

interpretation

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interpretation

Volume 11 number 2

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An Unspoken Theme in Plato's *Gorgias*: War

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The *Gorgias* has since Hellenistic times had the subtitle *Peri Rhetorikēs*. The dialogue has thus stood as the classic Platonic analysis of rhetoric, specifically rhetoric as contrasted with and sometimes similar to philosophy. My argument is that the analysis of the dialogue must be extended to what I call its unspoken theme, that which lies behind the action and the discourse of the dialogue, war. In the background of this dialogue stands the Peloponnesian War and particularly Thucydides' account of that war. Within the dialogue, the central character, Callicles, stands for Athens, giving expression to the assumptions behind Athenian politics and revealing at the same time the inherent inconsistencies of her politics of international expansion. Both rhetoric and war express the search for domination which comes from the erotic longing for more. Philosophy as practiced by Socrates is also an eros driven activity. The dialogue contrasts the search for fulfilment and in the process offers the Platonic response to Thucydides' history of the war, as it forces us to reflect upon the relationship between rhetoric, war and philosophy. The following analysis of the *Gorgias* will thus of necessity interweave Socratic discourse with Thucydidean narrative and speech.

"Of war and of battle, they say, so is it necessary to have a share, O Socrates." These are the first words of *Gorgias*. They are spoken by Callicles to Socrates and Socrates' companion, Chaerephon, as they arrive after Gorgias' rhetorical display has ended. Socrates recognizes the adage and responds: "But then, as the saying goes, we have come after the feast and arrive late" (447a). The sentiments here expressed, as numerous editors of the *Gorgias* have let us know, are worthy of Shakespeare's Falstaff, who in *Henry IV, Part I*, expresses much the same thought: "The latter end of a fray and the beginning of a feast / Fits a dull fighter and a keen guest."¹ Unlike Falstaff, however, whose trepidation in the face of battles can provide much comic counterpoint to the story

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1980 American Political Science Association Meetings in Washington, D.C. I am indebted to the reviewers for this journal for several helpful points and to a most thoughtful letter from Robert Eden.

1. Act IV, scene 3. While it may make sense to arrive late for a battle, it hardly makes sense to arrive late for a war. Thus, the appearance of this word right at the beginning of the dialogue in a somewhat awkward usage should immediately alert us to its significance. Newhall Barker of *The Dramatic and Mimetic Features of the "Gorgias" of Plato* (Baltimore: Isaac Friedenwald, 1891), p. 31, comments on the "artistic placing of the first word, *polemou*, which indicates the nature of the dialogue" but does not proceed to tell us in what way it does so.

of kings, Socrates is neither fearful of battles nor overanxious for feasts. The *Symposium*, for one, records his reluctance to hasten to feasts (174a, d)² and, through the medium of Alcibiades' speech, Socrates' courage in battle. As becomes evident later in the *Gorgias*, Socrates neither avoids battles, sparring with words, nor eagerly awaits the verbal feasts which Polus and Gorgias are ready to offer him.³

The ostensible cause of Socrates' tardy arrival is Chaerephon, Socrates' friend. "He is responsible (*aitios*); he forced us to spend time in the agora," explains Socrates (447a). What Socrates does not explain is how Chaerephon could have forced Socrates to do anything. Had Socrates been eager to hear Gorgias, it is unlikely he would have allowed Chaerephon to restrain him. But Chaerephon as the cause of his late arrival has other connotations, if we keep in mind the story told in the *Apology* about Chaerephon's trip to the oracle at Delphi. We do know, however, that Chaerephon is given to great enthusiasms. In the *Charmides*, his welcome to a Socrates just returning from the battle at Potidea is described by Socrates as reaching almost manic proportions (153b).⁴ In the comedies of his time, his anemia and squeaky voice are intended to reflect a man overly addicted to study.⁵ However, Chaerephon's enthusiasm for Socrates and for study does not preclude an interest in political things. In the *Charmides*, with great enthusiasm, he inquires of an indifferent Socrates the details surrounding the battle of Potidea, and indeed it is he who seats Socrates in the dialogue next to the future tyrant Critias. Nor does Chaerephon's enthusiasm for Socrates preclude other friends or prospective teachers. Though Philostratus records the insolent questioning of Gorgias by a Chaerephon,⁶ in the *Gorgias*, Chaerephon describes himself as friendly (*philos*) with Gorgias (447b). For this reason he will be able "to heal" the situation, the missed performance, and have Gorgias for friendship's sake give Socrates a demonstration, if not today, then tomorrow.

While Chaerephon is friendly with Gorgias, his association does not equal that of Callicles, for it is with Callicles that Gorgias is staying while in Athens. Callicles is gracious, and he invites Socrates and Chaerephon to visit him at any time to talk with Gorgias. But we do not wait for "whenever" (447b) for Socrates to talk with Gorgias. Rather, Socrates is eager to begin the questioning

2. At the beginning of the *Republic* the promise of a feast is not enough to bribe Socrates to stay in the Piraeus. There must be as well the promise of discourse with young men and of a novel torch race (328a).

3. Throughout the dialogue there is the leitmotif of Gorgias' and Polus' speeches as feasts (e.g., 447a and the elaborate comparison of a rhetor with a cook in Socrates' speech, 464b–465e).

4. See Christopher Bruell, "Socratic Politics and Self-knowledge: An Interpretation of Plato's *Charmides*," *Interpretation*, 6 (1977), 142; also *Apology* 21a.

5. Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists*, 483. E. R. Dodds, "Introduction," *Plato's "Gorgias"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 6, provides a list of the various comedies in which Chaerephon appears.

6. Philostratus 483.

immediately. Thus the conversation takes place in an undefined space. All we are told is that it is within (*endon*, 447c). It is within this indefinite space that the interlocutors will try, not always successfully, to speak freely, to exercise their *parrhēsia* (461e, 487a, b) and it is within this space that Gorgias sits oracle-like, promising to answer any questions put to him by those who are eager, after Gorgias' display, to hear more and to test the apparent universal wisdom of this man who could stand in the theater at Athens and have the courage to say "Do you propose a theme."⁷ As at Delphi, Chaerephon, explicitly this time at the prompting of Socrates, is to ask the question which leads to Socrates' subsequent investigations. Thus the *Gorgias*, through Chaerephon's initial question and subsequent enthusiasm for the questioning of a pompous man before others (485c), becomes in abbreviated form the life which Socrates led after the fateful questioning of the oracle of Apollo. The undefined locale of the *Gorgias* becomes the setting for the trial of Socrates, where, as in the *Apology*, he attacks the values of Athens, its goals and the grounds on which it bases its actions. At the end of the dialogue, as in the *Apology*, he will talk about death, that which gives the final lie to the achievements of politics, a world of bodies and based on opinion.⁸

Among the participants in the dialogue, Callicles is the one Platonic character, clearly identified by deme, Acharnia, who remains elusive, unnoted in any other ancient source. The other characters of the dialogue are known. Gorgias is the famous orator and teacher from Leontini in Sicily who believed that because of the limits of human reason, speech had more power over the soul than physical force or drugs could have over the body.⁹ Speech properly employed could be a magical potion capable of controlling individuals and cities. As we shall see, it is not the beauty of Gorgias' speech that attracts the youth who follow him to Callicles' house. It is a desire to learn his craft, not for its own sake, but for the power which it promises to one who possesses it. Polus is also from Sicily, but from the most prosperous and fair city of Agrigentum. Less famous and younger than Gorgias, he is known in antiquity as the author of a work entitled *Technē*, and is the recipient of somewhat scornful mention in the *Phaedrus* (267bc). Yet, it is Callicles who begins the dialogue, whose name signals its conclusion, whose grand speech provides the central, pivotal point in the dialogue. I myself have no doubt that Callicles was a real person.¹⁰ When Plato wants characters to remain unidentified they remain quite anonymous.

One can speculate on who Callicles was, as Dodds does, and then why he remains so elusive to modern researchers. His deme gives us some clues:

7. Philostratus 482.

8. Even Pericles who strives to give his city immortality (Thucydides II.43.2) cannot; it is the historian Thucydides with his words who must do this.

9. Gorgias, *Encomium on Helen* II.

10. See Dodds, p. 12.

Acharnia, a thickly populated area north of Athens, suffered heavily in the first invasion of the Peloponnesians and the Acharnians “were for that reason determined to fight a war of revenge to a successful conclusion.”¹¹ He thus comes from an area in which the aggressive prosecution of the Peloponnesian war is approved. His beloved gives us other clues: Demos, the son of Pylampos, ties Callicles to the leaders of Athens and to Plato.¹² Dodds suggests an early death for this outspoken young man of the dialogue, but his insignificance perhaps also underscores the inability of the Athenians themselves to accept openly the expression of the ideas behind their actions in relation to other cities. Such language could only be part of conversations within houses, in the councils of government leaders, or in the works of exiled historians.¹³ Callicles may have been too ready to exercise his Athenian *parrhēsia* publicly as well as privately.

But perhaps Callicles is more than a real person who failed to become part of the standard discourse of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. I would like to raise the question of whether Callicles with his grand speech defending the right of the stronger could indeed be Athens, Athens from 431 to 404, expressing in words the values which the Athenians try to defend in their deeds during the Peloponnesian War.¹⁴ He shows the same indifference to Socrates’ counter-arguments which the Athenians showed to Socrates’ questioning and similarly refuses to engage in the dialogue Socrates seeks on questions of the good life and the differences between real and false pleasures.

Athens is at war. In 431, the forty-eighth year of the priestess-ship of *Chrysis* at Argos, in the Ephorate of Aenesias at Sparta, six months after the battle of Potidea, the Lacedaemonians break their thirty-year treaty with Athens after only fourteen years and invade Attica. The war between the two great powers of Greece has begun. The war will devastate much of Greece and signal the end of what we know as the glory of Hellas. The Athenians, as Thucydides has led us to believe, are fighting to protect the empire they acquired after the Persian Wars, while the Spartans fight from a fear of the expansion of Athenian power. The first year of the war is uneventful. The Thebans attack Plataea; the Lacedaemonians ravage the farms in the plains of Attica; Pericles speaks words of praise for Athens as he commemorates the Athenian dead. The next year, the

11. K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), p. 79.

12. Plutarch, *Lives*. Pericles 13.

13. Terrence Irwin, *Plato's "Gorgias"*, translated with notes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Clarendon Plato Series, 1979), p. 175 asks: “How many would be shocked by Callicles’ claim that aggression by powerful states is all right?” With reference to Thucydides, he makes two points, “(1) Thucydides may be reporting, not what the Athenians actually say of themselves, but only what would be rational to say,” and “(2) Even Thucydides’ speakers do not say it is just and fine to do what they do.”

14. Cf. 492d.

war continues and the plague strikes. Pericles is fined and then voted back into office. Shortly afterwards, Pericles is dead (503c).*

Some years later, around 427, while the war still rages, extending now to northern and western Greece, and while the Athenian subjects become restless and some, such as the Mitylenians, begin to rebel, Gorgias from Leontini visits Athens for the first time.* His mission is not to teach the art of rhetoric nor to display his talent before the crowds. Rather, he comes to Athens as an envoy for his city, requesting that the Athenians fulfill their treaty obligations and help the Ionian Leontines against the threatening Syracusans, allies of Sparta. His prose speech, of an elegance unheard before in the assembly, fascinates the Athenians,¹⁵ but scholars differ in their assessment of his success.¹⁶

In 422, as the war continues in the north and both sides begin to feel war-weary, a young man named Demos, the son of Ppyrilampos, was of such an age and beauty to become the beloved of an older man.* There follows shortly the Peace of Nicias, giving both sides in the war several years of respite from battle. But during this time another young man who had shown his courage in the battles of Delium and Potidea comes to dominate the Athenian political and social world. He secures for Athens alliances with the formerly pro-Spartan Argos, Mantinea, and Elis. He wins an unprecedented number of victories at the Olympic games. He parades adorned luxuriously through the city and he makes Eros with a thunderbolt his heraldic design. He spends time with and is in the awkward position of trying to seduce Socrates at the same time as being his beloved.* He, who speaks with a lisp, so scorned by Callicles (485b), persuades the Athenians to venture to Sicily and presents them with visions of great conquests extending even beyond the island of Sicily itself, on to Carthage and Libya. "We are told that Socrates the philosopher and Meton the astrologer did not believe that any good would come to the city from this venture. Socrates may have received a premonition of the future from his familiar guardian spirit."¹⁷ But Alcibiades is not among those who die in the forests or salt mines of Sicily. He instead uses his artful speech to persuade and enchant the Spartans, urging them to send help to Syracuse and thus ensure the Athenian debacle in Sicily.

Meanwhile in Macedonia, Archelaus, a slave to the king's brother, has murdered his master and his master's son, thrown the king's son down a well (471a–d) and taken control of the kingdom.* Soon afterwards Archelaus becomes an ally of the Athenians, praised by them as a good man who acted with

*All the events marked with an asterisk are described as having happened recently or being contemporaneous with the dialogue.

15. *Diodorus Siculus*, XII.53.

16. Compare for example the assessments in F. E. Adcock, "The Archidamian War, 431–421 B.C.," *The Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge: University Press, 1927), V, p. 223, and A. F. Woodhead, *The Greeks in the West* (New York: Praeger, 1962), p. 83.

17. Plutarch, *Lives*. Alcibiades 17.

enthusiasm to do whatever good he was able to do.¹⁸ Poets such as Euripides and Agathon spend time at his court. Socrates is invited, but refuses the invitation.¹⁹ Archelaus earns the praise of Thucydides: "On his accession he cut straight roads, and otherwise put the kingdom on a better footing as regards horses, heavy infantry, and other material than had been done by all the eight kings that had preceded him" (II.100.2). For the Athenians, he supplies the wood for the ship building on which their naval power is built. By the year 399, the year in which Socrates is to be executed by the citizens of Athens, Archelaus will be dead, murdered at the hands of one of his countrymen, his beloved.²⁰

In 411 B.C., with the war now extending eastward to the coast of Asia Minor and Alcibiades back in favor in Athens, Euripides' play *Antiope* is performed.* The twin sons of Antiope and Zeus are brought up by a shepherd and each turns to a different vocation; Amphion devotes himself to music, able to move stones with his lyre, Zethus turns to hunting and the care of his flocks, that is, to the acquisition of more and to the tending of what is already his own. On stage they debate the advantages of each life. Meanwhile, the war continues, Athens' government changing from democracy to oligarchy and back again. Aristocrates, a friend of Callicles,* and a member of the oligarchic Four Hundred, is part of an expedition to Arginusae in 406 B.C. The Athenians win, but the generals, hindered by a storm and the confusion following the battle, fail to pluck the living and the dead from the ocean. The generals, among them Aristocrates, are tried upon their return to Athens.* Socrates, one of the prytanes in charge of the assembly on the day that they are to be tried, protests that the combined trial of all the generals is against the law,* but to no avail. The generals, including Aristocrates, are executed. Two years later, the war is over.

The dialogue thus appears to take place during the timespan of the entire war. Some have suggested that the anachronisms give the dialogue a certain timelessness. Perhaps just the opposite is true. Perhaps they have the effect of giving the dialogue a certain timeliness, that is a close association with the war that dominates Athenian political and artistic life for these twenty-eight years. An understanding of the characters in the dialogue and their arguments cannot be disassociated from the political circumstances surrounding the dialogue, especially considering the frequency with which references to precise political events are made throughout.

At the same time the political references tie the dialogue to the time period of the war, they also underscore the fictitious nature of the dialogue. This dialogue could never have taken place and perhaps this has something to do

18. Dodds, p. 241.

19. Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, 1398a24. The excuse which Socrates gave according to Aristotle was "hubris." Whose, it is not clear.

20. *Alcibiades* ii, 141d.

with Callicles' own elusiveness. Is he or is he not real? But the ahistoricity of the dialogue is important in itself. Thucydides' history of the war was tied to the events and speeches of the war, the details out of which an understanding of that war could emerge. Plato, the philosopher, not an historian, offers a fictional dialogue to explain the war—to reveal its premises and underscore its vanity. The ahistorical dialogue, the dialogue which is impossible, certainly because of the timing but perhaps also because of the characters involved, suggests the necessity to diverge from what we would today call the facts of history to that truth which lies more fully in the fictions of Platonic dialogues than in the researches of any history.

Polus comes from a city of such wealth that everyday household articles are fashioned out of gold and silver, and of such beauty that Pindar describes it as "glorious", a "lofty city lavish above all in the gifts to the gods," "the very eye of Sicily."²¹ Why Polus has joined Gorgias on his mission to Athens we are not told. His city is not pleading for Athenian aid. His city stands as one of the glories of Sicily, one of the few cities able to remain neutral during the Sicilian campaign. But that day when Athenian ships enter Syracuse's waters is far off when Gorgias arrives in Athens with Polus tagging along. And while we do not know why Polus comes to Athens, we do know why he follows Gorgias; he is eager for power, for the power which rhetoric gives, and he is assured by Gorgias that the way to get power in the city is to learn the art of rhetoric.²² It is Polus' urge for power that drives him to follow Gorgias, that keeps him in close attendance to Gorgias, so that one day perhaps he may do more than simply articulate the role of rhetoric, that he may some day indeed exercise the power which rhetoric promises.

Gorgias tries to define rhetoric for a Socrates eager to discover what precisely is its power, this power which Polus so earnestly seeks. Gorgias says it is the greatest good (*megiston agathon*) for human beings (*anthropois*, 452d). Presumably he means only some humans, those who know how to use it. It is good, because it is the cause (*aition*) of freedom (*eleutheria*) for humans. Again we must interpolate "some humans," because the freedom for some as it is developed in the next phrase by Gorgias does not mean for all, but the freedom to rule over others in the city.²³ Gorgias does not acknowledge that the freedom

21. Kathleen Freeman, *Greek City-States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), p. 64; Pindar, *Olympian Odes* II.6–10, and III.2; and Frag. 1922.2.

22. The word for power which runs through the dialogue is *hē dunamis*; it is beyond my capacity at this point even to count how many times *dunamis* and rhetoric are conjoined in the first half of the dialogue. Only a reading of the dialogue with attention to this point would reveal the intensity of the usage of this term. Cf. Gorgias in the *Encomium on Helen* (paragraph 8) where he describes *logos* as the greatest *dunastēs*, and comments that though *logos* has the smallest body and is least visible, it accomplishes the most divine *erga*.

23. Cp. Diodotus' speech in Thucydides, III.45.6.

for the rhetorician which he and Polus so praise means in turn slavery for someone else. The free person in Greece is not only the one who is not ruled over by others, but the one who rules over others, who turns others into slaves. Gorgias, confirming the power (*dunamis*) of rhetoric to Socrates, shows how the rhetorician can make slaves of other artisans. "With this *dunamis*, you will be able to make the doctor into a slave (*doulon*), the trainer into a slave (*doulon*)" (542e). Gorgias envisions that such a power to enslave others will be used for benign purposes, to persuade a sick man to listen to medical advice, or an assembly of Athenians to listen to the advice of a Pericles or a Themistocles, that the slave, whoever he or she may be, will benefit from the control of his or her master.

Polus is not so benign in his visions of the power of rhetoric, which according to him has the greatest power in the cities (*megiston dunatai en tais polesin*, 466b). He, unlike Gorgias, does not talk about enslaving the artisan to do good deeds. The man he envies, after whom he wishes to model himself, is the tyrant of Macedonia. Archelaus is indeed free and powerful now, a master rather than a slave. Once he was the mere son of a slave to a king. Now he as king has achieved complete liberty to do as he wishes. Yes, he committed many crimes to acquire this freedom, killed many people, deceived others, but now he must be truly happy, having exchanged slavery for freedom. If Socrates does not admit that he too envies Archelaus, he is simply being obstreperous. Surely, Archelaus can do whatever he wishes in the city, he can take away his subjects' property, he can send them into exile, he can kill them, all without the fear of punishment. He has moved from a slave himself to one who makes slaves of others. Archelaus did not achieve this status through the art of rhetoric, but the effective use of speech can accomplish as much. Polus wishes to follow Archelaus' example; now, Polus is no more than a servant to Gorgias, answering Gorgias' questions for him when Gorgias is tired. Polus yearns for a life very different, when he no longer answers questions addressed to other people, when he has power, that is when he is free to do what he wants, when he wants and how he wants.

Polus' vision is limited in many ways but the one which concerns us most is that it is limited by the walls of the city. The power he and indeed Gorgias as well search for is a power that remains within the city.²⁴ The mastery they envision is a mastery over fellow citizens, a mastery possible through words. They do not deal with mastery over other states, nor the mastery which Gorgias' mission is intended to avert from Leontini. As Thucydides' history so vividly shows, in this realm the most elegant speeches have no effect. When Gorgias had talked about the greatest power, rhetoric, he had talked about Pericles' and

24. Despite the fact that Gorgias is on a mission concerning relations between states, he ignores the power of speech to influence cities as a whole. He sees only parts within a city. Could this be a sign that those scholars who assess his mission as a failure are correct? See preceding n. 16.

Themistocles' feats: they persuaded the Athenians to build walls and to build the harbor. What Gorgias leaves out in reference to both of these men is, of course, their role in the incredible expansion of Athenian hegemony, of the freedom Athenians exercised after the Persian Wars to enslave the islands of the Aegean, to take their resources in order to build up the free Athens, the *dunastēs* or *tyrannos* of the Aegean. The power which Polus envies is rather a power which is exercised exclusively within the city.²⁵ Polus ignores those activities of Archelaus which strengthened the status of Macedonia vis-à-vis the cities of Greece, his success in expanding Macedonian trade, in increasing Macedonia's allies, and in Hellenizing the barbarian state.

Because Polus' understanding of power and political events is confined to relationships within the city, he can be, as Callicles points out so well, manipulated by Socrates into confusion over what is natural and what is conventional. He functions within the city and his values are those of men within the city. He envies the actions of Archelaus, but he cannot call them good (*kalon*); he must call them shameful (*aischron*). He is trapped by the conflict between nature and convention, arguing that Archelaus' actions make him as an individual happy, but admitting that by convention, by the traditional values of the city, they are not good. Because he is limited by the perspective of the city, he cannot separate what exists by nature and what exists by convention; it is only once he leaves the city, once he can break away from the laws of the city that he can distinguish between the two. Within the city *nomos* is the same as *physis*; the laws of justice and injustice are not easily disregarded or dismissed (474cd). The praise of the person who disregards the *nomoi* flounders under Socrates' questioning which does indeed shift back and forth, as Callicles claims, from *nomos* to *physis* and back to *nomos* again.²⁶

Gorgias and Polus both become ashamed, as indeed they should when talking before men who are citizens, of their rejection of the traditional values of justice and virtue on which the city is built and according to which the city must function. Gorgias cannot take responsibility if rhetoric is used unjustly; Polus would use rhetoric to achieve unjust ends, but would not call the ends good. Callicles is the one who is willing to look outside the city, who is willing to disregard the traditional values totally and to look to a nature unlimited by the demands of the political community. He can envision a new meaning for justice, he can uphold a vision of inequality and the taking of what is not one's own. Callicles can look to the relationships between cities for the unconditioned motivations of human beings.²⁷ Callicles sees himself as rising above the conflict between nature and convention—so much so that he can unite the two concepts

25. The use of the phrase *en tais poleis* is strikingly frequent in Polus' speech: 466a, b, d; 467a (two times). Also Gorgias at 452d.

26. E.g., 474c and the introduction of *aischron* (shameful) and 478a, b, d.

27. See Arlene W. Saxonhouse. "Nature and Convention in Thucydides' *History*," *Polity* 10 (1978), 461–487.

in a startling new phrase “the law of nature” (*nomos tēs physeōs*, 483e), a law of inequality supported by nature herself, as seen among animals and most significantly among nations where the question of right (*dikē*) is only spoken of, but not followed. The relations between cities and the inclination to war among states become the model which Callicles will use to justify the actions he would like to take within the city—if he could. This is why Callicles within the structure of the dialogue must expand the limited perspective of the earlier interlocutors beyond the city walls and why as his own person he must cast aspersions on those who have succumbed to the verbal power of the Socratic dialectic.

Polus, the skittish young colt, has arrogantly praised the life of the tyrant. He envies Archelaus’ power, assumes that Socrates must too, and yet has just agreed that rhetoric must be used to bring the malefactor, whether he or she be friend or family, to justice and punishment and help the enemy who has committed an injustice escape punishment. Callicles asks Chaerephon as one who knows Socrates well: “Is Socrates serious or is he playing?” (481b).²⁸ Chaerephon who may be an enthusiastic follower of Socrates, but who is not necessarily known for his wit, believes (*emoi men dokei*) that Socrates is indeed very serious.²⁹ “Ask him yourself,” he urges Callicles, repeating exactly Callicles’ advice to Socrates earlier in the dialogue (447c). “By the gods, I am most eager to,” and so he does, adding that if what Socrates has said and Polus has agreed to is true, life would be turned upside down (*anatetrammenos*, 481c). Socrates does not at once answer the question posed to him. Instead, he talks of suffering and of love.

“O Callicles, if people had not the same suffering (*pathos*), but there was a certain suffering for some men and another for others, and one of us suffered (*espaschen*) a private suffering (*idion ti pathos*) different from others it would not be easy to demonstrate (*epideixasthai*) to another one’s own suffering (*pathēma*). I say this knowing that I and you now happen to be suffering (*peponthotes*) the same thing, both being in love with two beloveds. I Alcibiades the son of Clinias and Philosophy, you the demos of Athens and [Demos] the son of Ppyrilamos” (481cd). The discourse between Callicles and Socrates is to begin from a similarity of experiences, from a companionship in suffering. The epistemic basis for the dialogue between Socrates and Callicles is not reason, but the pain which will keep surfacing in the subsequent dialogue. Their common pain or suffering is love, the sense of lack, of needfulness.

The *Symposium* is the *locus classicus* for the relationship between suffering

28. At the beginning of the dialogue, Callicles had also turned to Chaerephon to learn Socrates’ state of mind. “Is Socrates eager (*ephithumei*) to hear Gorgias?” he asks (447b). Callicles appears to have difficulty confronting Socrates directly.

29. This does not necessarily mean that Chaerephon is correct. One cannot answer Callicles’ question without further consideration of the attempt by Euthyphro to bring his father to justice.

and love.³⁰ Surrounding Socrates' famed speech, there are the speeches of Aristophanes and Alcibiades. While Socrates talks, through the person of Diotima, also of pain and of a longing to be satisfied, he envisions a final satisfaction, which, however, can only be reached by the separation of the soul from the needs of the body, by the soul's ascent to a vision of true beauty which exists independently of the body and provides the lover with a nonphysical immortality (212a). The satisfaction of true love can occur only when the human being ceases to be bounded by the needs of the body; political life focused on human beings in their cities is centered on the activity of bodies in relation to one another—bodies organized in varied units in the city, bodies which fight to preserve the existence of the city, bodies which must be housed, clothed and fed.³¹ The suffering of the body which feels love, a lack of what is outside it, can only cease with the abstraction from body, not before. The suffering, in other words, can only cease when the human being becomes divine.

The speeches of both Aristophanes and Alcibiades refuse to deny the needs of the body, refuse to accept a solution which abstracts from body as Socrates, appearing to be convinced by Diotima, seems willing to do. They emphasize the longing of the body, the pains which dominate the body as it tries to fulfill itself, to attain a physical immortality or at least a physical completion. Both speeches by Aristophanes and Alcibiades emphasize the relationship between love and suffering. Aristophanes' halves search, often fruitlessly, for their other half. Alcibiades' satisfaction with his life before the Athenian demos is questioned, made to seem lacking by the presence, the words, the music of his Socrates. Eros is disruptive. It does not let the lover live in happy self-satisfaction; it forces her to seek to possess what is outside her, be it the demos of Athens, the Demos of Prylampos, or the true beauty capable of perception only through the mind. Eros creates longing and the pain so evident in the language of Aristophanes and Alcibiades. Only Diotima offers a way out of that pain in the state of unity with the beautiful. But at that point, the lover is no longer human, no longer distinct from that which she longs after, from that which she loves. The lover in a sense has died and become one with her beloved, has become a god. To be human is to desire, to lack, to have eros. Callicles and Socrates are driven by these human desires; they both love and they both suffer.

It is philosophy which will stand at the end of Socrates' speech as the test for the political Callicles. Callicles must respond to the consistency of philosophy (482a), but he cannot. He makes arguments from politics, while Socrates makes arguments from philosophy, from the vision which Diotima held before him of an eternal, unchanging beauty, an eternal, unchanging truth. However,

30. The analysis in this section owes a great deal to the article by Martha Nussbaum, "The Speech of Alcibiades: A reading of Plato's *Symposium*," *Philosophy and Literature* 3 (1979), 131–172.

31. Cf. *Republic* 11.369–374d.

the solution which Diotima offers takes humans away from their bodies and thus rejects the political. Aristophanes and Alcibiades, the consummately political men, each in their own way are tied to the body and thus tied to politics. Their yearnings can never be satisfied. They continue engaging in activities of the city as each searches for a physical completion which can never be achieved. Thus, the polis and the political being strike out on new ventures. If one of Aristophanes' halves does not find its mate in one person, it continues its search to the next hemisphere of appropriate sex, reaching forever to others for an unattainable completion. Alcibiades does not stay by Socrates; he is drawn by the love of praise, of wealth and other bodies. Athens, the tyrant of the Aegean, does not stay satisfied with power over her empire. She pursues more, drawn by the wealth and challenge of Sicily; she does not herself rest, nor does she give rest to others.³² Pericles tried during the war to make her whole, to have her cease her endless search for more, for the unattainable completion.³³ But the wholeness Pericles offers, as we shall see, is a completion which rises out of "human flesh and color and other mortal nonsense to a divine beauty" (211e). Political men, the citizens and leaders of Athens, do not desire the satisfaction of nonphysical wants alone. Neither Callicles nor Polus wants the power to persuade in speech alone, the power over the opinions of others. They want that power so that they may have power over men's and women's bodies. They want to be able through their power in the city to satisfy the varied wants and longings of their physical being.

Thucydides' *History* traces the effects of human passions on the relationships between and within cities. The fear of Athens is what starts the war (whatever the *prophases*, excuses, may be). The desire for more drives the Athenians on to invade Sicily. Eros is there as well, not always fully articulated, yet motivating the actors in this greatest of upheavals. Pericles, praising Athens as he commemorates her dead, exhorts her citizens to become lovers (*erastes*) of Athens. "Feast your eyes on her each day," he says to them, "until you become her lovers" (II.43.1). Pericles' beautiful speech is intended to make Athens beautiful, capable of creating a longing, a passion for her, a passion which will make the Athenians forget themselves and think only of her, their beloved.³⁴ It is through her that they will reach a condition of immortality, that they will be defined not by their bodies which die, but by the memories which will be their immortal sepulchres (II.43.3). For Pericles, the city is what the beautiful is for Diotima. They both lift the individual out of her body and tie her to that

32. Thucydides I.70.9.

33. Thucydides II.65.7).

34. See Nussbaum, p. 156, on the role of the *erōmenos*, the beloved, as an unmoving object to be desired, in Greek homosexuality. She effectively applies here the analysis of K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), to the study of Platonic thought.

which will last forever; they both give human beings an immortality which was previously reserved for the gods; they both defy the limitations of the body, one through the political devotion of the citizen, the other through the inquiries of the philosopher. They stand in opposition in their struggle for the same goal.

However, both Thucydides and Socrates show this love to be ultimately impossible. The Athenian *erastes* does not survive long beyond Pericles' speech. The abstract love of Athens, of her beauty, is hard to sustain once the plague strikes the bodies of the men and women in Athens. Pericles must make clear in his next speech why Athens is to be loved. It is no longer for the beauty of her *politeia* and the life she creates. These fade quickly before the physical traumas of war and illness. She is to be loved because she protects and satisfies the needs of the bodies of the individuals who comprise the city, because without her welfare the individual's welfare would be sacrificed. Individual good fortune is meaningless without the city to protect that fortune. The beautiful Athens of the funeral oration becomes no more than a tyranny (II.63.2) balancing hazardously between the complete domination of others and the potential subjection to others. Eros for Athens the city, despite all of Pericles' verbal and physical efforts to beautify her, fails to provide the motivating force for the Athenians, and eros disappears from Thucydides' history. That is, it disappears until Book VI, until both Sicily and Alcibiades stand there to be desired, to become the *erōmenos*.³⁵ "And *eros* fell on all alike to set sail [for Sicily]" (VI.24.3). The citizens, no longer pressed to love and desire something so abstract as a *politeia*, can desire something tangible, something which relates to their bodies and not to their minds alone: the wealth of Sicily and, indeed, the body of Alcibiades. The static condition of contemplation, or the eros satisfied, asked for by Pericles did not lead anywhere. Rather, the eros for bodies, for more, does; it leads to Sicily, the home of Polus and Gorgias.³⁶

It is precisely the eros for particulars that moves polities along. The Spartans, characterized by their *hēsuchia*, their quiet, their moderation, their freedom from longing, stay within, become mired in their ways, lack adventure and allow others to grow while they remain still. The pain or suffering, the wanting of more which drives the Athenians to become an empire is what leads to their greatness, what makes their defeat worthy of the attention of the greatest historian as the greatest event ever. The *eunomia* and passivity of the Spartans leaves them as still as stones or as dead as corpses (49e).³⁷

When Callicles speaks violently and forcefully in the middle of the *Gorgias*,

35. It is interesting to note that it is in the same book as the decision to go to Sicily that Thucydides includes, totally out of context, the love story of Harmodius and Aristogeiton and shows how eros here influenced political events (VI.55–59). (Words derivative from *eros* recur through these passages.)

36. The relationship between Gorgias and Sicily is underscored in the dialogue by the *Sicilisms* used by Gorgias. I must rely here on the interpretation of others, e.g., Barker, p. 3, who cites 450b as an example pointed to by the scholiast Olympiodorus. Dodds, p. 196, is skeptical.

37. For the above analysis, see the Corinthians' speech in Thucydides, I.68–71.

he speaks not of Athens, nor of Sparta; he speaks not of Potideia nor Corcyra, but of nature and the natural drive for more, for more than what one has, a drive which can only be restrained by the enchanting words of the weak, of the passive, those who do not have the strength of character to acquire more, to seek constantly to satisfy never-ending needs and desires. These are the many who for their own preservation must praise temperance. Callicles does not mention Sparta or Sicily or Athens, but the views he expresses remind us of the relationships between such states, relationships which have gone unnoted in the discourse of the earlier speakers and which now rise to the surface as the city is seen not only from within its walls, but as part of a larger world where the possibilities of wholeness and completion are even more limited.

Callicles' grand speech in the middle of the dialogue bears a careful examination. It is complex, divided into two parts, and not at all times coherent or consistent. It comes in response to Socrates' speech about love; Socrates has talked about the suffering of the lover, the variability of the beloved (that is, all except philosophy) and the consequent variety and often irreconcilable demands beloveds place on their lovers. Only philosophy, Socrates claims, does not ask him to be discordant (*asymphōnon*) with himself (482c). Callicles does not respond directly, just as Socrates did not respond to Callicles directly when Callicles had asked whether Socrates was serious in his arguments with Polus. Callicles ignores the speech about love. Perhaps here he thinks that Socrates is playing, whereas in fact, it may be here that Socrates is indeed most serious, since until we understand the nature of our loves and passions as human beings, and particularly of our sufferings which come from a sense of what is lacking; we shall never know whether our lives are to be turned upside down or not. Callicles instead focuses on two different kinds of suffering, not those that come from the physical lack of what one yearns for, but those that come from shame, from a shame derived from what Callicles sees as a false dichotomy between nature and convention, and the enslaving of free men.

Callicles begins with an accusation: "O Socrates, you act like an insolent youth, but really you are not more than a demagogue" (482c). Socrates makes speeches to appeal to the many, to the demos which is the beloved of Callicles. Socrates is trying to subvert Callicles and transfer the demos to himself. Three times in the next few lines Callicles is to call Socrates a demagogue, but four times he accuses Socrates of making others suffer, of being the cause for pain. Callicles seems here, as indeed elsewhere in this speech, confused. The demagogue strokes the beast so as to make it satisfied, happy, willing to perform whatever task the demagogue asks of it. It is the demagogue, according to Socrates, who is pained by the disharmony within himself, disharmony caused by the variability of the many, by the constantly changing whims of those he seeks to please. But Callicles sees it otherwise; he paints the demagogue

Socrates as the one who makes others suffer. Does Callicles know what he is talking about? Is his grand speech flawed, as suggested by this initial equation of demagoguery and the suffering of the listeners, rather than demagoguery and the pleasing, soothing phrases Gorgias teaches? This is not the only problem in his grand and central speech. Many more are to come.

According to Callicles, the suffering which Socrates causes comes from shame. The political, the public man is driven on by shame, by how he appears to others, by how the many view him. His value comes not from himself, but from the opinions of others. To be ashamed in front of others leads to suffering because it suggests a denial of esteem.³⁸ However, while suffering which comes from shame may lead to a withdrawal, a removal of the self from public view as both Gorgias and Callicles try to do (458b, 497bc, 505d), the suffering which comes from eros, which Socrates and Callicles share, leads to action—the action of pursuit of power or the beautiful. The suffering which Socrates causes to others comes, on Callicles' account, from Socrates' refusal to allow others to distinguish between nature and convention, to confuse the two and thus force others to say what they do not believe and cannot defend, for example, that justice and equality are noble. What public man needing to appeal to the many for his power would dare to say that justice is not noble, that virtue is not good? What public man in a democracy would dare to so offend the many by openly acknowledging a doctrine of injustice and inequality?

The Athenians, speaking to the Spartans before the war started, could not do it. The Corinthians had come to speak before the Spartans to urge them into war against Athens. The Corinthians had turned traditional words of commendation into words of condemnation. *Sophrosunē*, moderation, has led to an inability to deal with affairs outside (*ta exō pragmata*, 1.68.1). Spartan *hēsuchia*, inactivity, makes them responsible for the slavery of their friends and allies (1.69.1). The Spartans are trampled on, punched in the face, and leave their friends unaided in situations of danger. Because they do not act to stop the movements of the enslaving Athenians, the Spartans are the true enslavers. They sit back, nursing their traditional values while the Athenians actively pursue more, that is, harm for Sparta's allies and for all of Greece. But even after this speech by the Corinthians, questioning the value of traditional virtues and suggesting the danger of these virtues when one is talking about relationships between cities, the Athenian envoys who happen to be in Sparta at the time find it impossible to isolate their actions from traditional values. Rather they must argue: "Not unreasonably (*oute apeikotōs*) do we possess what we have" (1.73.1). The history of the Persian Wars where Athens was the saviour of Greece by providing the three most important elements in the defeat of the Persians (troops, leadership, and the most unhesitating enthusiasm, 1.74.1), gives them the honor and the prestige, the pride to stand where they

38. Cf. Thrasymachus' blush, *Republic* 350d.

do with regard to the empire they have. “We are worthy (*axioi*), O Lacedaemonians, because of the enthusiasm shown then. . . not to deserve so much hostility (*epiphthonos*)” (1.75.1). They did not act from the view that because of their strength they should rule over Greece. Rather the blame must lie on the shoulders of the Spartans who let the allies fall under Athenian domination and forced the Athenians to rule. And while it may be a necessity that the lesser (*hēssō*) are controlled by the more powerful (*dunatōterou*), the Athenians are worthy (*axioi*) of their position (1.76.2) and indeed more eager to show justice and equality in their dealings with their subjects than the Spartans would be.

In this public speech the Athenians, despite the opening given them by the Corinthians, show their deference to the conventional values of good and bad, virtue and justice. They are ashamed before the public to say what is true by nature. This they can do only in the privacy of a meeting with the leaders of Melos. There the language of values is discarded. Don’t talk to us of right and wrong. You know as well as we that right “in human speech is judged from an equal necessity while the strong do what they can and the weak submit” (v.88). There the necessity of nature dominates and the strength of the Athenians alone justifies her conquest. In the confines of the meeting room in Melos, the Athenians do not speak as public men concerned with the effect of their words on others or with the shame that may come to them for their praise of injustice, for their praise of inequality, for their exclusive concern with self-interest. Thus, they do not have to hide their ambition for power and domination with fancy phrases of worth and recollections of noble deeds of the past. The demands of nature are starkly stated: the strong rule over the weak. And this is not only necessary, but approved by the gods (v.105.1). Right is not what appeals to the many, but what *physis* demands.

Both Gorgias and Polus are like the Athenians at Sparta, unable to give up noble sounding phrases of justice and virtue, of equality and goodness. They are trapped by a Socrates “working evil with words” (483a), who sees in their reasons for studying rhetoric the same aims which the Athenians had as they expanded their empire, the desire for domination over others, to become *dunastai*, to be free men who enslave others, and to be unjust rather than suffer injustice. Callicles shakes off the chains of traditional values which limit the perspectives of Gorgias and Polus; he speaks as the Athenian leaders at Melos do, within the walls of some undefined space, given the freedom to speak by Socrates and which the Athenians took upon themselves as they talked to the leaders of Melos. He openly declares what others could not; perhaps they held back because of fear, but more likely they were restrained because they were unable to articulate the assumptions which underlay their statements concerning good and bad, just and unjust.

These traditional values cited in the earlier sections of the dialogue belong not to the real man, the *anēr*, the one who can take more (483b). the one who

according to Callicles is able to bring to completion whatever he thinks about (491b).³⁹ They belong to the slave (*andrapodos*, 483b), the weakling, the one who cannot act whatever he may think, for whom it is better to die than to live and who must call greediness (*to pleonektein*) unjust (483c). Callicles appears certain that it is better to live than to die. Only a slave would crave death. Life for Callicles is the passionate life, a life of constantly seeking more; it is the Hobbesian life where one's desires can never be fully satisfied, only briefly met and then instantly reignited. Not to have passions is to be dead. The real man is the eternal consumer. He seeks to satisfy his passions constantly and is unconcerned about the absence of an end to those passions, a final resting place, a *finis ultimus*. The slave seeks death because he seeks cessation from passions which can never be satisfied and thus never afford him any pleasures.

We must not forget that this speech was prefaced by Socrates' speech on love and the suffering of the lover. Socrates the philosopher does not stop searching; his passion for truth and beauty do not come to an end either, so long as he lives as a human being. The end to the philosophic eros, as Diotima describes it (and indeed as it could be inferred from the *Republic*),⁴⁰ is a death to the life which both Callicles and Socrates know of as eternal searching. For Socrates death may be a resolution, a completion, though his possibly comic vision in the *Apology* (40e–41c) suggests that his life of eternal questioning would not necessarily end with death. For Callicles death can only be a sign of defeat, of benefit only to those who do not know how to live well, to satisfy their own passionate desires at the expense of others. Not to be able to control and dominate the activities of others, not to be able to defend oneself or those one loves, to allow oneself to be trampled in the mud, such a life cannot be worth living.

The importance of domination for human happiness, this Callicles knows; this he asserts declaratively. When Callicles analyzes the conditions and causes of freedom and slavery, he begins to speculate; he begins to hesitate. *Oimai*, I believe, he says (483b). He no longer knows. The weak are the ones who establish the *nomoi*, the traditions and the values which limit and enslave the actions of strong men. The Athenians declare to the Spartans who stand in a position of weakness vis-à-vis Athens: "Calculating what is in your interest, now you make reference to the language of justice, which has never turned anyone away from getting more (*pleon echein*) who had the strength to acquire it" (I.76.2). The language of justice, in other words, is the discourse of those who are weak. The weak fear the stronger (*erromenesterous kai dunatous*, 483c); they fear that the strong will take more than their fair share, as indeed the Athenians did in Greece. And so the weak, for example

39. Cf. the strikingly similar language in the Corinthians' speech: *epitelesai ergōi ha an gnōsin*. I.70.2. Callicles' strong men are *hikanoi ontēs ha an noesosin epitelein*.

40. VI.506e; VII.533a.

the Spartans (I.86.1–5), say that the Athenian actions are evil, that they are unjust and not in accordance with the *nomoi*. To want more than one's fair (equal) share is condemned by those who are weak, by the slaves who cannot satisfy their passions and who envy the truly strong man or the strong city. It is the weak and worthless, or so Callicles believes (*oimai*, 483c), who love equality.

Callicles appears here as no friend to democracy. But we must be careful. Just moments before, Socrates had described Callicles' dual love, the two "demoses", and how Callicles must alter his views and his language to please them. Certainly the Athenian demos could not be gratified to hear Callicles' rejection of equality—or could they? If we focus on the relationships between states rather than the relationships within states, then Callicles' arguments do indeed please the Athenians, who enslaved the rest of Greece and rejected the enchanting language of *dikē* as they enlarged their empire. Pericles admits to the disheartened Athenians: the taking of the empire which they hold like a tyrant may have been unjust (*adikon*), but to let it go would be dangerous (II.63.2). The city must be viewed from two perspectives. Within, the democratic *politeia* demands equality among its citizens, *isonomia*; its unity derives from this equality binding all citizens together into a coherent whole. Without, the city stands in unequal relationship to her neighbors; the city stands as deficient, desirous of more, eager to take what is not its own, *pleon echein*, to affirm a condition of inequality rather than equality. Callicles reveals in the early part of his speech the incompatibility between the ground rules of action within the city and the ground rules which apply outside. He appeals to the demos, as does the beloved of Socrates, not by approving of their democratic, egalitarian principles, ones which Pericles conjures up when trying to make Athens whole and beautiful (II.37.1–2), but rather by encouraging the demos' vision of itself as comprising the citizenry of the super-city.⁴¹

When Callicles describes the enslaving of the real man by the many, the chains to which he refers serve as a metaphor for language, words of praise and words of blame. Words, Socrates' words, the words of the many, can make the strong feel shame, can restrain a Polus or an Alcibiades and make even a master of language such as Gorgias flustered. Words have the capacity to affect actions, to enslave the powerful. Gorgias is right. It is the power of words from which Callicles tries to break away in the first half of his speech—and yet to reassert in the second half when he turns to relations within the city, where a common language and the common values associated with a common language are crucial. To break away from the power of words Callicles turns to nature, first to animals (*en tois allois zōiois*, 483d) for whom there is no language of justice and injustice, to whom the dictates of nature speak directly, without the intervention of morals and virtues, and demand that the stronger

41. Cf. Alcibiades' speech to the Athenians, esp. VI.18.3–7.

have more than the weaker, that the lion in all his generosity takes all. After suggesting that this is true as well in whole cities and races, Callicles turns for his examples to barbarians, those who for the Greeks represent the uncivilized, animal-like beings who do not speak Greek, saying only bar-bar-bar, who have no language of justice and virtue. "With what right (*poiōi dikaiōi*) did Xerxes march against Greece, or his father against the Scythians? Or one would be able to mention myriad other cases of the sort" (483de). But Callicles does not provide us with more examples. Is it because he has realized the inappropriateness of his two examples, both of whom were defeated by the weak native inhabitants in Scythia and Greece? Or is it because he suddenly remembers the historian of those wars, Herodotus, who often makes clear that those who invade with no right, those who take more than their share and overstep their bounds, are punished by the gods whose jealousy (*phthonos*) can never be escaped? Callicles avoids the issue but has not Plato played with Callicles' speech, given him a set of false examples to prove his central but dubious point? Has not Plato undercut Callicles' purpose by making him appear foolish?

Callicles ignores the issue of the defeats faced by Darius and Xerxes by turning next to the gods, to swearing by Zeus (traditionally the distributor of justice) that there is (or so he believes, *oimai*, 483c) a *nomos tēs physeōs* which the Persian tyrants followed in their invasions of weaker lands. But this *nomos tēs physeōs* may be quite different from what Callicles envisions, since in neither case did Zeus smile on the adventures of the invaders, of those who tried to take more than their share. The unmentioned example behind this outburst is, of course, Athens. The Athenians, like the barbarians and like the animals, are not restrained as they assert their dominion over others. Concern with one's fair share does not matter as they subdue one state after another, as they satisfy their desire for more. They are acting on the principles which Callicles suggests are endorsed by the gods, which the Athenians themselves, as the war recorded by Thucydides progresses, also suggest are sanctioned by the gods (v.105.1–3).

But Callicles turns quickly from nations to men, to individuals. He does not stay long in the realm of relationships between states where his examples have raised doubts about the validity of his beliefs, about the future expansion of Athenian hegemony. Rather, he considers the fate of one caught within the structure of the city, within a city where the language of justice and injustice is used, where the strong men among us are charmed and enslaved (*katadouloumetha*, 483e) by our saying that equality is good and just. The real man, the man having a strong enough nature (*physin hikanēn*, 484a), would flee our charms, (or so Callicles believes, *oimai*, 484a), and our words (*grammata*) and laws which oppose nature (*para physin*, 484a). He would stand forth revealing himself as our ruler and us as his slaves; there the justice of nature would shine forth. Callicles here chooses to talk about a man, but he describes again the actions of the Athenians, who in their relations with other

cities of Greece have shown this independence of the old values, who have rejected the idea that equality is good and just in relationships between states, and who stand forth revealing the true justice of nature.

Callicles next adds to the evidence from nature (animals) and history the words of the pious poet from Thebes, who proclaimed that *Nomos*, the king of men and of gods, turns violence into justice, that *nomos*, presumably the *nomos tēs physeōs* which Callicles had just proclaimed, supports the actions of Heracles as he steals the cattle of Geryon, without payment and without sale (484b). However, as Martin Ostwald has pointed out in but one of several attempts to discover the meaning of this cited passage, the “interpretation bears the stamp of the *nomos*–*physis* controversy, which did not flourish until several decades after Pindar’s death, and it is hazardous to retroject into Pindar’s poem views which were articulated only by a later generation. . . . Nor is it likely that Pindar wrote the poem to support the view that heroic morality is law unto itself . . . [Pindar] makes a special point of emphasizing unheroic qualities in Heracles and of stressing the *arete* of his opponent Diomedes.”⁴² Callicles, though, does not catch this subtlety. He does not see the alternative reading which would suggest that the strong only declare what is just, or as another Platonic character phrased it, justice is the interest of the stronger.⁴³ Callicles does not know the poem well, neither the words, he admits (484b), nor, we may surmise, the meaning of the poem. He must thus turn to paraphrasing. He does not spend his time memorizing poems, the activity for the affected, the *effete*, those who do not act. He knows as little about poetry at this point as he does about philosophy, which he now urges Socrates to abandon as he moves to the second half of his speech.

Callicles is eager to reveal the truth, his truth, to Socrates as he starts this second half. He had called Socrates “in truth” (482c) a demagogue at the beginning of the first half of his speech, but he did not understand the meaning of the word demagogue, much less the truth. Again he claims he is going to turn to the truth (484c), but his two truths are irreconcilable. One truth, that Socrates is a demagogue, hardly coincides with the second truth that Socrates as a philosopher will be unable to defend himself before the many. Callicles’ understanding of what is true is not consistent from one moment to the next, unless we were to see him as equating philosophy and demagoguery, but this he does not do. His argument is that the philosopher does not understand how to function before the masses, to control the many rather than be controlled by them.

Callicles is inconsistent precisely because he makes a fundamental shift as he moves from one part of his speech to the next. In the first part, he had

42. “Pindar, *Nomos*, and Heracles,” in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 69 (1965), p. 123. See also the references in A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing, 1956), p. 117, n. 2; and Dodds, pp. 270–272.

43. *Republic*, I.338c.

dealt with the superman or supercity, the Athens of Greece. He had talked there about the relationship of one city to another, the law of power and of force, the realm in which force and fraud are virtues.⁴⁴ The second half of the speech deals with relationships within the city—a city based on an equality which had been denied in the first half. The second half deals with the survival of individuals within the set of political relationships among equal citizens—survival, not leadership, is the topic of the second part of Callicles' speech. What is necessary between states is different from what is needed within states. The opposition in the first half of the speech was between *dikē*, justice, the battle cry of the weaker, and those who are strong, who deny equality. Within cities, however, as it is posed by Callicles, there is a conflict between philosophy which assumes an inequality between better and worse individuals, between better and worse pleasures, and politics which assumes an equality of all citizens, good and bad, before the law.

Callicles does not refer immediately to politics as he downgrades philosophy; rather the phrases he uses suggest the level of politics, that of reputation, of seeming, of appearance. One must have the reputation of being *kalos kagathos* or being an *eudokimos anēr* (a respected man, 484d), and one must know the pleasures and passions of others, what appeals to them and what will repel them. Philosophers remain not only *nomōn aperioi* (inexperienced in the laws) but unable to manipulate the opinions of the many. They are thus laughable, worthy of such scorn as Polus heaps on Socrates (462e), rather than esteem. They are laughable whether they participate in private or in public affairs, just as—or so Callicles believes (*oimai*, 484e)—are *hoi politikoi* when they spend time in the activities of the philosophers, as indeed Callicles becomes by the end of this dialogue.

The inconsistency is transparent and has been frequently pointed out. First, Callicles encourages the total disregard of the opinions of the many, their enchanting phrases, their enslaving *nomoi*, and subsequently he encourages attention to the opinions of the many, the weak who have enslaved the super-heroes. How can we reconcile these two views? We can do so only if we recognize that Callicles is distinguishing, albeit not clearly, between relationships within and relationships without the city. The city cannot endure easily the individual who stands over all, the Alcibiades, the Themistocles, even the Pericles.⁴⁵ It cannot survive the superhero and the praise of inequality of the first part. The Archelaus, so admired by Polus, is to be killed by one of his own men.

Callicles quotes more lines of poetry; this time he turns to a more contemporary author, Euripides, an Athenian. Now that he talks about relationships within states, he turns to a poet from his own city rather than to a poet who

44. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960), p. 83 (Ch. XIII).

45. Socrates makes a point later in the dialogue of emphasizing how the great political leaders of Athens were all badly treated by the demos (515e and 516e).

speaks for all of Greece. He quotes from a passage most likely spoken by Zethus the herdsman in Euripides' *Antiope*. We all praise that which we do best. It is a plea for individuality, a recognition of the different abilities which we all have. It is from such natural difference, Socrates assures in the *Republic*, that the true city is built. But Callicles does not agree with his compatriot Euripides. The most correct approach—or so Callicles believes (*oimai*, 485a)—is to partake of two ways of life and then choose one over the other, the chosen one always being politics. He does not encourage the diversity Euripides' Zethus praises and he does not encourage the pursuit of philosophy. The *eudokimos anēr* is the one who appears to have followed the proper pattern of growth, the one who no longer engages in the pursuits of a child when he is old, the one who no longer engages in philosophizing when he is of an age to enter politics.

Yes, philosophy is fine when one is a youth, but it is a thing most laughable when an old man practices it. The philosopher is different from the many. He scorns their opinions and their uniformity. He stands aloof, off in a corner whispering, with two or three other men, not joining in the center of activities, the varied meetings of the many. He is not a part of the whole and does not care about the opinions and values of the whole. The individual, independent of and uninterested in the opinions of the whole, who stood at the center of the earlier section of Callicles' speech, is now seen as threatening the survival and freedom of the city on which Callicles depends.

With the shift in focus from the first half of the speech to the second half, there is a comparable shift in the meanings of slavery and freedom. At first the free man is the one who breaks the chains of the *nomoi*, or the Athens who subdues other cities and threatens those who do not submit. This is the freedom Polus and Callicles want. The second concept of freedom is one centered around the man who submits to his chains, the "liberal" man who is judged by his peers as noble, who possesses the requisite social graces and who can help his friends when they need his help.⁴⁶ The slave in the first section is one held back by the opinions of the many; the slave in the second section is the one who does not attend to the opinions of the many, the one like Socrates whose pursuit of philosophy shows him to be illiberal, to lack the graces of a well educated man, to continue to lisp and to be unable to help his friends or harm his enemies. Such an individual is unmanly (*anandron*), like a slave (*douloprepes*), unfree (*aneleutheron*, 485b–d)—such a man deserves a boxing around the ears, just as does a slave who is too stupid to understand directions. The free man (*eleutheros*) is the one trained to earn respect in battle and in speech, the one trained to participate in the activities of the city.

But once again, as at the beginning of the dialogue, Callicles appears generous. He appears liberal, eager to help his friends. He makes a speech to

46. See Dodds, p. 274.

Socrates, one filled with good feeling (*eunoia*, 486a), not meant to anger him. It is a speech modeled again on that of the restless and active Zethus in Euripides' *Antiope*, Zethus whose advice he had rejected moments before. The conceit is extensive. "I happen to suffer (*peponthenai*) what Euripides' Zethus does before Amphion. . . . There come words to me to speak to you such as he [Zethus] spoke before his brother" (485e). Don't act like a youth, Socrates.⁴⁷ Give up philosophy. Become mature and learn to function in the city. Don't act shamefully, as do those—or so I believe (*oimai*, 485a)—who pursue philosophy for too long, allowing yourself to be accused and killed, appearing dizzy with your mouth gaping open in the courtroom, subject to the power of any who might wish to harm you. Don't allow others to be rude to you (as, we might note, was Polus, for example, 461c). Don't lose your power to help yourself. Be persuaded by me, give up the private life. "Practice the music of affairs," encourages Callicles, again quoting Zethus (486c). Avoid what is called by the Athenians *apragmosunē*, a noninvolvement in the affairs of the city. There is an irony in this point; it is Amphion who through his knowledge of music is able to build the walls of Thebes, whose lyre moves the stones out of which the wall is built. It is he who by practicing his private music most helps the city. Yet Callicles urges: "Don't imitate those men caught in debates about petty things, but those for whom there is life and opinion and many other goods" (486cd).

Callicles has given his speech to his dear Socrates (*o phile Sōcrates*, 486a) and spoken with warm brotherly feelings. Socrates, though, does not trust this speech. He questions Callicles' sincerity and suggests that it is ironic (489e). Why does Callicles offer Socrates this friendly advice, which Socrates does not take seriously? Does this in part explain the shift in the two halves of Callicles' speech? Is Callicles' speech a cover for his fear of Socrates? Is not Socrates the superman who does see clearly the fallibility of the *nomoi*, the dependence of the weak on the *nomoi*? Is not Socrates able to rise above, to shake free from the chains of opinion, to shift most facilely in his discussion between *nomos* and *physis*, to recognize that *dikē* does not come from the opinion of the many? Does not this knowledge, this awareness indeed enable him to become a demagogue? Does he not then pose serious threats for poor Callicles, the one who because of his eros wishes to appease the many?

Callicles is frightened of the power of Socrates; the second half of the speech is an attempt to subdue the philosopher, to fit the philosopher into the city rather than allow him to break away and stand above the other slaves. The philosopher is not useless; he is not simply foolish. The philosopher is threatening, threatening to the power and stature of a Callicles. Philosophy does recognize the distinction between nature and convention, as Callicles points out in

47. When Callicles quotes the passage from Euripides, he changes one word significantly. Instead of *meirakiodei* (youthful, childish) in Callicles' version, there is in the original *gunaikomimōi*. Cf. Gonzalez Lodge, ed., *Plato, "Gorgias"* (Boston: Ginn, 1980), p. 147.

his initial attack against Socrates. Those men supposedly whispering in corners care not a whit about the opinions of the many; the chains and the enchantments. They are able, should they want, to enslave, subdue, paralyze those tied up by the *nomoi* of the many. Indeed, they do not even whisper in isolation in corners, two or three at a time. They speak out in the open—out in the agora, as Socrates has informed us right at the beginning of the dialogue (447a). The philosophers thus threaten the survival of the city for they are privy to the secrets of Callicles. Socrates is Callicles' enemy. The appeal to give up philosophy, Socrates recognizes, is not sincere. It is an appeal meant to disarm Socrates, to fit him into the model of the city, the equality of the city. It is an appeal to make him value what the city values, most of all life, but also reputation and freedom from subjection to another.⁴⁸ Callicles pretends that Socrates' pursuit of philosophy is a mistake rather than a conscious choice. But because this assumption about Socrates' motives is clearly incorrect, he must try to disarm and subdue Socrates.

Callicles' speech is divided into two halves, each with its own truth depending on whether one looks at the city from within or from outside. The speech thus appears to have contradictory goals. Scholars have debated: is Callicles a democrat, or is he an oligarch?⁴⁹ The answer to such a question must depend on which half one reads, which must thus suggest the inadequacy of such an analysis. Let us leave debates concerning particular political orientations aside and see Callicles as the political man, the man of action, like Zethus the herdsman, like Athens the city. Whether he be democrat or oligarch, he is the stone against which the philosopher's life is to be tested and justified. The philosopher must do this in response to both parts of Callicles' speech; he must show the deficiencies of both visions—on the one hand, the superman and the supercity who scorn the opinions of the many, on the other the political man who is dependent on the opinions of the many, his beloved demos.

Callicles has proclaimed that the better man must have more, that this is just by nature, that this is the law of nature. What, though, Socrates must ask, describes the better man? What is this justice that you and Pindar praise? This Callicles clarifies only under Socrates' questioning. The better are the stronger, the stronger are the many. Suddenly, Callicles, under Socrates' manipulation, turns into a democrat (458d). Superiority does indeed come from the many, the unity of large numbers of individuals, in the assembly and on the battle-

48. Freedom is not being a slave for Callicles, but Socrates does not in his discourse distinguish between slave and free. Cf. 514d and 515a; in 514e he does not speak differently to men or women. Considering Callicles' emphasis on manliness, this is a significant attack on Callicles' vision.

49. G. B. Kerferd, "Plato's Treatment of Callicles in the *Gorgias*," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 20 (1974), p. 48 and in notes 2 and 3, describes the various arguments on either side. Kerferd sides with those who see Callicles as a democrat, p. 52.

field. But Callicles will not admit such a simple equation between numerical superiority and the best. There are those who know how to manipulate assemblies, the demagogues who use language well, and there are those who know how to use small numbers of men as if they were many on the battlefields (for example, the Greeks against the Persians). Callicles clarifies. The better is not simply the many—"the litter of slaves" (*doulōn*, 488c; cf. 489d)—nor is it those who are stronger only in terms of bodily strength. The better is the political ruler, Polus' Archelaus and Callicles' man of affairs, one devoted to the music of *pragmata*, that is, those who rule over others, (491b, d) those who are able to accomplish in deed what they have in their minds.⁵⁰ The natural justice of which he had spoken relates to the rulers within the city and the masters of empires.

But Socrates introduces a new level of interaction which had not been raised before in Callicles' speech, nor by Polus or Gorgias—namely ruling within oneself. "Come now, my friend, what of themselves? Are they ruling something or being ruled?" (491d). Callicles has difficulty with this notion. When at last he understands, he blurts out offensively, "You are cute (*hēdus*, sweet?). You call fools moderate (*sōphronas*)" (491e). Socrates, according to Callicles, is offering a new or different form of slavery, again the obverse side of mastery. "How could the happy human being (*eudaimōn*) be a slave (*douleuōn*) to anything?" (491d)—even, Callicles asks, to himself. No, the one who is to live correctly (*orthōs*) must release his passions, satisfy his desires, and constantly fill himself up (*apopimplanai*). This—or so Callicles believes (*oimai*, 492a)—is not possible (*ou dunaton*)⁵¹ for the many and thus, because of their lack of manliness (*anandrian*), they find fault with the satisfying of one's desires; they see it as shameful intemperance. The truth (492bc) is, Socrates, that freedom is not mastery over oneself, but the total release of one's passions—along with the power (*dunamis*) to satisfy those passions. Slavery is being unable to fill what is empty, unable to find that elusive missing half in Aristophanes' model, and thus being miserable and finding life worse than death. Socrates' problem, according to Callicles, is that he does not acknowledge the importance of the *epithumia* for happiness and for life (492e). To be without desires is to be dead—a stone or a corpse.

The foreshadowings of Hobbes are startling. As Hobbes has so vividly shown us, these desires—these insatiable desires—must lead to war.⁵² The urge to satisfy one's desires leads one to build up one's strength, to develop the power

50. See preceding footnote 39. We see Callicles here encountering the same problems as Thrasymachus; for both superiority must be defined with references to the mind, albeit the mind directed to the satisfaction of desires. It is this which makes them both interlocutors worthy of Socrates—and which makes the Athens they both represent and which Pericles extolls worthy of Socrates' attention.

51. Forms of *ou dunaton* appear three times in 492a.

52. We should not forget at this point that Hobbes' first currently acknowledged published work is a translation of Thucydides.

to satisfy those desires, whether that power comes in the form of rhetoric, military strength, or manipulative wiles; it is the power of conquest, the denial of equality, the vision of the world as comprised of masters and slaves. Socrates accuses Callicles: he does not understand the importance of equality. He does not pay sufficient attention to geometry (508a). Equality is a realm which denies power over others and emphasizes friendship. Callicles, the one with desires to be satisfied, the one who lives by having power over others, cannot accept equality.⁵³ To accept equality as an individual or as a city interacting with other cities is to die. The self-satisfied city and the self-satisfied individual, happy with their equality, are weak. Sparta had allowed others to trample her in the mud, to punch her in the face. The Corinthian's advice to Sparta parallels Callicles' advice to Socrates. "Be practiced in the music of affairs (*pragmata*, 486c)" (cp. Thucydides, 1.72.2–4). Athens the tyrant of the Aegean has been active in her pursuit of inequality, in her pursuit of the power which will enable her to fill herself with the wealth of cities outside. There is for Athens as a city no final resting place; even the one Pericles urges in his funeral oration is only a temporary resting point, to be moved beyond once the exigencies of war subside. The city must always be in a condition of movement because there are those outside who threaten it. The Sparta that tried to sit still, to practice its traditional *hēsuchia*, could not.

Political life within the realm of one city to another is a life of the constant pursuit of more. What Callicles cannot understand because of his failure to study geometry is that the disharmonious nature of relations between states cannot be transferred to relations within states, that the tyrannical city pursuing more outside must ensure an equality upon which friendships and community (*koinōnia*) are built within (507c–508a). The tension in Callicles is between eagerness for power over others, and the desire for friends, causing Callicles to act graciously so as to build up a store of friends who will protect him in a time of need should others threaten him (cf. 487cd).⁵⁴ But because he is not sincere in his professions of friendship, because he does not really treat others as his equals, his friends do not protect him. While he pretends that Socrates is his friend and that he cares for Socrates, he nevertheless tries to control Socrates and becomes irate and withdrawn when he cannot. It is an irony of history that Callicles becomes dependent on Socrates' pupil and friend alone for his survival in the minds of subsequent generations.

53. Note Hobbes' ninth law of nature with its emphasis on the acceptance of equality as the way out of the state of nature (*Leviathan* Chap. XV). We must, of course, remember that Socrates is not the equal of those whom he guides in his discourse with them. On this level Callicles' fear is justified. However, unlike Callicles, Socrates' inequality is not for the sake of satisfaction of private desires by domination over others. On this level Callicles' fear is not justified.

54. Dodds, p. 282, summarized the evidence on the background and character of these men. He concludes: "The general picture which the evidence suggests is that of a group of ambitious young men, drawn from the *jeunesse dorée* of Athens . . . It certainly does not support Lamb's description of Callicles' as 'the typical Athenian Democrat.'"

Later in the dialogue Socrates is to describe Athens' most powerful and famous political leaders as ones who gorge the city, will fill her (*empeplēkasi*, 518e–519a) with harbors and dockyards, with walls and imports, and all such filth (*phluarion*). The politicians, Themistocles, Cimon, Pericles, all try to make Athens a master over her neighbors so as to fill the city with such garbage so that the citizens do not feel a lack—or the need to pursue the truly beautiful. These are the politicians who are praised for what they give to the city, hegemony over other Greeks, while those such as Callicles and Alcibiades will be seized and held responsible should this hegemony or garbage be lost, should the Athenian demos be deprived of that which fills and satisfies it. The form of dialogue which Socrates tries to encourage does not profess to fill the participants and silent listeners with anything. It does not gratify them. It does not reach any conclusions or victory point (457a). Thus there is no mastery or inequality among the interlocutors. The conception of power which Socrates proposes in this dialogue is not the power to fill another and satisfy her desires, nor to make another serve one's own interests. It is a conception of power which can only be understood in terms of making one better, and making one better consists in making one aware of what one lacks—not the dockyards or imports or other such filth—but virtue. The *Gorgias* is not simply about rhetoric vs. philosophy as a way of life. It is also about different kinds of power. Rhetoric leads to domination over the opinions of others, war to the domination over the bodies and wealth of others. The desire for domination comes from a dissatisfaction with what one has, and a supposition that domination will lead to the fulfilment of some of those desires. Polus and Callicles give expression to what is to become the classic twentieth century formulation of politics—who gets what, where, when, and how. Socrates is to question that formulation of politics and the conception of power implicit in it.

Because the politicians fill the city with harbors and walls, they do not make the citizens better. They offer them the satisfaction of ports, walls, and imports, but the citizens therefore are not made to feel the lack of what makes them better—their lack of what is truly beautiful. They are not pricked by the Socratic irony into a sense of needfulness (cf. Alcibiades' experience, *Symposium* 216a). What lack they do feel comes from a desire for more of what has already given them pleasure, from the passions which once filled are quickly reignited. Socrates finds fault with the politicians for not making citizens better.⁵⁵ But we may ask why should they? To make them better human beings does not help the politicians, nor the city in its drive for mastery and domination. To make them better would be to alert them to what they truly lack, and that is a

55. Scholars have had difficulty understanding how Pericles made the citizens worse, as Socrates claims, rather than better. They turn to such points as payment for attendance at the assembly and for military service. Cf., e.g., Lodge, 237; W. H. Thompson, *The Gorgias of Plato* (London: George Bell, 1905), p. 226; and Dodds, pp. 335–356. The problem here is that all these analyses look at the question from a political perspective, from the perspective of the city, not from the perspective of the philosopher.

lack which could never be satisfied by the city nor by the politicians who give them walls and the harbors into which the goods of the world flow.

The politicians, though, can never provide for the city a state of completion. Filling the city is like filling the leaky jar (493ab). The walls are never enough, nor the harbors, nor the ships, and thus there is the need for external conquests, for domination over others because Athens herself, like the human body, can never be completely satisfied. It is the constant need for more, however, that leads to Athens' stature, and the ambivalence surrounding her position in Greece at the end of the fifth century, an ambivalence captured brilliantly by Thucydides, especially in the speech of the Corinthians at Sparta. Athens is both enslaver as she acquires more, and model to be envied, hateful and admired, shameful and glorious. All this is the result of her refusal to be content with little, to deaden her desires. And yet, of course, she loses the war; encouraged by politicians such as Alcibiades to desire too much, she tries to get too much power. The Athenians do not limit or question the nature of their desires for more. They refuse to engage in the questioning Socrates urges upon Callicles during the second half of the *Gorgias*.⁵⁶

Callicles, eager to please both demoses, refuses to accept any deadening of the desires as a necessary result of the dialogue he has with Socrates. He is a man of action, a man whose first thought on seeing Socrates arrive late for a display of words is of war and battle. He is a free man, unlimited in his actions, as far as he understands himself. He is not a slave, subject to the mastery of another. He is not one to accept the notion of completion, of ends, of quiet. Nor is Socrates. Callicles is an Athenian. So is Socrates. The difference between the two is Socrates' willingness to distinguish between good and bad desires, those which have a final—even if humanly inaccessible—aim or goal and those which will only lead to a desire for more. This difference must also stem from different conceptions of power, power over others as in the master and slave relationships of Callicles' vision, and power over oneself—a power to distinguish between good and bad passions and to choose the former.

Callicles refuses to participate seriously in the subsequent conversation. He continues only to be gracious, to please his honored guest Gorgias (497c, 501c). He refuses to engage in Socrates' discussions concerning worse and better desires, and the relationship between pleasure and pain and cessation of desire. The subsequent discussion carried on by Socrates in a comedy of his own making never resolves these questions. Do pain and pleasure cease at the moment of fulfilment? The lovers spoken of by Diotima and Alcibiades and Aristophanes feel pain as does any passionate being. The lover is thus to pursue the beautiful, to improve the self because of a sense of lack. Without that lack, there is no change, no growth, no movement toward the complete or full human being. Socrates cannot and does not encourage the cessation of desire,

56. Cf. Anytus in the *Meno* and Socrates' description of his life of questioning in the *Apology*.

or eros. He urges the tempering of eros, whether for individual or for city (507d) and its transformation from what leads to making some men or cities masters and free, some tyrants and some subjects and slaves, into an equality which Callicles cannot fully understand and refuses to try to understand as he withdraws from the conversation and the search for true pleasures.

Callicles' speech had been fraught with inconsistencies because on the one hand he had talked about free men and slaves, and then about the city, a city bound together by friendships, a city populated by others about whom one cares, a city in which one survives on the esteem of others. The two perspectives clashed. The inequality of the first half clashed with the equality of the second half. Socrates tells Callicles that Callicles does not understand equality, that he focuses on power over others and thus cannot understand power over himself, and because he cannot distinguish between good pleasures and bad, he cannot exist in a community such as Socrates envisions, based on friendship and searching for a whole as it pursues the truly beautiful.

The topic of war does not surface frequently in the *Gorgias*. It would almost be possible to read the dialogue, and indeed many have, as if the war which dominated Greece during the twenty-eight-year span of the dialogue were not going on. But it was. And the war's continuation must influence our understanding of the conditions which existed within the city and within the individual. The city states of Greece could not exist without an awareness of the external threats which faced them, both from other Greeks and from the barbarians on the north and to the east. The Peloponnesian War dominated Athens at the end of the fifth century B.C. Euripides, Aristophanes, and Thucydides suggest some of the responses to this war. Socrates' life was touched by the war and Plato's understanding of Socrates and Socrates' place in the city cannot be disassociated from that war.

The *Gorgias* is generally recognized as a dialogue about rhetoric, and about moral choices concerning what type of life one is to lead. The background of war, the unspoken theme of the dialogue, gives to this dialogue, as to cities themselves, a greater depth, where rhetoric is only a surface activity of the city, a model with its concern for victory and conquest, irrespective of *dikē*, of the war in the background. The moral choices in their turn depend on the existence of a city striving for its own wholeness within an ordered cosmos (508a). War, however, raises the question of whether that wholeness for city or for individual is ever possible prior to death—whether the leaky jar of the Sicilian or Italian tale is a parable that must apply to the city as well as to the individual as long as she/he/it lives. The power which Polus and Gorgias see as deriving from rhetoric is a limited power though they may call it the greatest good. It is limited to a power within the city. Callicles, like Athens and her leaders, sees a greater power, a power over other cities and over other peoples. But that

power is also limited by its never-ending nature. To live is to want; to kill the passions *is* to be dead. Neither the city nor the individual can ever find wholeness while alive in the human body. The completion sought through power over oneself which characterizes the philosopher's life may come closer than the city's continual search through war for power over others. War becomes the symbol of the inability of the city to be complete—ever—so long, at least, as cities are comprised of bodies and not the bodiless warriors and memories of Pericles' funeral oration.

The answer which philosophy in the person of Socrates gives to Athens and to Callicles is not a wholeness nor a completion never accessible through the wars of the city, but a transformation of political activity from one of domination to one of making citizens better, that is, to lead them into a condition in which they will not be dependent on others—either as master or as slaves—but will be wholes in themselves and not controlled by the opinions, the values and *nomoi* of those surrounding them. This is not so that the individual will be able to dominate others, but so that she can dominate herself, not so that the world becomes divided into slaves and masters, but so that there is no such concept and the master over others disappears. Philosophy abhors the concept of conquest (457d), of masters and slaves. The best person, made best by the activities of the true politician, would be a complete whole, not a ruler over others, just as the best city would be a complete whole and not need to have hegemony over other cities.

But, neither the best person nor the best city is possible; neither the complete person without needs, at least so long as she is alive, nor the complete city existing in isolation from other cities can come into being. Philosophers, as Socrates so vividly demonstrates in both the *Apology* and the *Crito*, is very much a part of the city. The philosopher is not self-sufficient; the philosopher cannot exist without the city. Likewise the city does not exist as a self-sufficient whole. It exists within a set of relationships with other cities. Wholeness would exclude an awareness of other cities. The chaos of the Peloponnesian War reveals definitively for the Greeks their participation in a world that goes beyond the confines of the city walls.⁵⁷

Thucydides' presentation of war comes from a careful articulation of paradigmatic events. The whole war is understood by comprehending in detail the specific events which mark its progress. The *Gorgias* avoids the details of the war, the time-bound events which history records. Nevertheless, for Plato those events exist in the background. The actions and the motivations of the Athenians are reflected in Callicles' speech, in the assorted references to the various political leaders who turn Athens into an empire and a threat to the freedom of

57. Cf. *Laws*, 626a, "What most men call peace is only a word; in fact there exists by nature a state of unproclaimed war between every city and every other city." The city of the *Laws* tries to escape this fact. The city of the *Republic* does not. The city of Athens cannot. Political philosophy cannot be disassociated from wars, from the topic of history.

others, who make Athens part of a society greater than herself. But the war itself serves to alert us to the limitations of both politics and philosophy. The political eros for power, for domination over others, suggests the limits and deficiencies of the city. Pericles had wanted for an instant to treat Athens as a whole, a beautiful form for all else in Greece to imitate, to raise her above the activities of every city. But he could not. The city at rest, as Sparta demonstrates, cannot survive in a world that is in motion. Athens was part of the Greek system of states and Socrates similarly is a part of Athens' activities. Neither city nor individual, including the philosopher, can survive without an awareness of the deficiencies which make one a part of a larger unit, which in its turn, comprised of human bodies, is deficient and lacking completion. The unspoken theme of this dialogue helps to reveal this underlying dependence which can never be escaped, neither by politicians like Callicles who fail to recognize that the life as master is also the life as slave, nor the philosopher whose life entails the continual search for what one lacks, a search of which this discourse is but one example.⁵⁸

58. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (1964; rpt. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Ed., 1978), p. 239, has written at the end of his essay on Thucydides: "The self-sufficiency of the city as Plato and Aristotle presuppose it excludes the city's dependence on such a society of cities or its being essentially a member of it . . . The lesson of Thucydides' work renders questionable a presupposition of classical political philosophy; it excludes the kind of self-sufficiency of the city which classical political philosophy presupposes. The city is neither self-sufficient nor is it essentially a part of a good or just order comprising many or all cities. The lack of order which necessarily characterized the "society" of the cities or, in other words, the omnipresence of War puts a much lower ceiling on the highest aspirations of any city toward justice and virtue than classical political philosophy might seem to have admitted." I would argue that from the evidence of the *Gorgias*, Plato is very much aware of the limits on human achievement which the "omnipresence of War" imposes. Classical political philosophy does not ignore the *polemos* with which the dialogue *Peri Rhetorikēs* begins.