

The Purpose of Rhetorical Form in Plato

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Abstract

This paper explores Plato's views on the purpose of rhetorical form by surveying the way in which Socrates engages in speechmaking at several points in the *Gorgias*. I argue that Socrates has nothing in principle against the use of a long speech as part of the practice of philosophical inquiry and argument, provided that the speech is geared toward understanding. This reflects a key and relatively unremarked distinction that Socrates makes in the *Gorgias* between persuasion that comes from being convinced and persuasion that comes from being taught. The kind of long speeches that Socrates objects to are those that have a conviction-based purpose. However, this leaves open the use of a wide variety of rhetorical techniques – pieces of argument, speechifying, analogy, myth, and exhortation – that have a teaching-based purpose, which is precisely the sort of rhetoric that Socrates licenses in the dialogue.

Keywords: philosophy, rhetoric, speechmaking, persuasion, conviction, teaching

1 Introduction¹

I have elsewhere addressed the issue of Socrates's missing "great speech" in Plato's *Gorgias*, a speech in defense of philosophy that would serve as a response to Callicles's disparagement of the philosophical life at 482c–486d.² In that paper, I argue that a close reading of the dialectical moves that occur in the dialogue after Callicles's speech provides us with most of the core points that would be the essence of a speech that Socrates could give Callicles in defense of the life of philosophy.

¹ My thanks to Filip Karfik and Jakub Jirsa for an invitation to present at the *Twelfth Symposium Platonicum Pragense on Plato's Gorgias* held in Prague in November 2019, and to all the participants at this event for the high level of discussion that served as an impulse to write this paper. I'm also especially grateful for expert feedback and comments from Vladimír Mikeš.

² Tushar Irani, "Socrates's Great Speech: The Defense of Philosophy in Plato's *Gorgias*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 59 (2021): 349–69.

In this paper I consider a broader question by examining the use of speechmaking generally in the *Gorgias*. While the essence of Socrates's response to Callicles's speech can be pieced together from their subsequent exchanges in the text, it remains the case that Plato deliberately does not have Socrates deliver this response in a speech comparable in form to the one produced by Callicles, though he provides many cues in the text that such a speech will be forthcoming (see 500c1–8, 505c7–d7, 506b4–c1). Why, then, do we not find Socrates's own great speech anywhere in the *Gorgias*? This absence is especially striking since in other dialogues Socrates often has no hesitation in giving long speeches.

An easy answer to this question draws on Socrates's two comments to Gorgias and Polus at 449b4–c6 and 461c8–462a5, where he expresses his distaste for long speechmaking and his preference for the considered kind of exchange that occurs through back-and-forth dialectic with an interlocutor. And yet Socrates is quite willing to produce a lengthy speech of his own at various stages in the *Gorgias*: the point is emphasized especially at 464b–465d, 517b–519d, and 523a–527c. So either Socrates is guilty of inconsistency at these stages in the text or his aversion to speechmaking is not absolute and can be outweighed by other considerations in select circumstances. I argue in this paper that the latter is the case and that a closer inspection of how, when, and why Socrates delivers long speeches in the dialogue explains his reluctance to do so in defending the life of philosophy against Callicles.³

I shall proceed, first, by surveying those parts of the *Gorgias* where Plato draws our attention to Socrates's attitude toward speechmaking before explaining, next, why a lengthy speech in defense of the philosophical life would be inapt as a response to Callicles. Briefly put, there are reasons

³ My interest here is in the use of speechmaking generally in Plato, though my argument has a natural affinity with recent work that takes seriously his use of myths in the dialogues: see *Plato's Myths*, ed. C. Partenie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Daniel Werner, *Myth and Philosophy in Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); *Plato and Myth: Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths*, eds. C. Collobert, P. Destrée, and F. Gonzalez (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Tae-Yeoun Kim, *Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020); and Katharine O'Reilly, "Jars, Sieves and Souls: The Myth of the Water Carriers in *Gorgias* 492–3," forthcoming in *Plato's Pleasures: New Perspectives*, ed. Joachim Aufderheide and Mehmet Erginel (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

internal to the text concerning Socrates's engagement with Callicles as well as reasons *external* to the text concerning Plato's engagement with his reader that require a careful analysis of Callicles's views. It is only by exploring the assumptions that underlie his conception of the good life that Callicles can see the flaws in his own position, and in doing so Socrates engages Callicles in a persuasive endeavor that would be poorly served by a single speech. Even so, Socrates uses a range of rhetorical techniques (including sustained speechmaking) that together build a cumulative case throughout the *Gorgias* for the choiceworthiness of the philosophical life. Callicles himself remains unyielding throughout the dialogue in refusing to accept the benefits of the life of philosophy, but by having Socrates systematically dismantle Callicles's approach to the good life – through argument and through speechmaking – Plato leaves us in a position to affirm what Callicles cannot.

Through showing rather than telling Callicles that his views are flawed, and by constructing a case piece by piece in the *Gorgias* for the philosophical life, I suggest that Socrates engages Callicles (and Plato engages us) in a form of teaching. This reflects a distinction Socrates draws early in the dialogue at 453d–455a between persuasion that comes from being convinced (*πιστευτικῆς*) and persuasion that comes from being taught (*διδασκαλικῆς*). While the former has flattery and gratification as its aim, teaching-based persuasion has the aim of enlisting our understanding. However, nothing that Socrates says here or anywhere in the *Gorgias* confines the use of teaching-based persuasion to dialectic or any other particular form of discourse. Instead, Plato leaves open the possibility that long speeches may also promote the goals of teaching and learning when strategically employed, and this is precisely what we find in the dialogue. Such an inquiry thus sheds significant light on Plato's views on the use of speechmaking in general, where what matters to him ultimately is less the exact form of a piece of discourse and more its conduciveness to understanding.

2 Under What Conditions is Speechmaking Warranted?

The most tempting way to address Plato's views on the use of speechmaking in the *Gorgias*, especially in relation to his conception of philosophy, is in terms of binaries: rhetoric versus dialectic; long speeches versus short speeches; flashy oratory versus sober-minded discussion.

Such binaries seem to be supported by Socrates's remarks early in the text about how he wishes to engage his interlocutors in argument. From the start at 447a–b, we learn that Socrates has missed a dazzling display speech (ἐπίδειξις) delivered by Gorgias and there is good reason to think his late arrival is intentional: Socrates says he has come not to listen to such speeches but to take part in discussion (διαλέγεσθαι). Soon after at 448d, he admonishes Polus for engaging in “what is called rhetoric” (τὴν καλουμένην ῥητορικὴν) rather than discussion (διαλέγεσθαι), and when he begins his exchange with Gorgias at 449b–c he lays down some ground rules by asking Gorgias to refrain from speechmaking (τὸ ... μῆκος τῶν λόγων) and to participate instead in the short give and take of dialogue.⁴ The same rules are affirmed later at 461d–462a where the one request Socrates makes of Polus before they engage with each other is that Polus desist from making long speeches (μακρολογία).

Importantly, however, when Callicles delivers his great speech at 482c–486d – an elaborate and sustained piece of rhetoric unlike any other in the Platonic dialogues – Socrates does not fault the speech for its extravagant length. Here is his immediate reaction to the speech and the exchange with Callicles that follows:

SOCRATES: If I actually had a soul made of gold, Callicles, don't you think I'd be pleased to find one of those stones on which they test (βασανίζουσιν) gold? And if this stone to which I intended to take my soul were the best stone and it agreed that my soul had been well cared for (καλῶς τεθεραπεῦσθαι), don't you think I could know well at that point that I'm in good shape and need no further test (βασάνου)?

CALLICLES: What's the point of your question, Socrates?

SOCRATES: I'll tell you. I believe that by running into you, I've run into just such a piece of luck.

CALLICLES: Why do you say that?

⁴ All quotes from the *Gorgias* in this paper follow Donald Zeyl's translation in *Plato: Complete Works*, eds. J. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), with minor modifications in places. References to the Greek are based on *Platonis opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900–7).

SOCRATES: I know well that if you concur with what my soul believes, then that is the very truth (τάληθη). I realize that a person who is going to put a soul to an adequate test (βασανειν ικανως) to see whether it lives rightly or not (περι ορθως τε ζωσης και μη) must have three qualities, all of which you have: knowledge, good will, and frankness. (486d2–487a3)

Neither here nor at any stage in their conversation does Socrates take issue with the length of Callicles’s speech. On the contrary, he seems delighted with it, noting that the speech evinces Callicles’s knowledge, good will, and frankness: qualities that are indispensable in an ideal interlocutor.⁵ This is especially surprising given the unmistakable scorn that Callicles displays in his speech for Socrates’s chosen vocation as a philosopher. In no other dialogue do we see a character express greater contempt for the practice of philosophy and Socrates’s pursuit of it as a way of life. Yet rather than take offence, Socrates singles out this line of criticism in the speech as particularly commendable:

And most admirable of all (παντων δε καλλιστη), Callicles, is the examination (σκεψις) of those issues concerning which you took me to task, that of what a man must be like (ποιον τινα χρη ειναι τον ανδρα), and of what he must pursue (τι επιτηδεειν) and how far (μεχρι του), when he’s older and when he’s young. (487e7–488a2)

Now, one might read these remarks as insincere or ironic: the standard refuge of those who find it baffling when Plato has Socrates respond to hostility with decency. Yet this dismissal of the praise that Socrates heaps on Callicles’s speech fails to do justice to the content of the piece. Callicles’s speech is not a work of high-flown oratory of the sort that Polus attempts (and Socrates rightly

⁵ This evidence is no doubt provisional, since Callicles eventually falls far short of an ideal interlocutor. As Socrates puts it later in the text: “I didn’t suppose at the beginning that I’d be deceived intentionally by you, because I assumed you were a friend” (499c2–4). For discussion, see Richard McKim, “Shame and Truth in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” in *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings*, ed. Charles Griswold (London: Routledge, 1988), 40; Marina McCoy, *Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 103–6; Franco Trivigno, “Paratragedy in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 36 (2009): 95–6.

censures) in extolling the practice of rhetoric earlier in the text at 448c4–9, but a finely wrought and well-thought-out case for choosing the rhetorical life over the philosophical life.⁶ It is no stretch when Socrates calls the speech an “examination” (σκέψις, 487e8) of the kind of life one should live, for Callicles’s advocacy of the rhetorical life is based on a theory of human nature and our relations with others that leads quite plausibly to the need for rhetoric in democratic politics.

That is to say, Socrates sees that Callicles’s speech is based on *reasons*. The doctrine of natural justice that Callicles develops in the first part of the speech is sophisticated, and he appeals to it both as a justification for the claims he advances in the second part of the speech to assert the choiceworthiness of the rhetorical life and as an explanation of Polus’s failure to argue for that thesis against Socrates (see 482d7–483b4). Callicles’s speech, we can say, is geared toward understanding. It shows Socrates how one might argue cogently for the benefits of the life of rhetoric without having to invoke tendentiously, as Polus does, a glamorized portrait of the tyrant or the horrors of torture (see 470c4–471d2, 473b12–d2). This is why a discussion with Callicles will be the best test of whether and how well Socrates has managed to care for his soul (καλῶς θεραπεῦσθαι, 486d5–6). For Socrates realizes that, unlike Gorgias and Polus, Callicles’s views are grounded in principles that suggest a conception of the good life standing in direct opposition to his own. Callicles is a genuine touchstone for Socrates in the sense that, if either of their views fail to survive critical scrutiny, Socrates will have a better understanding of what living well consists in. Seen in this light, the exact form of Callicles’s speech is irrelevant. Despite its status as an elaborate piece of rhetoric, Socrates values it as a piece of thinking.

2.1 The Pastry-Baking Analogy

This way of approaching the purpose of rhetorical form in the *Gorgias* helps us make sense of four other cases in the text where Socrates licenses the use of speechmaking; or at least, he has no

⁶ For a similar contrast, see Socrates’s criticism of Agathon’s speech on love in the *Symposium* at 198b1–199b5 versus the more favorable attitude he displays toward Diotima’s speech. Of course, the fact that Socrates holds Callicles’s speech in higher regard than Polus’s speech does not preclude the need for Callicles’s views to be examined. Still, the point remains that Socrates has no objection here to the use of speechmaking per se.

objection to its use, since on each occasion Socrates himself delivers the speech. The first is his pastry-baking analogy at 464b–465d and is the most straightforward case. In this analogy, Socrates takes issue with the way his contemporaries conventionally engage in rhetoric by comparing their practice with the practice of pastry-baking: in the same way that a pastry-baker caters only to what a customer finds most pleasant to eat, so a conventional rhetorician caters only to what an audience finds most pleasant to hear. On this basis, Socrates holds, practitioners of rhetoric like Gorgias and Polus should be understood as possessing not an art, but a mere knack for flattering the appetites of their listeners.⁷

This summary captures Socrates’s main point in the pastry-baking analogy, though the entire stretch of text (spanning about one-and-a-half Stephanus pages) contains a complex comparison of a wide range of pursuits, including cosmetics, gymnastics, medicine, sophistry, legislation, and justice. Socrates also identifies what he calls the “art of politics” (ἡ πολιτική) with the care of the soul in this part of the dialogue (464a1–c4). This claim relies crucially on a distinction he establishes between the goods of the body and the goods of soul, and its implications recur throughout the *Gorgias*. Indeed, in many ways the pastry-baking analogy contains material that is key to the development of Socrates’s views later in the dialogue. As we shall have occasion to observe often in this paper, several of the ideas first introduced in the analogy are referenced well into Socrates’s discussion with Callicles (see esp. 500e4–501c5, 502d10–503d3, 504d5–e3, 513d1–514a3, 517c7–518a5).

More than this, however, the pastry-baking analogy shows that Socrates is quite amenable to producing an elaborate speech of his own when he believes it necessary. Although the analogy falls short of logical rigour, Socrates tells Gorgias and Polus before the speech that it will display (ἐπιδείξω, 464b2) to them how he regards the conventional practice of rhetoric. But why is

⁷ This reading of the analogy is explored further by Raphael Woolf, “Why is Rhetoric Not a Skill?,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 21 (2004): 119–30; Jessica Moss, “The Doctor and the Pastry Chef: Pleasure and Persuasion in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” *Ancient Philosophy* 27 (2007): 229–49; and Tushar Irani, *Plato on the Value of Philosophy: The Art of Argument in the Gorgias and Phaedrus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 49–52.

speechmaking warranted in this case? Socrates offers a justification to Polus directly after developing the analogy:

Perhaps I've done a strange thing (ἄτοπον): I wouldn't let you make long speeches (μακροὺς λόγους), and here I've just composed a lengthy one myself. I deserve to be forgiven, though, for when I made my statements short (βραχέα) *you didn't understand* (οὐκ ἐμάνθανες) and didn't know how to deal with the answers I gave you, but you needed a narration (διηγήσεως). So if I don't know how to deal with your answers either, you must spin out a speech too. (465e1–466a2) (emphasis added)

Socrates here expresses his willingness to engage in speechmaking as well as an openness to listening to a long speech when delivered in the service of understanding. The length of the pastry-baking analogy is justified because when he first describes the conventional practice of rhetoric as “an image of a part of politics” (πολιτικῆς μορίου εἶδωλον, 463d2), neither Gorgias nor Polus understand his view. Socrates hence gives the speech for the purposes of clarification (463d4–e4).⁸ Having a view of something in this sense is a kind of achievement, one based on reasons, and the understanding Socrates seeks from his audience requires that they grasp those reasons: he wants them to understand his view, as it were, from the inside. The pastry-baking analogy clarifies why Socrates calls rhetoric an image of a part of politics in just this way. By focusing on what's most pleasant (ἡδίστω, 464d2) instead of what's best (βελτίστου, 464d1), the conventional practice of rhetoric is an image of a pursuit that benefits the human soul in the same way that pastry-baking is an image of a pursuit that benefits the human body.

2.2 The Water-Carriers Myth

The second use of speechmaking that I wish to highlight from the *Gorgias* is the myth of the water carriers that Socrates puts forward early in his conversation with Callicles at 492e–494a.⁹ Socrates

⁸ See Gabriela Roxana Carone, “Socratic Rhetoric in the *Gorgias*,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 35 (2005): 228, who also observes Socrates' positive attitude toward speechmaking for such purposes.

⁹ My thanks to Filip Karfik for emphasizing to me the importance of the water-carriers myth to Socrates's conversation with Callicles, particularly in relation to their opposing conceptions of the good life.

appeals to the myth after a particularly heated moment in the text at 491e–492c, where Callicles advocates a view of the good life as a life of unconstrained desire fulfillment. This hedonistic view of human happiness emerges after a section of dialogue at 488b–491e during which Socrates questions the notion of the superior man whom Callicles had championed earlier in his great speech, and the water-carriers myth continues the same line of inquiry. We can see this more easily by arranging these parts of the text in sequence:

1. Callicles’s great speech (482c–486d)
2. Socrates cross-examines Callicles about the “superior man” (488b–491e)
3. Callicles’s promotion of hedonism (491e–492c)
4. Socrates’s water-carriers myth (492e–494a)

Together, Socrates’s cross-examination of Callicles in (2) and his use of myth in (4) are both attempts to get Callicles to clarify the view of the good life he assumes in (1). The fact that one attempt takes the form of dialectic and the other the form of a long speech is irrelevant. Socrates makes this evident in responding to Callicles’s outburst after (3) by asking him “not to relax in any way, so that it may really become clear (κατάδηλον) how we should live (πῶς βιωτέον)” (492d3–5). He develops the water-carriers myth at 492e–494a – a speech that pointedly makes use of figurative reasoning (εἰκόνα, 493d5) rather than deductive argument – for this very purpose.

Notice, too, how Socrates relates the myth by first describing it in one way at 492e7–493d3 and then reworking it slightly at 493d5–494a5.¹⁰ In the first version, he likens the soul of the insatiable man with unconstrained desires to a leaky sieve constantly having to refill a leaky jar with water. Socrates admits that this story is quite strange (τι ἄτοπα), but having presented it (ἐνδειξάμενος) he hopes it will nonetheless make clear (δηλοῖ) for Callicles by allegorical means the benefits of an orderly life compared with an undisciplined life (493c3–7). In the second version of the myth, Socrates more directly compares the orderly life with the undisciplined life, though still by means of an allegory. The former life is likened to a man who possesses secure jars: after filling them with various substances, this man rests content and does not concern himself with replenishing

¹⁰ This point has received excellent treatment recently by O’Reilly, “Jars, Sieves and Souls.”

them further. The latter life, however, is likened to a man with rotten jars, who is “forced to keep on filling them, day and night, or else he suffers extreme pain” (493e8–a1). After depicting each life in the myth, Socrates has the following exchange with Callicles:

SOCRATES: Now since each life is the way I describe it, are you saying that the life of the undisciplined man is happier than that of the orderly man? When I say this, do I at all persuade you to concede that the orderly life is better than the undisciplined one, or do I not?

CALLICLES: You do not, Socrates. The man who has filled himself up has no pleasure any more, and when he’s been filled up and experiences neither joy nor pain, that’s living like a stone, as I was saying just now. Rather, living pleasantly (τὸ ἡδέως ζῆν) consists in this: having as much as possible flow in (ἐν τῷ ὡς πλεῖστον ἐπιρρεῖν). (494a2–b2)

I noted above that having a view of something is a kind of achievement according to Socrates, and this is exactly the outcome of his use of the water-carriers myth. In this case, however, it is not (as in the pastry-baking analogy) Socrates’s position that gets clarified, but Callicles’s position. To understand Callicles’s approach to the good life, Socrates wants to grasp the presuppositions that motivate it and the implications it leads to: he wants to understand Callicles’s view, as I put it earlier, from the inside. The myth does this by getting Callicles to sharpen his identification of the good life with the pleasant life. What “living pleasantly” amounts to, for Callicles, is the greatest possible experience of sensory pleasure. Callicles grants that such a life may entail pain or discomfort, but insists that the man with satisfied desires or “full jars” in the myth no longer experiences pleasure and thus, on his view, does not qualify as living a good life.

Read in this light, Socrates’s use of the water-carriers myth accomplishes in a brief space what his cross-examination of Callicles at 488b–491e does not. Once Callicles affirms a view of happiness as a life devoted to the maximal gratification of one’s desires, Socrates sees he has his work cut out for him. For a consequence of Callicles’s view is that it locates human virtue or excellence in the power to enlarge and satisfy one’s desires to the greatest extent possible. There were intimations of this idea already in the *Gorgias* (see 491e8–9, 492c4–6, d5–e1) but the myth makes

it plain how Callicles will reject any understanding of the human good that requires the imposition of a limit or “orderliness” on human desires. From this point on, Socrates marshals a series of arguments designed to refute the thesis that what’s good for a human being is reducible to what’s pleasant. Here he reverts to his usual method of questioning and testing the consistency of his interlocutor’s views until 499b–d, where Callicles finally retracts the claim that all pleasures are equally good for a human being. Yet it is the use of the myth at 492e–494a that leads Callicles to put that position on the table.

2.3 Socrates’s Critique of Earlier Politicians in Athens

Socrates’s critique of former Athenian politicians at 517b–519d is a third instance in which he delivers a long speech in the *Gorgias*. As in the pastry-baking analogy, this is another place in the text where Socrates engages in speechmaking to clarify his views. In fact, he draws on the analogy substantially (see 517c7–518a5), expanding on it to develop a new objection to the conventional practice of rhetoric. The question at issue here concerns how the use of rhetoric conduces to the good of a wider political community. Socrates contends that earlier political leaders in Athens – he lists in particular Cimon, Themistocles, Miltiades, and Pericles – did nothing that really benefited the Athenian people with their oratory. Rather, just as what counts for success in pastry-baking, these politicians succeeded only in indulging the appetites of the people, “for they filled the city with harbors and dockyards, walls, and tribute payments and such trash as that, but did so without justice and moderation” (519a1–4).

Socrates then comments on the absurdity of a purportedly just leader resenting being treated unjustly by his city. For a just politician skilled in rhetoric, Socrates holds, must make those over whom he exercises his rhetoric just. If the people turn out to be unjust, then the fault lies with the politician (519b8–c2). Whatever we think of his reasoning, Socrates makes it clear that he advances this critique to explain why he believes no preeminent politician before him possessed any genuine political expertise.¹¹ And the rationale for this belief should be familiar to us by now: all of these politicians engaged in rhetoric merely as a form of flattery, reducing what was good

¹¹ For a fuller discussion of Socrates’s views in this part of the *Gorgias*, see J. Clerk Shaw, “Socrates and the True Political Craft,” *Classical Philology* 106 (2011): 187–207.

for the Athenian people to what was most pleasant for them to hear. But that is a false view of the human good, as Callicles has admitted by this stage in the text. Socrates has no reservations here in abandoning dialectic, recalling many tropes and ideas from earlier in the dialogue, and he admits his loquaciousness freely when Callicles highlights the point (see 519d8–e2), yet he does so to bring home to Callicles the consequences of their previous agreements.¹² Again, this is a speech delivered in the service of understanding.

2.4 The Concluding Eschatological Myth

My final example of Socrates’s use of speechmaking in the *Gorgias* comes from the last part of the dialogue, where he spends over four Stephanus pages relating an eschatological myth at 523a–527c. This stretch of the dialogue is the longest case of unbroken oratory in the text and a full treatment of the myth lies beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes, two points stand out as worthy of attention. The first concerns the plainly allegorical content of the myth and its use by Socrates to elucidate a claim he makes at 521d–e, where he asserts that he alone among all of his contemporaries and most of his predecessors practices the true art of politics (ἀληθῶς πολιτικῆ τέχνη, 521d7). The second (related) point concerns Socrates’s introduction of the myth at 523a1–3, where he insists that the story should be interpreted as a *logos* instead of a *mythos*.

The allegorical content of the concluding myth in the *Gorgias* has received excellent discussion by David Sedley, who identifies several echoes of key themes and arguments from earlier in the dialogue in the story.¹³ As Sedley observes, and as we have also seen, the idea that figurative language can be used to clarify moral truths is already signaled at 493c3–7 in the myth of the water carriers.¹⁴ Most notable of all in the myth at 523a–527c is the theme of punishment and the sense in which Plato conceives of Socratic refutation as a corrective form of punishment administered

¹² Note in particular 517d5–6, where Socrates justifies his use of images as an aid for Callicles to understand his argument (διὰ τῶν αὐτῶν εἰκόνων λέγω, ἵνα ῥᾶον καταμάθῃς).

¹³ David Sedley, “Myth, Punishment and Politics in the *Gorgias*,” in *Plato’s Myths*, ed. Catalin Partenie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). See also Radcliffe G. Edmonds, “Whip Scars on the Naked Soul: Myth and Elenchos in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” in *Plato and Myth*, ed. Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée, and Francisco J. Gonzalez, 165–85. Leiden: Brill, 2013.

¹⁴ Sedley, “Myth,” 53.

to improve an interlocutor's soul. The myth thus serves in the text to reinforce Socrates's claim to be the best practitioner of politics in Athens. It follows naturally from his critique of earlier Athenian politicians at 517b–519d while drawing on ideas he develops in the pastry-baking analogy at 464b–465d concerning the art of politics.

This helps us see why Socrates regards the concluding myth primarily as a *logos*. Sedley claims that the designation of the myth as a *logos* refers to its true content, though he acknowledges that its figurative nature leaves open what exactly that content is.¹⁵ In fact, it is not clear that an analysis of the myth in terms of its truth value is the best approach to adopt in interpreting its significance, especially if Socrates's description of the soul's survival after death should not be read as literally true. How does one go about assessing the truth of an allegory? If the myth is put forward as an account of Socrates's practice of refutation as a beneficial form of punishment, then it would be otiose for its status as a *logos* to consist in the truth of that account. For Socrates has already affirmed this truth elsewhere in the text and believes he has demonstrated it repeatedly during his exchanges with Polus and Callicles (see 475d6–7, 505a6–b12, 505c3–4, 521e2–522c2).¹⁶

Instead, the myth should be read as operating on a different explanatory level as an elaboration on how Socratic refutation benefits the soul of an interlocutor. That is to say, the myth should be read as *deepening* our understanding of Socrates's claim to be an expert in politics, rather than as a statement of that claim's truth value. It does so by bringing together a series of supporting claims that Socrates has advanced in the dialogue concerning the nature of the human good and the nature of human virtue. And it does so, importantly, without relying on explicit argument. When

¹⁵ Sedley, "Myth," 52, 68, n.29. Christopher Rowe likewise believes that the myth's status as a *logos* consists in it being a "true account or report," though he argues for a two-level reading of the content of the myth on which we are meant to see through the conventional (and false) notion of punishment in the story and grasp the view of punishment that Socrates puts forward as true ("The Status of the Myth of the *Gorgias*, or: Taking Plato Seriously," in *Plato and Myth. Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths*, eds. Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée, and Francisco J. Gonzales [Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2012], 190-1).

¹⁶ The idea of Socratic refutation as a kind of punishment and its implications for Plato in the *Gorgias* receives close discussion in Gabriela Roxana Carone, "Calculating Machines or Leaky Jars? The Moral Psychology of Plato's *Gorgias*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 26 (2004), 55–96. See also the chapter by Louis-André Dorion in this volume.

interpreted alongside earlier parts of the *Gorgias*, the myth functions as another piece of Socrates's cumulative case in the dialogue for the life of philosophy and its contribution to the care of the soul. This is most apparent from the conclusion at 527a5–c4, where Socrates folds the story into a group of theses he has advanced throughout the text. Sedley notes that Socrates regards this package of findings as “so integral a unity that they jointly constitute a single *logos*.”¹⁷ That is correct, yet what this single *logos* amounts to for Socrates is a long-drawn-out defense of the philosophical life: observe how in the last lines of the *Gorgias*, he reasserts the way the dialogue has disclosed one *logos* to him and his interlocutors, an account of the best way of life (ὁ τρόπος ἄριστος τοῦ βίου, 527e3). Socrates goes on to affirm the advantages of this *logos* over Callicles's endorsement of the rhetorical life in the text (see 527e5–7), which can only mean that by the end of the *Gorgias* Socrates believes he has answered the challenge to justify the practice of philosophy. The myth at 523a–527c adds one more dimension to that defense. Its status as a *logos* consists not in its truth value but in how it supplements the longer *logos* on behalf of the philosophical life that Plato has had Socrates construct carefully throughout the dialogue.

3 The Form of Socrates's Defense of Philosophy

Let us return now to the question with which I began this paper. As we have seen, Socrates has nothing in principle against engaging in long speechmaking in the *Gorgias* provided that it serves the ends of clarification and understanding. This is in contrast to the use of rhetoric he associates with the practice of his contemporaries, who engage in speechmaking for the purposes of flattery and gratification. In each of the cases we have surveyed, Socrates makes a long speech either to elaborate on the reasons for his own views or to develop a better grasp of his interlocutors' views. Indeed, despite the combative tenor of Callicles's great speech, Socrates values the way in which the piece helps him understand Callicles's position.

This makes it all the more perplexing why Socrates refrains from defending the life of philosophy in a way that's comparable in form to Callicles's great speech. And yet the answer should be clear at this point: if Socrates chooses not to produce such a speech, it must be because he believes it would not promote the goal of understanding his conception of the good life.

¹⁷ Sedley, “Myth,” 53, n. 4.

Why is this? The fact that Socrates effectively has two audiences seems relevant here. On the one hand, within the drama of the *Gorgias*, Callicles needs to recognize that despite the persuasiveness of his doctrine of natural justice and the attractiveness of the rewards that rhetoric can provide in democratic politics, there are various problems with the theory of human nature and human excellence on which his conception of the good life depends. It is only in the absence of this theory that Socrates's own position has any traction. On the other hand, outside the drama of the *Gorgias*, Plato wants us to see that, for all the allure of Callicles's idea of the strong man who shakes off the restraints of the masses and furthers his own interests by disregarding custom and convention, there are flaws at the heart of Callicles's position that imply the value of the philosophical life over the rhetorical life. Callicles himself is not prepared to accept this inference by the end of the dialogue, but we are clearly meant to draw it.¹⁸

Disabusing Callicles of his reasons for championing the life of rhetoric and explicating these flaws for us requires that Socrates call attention to the fragility of Callicles's doctrine of natural justice and his notion of the superior man. This is not something he can achieve in a prolonged speech. For suppose that Socrates *did* deliver a lengthy display speech in response to Callicles that championed the life of philosophy. Such a speech would come at the cost of the work he achieves in excavating Callicles's position at 488b–491e and 491e–492c, and in the water-carriers myth at 492e–494a. It would also rule out the systematic refutation of Callicles's hedonism subsequently in the text. We would be presented instead with the juxtaposition of two theories of the good life in competition with each other, a pair of opposing set pieces where the choice between them would reduce simply to a matter of preference between the goods of the rhetorical life versus the goods of the philosophical life. But conceiving of the choice between these ways of life in these terms misses exactly what Socrates wants to underscore in the *Gorgias*: by itself, the power that the conventional practice of rhetoric provides is no good for us at all – structuring our lives around this pursuit would deprive us of what we hold “most dear” (φιλτάτοις, 513a6) – whereas the power that one acquires by engaging in philosophy, wisdom, is the only good we need.

¹⁸ The implication is clear from the last lines of the dialogue, though it is equally clear that Callicles is some way off from accepting it: see 527a5–8.

From this, it is tempting to infer that philosophical inquiry for Socrates must always be conducted through the back-and-forth of dialectic and the careful analysis of an interlocutor's views. Yet this does not follow. Refutation typically requires elenctic discussion, but before that Socrates must get his interlocutor's and his own views adequately on the table. For such inquiry, there is nothing that makes the form of a long speech unsuitable for Socrates's aims. In fact, we have seen how Socrates's use of the water-carriers myth proves more suitable than his characteristic method of cross-examination in getting Callicles to articulate his understanding of the good life and sharpen his sense of what human virtue is. Protracted rhetoric of the sort we see here and elsewhere in the *Gorgias* can serve the ends of philosophy just as well as dialectic. The question is how, at what stage, and for what purpose such speechmaking is deployed.

This use of speechmaking supports a distinction Socrates draws between two kinds of persuasion early in the dialogue with Gorgias. The first, employed for instance by an arithmetician, is the kind of persuasion that occurs through being taught (διδασκαλικῆς, 455a1, see also 453d7–e3); the second is the kind that occurs through being convinced (πιστευτικῆς, 455a1). This distinction plays a key role in Gorgias's efforts to define the nature of rhetoric (see esp. 458e6–a1) but once he affirms that a conventional rhetorician concerns himself only with producing conviction in an audience, the possibility of a kind of persuasion that has teaching or (as Socrates also puts it) learning (μάθησις, 454d2) or knowledge (ἐπιστήμη, 454e4; εἰδέναι, 454e4) as its aim is left undeveloped in the text and has not, as far as I am aware, received much attention by scholars.

My suggestion in this paper is that Socrates's use of long speechmaking in the *Gorgias* conforms to teaching-based persuasion rather than persuasion aimed at mere conviction. For we have found that he generally engages in speechmaking to clarify either the reasons he has for his own views or the reasons his interlocutors have for theirs. Notice that after he relates the water-carriers myth, Socrates openly expresses his interest in persuading Callicles about the disadvantages of a life committed to the endless satisfaction of one's desires: "When I say this," he asks Callicles, "do I at all persuade (πείθω) you to concede that the orderly life is better than the undisciplined one, or do I not?" (494a3–5). Callicles does not concede, but a consequence of the water-carriers myth is that it puts him in a better state to understand his own position. That is, the myth prompts Callicles

to consider *what it is he means* in identifying the happy life with the pleasant life, and thus what benefit he believes the practice of rhetoric confers in living well.

The import of this last point bears stressing. We saw in the previous section how Socrates admires Callicles's great speech for the sophistication of its thinking. A key result of the discussion that follows in the text – consisting of pieces of argument, speechifying, analogy, myth, and exhortation – is that it deepens Callicles's thinking, enabling him to form a sense of the internal workings of his own commitments. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Callicles thereby learns something about himself, to the extent that he reflects more carefully on his convictions about the good life. This is one example of the way Socrates's use of different rhetorical devices has a teaching function that benefits his interlocutors. A response to Callicles's speech that consisted only of a competing speech of Socrates's own would fail to accomplish such an excavation of Callicles's commitments.

Ultimately in the *Gorgias*, we learn that the life of rhetoric amounts to the life of a flatterer, equipping an aspiring politician with the power to satisfy his desires at the expense of others or to protect himself from the predations of others. Callicles concedes this point late in the text at 521b1–3. His speech at 482c–486d never makes explicit the notions of human excellence that motivate his promotion of the rhetorical life. It takes dialectic but also a considerable use of speechmaking for Socrates to draw out these unspoken features of Callicles's position. He does so by extracting from Callicles, first, the idea that virtue (ἀρετή) lies in “the filling up of desires (τὸ τὰς ἐπιθυμίας ἀποπιμπλάναι)” (503c5; see also 492c3–6, 492d5–e1) and, second, the idea that “preserving oneself and one's belongings (τὸ σῶζειν αὐτὸν καὶ τὰ ἑαυτοῦ ὄντα), no matter what sort of person one happens to be, is what virtue is (τοῦτ' ἐστὶν ἀρετή)” (512d3–4). Once these justifications for the life of rhetoric have been examined and rejected, Socrates at last has the space to promote the life of philosophy.¹⁹

If this is right, we can see how well Callicles acts as a “touchstone” for Socrates's commitment to philosophy and a test for how he has cared for his soul, in just the way Plato has us anticipate at

¹⁹ I argue for this reading of Socrates's final exchange with Callicles in Irani, “Socrates's Great Speech.”

the start of their exchange. Recall Socrates's opening remark to Callicles: "if this stone to which I intended to take my soul were the best stone and it agreed that my soul had been well cared for (καλῶς τεθεραπεῦσθαι), don't you think I could know well at that point that I'm in good shape and need no further test?" (486d5–7). While Callicles never comes around to agreeing about the value of philosophy, he does provide Socrates with the agreements necessary to test the strength of their opposing commitments.²⁰

So while Socrates eschews giving a speech that champions the philosophical life in the *Gorgias*, Plato encourages us to assemble the elements of that defense for ourselves from the stretches of conversation in the text where Socrates addresses Callicles's views and explicates his own. The use of rhetorical form figures in Socrates's engagement with his interlocutors only insofar as it promotes the goals of teaching and learning, and by adopting a "show rather than tell" strategy in conveying Socrates's defense of the philosophical life, Plato engages in the same kind of teaching-based persuasion with us.²¹ The result is a reading experience where we achieve a deeper understanding of Socrates's position, an understanding that would be impossible in the absence of a thorough accounting of Callicles's position. Yet as we have found, this does not require the use of a single form of discourse in the dialogue. Rather, Socrates employs a variety of rhetorical techniques and all of them qualify as an active engagement in philosophical inquiry, for him and for us.

²⁰ For discussion of Callicles's intransigence, see Dominic Scott, "Platonic Pessimism and Moral Education," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 17 (1999): 15–36; Raphael Woolf, "Callicles and Socrates: Psychic (Dis)harmony in the *Gorgias*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 18 (2000): 1–40; and Irani, *Value of Philosophy*, 101–5.

²¹ Similar claims about teaching and learning as the proper ends of speechmaking can be found in the *Phaedrus* at 277e6–9 and 278a2–5.

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