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Liberty, Democracy, and the Temptations to Tyranny in the Dialogues of Plato

Edited by

Charlotte C. S. Thomas

MERCER UNIVERSITY PRESS
Macon, Georgia
2021

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This collection of essays is based on the 2019 A. V. Elliott Conference for Great Books and Ideas, the 12th annual conference sponsored by the McDonald Center for America's Founding Principles, entitled "Liberty and Tyranny in Plato."

The McDonald Center for America's Founding Principles began as a small conference in the Spring of 2008. It secured initial funding that summer through Mercer University's Academic Initiatives Monetary (AIM) fund and has grown substantially each subsequent year. Neither this volume, nor the conference it is based upon, nor any of the other important work now done by the McDonald Center would have been possible without the foresight of Mercer President, William D. Underwood, the confidence of the AIM committee, the support of then College of Liberal Arts Dean Lake Lambert, and the entrepreneurial spirit of the Center's founders. Anita Gustafson, who now serves as Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, has continued in this tradition and shown the McDonald Center consistent support and encouragement.

In the Spring of 2013, the McDonald Center received a generous endowment gift from Mr. A. V. Elliott, for whom our annual conference is now named. Also in 2013, Thomas and Ramona McDonald made an endowment gift to support all of the Center's work, and with it they gave us their name. We are, and always will be, in deep debt to the Elliots and McDonalds for their support.

Our conference on Liberty and Tyranny in Plato was both a gathering of Plato scholars on Mercer's main campus in Macon, Georgia, and also the culmination of a semester-long reading group made up of Mercer faculty and students. I would like to thank all of the participants in that group by name. Each of them contributed significantly to the excellent conversation that animated our conference and this volume of essays, which it inspired. So, thank you: Will Jordan, Kevin Honeycutt, Elizabeth Harper, Thomas Bullington, Marc Jolley, Garland Crawford, Vasile Stanescu, Erin

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used to say, good philosophy is like good theology. It does not dispel mystery. It only deepens it.

GORGIAS AS REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM ARGUMENT: SOCRATES, TRUE POLITICIAN BUT FAILED TEACHER?

Jeffrey Dirk Wilson

The *Gorgias* examines the relationship between politics and philosophy and the relationship of rhetoric to both. The longest of Plato's undivided works, E. R. Dodds notes its tragic and even bitter tone,¹ but what tragedy and why the bitterness? I suggest that this dialogue is colored by Plato's own disillusionment with the flawed character of human nature and the inability of his beloved teacher to overcome that human frailty with his teaching. I shall examine the final quarter of the dialogue (503c-527e) where the role of political leader as magistrate, i.e., as chief teacher of virtue in the political community, is considered. Throughout the dialogue, Socrates offers the refrain to his interlocutors, "Refute me, or be refuted!" After coming to the conclusion that the four truly great political leaders of Athens had failed as teachers of virtue and despite his insistence on rational refutation, Socrates closes his account of political truth with a myth that has the character of a folk story (523a-526d). This juxtaposition of rational argument and a folkloric myth is itself aporetic because myth is aimed at that part of human nature which is below rationality, namely the imagination. It might be argued that Plato's myths are rational myths as distinguished from Homeric myths which are poetic, but myth taken *qua* myth is non-rational in its character. They are, in the final account, stories. This *aporia* of rational refutation juxtaposed with myth is not discussed by Socrates, but is, rather, enacted by him. What is the relationship of human rationality to the non-rational aspect of human nature? In the dialogues that

¹ Eric Robertson Dodds, "Introduction" and "Commentary" in Plato *Gorgias: A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eric Robertson Dodds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 19.

conclude with explicit *aporiai*, the *aporia* itself sheds light on the theme of the dialogue. The closing *aporia* to the *Gorgias* sheds such light on Plato's lending a tragic and even bitter tone to the *Gorgias* and, thereby, also invites a reconsideration of the dialogue as a whole. Before this proposed resolution to fundamental questions about how to read the *Gorgias* can be concluded, however, another question must be considered, namely: Does the modern, i.e., post-Cartesian, understanding of the intellect in relation to the imagination inhibit an accurate reading of Plato's representation of their relationship?

Juxtaposition of Rational Refutation and Myth

Three-quarters of the way through the *Gorgias*, Socrates challenges Callicles to name political orators in Athenian history who truly cared for the citizenry. Callicles names four: Themistocles, Cimon, Miltiades, and Pericles (503a-c). The first duty of anyone concerned with the public trust is to make the citizenry as good as possible (513e-514a). Socrates proceeds to demonstrate the failure of the Four as political orators because, in each case, the people turned against them, i.e., the people became worse rather than better during the guidance of those statesmen (e.g., 515a-b, 519b-d). A shepherd who cannot lead his sheep is a failure as a shepherd. If Pericles and the others failed as statesmen because the Athenians became worse instead of better during their tenure, then by implication Socrates—who claims to practice "the true politics" (521d)²—must be a failed teacher for the same reason. That conclusion, however, is absurd because Socrates was the greatest of teachers, and yet, if that is so, how could Athenians not have been improved by his teaching? The *Gorgias* (especially 503b-527e) is viewed here through the lens of this *aporia*.

It is impertinent, perhaps, to suggest that one has gotten the point Plato was making that so many better scholars have missed. I do think, however, that Professor Dodds trips over the point of this

² Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 864; hereafter, Cooper, 864.

extended argument, and his citations of others who criticized the argument in antiquity evidences a long history of tripping over the very point Plato was trying to make. Dodds comments:

This passage was much criticized in antiquity, as appears not only from Aristides' extant *Defence of the Four* (*orat.* xlv) but from the *ἀπολογία* recorded by OI [Olympiodori in *Platonis Gorgiam Commentaria*, ed. W. Norvin (1036)] (192. 3ff.) and the somewhat embarrassed *apologia* he offers. People asked whether Socrates had made Alcibiades and Critias better men, whether Dionysius II a better man, and the Athenians' treatment of Socrates did not disprove his claim to be a statesman. To the last point the answer no doubt is that Socrates was not a statesman and did not pretend to know how to teach *ἀρετή*; if Plato makes him claim to be a true *πολιτικός* (521d), it is only in the sense of claiming to know the general principle on which the statesman should act. But the argument of the passage is in any case a weak one.³

Dodds goes on to provide various reasons for the failure of a statesman and even of the citizenry (355-56), but here, again, he misses the point. After all, if we take Socrates's argument and challenge him on the same points on which he criticizes the Four, we can reasonably ask, did Socrates improve Callicles, or Charmides, or Alcibiades, or even his devoted disciples in the *Phaedo* whose passions are so to the fore and their rationality so in retreat that they weep and wail as Socrates, the model for the later Stoics, prepares to die?

At a very minimum, the discussion suggests the question of why is it that the political craft is unlike any other? One possible answer to that question—an answer that Dodds does not include in his list of possible explanations for the failure of the Four—is that politics has to do essentially with the human's soul and only accidentally with the material realm. It is, indeed, the material realm in which politics is played out, but it is the human soul that in every case is the motive force. If that is the case, however, then why did Socrates,

³ Dodds, *Gorgias*, 355.

most rational of men, still manage to get himself condemned to death by his fellow citizens?

Dodds rightly notes that "the *Gorgias* stands out among the early dialogues by the tragic tone of its later pages."⁴ He is also surely right in claiming that part of the reason for "the tragic tone" is that Plato realized that 404 B.C.—the year of Athens' conclusive defeat by Sparta—marked "the end of an age, and the clock could not be put back."⁵ In the aftermath of that defeat Athens betrayed her noblest citizen.⁶ However fitting such a lament might be from Plato or any other of the noble Athenians in the decades following that decisive and enduring eclipse, Plato's gaze was directed to the eternal even when he felt most keenly the tragedy of the temporal. I suggest that the tragic tone of the dialogue is due to the realization that by the very arguments presented by Socrates to Callicles—and as rightly observed by ancient critics referenced by Dodds—Socrates himself was a failed teacher. For Plato, that was the *reductio ad absurdum* conclusion which was both nonsense and the necessary conclusion of the argument's logic. If Socrates was the true practitioner of politics, and if Socrates was the wisest of men, and if Socrates was best of men and greatest of teachers—which certainly Plato believed—then why was he unable to make human beings better? Why did the people he sought to improve, in turn, condemn him to death? That was for Plato the truly tragic reality.

While one must apply to Socrates as teacher the same test as he applied to the Four, there are also ways that Socrates can be distinguished from them. Dodds comments on 517a7-518c1: "Plato

⁴ Dodds, *Gorgias*, 19

⁵ Dodds, *Gorgias*, 34.

⁶ On 521a2-522e8, Dodds writes: "Here we reach the bitter conclusion of a long debate: Athens has one man who knows what true statesmanship is—and because of his knowledge that man must one day receive his death-sentence at the hands of 'a jury of children.' In choosing the manner of life Socrates chose also his manner of death, and chose it with his eyes open.... For Plato the trial of Socrates was, as Friedländer has said, 'the crucial experiment' which tested the worth of the two opposed ways of life and set the seal of authority on Socrates' mission." Dodds, *Gorgias*, 368.

recognizes that what the Four Men did, they did well. The fault, in his view, lay not in their incompetence, but in their misconception of the statesman's task, which is primarily educational—he defined it in the *Laws*...(650b6)."⁷ Zuckert comments on this point as well, "Persuasion, and thus the power of rhetoric, is not simply a product of the skill of the speaker; it also depends on the relation the speaker has to the audience and thus on the character of the audience."⁸ Both Dodds and Zuckert show that the "Four Men" did as well as could be done with the vision they had and with the tools at their disposal. The work of chief magistrate as teacher is all too easily forgotten, neglected, or missed altogether in the first place, and yet it is as teacher that the statesman can affect the political community most. But by the standard of this realization—the primacy of the teaching role—Socrates is even more culpable than the Four. They did well what they understood to be their duty, but they under-conceived their duty and, thus, only had tools inadequate for their highest task. Socrates understood the character of the people he addressed, and he understood his true duty as a politician, namely to teach the people virtue, and he had the tools of philosophy as well as of rhetoric, and yet he failed as much as the Four.

There is implied here an essential teaching responsibility of statesmen. Political oratory is the primary tool of that teaching responsibility. While Socrates argues that political orators are accountable for the virtues and vices of their citizenry, unanswered is whether a people—the communal citizenry—can be taught virtue (520d). Further, the unasked question is whether Socrates is culpable for not teaching Athenians gentleness. Plato's response to these unanswered and unasked questions is to have Socrates present an eschatological myth at the end of the dialogue, but before he pitches

⁷ Professor Zuckert cites James I. Kastely for pointing "out that E. R. Dodds, Brian Vickers, and Terrence Irwin all fail to note that Socrates admits that these statesmen were exceptionally able servants, even though they failed to improve the character of the people," but the quotation from Dodds shows that, at least, for him, that is simply not the case. Catherine H. Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 554.

⁸ Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*, 539

his "refute me, or be refuted" mantra one last time. Is the reader to infer that while there is no earthly way for a political orator to teach the people virtue, there might still be a heavenly way to do so?

The problem of the myth is compounded by two considerations. First, it follows immediately after Socrates' claim to be a true practitioner of politics: "I believe that I'm one of the few Athenians—so as not to say I'm the only one, but the only one among our contemporaries—to take up the true political craft and practice the true politics. This is because the speeches I make on occasion do not aim at gratification but at what's best" (521d).⁹ The second is that he goes on to compare his work to that of a physician who might be accused by a pastry chef to a jury of children of not giving them pleasure (521e-522a). This is a moment where the dramatic depth of the dialogue is on full display. Plato has his literary Socrates, putatively years before the trial and death of the historical Socrates, characterizing that trial and death. The presence of Chaerephon at the outset of the dialogue (447a-c) with occasional reappearances (458c and 481b)—lest readers forget that he is present throughout the conversation—serves to remind readers of Plato's *Apology* in which Plato's Socrates, during his trial, makes reference to his late friend's inquiry of the Delphic Oracle whether anyone was wiser than Socrates (*Apology* 21a). The mentions of Chaerephon effectively import the action of the *Apology* into the *Gorgias*, allowing for the implication that Plato, as author, intends readers to identify Meletus, the prosecutor in the *Apology*, as the pastry chef in the *Gorgias* accusing the physician, Socrates, for not giving his patients pleasure.

And yet—the reader must say—children can be very fond of their doctors even though they have at times inflicted pain, say in the sewing of stitches on an ugly wound. This part of the literary Socrates' argument justifying the historical Socrates really does not hold. For all that Socrates has emphasized rational argument, he has committed the logical fallacy of the straw man here, i.e., casting Meletus as a pastry chef. But that too is a standard trick of Plato's Socrates. Homer plays such a role in the *Republic* and in the *Theaetetus*.

⁹ Cooper, 864.

Heraclitus and especially Protagoras are straw men in the *Theaetetus*, as is even the more favorably depicted Thales. Earlier in the *Gorgias*, Socrates has said that laughter is not an argument (473e), but it is mockery to the end of laughter that Socrates uses against his putative accuser, the pastry chef. It is not rational argument here that Socrates uses, but rather rhetorical sleight of hand—exactly what he says he has no skill in doing. But this too is standard fare in Plato's dialogues: Socrates does what he condemns; it is just that he does it more brilliantly than those he condemns.

The putative commitment of Socrates of the *Gorgias* to *elenchos*, refutation, is specifically reinforced a few lines later, just prior to beginning the myth:

Now if someone were to refute me and prove that I am unable to provide *this* refutation for myself or for anyone else, I would feel shame at being refuted....If I were put to death for lack of this ability, I really would be upset. But if I came to my end because of a deficiency in flattering oratory, I know that you'd see me bear my death with ease. For no one who isn't totally bereft of reason and courage is afraid to die; doing what's unjust is what he's afraid of" (522d-e).¹⁰

Socrates of the *Gorgias*, having told his interlocutors that he is the one true practitioner of politics then alive and that he would only be ashamed if he were refuted in a rational argument, immediately thereafter launches into a genre that precisely cannot be refuted because it is not subject to rational argument whatsoever, namely an eschatological myth in which, in a word, he tells us that those who live justly on earth shall be rewarded hereafter while those who live unjustly shall be punished.

This myth, along with its parallels in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, makes a series of claims about the after-life that simply cannot be tested. Professor Dodds even distinguishes the *Gorgias* version of the myth from the other two versions. He says, "It displays none of the quasi-scientific trappings of the myths in the *Phaedo* and the

¹⁰ Cooper, 865 (emphasis in Cooper).

Republic, but has the directness and vividness of folktale, and keeps something of the folktale *naïveté* in its style."¹¹ Of course, as Professor Dodds also points out, Socrates—and we can add Plato as author—creates some distance from this myth by observing that he had heard it from someone else (524a8-b1).¹² But seven times (at least), Socrates calls this myth a *logos*, three times at the myth's beginning, once in the middle, and—just in case we had forgotten—once more at the end. Indeed, he calls it a very beautiful *logos* (522e5, 523a1 and 2, 527b4, c6). Three times (at least)—beginning, middle and end—Socrates affirms that he believes the myth to be true (523a2, 524a8-b2, 526d3), and—as shall be discussed below—still twice more as the dialogue comes to a conclusion. In other words, it is as if Socrates is telling a story to the children of the jury whom Meletus the pastry chef has tried to influence against him, and assuring them that the story is true, in a way not unlike the way parents tell their children about Santa Claus and to the same moral end, namely that the children should, therefore, behave themselves. Socrates doth protest too much, methinks. He has abandoned the rational argument of refutation for a myth that is not subject to refutation and also is not—unlike poor Santa Claus—subject to empirical disproof.

After telling this myth, he acknowledges that some may think it “an old wives’ tale” and “feel contempt for it” (527a5-6). The myth complete, he returns to the argument that he claims to be irrefutable: “This one alone survives refutation and remains steady: that doing what’s unjust is more to be guarded against than suffering it, and that it’s not *seeming* to be good but *being* good that a man should take care of more than anything, both in his public and private life.”¹³ That statement embodies a range of metaphysical claims, but at present I want to focus on the relationship of the rational

¹¹ Dodds, *Gorgias*, 372-73. Thanks to Dr. Mary Townsend for pointing out the similarly folkloric character of the origins myth presented by Protagoras in the eponymous dialogue and that both myths share a positive view of shame in conjunction with justice (April 6, 2019).

¹² Dodds, *Gorgias*, 373.

¹³ Plato, *Gorgias* 527b; Cooper, 868 (emphasis in Cooper).

argument Socrates makes to the myth that he tells and which, multiple times, he calls a *logos*. The myth intervenes between the earlier rational arguments and their final reprise. The myth, moreover, follows more or less immediately on Socrates’ claim to be the only true practitioner of politics then living. What is there to make of this?

One cannot remind one’s self too often that Plato was not merely a philosophical genius, but also a literary genius and that—to borrow from the title of a book by Seth Benardete—the argument is often in the action.¹⁴ To read Plato’s texts well, one must always watch what Plato as author is *doing* as well as to listen to what his characters are *saying*. I suggest that the juxtaposition of Socrates’ claim of the irrefutable argument, on the one hand, and the myth, on the other, tells us that the true practitioner of politics will tell myths, myths that reinforce the rational arguments and to tell myths which cannot be refuted by argument because myth as genre is not subject to refutation. There is a sense in which Socrates’ steady drumbeat throughout the *Gorgias* of “refute me or be refuted” is a rhetorical ruse. He is guilty of philosophical legerdemain. While he is distracting us with his cast iron rational arguments, he is pulling a myth out of his magician’s hat, and a myth which he insists is a *logos* as true as anything that could be said in rational argument.

In fact, though Socrates calls his myth a *logos*, it is not an appeal to the intellect—as rational refutation is—but rather it is an appeal to the imagination. Is there anything earlier in the *Gorgias* that prepares the reader for this juxtaposition of myth and *logos*?¹⁵

¹⁴ Seth Benardete, *The Argument of the Action: Essays on Greek Poetry and Philosophy*, ed. with an introduction by Ronna Burger and Michael Davis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹⁵ In the question and answer period following the presentation of my paper, I actually asked this question. In truth, I posed the question only rhetorically. Nicholas D. Smith, Socrates-like, rose from his seat, and said, “Well, actually there is.” He went on to point to passages where Socrates appeals to the imagination, to the passions, of his hearers throughout the dialogue, juxtaposed to the rational arguments he was making all the while. After the conclusion of the formal session. Smith, along with Catherine Zuckert, Alex Priou, one or two others, and I walked together from the room where our formal sessions were held to the hotel. Smith and I continued the conversation, the dialogue, continuing as Socrates with

I suggest that the puzzlement over the myth is, at least, partly due to an implicitly Cartesian reading of the *Gorgias* and of the Platonic texts in general. In order to resolve the *aporía* of *elenchos* versus myth, it is helpful, perhaps even necessary, to de-Cartesianize our reading of Plato.

De-Cartesianizing Our Reading of Plato

It is a commonplace amongst philosophers that Descartes only read one of Plato's dialogues, the *Phaedo*, and that one he read badly. In the *Phaedo*, Plato's Socrates makes some of his sharpest distinctions between body and soul. Speaking approximately, Descartes took those body-soul distinctions and radicalized them, giving us what Gilbert Ryle, in *The Concept of Mind*, denominates, "with deliberate abusiveness, as 'the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine.'" ¹⁶ This dogma "is so prevalent among theorists and even among laymen that it deserves to be described as the official theory... which hails chiefly from Descartes." ¹⁷ He summarizes the dogma: "Every human being has both a body and a mind.... His body and his mind are ordinarily harnessed together, but after the death of the body his mind may continue to exist and function." ¹⁸ What I am suggesting takes Ryle's

a chief interlocutor and others along the way. I recount the ideas I heard in Smith's words without claiming that I record his speech here. Smith spoke of how Cartesian our readings tended to be, reading with a Cartesian lens that filtered out all that was going on in the Platonic dialogues that did not cohere with the rational argument taking place at the most obvious level. Then, when confronted with something like the myth at the end of the *Gorgias* that did not fit with our reading, we could only be puzzled. The question was what were we going to do, having been confronted with an immovable obstacle like a myth that was obviously important to Plato's Socrates and which came at the point of the dialogue where one could reasonably expect some kind of resolution, but where we are met with a bigger *aporía* than we had hitherto tackled? This was an epiphanic moment for me, for which I thank Professor Smith. I shall never read Plato's texts the same again. What follows is my own initial response to Professor Smith's challenge. The experience was, for me, like taking a walk in one of Plato's dialogues.

¹⁶ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 17.

¹⁷ Ryle, *Concept of Mind*, 13.

¹⁸ Ryle, *Concept of Mind*, 13.

claims a step further, namely that this Cartesian dogma permeates Western culture to the extent that all of us—philosophers and ditch-diggers alike—are Cartesians.

What I am suggesting is that even the most serious scholar of Plato can give Plato's texts a Cartesian reading without wanting or knowing that that is what one is doing. I am suggesting further, that overtly seeking to over-ride one's Cartesian default setting can lead to a fresh reading of Plato's texts, and in specific here, the *Gorgias*.

How, then, do we de-Cartesianize our reading of Plato's texts? Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, in their article "Socrates on the Emotions," show that Plato's Socrates recognizes persuasion cannot be complete through rational argument alone, because some of the most deeply held beliefs have a non-rational basis in "our natural attractions and aversions": "The beliefs created by these natural attractions and aversions, because they derive from non-rational processes, are veridically unreliable, but are also to some degree (by their nature as non-rational) resistant to rational persuasion." ¹⁹ At the beginning of *Republic* 2, Glaucon asks Socrates, "Do you want to seem to have persuaded us... or do you want to truly convince us?" Socrates replies, "I want truly to convince you." ²⁰

If we take as a general premise that Plato's Socrates wants truly to convince his interlocutors, then it is necessary that he address the whole human person, i.e., the human imagination as well as the human intellect. Brickhouse and Smith do well to call these processes of persuasion "non-rational," rather than irrational, for the imagination *qua* imagination is precisely not part of the human's rational apparatus. It can and does interact with the intellect, but considered unto itself, it is something entirely other than rational. It is only with respect to reason that something can be called irrational, i.e.,

¹⁹ Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, "Socrates on the Emotions," *Plato Journal*, 15, 14-15. Quoted in Jose Lourenço and Nicholas D. Smith, "Socratic Epistemology," in *Knowledge in Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Nicholas D. Smith, vol. 1 of *The Philosophy of Knowledge: a History*, ed. Stephen Hetherington, Nicholas D. Smith, Henrik Lagerlund, Stephen Gaukroger, Markos Valaris (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 72.

²⁰ Plato, *Rep.* 2.357a4-b2; Cooper, 998.

contrary to reason. The mistaking of the “non-rational” for “irrational” lies at the heart of Descartes’s “Ghost in the Machine.” Descartes famously writes, “The soul by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from my body, and is even more easy to know than is the latter; and even if the body were not, the soul would not cease to be what it is.”²¹ It would be wrong and even silly to suggest that Plato was not a dualist, but one can conclude from the work of Nicholas Smith and his colleagues, Thomas Brickhouse and Jose Lourenço, that it is correct, obvious, and even sobering to conclude that Plato was not a Cartesian dualist. To employ—as if true—the Platonic insight of Smith and Brickhouse that the beliefs derived “from non-rational processes, . . . are . . . resistant to rational persuasion,” just because we are shown and perhaps persuaded rationally does not entail dislodging beliefs derived from non-rational processes. In other words, even if we are persuaded rationally that the Cartesian “Ghost in the Machine” is wrong as an account of human being, that alone does not touch our default settings as Cartesians. To change those default settings requires address not only to reason but also to the non-rational processes, in short, the imagination broadly construed, i.e., the imagination of the Divided Line that apprehends reality thrice removed from reality.²²

²¹ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. David Weissman (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), 22 (*Discourse*, Part 4).

²² Plato, *Rep.* 6.509d-510a; reprised in 7.533e-534a. If someone suggests that I have operated by philosophical sleight of hand, importing arguments and ideas from the *Republic* into my argument about the *Gorgias*, I point out that just as Socrates of the *Gorgias* addresses the intellect through argument and the imagination through myth, so does Socrates of the *Republic*. Not only is there the Myth of Er (*Rep.* 10.614a-621b), but the Myth of Gyges (2.359c-360b), and perhaps most tellingly the Myth of the Metals (3.414d-415d). In the dialogue surrounding the Myth of Metals, Socrates actually models Plato’s dualism by speaking to the need of addressing both the rational and non-rational faculties of the human being: “I think we must observe them at all ages to see whether they are guardians of this conviction and make sure that neither compulsion nor magic spells will get them to discard or forget their belief that they must do what is best for the city. . . . By ‘compelled’ I mean those whom pain or suffering causes to change their

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates shows interest in the passions throughout the dialogue. Consider, for example, the way Socrates juxtaposes scratching where it itches with blushing and how these two are emblematic for the hedonistic life versus the philosophical life:

Socrates: Do carry on the way you’ve begun, and take care not to be ashamed. And I evidently shouldn’t shrink from being ashamed either. Tell me now first whether a man who has an itch and scratches it can scratch to his heart’s content, scratch his whole life long, can also live happily.

Callicles: What nonsense, Socrates. You’re a regular crowd pleaser.

Socrates: That’s just how I shocked Polus and Gorgias and made them be ashamed. You certainly won’t be shocked, however, or be ashamed, for you’re a brave man. Just answer me, please.²³

Socrates gives us a human at the level of a chimpanzee who scratches wherever and whenever it itches. The reaction of the hearers is to laugh, as indicated by Callicles. Socrates’ words drip with irony, and Callicles tries to give as good as he gets, but he cannot manage it. His words fall flat. Socrates converts Callicles’ flat reply

mind. . . . The ‘victims of magic’ . . . are those who change their mind because they are under the spell of pleasure or fear” (Plato, *Rep.* 3.412e-413c; Cooper, 1049). How does Socrates propose to counteract the compulsion and magic? He elaborates the noble lie (414b), addressed not to someone’s reason, but to the non-rational imagination.

Emily A. Austin offers a fresh and welcome approach to reading the *Gorgias* and sees Socrates addressing the lingering child, and therefore the non-rational aspect, in all of us. Story plays an essential role in addressing that lingering child. Emily A. Austin, “Corpses, Self-Defense, and Immortality: Callicles’ Fear of Death in the *Gorgias*,” *Ancient Philosophy*, 30 (2013), 49. Still, she does not address the non-rational aspect as essential to a fully mature adult psychology, again an example of the pernicious influence of implicit Cartesianism. She also seems somewhat puzzled about the role the myth plays in the dialogue. Austin, “Corpses,” 50-51.

²³ Plato, *Grg.* 494c-d; Cooper, 837.

into further irony: "That's just how I shocked Polus and Gorgias and made them be ashamed," in other words, by being such a "crowd pleaser." Of course, Callicles is literally correct. Socrates is talking nonsense. Literally, Socrates is saying that he brought Polus and Gorgias to the philosophical moment (the blush) by doing a comedic turn for the *hoi polloi*. That is rubbish, indeed, but literalness has no chance against irony. Now, Socrates goes in for the kill. He says, in effect, that Callicles is in no danger of ever being brought to the philosophical moment. He is too brave for that. Again, utter rubbish, but devastating irony! Socrates has presented two physical states, one a perpetual response to appetites and the other the blush of shame, as emblems of two ways of life, hedonism and philosophy. In this exchange, there is no attempt at rational argument, but is there no *elenchos*? Socrates plays irony as a *logos*, and that irony is an *elenchos*.

At 473e, as noted above, Socrates takes Polus to task for laughing as a response to Socrates' argument: "Is this now some further style of refutation, to laugh when somebody makes a point, instead of refuting him?"²⁴ Now, however, Socrates himself incites laughter as part of his *elenchos*. The *Gorgias* (525e) and the *Republic* (620c) make reference to Thersites in the concluding myth, and Thersites is named in no other Platonic dialogue. Plato thereby evokes *Iliad* 2.211-277 where Odysseus restores order to the army by making them laugh by mocking Thersites, himself a mocker. As the wily Homeric hero mocked Thersites, so Socrates mocks Callicles. Socrates the philosopher of *elenchos* also persuades by appealing to the human imagination. That is a conclusion that Descartes could not have drawn, nor could we as long as we read the Platonic text with a Cartesian lens.

Now, we can better understand what Socrates was doing when he set up the pastry chef (and thereby Plato set up Meletus) as a straw man, by making us laugh at him. Plato has his Socrates appeal to the human imagination with his brilliant rhetorical flourishes, and thereby to persuade the human imagination of rational truths

²⁴ Cooper, 817.

when he is not able to persuade the human intellect of them.²⁵ All of a sudden, the mule-driving, sheep-leading analogies become clearly applicable. The human is a *rational* animal, but still an *animal*. Socrates prepares his listeners—Plato, his readers—for this epiphany, but the Cartesian lens prevents us from attending properly. For example, in 517b, Socrates praises the good qualities of the Four "in redirecting its [the city's] appetites and not giving into them, using persuasion or constraint to get the citizens to become better."²⁶ The non-rational faculties are not susceptible to rational argument. For that reason, rational argument has to be translated into forms of non-rational address to the non-rational of human faculties.

The human must both think truth right with the intellect and also feel truth right with the imagination. This insight derives from what I described at the outset as the dialogue's closing *aporia*.

²⁵ My view is partly in agreement and partly in disagreement with that of Jessica Moss: "Appetite is not subject to positive moral education, and thus can play no positive role in virtue, because it is not possible to 'redirect' appetite desire towards the good. Both Callicles' speech and the *Republic's* programme for musical education show that unlike desires for pleasure, feelings of shame and admiration *are* [her emphasis] subject to morally useful redirection." Jessica Moss, "Shame, Pleasure, and the Divided Soul," in David Sedley, ed. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 29 (Winter 2005) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 168. While I have largely addressed the imagination and passions, thus approximately her "thumoeidic part of the soul" (168), I also hold that Plato's Socrates believes the passions for pleasure and even the appetites can be directed toward virtue. Two successive examples from the *Republic* will suffice to establish my point when Socrates proposes that desire for sex be teleologically ordered to the good of the city. First, "the best men must have sex with the best women as frequently as possible" (459d), and, second, "Among other prizes and rewards the young men who are good in war or other things must be given permission to have sex with the women more often" (460b). Cooper, 1087. There is nothing quite like doing your patriotic duty by having sex.

²⁶ *Grg.* 517b-c; Cooper, 860. Terrence Irwin uses this speech as a basis for attributing "authoritarian views" to Socrates. Terrence Irwin, "Notes," in Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. with notes, Terrence Irwin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 236. My argument provides an alternative reading to his notion that Socrates advocates coercion.

Socrates' modelling of how to address imagination as well as intellect is performative rather than discursive pedagogy. Socrates set up the contrast of the physician and the pastry cook and claims that in a contest with children, the pastry cook would always win (464d-e). There is a sense, however, that Gorgias has made a point early in the dialogue which is not entirely invalid, namely that the rhetorician can persuade someone to undergo medical treatment when the physician cannot (456b-c). Employing the language of Socrates' analogy of philosopher to physician so is rhetorician to pastry cook, by spinning a myth to his readers, Socrates the physician has offered them a pastry as reward for submitting to their vaccination or stitches—a healthy pastry, to be sure, perhaps an oatmeal cookie.²⁷ There is, after all, some quality of the pastry chef in the best of doctors: children and adults must not only think the medicine good for them, they must feel it good for them too.

Earlier I said that in light of the myth which follows, it was a problem when Socrates of the *Gorgias* claims: "I believe that I'm one of the few Athenians—so as not to say I'm the only one, but the only one among our contemporaries—to take up the true political craft and practice the true politics."²⁸ With a de-Cartesianized reading of the text, I now want to suggest that that claim is not the problem, but rather the key to understanding the relationship of *elenchos* to the myth. Just as Socrates addresses the human intellect with rational argument, so he addresses the non-rational imagination with myth. A good story persuades the feelings analogous to the way that

²⁷ While Jessica Moss has other points to make, still I have her to thank for the juxtaposition of 456b-c and 464d-e. Jessica Moss, "The Doctor and the Pastry Chef: Pleasure and Persuasion in Plato's *Gorgias*," *Ancient Philosophy* 27 (2007), 235. She is tempted to draw a conclusion parallel to my own, but rejects it in the end: "Perhaps there could be a way of persuading people to pursue virtue as *pleasant* [her emphasis], and vice as painful—a way of using appetites as a tool of moral persuasion. A careful reading of doctor/pastry chef analogies indicates that although the dialogue does raise this suggestion, in the end it rejects it." Moss, "Doctor," 246. What Moss misses by attending only to what the dialogue says to the neglect of what it does is that the dialogue concludes with Socrates bringing the discussion to an end with a pastry, a myth with the character of an old wives' tale.

²⁸ Plato, *Grg.* 521d; Cooper, 864.

rational argument persuades the intellect.²⁹ The device is one used by parents perhaps since Adam and Eve of first explaining to a child why something must or must not be done, and then spinning a story in which the moral lesson becomes the moral of the story: the *logos* of *elenchos* becomes the *logos* of *mythos*. Because Socrates knows he must speak both to the intellect and to the imagination, he is one of the few "to take up the true political craft and practice the true politics." He cannot merely replace Homeric myth with dialectic, he must also simultaneously fight myth with myth.³⁰

"But Socrates still gets himself killed," you reply. And here we see the tangle of the historical Socrates and Plato's literary creation, the literary tangle also of bitterness and epiphany. If the *Gorgias* be read with Zuckert (i.e., in her version of the dramatic order),³¹ then,

²⁹ As an example of a Cartesian rationalization of the myth's juxtaposition to *elenchos*, Irwin comments on 527a-b: "But just as the *elenchos* seeks the most coherent selection from our moral beliefs, we also seek to make our moral beliefs coherent. And since we have better warrant—Socrates assumes—for our moral beliefs, we should select those religious traditions which fit our moral beliefs. The policy is not foolproof; but Socrates claims that it is the most reasonable option in the present state of our knowledge." Irwin, "Notes," 248. Indeed, his entire assessment of the myth (242-49) is rationalist. Perhaps Professor Irwin has done the best that anyone can do while reading the text through a Cartesian lens.

³⁰ Here, I disagree with Matthias Vorwerk. He asks whether rhetoric has any role at all to play in persuading someone. As part of his answer, he sees the myth as showing that in this life, rhetoric serves "nur zur Verschleierung von Unrecht und zur manipulieren." He concludes, "Sie [die Überzeugungskraft] will nicht durch emotionale Argumente manipulieren, sondern durch die Vernunftgründe zur Erkenntnis der Wahrheit führen." Matthias Vorwerk, "Der Arzt, der Koch und die Kinder: Rhetorik und Philosophie im Wettstreit," in *Gorgias-Memori: Selected Papers from the Seventh Symposium Platonicum*, eds. Michael Erler and Luc Brisson (Sankt Augustin, Germany: Academia Verlag, 2007), 301-02. Thus, he argues for the essentially rational character of the myth which Socrates himself has acknowledged to be folkloric, the myth that, I argue, is aimed at the imagination. Vorwerk's analysis is an example of the implicit Cartesianism that I am arguing against. In a sense, I am arguing that the work of rhetoric is precisely to manipulate the non-rational faculties of the human in order to align them with the rational faculties.

³¹ "If we list the dialogues in the order of their dramatic dates, we see not only that the dialogues featuring Socrates can be so ordered, but also that the non-

yes, Socrates still gets himself killed. If, however, the *Gorgias* be read with Kahn,³² then the writing of the *Apology* is well behind Plato as he inscribes the *Gorgias* into the wax. Though the tone of the *Gorgias* is bitter and though Socrates of the *Gorgias* is feisty and defiant in his arguments, still in the end he relents and becomes conciliatory in a way that he does not, for example, in the *Apology*. Smith and Brickhouse would argue that Socrates does appeal to the non-rational faculties of humans in dialogues commonly taken to be "Socratic": "Non-rational appeals and extra-logical rhetorical devices of various sorts are nonetheless abundant in the relevant group of dialogues."³³ They give numerous examples from several dialogues, one of which is the *Apology*.³⁴ What is different is that Socrates of the *Apology* is feisty and defiant to the last line, while in the *Gorgias*, Socrates spins a myth as *logos*. After recounting the myth, Socrates delivers a gentle homily derived from the myth, addressed to Polus and Gorgias as well as to Callicles and, presumably, to others like Chaerephon who were present.

The final page of the *Gorgias* has the character of a philosophical altar call. Like many a preacher who has held up a vision of final judgement to his hearers, Socrates launches from the myth to call his hearers—and Plato, his readers—to a new way of life, the life of

Socratic dialogues can be ordered into the narrative that emerges on the basis of the dramatic dating." Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*, 8-9.

³² Professor Kahn reads the *Gorgias* as representing an intermediate stage in Plato's development: "The *Gorgias* thus lies on a direct line of moral concern that leads from the *Apology* and *Crito* to the *Republic*." Charles Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 127. At the same time, he regards the *Gorgias* as prior to the *Republic*, but not proleptic to it. Charles Kahn, "Prolepsis in *Gorgias* and *Meno*?" in *Gorgias-Menon: Selected Papers from the Seventh Symposium Platonicum*, eds. Michael Erler and Luc Brisson (Sankt Augustin, Germany: Academia Verlag, 2007), 325.

³³ Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, "The Myth of the Afterlife in Plato's *Gorgias*," in *Gorgias-Menon: Selected Papers from the Seventh Symposium Platonicum*, eds. Michael Erler and Luc Brisson (Sankt Augustin, Germany: Academia Verlag, 2007), 137.

³⁴ Brickhouse and Smith, "Myth," 137.

virtue: "It's not *seeming* to be good but *being* good that a man should take care of more than anything, both in his public and his private life."³⁵ In fact, Plato casts the voice of Socrates here as if he spoke from the grave: "So, listen to me and follow me to where I am, and when you've come here you'll be happy during life and its end, as the account [λόγος] indicates."³⁶ Where is Socrates that he beckons his hearers to join him? The historical and literary Socrates are melded into one. Socrates who died ventriloquizes Socrates in the dialogue. As such, he refers again to the myth as a *logos*, and he does so still one more time: "So let's use the account [λόγος] that has now been disclosed [παρραφανέντι] to us as our guide, one that indicates to us that this way of life is the best, to practice justice and the rest of excellence both in life and in death." Dodds notes, "παρραφανέντι adds a touch of vividness and perhaps of religious solemnity: the word could be used of the epiphany of a god."³⁷ A revelation has been received. Socrates has been merely the means of that revelation. He calls his hearers to become followers of this best way of life.

Plato's literary Socrates comes to know some things of which the historical Socrates really was ignorant. One of Plato's aims as he built his literary corpus and taught in the Academy was how to be a philosopher without getting killed. Plato's Socrates knows that stories can calm and perhaps persuade the non-rational irritation and even fury aroused by rational refutation: story and argument alike are essential to the political craft.³⁸ This dialogue, however, ends not

³⁵ Plato, *Grg.* 527b; Cooper, 869 (emphasis in Cooper).

³⁶ Plato, *Grg.* 527c4-6; Cooper, 869.

³⁷ Dodds, *Gorgias*, 386. The atemporal or paratemporal or transtemporal aspect of the *Gorgias* is evidenced by the difficulty or even impossibility of establishing a dramatic date for the dialogue (contra Zuckert). Dodds writes, "In what year are we to imagine the conversation as taking place? If Plato ever asked himself this question (which may perhaps be doubted), his answer must have been 'In no particular year.' For, as Herodotus of Babylon already noticed . . . no ingenuity can reconcile the various chronological data which he has obligingly supplied." Dodds, *Gorgias*, 17.

³⁸ My own conclusion is at odds with that of Lourenço and Smith: "Several indications in our texts show that Socrates believes his elenctic refutations of others can also address faulty cognitive processing of this non-rational sort."

only with a story, but with a moral to the story. Where another dialogue may end in defiance (e.g., *Apology*) and some in befuddlement (e.g., *Lysis*, *Hippias minor*), or in amity (e.g., the *Republic*) the *Gorgias* concludes with an invitation.

Conclusion

Socrates the literary figure, the true practitioner of politics, characterizes the jury as children who found the historical Socrates guilty, and then the literary Socrates tells a folktale fit for children. The conclusion I draw from this is that though the true practice of politics should be obedient to reason, the inability of the mass of human beings to obey reason—even in such a noble city as fifth century B.C. Athens—implies the necessity of telling myths, and not just any old myths, but eschatological myths in which the just are rewarded in the afterlife and the wicked are punished. Setting aside the question of the metaphysical claim, Socrates of the *Gorgias* seems to suggest that the telling of eschatological myths is politically necessary to the maintenance of virtue amongst the citizenry even of a remarkable political community.

This is a claim that must ring dully in the ears of an increasingly secularized society in which the meaning of “the separation of church and state” is debated in and out of the courts. Nevertheless, the conclusion I have drawn has unlooked for support from a philosopher unlikely to agree much with Plato. I mean David Hume who proposes a similar conclusion in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section 11 entitled, “A Particular Providence and a Future State.” This section of the *First Enquiry* is unlike the other eleven in that it is written as a dialogue, and bears a relationship to his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Hume as an agent in the world was surely an atheist, certain that at death he would become

Lourenço and Smith, “Socratic Epistemology,” 80. I would suggest that their arguments in this article actually lead to the conclusion I have formulated rather than the one they propose.

mere atoms in the void,³⁹ and yet Hume the political philosopher says to his interlocutor in Section 11:

You conclude, that religious doctrines and reasonings *can* have no influence on life, because they *ought* to have no influence; never considering, that men reason not in the same manner you do, but draw many consequences from the belief of a divine Existence, and suppose that the Deity will inflict punishments on vice, and bestow rewards on virtue, beyond what appear in the ordinary course of nature. Whether this reasoning of theirs be just or not, is no matter. Its influence on their life and conduct must still be the same. And, those, who attempt to disabuse them of just prejudices, may, for aught I know, be good reasoners; but I cannot allow them to be good citizens and politicians; since they free men from one restraint upon their passions, and make the infringement of the laws of society, in one respect, more easy and secure.⁴⁰

Hume recognized what Plato had long before seen and that Socrates of the *Gorgias* clearly establishes: the general run of citizens will not stay the course of reason. They need stories that reinforce reason and in that respect are rational even though in genre they are not arguments at all and, thus, not subject to rational scrutiny or refutation. Hume, in response to Descartes, was a pre-eminent philosopher of the imagination and, therefore, of sentiment. Curious as it may seem, Hume might assist in recovering to our reading of Plato what we lost with Descartes.

Human beings are not mules to be driven, nor sheep to be led, but we are still animals, though rational animals. Because we have

³⁹ David Fate Norton writes, “A few weeks before his death Hume was able to satisfy Boswell that he sincerely believed it ‘a most unreasonable fancy’ that there might be life after death.” David Fate Norton, “An Introduction to Hume’s Thought,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 32, n. 29.

⁴⁰ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh, An Abstract of “A Treatise of Human Nature”*, ed. with intro. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), 101 (emphasis in Hume).

reason, we are subject to rational persuasion. For all our rationality, however, humans also live in our imaginations and senses, as other animals live all the time. Images must be presented to our imaginations to calm fear and jealousy and to inspire the feeling of having done well. To those imaginative ends, we must be told stories which, in and of themselves, are not rational, but rather appeal to the non-rational side of human being, to the side of imagination and passion. The philosopher who repudiates rhetoric as a philosopher, must embrace it as a politician. Callicles says that he is not convinced by Socrates' arguments, so Socrates tells him a story. Thus philosophy is extended as myth. There is a way in which this too is *elenchos*: argument against argument and story against story. The philosopher who spends many pages running Homer out of town must, as a politician, spin myths of his own.

Professor Dodds quotes the brilliant line of another thinker commenting on the *Gorgias* myth, who plays upon the famous line of Carl von Clausewitz that "war is the continuation of politics by other means," saying that "philosophy was for Plato 'the continuation of politics by other means.'⁴¹ For all of that line's elegance, I do not think it is quite right. Based upon my analysis of Plato's juxtaposition of Socrates' claim to be the pre-eminent practitioner of politics to his telling of an eschatological myth, it is myth-telling that is the continuation of both philosophy and politics by other means. Myth, in general, and eschatological myth, in particular, is essential to a durable political community.

Socrates condemns four of the greatest leaders of Athens because the people they sought to teach turned against them. But Socrates stands under the same condemnation. Not only was he condemned by Athens, but he failed to transform even those who deliberately sought to follow him. In that tragic realization, Plato as author has his literary Socrates' claim to be the true practitioner of

⁴¹ "As a recent writer has put it, adapting Clausewitz, philosophy was for Plato 'the continuation of politics by other means' (V. de Magalhães-Vilhena, *Socrate et la légende platonicienne*, 128)" Dodds, *Gorgias*, 384.

politics, then to make his irrefutable claim, then to tell his eschatological myth which is a *logos*, and then to make his irrefutable claim one last time. In the *Gorgias*, the eschatological myth is essential to the work of Socrates the philosopher as politician. Rational argument is insufficient, no matter how irrefutable. The rational animal needs a good story as well. While not accepting Plato's metaphysics or psychology, David Hume, the atheist, agrees that the general run of humanity needs the story of heaven and hell to maintain civil society. Where the texts of Plato and Hume agree, we neglect their insights to our peril.