

Plato's *Gorgias* as a Premodern Attack on Modernity

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I was reading an excellent work on revolutionary syndicalism. I read all manner of slogans about “societies of free men” and “self-governing” guilds. While I've always been sympathetic to syndicalism, it occurred to me: what evidence is there that “all people” are capable of freedom? Freedom requires the profound use of reason independently of self-interest and other internal drives. Worse, do workers want freedom? Freedom means that all your actions are your fault, regardless of the distinction between intent and consequence. Few see freedom that way.

Tito's experiment in Yugoslavia was an excellent one. Proving that the USSR was not in least concerned with labor, self-management brought down the fire of Hell itself upon Belgrade. War was threatened. When Marx threw out the Proudhonists for asking why there were no actual workers at the First International, he was so enraged that people were concerned for his health. Such rage speaks to a deeper problem.

Tito's experiment was a failure. Few workers could be bothered with the details of administration. It entailed hours after work dealing with all manner of boring administrative minutia. Obviously, a class of professional politicians emerged that took over the process. Tito then introduced a rotational law to fight this. Yet, passing a law has no relation to the cause of the issue in the first place. Freedom is of immense difficulty and only few actually have or want it. Freedom is constant labor, thought and battle. It's a struggle for autonomy, not to become a plaything of the passions.

Freedom cannot be the mere surrender to passions. This is the opposite of freedom since these drives are immediate, instinctual instincts over which the person has no control. Freedom must be rational and totally autonomous. How many are capable of that? Most see freedom as an intolerable burden. Few workers want to rule themselves. They want to put in their eight and go home or to a bar. They don't want to go over details of production targets with suppliers for three hours after work.

This might be a strange beginning for a paper like this. So few philosophers are actually capable of critical thought in the universities. A question like that floors them. “The individual” is assumed to be the basic unit of society and that “all human beings desire freedom.” Philosophers use undergraduate papers for research and just rearrange professionally-sanctioned slogans in an in-group environment so closed off that it mine as well be, to an outsider, a Bulgarian choral group. They're useless and wildly overpaid human beings.

Mocking the pretensions of the “professional academics” or some other institutionalized power was Plato's whole purpose. This is why academics, institutionalized, self-seeking, intellectually inbred and ludicrously conformist, have no tools available to deal with Plato. They, by the very structure of their life, cannot understand him. If they did, they'd realize he's talking about them.

The *Gorgias* is one of the most profound Platonic dialogue. It is a perfect introduction to Platonic thought in general and is highly underrated in this respect. It is probably the most important dialogue when dealing with modern “civic debate” and the lowering of civic understanding in the western world. People want “freedom” in the same sense that they want “honesty.” Only a handful really mean it and even fewer are capable of living it consistently.

Everyone must admit that – and no one's innocent – that humanity cares only about having their lifestyle validated. They want to hear what they want to hear.

The question is not about public debate.¹ Like everything in American life, the terms are so debased that they have no meaning. The *Gorgias* is not about the “political speech of citizens in a democracy.” That does not even come up. The very fact that it does over and over again in the literature proves how useless academics have become.

“Persuasion” is not a value-neutral term. It's about the powerful manipulating the herd for their own interests. Few people would desire a situation where the best paid lawyer would win the day in court. Truth and truth alone matters. That is what the issue is here. This is why the professionals in the university will not and can not deal with Plato, especially in this dialogue.

Oratory requires a world in which no truths are accepted or understood other than power. This is Socrates' whole argument. In a world where truth mattered, oratory, as such, would have no place. It is a sign of social decay. It is a sign that society has deviated so far from the divine that those most pleasing to the ear are as good as diligent researchers. There is no clear distinction between them. The truth is that persuasion is an evil unless it is founded on the true and the good. The only alternative is self-interest. Unfortunately, the adversarial system of justice enshrines it. Self-interest, defined broadly, only accidentally arrives at the truth.

The question is not merely that of producing conviction and inculcating belief. Its producing conviction among the powerful, with no foundation for any truth claims. It's the Will to Power. This is not a free will. Power is not “free” by definition.

From 449a onward, Socrates demolishes Gorgias' pomposity by easily connecting knowledge to oratory. There is no specific craft of speaking well (that is, of manipulating others), only expertise within a real craft can do that. There, it is knowledge, not manipulation. If one is ignorant, than “faking it” would be a necessity (452a). It's modern politics. Pretending that “speeches” is a quaint relic from Athens is to deliberately veil the reality of modernity.

By “speeches,” Plato means any form of communication about the world relevant to power struggles. It does not refer to the ordinary speech of citizens. Speech connected to knowledge is another matter, this is called a “lecture.” There, expertise communicates itself. Oratory is not a part of any other body of knowledge, so all it can do, by process of elimination, is manipulate. What Socrates is referring to, in modern terms, is the rule of advertising and public relations – media control – rather than mere “speech-making.” It refers to all forms of communication that the wealthy can afford. This includes modern academics. Illegitimacy requires oratory. Orators do not work for free. It is about the control over political language and the very nature of reality.

At 452e, Gorgias shows his hand, and proves that this has nothing to do with the “political speech” of ordinary people.

I'm referring to the ability to persuade by speeches judges in a law court, councilors in a council meeting, and assemblymen in an assembly or in any other political gathering that might take place. In point of fact, with this ability you'll have the doctor for your slave, and the physical trainer, too. As for this financial expert of yours, he'll turn out to be making more money for somebody else instead of himself; for you, in fact, if you've got the ability to speak and to persuade the crowds.

¹ All citations come from the John Cooper edition of Plato's Complete Works, published by Hackett in 1997. The *Gorgias* is from

This is extremely relevant to social life in all times and places. It is a direct attack on the soapboxer speaking of abstractions like “democratic mechanisms” and “procedural justice.” No one will ever, ever die for the abstract right to institute jury trials. They might if they think that, in so doing, their agenda will be passed with greater efficiency. When someone speaks in universalist abstractions, understand it is a veil behind which their real agenda lies. Getting to it can be dangerous.

When one has no right to rule, Gorgias is hired. Gorgias is defending the world of corruption. He is persuading people, pretending to be knowledgeable in a field, but presenting information in such a way that it seems to be irrefutable. It is not imparting information, but concealing it. In today's language, it would be psychological manipulation. It is the whole arsenal of “Madison Avenue” advertising that preys on the psychological weaknesses of its victims. The orator is a liar.

Gorgias claims that he will use his skill only in the service of justice. However, Socrates explains that this is question begging. He would have to know the nature of what is just and unjust, which is, in fact, the domain of another skill entirely (452c-455a). Oratory is not a craft in itself since it actually knows nothing. It produces nothing and can only act as a parasite on those crafts that do produce. This is the summary of the first half of the dialogue. The orator is not a citizen in public debate. He is a tool of the wealthy seeking to control the state for his master's purposes.

At 464d, Socrates summarizes the argument he was making all along:

[Oratory] takes no thought at all of whatever is best; with the lure of what's most pleasant at the moment, it sniffs out folly and hoodwinks it, so that it gives the impression of being most deserving. Pastry baking has put on the mask of medicine, and pretends to know the foods that are best for the body, so that if a pastry baker and a doctor had to compete in front of children, or in front of men just as foolish as children, to determine which of the two, the doctor or the pastry baker, had expert knowledge of good food and bad, the doctor would die of starvation.

“Pastry baking” is the production of junk food. An orator can be hired by such a baker to convince the world that this is nutritious food. Unregulated, millions would believe it. Pastries, due to their taste, will win out over artichoke hearts every time. Unfortunately, it would also lead to severe health problems. Socrates' argument is that oratory is like promoting pastries to children. It looks and tastes good, and if one does not think about it too long, it will be consumed constantly and even become a lifestyle. Even if unhealthy and obese people complain later on, the same oration would convince them that it is their fault for being so gullible.

It would seem that the orator, in this sense, would be quite preoccupied with freedom of speech. He might be worried that people will recognize the immense power of oratory and try to regulate it. If something can “make a doctor your slave,” then that's quite a powerful weapon. Such a weapon would necessarily have to be regulated or carefully watched. For Athens, dedicated, as Socrates says, to freedom of speech, this is a declaration of open season on the unsuspecting. “Freedom of speech” seems far less pleasant when the power of these orators is taken into consideration. Again, this is not about civic activism.

The use of classical verbiage blunts the force of the argument. “Speech making” seems

harmless. This, however, is not what he means. Today, Socrates would be at war with the entire industry of advertising, in a broad sense. All forms of manipulation are included under “oratory” here, as Gorgias as already admitted. Socrates says:

So pastry baking, as I say, is the flattery that wears the mask of medicine. Cosmetics is the one that wears that of gymnastics in the same way; a mischievous, deceptive, disgraceful and ill-bred thing, one that perpetrates deception by means of shaping and coloring, smoothing out and dressing up, so as to make people assume an alien beauty and neglect their own, which comes through gymnastics.

Consider a doctor speaking to a crowd. He uses dry statistics and boring charts about how sugar and carbohydrates can harm the body over time. He then advocates beets and asparagus as the a proper, healthy diet. He is followed by a man pushing M&Ms. He mocks the dry speech of the doctor and reminds the crowd how awful beets taste. He then, using humor and parody, discredits the dry science the doctor was trying to get across. Who would win in such a scenario? Sugar will win over asparagus every single time. Taking this into politics or science, it would mean that the simplest, “quick-fix” would get the support of the population if it had strong enough public relations. It preys on ignorance. No one wants to hear lengthy lectures in budgetary issues, so symbolic issues and distractions will be used instead, and act as the analogue to pastries and candy. Because the orator has no interest in the truth of the matter, he is free to say and do whatever is needed to gain the confidence of the crowd (cf 459d).

At 456c, Gorgias tries to defend himself:

And I maintain too that if an orator and a doctor came to any city anywhere you like and had to compete in speaking in the assembly or some other gathering over which of them should be appointed doctor, the doctor wouldn't make any showing at all, but the one who had the ability to speak would be appointed, if he so wished. And if he were to compete with any other craftsman whatever, the orator more than anyone else would persuade them that they should appoint him, for there isn't anything that the orator couldn't speak more persuasively about to a gathering than could any other craftsman whatever.

Gorgias' fatal flaw is that he's speaking of a powerful skill without it being attached to the good and the right. No one denies that sometimes, it takes great rhetorical skill to convince a person to not jump off a bridge to his death. No one would complain about the orator then. However, in that case, the use of that skill would necessarily be connected to the understanding that suicide is irrational and death is an unmitigated evil. There is nothing inherent in rhetoric, however, that connects it to the good. It's a bit like assault rifles. In the right hands, they can destroy vicious enemies. In the wrong hands, they can commit the most heinous crimes. Guns do not recognize the moral rectitude of their use. Socrates is saying the same about rhetoric: it's a loaded gun without any inherent recognition about how it should be used (cf. 469b).

The moment Gorgias admits that oratory can be used unjustly, and that there's nothing about the skill that prevents its regular misuse, Socrates is then able to eliminate Gorgias from the conversation entirely. The great orator is almost totally silent for the second half of the dialogue as more extreme variants of his position emerge. Pastry baking, of course, is short-hand

for political propaganda and “quick fixes” in politics. It preys on the ignorance of the populace.

His place is taken by Polus, who is far more Nietzschean than Gorgias was. He unabashedly claims that the power of psychological manipulation is a great gift. If one can afford it, it would make its holder the most powerful man in the state. The first issue is obvious: only the very wealthy can afford advertising agencies or public relations firms.

The second issue is more substantial: there is nothing good or pleasant in being in such a state. No one will say that injustice is a good thing, even if one is benefited by it. It destroys the moral code of the population, ensuring that many more Machiavellis will arise. Therefore, since all humans seek the good, acting in this way is not doing what we will. It is not in our interest. It feeds on the short-term interest and the impulse of the moment (469c). Even the most crude hedonist cannot accept this.

The second part of the dialogue deals with the questions of human ends. A more extreme take on Gorgias' position is taken by Polus, and states that doing what one wants without consequences is the ultimate goal. This is the goal of rhetoric, properly understood. Acting unjustly, however, is never what one wants. Doing what one wants without regard to values is absurd. No one, over time, will see this as a good. It is only the short-term impulse appearing far more powerful than it really is. It's a lie (496d).

Socrates' debate with Polus rests on the assumption that there is an objective just and unjust. Any discussion of this type would have to assume that. Otherwise, the Will to Power would rule alone and, when turned against the user, there would be no grounds for complaint. When one is the victim of injustice, all relativist arguments disappear, the victim becomes a dogmatist very quickly. This is a subtext throughout the dialogue.

Over time, doing what one wants, using the misleading vividness of the short term impulse, would destroy us. It would turn such a person into a monster, and an unhealthy one. To act without consequences leads to a totally distorted view of reality. It creates a sense of entitlement that the employers of the orator firmly accept.

The *Gorgias* is a dialogue that decays from Gorgias to Polus to Callicles. The latter is even more shameless than Polus. Speaking almost in modern terms, Callicles argues that this “injustice” is not objective at all. Human beings, like any other animal, exists in fierce competition with one another and seeks to gain what he can. This is normal. Ethics is an interference in this normal competition. He mocks philosophy, saying it poisons the population into merely taking what is its “fair share” and nothing else (483d).

He cites “nature” as this drive to gain whatever one can with as few consequences as possible. This alone is justice. It's the familiar “might is right” argument and nothing more. Socrates, not taking this at all seriously, reminds Callicles that the masses are far more in number than their “natural superiors” that is, the victors in this endless struggle. In fact, the whole reason they have to be manipulated and “lulled to sleep” is that if they were to awake, they would destroy their “superiors” (490a).

This being a dead-end for Callicles he then shifts to the nature of their “better share.” His undoing is that he thinks their appetites should expand without limit (492b). The pleasant and the good are the same, meaning that the best men, the happiest, are those who can indulge their appetites without consequences. Socrates then replies that, to have an appetite filled, one has to lack something. This is painful. Then, once it's filled, there is no more joy because the act of satisfying that desire is finished. There seems to be no pleasure in this at all. Even worse, the most ignorant can gain the same amount of pleasure from satisfying their desires as a genius has satisfying theirs (503a).

This is important because it is the same argument as the above: the pleasures of candy will always win over the more difficult, but superior, foods. A life as Callicles describes is that of the perpetual child. The “natural victor” is one who satisfies each appetite as it comes, without regard to quality. There is nothing inherent in such a life that would suggest a ranking system. The moment you introduce one, it leads to an objective standard apart from the life of self-gratification.

Whether it be power or sugar candy, the appetites, ungoverned, gravitate to the lowest and most unhealthy kinds because they taste or feel better. These are not the same as being good (as Callicles claimed). Those employing orators are seeking the gratification of base desires: power, money or rationalization. Callicles position, and that of the sophists in general, is contradictory. In order to gain the sort of power that would have them in the position to control the law courts, a great degree of discipline are necessary. The arts of war or business must be mastered, for example. Mere indulgence would not be useful there at all. However, once in power, the tyrant can then be safe from injustice and indulge all he wants.

If the goal is total satisfaction and immunity from injustice from others, then living such a life destroys itself. In other words, the life of indulgence leads to the destruction of the very “virtues” that permitted the leader to take power in the first place. Hence, the tyrant must be highly disciplined and not indulge himself. life of indulgence and power-seeking is not happy and it is not pleasant. Hence, to conclude, even the hedonist needs a strictly hierarchic and objective ranking of pleasures and actions to reach them. There never is any life of indulgence. Power is not a good in itself and therefore, the orator offers sugar candy, not truth.