

AN INTRODUCTION TO PLATO'S ETHICS

Based on the dialogue *Gorgias*

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1. Plato and his philosophy

i. Plato's life and works

Plato was born into an aristocratic Athenian family in c. 428 B.C.E and died in Athens c. 348 at the age of c. 80. Apart from his *Seventh Letter*, in which he tells us about a particular part of his life (but some scholars argue the letter was not written by Plato or by someone sufficiently close to him or his time to know what they are claiming to report), we have little knowledge of Plato's life. What we have is some twenty-eight dialogues all of which, most scholars agree, are by Plato, ranging from short dialogues to very long ones. But in none of these dialogues does Plato choose to include himself, as a character or an authorial voice; though he does include some of his family members, such as his brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus, as characters in the dialogue, *Republic*.

If there is one thing about Plato's life that we can be sure of from his dialogues, it is that Socrates had an immense influence on his life and thought. Since Plato is one of the two sources we have of Socrates life and thought (the other source is Xenophon), we have, especially when studying Plato's philosophy, to rely on the way Plato represents Socrates, his life and thought; a representation which, while based in the historical Socrates, appears to be considerably creative and free. Plato was in his late twenties when Socrates was executed in Athens on the charge of corrupting the young and not believing in the gods recognized by the city (399 B.C.E). Plato dedicates three whole dialogues to the circumstances surrounding Socrates' charge, trial and execution (*Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo*). They include a remarkable account, the dialogue *Phaedo*, of how Socrates spent his last day in prison with a group of friends, discussing with them the question whether death is something to be feared if one has tried to live a good life, and whether, if one has tried to live a good life, one may hope of some sort of existence beyond death. The dialogue ends with a powerful and moving account of how, on that day, Socrates drank the poison offered to him by the official executioner and passed away in front of his friends. But Plato says that he was not present on that day, due to illness.

We can also be certain that the social and political circumstances in Athens during Plato's early life and formative years had a very significant influence on his life and thought. A few years before his birth (431 B.C.E), Athens became caught up in a lengthy and thoroughly destructive and self-destructive war with the city of Sparta, with several other cities as allies on each side. Athens was eventually defeated (in 404), when Plato was in his mid-twenties, and the aftermath of this defeat included a period of unrest when Athenian democracy was replaced for a while by tyrannical rule. Plato's opposition to war is expressed vocally in his dialogues (especially the *Republic*), and he offers a penetrating diagnosis and critique of the political mindset, especially the pursuit of expansive political power and the associated imperialism, that, he argues, leads to such war. There can be no doubt that Plato's experience of the war, its aftermath, and the trial and execution of Socrates, made him highly sceptical of the politics of the real world—both democracy and tyranny (in the *Republic* he characterizes tyranny as the worst kind of political rule, democracy as the second worst)—and contributed to forming his distinctive view that there is no hope in politics unless politicians and political rulers become reformed as human beings. One of his principal thoughts is that only philosophy, the search for wisdom, understood in a certain distinctive way, can reform human beings, a reform that, he argues, is necessarily both for each of us, privately and personally, and for all of us, publicly, socially, politically and indeed in our relation to nature and the environment.

ii. Plato's philosophy

The word '*philosophia*' means 'the desire/love for knowledge/wisdom', and Plato may have coined the word; or the word may, rather, go back to Heraclitus a century earlier. Today we think of philosophy as an academic discipline taught by teachers of the subject, and we take it for granted that this discipline divides into several sub-disciplines, which may be more or may be less inter-connected, such as: epistemology (theory of knowledge), metaphysics (theory of what there is and what the most basic things are), logic (theory of how to think), ethics (theory of how to live), political philosophy, etc. But it is important to ask what Plato understands *philosophia* to be, and why he thinks it is important to engage in it; and to recognize that Plato did not divide philosophy into sub-disciplines, and that to approach his thinking through such divisions may be misleading and distorting.

Perhaps the most important thing about Plato's philosophy is that it is conducted through dialogue: Plato's philosophical writings are the written representations of live dialogues. Socrates, who Plato represents as central in his, Plato's, way of conducting philosophy, conducted his thinking entirely through live dialogue and did not put anything in writing. At the end of the dialogue, *Phaedrus*, Plato argues that live dialogue is far superior to the written word; at any rate when it comes to searching for wisdom and the things that it is most important for us to search for.

Why does Plato conduct philosophy through dialogue? And what is the philosophical, as opposed to the literary, significance of this? For Plato, philosophy is a form of enquiry, enquiry in search for the answer to certain distinctive questions. It is true, there are all kinds of enquiries in search for the answer to all kinds of distinctive questions, which do not belong to philosophy; such as the enquiry in response to the question ‘What is a good way of designing trekking boots? Or social housing?’ Distinctive of such enquiries is that there are experts about such questions, people who know how to answer them, or at any rate know this much better than most; such as shoe designers or architects. But in regard to philosophical questions, Plato thinks, this is not so; rather, we are all more or less in the dark about how to answer the questions we are drawn to asking. There are, therefore, no teachers of philosophy; if a teacher is understood as one who already knows, an expert. Rather, the best we can do is search for ourselves, or together and in a small group, in response to a philosophical question. Plato presents Socrates as such an unusual teacher: one who does not know, or thinks he knows, more than his students, except that he has the ability to help others to search, for themselves and together with him, in response to the questions that he helps them to recognize, articulate and take up.

It may not be that Plato’s chosen medium of philosophical enquiry—the philosophical dialogue—is the only way of conducting such radical enquiry; but it is, it appears, a well suited and even ideal way. For, just as Socrates is presented, not as one who already knows, but as as who searches together with others, so Plato intends the reader to take an active part in the dialogue, the dialogue presented in a particular Platonic dialogue, and to use this as an occasion to search for himself or herself.

What are the distinctive questions that set off the extended enquires, and the many arguments that make up these enquiries, in Plato’s dialogues? (We shall say more about the notion of an argument, below, in Chapter 2, section i.) These distinctive questions come in two different forms: there are questions of the form *whether ... or ...*; and there are questions of the form ‘What is ...?’ Examples of *whether ... or ...* questions include (all from the *Gorgias*):

whether power and being powerful is a good thing; whether being powerful is doing what one wants; whether doing what one wants is doing what one thinks is best; whether it is possible to be mistaken about what one wants; whether it is better to suffer injustice and harm or to commit injustice and inflict harm on others; whether it is good to escape punishment if one has committed an injustice; whether pleasure is good.

Plato thinks that such *whether ... or ...* questions can be so radical and difficult to answer, and even properly to search for an answer to, that related ‘What is ...?’ questions need to be

asked, and enquired into, in order to answer these original questions and indeed to search for an answer to them. Examples of such 'What is ...?' questions include (from *Gorgias* and *Philebus*, also the *Republic*):

'What is to have power and be powerful?'; 'What is it to do what one wants?'; 'What is pleasure?'; 'What is the good?'; 'What is justice?'

Most of the questions just mentioned are what we could call ethical questions, and it is such questions we shall concentrate on here, based on the dialogues *Gorgias* and *Philebus*. But a similar form of enquiry can be conducted in regard to other questions; such as (from the *Philebus*): *whether the world we inhabit is due to reason and intelligence or due to chance.*

As we have seen, Plato thinks that philosophy and philosophical enquiry begins with certain radical *whether ... or ... questions*; and he argues that, if we want to make good progress in such enquiry and do our best to answer the original question, we need to ask related 'What is ...?' questions. This, in short, is Plato's method of philosophy and philosophical enquiry. We can learn to practice this method by looking to Plato's questions (as in the examples just given) or through questions of our own. For example, we today may find ourselves wanting to ask: *whether the aim of production is to make the greatest possible financial profit.* To take up this question properly, if we follow Plato's method, we will need to ask: What is productive action? We may, then, find that the aim of production is not to make the greatest possible financial profit, but rather, to make the best possible product. (This, indeed, is what Plato argues in book 1 of the *Republic*, when he argues against the profit economy.)

Plato is famous for having put forward the theory of Forms: the view that there are certain things, Forms, that cannot be perceived by the senses and that, unlike the things we perceive by the senses, are changeless; and that the things we perceive by the senses depend, for their existing and for their being what they are, on these Forms. This theory is familiar especially from such dialogues as *Phaedo* and *Republic*.

To understand this theory at all, it seems to us, one needs to ask how it is related to philosophical enquiry as Plato understands it. The relation, it seems to us, is this. Plato thinks that to answer certain most important and pressing questions, which we typically articulate as *whether ... or ... questions*, we need to take up certain question of the form 'What is ...?' What such questions ask for is, evidently, what something is; its 'essence', in the sense of 'essence' meaning *what something is*.

Plato argues that we cannot properly answer such 'What is ...?' questions by pointing to something conspicuous to the senses. In the dialogue, *Hippias Major*, for example, he argues that the question 'What is beauty?' cannot be properly answered by pointing to, say, a

particular girl, or horse, or musical instrument, of exemplary beauty. Rather, we need to search, in words and through reasoning and argument, for an answer to such questions. This is the kind of search that Plato exhibits in many dialogues, through exhibiting, typically, Socrates searching together with another for an answer to a particular ‘What is ...?’ question.

The Platonic Forms are what we would find, if we found the answer to a *ti esti* question. Such Forms cannot be perceived by the senses, because, Plato argues, we cannot know the answer to such ‘What is ...?’ questions simply by pointing to something conspicuous. And the Forms are changeless, because they are essences, in the sense of what something is; and what something is cannot change, or it would not be that essence, the essence of that thing.

The reason why the ‘What is ...?’ question, and the notions of essences and Forms, are so important for Plato is that, as he argues, only by knowing what a thing or quality, F, is do we have a reliable standard (*paradeigma*) for determining of a thing whether or not it exhibits that quality, F. For example, only by knowing what beauty is can we tell of a thing whether it is such as to be beautiful; or, only by knowing what power is can we tell of a person whether he or she is such as to be beautiful. Plato sets this view against the view of such people as Hippias (in the dialogue *Hippias Major*), who he intends to represent common opinion and what we are all inclined to think and to consider obvious. For they think that we know what beauty is, or what power is, etc., and so we are in possession of an adequate standard of beauty, of power, etc., simply by being acquainted through the senses with things that are beautiful or powerful, and that can, immediately and without effort or any substantial search, be recognized as beautiful or powerful. Against this view, Plato argues that knowing such standards—of beauty, of power, etc.—requires difficult and demanding intellectual search, the kind of searches that Socrates typically undertakes in many of Plato’s dialogues.

iii. Plato’s ethics, and the place in it of the idea of happiness and well-being

Plato does not distinguish philosophical questions into ethical questions and other questions. Rather, he thinks that all philosophical questions are occupied with the matters that are most important to us humans—*ta megista*, or ‘the greatest and most important matters’. Such matters include ethical questions, questions about the life worth living; but they also include other matters, such as the nature of the world we inhabit; and Plato does not think there is a sharp distinction between the two.

We shall not attempt a summary of Plato’s ethics here, since this is better attempted through a study of a particular dialogue; such as the present study of *Gorgias* and *Philebus*. There is, however, one core element in Plato’s ethics which is anticipated in the *Gorgias* but

not defended until the *Republic*. In *Republic*, and also in *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, Plato argues that there is no essential conflict between the self-regarding good and the other-regarding good; rather, the two goods are essentially reconcilable and make up a unity—they are only different perspectives on the same good. The impression, in our current condition, that there is a conflict between these two goods—one's own good and the good of another—is, Plato thinks, the result of corruption and of false orientation and way of thinking.

How will Plato defend this view, in these dialogues after the *Gorgias*? This is a very big question, but let us point to three principal elements in Plato's argument for this core view.

First, Plato defends (in the *Republic*) a distinctive account of why the self-regarding good tends, as we know very well from both personal and political experience, to conflict with the other-regarding good. He argues that such conflict is typically due to our having unrestrained desires, desires which, therefore, we typically can satisfy only at the expense of others. And he argues that having unrestrained desires is not good for one, in any case.

Secondly, he argues (in the *Republic*) that we are not self-sufficient beings, as individuals; on the contrary, we rely, even for the simplest tasks and the necessities of life, on joint-activities: activities that essentially involve several people and, indeed, a community. For example, even to farm some land, we need some people to make tools, and being good at this; others to cultivate the land, and being good at this; yet others to transport the goods to a market, and being good at this; etc. So, for a single activity (to farm some land), a whole collaborative community, and an economy, is needed.

Finally, he argues (in *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*) that human beings are by nature drawn to each other and to engaging in collaborative, shared, joint activities. The force that draws us together is, above all, love (*erōs*). This force, *erōs*, takes many forms. The most familiar form of *erōs* is sexual union and the conception and raising of children; hence a family structure. Other forms include all kinds of joint creative activity, such as artistic creation. Even the activity of jointly searching for truth and wisdom Plato conceives, at its best, as a manifestation of *erōs*.

In a complex variety of ways, therefore, Plato argues that a core cause of the conflict between the self-regarding and the other-regarding good is a cause that is ultimately destructive of both the other-regarding and the self-regarding good. This implies that, if we can aim at the good at all, we must do so in way that tries to overcome the conflict between the self-regarding and the other-regarding good: a way that tries to reconcile and unify the two. For Plato—as later for Rousseau—this is the natural state; whereas our actual state, dominated as it is by the conflict between the self-regarding and the other-regarding good, is unnatural and the result of corruption and a false orientation and ways of thinking.

Let us, finally, say a word, also by way of caution, regarding the place of the notions of *happiness* and *well-being* in Plato's ethics. When, some decades ago, ethicists and moral philosophers, especially in the tradition of analytic philosophy, became tired of the interminable debate between deontological ethics, the ethics based on the idea of duty and reason, and associated with Kant, and consequentialist or utilitarian ethics, the empirical ethics based on the idea of the greatest happiness of the greatest number, and associated with Mill, they turned to Aristotle, his idea virtue, and especially his idea of happiness and well-being. Aristotle's view, as it was commonly understood, was that the life worth living for a human being is the happy life. This is the view commonly referred to as *eudaimonism* (from the Greek term '*eudaimonia*', meaning happiness or well being).

It is, we think, correct to say that, since this tendency in modern moral philosophy and ethics, and in large part due to it, Plato's ethics has stood in the shadow of Aristotle's; and Plato's ethics has commonly been approached on the assumption that it is a form of eudaimonism. But it is, it seems to us, better not to approach Plato's ethics on this assumption. To be sure, the idea is present in Plato that the life worth living for a human being is a happy life; and that all humans desire to be happy. But it is questionable whether the idea can be found in Plato that the good life for a human being is the same as the happy life for a human being; or, that to live well for a human is to live a happy life; or, that anything that is good in a human life is good because it leads to, or constitutes, the happiness of the human being whose life it is—views commonly associated with eudaimonism.

Eudaimonism, as it is commonly understood today, and as associated with Aristotle's ethics, is the view which says that what explains why something in a human life is good is that it leads to, or constitutes, a happy life for that human being. On this view, evidently, there is a priority of the self-regarding good over the other-regarding good. For eudaimonism implies that, if we want to show that one has a reason to care for the good of another, we need to show this by showing that caring for the good of another leads to, or constitutes, one's own happiness. But, as we briefly argued above, it is questionable that Plato is committed to this view; it seems, rather, that he wants to subsume the self-regarding and the other-regarding good under a single, unitary good, which includes both these human goods, seen from these two perspectives, and indeed the good of any other living being, including nature as a whole.

Furthermore, a thinker committed to eudaemonism may well argue that one's caring for the good of another is part of one's own good, because it is part of one's own happiness. But he or she is unlikely to argue that we suffer irreparable and irredeemable damage to ourselves if we care only for ourselves—the kind of damage that Dante describes in the third Canto of *Inferno* and Plato describes in the myth at the end of the *Gorgias*.

It is a good question why Plato is committed to this idea: that, through having a misconception of its own good, the human soul can suffer irreparable and irredeemable damage—it is not a question we shall attempt to answer here. The Platonic dialogues most relevant for considering that question are, arguably, *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, in which Plato examines the nature of love (*erōs*) and concludes that all virtue is false unless it is based on love; a love that he describes as having a divine source. In the *Phaedrus*, remarkably, he argues that even the most rational human life cannot lead to true virtue, unless reason is informed by love.

2. What does a man want? (*Gorgias*)

i. Introducing the *Gorgias*

In the *Gorgias* Plato sets Socrates against three intellectuals, Gorgias, Polus and Callicles. Socrates radically challenges their ideals, what they desire and consider worth desiring; but they in turn, and Callicles especially, present a powerful challenge to Socrates' ideal and what he thinks is good and desirable. What Plato presents in this dialogue is a radical opposition and clash—like a primitive and original battle—between two very different and apparently antithetical ways of living, and their associated ideals and ideas; even, at any rate in the case of the three intellectuals, the associated ideologies.

For we ought to note that, as Plato presents these apparently opposed ways of living, they are informed and sustained by a comprehensive view of the life worth living—the beautiful and noble and admirable life—and, no less, of the life that is worthless and miserable and ugly and pitiable. In the case of the three intellectuals, we think it is proper to characterize this comprehensive view as an ideology, for they hold it in a distinctively dogmatic way, as if it were something obvious to all right-thinking people; and they are inclined to laugh at, deride and pour scorn on the alternative proposed by Socrates.

When we hear, in Plato's dialogue, of this clash of ways of living, and clash of the contradictory world views that inform and sustain them, it is important that we should not assume that Plato is, simply and from the start, taking the side of Socrates, or that he thinks there is some obvious mistake on the side of the three intellectuals. We shall see that, on the contrary, Plato presents a powerful case on their side; he makes them speak vigorously and, at least up to a point, persuasively. A reader may even wonder whether, in this dialogue, Socrates is presented as any more convincing; as having, by the end of the

dialogue and the succession of the many arguments in it, succeeded in refuting their comprehensive view and in having made us, the readers, believe rather in his, very different, view: believe that it is the true view and, no less, the view we want to live by.

We suggest, therefore, that we think of the drama played out in this dialogue as involving not two, but three parties. The two obvious parties are Socrates and, set against him, the three intellectuals, Gorgias, Polus and Callicles. But there is a third party, which Plato intends to be no less part of the drama, and this is the reader himself or herself. For it appears that Plato intends the arguments of both parties in the dialogue to have a genuine attraction and pull on the reader. Plato does this with the purpose of challenging the reader to make up his or her own mind; but not to do this, before having felt and experienced the full force of each side, and thus felt and experienced within himself or herself the extreme and radical tension between the two comprehensive views of the life worth living.

Who are these three intellectuals, Gorgias, Polus and Callicles? (We have said something about Socrates, in the Introduction.) Or rather, who are they presented as being, in the dialogue? It is most important to recognize that Gorgias is, and is presented as being, an orator and expert in rhetoric; that is, someone who is extremely good at speaking, and, in particular, speaking to a crowd, and equally good at teaching others this apparently impressive and admirable skill. Indeed, the whole dialogue is occupied with the idea of rhetoric, what this skill is and why it is so attractive. Plato goes out of his way to point out that Gorgias has no other particular skill, art or distinctive ability, except this, to be an expert orator and teacher of rhetoric. He points out that Gorgias does not, and does not intend or want to, base his ability to speak well, and to instruct others in speaking well, on any other distinctive skill or expertise. He is, in this respect, presented as being in an important way different from, say, a doctor or a mathematician. For they, too, are good at speaking and at teaching others to speak; but they, unlike the rhetorician, base their ability to speak well and to teach others to speak well, on some other distinctive skill and expertise they possess, such as medicine or mathematics.

Plato tells us, in this way, who Gorgias, Polus and Callicles are supposed to be: they are supposed to be spokespersons of the common man, and what the common man listens to and is attentive to. For what does the crowd represent, that is, the kind of crowd that listens to and expects to take advice and guidance from an orator (rhetorician), and an orator that does not intend or presume to rely on any particular skill or expertise other than the ability to speak well, except the common man. As so understood, the common man is not a particular group of people, such as the ignorant or the uneducated. On the contrary, it is any one of us, in so far as we think that we need advice and guidance; and that we need advice and guidance over and beyond any professional skill and specialized intelligence we may possess, such as medicine or mathematics, or any particular need we may have, such as a health problem or a financial difficulty; and that the advice and guidance we need is

available to us, and desirable for us, not only or especially as individuals—and hence as potentially extra-ordinary people, people who stand out from the crowd—but as indiscriminate members of a crowd, and the kind of crowd addressed by and attentive to orators and politicians. The crowd, so understood, is each one of us in so far as we understand ourselves as typical and unexceptional in what we want and desire; even if each of us may, at the same time, think that we are exceptional and able to distinguish ourselves and stand out from others and from the crowd in how successful we are at getting for ourselves what we, like everyone, want and desire.

We may think of this dialogue, the *Gorgias*, as a contest of arguments between spokespersons for two ways of living. But if we think of it in this way, we must make sure to understand the idea of an argument (*logos*, in Greek; from *legein*, to speak, to say something) in a broad way and in such a way that an argument signifies something that people do: an argument is an attempt, made by a person, to show something to another person, or group of people, in and through the use of words. If we understand an argument in this way, it is evident that orators, such as Gorgias, Polus and Callicles, are skilled in and naturally at home in the use of arguments; and so too, we shall see, is Socrates.

We ought to note that, whereas the three orators think of arguments as directed at a large group of people, a crowd, with the obvious aim of persuading them of something, Socrates sets himself against this way of using arguments, when he says that he intends his arguments to be directed above all at a single person. Socrates does not want to use arguments the way orators do, and he appropriates for himself a deliberately different way of using arguments. For him, an argument is the means used by two, or a small group of, people, with the aim of looking for and trying to find, jointly and together, the answer to a question; such as, as perhaps the most important question in the dialogue: ‘What does a man want?’

Remarkably, Socrates says that he does not himself know the answer to the questions that, as he sees it, they are enquiring into and trying to answer. Rather, he sees arguments as a means of searching for something not yet known to us and something it may be very difficult to find, if we can find it at all; indeed, something about which we may be in the dark. In the course of this kind of searching-through-argument, especially between two or three people searching together, which he has made his own, Socrates sees himself as having discovered that many of the things that people think they know, about things that matter most to them, they do not know at all, even to the extent of being in the dark about them. This is a very different attitude towards arguments and their aim than that of the three orators. For they are confident that they already know, and know perfectly well, that which they intend, through argument, to persuade others about.

One might object to Plato's whole approach here: Why should we trust Plato that it may be possible to resolve by reasoning such radical disagreements about the life worth living? Indeed, how can there be a standpoint from which such disagreements can be rationally resolved? For surely, we cannot suppose that Plato is in possession of such a privileged standpoint! This is a common objection to Plato's ethics, especially among pluralists and liberalists, such as Isaiah Berlin or John Rawls.

It is remarkable that, in the *Gorgias*, Plato gives a clear answer to this question. For, at a crucial juncture in the argument with Polus, Socrates says that it is Polus who has refuted himself. What this means is that Socrates sees his argument as being based, not on some a standpoint available only to Plato and Platonists—which would indeed be questionable and hard to believe in—but on something that Polus, and the common man that he represents, himself believes. Indeed, when Socrates later says that he does not already know the answers to the important questions whose answer they are searching for, he directly implies that he does not have a standpoint of privileged knowledge from which to refute the three intellectuals and the common man they represent. What this shows is that Socrates intends his arguments against the common man to overturn the view of the common man by relying on elements in that view. Socrates' critique is, in this sense, an 'internal' critique, also sometimes called a 'dialectical' critique and 'dialectical' argument; not an 'external' or 'dogmatic' critique. We shall have to see how this is worked out from argument to argument.

ii. Socrates' discussion with Gorgias

Let us turn to the arguments between Socrates and the three intellectuals, Gorgias, Polus and Callicles. For this dialogue is, in large part, composed of an extended series of such arguments, between the common man, represented by the three intellectuals, and Socrates. It is important to proceed the way the dialogue does: first Socrates' discussion with Gorgias; then with Polus; finally with Callicles. For what Polus and Callicles do is build on Gorgias' view, that being powerful is supremely good, but in such a way as to make this view, as they think, irrefutable. They do this by turning it into the view that being powerful is what good is (i.e. they answer the question 'What is good?', as 'Good is: being powerful'); and by arguing that to be powerful is: to be able to do what seems to one good and best.

Gorgias is satisfied that the expertise he has mastered and is able to teach others, rhetoric, is an immensely attractive and desirable skill to possess, indeed that rhetoric is occupied with 'the greatest and most important things' for us humans. It is a good question why he is satisfied about this. Clearly, he is a very successful rhetorician and teacher of rhetoric, who is earning a very good living through this profession. Part of the reason for his self-satisfaction, it appears, is that he is selling a service and commodity that others are willing

to buy and to pay well for. This suggests that, when Socrates challenges him to say what rhetoric is and why it is so attractive, he is challenging the idea that selling something that others want to buy is by itself something admirable, irrespective of the question of what the service or commodity is and why it is desired by those who desire it. For, as we shall see in Socrates' argument with Polus, Socrates argues that people desire all kinds of things, and do so under the impression that these things are good for them, when many of these things may not be any good for them; and that, if they knew what things are not good for them, they would not desire them at all. We might even say that this is Socrates' challenge, his argument, against consumerism and the consumerist mindset.

But Gorgias' self-satisfaction is based on more than his commercial success. For he thinks that the particular service he provides, which is the ability to speak well, and to speak well to a crowd, is, and is recognized by all as being, occupied with 'the greatest and most important things' for us humans. If one is an expert in something, and if what one is an expert in is, and is recognized by all as being, among the greatest and most important things for us humans, then, evidently, one has good reason to think that one's life is, and is recognized by all as being, a success; a success not only in commercial and financial terms—though all the better if one can make good money based on it—but a success in every way, including social status and prestige, even in the most pure and absolute ways we can imagine: a good life.

Socrates challenges Gorgias to say why he thinks that rhetoric is occupied with 'the greatest and most important things' for us humans, and Gorgias gives what appears to be a perfectly good answer: to be able to speak well and to persuade others is to be powerful and to have power (*dunamis*); and he who is able to speak well and to persuade a crowd is especially powerful. Clearly, Gorgias thinks that being powerful is among the greatest and most important things for us humans; perhaps even *the* greatest and most important. This reveals a major prejudice of the common man: that power and being powerful is good and desirable, even supremely good and desirable. When we say 'prejudice', we don't mean that this view is, or is presented by Plato as being, wrong. Indeed, we shall see that Socrates accepts the view that it is good to be powerful; and he uses it against the three intellectuals. This is just as we would expect, having noted that Socrates intends his arguments to rely on views held by those whose views he is trying to overturn. We mean that, as held by the common man, the view that it is supremely good and desirable to be powerful is taken to provide a standard (*paradeigma*) for successful living, and a standard for successful living that is easy to use and apply successfully. For Socrates, on the other hand (as we shall see in a moment and when we consider his argument with Polus), the same view, that being powerful is supremely good and desirable, shows, when properly thought through and put to the test, how extremely difficult it is to find a standard for good and successful living, and how very useless the appeal to the supreme goodness of power is for our having such a standard.

Socrates does this in the following way. On his prompting, Gorgias acknowledges that, unlike the doctor and the mathematician, who are also able to speak well, to persuade others, and to teach others, but who have this ability on the basis of some particular knowledge other than the ability to speak well—the knowledge of medicine or of mathematics—the rhetorician does not intend to base his ability to speak well, to persuade others, and to teach others, on any other knowledge. Why does acknowledging this present a problem for Gorgias and his high regard for the skill of rhetoric? Clearly, one problem it presents for Gorgias is due to Gorgias' supposing, entirely naturally and plausibly, that what is admirable about being a good rhetorician is that a good rhetorician, unlike a bad rhetorician or even one who is useless at speaking well, has mastered well a particular skill and expertise, and skill and expertise that it is difficult to master and to master well. But if rhetoric is not based on the mastery of some knowledge, how can it be something that it is difficult to master and to master well? Obviously, no one would be paying him good money to be instructed by him, if rhetoric were not a difficult expertise involving some demanding knowledge that only few people master.

Gorgias cannot very well ignore this question, and in the end, and somewhat reluctantly and even shamefully, he does come up with an answer: What the rhetorician knows is what the crowd—the common man—wants and what appears good and desirable to the common man. Gorgias admits that it is this knowledge, if anything, that enables the rhetorician to speak well to and to persuade the crowd, and to do this without having any specialized knowledge such as the knowledge of medicine or of mathematics or even of shoemaking and in general how to produce everyday necessities.

But why is it a problem for Gorgias that he should admit this? And why does he admit it only with some reluctance and even a sense of shame? Originally, Gorgias saw rhetoric as a skill that enables the rhetorician to guide and to lead others, even to master others and make them do what he, the rhetorician, wants. And he saw rhetoric as occupied with 'the greatest and most important things' for us humans. If the rhetorician has the skill and authority to guide and to lead others, it is only proper to think that he must be occupied with 'the greatest and most important things' for us humans. But, if it is admitted that the knowledge on which the rhetorician's skill is based is, purely and simply, the knowledge of what the common man wants and what appears desirable to the common man, it appears that the worth of rhetoric has been seriously lessened. Rhetoric now appears as a slavish skill, and the rhetorician as the servant of the crowd and its prejudices and whims. It is understandable, therefore, that Gorgias should be ashamed of admitting this: because he is admitting something that appears shameful to him, namely, that rhetoric should be a slavish skill; and because he is ashamed of having, apparently, contradicted his original view, namely, that rhetorical is a noble and admirable skill.

Furthermore, originally Gorgias thought that rhetoric is occupied not only with what is believed by the crowd and the common man to be 'the greatest and most important things' for us humans, but also with these very things: what is most important for us humans. Gorgias is proud of his social status and the esteem in which he is held and the privileges this affords him; but he is also convinced that this is a status and position he deserves and is worthy of, and worthy of because he is occupied with things that are supremely important and worthy. But now, by admitting that the knowledge on which his skill is based is, quite simply, the knowledge of what the common man wants and what appears desirable to the common man, he appears to have taken a huge step down: from being a minister of what is most important to us humans, to being a servant to the crowd and the common man and whatever it is that appears most important to the crowd and the common man. Again, Gorgias reacts to this admission with a sense of shame: because he is admitting that all he knows, and all he needs to know to be a successful rhetorician, is what appears important to the crowd and the common man; and because he is ashamed of having, apparently, contradicted his original view, namely, that rhetoric is occupied with what is most important for us humans, not merely what appears so to the crowd or the common man.

Socrates has one more argument against Gorgias. Gorgias thinks that rhetoric is occupied with 'the greatest and most important things' for us humans. On Socrates' prompting, he acknowledges that if something, X, is among the greatest and most important things for us humans, then this thing, X, must be good; it cannot be something that may be just as much bad as it may be good. But, now that Gorgias has admitted that the knowledge on which his skill is based is the knowledge of what the common man wants and what appears desirable to the common man, he appears to have no basis for thinking that rhetoric is occupied with 'the greatest and most important things' for us humans. For it seems obvious that this knowledge, that is, the knowledge of what the common man wants and what appears desirable to the common man, may be just as much bad as it may be good; whether it is good or bad will depend not on the knowledge and what is known by the rhetorician, but on how the possessor of the knowledge, the rhetorician, is willing, or is able, to use it: for good or for bad. So it appears that Gorgias no longer has a basis for thinking that it is distinctive of the rhetorician to be a good man. For he cannot accept that the power of the rhetorician is like the power of the boxer, who can use his ability to box well, and the power this affords him, just as much to beat up his parents as to protect them. Again, it is with a sense of shame that Gorgias admits that he no longer has a basis for thinking that it is distinctive of the rhetorician to be a good man: because it is his sincere view that it is distinctive of the rhetorician to be a good man; and because he is ashamed of having lost the reasoned basis—if he ever had it—for his original view, namely, that the rhetorician, and he himself in so far as he is a rhetorician, is a good man.

It is hard to sum up Socrates' argument with Gorgias; and perhaps it is not necessary to do so, because a summary emerges in Socrates' discussion with Polus. But here is an attempt at

a summary. Gorgias thinks that rhetoric, the ability to speak well and to persuade others, especially in crowds, is an immensely attractive and desirable skill to possess. He thinks this for two reasons. First, because he thinks that this skill gives its possessor immense power. Secondly, because this skill is occupied with the greatest and most important matters for us humans. After all, when orators and politicians speak to a crowd, they use the language of what is good, just, beneficial, noble—we may compare today’s politicians and, especially, the media-spokespersons they use. But Gorgias does not take the step that Polus and Callicles take in what follows: to claim that the single most important thing for each of us humans just is, purely and simply to have power and be powerful. Why does he not take this step? Apparently, because he thinks this view is too extreme. Why does he think it is too extreme? For two reasons, it appears. First, because he recognizes that having power need not be based on what is good, just, noble, it need only be based on what the crowd thinks is good, just, noble; and he thinks it would be slavish and ignoble just to rely on what the crowd thinks. Secondly, because he recognizes that political power can be used in all kinds of ways, including opposite ways; therefore, if it can be used for good, it can also be used for ill.

As we shall see, Polus and Callicles think Gorgias could have avoided these difficulties, simply by equating the good with power. They, Polus and Callicles, are happy to depend, for their power, simply on knowing what the crowd wants; and they are happy to use power any way they like and think best.

iii. Socrates’ discussion with Polus

Polus now takes over the discussion and dialogue with Socrates. Polus is certain that, if Gorgias has allowed himself to be refuted by Socrates, it is his fault rather than the fault of the view Socrates wants to refute. This, Polus takes it, is the view that power is supremely good for the one who has it. Apparently, Polus thinks Gorgias would have avoided being refuted, if only he had stuck to the view that power is the supreme good for the one who has it, and that power, and power alone, is the greatest and most important thing for us humans. Gorgias, Polus thinks, is at fault for having combined this view, which he, Polus, thinks is irrefutable, with certain other views; in particular the view that the powerful man is also a good man, according to a standard of goodness over and above being powerful; or the view that the good man is occupied with the greatest and most important things for us humans, and not merely with what people, oneself included, take to be such things. In Polus’ mind, had Gorgias simply set aside such views, views that Polus is ready to deride and that Callicles will, later in the dialogue, deride as being based on nothing more than tradition and convention, Socrates would never have been able to refute the view that power is supremely good for the one who has it.

We should note how Socrates reacts to the challenge presented by Polus. Socrates does not try to hold on to any of the views that, as Polus thinks, allowed him to refute Gorgias and the view under examination (that power is supremely good for the one who has it). He is happy to let these views be for the moment, for the sake of engaging, no longer with Gorgias and his mindset, but with Polus and his mindset. Even more remarkably, Socrates does not contradict Polus' claim that power is supremely good for the one who has it. Rather, he asks Polus to tell him what power is and what he takes it to be. The expectation, and the climax to which Plato is building up, is that Polus will not be able to give an account of what power is in such a way that, on that account, power is necessarily good for the one who has it. For it will emerge that, on any account of power that Polus is able to give, and in which he himself believes, it will turn out that power and being powerful may just as much turn out bad for the one who has it as it may turn out good for the one who has it.

In response to Socrates' question, 'What is power?', Polus responds that everyone knows what power is: it is to be able to do what you want. Clearly, Polus thinks that being able to do what one wants is a good thing, even a supremely good thing. Again, it is remarkable that Socrates does not contradict Polus' view, that being able to do what one wants is a good thing, even a supremely good thing. Indeed, it appears that he is happy to share this view. It is most important that we should observe this, for it shows that it is quite wrong to think that Plato's aim here is to show that we should not desire to do what we want, rather, we should desire to do what is good for us; that is, it is quite wrong to think that Plato's aim here is to set what we desire against what is good. We may even say that, on the contrary, Plato is happy to accept that what is good and what we desire are one and the same thing.

Had Plato simply denied that to be able to do what one wants is good, even supremely good, we would naturally have been inclined to object, and object, in particular, in the name of freedom and autonomy and integrity. For it is hard to deny that if a person is not able to do what he or she wants, then this person is, in a bad sense, unfree; and that, if a person is able to do what he or she wants, then this person is, in a good sense, a person of autonomy or integrity. To prevent a person from doing what he or she wants, is to harm him or her; it is to harm his or her freedom and integrity, in the sense of his or her ability to act out what he or she want, indeed what he or she is. For what we want distinguishes us as the one we are.

Socrates keeps pressing the question 'What is it?' He now asks, 'What is it that we want?' For, if Polus thinks being powerful is supremely good, and if he thinks being powerful is being able to do what one wants, he must take himself to know what it is that we want. Otherwise, if he did not take himself to know this, he could not set up power, and doing what one wants, as the standard of how to live to live a life worth living; that is, he could not use these apparent insights as a compass by which to direct his life. He would have to take up a more sceptical attitude and, like Socrates, content himself with setting out to search

for what it is that one wants, and to search for this as something it may be difficult to find and even something we may be in the dark about. But Polus, like the common man that he represents, cannot accept that we may be without a compass in life; that we may be in serious need for guidance, assistance, advice, orientation.

Polus is confident that he knows what it is that we want: he says, and he takes it to be obvious, that what we all want is to be able to do whatever we think is best. This is a most important juncture of the dialogue. For here, even the common man, as represented by Polus, is presented by Plato as supposing that, for us humans at any rate, desire is always associated with thought: we humans don't simply desire things, in a blind and thoughtless way; we desire things that we think are worth having, and, when we choose among several such things, we desire things that we think are most worth having. Polus is happy to suppose this; and he thinks his supposing this is consonant with his thinking that he knows perfectly well what it is that we want. Indeed, it may well seem that the two views—that desiring something involves thinking it is good or best; and that we all know, without any difficulty or problem, what we desire and want—are compatible, coherent and consonant. For it may well seem that we all know, without any difficulty or problem, what we think is good or best.

This is, it seems to us, the crux of the dialogue. For Socrates argues, most strikingly, that we do not even know, not without much difficulty and many problems, what we think is good or best; *and that this* (that we do not even know what we think is good or best) *is also Polus view*. Socrates asks Polus whether it is possible that one is mistaken in thinking that something is good or best, without knowing that one is mistaken; and Polus responds that this is possible. Socrates then goes on to argue that, if what one wants is what one thinks is good or best, and if one can be mistaken in thinking that something is good or best, but without knowing that one is mistaken, then one can be mistaken about what one wants; which means that we may not even know what we want.

For understanding this argument, it is crucial to observe that what Socrates is saying is not only that we do not know what is good or best. If this were all that he were saying, Polus could have replied, quite simply, that the best we can do, for living a life worth living, is basing our life on what we think is good and best. But Socrates is saying that, if (as Polus grants), we can be mistaken in thinking that something is good or best, then we can be mistaken even about what we want.

The reader is likely to feel a little dizzy at this point: How, he or she may wonder, can we fail to know what we want? Is this not absurd? Surely, one may find oneself thinking, Polus is right that we all know what we want. And, one may find oneself thinking, if it is also true, as both Socrates and Polus admit, that we can be mistaken in thinking that something is good or best, this does not contradict that we all know what we want; it only contradicts that we

know what we would want if we knew what is good or best. It is not surprising that Polus is not, in the end, persuaded by Socrates' argument.

But, whatever about Polus, what about the reader? We, as readers, must ask ourselves, 'Is Socrates' argument good or bad?' This is the argument which says: If what one wants is what one thinks is good or best; and if one can be mistaken in thinking that something is good or best, but without knowing that one is mistaken; then, it follows, one can be mistaken about what one wants. One way of showing that an argument is bad is to find a counter-example to it; that is, to find a similar form of argument, with similarly plausible premises, but in which the conclusion is clearly and unquestionably false. Let us make an attempt to find a counter-example to Socrates' argument: if we can find one, Socrates' argument is bad; if not, we are not to find fault with it and it appears to be a good argument.

Suppose that, not having been able to quench one's thirst for a while, one is feeling very thirsty, and one thinks a drink would be a good thing, even the best thing in the circumstances. On seeing a glass of (what looks like) water in front of one, one thinks that drinking this is what one wants. However, what one did not know is that the liquid is in fact turpentine, which is highly toxic. So, one is mistaken in thinking that drinking this is good or best. But is one mistaken in thinking that one wants this? Or, on the contrary, can one still correctly think and say: I know that I want this (pointing to the glass)?

We may find that one can still correctly think that one knows that one wants this; which shows that Socrates' argument is bad. For one knows that what one wants is to quench one's thirst, and so one knows what one wants; all one is mistaken about is the facts (that this is turpentine and not water), and the facts, one may insist, are independent of what one wants.

If this is an adequate response, then Socrates' argument is indeed a bad argument. But it is not clear, it seems to us, that the response is adequate. For it supposes that there is, always, a real distinction between questions about what one wants and questions about what the facts are. If there is, always, such a distinction, then one may object to Socrates' argument that being mistaken about the facts does not imply that one is mistaken about what one wants. But it is not clear that there is, always and in every case, a real distinction between questions about what one wants and questions about what the facts are. Perhaps there is such a distinction, in the case we considered. But it is not clear that this case generalizes.

Plato's idea here, which he presents Socrates as defending against those who think that we all know what we want and that knowing this is perfectly easy and readily available to us, is that we may not know, and may even be in the dark about, what we want; and that a particular effort, search and undertaking is needed to come to know what one wants—to

know oneself, in this way. If we want to assess this idea, and Socrates' argument for it, we need to consider how we come to realize that one was mistaken about what one thought was good and best; and we need to look for distinctive ways of realizing this, in which a natural and proper response to this realization is: 'I did not even know what I wanted. Only now is it clear to me what I want and have always wanted.' In considering this, we need to avoid thinking of coming to know what is good and best as a matter of being instructed by others, who already know, about this. Socrates', we recall, does not think he knows this or is able to instruct others; he thinks, rather, that he is able to help others search for it and take on this undertaking. In considering this, therefore, we need to think of coming to know what is good and best as a matter of finding this out for oneself; as an achievement of self-knowledge.

Let us propose three distinctive ways in which one may come to realize that one was mistaken about what one thought was good and best, in which, it seems to us, it is indeed natural and proper to respond by thinking: 'I did not even know what I wanted. Only now is it clear to me what I want and have always wanted.' We do not intend these three scenarios to be exclusive and incompatible with each other; rather, a single case may exhibit one, or two, or all three of them. We believe that Plato was well aware of these scenarios, indeed he draws our attention to them.

One scenario is that in which, through a crisis in one's life, one comes to think that one was radically mistaken in what one thought was good and best. Perhaps one thought that marrying was a good thing for one, only to realize later, through such a crisis, that one was quite mistaken in thinking this. It seems natural and proper to respond to such a crisis and the realization it has afforded one, by thinking: 'I did not even know what I wanted. Only now is it clear to me what I want and have always wanted.' In the dialogue *Symposium* (211), Socrates relates how, long ago when he was young and very much in love, a wise woman, Diotima, helped him realize that the love he was experiencing would, if continued like that, take him to a bad place; and so she helped him to change the course of his love and his life. The Greek poet Seferis relates a similar moment and concludes the poem with 'And so we changed the course of our life.' The opening of Dante's *Inferno* is another great moment of this sort.

A second scenario is that in which one stands back from one's life, recognizes that it is a distinctive way of life, but a way that one has been lent to one rather than one that one has properly adopted and appropriated—it is borrowed goods. Here one may, naturally and properly, respond to this recognition by thinking: 'Perhaps that is not what I want at all.' Plato describes this recognition, most strikingly, in the Cave Simile (*Republic* VII.514-519).

A third scenario, which is especially important to Plato and which he articulates and develops with particular care in the *Republic* (see esp. IV.43-441, and VIII-IX), is that in which

one desires radically different and even opposite things; such as (from the *Gorgias*), the reader coming to realize that both power and knowledge seem attractive and desirable to him or her, and recognizes that these desires may conflict and it may be strictly impossible to satisfy both desires. Again, one may, naturally and properly, respond to this recognition by thinking: ‘How do I know *which of the two* I really want. To know this I must first try to discover *which of the two* is good and best.’

Let us attempt a summary of this, most central part of the dialogue. Polus’ view is that what is good and desirable is: being able to do what one wants. Socrates does not object that this view is false. He objects that it is not clear to us what we want, because it is not clear to us what is good; and, as we recognize (Polus recognizes this, too), what we want is what is good; and the reason why it is not clear to us what is good is that, as we recognize (Polus recognizes this, too), we can be mistaken about what is good. This is a remarkable and most challenging conclusion: that, so long as it is not clear to us what is good, it is not clear to us what we want. We are commonly inclined to think: “I may not know what is good, but at least I know what I want.” Plato’s argument radically challenges this view; and it does so from the inside of the view. If Plato’s argument works, then the only way we can become clear about what we want is by searching for what is good.

iv. Socrates’ discussion with Callicles

There is more to the argument between Socrates and Polus; we shall come back to it at the end. At this point, Callicles intrudes and takes over the discussion with Socrates. Setting aside the myth at the end of the dialogue, the remainder of the dialogue is a radical dispute between Callicles and Socrates; and a dispute in which it seems Plato leaves deliberately open who of the two emerges as winner, and who as loser in the argument.

Just as Polus thought Gorgias allowed himself to be refuted by Socrates only because he allowed his fundamental view—that power and being able to do what you want is the supreme good for each of us humans—to become mixed up with other views, and so to be diluted, so Callicles thinks that Polus allowed himself to be refuted by Socrates for similar reasons. In this case, Callicles objects that Polus allowed himself to be refuted by Socrates only because he admitted a distinction between, on the one hand, being powerful, doing what one wants, and doing what one thinks is good and best (all these, both Polus and Callicles think, amount to the same), and, on the other hand, what is beautiful, admirable, noble. For, Callicles insists, what is beautiful, admirable, noble just is: being powerful, doing what one wants, and doing what one thinks is good and best.

Callicles recognizes full well that these two things—in short, power and noble beauty—are not commonly thought to be simply the same. But he thinks, as indeed does Plato, that

common opinion may well be mistaken, and that, in this case, it is mistaken. Callicles argues here that, quite generally, we should not allow common opinion, and the customs and traditions it has turned into over time, to guide our views about what is good and best; rather, we should have the courage to stand up to common opinion, custom and tradition and to judge for ourselves whether to follow it or to oppose it. For, he says, what matters is not what is good according to tradition and custom (*nomos*; also 'customary law'), but what is good by nature (*phusis*). And what is both good and noble and beautiful by nature, he submits, is having the power to do what one wants and what one thinks is good and best.

We ought to note that Socrates does not contradict the formula: What matters is not what is good according to tradition and custom, but what is good by nature. The question, Socrates thinks, is, rather: What is good by nature? Is what is good by nature: having the power to do what one wants and what one thinks is good and best? In the remainder of the dialogue, Socrates argues for a negative answer to this question, and Callicles for an affirmative answer. It is fair to say that Socrates' arguments do not, in the end, succeed in persuading Callicles to give up this view of what is good by nature. Whether he succeeds in persuading the reader, is a good question.

Socrates' arguments against Callicles are based on one principal idea: that, if what is good, noble and beautiful by nature is, purely and simply, having the power to do what one wants and what one thinks is good and best, then what is good, noble and beautiful amounts to no more than what is pleasing to one and what one takes pleasure in. But, in that case, Socrates points out—and in doing so he offends and scandalizes Callicles extremely—there is no difference between a person like him, Callicles, who is proud of himself, his abilities and his accomplishments and achievements, and a person who is content to scratch his private parts or, indeed, to offer himself up as a male prostitute: by nature, they function in just the same way.

Socrates adds, in a further argument, that, even setting aside such ugly and base pleasures, there is a kind of pleasure whose satisfaction, even if it leaves us content for a moment, needs to be constantly, repeatedly and without end, satisfied over and over again; and, therefore, it is not a possible basis, or at any rate a good basis, for a life worth living. Such are the pleasures of eating, drinking and sex. Satisfying such pleasures may be a necessity, since we are the kind of bodily creature we are; and such pleasures may not be ugly or base. But they do not afford us an ideal of a life worth living. For, a worthy idea of a life worth living is an ideal of a life that is not deficient or lacking in anything; but a life devoted simply to satisfying such desires is constantly deficient and lacking in something, and this is clear because in such a life we constantly need to satisfy the same desire, over and over gain without end until we die. This, at any rate, is Socrates' argument against these distinctive pleasures.

The reader may come away with the impression that Socrates' has not been fair to Callicles and his mindset and standpoint. In particular, it may seem that Socrates has not been fair in associating Callicles' standpoint (i.e. view that what is good by nature is: having the power to do what one wants and what one thinks is good and best) with hedonism (i.e. the view that what is good by nature is, purely and simply, pleasure); or in associating hedonism with the view that there is no way to demonstrate that some pleasures are preferable to us humans than others. It is difficult to assess how good Socrates' argument against Callicles is, without a proper examination of this phenomenon, pleasure, and without asking: 'What is pleasure?' and 'Why is pleasure attractive to us?' and 'What is the place of pleasure in life?' and 'What is more important in life, pleasure or knowledge?' But these are not questions Plato takes up in the *Gorgias*: he will take them up in a later dialogue, *Philebus*, as we shall see.

v. Socrates' own standpoint and the myth at the end of the dialogue

We have left out so far an important moment in the discussion with Polus. This is when Socrates urges, against Polus' praise of unrestrained desire, that, first, It is better to suffer injustice and harm than to inflict injustice and harm on others; and, secondly, that, If one has committed injustice and harm on another, it is better to be punished than to go unpunished. Polus, and Callicles after him, think these views are counter-intuitive, paradoxical and quite absurd. Here, if anywhere, we see most clearly and directly how different and apparently antithetical is the comprehensive view, about the life worth living, of Socrates, when compared to that of the three intellectuals (or, at any rate, Polus and Callicles).

It is most remarkable that Socrates appears to reveal here his own standpoint; he is not just engaged in controverting the standpoint of another. Indeed, he reveals a standpoint to which he is most passionately committed; and he does this, even while claiming that he does not think he knows the truth of this standpoint. Perhaps this is also part of the function of the myth at the end of the dialogue: to indicate Socrates' own, distinctive standpoint, even while admitting that it goes beyond what the dialectical argument so far has been able to defend or attempted to defend.

We are not sure how well integrated into the overall argument of the dialogue is the view to which Socrates commits himself here. It is difficult to see how the arguments alone, against Polus and even against Callicles, that is, the arguments we have been going through, could by themselves sustain the conclusion that it is better suffer than do commit injustice. Apparently, this is a theme that Plato introduces here, without intending to articulate or defend it properly; he will do so in the *Republic*, the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. The underlying idea, of the view that it is better to suffer than to commit injustice, appears to be

this: There is no essential conflict between the self-regarding good and the other-regarding good; rather, the two goods are essentially reconcilable and make up a unity. The impression, in our current condition, that there is a conflict between these two goods—one's own good and the good of another—is, Plato thinks, the result of corruption in our current condition and of false orientation and way of thinking. This is not something Plato attempts to argue in the dialogue, *Gorgias*; he will do so in the *Republic*, *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* (see above, Chapter 1, section iii, for this point).

How does Socrates' statement—that suffering injustice is better than committing it—fit into the dialogue, *Gorgias*, if not by Plato's attempting to defend it in the dialogue? It is hard to know, but we want to make a suggestion. The dialogue ends with a myth; in which is depicted how those who have inflicted injustice and harm on others, and have escaped punishment while alive, can expect to suffer a painful punishment after death. It is not clear how Plato intends the myth to be understood; and how literally he intends it. Does he believe that this will actually happen? It appears that the myth presupposes the truth of Socrates' statement that suffering injustice is better than committing it. But, since Plato has not attempted to defend that statement, the myth cannot simply be accepted as truth. We must, therefore, ask, 'What is the function of the punishment-after-death myth?'

We suggest one function of the myth is to indicate just how serious, and seriously important, it is to think of one's desires in the right way and to try to satisfy them in the right way. For if the myth shows anything, it shows that if one desires in the wrong way, and if one does not do all one can to desire in the right way and to examine one's desires and oneself, this will be of such harm to oneself that such a condition after death—if there were such a condition—would be fitting and revealing of the gravity of one's condition. In this way, the myth serves to tell the reader that the clash of views between Socrates and Polus-Callicles, is not an issue to be taken lightly, or dispassionately, as if it were basically an intellectual dispute; on the contrary, it is to be taken as a matter of life and death: the life and death of one's very self and soul.

Plato will elaborate this idea in the *Republic* especially; and in one passage especially. For in *Republic* VII.518-519, he says that an intelligent and rational person may use his intelligence and reason for good or for ill; and that, which of the two ways he uses it, determines whether his soul, that is, his whole self and what he is, is in a state of darkness or in a state of light. Even setting aside this metaphor of darkness and light, and of the soul's journey from darkness to light, the basic thought is that the quality of our desires affects, through and through, the quality, condition and orientation of our life itself; of our whole life—except that 'whole' here does not mean the number of years one happens to be alive, but the basic condition of one's living at any moment.