

Callicles on Nature and Justice in Plato's *Gorgias*

[Socrates has argued that "suffering injustice is better than doing it," and Polus was unable to refute him. Callicles then argues that Socrates' philosophy of "doing justice" is unnatural folly.]

Callicles: What you say, Socrates, is utter folly. For by the law of nature, to suffer injustice is the greater disgrace because the greater evil; but conventionally, to do evil is the more disgraceful. For the suffering of injustice is not the part of a man, but of a slave, who indeed had better die than live; since when he is wronged and trampled upon, he is unable to help himself, or any other about whom he cares. It is both better and more honorable to be the one doing wrong, than the helpless victim, in the real world of battle and conflict.

The reason, as I conceive, is that the makers of laws are the majority who are weak; and they, make laws and distribute praises and censures with a view to themselves and to their own interests; and they terrify the stronger sort of men, and those who are able to get the better of them in order that they may not get the better of them; and they say, that dishonesty is shameful and unjust; meaning, by the word injustice, the desire of a man to have more than his neighbours; for knowing their own inferiority, I suspect that they are too glad of equality. And therefore the endeavor to have more than the many, is conventionally said to be shameful and unjust, and is called injustice, whereas nature herself intimates that it is just for the better to have more than the worse, the more powerful than the weaker; and in many ways she shows, among men as well as among animals, and indeed among whole cities and races, that justice consists in the superior ruling over and having more than the inferior.

For on what principle of justice did Xerxes invade Hellas, or his father the Scythians? (not to speak of numberless other examples). Nay, but these are the men who act according to nature; yes, by Heaven, and according to the law (*nomos*, convention) of nature: not, perhaps, according to that artificial, human law, which we invent and impose upon our fellows, of whom we take the best and strongest from their youth upwards, and tame them like young lions, charming them with the sound of the voice, and saying to them, that with equality they must be content, and that the equal is the honorable and the just.

But if there were a man who had sufficient force, he would shake off and break through, and escape from all this; he would trample under foot all our formulas and spells and charms, and all our laws which are against nature: the slave would rise in rebellion and be lord over us, and the light of natural justice would shine forth. And this I take to be the sentiment of Pindar, when he says in his poem, that *Law is the king of all, of mortals as well as of immortals*; this, as he says, *Makes might to be right, the superior man doing violence* as I infer from the deeds of Heracles, for without buying them--I do not remember the exact words, but the meaning is--that without buying them, and without their being given to him, he carried off the oxen of Geryon, according to the "law of natural right," and that the oxen and other possessions of the weaker and inferior properly belong to the stronger and superior.

And this is true, as you may discover, if you will leave philosophy and go on to higher things: for philosophy, Socrates, if pursued in moderation and at the proper age, is an elegant accomplishment, but too much ruins a person. If he carries philosophy into later life, he will be ignorant of all the things a man needs to know: he will be inexperienced in politics, and in how

to talk with men, and he will be ignorant of human pleasures and desires and of human nature in general. In particular, he will be ignorant of the great truth, that the real man does not restrain his desires, but indulges and feeds them, and learns to have more and ever-more pleasure, even as he learns to rule over more and ever-more men.

And please don't tell me that a man should "live within his limits" and "rule himself" and "not fall into excess." How can a real man be happy if he is enslaved to anyone at all? Again: nature tells us that the man who wants to live life to the fullest will allow his appetites to grow as large as possible, and will nurture and cultivate them, and devote himself to them with courage and intelligence, and fill them whenever he has a wish to.

Of course this is not possible for the many, for ordinary people. So they criticize and chastise people who do, calling them "shameless" and "immoral." But to live that way—governed by what most people think—is what is really shameful and slavish. No, the real truth is this: that *wantoness, lack of self-limitation, excess, and freedom, if available in good supply, are true human excellence and virtue and happiness*, and all these other things are just words and "social contracts" that go against nature, and are just worthless nonsense.

[Socrates replies that he is delighted, because Callicles combines the three essential qualities needed in a true dialogue partner-knowledge, good-will, and outspokenness. So now they will have a true test and trial by inquiry, as to what constitutes the good life--whether it is the quiet life of inquiry and philosophy, or the active life of power and pleasure.]