

The Challenge of Callicles

Living a Good Life

Fall, 2021

Professor Horst

- Last week
 - Inventory of Desires
 - Desire Mapping
- Third exercise for Wednesday
- Today: What is the relation between our desires and a good life?
 - Calicles in the *Gorgias*
 - What Socrates and Kongzi might say in reply

Desires and the Good Life

- If you got all the things on your list of desires, would that be a good life? A happy life? A fulfilling life?



Desires and the Good Life

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- If so, maybe we don't need Philosophy – just how to effectively pursue our desires



i.e., a good life = a life where I get everything I want

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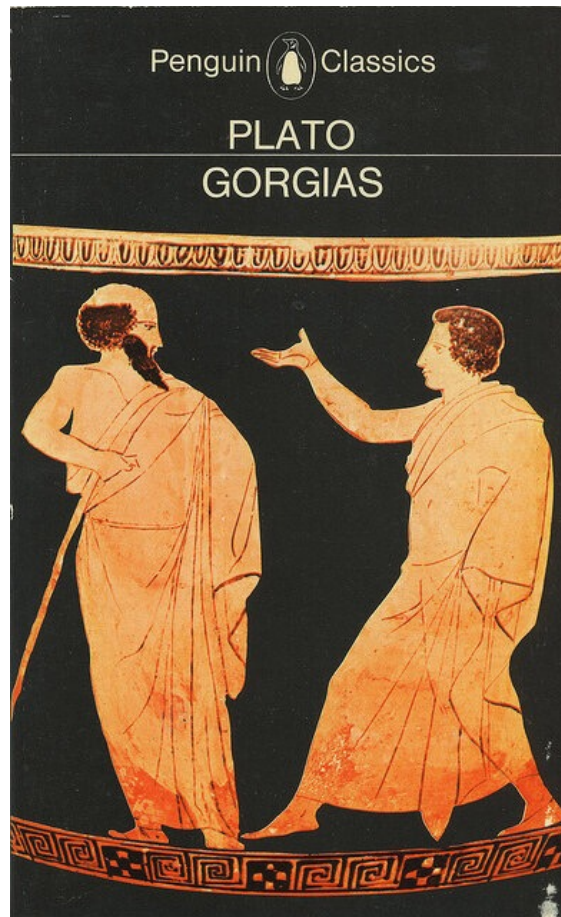


Penguin Classics



PLATO
GORGIAS





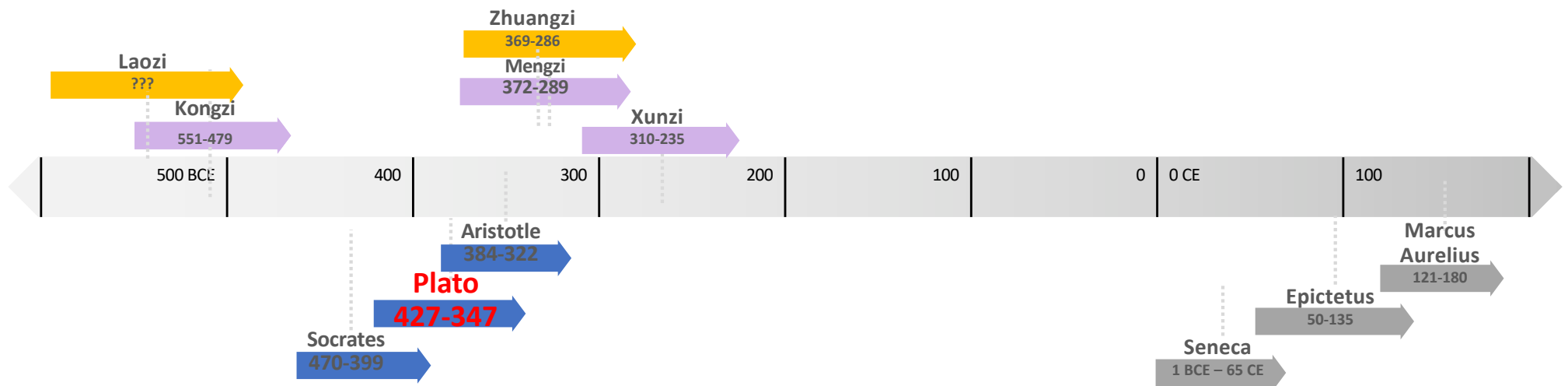
Plato on the Value of Philosophy
The Art of Argument in the *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*
Tushar Irani

Ἀγαθὸς ἀνθρώπος, ὁ οἶδ' ὅτι οἷος ἀνθρώπων
πάραθ' ἔστι τελέειν. Σώφρων, ὁ μετείας ἔστι
θυμίας ἔχων. Ἐξυμνῶν, ὁ κρατῶν ἀπειτινόν-
των ἢ τῆς ψυχῆς μορίων τὰ ὀρθῶς λογισμῶν.
Σπουδαῖος, ὁ ἐλεείας ἀγαθός. ὁ ἔχων πλεῖν αὐ-
τῷ ἀρετῶν. Σιώνοια, δ' ἀνοία μὲν λύπης ἀνθ'
λόγου. Διζυμῶν, βραδυτῆς ἐν μαθήσει.
Δεασοπία, ἀρχὴ ἀνυπέρβυτος δικαία. Ἀφι-
λοσοφία, ἔστι καθ' ἣν ὁ ἔχων, μισολόγος ἔστί.
Φόβος, ἐκπληξίς ψυχῆς ἔστι κακοῦ παρὰ δό-



Timeline of Ancient Philosophy

600 BCE – 200 CE



Philosophy and Rhetoric (and Sophistry)

Philosophy (Philosophers)

- Use language to bring about change in listener, persuade them
- Use argumentation
Elenchus
- Represented by **Socrates**

Rhetoric (Rhetoricians) Sophistry (Sophists)

- Use language to bring about change in listener, persuade them
- Use argumentation **Speeches, Argument contests**
- Represented by
 - Gorgias
 - Polus
 - Callicles

Questions of the *Gorgias*

- What is Rhetoric?
- How ought one to live?

Questions of the *Gorgias*

• **What is Rhetoric?**

Gorgias and Polus: the **art** of persuasion through speech

Beneficial to practitioner because he can get others to do what he wants.

Does not educate or require expert knowledge of subject discussed.

• **How ought one to live?**

Socrates: hence not an art (*techne*) because arts

- Require knowledge of subject
- Aim at good of recipient (rhetoric at good of practitioner)

Who would be today's rhetoricians?

- **People who try to gain their own end by influencing people through persuasive speech?**

- **Is it a good thing?**

A Good Practice/Way of Life?

- **Gorgias/Polus/Calicles:** It is the “master art” because you can speak persuasively on any subject, and get people to do what you want. Power like that of a tyrant!
- **Socrates:** it amounts to an ability that allows one ignorant person to persuade another ignorant person in order to get his own way. Does not seem like a good thing at all

Callicles

- Gorgias and Polus definitely historical individuals
- Callicles may or not be
- Most commentators think he is a fictional figure created to put in frank terms what Plato thinks are the real values behind a life of rhetoric
- Socrates gives him a very powerful speech, and makes him a very strong character.
- Plato characterizes the choice between Callicles' view/way of life and that of Socrates as a fundamental life-choice – perhaps *the* fundamental question in how to live


Callicles

- Makes a distinction between “natural” and “conventional” senses of the word ‘good’
 - **Conventional:** laws, customs, moral rules, etiquette
 - Callicles: this is a subterfuge to rein in the strong – not real objective truth on moral matters, just contrived conventions to limit the strong
 - **Natural:** the strong get their way, satisfy their desires

Callicles and the Sophists

• **Relativism**

??

- 
- Protagoras: “Man is the measure of everything”
 - Recognized that customs differ from city to city, took moral norms to be purely conventional (good-in-Athens vs. good-in-Sparta)
 - Callicles adds to this a “natural good” we all really want to pursue
 - Most Sophists advised fitting one’s conduct to local custom (Callicles would agree that this is *prudent* unless one can get away with breaking custom to suit one’s own ends)

• **The “Superior Man”**

- For Gorgias, someone who is both politically adroit and conventionally virtuous
 - For Callicles, someone who throws off convention and can work his own will upon others (the “strong”) – rhetoric the master tool in this, confers power like a tyrants
- Callicles also equates the good with pleasure, recommends immoderation

Callicles' View of the Good Life

- **“Good” (natural sense) = in accordance with what I desire**
 - Of course, relative to person (though not to convention)
 - Good-for-Callicles
 - Good-for-Socrates, etc.
- The desires I actually happen to have are the arbiters of what I count as a good life (what's good-for-me).
- Good life consists in fulfillment of desires, not having them frustrated
- The *more* and *stronger* the desires (assuming they are fulfilled), the better the life.
- Rhetoric is the master art because it confers the ability to get what you desire by persuading others – power like that of a tyrant

Moral Psychology



Callicles' Moral Psychology

- Desires (of various intensities)
- Pleasure
- Courage/cowardice/shame



- Good life = having your desires fulfilled (=pleasure)
- More is better



- Cultivate **POWER** = ability to get what you want
- Rhetoric a key skill b/c it confers power comparable to a tyrant's

NOTE that assumptions about psychology and ethics lead to conclusions about what one ought to DO

Two Lines of Objection

1. Easier way to have your desires fulfilled is to have *fewer* desires, and ones *more easily attained*.
 - Some classical philosophies took this view
2. Aren't some desires/pleasures better than others?
 - The scratcher
 - The catamite

Two ways to always get what you want...

Hard way (Callicles)

- Have lots of intense desires
- Control other people by getting them to do what you want through rhetoric (or being a tyrant)

Easy way

- Have only a few simple desires for things that are easy to get



Diogenes the Cynic

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Easy way

- Have only a few simple desires for things that are easy to get
- **Callicles: “The life of a stone or a corpse”**

Does it matter WHAT the desires and pleasures are:

Are some desires/pleasures better than others?

The Scratcher





Is the Scratcher living a good life?



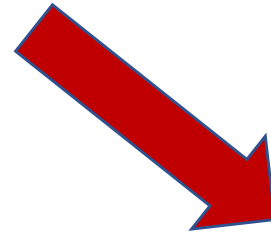
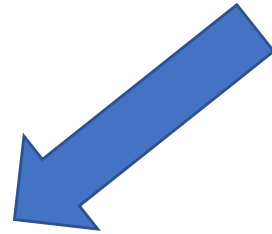
- Strong desire
- Strong pleasure
- Able to fulfill all his desires

By Callicles' criteria, seems like the answer SHOULD be "YES"

Is the Scratcher living a good life?



Yes



No

Reductio ad absurdum

(Theory leads to an absurd/
counterintuitive/unacceptable
conclusion)

Callicles contradicts himself – needs new theory

(Had said that all that
matters is that whatever
desires you happen to
have are fulfilled)

Possible source of the problem...

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- Good life consists in **fulfillment of desires, not having them frustrated**

I have desires now for what I think will be pleasant/satisfying/fulfilling later.

But I could be wrong!

What really matters is what *will really be* pleasant/satisfying/fulfilling/(???) later.



But note!: If you go this way, you now have another question:
What SHOULD I desire/what will REALLY be good for me?

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Suppose you'd written your list at age 5...





Some luck lies in not getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which once you have got it you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known.

— *Garrison Keillor*

AZ QUOTES

From *Lake Wobegon Days*

2 Surprising (?) Assumptions in the Dialog

- General notion of “what is good” (whatever that might be)
 1. Only discussed in egoistic terms – what is good for *me* (whatever that might be)
 2. Much of the discussion predicated on assumption that it is something like *pleasure*.

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- Maybe an accommodation to what the interlocutors (Polus, Callicles) are ready and willing to accept.

2 Surprising (?) Assumptions in the Dialog

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 1. Only discussed in egoistic terms – what is good for *me* (whatever that might be)
 2. Much of the discussion predicated on assumption that it is something like *pleasure*.
- Even if the good is pleasure, need to admit that what matters is what *really turns out to be pleasant*, rather than what we *think* will be (what we desire) – i.e., **an objective fact of what will be pleasant.**

The Challenge of Callicles

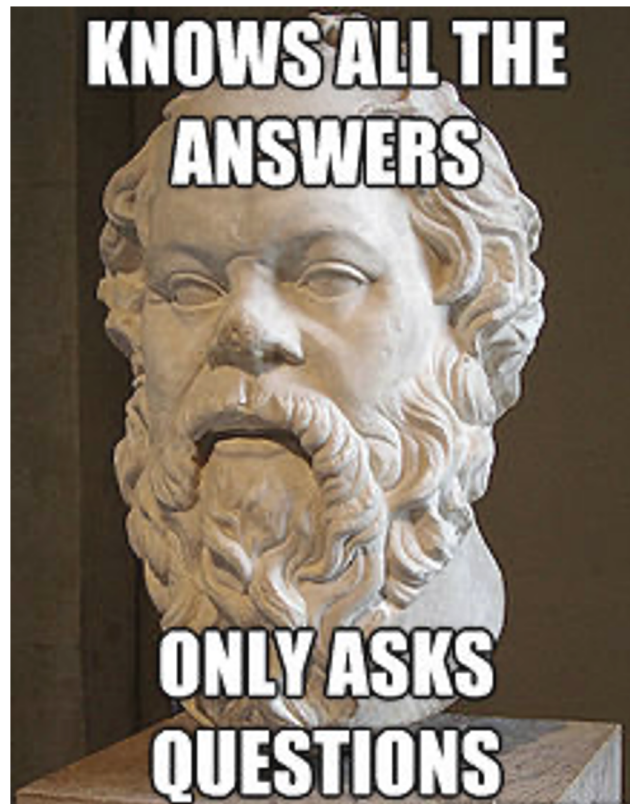
- **What we want is the only arbiter of what is good.**
- **So a good life consists in fulfillment of desires.**
- **Supposed moral norms are just conventions, and in fact hinder us from the “natural good”**
- Maybe a refutation here – but Plato presents it as a fundamental *choice* between ways of life.

The Challenge of Callicles

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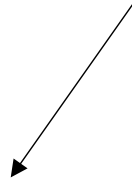
- 2 philosophical alternatives
 - Socrates
 - Kongzi

Socrates' Response to Callicles

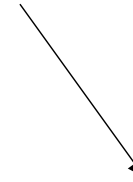


Two competing conceptions of the good life in Plato's *Gorgias*:

life of rhetoric vs. life of philosophy



represented and promoted
by Calicles



represented and promoted
by Socrates

Calicles' Great Speech (482c–486d)

first part: it's human nature to try to dominate others and get as much as possible for oneself

- those who succeed: strong and superior = winners!
- those who fail: weak and inferior = losers!
 - conventional morality is a sham

second part: philosophy is for losers!

- since you'll never succeed in politics by doing philosophy
- instead: practice rhetoric
 - dominate/influence/convince others
 - by means of persuasion
 - for the sake of one's personal advantage

Cross-Examining Calicles

Socrates:

- who are the superior?
- and what good things do they deserve more of?

Calicles:

- the superior = the intelligent and the brave
- the good they deserve is the satisfaction of their most intense desires
 - anything impeding this (laws, norms, conventional virtues) = slavery
 - so the good life = life of maximal pleasure

Socrates:

- but aren't there better and worse desires?
- and so aren't there better and worse pleasures for a human being to pursue?

Calicles:

- no; all pleasures are equally good, the more intense the better
- what's good = what's most pleasant

Are All Pleasures Equally Good?

- are there things in your life you think are not worth taking pleasure in?
 - desires you have that you also wish you did not have?
 - e.g., desire to binge-watch Netflix all night, have another cigarette, etc.
 - taking pleasure in something you don't really want to do
- or are there things in your life you don't take pleasure in, but wish you could?
 - desires you don't have that you wish you did have?
 - e.g., desire to finish reading a book, practice musical instrument, etc.
 - not taking pleasure in something you really want to do
- in these cases, we take a stand on the quality of our desires
- even Callicles comes to concede this
 - he believes the pleasures of a fool and a coward are shameful
 - with this concession, Socrates makes room for the value of philosophy
 - now we must ask: which desires in our lives are worth pursuing?

A Case for the Examined Life

- what's important to living well
 - not: experiencing as much pleasure as possible
 - but figuring out what's worth taking pleasure in
 - whether the desires you choose to act on reflect the values you wish to live by
 - consider in terms of desire maps
- “the unexamined life is not worth living” (Plato, *Apology* 38a)
 - Greek: ὁ ... ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ
 - literally: “the unexamined life is not to be lived for a human being”
 - compare: “the unripe fruit should not be eaten”
 - “the untuned instrument should not be played”
 - “the untested car should not be driven”
 - so Socrates isn't condemning human beings who don't examine their lives
 - he's offering his ideal of the good life: a view of how one should live
 - but who does the examining?

Socrates' Parting Advice: Take Care of Yourselves (and Each Other)!



The Death of Socrates, Jacques-Louis David (1787)

The Confucians' Responses to Callicles

- Kongzi 孔子 (or Confucius), 551 – 479 BCE, pronounced kong-dz
- Mengzi 孟子 (or Mencius), 4th c. BCE, pronounced mung-dz
- Xunzi 荀子, 3rd c. BCE, pronounced hsün-dz
- Implicit universalism of philosophy



Kongzi and Tradition



- *Analects* 7:1: “述而不作，信而好古 Transmitting and not inventing; having confidence in and loving the ancients...”
- *Analects* 2:11: “溫故而知新，可以為師矣。 One who reanimates [lit. warms up] the old in order to understand the new — such a person can be called a teacher.”
- Tradition vs. Traditionalism
- Can we be fully human without conventions/traditions?

Mengzi's and Xunzi's Paths

- The importance of developing one's nature in a balanced, complete way (Mengzi)
- The importance of human convention – especially “rituals” (Xunzi)

