Irwin says that Callicles's “reluctance is not surprising, since his infatuation with popular success makes him resist Socrates' arguments” (Irwin 1986, p. 70), but he does not explain how Socrates takes this “infatuation” to make Callicles resistant other than to cite Socrates' reply that “your love of the people, existing in your soul, stands against me.” Dodds says that “Callicles finds Socrates' argument more logical than convincing” and that “Socrates attributes this to emotional resistance” (Dodds 1959, p. 351). Dodds does not explain this “emotional resistance” other than to say that Plato recognizes “that basic moral attitudes are commonly determined by psychological, not logical reasons” (Dodds 1959, p. 352), and Dodds does not explain this contrast between “psychological” and “logical reasons.”

²³ Vasiliou rightly stresses how unusual this is: no other “dialogue begin[s] because Socrates specifically seeks someone out to ask him a question” (Vasiliou 2008, p. 95).

²⁴ Dodds says that “the other cause lay further back, in the false conception of statesmanship which had governed the relations of politicians and people since the Persian Wars. If Gorgias and his like had made the mistake of supposing that a ‘value-free’ education would produce the Good Life, the creators of the Athenian ἀρχή had made a no less grave mistake in supposing that wealth and power would produce it: neither party had given any thought to the true sources of εὐδαιμονία” (Dodds 1959, p. 15).

ary norms for behavior, but to make this activity his “way of life,” Callicles must intend to live this way. In his reasoning to do so, the *Gorgias* shows that he has not thought carefully enough about whether he has beliefs inconsistent with the argument from nature. What Callicles does in his reasoning instead is less explicit, but the implication is that he makes the mistake his targets make. Callicles engages in wishful thinking.

We can see that this is what Callicles does if we follow Polus and Callicles’s attempt to defend Gorgias’s answer to Socrates’ question about rhetoric. This answer comes out in steps. Gorgias first says that the power is about “the greatest of human concerns” (451D7–8). Socrates takes him to be talking about the “greatest good for men” (452D3–4) and asks him what this “greatest good” is that rhetoric has the power to provide. Gorgias says that rhetoric “is the source of freedom for a man himself and at the same time is the source of rule over others in one’s own city” (452D6–8).

Gorgias’s sequence of answers confusingly straddles two views about the relation of rhetoric to the “greatest of human concerns.” This concern itself is to live the good life. This is the life it most benefits a human being to live. On one reading of Gorgias’s answers, rhetoric is a power to do what is most beneficial given that one knows what this is. On the other reading, exercising the power of rhetoric is itself sufficient for the good life. The “power to persuade by speeches” (452E1) is a power to “rule over others,” and ruling over others is the most beneficial life for a human being.

This first view is probably the one Gorgias wants to defend, but Socrates makes the second the focus because it presupposes a belief he himself lacks. He does not question whether the “power to persuade by speeches” is a way to rule over others, but unless ruling over others coincides with doing what is most beneficial, exercising the power of rhetoric is not sufficient for the good life.

Gorgias does not seem to believe the two coincide, but Polus does. He thinks, first, that rhetors, “like tyrants, [have the greatest power (466B4) in their cities because they] put to death anyone they want and confiscate their property and banish from their cities anyone they see fit” (466B11–c2). Because Polus believes this, Socrates takes him to believe “that as long as acting as one sees fit coincides with acting beneficially, it is good” (470A9–10). Once he agrees he has this belief, Socrates puts a question to him that unsettles him. He asks him where he “draw[s] the line” (470B10) between cases of doing what one sees fit that do coincide with acting beneficially and those that do not.

Polus tells Socrates to answer the question himself because he does not want to answer it. In so behaving, Polus is walking in Callicles’s shoes. Socrates does not draw the comparison, but he understands that Polus is trying to keep the gratification coming. “Well, then, Polus,” Socrates says, “if you find it more pleasing to

listen to me,²⁵ I say that when someone does these things [he sees fit to do] rightly (δικαίως), it is better, but when he does them wrongly, it is worse" (470c1–2).

Polus does not agree. In his reply, he cites the popular opinion that the tyrant Archelaus and the King of Persia are "happy" (470E2) because they both rule over others to do what they see fit. In the case of Archelaus, who was known for the shocking crimes he committed to secure his rule in his city, Polus thinks that everyone but Socrates would trade his life for Archelaus's life (471A–D).

This makes it clear how Polus has persuaded himself that ruling over others coincides with acting beneficially. Living the good life is exercising the power to do what benefits a human being most. To know what is most beneficial, Polus accepts the argument from popular opinion for the conclusion that it is doing what one sees fit. Since he believes that ruling over others allows one to do what one sees fit and that the power to persuade by speeches is a power to rule over others, it follows for him that exercising the power of rhetoric is sufficient for living the good life.

If we ask why Polus finds the argument from popular opinion persuasive, the following explanation strongly suggests itself. Because Polus wants to live the good life, he needs to know what this life is. He likes using rhetoric to rule over others to do what he sees fit, so he accepts the argument from popular opinion to give himself the belief that the good life is the life he is living. Polus does not think about whether he has beliefs inconsistent with the argument from popular opinion. His default behavior is to keep the gratification coming. He can keep it coming if he loses sight of the fact that he reasons to know the truth about the good life and behaves instead as if he reasons to give himself the pleasure of believing that his life of using rhetoric to do what he sees fit is the good life.

This is how Socrates seems to understand Polus. When Polus brings forward the argument from popular opinion, Socrates tells him that he is arguing in "rhetorical style" (471E2) and that this method of persuasion, unlike dialectic, is good only for gratification. Socrates thinks this is what happens in court. "One side thinks it's refuting the other when it produces many reputable witnesses on behalf of the statements it makes, and the man who says the opposite provides himself with only one or none at all" (471E3–7). The side in court is trying to gratify itself by producing certain beliefs in the jury in order to win the case. The truth of what it persuades the jury to believe is not its concern.

Regarding the good life, Socrates understands that "truth" indeed is the concern (472B6). He tells Polus, as he less explicitly told Gorgias, that "the matters in dispute between us are not at all insignificant ones" because they are about "recognizing or

²⁵ *Gorgias* 462D5: "Since you, Polus, value gratification, would you like ..." *Gorgias* 504C5–6: "All right, if that pleases you more [for me to say it], Callicles, I will ..."

failing to recognize who is happy and who is not” (472c6–d1). Polus knows of course that the dispute is about “who is happy [or εὐδαίμων] and who is not,” but he does not understand that the degree of importance of this matter requires him not to accept the argument from popular opinion without considering whether he has beliefs inconsistent with this argument. Otherwise, he is just winning gratification for himself like the side in court.

Socrates recognizes Polus’s mistake and tries to help him correct it. He tries to get Polus to see that he himself believes that those who see fit to act wrongly by doing rather than suffering wrong do what is worse and that the same is true of those who see fit to act wrongly by avoiding rather than paying what is due. Polus is not completely convinced (475E6, 479E9),²⁶ and it is very natural to think that he resists to protect the pleasure he takes in his belief that he is living the good life.

Now that Polus has been refuted, Callicles jumps into the conversation to take his turn with Socrates. In the ensuing discussion, Plato uses Callicles to show another way Gorgias’s followers supply the missing step in the reasoning to establish the truth of the second reading of Gorgias’s answer to Socrates. Callicles accuses Socrates of trading on what acting rightly is (482c–486d). There is what “custom” says it is, and there is what it really is. This is what “nature” says it is. Callicles says that although Polus was too ashamed to insist on the difference (482c–483a),²⁷ he is not. He insists that doing what one sees fit is what nature says acting rightly is. We should live this way, and a good man has the virtue to do so. He does not allow the “contracts of men that go against nature” (492c7) to prevent him from doing what he sees fit and thus from living the life that most benefits a human being.

In his attempt to persuade Socrates, Callicles acts like the side in court who tries to bring in a more impressive witness after Polus’s witnesses failed to persuade Socrates that doing what one sees fit is what is beneficial for a human being. To win his case, Callicles brings in “nature.” He says that “nature herself declares that it is right for the better man and the more capable man to have a greater share” (483c9–d1). This man gets it by doing what he sees fit even if it is contrary to custom, and Callicles insists that nature “shows this is what the right has been decided to be” (483d5).

Socrates does not say Callicles is arguing in “rhetorical style,” but Callicles, like Polus, seems to persuade himself in a way good only for gratification. Callicles wants to live the good life. He realizes that to do so he needs to know what this life

26 In Polus’s resistance to Socrates, his behavior is different from Gorgias’s when Socrates refutes him in dialectic. As Dodds notes, Gorgias accepts his “dialectical defeat in dignified silence, and continues to take a benevolent interest in the further course of the discussion” (Dodds 1959, pp. 9–10).

27 There is no indication that Callicles is correct about Polus.

is. It would gratify him to believe that his life in rhetoric is the good life. He believes that the good life is the most beneficial life and that acting beneficially is acting rightly. In his reasoning to know what acting rightly is and thus what the good life is, he accepts the argument from nature and its conclusion that acting rightly is doing what one sees fit.

In reasoning this way, Callicles makes a mistake. To solve what Socrates takes to be life's most important problem,²⁸ Callicles does not consider whether some of his beliefs are inconsistent with the argument from nature. Socrates thinks that Callicles should consider this given the importance of being right about what the good life is, but this is not something he does. The dialogue does not make it completely explicit what Callicles does in his reasoning instead. Socrates never explicitly says to him, "Callicles, you, like Polus, accept the argument you accept because you are engaging in wishful thinking in order to gratify yourself." This, though, is what Socrates believes. In Callicles's reasoning to know what the good life is so that he can live this life, he allows the prospect of pleasure to overcome his interest in the truth. He accepts the argument from nature to win for himself the pleasure of believing that his life of using rhetoric to do what he sees fit is the good life. This is how Callicles gets the beliefs Socrates lacks and that Callicles uses to justify the life in rhetoric he loves.

4 The pain of repeated examination

This interpretation fits with how Socrates understands why Callicles resists accepting that he has been refuted. Callicles tells Socrates that "I do not know how it is that I think you are right, but the thing that happens to most people has happened to me: I am not quite persuaded by you" (513c4–6).²⁹

²⁸ Just as Socrates had told Polus that the matters they are discussing are not at all insignificant (472c–d), he tells Callicles that "you see, don't you, that our discussion is about this, and what would a man of even little intelligence take more seriously, about the way we are supposed to live" (500c1–4).

²⁹ The Greek οὐ πᾶν σοι πειθομαι is ambiguous. It can also mean "I am not at all persuaded by you." So, for example, in his translation, Griffith translates it as "I simply don't believe you" (Griffith 2010), but this is the minority position. "I don't quite believe you" (Cope 1864). "I'm not quite convinced by you" (Irwin 1979). "I'm not really convinced by you" (Zeyl 1987). "I don't quite believe you" (Allen 1989). "I am not completely convinced" (Hamilton 1971). "I am not completely convinced" (Hamilton & Emlyn-Jones 2004). For discussion, see Cope (1864), pp. 139–146, Dodds (1959), p. 352, Irwin (1979), p. 233, Irwin (1986), n. 27 on p. 70, Vasiliou (2008), n. 12 on p. 97, and Schofield (2017), n. 18 on p. 24.

Callicles here can seem to be saying something uncontroversial. When we are first confronted with an argument to show that we have contradictory beliefs, we do not have to accept the argument even if we do not see anything wrong with it. We can set it aside until we have time to go through the reasoning again to determine whether it is persuasive. We might think again about the argument, see nothing wrong with it, and again set it aside until we can think about it more because we still have not overcome our concern that somewhere in it there is a mistake we are not seeing.³⁰

Socrates, though, does not think this alone is the explanation. He does not think Callicles simply needs time to go over the dialectic. He explains that Callicles is not persuaded because of his “love of the people, existing his soul” (513c7). Further, Socrates is confident that Callicles would be persuaded if he and Callicles “examine (διασκοπώμεθα) these matters often and in a better way” (513c8–d1).³¹ To understand this, we need to know how Socrates understands the obstacle Callicles’s “love” creates and what Socrates thinks would happen in the examinations that would eventually persuade him.

Callicles’s “love of the people” is his love of using rhetoric to play the tyrant to make the people work for him to bring about what he sees fit (500c). On my interpretation, because it would gratify him to believe the life he loves is the good life, he accepts the argument from nature to give himself this belief. Socrates tries to show Callicles that he has beliefs that commit him to deny that the life he loves is the good life. Whereas Callicles sees himself as the master, Socrates sees him as enslaved to the people. For the people to give him what he sees fit, he must please the people. Further, for this to work, Socrates argues that Callicles must enslave himself even more because he must change himself. He tells Callicles that “you should now be making yourself as much like the Athenian people as possible if you expect to endear yourself to them and have great power in the city” (513a1–4).³²

30 Irwin, in his commentary on the *Gorgias*, says that Socrates assumes that “repeated examination will convince Callicles, when he sees that there are no tricks, and that Socrates’ position really follows from Callicles’ own basic convictions, as revealed in the elenchus” (Irwin 1979, p. 233). Irwin repeats this sort of interpretation: “[t]he point seems to be that repeated examination will convince us of the cogency of the argument, which we may quite justifiably doubt on first hear” (Irwin 1986, n. 28 on p. 70).

31 “if we closely examine these same matters often and in a better way (ἐάν πολλάκις [ἴσως] καὶ βέλτιον ταῦτα ταῦτα διασκοπώμεθα)” is the translation in Zeyl (1987). The translation in Irwin (1979) is “if we thoroughly consider these same questions often and better.” In Griffith (2010), the translation is “if we examine these same questions often enough, and in a better way.”

32 Schofield gives what appears to be the right explanation. Socrates thinks the practice can be “sustained” only if the people do not suspect the rhetor has likes and dislikes different from their own (Schofield 2017, p. 23). See also Irwin (1979), p. 231 and Kamtekar (2005).

Callicles cites no problem with the argument Socrates uses against him, but it is hard for him to accept it because this would mean that he would have to give up the pleasure he takes in his belief that the life he loves with the people is the good life.³³ This, not simply a suspicion that there is a mistake in the dialectic, is what makes it hard for Callicles to accept the refutation. Socrates thinks examination “often and in a better way” would eventually persuade Callicles because he would find that the pain he experiences in these examinations outweighs the pleasure his wishful thinking gives him.

These examinations consist in part in the *ἐλεγχος* or refutation in dialectic for which Socrates is known. He thinks this experience can be painful for the respondent.³⁴ When Polus was hesitant to give the answer that would complete the refutation, Socrates told him not to “shrink back from answering.” He says to him that “you won’t get hurt in any way” and that you should “submit yourself nobly to the argument, as you would to a doctor” (475D5–E1).³⁵ Socrates thinks Polus is right that answering will be painful for him but wrong that this pain will harm him. Socrates thinks that this pain will be beneficial for Polus because “pain and suffering” is the only way to get rid of unrighteousness (525B7).

33 Schofield argues for a seemingly similar interpretation. “*Eros* for the *demos*, is Socrates’ immediate diagnosis: Callicles is blinded by the way the likes and dislikes of the *demos*, reinforced by his rhetorical training, have already shaped his soul. His affections have clouded his ability to grasp reality” (Schofield 2017, p. 29). Schofield, though, does not explain Callicles’s resistance in terms of wishful thinking. Further, Schofield’s explanation of why Socrates thinks that more examination would persuade Callicles is different from mine. Schofield thinks Socrates believes that he can find some “common ground” and “territory [Callicles] is willing to explore jointly” (Schofield 2017, pp. 13, 28).

34 Moss sides with an argument she finds in Klosko (1983), Scott (1999), and Woolf (2000) that the *Gorgias* “implies that rational argument alone cannot sway someone in whom non-rational forces – *erôs*, or non-rational desires in general – are strong” (Moss 2007, p. 230). She does not explain what “rational argument” means here or place “non-rational forces” and “desires” within a Socratic or Platonic theory of the soul, but the view seems to be that Plato is criticizing the historical Socrates by giving the character a belief that Plato himself thinks is false: namely, that examination “alone” can persuade Callicles to change his mind about what the good life is. It is possible that Plato did believe this is false and intended his readers to draw this conclusion from his portrayal of Socrates and Callicles, but this interpretation is a lot less plausible once we think, as I argue, that Plato portrays Callicles as forming his belief about the good life in wishful thinking and portrays Socrates as thinking that refutation in dialectic can be painful. Moss also thinks Socrates believes that refutation in dialectic can be painful (Moss 2007, pp. 239–240), but she does not consider what the dialogue shows about how Callicles formed his belief about the good life or why Socrates so confidently says that examination often and better will persuade him.

35 See too 464D and 521E–522A.

Callicles “shrinks back” more than Polus. When Socrates shows Callicles that his own beliefs commit him to think that “to be disciplined is better for the soul” (505b11), he is annoyed, refuses to admit the point, and tells Socrates to continue the discussion with someone else. Socrates complains to Gorgias and Polus that “this fellow won’t put up with being disciplined and with his undergoing the very thing the discussion is about” (505c3–4). Callicles says testily in reply that “I don’t care about anything you say, Socrates, and gave those answers just for Gorgias’s sake” (505c5–6).

From Socrates’ point of view, Callicles acts incorrectly. He should discipline his soul by answering the question that completes the refutation. Given that previously he wanted Socrates and Gorgias to continue their discussion because he found listening to them gratifying, it is natural to think that he now resists answering and participating in the dialectic with Socrates because he is continuing to guide his behavior in terms of what adds to or detracts from his gratification.³⁶ Not answering allows Callicles to avoid the pain of having to accept that he is wrong. So that is what he does.

Examination “often” blocks this escape route.³⁷ Socrates thinks that if Callicles takes his head out of the sand to engage in dialectic again, he will come closer to deciding that the gratification he gets from believing that his life is the good life does not outweigh the pain he experiences in the ἔλεγχος. The dialogue provides no expectation that Callicles will do what he should rather than continue to gratify himself, but this does not show Socrates does not believe in the truth of what he says. He believes that if Callicles experiences the pain of seeing that he is “in discord with himself” (482b6) again and again, he will begin to think the better option is to abandon the argument from nature and admit he is without justification for living with the people in the way he loves.

Refutation in dialectic, further, is only one part of the “better way” of examination Socrates conducts. After he has shown Callicles that he is “in discord with

³⁶ Scott says that “[Polus’s] only reason for not accepting these inferences [in the Socratic dialectic that refutes him] is his dislike of the conclusion” (Scott 1999, p. 18). Scott argues that “Plato is deliberately drawing our attention to the problem of intransigence, to a suspicion that some interlocutors are so enamoured of their opinions that they will never relinquish them” and that “Plato uses the dialogue form [in the *Gorgias* and Book I of the *Republic*] precisely to show the ineffectiveness of philosophical dialogue on a certain kind of interlocutor” (Scott 1999, p. 25). Scott does not explain what it is for someone to be so “enamoured” with a belief that he resists abandoning it in the face of refutation. Nor does he offer an interpretation of Socrates’ remarks to Callicles at 513c7–d1.

³⁷ Klosko argues that “Plato believes the method of Socrates to be inadequate” because Socrates cannot prevent Callicles from “walk[ing] away from the discussion unconvinced” (Klosko 1983, pp. 584, 590).

himself” because dialectic shows he is unwilling to discard his beliefs that entail that acting rightly is not doing what one sees fit, Socrates explains to him that his life in rhetoric of doing what he sees fit will have negative consequences for him in death.³⁸ Socrates explains that whereas the souls of “the Great King” and “other kings or potentates,” who have not lived correctly because their souls were “nurtured without truth,” will suffer for their lives (524E3–525A3), the souls of those who have “lived a pious life, one devoted to truth,” and especially “that of a lover of wisdom,” will go to “the Isles of the Blessed” (526C1–5). Socrates tells Callicles that he is “convinced” (526D4) this is true. He tells Callicles that although he may regard this account as a mere “tale” and “feel contempt for” it, such contempt is reasonable only “if we could look for and somehow find an account better and truer than this one” (527A6–8).

This account of the afterlife is “better” because it is beneficial to contemplate. As part of the account he gives, Socrates explains to Callicles that it is right to make an example of the incurable man so that when others “see him suffering whatever it is he suffers, they may be afraid and become better” (525B3–4).³⁹ Socrates thinks this is true even though the incurables cannot profit from their punishment. He says that others “profit from it when they see them undergoing for all time the most grievous, intensely painful and frightening sufferings for their errors, simply strung up there in the prison of Hades as examples, visible warnings to wrongdoers who are ever arriving” (525C4–8).

Socrates thus thinks that we can be motivated to abandon the beliefs that guide our behavior by seeing their negative consequences in others who have these beliefs, but he no doubt also thinks that we do not have to see these consequences with our eyes. We can think about what we understand the negative consequences to be. This is what Socrates is trying to help Callicles do. By giving him the account of what happens to our souls in the afterlife, Socrates is trying to help him think about the negative consequences he will suffer if he does not change the way he lives his life.⁴⁰

38 On my interpretation, refutation in dialectic and thinking about negative consequences together constitute the “better way” of examination Socrates has in mind. Schofield argues for a different interpretation. He thinks that it consists in “a more elevated conception of politics, [as] contrasted with the politics of gratification” (Schofield 2017, p. 27).

39 For discussion of how Socrates understands the “incurables,” see Brickhouse & Smith (2002) and Brickhouse & Smith (2007). Their interpretation turns on difficult questions about how Socrates understands belief and desire. I remain neutral on these questions in this paper.

40 At the end of the *Phaedo*, as in the *Gorgias*, Socrates tells a story about the judgement of souls in death. He says that although it is not fitting for “a man of intelligence” to insist that the afterlife is just as he describes it, belief that “this or something like it is true” is worth the risk and that

Socrates does not explain how this thinking about negative consequences is related to Callicles's previous refutation in dialectic, but a natural hypothesis is that together they constitute the "better way" (513c8) of examination he mentions to Callicles when he tells him what will persuade him.⁴¹ Callicles first sees that he is "in discord with himself." This is painful. Callicles next sees that given the beliefs about the good life dialectic has shown him that he is unwilling to discard, his life in rhetoric with the people has negative consequences for his soul in death. This too is painful, and Socrates thinks that if Callicles has these painful experiences "often" (513c8), he will be persuaded to abandon the argument from nature and his belief that his life in rhetoric with the people is the good life.⁴²

If Callicles were to get this far, then from Socrates' point of view, he would have moved toward the truth about the good life. He would not yet be where Socrates says he himself is (527c5) because Callicles would not yet have grasped as Socrates does that the best way to live is "to practice righteousness and the rest of virtue" (527e3–4), but Callicles would be closer because he would no longer have the account of the good life that Socrates believes is "worthless" (527e7).

"the man of intelligence "should repeat such things [to himself] like a spell" (114d2–7). His point, it seems, is that thinking about negative consequences can help us abandon beliefs that guide the way we live. See, for example, Belfiore (1980), p. 135. "The myth at the end of the *Phaedo* is also said to be an *epode* [or spell] that adults can use to inspire themselves with the courage to despise bodily pleasure."

⁴¹ Scott seems to ignore Socrates' talk of a "better way" of examination. "On the one hand, we have Socrates' views about what is needed to produce a change of mind: at [*Gorgias*] 513 C 8-D 1 he assures Callicles that he will be persuaded if they investigate the same problems more frequently and more thoroughly. The Socratic recipe, when faced with unfinished business, is simply this: more of the same. On the other hand, the way in which the interlocutors respond to Socrates' lines of questioning raises the suspicion that dialectic on its own is just not up to the task that he has set for it" (Scott 1999, p. 25).

⁴² This interpretation of what the character Socrates thinks in the *Gorgias* is consistent with an interpretation of the historical Socrates that Michael Frede gives. "If one holds a belief which is incompatible with another belief, the explanation may be, not that one lacks a sufficient sense for incompatibility, but that the belief is so firmly lodged in the way one is used to thinking and feeling about things that it is not easily displaced by having it pointed out to one that it is incompatible with a belief we are, and should be, unwilling to discard. It seems particularly important to keep this in mind in the case of extremely intellectualistic positions like that of Socrates or that of the Stoics, for whom even desires are beliefs of a kind. They certainly do not assume that ridding oneself, or others, of mistaken beliefs is just a matter of cogent argument. In particular the Stoics, and especially the later Stoics, pay a great deal of attention to the treatment of irrational beliefs or propensities to believe" (Frede 1996, p. 15).

5 Conclusion

When Socrates tells Callicles that we must “practice self-control” if we want to be “happy” (507c9–d1), he does not only mean we should avoid the “luxury” (492c4) that Callicles makes part of the good life and takes to characterize the life of the tyrant. The self-control extends to how we think and form beliefs about what the good life is. Socrates thinks that this belief above all others is important to get right. Given the great importance of possessing the right answer to the question of what the good life is, we need a very high degree of justification in order to rest content with an answer.

Polus and Callicles do not understand this. They make the mistake Socrates warns against in the conclusion of the dialogue: that “it is not seeming to be good but being good that a man should take care of more than anything” (527b5–6).⁴³ Polus and Callicles do not take this care. To be good and thus to live good lives, they need to know what the good life is. They reason to know this, but they are not careful to do it correctly. They reason as if their goal is seeming to themselves to be good.

Plato uses Socrates to provide the contrast. After Socrates has told Callicles that those who have “lived a pious life, one devoted to truth,” and especially “that of a lover of wisdom” or φιλόσοφος, will go to “the Isles of the Blessed,” he tells him that it is “by practicing truth” (526d6) that he himself tries to live a good life. This practice requires him to go to great lengths to know what the good life is, and the *Gorgias* shows him doing this. He seeks out Gorgias to have a “discussion” (447c1), trades his role as questioner to keep the dialectic going with Polus, and puts up with abuse from Callicles to test whether Callicles “concur[s]” (486e5) with what he himself believes about the good life.

Socrates does not say explicitly that wishful thinking is the mistake Polus and Callicles make, but I have argued this is what he thinks. In contrast to Socrates and his followers, Plato portrays Polus and Callicles as acting to keep the gratification coming. Socrates understands this propensity to be part of the psychological mechanism that gives rhetoric its power, and he understands Callicles to resist accepting that he has been refuted because this would deprive him of the pleasure he takes

⁴³ Socrates seems to have this point in mind in the *Apology*. “This man seemed to me to seem to be wise to many other people and especially to himself, but not to be so; and then I tried to show him that he thought he was wise but was not. As a result, I became hateful to him” (21c6–d1). Liu interprets this passage as follows. “According to Socrates, the reputedly wise – politicians, poets, and craftspeople – lack the knowledge that they purport to have. Nevertheless, even after their lack of knowledge is revealed, they hold fast to the misleading but presumably gratifying appearances that they are particularly wise. Hence, they are guilty of wishful thinking” (Liu 2022, p. 331).

in his belief that the life with the people he loves is the good life. Socrates thinks that “examination often and in a better way” would persuade Callicles because he would realize that the pleasure he gives himself in his wishful thinking about the life he loves is not worth the pain he experiences in these examinations. He would be persuaded that he is without justification for his life in rhetoric with the people.⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ I am grateful to a reader and to the copy-editor for *Rhizomata* for very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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