2. Socrates and the Sophists

Gorgias of Leontini

Gorgias of Leontini (490-390? BC) was the best known 5th century teacher of oratory or rhetoric (from rhea, “to move”). He traveled often to Athens and was the author of a number of works, including a Defense of Helen (the notorious wife of Menelaus, accused of starting the Trojan War by her seduction of Paris). His essay, On Non-Being, is a reductio ad absurdum of the Eleatic philosophy of being and the PNC.

What is rhetoric?

The Gorgias shows us Socrates in dialogue with three characters, the famous rhetorician Gorgias, his student Polus (“Colt” in Greek), and a wealthy Athenian, Callicles, who wants to learn rhetoric from Gorgias and is hosting the evening. These characters represent the intellectual, competitive, and appetitive aspects of Sophistry, with Callicles seen as the culmination of the teachings and values of the others. The conversation begins when Socrates presses the famous rhetorician Gorgias to provide a definition of “rhetoric.”

In the opening, Gorgias makes two points. The first is that rhetoric is a uniquely powerful skill, so that if a rhetorician and a doctor both argued in the State Assembly who should be appointed Chief of Health Affairs in the city, the rhetorician would win it. Rhetoric is the source of the “greatest good” for human beings: “…the source of freedom for mankind as a whole and of rule over others for the individual who has it.” Socrates attacks this claim both for the “power” it assigns rhetoric and for the conceptions of freedom and happiness it assumes.

Gorgias’ second claim is that teachers of rhetoric should not be held accountable for misuse of the art, since they teach a techne (skill), and are not responsible for moral character of the students, which determines if they use
the skill justly and wisely. Socrates pounces on this point, using his dialectical method to get Gorgias to admit that the rhetorician has a responsibility to test his students’ character before he sells them this weapon: if the art of rhetoric is as powerful as he says, and they lack the virtue to use it properly, he must teach them that—moral virtue—before teaching it to them.

Polus then intervenes, annoyed that Socrates has refuted his master. Gorgias was too ashamed to admit that what is “noble” (kalon) for society may not be what is “good” (agathon) for the individual, Polus says; this was what led to his refutation. Polus, unlike Gorgias, seems less restrained by a decent respect for conventional morals and the commonly held belief that the rhetorician should know and teach ethics to his students to insure that they will not misuse the weapon he has given them. (Compare the idea that law schools or business schools should teach ethics to future lawyers or businessmen, a claim that many teachers in those schools would reject.) This leads to two further exchanges between Socrates and Polus.

In the first exchange, Socrates introduces a critical distinction between the genuine vs. counterfeit arts and professions. In the process, he envisages Greek urban society critically, together with all of the institutions of the arts and sciences. Some of them, he acknowledges, are healthy and good for human beings; but others are corrupt and harmful. Arts such as gourmet cooking are basically harmful, since they appeal to pleasure, not to what is genuinely beneficial (e.g. Hardees or Budweiser vs. health food, Hummers vs. fuel-efficient cars). The “true arts” or the “true forms” of the arts, he says, aim at the right ends, i.e. what is truly good for human beings, and do so with an understanding (logos) of the nature of their object and of why they employ the means they do.

Consider which arts you think might be genuine and which are counterfeit. Is advertising genuine only if it is truthful, or if it is not truthful, is it counterfeit and fraud? Is cosmetic surgery really medicine? Should something count as food if it is not good for your body? Are porno or slasher flicks examples of film art? Do professors of military science or business science or communication science convey real knowledge? Are lawyers who seek to persuade juries of their clients’ innocence, whether they are guilty or not, really trying to bring about justice, or politicians who craft laws to please the people who fund their campaigns, or vote to keep them in office, rather than laws to serve the common good? Socrates’ idea of true arts of the body and the soul implies a powerful critique of democratic society.

Which is worse: to suffer wrong or to do it?

In his second exchange with Polus, Socrates argues that for something or someone to be “powerful,” they must bring about the real good for human
beings (466b-68e). In his view, rhetoric is powerful only if it can promote the real goods of human life, justice and education (paideia), not otherwise (469a-70e). If it does not know these are the true ends and constituents of a good life, the skill will do more harm than good, and what seems to be a genuine expertise and art (techne), will be in fact nothing more than a knack (empeiria) for producing pleasure and flattery—which is what many of the “arts” and businesses are all about, catering to desires that aim at pleasure, not real human well-being. During this exchange, Socrates makes the remarkable claims that “It is better to suffer wrong than do it” and “It is better, if you have done wrong, not to get away with it.” But are these universal, rational moral principles, as Socrates insists?

Polus calls Socrates’ arguments “childish” and “ridiculous,” and defends the life of the tyrant Archelaus—a life of absolute freedom and power—against Socrates’ ideal of the good life, the life centered in justice and philosophical inquiry. But Polus (“Colt”) is led by his own admissions to agree with Socrates’ conclusions, just as was his teacher, much against his will: he is “tamed” by Socrates’ moral dialectic. In two remarkable arguments, Socrates shows: (1) that if, as Polus admits, it is more shameful to do wrong than to suffer it, then it must be more painful or harmful, but as it is not more painful, it must be more harmful and therefore worse (474c-75e); and (2) likewise, that if it is more ‘honorable’ to be caught and punished for wrongdoing than to get away with it, it must either be more pleasurable or beneficial, and by elimination it is more beneficial and good (esp. 476a-77a) These are interesting and important arguments in the Gorgias, though they certainly can be questioned.

The dialogue then proceeds to a third stage, when Callicles enters the discussion, objecting, just as Polus had, that this time it is Polus who has been swayed by a conventional understanding of what is noble and shameful; and that Socrates used this to trick him into the admissions that were his downfall. In Callicles’ view, Polus was right to insist that it was better to be unjust and powerful than to be just and lack power, but he was mistaken when he admitted that it was more shameful. The truth is, Callicles insists, that ‘by nature’ it is both worse and more shameful to be the victim of wrongdoing and unable to prevent it, and better and more noble or honorable to be able to do wrong to others and get away with it. The only thing that is really shameful, in Callicles’ view, is not being a winner in the competition that is life. (Compare the infamous quotes: “Winning is everything” and “Might makes right.”)

How is truth established?

Before examining the discussion with Callicles, let’s consider Socrates’ criticism of rhetoric. He says that whereas the rhetorician claims to be able to produce belief or opinion (doxa) in his student, i.e. in the person persuaded by him, that person typically does not learn why he holds that belief. Socrates
claims that a true art of rhetoric would not do this—it would (i) persuade its audience of beliefs that were good for their minds and character, and (ii) persuade them in such a way that they could give the reason (logos) for holding that belief, i.e. they would possess a “justification” of it. A true art of rhetoric would both aim at the right end, and use the right logical means.

Socrates presents dialectic as an objective method of moral inquiry, in which the interlocutor must be honest about his opinions, seek the definitions of moral concepts, be open to refutation by exposing the inconsistency of his beliefs, and be willing to seek a consistent, rational point of view. He offers an impressive demonstration of what the “philosophical method” of truth-seeking involves. We still wonder: is Socratic dialectic a valid method of truth-testing in ethical and political matters?

Socratic dialectic seems to offer a method of falsification of ethical beliefs, but it is less clear if it offers a method of verification. Socrates can expose inconsistency, which shows that his interlocutors “do not know” what they are talking about, but Socrates does not lead them to truth, except insofar as he suggests ideas for them to explore on their own (as we will see in discussing the Euthyphro). And yet, Socrates thinks that everyone, if they come to understand their innermost beliefs, will come to see that they are the same as the moral beliefs that he holds! And these beliefs, he insists, have been critically tested, i.e. are consistent, and have never been refuted—a point he values highly: “I think it is better to have the vast majority of men disagree with me and contradict me, than to be out of harmony with myself, to contradict myself, though I am only one” (482c).

Socrates is careful not to be dogmatic in the way in which he describes his moral knowledge: (a) he does not possess absolute knowledge or objective certainty (508e-509a); but (b) he possesses human knowledge—he can prove his opponents’ arguments are inconsistent and can defend his own positions against all critics, can “give an account” (didonai logon) of them. Even though his beliefs are still open to refutation, Socrates thinks he can objectively “justify” them, by defending them against others’ criticisms. In contrast to Gorgias, Polus and Callicles, Socrates says he is uninterested in victory or profit, but insists that he has found an objective method to test the truth of his and others’ beliefs—even if he can never know with certainty that he has attained it. Socrates is a classical rationalist in that he believes in the power of human reason to guide a person toward a truly good life—in contrast to the Sophists, who think that reason can lead us only to find the most effective means to attain our ends, which are set by personal choice or desire instilled in us by nature or socialization.
Callicles

The third Sophist we will consider is Callicles, a fictional character in Plato’s dialogue *Gorgias*, who presents views associated with the Sophists Antiphon and Thrasyvachus. Callicles represents an important concept for Plato, the ideal of life of domination.

Callicles develops four ethical and political themes in his discussion with Socrates in the *Gorgias*.

1. Naturalism (or realism): “By nature (physis) it is worse and more disgraceful to suffer wrong than to do it; but by law and morality (nomos), it is worse and more dishonorable to do wrong.” There is a true way to live—by nature, not by conventional right. (The “I” is set against the “We.”)

2. Egoism: “If one whose nature was equal to it would arise, he would throw off our chains and charms and moral codes contrary to nature.” Everyone should seek their own self-interest in what they do, rather than seek to benefit others. This is to seek what is naturally good. (The I’s all compete to be “#1.”)

3. Aristocracy: “Nature itself reveals that it is fitting for better and more able men to have more and rule over weaker and less capable men.” Morality in every society teaches us to be moral, law-abiding and cooperative; but in reality, every society is hierarchical, competition drives all men, and this is as it should be, for aristocracy (from *aristos* = best, *cratos* = power to) is more natural than democracy. The natural master recognizes that life is competition, and rises up to seize what is his by natural right. (Real men become CEO’s and winners; nice guys finish last.)

4. Hedonism: “Real excellence and happiness is nothing but the ability to expand and satisfy one’s desires to excess, the freedom to do what you want and get away with it.” The real men or natural masters liberate themselves from the internalized chains of conventional morality (conscience, moral rules) and enjoy the life of the truly free man, who maximizes his power to satisfy his natural desires and obtain the natural good for man, the most possible pleasure (Greek: *hedone*) in life. (The “I’s” define for themselves how to live, and don’t just do what the “We” says they should.)

Socrates does not reject all of Callicles’ views. He seems to agree with both the view that there must be a basis for ethics in reality or nature, not merely convention, and also with the view that a person is right to be a rational egoist (ethical egoism), that we should seek to determine what is truly good for us and pursue it; if not that we should never do good for others; he disagrees, however, on where our self-interest truly lies. He feels he needs to examine what Callicles means by aristocracy, e.g. if he means the ‘truly wise’ should govern, and he rejects Callicles’ identification of the good with pleasure.

Thus both Socrates and Callicles, in contrast to Protagoras and Gorgias, embrace *metaethical objectivism* in ethics, the view that ethical statements can be
true or false, depending on whether they correspond to the true good for man. In contrast to Callicles, however, who asserts his ‘realism’ as it were self-evident, Socrates is a methodological objectivist concerning ethics: ethical beliefs must be tested and proven through rational examination and justification, to be established as true or false. For Socrates, this process is never final: a person’s beliefs can have withstood countless tests of dialectical examination, but they are always methodologically open to further critical evaluation; we can never know absolutely that our moral beliefs are true.

**What is the good life?**

It is on the question of ethics, on the content of the good life that Socrates and Callicles are most sharply opposed (482c-488b, 491e-492d, 499e-500d). Socrates has a very different understanding of freedom (eleutheria), virtue (arête), and happiness (eudaimonia) than Callicles. To Socrates, freedom does not consist in the ability to do whatever you want to do, but in knowing which desires are good for you and which not, and willingly constraining the bad and acting on the good (true freedom = rational self-mastery). Happiness is based on the establishment of good hierarchy in one’s soul, with reason governing one’s desires and ambitions, not being the servant of sensual pleasure and political power. (Cf. Socrates’ ‘leaky jar’ argument, that the sensualist is continually emptying and refilling his senses with pleasure, and never finds the contentment of the self-governed man, 492c-95e, and his picture at 508a of the kosmos as a rational world-order in which the wise and virtuous man makes his home.)

Socrates’ own beliefs would appear to be that pleasure is not the good for man; the good is more fundamental than the pleasant. The primary fact of human life is not pleasure and pain, but the needs and wants of man, and there is a natural hierarchy in these desires, which reflects the true self of human being, in which the powers of the soul are higher than those of the body, in which the life of inquiry and reason is higher by nature than the life driven by desire for pleasure and power, in which living in harmony and justice with others is better than striving to outdo and outsmart them. The good life for man is the life in accordance with a well-ordered human soul, a life of human excellence or virtue, not the life of pleasure. (499c-500d, 503e-505c; summary 506c-509c).

Plato’s Gorgias invites us to think ask ourselves: what is “the good life” for a human being? Does it consist in achieving, by ruthless daring and self-interested calculation, the natural goods of pleasure and power, as Callicles says? Or does the wise person seek to live in relations of justice and friendship with other virtuous people, and thereby achieve the true goods of life, as Socrates says? And is there knowledge concerning these matters, or merely belief, albeit beliefs that might be tested and examined in critical dialogue with others?
What would you do?

- **Free money?** You go to an ATM and instead of the $200.00 you asked for, the machine spits out $20,000, but your receipt shows 200.00. You learn that if this happens, if the receipt says $200.00, the money cannot be traced to you. “Maybe some manager somewhere would be penalized, but the guy who got the money would never be caught.” Would you keep the money?

- **Ethics vs. Happiness?** As part of a “scientific experiment,” you are seated with 7 others in a room with buzzers in front of you. At a bell, the first person to push the buzzer will win $1,000,000, tax free, and will be legally free from punishment. But when the buzzer is pressed, an indigent man without a family living in India will die. Would you try to press the buzzer? (As part of the thought-experiment, you are certain that everything you are told is true.)

- **Self-defense?** Same situation as #2, but now the person to be killed will be the last person to press the buzzer. Would you now try to press the buzzer? (Again you are certain this is all true.)

Concerning #1, some people say they wouldn’t do it because they would be punished by God. But what if we assume there is no God? Would it then be rational to keep the money, if (a) you want it and (b) there was no punishment in the afterlife? (Another question: does the amount of money matter? Would you give it back if it were $200 when you’d asked for $20. How high would the amount you got ‘for free’ have to be, for you to take the money and not return it?

Concerning #2, many people say that they would not press the buzzer, because “I couldn’t live with myself.” But what if you were offered a pill that makes you to remember inheriting the money. Would you press the buzzer and take the pill?

Concerning #3, most people say that they would press the buzzer “in self-defense.” But some say they couldn’t kill someone who might be innocent.

What is the right thing to do? What would you do?