

**Socrates vs. Callicles on the Good Life:  
The “Leaky Jar Analogy” (Plato’s *Gorgias* 492e–494a)**

**1. Background**

Recall from last class Callicles’ extreme hedonist view of happiness in Plato’s *Gorgias*: according to this view, the good life consists in unconstrained desire satisfaction. In this handout we’ll consider Socrates’ argument against this view with his leaky jar analogy.

**2. What’s the Argument?**

**Basic point:** The goal of this argument is to show how the extreme hedonism that Callicles champions is marked by the constant need to replenish desires, which results ultimately in suffering rather than lasting fulfillment. Socrates is thus challenging Callicles’ claim that maximal, unbridled pleasure leads to happiness.

Socrates does this by drawing an analogy between an undisciplined life and a leaky jar: a container that cannot hold its contents steadily, thus requiring endless refilling.

**Reconstruction (premise-conclusion format):**

1. The life that Callicles promotes (the “undisciplined man”), devoted to pursuing unrestrained and ever-expanding appetites is analogous to a soul/psyche whose appetitive part is like a leaky jar — insatiable and incapable of retaining what it receives.
2. Because such a “jar” leaks continuously, the person must constantly work to refill it to maintain satisfaction.
3. This perpetual need for replenishment is inherently painful and exhausting, since it forces a person to labor ceaselessly without ever achieving stable contentment.
4. In contrast, an orderly, self-controlled life (the “self-controlled man”) is analogous to having sound, well-maintained jars that, once filled, remain stable without requiring constant effort.
5. Therefore, a life of self-control and order— where desires are met in a stable manner — is happier and preferable to an undisciplined life of endless, painful striving for pleasure.

(Note: there are very many other details in the analogy that you might find relevant in discussing it. This is one possible reconstruction of the reasoning; others are possible!)

### 3. Evaluating the Argument

Here are some prompts to consider in evaluating this argument:

- **Analogy Strength:**
  - Is comparing the undisciplined life to a leaky jar effective?
  - Does this analogy capture the essential features of an insatiable, pleasure-seeking life?
  - What about Socrates' alternative image of the self-controlled life? — does this represent a better alternative to the undisciplined life?
- **Underlying Assumptions:**
  - What assumptions does Socrates make about the nature of desires and satisfaction?
  - Is it necessarily true that constant replenishment leads to pain and instability?
- **Counterexamples and Alternatives:**
  - Can you think of situations where ongoing striving or continuous desire might be fulfilling rather than exhausting?
  - Might there be aspects of pleasure or desire that do not fit neatly into this analogy?
- **Implications for the Good Life:**
  - Does the argument convincingly demonstrate that a self-controlled or orderly life is inherently happier than an undisciplined life?
  - What, if any, limitations or oversights are present in this reasoning?